

ANGLES AND STANDPOINTS: DEMYSTIFYING THE CONCEPTS OF YOUTH PERSPECTIVE AND YOUTH MAINSTREAMING



Youth Knowledge #33

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



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ANGLES AND STANDPOINTS: DEMYSTIFYING THE CONCEPTS OF YOUTH PERSPECTIVE AND YOUTH MAINSTREAMING

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Council of Europe and European Commission

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Introduction

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and Howard Williamson*

The European Union and the Council of Europe, the two organisations shaping youth policies at a European level and the partner institutions that guide the work of the EU–Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth (the Youth Partnership), have for some decades been developing methods to incorporate the perspectives of young people into policy making, implementation and evaluation processes. In the last few years, the European Union has done so through introducing the concept of “youth mainstreaming”, whereas the Council of Europe has called for the integration of a “youth perspective” across all aspects of its work.

These ideas, aside from the terminology, are not new. In 1995 the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth was already calling for “integrated youth policies and programmes”, multilevel and cross-sectoral policy co-ordination for youth. Over the last 30 years and more, youth organisations, as well as policy makers and decision makers, have argued and gradually acknowledged that young people remain under-represented in decision making. Strategic documents were adopted and institutional arrangements developed to support the integration of the voices, rights, needs and expectations of young people into decision-making processes.

For the European Union (EU), mainstreaming youth across different policy fields was a key objective of the 2022 European Year of Youth, as outlined in the European Year of Youth legacy communication (European Commission 2024a). Moreover, the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Council of the European Union 2018), and its specific tools like the EU Youth Dialogue and EU youth programmes (such as Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps), had already proposed action to bolster young people’s involvement and participation in decision making. The position of EU Youth Coordinator was established by the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 with the objective of enhancing cross-sectoral co-operation as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues within the European Commission’s services, thus also supporting youth mainstreaming.

The youth perspective of the Council of Europe was announced in the Reykjavik Declaration following the 4th Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2023). The declaration emphasises that a youth perspective should be integrated with the long-standing principle of youth participation in decision making, a principle reaffirmed by the summit and which has been upheld by the Council of Europe’s youth sector through its “co-managed” processes which have prevailed for over five decades.

Despite the long-standing priority of involving young people in policy making across various sectors and levels of governance, undeniable recent progress on this front, the development of several tools (such as youth checks/tests) (European Commission 2024b) and the open debates on the subject, there remains a need for systematic research on policy documents, practices and programmes regarding this topic. The concepts of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective have been linked recurrently with youth participation, youth engagement, co-management and co-decision making, but also with cross-sectoral policy making and interinstitutional co-operation (Deželan 2024). As the lines between these concepts are still invariably blurred, yet their use in political, practical and academic discourse has exploded, there is a need for more conceptual and empirical research.

While having multiple viewpoints on youth mainstreaming and a youth perspective is scientifically valuable and may be politically fruitful, it is also necessary to seek greater clarity and to encourage a dialogue between the different angles and viewpoints, and between different stakeholders. Moreover, practices of involving young people in decision making and ensuring their issues and concerns are accommodated in different policy fields are, arguably, already present in a wide variety of formats at local, regional and national levels. Understanding such grounded realities is, however, still at a very early stage, although both European institutions have recently elaborated on their own positions, with the Council of Europe working on a reference framework on a youth perspective (as presented in Chapter 2), and the European Union providing Council conclusions on the promotion of youth mainstreaming (Council of the European Union 2023).

The aim of this Youth Knowledge Book, therefore, is to propose strong conceptual frameworks for analysing and researching the ideas of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective in order to combine examples of best practice at different levels of policy governance and decision making, and to learn lessons for policy, practice and research. Researchers, experts and practitioners were invited through an open call to contribute to the debate and to engage critically with both the conceptual frameworks and practical applications of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective. Submissions that analysed how these concepts have been understood and put into practice across different political and cultural contexts were encouraged. All chapters received as a result of the call for papers were peer reviewed by the editorial board for this book in a single-blind procedure. Prospective contributors were asked – in the call for proposals and during the peer-review process – to clearly explain their understanding of youth mainstreaming and/or youth perspective and to show how these concepts are linked to or reflected by the experiences, practices and/or data they had researched or were intending to write about.

As part of this volume, two chapters have been contributed by representatives of the European Commission and the Council of Europe. These chapters – on the European Commission's approach to youth mainstreaming (Chapter 1) and on the Council of Europe's approach to youth perspectives (Chapter 2) – set out the institutions' own conceptualisations and practices regarding youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives. Unlike the other chapters in this book, these contributions were not subject to the peer-review process organised by the editors.

Their inclusion is intended to offer readers direct access to the official framings and priorities advanced at the European level.

To organise the wide variety of chapters, the book is divided into four sections: institutional views from the European Commission and the Council of Europe; theorising concepts and definitions in European policies; national experiences from the youth sector in Europe and experiences beyond the European youth sector; and practices from different sectors and/or international organisations.

Section 1 – Institutional views

The first section includes contributions from representatives of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, as the conceptual frameworks proposed and used by these institutions are guiding the current debate on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective in Europe.

The chapter by Biliana Sirakova and Marta Touykova presents the definition used by the European Union for the concept of youth mainstreaming, as well as the evolution of the practices, policies and projects operationalising the concept. It traces the evolution of youth mainstreaming from early policy documents, such as the European Commission's 2001 White Paper "A new impetus for European youth", to more recent institutional developments such as the establishment of the post of EU Youth Coordinator and the Commission Youth Network and the integration of a youth check into policy design. By documenting specific instruments and mechanisms, ranging from participatory processes to cross-sectoral co-ordination, the chapter shows how the European Commission seeks to embed youth viewpoints into policy making across a range of policy fields. The chapter presents youth mainstreaming as both a necessary approach to support young people where it matters to them and a key enabler of their participation in democratic life, emphasising that young people are a source of ideas and a force for innovation essential to addressing Europe's major challenges, from sustainability to digital transformation.

In his chapter, Tobias Flessenkemper introduces the Council of Europe's reference framework on a youth perspective, a strategic tool aimed at embedding a youth perspective across all sectors of the Organisation's work. The Council of Europe is building its reference framework on a youth perspective on four core principles – thinking with young people; learning from and with young people; participating with young people; and acting with and for young people – and it promotes a rights-based, intergenerational and cross-sectoral approach to policy making. The chapter highlights both long-standing and more recent efforts by the Council of Europe to institutionalise youth participation and include a youth perspective in the Organisation's work beyond the youth sector. This is guided by a three-step operational model that comprises: 1. preparation; 2. design and implementation; and 3. monitoring and evaluation. Framed as a response to current threats to democracy and democratic backsliding in Europe, the reference framework positions young people as essential assets in rebuilding resilient, inclusive and forward-looking democratic systems.

Section 2 – Theorising concepts and definitions

The second section takes a theoretical approach to the concepts of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as they are used currently in Europe. It also includes empirical research and practical examples supporting the theoretical framework and considering the existing challenges and risks of the misuse or misunderstanding of these concepts.

Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll and Andreas Rottach propose an analytical framework to support empirical and comparative research on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective. The chapter argues that youth policy can be understood multidimensionally, with the policy content intersecting with policy structures like actors' self-identification and representation of their role as well as with policy processes and political principles. In this framework, youth mainstreaming serves as a mechanism to enable policies that are directed at young people to be youth-informed policies, and ensures that wider policies take full account of their impact on young people, including the mitigation of any negative effects. Grounded in neo-institutionalist and cosmopolitan approaches, the chapter explores how governance structures and power dynamics influence the institutional and practical operationalisation of youth mainstreaming. Based on these implementation experiences, the authors present different sources of youth perspective to inform policies, starting with direct and representative youth participation and continuing with impact assessments, research, working with young people and institutional co-operation as the main ways used to inform policy about the perspectives of young people. Finally, the chapter presents youth mainstreaming as both a normative and a political strategy aimed at embedding young people's needs, expectations and concerns across the policy cycle and ultimately at improving the living conditions and life-course prospects of young people and strengthening their voices.

Etch Kalala and Lasse Siurala position youth policy within the broader context of urgent global threats, including democratic decline, accelerated climate change and unregulated digitalisation. They contend that youth perspectives cannot remain neutral or merely reactive, but must actively champion democratic values and ethical responsibility, particularly in the face of rising populism and illiberal politics. Their analysis presents an imperative for youth policy to move beyond participation and towards active political engagement.

In her chapter, Carlotta von Westerholt argues for the integration of an intersectional perspective in youth mainstreaming strategies and practices, to better reflect the diversity of young people targeted and affected by policies. The analysis captures the limitations of all mainstreaming approaches, such as youth mainstreaming, gender mainstreaming and disability mainstreaming, essentially because they are conceived and applied in silos. The author emphasises the diverse and multiple identities of young people, determined by, *inter alia*, age, gender, race, class and ability, and advocates instead an intersectionality-informed model that is not sector-specific or cross-sectoral, but unifying. The proposal builds upon existing political commitments and the opportunities for amending the policy approaches

(the EU Youth Test and the Union of Equality), as well as on the lessons learned from the more established gender-mainstreaming initiatives.

The chapter by Marie Daviet critically examines how gender mainstreaming is implemented in the Erasmus+ programme, especially in the youth sector. Despite a favourable policy framework, she finds that gender is not reflected as a priority in Erasmus+ programme documents nor in the activities of National Agencies.¹ Based on documentary analysis and interviews with representatives of youth organisations in France, the chapter presents a mixed picture. Although gender equality values are presented, only some organisations are able to integrate gender equality into their activities, while in other cases gender mainstreaming is hindered by limited time, resources and expertise. The chapter concludes that gender mainstreaming requires more than formal inclusion in policies. It demands capacity building and institutional support, as well as commitment at all levels, including donors and grassroots youth organisations.

Section 3 – National experiences from the youth sector

The third section of the book presents national cases across Europe (in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Lithuania and France), showing how youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective is integrated into institutional tools, youth work and youth participatory practices.

The chapter by Dan Moxon, Marko Kovačić and Veronica Ștefan represents a summary of more in-depth research examining the concept of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective, as well as their implementation across Europe. The chapter considers how these agendas are gaining political traction, and seeks to provide a clearer understanding of their meaning and execution through a review of policies, academic literature and practical case studies at a national and local level. By analysing national initiatives in France, Malta, Ireland, Croatia, Germany, Austria, Finland and the Flemish Community of Belgium, it identifies key challenges and success factors in implementing these agendas.

Rebecca Romes-Larsen and Viktoria Abendroth reflect on a youth-specific regulatory impact assessment (RIA) tool designed to integrate the youth perspective into legislation from the outset of the policy cycle. The German “youth check”, although not legally binding, is regulated and supported by a clear and well-structured institutional setting. It systematically examines the effects of draft legislation on young people aged 12 to 27 across defined areas and dimensions of life, thereby contributing significantly to youth mainstreaming. Its strengths lie in its objectivity, methodological rigour and capacity to raise awareness among policy makers, despite limitations such as time constraints and an absence of institutionalised youth participation in the assessment process.

1. National Agencies are based in EU Member States and third countries associated to Erasmus+ programme and their role involves providing information on Erasmus+, selecting projects to be funded, monitoring and evaluating Erasmus+, supporting applicants and participants, and promoting Erasmus+.

In their chapter, Susanna Osinga, Lindsay Vogelzang, Irene Fierloos, Arwin van Buuren, Milene Gonçalves and Lysanne te Brinke explore the design-based approach – the frame innovation method – used to promote and advance youth participation and youth mainstreaming in Rotterdam. The method is aimed at supporting municipalities to engage young people and to reframe systemic challenges – adultism, representativeness gaps, short-term visions and commitments – and the challenges linked with organisational infrastructure and support. The authors present participatory design methods, such as co-creation, based on four themes: trust building (open hearts, open minds); uncertainty navigation (navigating the unknown); intrinsic motivation (driven by responsibility); and impact recognition (what you do matters). The chapter concludes that design theory offers tools to reframe and solve complex problems relevant to young people, suggesting that involving designers in local governance can sustain participation and foster more inclusive and sustainable municipal policies.

Katie Eppenhof, Bas Krans, Samira Shadid, Wendy Wesseling and Stijn Sieckelincx present the Maatschappelijke Diensttijd (MDT), or “social service time”, in the Netherlands. This is a national voluntary service scheme that fosters youth participation, talent development and social engagement for young people aged 12 to 30. This chapter focuses on “Next Up”, an MDT initiative led by the youth organisation R-Newt, which supports marginalised young people in developing community-based projects through participatory, demand-driven methods informed by youth organising. The Dutch experience illustrates the transformative potential of youth-led service learning in advancing youth mainstreaming and democratic engagement.

Alonso Escamilla and Paula Gonzalo present the role of regional youth councils in Spain, with case studies on Madrid, Extremadura and Castilla y León, where interviews were conducted. The authors show how youth councils are platforms amplifying youth voices. The chapter highlights the achievements of the regional youth councils: promoting youth mental health, housing and employment on the political agenda. The authors also identify factors that impede the effectiveness of youth councils, such as the lack of structured youth policy tools, limited participation and political instability, but they also highlight enabling factors: civic education, inclusive participation and inclusive civic spaces.

Galileo Lorenzo Sciarretta, Alessandro Leon Caravacci, Irene Licastro and Francesco Mario Colucci investigate how local youth councils in Italy function as instruments to strengthen youth participation and contribute to youth mainstreaming by enabling the integration of young people’s perspectives into local governance. Drawing on field interviews, the authors explore how local youth councils can empower young people through consultative and propositional roles, facilitate early political socialisation, promote social capital and increase the responsiveness of public institutions to youth concerns. However, their effectiveness depends on overcoming risks such as tokenism, elitism, limited access and lack of structural support.

Giedrė Kvieskienė, Viktorija Stasytė and Eglė Celiešienė present efforts to promote youth political engagement through participatory educational practices

at the Lithuanian College of Democracy (LCD). They discuss initiatives that reached a wide range of young people, including vulnerable young people, to learn about democracy, engage directly in public policy processes and interact with local, national and EU-level decision makers. The case studies illustrate the importance of hands-on, locally adapted methodologies, strong pedagogical facilitation and multilevel collaboration for fostering meaningful, inclusive youth participation and dialogue with decision makers. The authors show how tailored, context-sensitive approaches not only build youth competencies but also strengthen institutional trust and responsiveness.

The chapter by Éric Le Grand, Christine Ferron and Séverine Lafitte presents a health initiative in France aimed at empowering young people with disabilities. The project empowered professionals and young people, supporting youth autonomy and participation. The chapter analyses broader health policy in France, which rarely supports youth participation, emphasises individual responsibility, and neglects the social determinants of health, such as age, disability or other vulnerabilities. Through participatory methods, the project enabled young people to express their needs and empowered them to take decisions for their health with confidence. The project represents a promising practice of integrating health promotion into youth disability care, but is also an example of good practice on introducing a youth perspective into healthcare.

Section 4 – Practices beyond the (European) youth sector

The fourth section of the book presents good practices and lessons beyond the European youth sector, including the experiences of United Nations bodies and examples of youth mainstreaming in environment and climate protection, anti-corruption policies, heritage policies and health.

Tomaž Deželan, Slađana Petković and Marti Taru offer a comprehensive analysis of how international governmental organisations conceptualise and operationalise youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective within their institutional frameworks. Drawing on desk research, interviews and participant observation, they examine practices across key international governmental organisations' local youth councils – including the Council of Europe, European Union/European Commission, Economic and Social Committee of the EU, United Nations, Commonwealth Secretariat, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – highlighting the evolution of youth inclusion mechanisms from co-decision and structured dialogue to youth impact assessments and cross-sectoral co-operation. While approaches differ, a shared normative foundation emerges: young people are rights holders whose voices, needs and accumulated experiences must be systematically integrated into all phases of the policy process. The chapter also explores the terminological and conceptual boundaries of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective, underscoring the links to social justice, agency, empowerment and intergenerational equity. Identifying political will, stakeholder engagement and organisational norms and culture as key enablers, the analysis reveals that

youth mainstreaming should be understood as a growing dynamic rather than an end state, with uneven but increasing implementation across organisations – one that reflects broader transformations in governance and democratic participation.

Irina Lonean shows that integrating a youth perspective into anti-corruption efforts is both necessary and beneficial for strengthening democracy and rebuilding trust in public institutions. Drawing on anti-corruption education initiatives like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment (GRACE) and its YouthLED Integrity Advisory Board, the chapter presents opportunities for enhanced youth engagement in the Council of Europe's mechanisms for combating corruption, particularly within its anti-corruption body GRECO (Group of States against Corruption). The chapter argues, however, that meaningful integration of a youth perspective must go beyond the current education initiatives to include co-creation and co-decision processes.

The chapter by Ria Das and Sia Das introduces another tool for the promotion of youth interests. In relation to climate concerns, they explore climate litigation, demonstrating how young activists are increasingly using legal mechanisms to assert their rights to a sustainable future. Cases from the United States and Europe exemplify this trend, providing compelling evidence of youth mobilisation through advocacy, litigation and international human rights law.

Meetali Gupta addresses the position of young heritage professionals within EU cultural heritage policies. Her contribution reveals how current strategic frameworks tend to position youth primarily as recipients of education, training and volunteering schemes, rather than as actors with agency. She identifies both a theoretical and a propositional gap: young professionals are rarely defined as a group with specific needs, resulting in top-down governance structures that reinforce intergenerational inequalities. The chapter calls for a shift from participatory rhetoric to genuinely inclusive frameworks that recognise and empower young professionals as co-creators of heritage futures.

Olga Skaredina, Aseel Abo-Taleb and Zuhair Ahmed Kowshik present a robust example of institutionalised youth engagement in global environmental governance. They show how the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) offers a structured platform for young people to influence policy at all stages – from agenda setting to implementation. Despite structural barriers such as limited support and representation, the chapter demonstrates how formal mechanisms, when designed with transparency, inclusivity and accountability, can enable youth to act as legitimate and effective participants in intergovernmental processes.

This Youth Knowledge Book is, therefore, as broad and diverse as the theory and practice of the two main concepts – youth mainstreaming and youth perspective. The chapters across the three sections of the book bridge theoretical exploration and practical illustrations and implications, offering insights into how youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives can be embedded more effectively within the governance structures and decision-making processes of public institutions. From the start, we acknowledged the need for a debate that might assist conceptual clarification and address questions and examples of development

and implementation; for that reason, the book includes contributions from policy makers, youth workers and other practitioners, as well as researchers. Some chapters trace the origins of these concepts and the evolution of related notions in local, national, European and international policy frameworks and analysis.

Furthermore, in the context of a fairly unclear theory, we also welcomed contributions that addressed the risks of misusing the terms “youth mainstreaming” and “youth perspective”. These contributions highlight in particular a concern that youth mainstreaming could become a box-ticking exercise, a hollow procedural tool, rather than a transformative principle based on intergenerational fairness. Practical challenges and ethical dilemmas related to youth inclusion in non-youth-specific policy fields are also presented, to extend the debate beyond the youth sector to ensure a genuinely cross-sectoral approach. Other contributions explore the dynamics of power and conflicts between traditional and more youth-centric approaches in political decision making, scrutinising how these tensions are managed and what outcomes they produce, examining whether the outcomes of youth participation processes are integrated into policy making as genuine contributions or merely as symbolic or tokenistic input. This also entails a detailed presentation of the achievements and challenges of youth outreach, youth engagement and youth participation projects that are capable of generating valuable contributions to policy development. Only with such critical reflection and holistic overview are the laudable aspirations of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective likely to be realised.

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Section 1

Institutional views

This section explores the use of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as normative policy tools in the European Union and the Council of Europe. It covers the European Commission's deployment of structured policy dialogues, youth checks and cross-sectoral co-ordination mechanisms, as well as the Council of Europe's value-driven emphasis on rights-based co-management and intergenerational accountability.

The two chapters show the potential of integrating youth perspectives into political decision-making processes for the future of democracy by enhancing legitimacy and enriching intergenerational dialogue. Challenges remain in the shape of the complexity of participation, reliability of resources, political backing, well-co-ordinated institutional mechanisms and close ties between consultation and implementation.

Chapter 1

Youth mainstreaming in the European Union

Biliana Sirakova and Marta Touykova

On 22 December 2021, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union designated 2022 as the European Year of Youth (Year of Youth). One of the objectives of this European Year was “to mainstream youth policy across all relevant EU policy fields in line with the 2019-2027 European Union Youth Strategy to encourage the bringing of a youth perspective into policymaking at all levels” (European Union 2021).

“Youth mainstreaming” was already part of the lexicon of European co-operation in the youth field. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (hereafter the Youth Strategy) posited that “youth mainstreaming can only be effective when it also guarantees a say for young people in all possible policy areas that affect them”, and referred to “mainstreaming initiatives across policy areas” and “mainstreaming youth as a priority” (Council of the European Union 2018). The origins of the concept dated much further back to the 2001 Commission White Paper “A new impetus for European youth”, (Council of the European Union 2018) which called for “taking more account of youth in other policies”. However, it was only in 2023 that youth mainstreaming was defined in a Council document as “an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes” (Council of the European Union 2023).

The Commission reaffirmed its position on youth mainstreaming in the follow-up to the Year of Youth. A stronger role for young people in EU policy making and the integration of their perspectives in all policies that impact them are the two key fields shaping EU actions for young people in the years to come.

Why is youth mainstreaming important to the European Commission?

A group of young people are visiting the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport of the European Commission. They are part of an Erasmus+ European Youth Together project that involves five organisations from five European Union countries. The project aims to educate about the principles, values and functioning of the European Union and to promote the active participation of young people in democratic life. On the agenda is a meeting with the EU Youth

Coordinator,² who is dedicated to enhancing cross-sector co-operation as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues within the European Commission (European Union 2018). The Youth Coordinator advocates and advises on the integration of youth perspectives in the drawing up of EU policies.

This meeting is an opportunity to complement the evidence, gathered through Eurobarometer surveys, the EU youth dashboard³ and public and dedicated consultations, on the needs and concerns of young people.

What do young people expect from the EU? What are their biggest concerns? The answers are as diverse as this social group of citizens united by a societal perception of being “young” and by certain disadvantages they commonly face compared to other age groups (United Nations 2018). One of the visitors mentions she would like to study abroad but is not sure whether her family can afford it. Another says that in her small town she struggles to find a job in her field of studies but does not want to move too far away from family. A young man jokes how he would like to do just that but at 27 years old he cannot afford the rent and is still living with his parents. The biggest concerns of young people stem from their personal daily struggles and are related to policies such as education, employment, housing and many more. In this context, youth mainstreaming is the only viable approach to supporting young people where it matters to them.

Failing to address the concerns that they have is a threat to democracy. “I believe the EU does not sufficiently deal with problems that concern people like me” was among the main reasons for not planning to vote in the 2024 European elections given by young people (European Union 2024). At 16% it was close behind “I am not interested in politics in general” (19%), “I believe my vote will not change anything” (19%) and “I distrust the political system in general” (17%), with the last two reasons susceptible to being positively influenced by policy making that is more cognisant of youth needs and perspectives. Hence, the second reason why youth mainstreaming is important for the European Commission is that there is a strong mutually reinforcing relationship between youth mainstreaming and the “participation of young people in democratic life, the basis for Union action in the field of youth (Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).

At the beginning of 2025 the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs of the European Commission launched a new EU competition aimed at supporting and recognising Europe’s brightest young entrepreneurs. The Young European Entrepreneur Award complements an initiative of the Directorate-General for Employment in co-operation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – the EU–OECD Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy (YEPA). YEPA aims to strengthen youth entrepreneurship policies and programmes by raising awareness about the barriers faced by young people in entrepreneurship. It facilitates exchanges between policy makers, experts and young entrepreneurs on “what works” in youth entrepreneurship policy. Other examples of policy initiatives for young

2. See https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthcoordinator_en.

3. See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/children-youth/database/eu-youth-dashboard>.

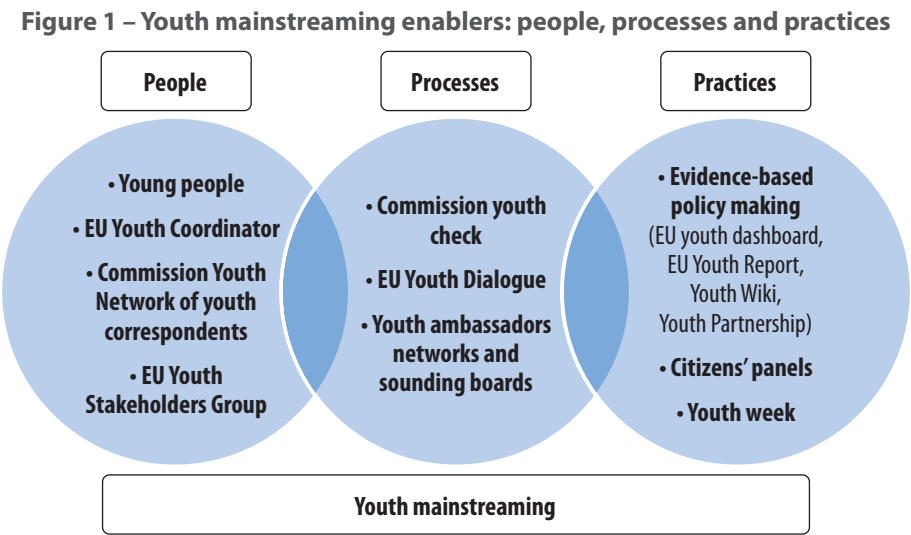
people feature in the regular EU Youth Report. These two initiatives contribute to a key pillar of the von der Leyen Commission (2024-2029) – Europe’s sustainable prosperity and competitiveness. Among other objectives, they aim to foster a drive for creativity and innovation in the young population. This speaks to the third reason why youth mainstreaming is a priority in EU youth policy. “To sustain democracy, secure peace, stand firm on European values and make the most of the green and digital transitions, we need the creativity, energy and diverse talents of all citizens, especially young people” (European Commission 2024a). Young people are a source of ideas and a force for innovation, which Europe needs to address the many challenges it faces across policies.

Summary – Why is youth mainstreaming important to the European Commission?

1. Youth mainstreaming is the most effective approach to supporting young people where it matters to them.
2. There is a strong mutually reinforcing relationship between youth mainstreaming and the “participation of young people in democratic life”.
3. Young people are a source of ideas and a force for innovation, which Europe needs to address the many challenges it faces across policies.

How is youth mainstreaming implemented in the European Commission?

Considering this definition of youth mainstreaming – “an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes” (Council of the European Union 2023) – youth mainstreaming is dependent on a set of enablers: people, processes and practices.



First, these are the young people themselves, or rather their perspective(s), vision, voice, concerns, needs and ideas. This body of insights should be based on both quantitative and qualitative data being shared by young people or by those working for and with them on their behalf. Policy makers rely on participatory and deliberative processes to obtain and understand this constellation of youth insights. On their own, participatory formats and initiatives do not guarantee that youth perspectives are integrated into policy making (Lundy 2007). Decision makers and policy makers follow up on the recommendations and any other output from participatory practices and incorporate the youth perspectives into decisions and policies. This requires a good understanding of the key issues for young people, competencies and capability, sponsorship at political level and steering. Timing is critical here because when there is too long a gap between any kind of youth insight-gathering process and the actual inclusion of input in policy documents, it becomes more likely that the input from young people is “lost” in the process. This risk is also present when the policy makers preparing participatory action are not those leading subsequent formulation, monitoring and evaluation of policy.

The youth perspective(s) should be based on evidence. Apart from the qualitative feedback obtained from young people through the participatory processes, there is a need for youth-specific research and age-disaggregated data, which can give a more accurate picture on a large scale. Youth mainstreaming relies on the availability of quality evidence on the situation of young people.

Finally, the integration of youth perspectives on a systematic basis requires structural processes and institutional mechanisms, for instance clear goals and indicators in strategies and work plans, youth checks/youth tests/youth impact assessment procedures and interdepartmental co-ordination networks or frameworks. These are especially effective in a context conducive to cross-sector co-operation and collaboration. In other words, the success of youth mainstreaming is also dependent on organisational design and culture.

Evolution of youth mainstreaming

In the first two decades of the 21st century, progress on youth mainstreaming at the EU level was limited (European Commission 2024c). The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 attempted to address this by, among other things, introducing the position of the EU Youth Coordinator. In 2024 the Commission reported on the interim evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, concluding that the EU Youth Strategy instruments have effectively supported cross-sectoral co-operation and mainstreaming, and noting:

- ▶ a stronger emphasis on youth mainstreaming in EU policies beyond the youth policy field;
- ▶ an increased exchange on youth at EU level further boosted thanks to the 2022 European Year of Youth;
- ▶ that “the EU Youth Coordinator is a frontrunner for youth mainstreaming at EU level, notably through the internal Commission Youth Network”;
- ▶ EU policy makers have actively participated in the EU Youth Dialogue discussions and activities (European Commission 2024b).

Nevertheless, the evaluation found there was an “opportunity to step up efforts at all levels to make further progress in youth mainstreaming across all policy fields”. The European Commission is committed to using the momentum on youth mainstreaming. As a legacy of the Year of Youth, it established new instruments to support this work and made plans to further strengthen existing ones. Today the Commission has recourse to an array of solutions to the youth mainstreaming puzzle. A non-exhaustive list of youth mainstreaming enablers – people, processes and practices – is provided below.

Youth check

The youth check⁴ is an instrument for youth mainstreaming, which helps the European Commission examine the potential impact of its new policies on young people. In 2024 the European Commission announced 60 points of action for follow-up to the Year of Youth. A key aspect was the introduction of a youth check in the Commission with the aim of ensuring that the impact of EU policies on young people is systematically considered during policy design. A comparative overview of youth mainstreaming practices in European countries shows that this instrument is fully integrated into the Commission’s comprehensive Better Regulations Framework (European Commission 2024c). It differs from other similar youth impact assessment tools in that it includes a consultation phase with young people or youth stakeholders. The Commission launched the youth check process in January 2025, applying it to the 2025 Commission work programme. Progress and results will be assessed in the tri-annual EU Youth Report.

EU Youth Coordinator

In 2018 the European Commission proposed the establishment of the EU Youth Coordinator role with the objective of enhancing cross-sectoral co-operation, as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues in the European Commission. The European Council welcomed this intention in the Council resolution on the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, noting that the EU Youth Coordinator should work hand in hand with various stakeholders to ensure a coherent communication with young people.

The first EU Youth Coordinator was appointed at the European Commission in June 2021. The co-ordinator encourages the integration of youth perspectives in relevant policies by co-ordinating the Commission Youth Network of youth correspondents, providing advice to services on youth issues and facilitating the youth check process. The co-ordinator engages in outreach activities and promotes EU opportunities to young people in EU Youth Dialogue and other events, conferences, debates and meetings with young people and youth stakeholders. The activities of the EU Youth Coordinator are outlined on the European Youth Portal.⁵

4. See https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/youth-check_en.

5. See https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthcoordinator_en.

Commission Youth Network

This network supports horizontal cross co-operation and communication on youth issues. It serves as a forum where Commission departments (or directorates-general) can exchange knowledge and good practices linked to working for and with young people. It functioned as an informal group during the European Year of Youth. Eight directorates-general were represented in the network when it was launched by the EU Youth Coordinator in 2021. By 2023, representation had grown to 20. As a legacy of the Year of Youth, the network was formalised and directorates-general were asked to nominate youth correspondents, focal points of contact on youth issues, who will represent them in the Commission Youth Network and facilitate the youth check process. In 2025, 33 directorates-general were represented by 61 youth correspondents.

EU Youth Stakeholders Group

The EU Youth Stakeholders Group⁶ is a platform for the exchange of knowledge and good practices in engaging, connecting and empowering young people. It helps improve understanding of the variety of needs and concerns of young people and youth organisations, on many levels, and facilitates youth consultations on forthcoming EU policy initiatives, including in the framework of the Commission youth check. Co-ordinated by the EU Youth Coordinator, the group brings together EU representatives, representatives of EU member states, EU national youth councils, selected European-level youth stakeholders and youth researchers. The European youth organisations that are members of the group have expertise across domains and also support youth mainstreaming in the Commission.

Evidence-based tools and platforms

The Commission makes use of evidence-based tools and platforms,⁷ the EU youth dashboard, Eurobarometers, the EU Youth Report, Youth Wiki and EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership to collect, synthesise, analyse and report data, information and research on the situation of young people, youth policies and programmes. All of these examples have a cross-sectoral nature connecting youth policy and insights to other policy fields. They cast light on areas where EU action may be of particular urgency and where young people need to be considered as a special group even in policy fields where traditionally this may not have been the case.

EU Youth Dialogue

The EU Youth Dialogue⁸ (EUYD) is the largest EU-level participatory instrument involving young people in policy making. The dialogue has evolved since its launch in 2010, its themes now reflecting the 11 youth goals, which span all areas of concern to young people. More and more policy makers from fields other than

6. See https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/euyouthstrategygroup_en.

7. See https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/evidence_en.

8. See https://youth.europa.eu/eu-youth-dialogue_en.

youth have become involved in this process. Strengthening dialogue is a key aspect of the Commission's communication on the Year of Youth and a closer link between the dialogue and the Commission's work programme is already a reality with the inclusion of a session dedicated to a Commission priority initiative in the EU Youth Conferences.

European Youth Week

The Commission organises a European Youth Week every two years to showcase achievements and draw attention to developments and priorities in the field of youth. Over the years, more and more Commission services have become involved in this celebration, which takes place all over Europe. Altogether 24 directorates-general were involved in the last instalment of the initiative in 2024.

Other initiatives

The "Youth Action Plan in EU external action" promotes youth mainstreaming in external action.⁹ The work is structured around three pillars – engage, empower and connect – mirroring the three core areas of action of the EU Youth Strategy. The Youth Action Plan enhances the EU's institutional engagement with young people globally. This plan was drawn up after extensive consultation with over 220 stakeholders across the globe, including many youth organisations. The Youth Sounding Board for EU international partnerships was involved in the process of consultation and design. This board is a group of young people who advise the Commissioner and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships on youth participation and empowerment in EU external action. It empowers young people to influence EU external action across all political priorities.

As a follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Commission decided to give young people a stronger voice in EU policy making through the European citizens' panels, where young people constitute one third of participants. These panels bring together 150 randomly selected citizens from the 27 member states to discuss – at European level – key upcoming proposals. Through this format, a wide range of perspectives of young citizens are factored in.

The communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health includes a specific chapter on young people and children, and explicitly references a youth policy dialogue with Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety (2019-24), which helped air the views of young people.

The annual European Sustainable Energy Week features a Youth Energy Day. This initiative gave rise to the network of Young Energy Ambassadors.¹⁰ Initiated in 2023, the Young Energy Ambassadors programme aims to recognise and reward the great contribution of many young people to the clean energy transition, and to involve them in the European policy-making process, particularly where it concerns energy policy.

9. See https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/youth/youth-action-plan_en.

10. See https://sustainable-energy-week.ec.europa.eu/youth-eusew/young-energy-ambassadors_en.

Many more examples exist and new initiatives are in the making. At the time of writing this publication, the Commission is working on the establishment of a President's Youth Advisory Board, as put forward in the 2024-2029 Political Guidelines. Its purpose is to advise the President of the European Commission on issues that matter to young people in their community and to act as sounding board for ideas developed by the Commission.

Conclusions

This chapter aimed to provide the standpoint of the European Commission and to contribute to the debate and the empirical research on youth perspective(s) and youth mainstreaming. The examples cited can serve other public-sector and international organisations.

The European Commission has achieved significant progress in building a strong foundation and an enabling environment for youth mainstreaming.

There are many diverse avenues for advancing youth mainstreaming in public organisations. The introduction of a youth regulatory assessment is not sufficient and does not guarantee the integration of youth perspectives in policy making.

More research and evaluation are needed to understand the effectiveness of different youth mainstreaming instruments and to define ways to measure progress in youth mainstreaming.

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Chapter 2

Youth for democracy – Youth perspective(s) in the Council of Europe

Tobias Flessenkemper

Democracy defenders and democratic values are under attack across Europe. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Alain Berset, stated in his 2025 report:¹¹

We cannot meet today's challenges with yesterday's playbook. And we must never forget that democracy is our first line of defence. What Europe needs is a reset: a New Democratic Pact for Europe. Because what is at stake is nothing less than Europe's security, the values we share and our place in the world.

Part of the reset is to bring youth perspectives into the whole range of the Organisation's activities – from standard setting to monitoring and co-operation. Through youth perspectives and youth participation, the Council of Europe is placing trust in young people to play a crucial role today in shaping policies for a future that maintains individual freedoms, based on diversity, equality and inclusion, and thus political liberty for all. The Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective was prepared by the Council of Europe based on the input and active collaboration of young people. The document was endorsed at the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, in Valetta in Malta on 8 and 9 October 2025.¹² The reference framework aims to increase confidence, improve quality and strengthen the resilience of the member states' democracies. Enhancing youth participation, strengthening young people's role in democratic life and including their perspectives in decision-making processes will be supported by the reference framework's key elements: think with young people, learn from and with young people, participate with young people, and act with and for young people.

11. Report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (2025) entitled "[Towards A New Democratic Pact for Europe](#)".

12. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/10th-ministerial-conference-2025.

A long-standing commitment to youth

For more than 50 years, the Council of Europe has recognised the central role of young people in promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Yet, despite continuous efforts, including a unique co-management system and support from the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest¹³ and the European Youth Foundation,¹⁴ youth participation often remains limited or fragmented outside of the youth sector.

The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government in Reykjavik in May 2023¹⁵ took steps to reinforce European youth policy and the Council of Europe's work in the field of youth. The summit concluded with a call to action: to integrate the voices of young people into intergovernmental decision-making processes in the Organisation. The Reykjavik Declaration¹⁶ underlined that youth participation is not only a matter of inclusiveness but a prerequisite for democratic resilience and effective policies: "Youth participation improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue".

This was an important step towards embedding the youth perspective not only in the youth sector but beyond, in all other policy areas of the Organisation.

Why is the youth perspective important now?

Across Europe, democratic backsliding, political apathy and erosion of trust in democratic institutions have become alarmingly common. Young people, despite their energy, creativity and commitment to issues such as climate change, social justice, digital rights and democratic participation, are losing faith in democracy and institutions. They feel a real need for peace and an environment that creates safe spaces where they can learn and grow, including through education that fosters critical thinking and civic engagement.

The reference framework offers a better vision of how European democracies can progress by recognising young people as an asset. We hope that the reference framework on a youth perspective will become a vehicle for embedding the youth perspective in the policy-making machinery and for pursuing policies that are more legitimate, inclusive, forward-looking and responsive to the evolving needs of young people.

13. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/mission-and-mandate.

14. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-foundation1.

15. See www.coe.int/en/web/cm/reykjavik-summit.

16. See <https://edoc.coe.int/en/the-council-of-europe-in-brief/11619-united-around-our-values-reykjavik-declaration.html>.

The four pillars of a youth perspective

The concept of a “youth perspective” can be understood in terms of four interrelated elements that, taken together, can promote meaningful youth participation in policy processes.

- ▶ **Thinking with young people** means involving young people as active contributors to policy making. It advocates open communication and dialogue with young people, and researching their needs and aspirations.
- ▶ **Learning from and with young people** promotes intergenerational dialogue and shared learning. It fosters mutual respect and understanding between decision makers and young people.
- ▶ **Participating with young people** ensures that young people are equipped with the skills and platforms to engage meaningfully, and that policy makers and stakeholders adapt their activities and methods to be more accessible and inclusive.
- ▶ **Acting with and for young people** emphasises the importance of actively including young people’s perspectives throughout the policy cycle, by creating safe spaces for dialogue and allocating resources for co-designing policies; it ensures that young people’s proposals are followed up.

Guiding principles

The Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective is firmly based on the idea that young people are rights holders and active citizens. They have specific needs that should be reflected in all policy areas that affect them, as well as the right to equal participation and influence in the policy cycle.

Recognising the diversity of young people, including differences in age, gender, socio-economic background and region, is essential to ensure that all can participate and have their voices heard. This human rights-based approach, guided by the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, is essential for youth participation.

The reference framework emphasises that policies should promote intergenerational respect, taking into account the impact of today’s decisions on future generations. It recommends that co-operation with civil society, academia, youth organisations and advocacy groups is necessary for equitable and sustainable policies. It also explains why long-term investment in youth leadership, civic education and partnerships is essential for sustained participation, with regular evaluations to meet the evolving needs of young people.

From vision to action: a three-step model

To bring these principles to life, the reference framework outlines a three-stage operational model.

- ▶ **Preparation**, which requires high-level political commitment, cross-sectoral co-ordination and the development of enabling legislation and governance structures.
- ▶ **Design and implementation**, which involve and promote sustainable participatory mechanisms, such as youth consultations, forums, advisory groups or co-management structures, and the evaluation of the impact of policies on young people before policy decisions are taken.
- ▶ **Monitoring and evaluation**, which include rigorous assessments of how youth perspectives are integrated, using measurable indicators and involving young people at every stage.

The reference framework is designed to be flexible. It will allow institutions to adapt to their contexts, ensuring practical relevance, while maintaining a common vision. Supporting tools, guidelines, checklists, training modules and good practices will be developed to accompany its implementation, provide guidance and support when an institution or organisation wishes to mainstream a youth perspective in its work and policies, at the Council of Europe and in member states.

Putting the youth perspective into practice

A few examples of initiatives, processes and tools that have facilitated youth engagement and mainstreaming at the Council of Europe can serve to illustrate how a youth perspective is already being considered, including the following within the Council of Europe's youth sector.

- ▶ The Youth Department¹⁷ uses a wide range of instruments to generate information and evidence on youth needs, statistics and various other sets of data to facilitate understanding and awareness raising on youth needs. These instruments include participation, consultation, research, studies, opinion polling and exchanges. The Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ)¹⁸ provides a platform for young people to exchange valuable information on youth needs and new ideas. The EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership's Knowledge Hub on Youth provides resources and tools for exploring youth realities, including thematic studies and relevant data.

17. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/about-us.

18. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/advisory-council-on-youth.

- ▶ The “Enter!” long-term training course builds the capacity of youth workers to carry out participatory research with young people. The Youth Work Portfolio¹⁹ helps youth workers to evaluate and improve research-related practices.
- ▶ The Compass Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People²⁰ offers activities to help youth organisations communicate their needs, ideas and strategies. Thematic and activity reports, including those supported with grants from the European Youth Foundation for national and international activities, provide information and insight into the evolving needs of young people and the situation of civil society organisations.
- ▶ The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership) provides comprehensive information and resources on youth policies, including international reviews, training courses for youth NGOs and civil servants, and advisory missions to help institutions engage youth more effectively.
- ▶ The youth sector co-management system²¹ exemplifies the integration of youth perspectives by fostering young people’s participation and representation in decision making. The CCJ and the European Steering Committee for Youth²² take decisions jointly about the youth sector’s priorities, programmes and budget.

The following initiatives also take place beyond the youth sector.

- ▶ The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has advanced youth participation through its Rejuvenating Politics initiatives which allows one young delegate per member state at Congress sessions. Young people and youth organisations are involved in and consulted, through the youth sector and its co-management system, during the process of revising the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.
- ▶ In 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe established a youth participation mechanism to enhance interaction between the Assembly and the youth sector. This mechanism aims to involve youth civil society organisations and the Council of Europe’s youth sector in the preparation of reports, hearings and exchanges, with opportunities for youth representatives to present contributions at Parliamentary Assembly committee levels.
- ▶ The Pilot Youth Forum on Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare, organised by the Steering Committee for Human Rights in the Fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO) in 2023, provided a platform for CDBIO to formalise and

19. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth-portfolio/youth-work-essentials.

20. See www.coe.int/en/web/compass/.

21. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management.

22. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/cdej.

expand its work on youth, including co-operation with the youth sector for the development of CDBIO's upcoming new action plan. At a CDBIO plenary meeting, CCJ representatives ensured that topics and strategies were made accessible to youth using structured frameworks and inclusive language. This reflects the adaptation of institutional tools and methods to ensure meaningful youth engagement in strategic planning.

- ▶ The 2024 annual conference of the Gender Equality Commission (GEC) provided a platform for the commission to understand youth priorities, leading to a renewed commitment to collaborate with youth. A follow-up meeting between the GEC and the CCJ explored potential collaboration opportunities, including the participation of the CCJ chair in the following GEC plenary meetings. During the meeting, the CCJ provided feedback on the GEC's 2024-2027 terms of reference, identifying areas where a youth perspective could be valuable and proposing ways to integrate youth voices. The GEC also promotes exchange of information and inclusive dialogue through events and initiatives, such as tackling technology-facilitated violence and exploring artificial intelligence's role in gender equality, and follows up on youth feedback with concrete actions, strengthening partnerships and setting a standard for inclusive policy making.
- ▶ The Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics Unit (SOGIESC) works closely with international LGBTI non-governmental organisations, especially those involved as observers in the Committee of Experts on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (ADI-SOGIESC). Regular consultations, both formal and informal, are held with youth civil society organisations such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth and Student Organisation.
- ▶ A recommendation on the active political participation of national minority youth was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2023, for which youth representatives, as well as young people from a minority background, were given the opportunity to work with the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination and Inclusion to provide input through focus groups.
- ▶ The development of the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence saw the involvement of CCJ members in the drafting process, together with the Committee on Artificial Intelligence.
- ▶ Since 2019, the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (COMEX) has been incorporating a youth perspective into its monitoring process. As part of this, consultation materials were adapted to include questions that focus on the promotion of regional minority languages from a youth standpoint. This initiative allowed COMEX to assess the potential implications of the charter for youth, particularly in balancing the needs of younger and older generations, especially in media-related areas.

- ▶ The 14th meeting of the Council of Europe – FRA – ENNHRI – EQUINET Collaborative Platform on Social and Economic Rights allowed an exploration of the potential of the European Social Charter and other human rights instruments to safeguard young people’s social and economic rights. This was an opportunity for the Social Rights Department to engage with youth and led to increased awareness of the potential of the Charter to promote and protect young people’s social rights.

More examples of promoting youth perspective at the Council of Europe are available from the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. Examples of initiatives and processes that have facilitated youth engagement and the integration of youth perspectives at the international level, as well as within member states at national, regional or local levels, can be found in recent research studies from the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, namely: “Learning from national and local approaches to youth mainstreaming and use of youth perspective in policy making across Europe”, by Dan Moxon, Marko Kovačić and Veronica Ștefan,²³ and “Youth mainstreaming: the international perspective” by Tomaž Deželan, Slađana Petković and Marti Taru.²⁴

What next?

The reference framework will support the further integration of the youth perspective throughout the Council of Europe and its member states.

To ensure the success of the youth perspective, the Council of Europe’s youth sector will continue to play a key role in supporting and engaging with young people and youth civil society. The continued commitment of institutions and policy actors, unfailing engagement and the support of young people and youth organisations, and adequate resources will be key to the success of the process.

Through the framework and its implementation, European policy makers will reaffirm their commitment to working with young people to shape a future of just and inclusive policies that will benefit both present and future generations.

23. For a summary of the study, see Chapter 8 of this book.

24. For a summary of the study, see Chapter 16 of this book.

Section 2

Theorising concepts and definitions

This section looks into youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as normative political objectives shaped by diverse institutional logics and evolving policy frameworks. The chapters reflect on how youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are being conceptualised, structured and prospectively operationalised within and beyond the youth field. It also considers the analytical distinction between implicit and explicit youth policy, as well as between instrumental and participatory mechanisms of engagement, providing a lens through which to assess the evolving role of young people in addressing contemporary challenges such as democratic erosion, climate change and digital harm.

By contrasting the previous administrative-instrumental logics with participatory-democratic orientations, the chapters in this section shed light on the high stakes around youth mainstreaming and integrating a youth perspective in a European context where democracy is under strain and institutional frameworks struggle to address emerging and global risks. They converge on an increasingly shared conclusion: youth policy can no longer remain neutral in the face of systemic crises. It must become a space for ethical and political engagement, where young people are not merely consulted but fully empowered. In doing so, these contributions also underscore the need to develop new epistemologies for youth research and public policy, frameworks that are both theoretical and practical, capable of grasping the complexity, interdependence and often existential nature of the threats shaping contemporary youth experience, and thus opening the way for renewed modes of understanding and intervention.

Chapter 3

(Re)conceptualising youth policy – An analytical framework

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Defining youth policy is a difficult undertaking. As Howard Williamson once wrote, “all countries have a youth policy, by intent, default or neglect” (Williamson, Fras and Lavchyan 2021: 15). Youth policy often seems clearly bordered by sectoral responsibilities attached to a ministry or department of youth, often associated with youth work and youth welfare services, culture and/or sports. However, as Magda Nico identified in 2014, the lives of young people are cross-sectoral, so why shouldn't youth policy be? (Nico 2014).

The realities of youth policy in Europe are varied, based on societal perceptions and subsequent policy goals (Chevalier 2018; Wallace and Bendit 2009). This is no different in the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (Pelzer, Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach 2024). Youth policy builds on arguments around protecting young people against negative influences, empowering them to live and shape their own lives, preventing social problems and fostering integration, as well as supporting young people in their transition to adulthood. It provides a fundamental political tool to provide individual, societal and political support and protection as well as regulation and control.

Closely related to and part of youth policy is the concept of youth mainstreaming, which is understood here as the integration of youth perspectives, as well as youth policy standards, in other policy fields. The two key terms of this Youth Knowledge Book, “youth mainstreaming” and “youth perspective”, are thus closely related, even intertwined. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe recently made these terms key anchor points of their (youth) policy, with the EU focusing on “youth mainstreaming” (Council of the European Union 2023; European Commission 2024) and the Council of Europe on “youth perspective” (Council of Europe 2023; Joint Council on Youth 2023). Although many questions on implementation still remain, the idea of youth policy being cross-sectoral, with the perspectives of young people being integrated into other policy areas, has become a political principle. This is mirrored in research publications like that of Tomaž Deželan, who, based on the practices of a variety of international organisations, has developed a theoretical framework defining and conceptualising youth mainstreaming (Deželan 2024).

Despite existing concepts and implementation strategies, an analytical framework, allowing researchers to analyse youth mainstreaming policies and practices, is lacking. Such a framework would offer the possibility of concise and comparative research on youth mainstreaming across institutions and countries. The aim of the present chapter is thus to contribute to research and analysis of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives by presenting a draft for an analytical framework for research on youth mainstreaming policies and practices. Methodologically, this chapter builds on research by the Centre for European Youth Policy at the German Youth Institute, which has already been presented in various articles and at conferences. As such, it is the further development of our work of the last three years and, with the development of an analytical framework, the theoretical layout for a comparative research project to be conducted over the next three years.

Building and presenting this analytical framework is done in five steps. Starting with an outline of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective concepts, the chapter situates youth policy across the range of sectoral, cross-sectoral and life situations policy. It continues through framing neo-institutionalism and cosmopolitanism as contextualising factors of analysis, then explores implementation mechanisms and concludes with presenting the full framework alongside its limitations.

Youth mainstreaming, perspectives of young people and youth perspective

The growing literature on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective has also led to a vast amount of confusing and partially competing terms. In this chapter, “youth mainstreaming” (lower case) refers to theory (for example, Deželan 2024), whereas “Youth Mainstreaming” (capitalised) describes the EU concept (Council of the European Union 2023). Likewise, we distinguish “Youth Perspective” (capitalised) as the concept of the Council of Europe (Joint Council on Youth 2023), and we use “youth perspective(s)” or “perspectives of young people” in a general sense.

The above-mentioned cross-sectoral nature of the lives of young people is central to the youth policy of both the EU and the Council of Europe. The EU, for example, strives to “improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors, notably employment, education, health and social inclusion” (Council of the European Union 2018). It does so through a dual approach, which “tackle[s] youth-relevant issues ... by mainstreaming initiatives across policy areas and ... by specific initiatives in the youth sector” (Council of the European Union 2018).

Following the 2022 European Year of Youth, the EU developed Youth Mainstreaming further via the Council Conclusions on Youth Mainstreaming (Council of the European Union 2023) and the Commission communication on the legacy of the European Year of Youth (European Commission 2024). The latter introduced a youth check, a Commission Youth Network of youth correspondents and the

EU Youth Stakeholders Group as new mainstreaming instruments. The EU Youth Dialogue and the policy dialogues between commissioners and young people are further important tools that can support mainstreaming. According to the EU, Youth Mainstreaming is:

an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes. Mainstreaming ensures that the challenges and concerns inherent to young people are not addressed in isolation but are integrated cross-cuttingly into broader policy frameworks (Council of the European Union 2023).

In parallel, the Council of Europe developed its Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective “in the Organisation’s intergovernmental and other deliberations as youth participation in decision-making processes improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue” (Council of Europe 2023). The reference framework is founded on a participatory approach between young people and the different departments and bodies within the Council of Europe. The Youth Perspective is framed as an attitude (thinking with young people), an experience (learning from and with young people), a skill (participating with young people) and an action (acting with and for young people) (Joint Council on Youth 2023).

These different conceptualisations highlight a cross-sectoral approach and youth participation as central principles of youth policy. Analysing the usage of youth mainstreaming in different international organisations, Tomaž Deželan developed a theoretical concept of youth mainstreaming. It is an equality-driven approach, which integrates perspectives (such as youth or gender) across processes and policies (Deželan 2024: 7). As such, youth mainstreaming requires policy reforms to incorporate the perspectives of young people into all stages of decision making. This brings us to the question of what previous policy processes looked like, and particularly what youth policy constitutes.

Conceptualising youth policy

The concept of “youth” is historically, socially and politically determined (Spence 2005; Williamson and Côté 2022). Historically, it emerged in the early 20th century, when child labour laws and compulsory public education were established, thus introducing adolescence as a new, transitional, phase of life between childhood and adulthood. Politically, “youth” became a policy field after the First World War, when concepts of youth welfare policy were developed²⁵ and socially, in western European countries, concepts of youth work were introduced (Verschelden et al. 2009).

25. For example, in Germany, where the orientation of a youth policy as a youth welfare policy or a holistic, cross-sectoral youth policy was discussed and decided on in the early 1920s (Mielenz and Münchmeier 2001).

From a political and social point of view, youth can be conceptualised as both an age cohort as well as an independent phase of life marked by transition from childhood to adulthood. As an age cohort, youth is defined according to national contexts. A brief glance at the European Union's Youth Wiki²⁶ reveals that European countries define the age cohort differently. What most youth age cohorts in Europe have in common is that youth generally begins around the age of about 14 years and does not end at the age of majority, but can extend up to the age of 27, or even beyond. In addition, international youth age cohorts vary, from 15 to 29 years old in the EU (European Commission 2025), 18 to 30 years at the Council of Europe as an age limit for its youth policy activities (Lavchyan and Williamson 2019), and 15 to 24 at the United Nations (United Nations n.d.).

Furthermore, youth is considered to be a transitional phase from childhood dependency to adult independence (United Nations n.d.). As a fourth phase of life, it was added to the three existing phases of life (childhood, adulthood, old age) in the 1970s (Chevalier 2018). Although youth has often been regarded as a phase of complex and reversible transitions (Walther 2006), a fluid stage of life between dependency and independence, there have recently been developments in which youth is considered not only as a transitional phase but also as an independent phase of life. To theoretically underpin this phase of life as independent rather than just transitional, the 15th Child and Youth Report of Germany identified three core challenges young people are facing and which qualify youth as a phase of life: qualification, independence and self-positioning. During this phase of life, young people acquire general educational, social and professional skills (qualification); they assume sociocultural, economic and political responsibility (independence); and they develop a balance between subjective freedom and social belonging (self-positioning) (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2017: 15).

Based on these approaches, we thus conceptualise the idea of youth in youth policy as a collective term for young people between approximately the ages of 14 and 29, whose life phase is characterised by qualification, independence and self-positioning.

The concept of youth policy

Having defined the target group of youth policy, we now turn towards its scope and structure. Traditionally, policy fields arise pragmatically and are aligned with ministerial responsibilities like foreign affairs or employment. In its analysis of policy fields, political science differentiates between polity (structures), policy (content) and politics (process). In the case of youth policy, such an analytical approach helps to combine both departmental and cross-sectoral conceptualisations of youth policy.

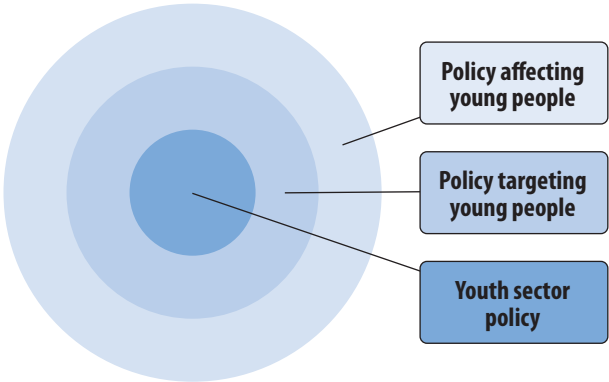
26. The chapter "Youth policy governance" in the Youth Wiki is available for each country at <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/countries>.

“Doing” youth policy is part of politics, that is, the process dimension of decision making. It means that making policy is based on “doing” and “acting”, thus actively using decision-making processes to shape policy. According to Luhmann (2002), the main mechanism of decision-making processes is that of power and therefore the process of decision making (politics) is the part of social reality in which power is used to fulfil the function of making collectively binding decisions for a society. Translated to any form of mainstreaming, it is thus assumed that, in a political context of decision making, the central aspect of any mainstreaming is that it is intended to influence political decisions. In doing so an attempt is made to use power. An important mechanism through which power can be used is participation, which is therefore a core element of mainstreaming. Such mainstreaming, participation and the resulting use of power happen within organisations, states or internationally, and both within the youth policy field and in other policy fields. Mainstreaming thus remains a phenomenon of political and of power realities. Consequently, in order to analytically frame youth policy and its relation to youth mainstreaming, normative claims supporting the importance of youth mainstreaming should be analysed within political (power) realities in decision-making processes.

Across Europe, youth policy is anchored differently in structural terms. It may be a department within social, educational, employment or other policy, or even a cross-departmental policy issue. The different structural anchoring contributes to the perceived blurred nature of youth policy. Analysing youth mainstreaming, however, requires a clear conceptual idea of youth policy. We therefore propose a conceptual differentiation between policy affecting young people, policy targeting young people and youth sector policy. The youth sector:

broadly includes a spectrum of youth-related activity, including practice by youth organisations, projects involving young people, building and street-based work, youth participation, digital engagement, policy that affects young people’s lives through governments and NGOs, and research on young people, youth policy and youth work. (Hofmann-van de Poll and Williamson 2021: 25)

Figure 1 – Multidimensional model of youth policy
(adapted from Hofmann-van de Poll et al. 2022)



Across these three dimensions and to varying degrees, the analytical categorisation of content (policy), structure (polity) and processes (politics) is embedded. These categorisations provide the characteristics of the three dimensions. For policy, it is the characteristic of whether actors explicitly aim their policies at young people. On the polity side, the three dimensions are characterised by the degree to which actors consider themselves designing and implementing youth policy. This is linked to how actors define the role of their own structures within youth policy. And when it comes to politics, the three dimensions are characterised by the above-mentioned power relations and the way actors make use of youth policy principles such as youth participation.

Both dimensions and analytical categorisations are influenced by the concept of implicit and explicit youth policy (Lüders 2015). Implicit youth policy impacts the lives of young people but is not framed as youth policy. An example of such implicit youth policy would be school policy, which in most countries is considered to be educational rather than youth policy. Explicit youth policy, on the other hand, is designed and implemented intentionally as youth policy with structures and processes ideally based on youth sector policy principles and concepts like meaningful participation. This differentiation between implicit and explicit youth policy will prove to be relevant when it comes to youth mainstreaming.

Taken together, the outer dimension of youth policy in Figure 1 thus understands youth policy as all policy affecting young people. This is the widest understanding of youth policy. Young people are implicitly affected by policy, but the policy is not explicitly aimed at young people, nor do actors consider themselves as designing or implementing youth policy. This outer dimension would encompass the totality of policies, as strictly speaking all policy is youth policy, as young people are part of the society for and by which policy is designed. An example would be pension, social security or housing policy.

The middle dimension of youth policy consists of policy not only affecting young people but also explicitly targeting young people in major and minor ways. However, those designing and implementing the policy mostly do not consider their policy to be youth policy. There may be some awareness that a policy can affect young people – often negatively, and sometimes actors in this dimension target young people with a youth policy mindset, but often they do not. If they do, such a youth policy mindset is hardly expressed explicitly. This is, for example, the case in education (targeting young people as pupils or students) or employment policy (targeting, for example, young people not in education, employment or training).

The inner dimension of youth policy follows a narrow conception of youth policy, considering youth policy as youth sector policy. In some countries, this sector is associated with youth work and youth welfare services, whereas in others it encompasses education, culture or sports. It affects and targets young people, and those designing and implementing youth sector policy consider themselves as youth policy actors.

Figure 2 shows how different features characterise the dimensions of youth policy.

Figure 2 – Dimensions of youth policy and its characteristics

	Content (policy)	Structure (polity)	Processes (politics)
	Actors explicitly aim their policies at young people	Actors consider themselves designing and/or implementing youth policy	Actors make use of youth policy principles such as youth participation
Policy affecting young people	No	No	No
Policy targeting young people	Yes	No	No
Youth sector policy	Yes	Yes	Yes

This conceptualisation of youth policy as a multidimensional model allows us to capture different views on youth policy in a single model. What it does not (yet) capture, however, is the development of youth mainstreaming. Recently, youth policy methods and principles, particularly youth participation, have been adopted by those in the middle and outer youth policy dimensions. The depth of this implementation, especially with regard to the “meaningful” in meaningful youth participation, should however be discussed.

**Youth mainstreaming
between normative claim and political reality**

Various theoretical approaches can be used to analyse the topic of youth mainstreaming. This section presents the concepts of neo-institutionalism and cosmopolitan empire as theoretical analytical frameworks. Both focus on governance, that is, “structures and practices of co-ordination and control without a sovereign power” (Benz et al. 2007). Although often applied in the context of EU policy making, neo-institutionalism and cosmopolitanism have a wider European use, as they provide the opportunity to analyse the relationship between (European) youth policy and youth mainstreaming through the individual components of generality and normativity. Moreover, the neo-institutional tradition makes significant contributions in the field of research on gender mainstreaming (Ahrens 2021; Mergaert 2012; Verloo 2016; Walby 2005), being partly applicable to the discourse on youth mainstreaming as well. The cosmopolitan approach of Beck and Grande (2007), on the other hand, orients towards research methodology, pointing out methodological nationalism as a central weakness of European research. Analysing this so-called blind spot in the social science study of European politics, we can better understand and contextualise the developments of youth mainstreaming at the European level.

Neo-institutionalism

The neo-institutionalist tradition, at the interface of sociology and political science, provides a fruitful theoretical contextualisation of youth mainstreaming as it takes into account adaptation (isomorphism) and normative logic of action (efficiency myth).

With isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), neo-institutionalism conceptualises the normative pressure on governmental actors to adapt to institutional standards, subsequently leading to a gradual convergence towards norms and standards. Institutional governance strategies, such as the use of reporting mechanisms by the EU and Council of Europe, can put pressure on member states to take action in a particular policy field. Ideally, as member states would prefer to avoid losing legitimacy in political discourse, they would adapt – or say they adapt – to the norms and values of the organisation. Such proceedings may lead to a process of harmonisation and standardisation in a particular policy field. However, as is forcefully argued in gender mainstreaming literature, this also includes the risk of box ticking and formalism when formal norm adaptation, for example through laws, is not followed up by implementation (Lombardo and Mergaert 2013; Caglar 2013). Such formalism enables member states and organisations to “keep up appearances” by maintaining standardised and often legally binding, formal structures, while their policies, measures and activities vary according to practical considerations (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 357). With regard to youth mainstreaming, isomorphism thus points out the normative pressure on governmental actors to implement youth mainstreaming, while at the same time there is the risk of formalisation, that is, actors implementing mainstreaming on paper only.

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), isomorphism provides a dual perception of power in politics. First, there is the power of setting agendas and of defining norms and standards that shape and guide behaviour. By setting the agenda, political actors can influence the norms and standards they should adapt to. Second, there is the power to actually set and change the organisational structure of politics, which then remains unchallenged for years (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 157). Normative pressure can thus change the structural processes of decision making. In the case of youth mainstreaming, political actors have the power to put youth mainstreaming onto the institutional agenda, as for example has already been done with the Youth Perspective in the Council of Europe Reykjavik Declaration (Council of Europe 2023). The subsequent reference framework developed by the Joint Council on Youth (2023) shows how the organisational structure can then be changed. In the EU, the Council of Youth Ministers adopted the Council Conclusions on Youth Mainstreaming (Council of the European Union 2023), followed by the Commission communication on the legacy of the European Year of Youth (European Commission 2024), which introduced new mainstreaming instruments for the EU as an organisation, including the Commission Youth Network of youth correspondents, the youth check and the EU Youth Stakeholders Group.

The second main concept of neo-institutionalism is the efficiency myth, also known as the rationality myth (Meyer and Rowan 1977). It is related to the concept of isomorphism as it puts the logic of action into focus. Neo-institutionalism

assumes that the logic of action in politics does not focus on the outcomes of political processes by treating preferences as given rather than adaptable, but is based on normatively embedded ideas about appropriate behaviour (logic of appropriateness) (Krücken and Hasse 1999: 37). Political decision-making processes are thus less oriented towards the most effective enforcement of political goals, but more towards maintaining and gaining legitimacy (Krücken and Hasse 1999: 38). Following the efficiency myth, youth mainstreaming becomes contextualised as a normative logic of action dedicated to gaining and then maintaining legitimacy in decision making.

These two neo-institutionalist concepts therefore have direct implications for theorising and practising youth mainstreaming. First, isomorphism implies that the effects of mainstreaming processes are difficult to be planned or foreseen. Despite positive intentions, such processes run the risk of being a formalised checkbox rather than normative standardisation. This is influenced by the underlying rationale of youth mainstreaming. Is it about influencing agenda setting, norms and standards? Or is it also about a lasting change of the organisational structure of politics? Second, the logic of action behind mainstreaming risks succumbing to the efficiency myth that is largely determined by the political pursuit of policy legitimisation.

Cosmopolitanism

Against the background of rising nationalism, cosmopolitanism helps to understand the dynamics of European politics as well as sociological European research. It goes beyond a national and state-centred view on European policy. As an analytical state-centred research agenda of European policy, cosmopolitanism discusses the EU, discusses the EU as a confederation of states (intergovernmentalism) or as a federal state (federalism), comparing European developments with national familiarities. Cosmopolitanism criticises such methodological nationalism as misjudging new realities (Beck and Grande 2007).

European realities, both in the EU and in the Council of Europe, are facing new modes of governance (Tömmel 2008), with each organisation having developed distinctive modes of governance that are not comparable to modes of governance in their constituent member states. In the youth field, the EU adopted an open method of co-ordination, while the Council of Europe established co-management as a mode of governance. Their co-operation in the framework of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (Youth Partnership) is another example of new modes of governance.

Although member states play a major role in decision making in both organisations, the organisations are also perceived as independent actors. For example, with regard to the youth field, this became visible in a study on the European youth work ecosystem, where both governmental and non-governmental actors formulated clear expectations towards the EU and the Council of Europe as institutional actors (Atanasov and Hofmann-van de Poll 2025). While not a state, the EU, as a supra-governmental institution, can to a certain extent exercise state

functions and regulate member states on some issues (Tömmel 2008: 13). The Council of Europe, as an intergovernmental institution, cannot and requires consensus among its members. Institutional policies of both the EU and the Council of Europe are mostly directed towards executive actors like national and regional administrations or non-governmental actors, who in turn intervene in social and economic decision-making processes. This interaction between different levels is a focus of cosmopolitan research on the EU, and to a lesser extent, the Council of Europe.

In EU politics, a focus is on the development of procedures structuring interaction between levels and providing orientation to sub-national actors regarding goal-compliant policy implementation. In an attempt to categorise the EU in its state functions, Beck and Grande (2007: 85) describe the EU as a cosmopolitan and post-hegemonic empire. This empire is based on the dissolution of national borders, as can be seen in for example the Schengen area; voluntary membership; consensus in decision making; transnational economic, social and political interdependencies; and the resulting added value and political benefit for all member states. Decision making takes place in a highly complex structure of institutional, material, and ideological and cultural conflicts and is based on a “meta-power game” (Beck and Grande 2007: 211). The contextualisation of decision making as a complex structure of different interests and conflicts, brought forward by both member states and non-governmental organisations, can be observed in research on the Council of Europe as well (Stivachtis and Habegger 2017; Trommer and Chari 2006).

Following the ideas of cosmopolitan research, the arena in which youth mainstreaming is developed and takes place is defined by such complex conflicts as well as power games. There is no clearly defined policy in which a youth perspective should be integrated or considered – rather, a youth perspective is brought into an arena in which negotiations between different actors and conflicts take place and where decisions are made based on power. This brings to the surface contemplations on cross-sectoral youth policy, where power dynamics between the youth sector and other policy sectors play a role that should not be underestimated (for Germany, for example, see Hofmann-van de Poll 2017).

Neo-institutionalism, cosmopolitanism and youth mainstreaming

Both neo-institutionalist and cosmopolitan theory provide useful anchor points for analysing youth mainstreaming. Youth mainstreaming can be considered as a new mode of governance in a complex arena governed by conflicts, legitimacy and power. It underlines political strategies (Council of Europe 2023; Council of the European Union 2023) with normative claims around the integration of the perspectives of young people into decision-making processes. On the surface, youth mainstreaming is thus about power-sharing and participation in decision making.

In theory, parallels can be drawn to gender mainstreaming, where attempts were made to combine new norms and practices (promotion of gender equality) with informal and formal rules, thus determining the organisational structure of politics through institutional change processes (Ahrens 2021: 12). However, Minto and Mergaert (2018), among many other critical reflections, assert that the implementation of gender mainstreaming mainly stayed at the formal level. Though some laws were established, unwritten customs and rules could not be decisively changed. Practical implementation focused on the promotion of efficient governance rather than feminist aspirations (Minto and Mergaert 2018: 204-206). Regarding the latter, informal agreements and expressions of interest were the rule, rather than binding rules of implementation. Youth mainstreaming bears a similar risk if the declarations of intent to include the perspectives of young people in all phases of decision making remain superficial rather than meaningful and binding in their implementation.

With the EU Council Conclusions on youth mainstreaming (Council of the European Union 2023) and the Council of Europe Reykjavik Declaration (Council of Europe 2023), youth mainstreaming now has European political strategies established to enforce normative claims. Since political strategies are fundamentally beyond a simple utilitarian rationality, youth mainstreaming is not only purpose-oriented, but it is also largely about political legitimation, the protection of competences and a general increase in the efficiency of European politics. Since we are talking about a political space that is neither a nation state nor a confederation of states, but rather a new form of political system, youth mainstreaming must also be seen as a micro-process of this politics. The decisive aspect of this new form of governance is that distribution of power and power relations no longer correspond to those of the nation state and are thus changing the rules of the game. Youth mainstreaming functions differently at different European, national, regional and local levels because the character of power is also different at all levels. Against this background, it becomes clear that the effects or success of youth mainstreaming are therefore likely to be difficult to assess.

Implementation mechanisms

So far, we have explored youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as well as key policy dimensions of youth policy and its influencing contextual factors. We now turn towards the placement of youth mainstreaming within youth policy and how young people's perspectives can shape policy making.

Recalling the dimensions of youth policy and their characteristics, youth policy can take explicit and implicit forms. In Figure 2, we argued that explicit youth policy only took place within the youth sector itself. However, the mechanisms of youth mainstreaming change implicit youth policy in the middle and outer dimensions, where young people are affected by a policy or a policy is aimed at young people, into explicit youth policy. In Figure 3, this mainstreaming process is symbolised by an arrow. Actors in other policy fields will make use of youth policy principles and/or consider themselves as designing and implementing youth policy.

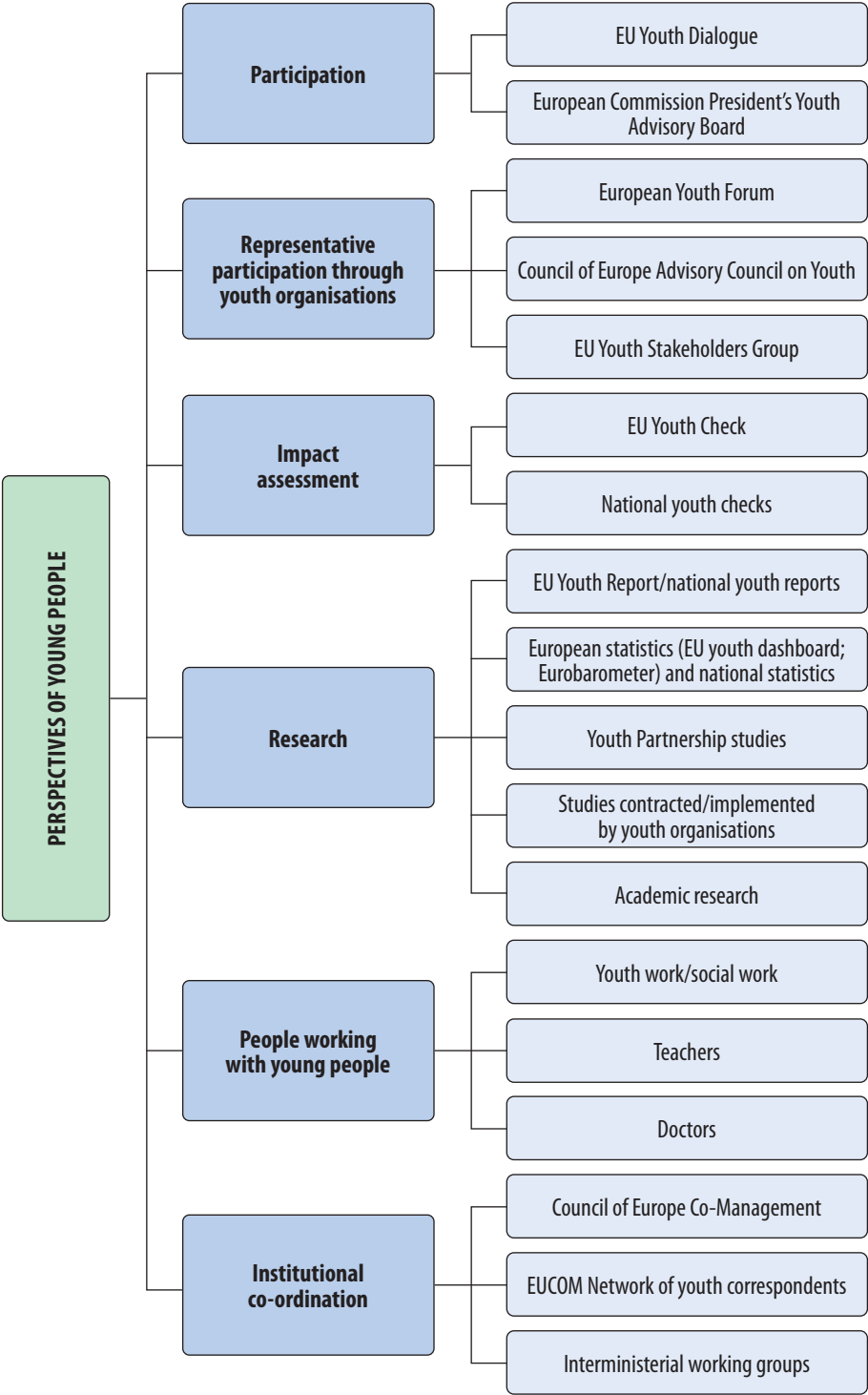
Figure 3 – The process of mainstreaming youth in the dimensions of youth policy – no → yes

	Content (policy)	Structure (policy)	Processes (politics)
	Actors explicitly aim their policies at young people	Actors consider themselves designing and/or implementing youth policy	Actors make use of youth policy principles such as youth participation
Policy affecting young people	No → Yes	No → Yes	No → Yes
Policy targeting young people	Yes	No → Yes	No → Yes
Youth sector policy	Yes	Yes	Yes

In particular, youth mainstreaming creates awareness in other policy fields that the perspectives of young people matter and that, by acknowledging these perspectives in deliberations, actors contribute to the qualification, self-positioning and independence of young people. As such, they contribute to the empowerment of young people as part of the present and future of society. The focus of youth mainstreaming in its analytical concept thus lies in those youth policy fields affecting the lives of young people and/or aiming at young people as a target group, rather than youth sector policy itself. The role of the youth sector, in terms of access, methods and principles on which youth mainstreaming is based, may however serve as an important contextual factor in the development of youth mainstreaming in other policy areas.

Youth mainstreaming, in this regard, is therefore by no means equivalent to youth participation, although the latter certainly is an important aspect of youth mainstreaming. Youth participation is, however, not the only way to include and acknowledge youth perspectives in policy making. Knowledge about the perspectives of young people, which can be about being as heterogeneous as young people, is not limited to (representative) democratic participation mechanisms. Figure 4 shows a non-exhaustive diagram of ways in which the perspectives of young people can shape policy making.

Figure 4 – Ways to inform policy about the perspectives of young people



Meaningful direct and indirect youth participation are the two most important sources of informing policy about the perspectives of young people. The differentiation between direct and indirect youth participation is made through the way young people arrive at their participation: with direct youth participation, young people can participate as individuals, whereas with indirect youth participation, the persons participating are representing organisations, which in turn often represent young people. Direct and indirect participation allegedly focus on the target group itself (young people) and their representatives as a source of information, and enhance direct contact between young people and decision makers. As a form of youth mainstreaming, the Youth Perspective of the Council of Europe is built upon these two forms of participation.

Impact assessment mechanisms have moved into the spotlight recently. In 2024, the European Union announced its own youth check, which is similar to those in some European countries (European Commission 2024). Existing impact assessment mechanisms are organised very differently. What they have in common, however, is that they assess the effect laws and political measures have on young people. The outcomes of impact assessment are taken into account in decision-making processes (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency and Youth Wiki 2024).

A further mechanism of how the perspectives of young people can feed into decision-making processes is research. In addition to a vast amount of academic research on the situation and lives of young people, there is an increasing body of policy-driven research and knowledge about young people. This includes the EU Youth Report and many national youth reports but also, at a European level, the studies commissioned by the Youth Partnership.

We consider consultation with people working or engaging with young people as a fifth category to become informed with the perspectives of young people. Youth workers, but also others like teachers or doctors, are amplifiers or seismographs of young people's perspectives. With a different approach compared to research and youth organisations, people working with young people often have an eye on the diverse needs and interests of young people. At the same time, this group of people is often neglected as an (additional) source of information on the perspectives of young people because there are no formal feedback mechanisms or links between them and policy makers.

Finally, institutional co-operation is a sixth category including the perspectives of young people in decision-making processes. Compared to the other categories, however, it is more diffuse. It functions in two ways. First, these forms of institutional co-operation co-ordinate the efforts of all policy areas concerning young people. In this function, such institutional arrangements are about (governmental) co-ordination of youth policy in its broadest dimension rather than about youth mainstreaming. Its second function, however, brings youth perspectives into decision making. This can be done directly, as with the co-management system of the Council of Europe, or more indirectly. The federal Interministerial Working Group on Youth in Germany, for example, regularly invites young people to present work and project outcomes that may be relevant for policy development currently being discussed.

These six pillars provide for a wide range of youth perspectives informing policy making, with each having its own rationale. Informing policy making with the perspectives of young people can – and in our opinion should – not be built upon a single source of knowledge. A combination of different mechanisms provides a holistic and “lived experience” approach to youth perspectives, thus fostering evidence- and knowledge-based policy (Hofmann-van de Poll and Pelzer 2023) as a cornerstone of youth mainstreaming.

Conclusions

The discourse on youth mainstreaming and the inclusion of youth perspectives in different spheres of policy has picked up speed during recent years. On the one hand, against the backlash of multiple crises affecting the lives of young people, there is a growing consensus of the need to acknowledge and incorporate young people’s perspectives into the development, implementation and evaluation of policy. On the other hand, both the EU and the Council of Europe developed the concepts of Youth Mainstreaming and Youth Perspective, which propelled them to a high position on the political agenda. However, the concepts developed in the EU and the Council of Europe simultaneously mystify and clarify youth mainstreaming theory. Although they use the terminology of the theory, their concepts of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are more narrowly defined than general youth mainstreaming theory. This may be due to the fact that in both institutions, more recent processes like the EU Youth Stakeholders Group and the working group on the implementation of the integration of a youth perspective in the Council of Europe have just been launched. Nevertheless, the concepts show what the practical implementation of youth mainstreaming can look like. In this regard, we consider the concepts of Youth Mainstreaming and Youth Perspective as part of a general, both theoretical and political, discourse on youth mainstreaming. With Youth Mainstreaming and Youth Perspective drawing on the theoretical discourse of mainstreaming youth perspectives, two European examples of different forms of youth mainstreaming in different contexts have emerged. Where the Council of Europe announced Youth Perspective as an organisational strategy based on the inclusion of perspectives of young people through youth participation within its institution, the EU originally developed a political strategy to achieve its overarching goals as a post-national political system. The European Commission also developed an organisational strategy, with a series of tools and mechanisms to mainstream youth perspectives in its work. This includes, for example, the aforementioned Youth Sounding Board, the EU Youth Stakeholders Group and the youth check. Both forms – organisational and political – do not detract from the fact that the measures taken by both institutions could be (and, in modified forms, are) implemented at national, regional or local level as well.

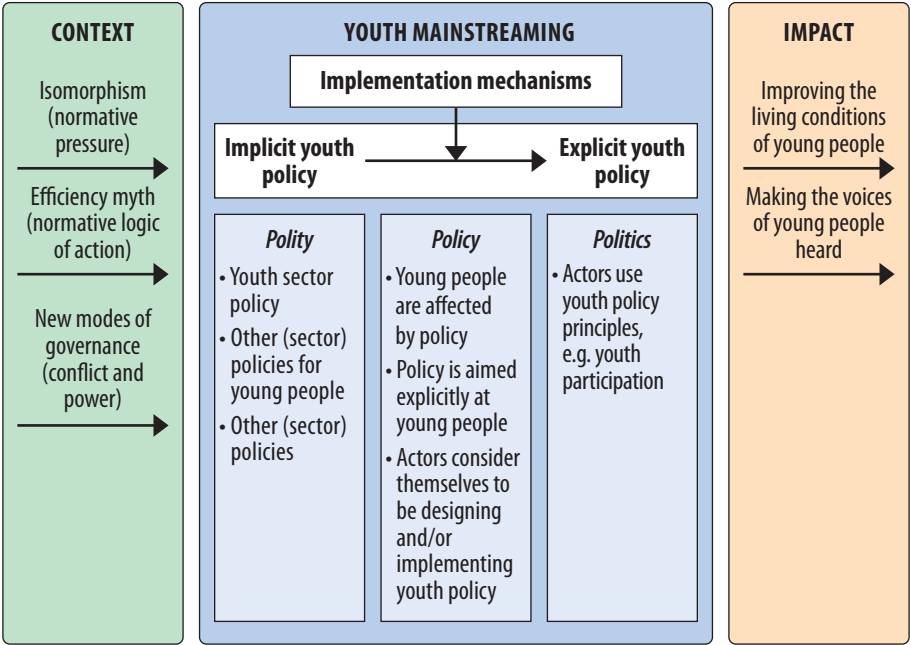
To provide an analytical framework of interpretation, we have conceptualised youth policy in general as an explicit and implicit policy supporting young people in the youth phase of life, supporting and empowering them to be qualified, to reach independence and to self-position. Youth mainstreaming is the process of

turning implicit youth policy into explicit youth policy, thus connecting its three dimensions. As a normative political strategy of all levels and sectors, it goes beyond purely utilitarian rationality. Its main normative core is the consistent inclusion of young people’s perspectives in policy making, implementation and evaluation. However, following the warnings of neo-institutionalism, believing in and realising a normative core are two different questions. In analysing youth mainstreaming processes, therefore, questions regarding maintaining power and the interpretive dominance of institutions, organisations and authorities have to be considered.

As the range of implementation mechanisms shows, however, the incorporation of youth participation can be – among various other mechanisms – part of youth mainstreaming, but it is by no means to be perceived as equivalent to youth mainstreaming. On the contrary, the various mechanisms available to securing youth perspectives show that youth mainstreaming may take place without the need for youth participation. Whether this is normatively desired is a different question and open to debate. In relation to youth mainstreaming, youth participation may provide legitimacy to decision makers for the decisions taken and affecting young people in one way or another. Youth participation may also offer young people access to a policy field normally closed to them, despite its influence, at least indirectly, over their lives. Youth mainstreaming can thus confer benefits for decision makers as well as for young people.

Taking the theoretical approaches together, a framework of analysis for research on mainstreaming youth perspectives would bring context, external influences and different dimensions of youth policy together.

Figure 5 – Analytical framework of youth mainstreaming



This draft analytical framework may be the beginning of a larger body of research on youth mainstreaming. Further theoretical and empirical research will show whether these concepts are fruitful or further theories and models need to be studied. In general, this analytical framework leads to a number of questions for further empirical research. These are, first, the question of the extent to which youth mainstreaming processes influence power relations in political processes and between actors. Such a question may have an influence on the role of youth participation in policy making, including analysing the relationship between youth mainstreaming and youth participation processes. Second, by monitoring existing youth mainstreaming processes, researchers and decision makers would get more information on the push-and-pull factors of youth mainstreaming. This could be done through comparative research on the design and implementation of youth mainstreaming at different (European, national, regional or local) levels, following an actor and action perspective, but also through research on the polity, policy and politics dimensions of youth mainstreaming. Third, from a more theoretical perspective, it would be interesting to analyse the relationship between normative claims and the political reality of youth mainstreaming as a strategy.

Ultimately, youth mainstreaming is about policy for, with and by young people. The key question for both policy and research is, therefore, whether youth mainstreaming processes can indeed positively influence the living conditions and life prospects of young people and strengthen the chance of their voices being heard. The proposed draft analytical framework may contribute to researching, analysing and even answering exactly these questions.

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Chapter 4

Youth perspectives in times of global threats

Etch Kalala and Lasse Siurala

The Finnish professor of youth studies Tommi Hoikkala used to argue from a constructivist point of view (Hoikkala 1971: 38-50) that “youth” as an empirical category does not exist. There are only numerous context-specific interpretations of youth. “Youth perspective” differs according to the social or professional point of view of the speaker. Whatever we think of constructivism, there can be versatile views on a youth perspective.

There is a long history of institutional practices and speakers who have constructed youth perspective. Youth perspective in societal decision making is embedded in the ethics of youth work: “to develop [young people’s] sense of agency, of being able to make decisions and be active in their own lives and their own futures, is at the core of the purpose of youth work” (Sercombe 2013: 129). In youth work practice it often means empowering youth agency (Young 2006). The youth policy discourse often uses the term “youth participation”, which has developed into impressive formats of local youth councils, national youth councils, international youth advocacy bodies, youth dialogues in the European Union (EU) and co-management with the governments in the Council of Europe.

We have also seen extensive youth climate protests indicating the plurality of forms of dissent by young people (Giugni and Grasso 2021). The social context of the former type of youth perspective is institutional, often linked to bodies of representative democracy, such as the municipal or government administration, or European organisations. The actors are often youth organisations and their umbrella bodies. Youth protests express their voice typically through mass demonstrations on the streets. There are also myriad forms of expression and dissent ranging from personal lifestyle choices to educational activities to facilitate the communication between young people and the decision makers. The actors in mass protests and educational projects are typically unorganised youth (de Moor et al. 2021). Both institutional youth participation and the spontaneous non-hierarchical youth protests and movements appear qualitatively different, each with their own particularities, weaknesses and strengths (Siurala 2022: 18-25).

Youth work and youth policy now operate under several global threats, including deformation of democracy, accelerating climate change and the harm of unregulated digitalisation. Increasing populist governance threatens the public sector, including youth administrations, in its ability to uphold its moral and ethical standards. These illiberal trends make it difficult for the public sector to defend the rights and interests of all citizens. Researchers call this “deformation of democracy” (Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider 2024). We argue – and this guides the rest of the chapter – that such deformation is dangerous because youth policy in most European contexts relies on participation and active citizenship. The youth field therefore cannot stay passive when its core values, democracy among them, are threatened.

At the same time climate change and unregulated digitalisation are also existential threats to democracy and young people in particular. Climate change has been ranked by young people as the most serious problem facing the earth (Special Eurobarometer 2023). Almost all young people use digital media, seen as both an opportunity and a risk. Still, concerns about harm are increasing among parents, the public, educators, researchers and the young people themselves (Common Sense Media 2025). Yet youth work and youth policy structures have been slow to integrate digitalisation into their goals and activities.²⁷

This chapter is a theoretical text drawing on relevant scientific literature, on administrative research and on a limited set of real-life examples. However, many of its conclusions are open to further discussion.

The chapter unfolds along several thematic axes. It begins by examining how illiberal populism and the deformation of democracy gradually erode public administration and place the ethical foundations of youth work and youth policy under increasing pressure. It then explores whether youth work can maintain a stance of neutrality in the face of populist agendas that challenge its core values, highlighting how institutional caution – manifested through practices such as “sitting on the fence” or “keeping one’s head down” – may amount to complicity in democratic backsliding. The third thematic axe considers how the youth field might actively respond to this deformation by reasserting its ethical foundations, through strategies that include institutional collective action, the defence of human rights and the strengthening of youth work’s autonomy. The fourth thematic axe addresses the difficulties youth structures face in responding to existential threats such as climate change and unregulated digitalisation, emphasising the persistence of political caution, structural inertia and the need to diversify youth participation. Building on this, the fifth thematic axe interrogates the epistemological underpinnings of the youth perspective, particularly in light of emerging post-anthropocentric and more-than-human frameworks. Finally, the chapter calls for a critical self-assessment of institutional routines and discursive practices in the youth field, arguing for renewed frameworks of youth agency that move beyond historical path dependencies and policy narratives.

27. As an exception the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership has, during recent years, produced literature on digitalisation and youth and climate change.

Deformation of democracy – Public administration threatened

The first threat is populist governance targeted generally at public administration, including youth affairs. Recent research suggests that public administration must take action to preserve democracy. Recommendations are made for the youth field to respond.

Recent research in public administration has raised significant alarms regarding the global undermining of democracy by populist politics. Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider (2024: 781) assert that “throughout the world, challenges to democratic governance are commonplace”. Similarly, Yesilkagit et al. (2024: 414) observe that “liberal democracy has become vulnerable to illiberal political movements and the gradual erosion of democratic institutions”. The attempts by populist politicians to exert control over public administration are more extreme than previous efforts to politicise the bureaucracy (Cooper 2021). Yesilkagit et al. (2024: 416) say “they delve deeper into the core structures and values of the civil service which, once changed, permanently alter systemic components”. Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider refer to these actions by political authorities – which diminish the ability of citizens to engage in legal political action – as a “deformation of democracy”.

Illiberal populist political authorities can render it difficult for civil servants to adhere to their professional codes – including their commitment to facts, expertise, human rights, moral integrity and equality for all citizens. Under such conditions, the traditional stance of public administration acting “neutrally” (making decisions based on objective criteria, without favouring any particular group or individual) is no longer sufficient to counterbalance the efforts of illiberal politicians to undermine democracy. Researchers argue that “neutral obedience amounts to complicity” (Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider 2024: 781). Furthermore, given that a commitment to public values like democratic governance lies at the core of public administration, Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider (2024: 798) contend that “in our view, protection of democracy should trump neutral competence and visions of apolitical public administrators”.

The pressing question, then, is how public administration should react to “deformation of democracy”, “illiberal populist politics” and “democratic backsliding”. Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider (2024) identify several strategies, including maintaining neutral competence, exercising patience, relying on ethical codes, engaging in whistleblowing, exiting one’s position and participating in “guerrilla government”. While each of these approaches has its advantages and drawbacks, Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider ultimately propose institutional collective action by public administration – specifically, the formation of an advocacy body to counteract the deformation of democracy. Yesilkagit et al. suggest the establishment of a “guardian state”, envisaged as a defensive barrier against illiberal tendencies. This guardian state would emphasise the cultivation of the moral compass of the bureaucracy and its leaders, focusing on a commitment to citizens’ interests, human rights,

the rule of law and the constitution. Additionally, they advocate institutional measures such as conducting research on the effects of democratic backsliding, strengthening administrative autonomy and enhancing internal monitoring mechanisms.

Can youth work remain neutral?

Over the past 15 years, public youth work has undergone significant funding cuts in many countries. Even in Finland – long regarded for its strong tradition of youth work – the sector has experienced a decline in its perceived significance. Municipal youth services, which also support youth organisations, have increasingly been merged with other sectors, leading to a reduction in their administrative and political standing (Ord et al. 2018: 53). These trends are not isolated: cases of political defunding have been documented across Europe. Between 2010 and 2023, government decisions resulted in the closure of 1 243 youth centres in Wales and England (Unison 2024). The YMCA reports a 77% reduction in local authority expenditure on youth services since 2010/11 (Frontier Economics and UK Youth 2022: 4). In 2023, Finland's coalition government discontinued all funding to the Finnish Network for Local Youth Work (Kanuuna), an organisation active in training and advocacy (Kanuuna 2024). Under the influence of conservative and neoliberal policy agendas (Nuorisotyölehti 2024), funding has been redirected towards issues such as school dropout, youth unemployment, delinquency, risky behaviours and the strengthening of social control mechanisms. As a result, core objectives historically central to youth work, such as promoting active citizenship and fostering youth participation, have been increasingly sidelined.

These trends raise a fundamental question: can youth work align with populist decisions that neglect climate policies, dismiss climate activism and oppose regulation of big tech companies? Or should it actively adhere to its mission of “being on the side of young people” by supporting climate activism and caring about the threat of digital harm?

Youth work and youth policy, we argue, may show cautiousness in two distinct ways. The first, which we refer to as “sitting on the fence”, occurs when youth work attempts to balance opposing sides of contentious issues. For example, as to climate activism, youth work might fund environmental youth organisations, but avoid assisting young people in youth centres to design climate strike banners, particularly when such actions are disapproved of by municipal administrations.

Another mode of caution, which we term “keeping your head down”, involves avoiding engagement with politically or morally sensitive issues altogether. Eeva Sinisalo-Juha (2024) finds that youth workers in Finland often shy away from addressing topics with moral implications, such as climate change, poverty, religion or politics and thus miss an opportunity for moral education. Siurala (2022: 26-27) found that European government youth policy makers were “hesitantly favourable” towards youth climate activism but lacked wholehearted support. Similarly, the established youth organisations struggled to relate to Greta Thunberg's spontaneous and non-hierarchical approach to activism.

A study associated with the European Youth Forum acknowledged the popularity of Fridays for Future (FFF) but criticised it for relying on “unsystematic survival/ guerrilla strategies, which disable any sustained and coherent defence of their interests” (Deželan and Yurttagüler 2020: 9; see also Deželan, Jason and Sardoč 2020).

The central question for youth work and youth policy, then, is whether these forms of caution – sitting on the fence and keeping your head down – risk amounting to complicity in the deformation of democracy. How far can youth work maintain its commitment to young people, human rights and democracy under the pressure of illiberal populist politics?

How can youth work respond to the deformation of its ethos?

In 2023, Finland’s government was publicly embarrassed when several of its far-right ministers were exposed for making racist remarks. In response, the government sought to reaffirm its commitment to tolerance, a theme prominently featured in numerous European youth campaigns, by adopting an anti-racism report. This initiative was followed in 2024 by the launch of an anti-racism action plan, with Prime Minister Orpo calling on all governing parties to participate. Notably, however, the far-right True Finns party (now the Finns Party) refused to endorse the plan, raising serious doubts about their commitment to anti-racist principles and fuelling public speculation about the persistence of discriminatory ideologies within government ranks (*Helsinki Times* 2024a).

The same year, the Finnish government attempted to introduce legislation banning conversion therapy, aligning itself with other Nordic countries, international human rights standards and the recommendations of the European Parliament, medical professionals and civil society organisations. Banning conversion therapy represents a widely recognised youth policy objective and a fundamental youth right. However, as the bill neared adoption, the government parties reversed their positions and introduced procedural obstacles that effectively derailed the legislative process (*Helsinki Times* 2024b).

These episodes reflect the growing need for the youth field to critically assess the implications of illiberal political agendas on its core principles and objectives. In particular, conservative and far-right governments are increasingly exhibiting bias against vulnerable youth populations, such as immigrant and LGBTIQ+ youth, while simultaneously reinforcing punitive discourses centred on youth violence and criminality. Although measures to support socially excluded youth can be beneficial, youth services must carefully examine their overarching priorities and institutional profiles: are they genuinely serving all young people equitably or are they becoming vehicles of social control mechanisms or instruments for implementing illiberal politics?

Bozeman, Nelson and Bretschneider (2024) and Yesilkagit et al. (2024) make recommendations that, in the youth field (youth work, youth policy and youth research), could mean the following things.

- ▶ Human rights and ethical codes in youth work. Developing a moral compass to counteract oppression. See UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Howard Sercombe's *Youth work ethics* (2013) and Tim Corney et al. (2022).
- ▶ "Guerilla government" – fighting-back strategies. Youth work unambiguously on the side of young people against political priorities. See Skott-Myhre (2009), Belton (ed.) (2014) and de St Croix (2016).
- ▶ "Institutional collective action" – resisting political oppression. An advocacy organisation for youth work, representing youth workers and managers. One example of such a body in the UK is In Defence of Youth Work (n.d.).
- ▶ Strengthening the autonomy of youth work. Autonomy does not mean isolation. Rather, autonomy and recognition are created through negotiating interdependencies with other actors (Siurala 2016).
- ▶ Training youth workers and their leaders to be aware and ethically conscious, enabling them to stand up against political repression. Investing in research and supporting activities that align with the values of youth work (Yesilkagit et al. 2024).
- ▶ Internal monitoring establishing indicators to track an organisation's capacity to resist the negative influence of illiberal populist politics.

Taken together, these strategies suggest that the youth field cannot remain apolitical in contexts where its foundational values – democracy, human rights and equality – are increasingly under threat. Instead, it must position itself as an active moral and political actor capable of resisting deformation and of sustaining its ethical commitment to young people.

Improving response to existential issues

Next, we discuss the response to climate change and the harm caused by unregulated digitalisation. A clear majority of young people are concerned about climate change. According to Special Eurobarometer (2023), "young people rank climate change as the most serious problem facing the world". Furthermore, climate change disproportionately affects young people (Watts et al. 2019). Typically, young people feel anxious, powerless, afraid, sad and angry about climate change (*The Lancet* 2024). Almost all young people use digital tools such as social media and almost all boys spend a sizeable amount of time digital gaming. Young people are fascinated by – some are even addicted to – social media and gaming. A growing number realise its problems: a third of young people think that "there are more harms than benefits" (Pew Research Institute 2024) and another 35% reported "being deceived by fake content online" (Common Sense Media 2025). Also, an increasing number of parents and educational and digital experts are deeply worried about the negative effects (Pew Research Institute 2020 and 2024).

Climate change has only gradually appeared on the youth work and youth policy agenda (Hofmann-van de Poll and Williamson 2021; Gorman 2021). It took almost 10 years until digitalisation was noted in youth policy texts and on the European Youth Forum agenda. Research on youth and climate change has also emerged rather late (Gorman et al. 2024a; Gorman et al. 2024b; Bárta and Tuménaitė 2024; Siurala 2022) and research on social media and gaming have been limited to psychological and medical studies on harm and risks (Siurala 2024).

This begs the question: what has kept youth work and youth policy from quickly responding to such key youth perspectives? To improve the response, three topics need to be considered. First, climate change and digitalisation are complex and politically controversial issues and they make it difficult for youth work and youth policy to orient themselves, but the emphasis of the UN and other international organisations on youth climate and digital rights, as well as the emergent action of young people, should encourage youth work to prioritise these issues. Second, youth climate movements may have confused ordinary youth work with its success, but climate change and unregulated digitalisation as social and youth concerns have stayed at the forefront of young people's minds. Third, it is suggested that the weaknesses of existing youth participation formats call for diversification of youth expression.

An ingrained difficulty with addressing controversial issues?

Both climate change and digitalisation are politically controversial issues (Marquardt and Lederer 2022), which may make it uncomfortable for publicly funded youth work to handle. Can youth work risk confronting the reserved attitudes of conservative/populist political decision makers in supporting youth climate activism? While the Fridays for Future climate activism did at times confront school headteachers' instructions not to skip classes on Fridays, responses from school leadership were in fact varied – ranging from supportive to neutral, and in some cases overtly sanctioning student participation (Costa and Singer-Brodowski 2024). Youth centres felt as if they were between a rock and a hard place: should they help young people prepare their posters for the protest or refrain from doing so to show support for the school's administration?

A similar controversy exists in the digital world of young people. Some people are concerned for the safety and welfare of young people in the digital life, such as their anxiety, body dissatisfaction, depression, exposure to bullies, low self-esteem and dependency on social media and digital gaming. Then there are those who focus on the positive effects and label those with negative views as “demonisers” and accuse them of spreading “moral panic”. They disagree on the negative effects of dependency on social media and digital gaming (Siurala 2024). In such controversial situations it may be difficult for youth work to commit itself to either side. The result can be to remain neutral or cautiously keep a low profile; either “sitting on the fence” or “keeping your head down”.

To improve the responsiveness of youth work to climate change and to problematic internet use, both themes may be anchored in human rights and research. There is recent research on both topics and the UN Human Rights

Council included climate rights and digital rights as young people's human rights in the autumn of 2024 (UN Human Rights Council 2024). All this needs to be integrated into youth worker training. Youth workers and their managers should agree on their importance and priority. Management should support training, find the proper partners, construct the respective assessment tools and advocate these strategies and activities to stakeholders and decision makers.

Surprise and ambiguity around Fridays for Future

When Greta Thunberg gathered millions of young people around the world with a strong political message to decision makers, traditional youth work – municipal youth services and youth organisations – was largely taken by surprise, followed by uncertainty. The movement did something that traditional youth work also wanted to do: attract more young people; find new kinds of participants for youth activities; engage more people over the age of 16, more girls, high-school students and active citizens who would change society. Studies on FFF participants did show that they indeed had mobilised “a historically large number of people, particularly newcomers, high-school pupils and girls” (de Moor et al. 2021: 5). Furthermore, FFF had a society-changing agenda: “current school protests are not only about climate action but reflect more fundamental political struggles about competing visions of a future society in times of climate change” (Marquardt 2020). It was a dream of European youth work, empowering young people to become active agents of social change.

Additional ambiguity was perhaps also caused by the political counter-reaction (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). Greta Thunberg was publicly ridiculed by certain leaders of major greenhouse gas-emitting countries (*The Guardian*). Youth climate movements have also been facing increasing state repression: anti-protest laws, harsher policing and unreasonably severe punishments (Berglund et al. 2024). More significant economic powers with a veto on the action had already appeared earlier (Tsebelis 1995) and, overall, a wave of obstructing climate change policies swept later across Europe (Brulle, Roberts and Spencer 2024). It has become more difficult around the world to stand up for climate justice. Understandably these developments can create cautiousness within youth work to empower young people to act on climate change.

However, there are encouraging signs. Young people remain greatly concerned about climate warming; since 2010, the number of climate protests have stayed at pre-Covid levels (Berglund et al. 2024) and young people have been mobilised to climate action and protests even within authoritarian regimes (Mugeere, Barford and Magimbi 2021). Youth workers, youth work organisations and youth policy makers need to keep climate action a top priority.

Diversifying youth perspective

To open the discussion on diversifying youth perspective, a quick look at the weaknesses and alternatives of the current youth representation could be useful.

A first weakness is a lack of overall impact: research indicates that youth councils and other youth representation bodies often fail to exert significant influence on policy and decision-making processes (Matthews 2001; Matthews and Limb 2003; McGinley and Grieve 2010; Cockburn 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2011). Second, there is tokenism: a tendency for young people's views to be given little status or to be simply ignored (Cockburn 2010: 308; Siurala and Turkia 2012: 82; Han and Ahn 2020: 16). A third limitation is a narrow mandate: youth councils and non-governmental organisations typically possess a limited support base, constraining their ability to credibly represent the broader youth population. Fourth, there is an under-representation of marginal youth: disadvantaged and marginalised young people are frequently under-represented in youth councils (Nairn, Sligo and Freeman 2006). And fifth, "simply mimicking adults is not always the most authentic, empowering and beneficial type of participation" (Malone and Hartung 2010: 26).

An example of an alternative approach to youth participation is the French PIA (Future Investment Programme) project 2014-2023 (ANRU 2024). First of all, it diverged from the conventional path of establishing youth bodies like youth councils or delegating tasks to youth organisation representatives. Instead, it endeavoured to discover methods to reach, empower and negotiate with "ordinary" young people, while also engaging bureaucracies in dialogue with them. The project initially focused on determining how and where to reach young people, elucidating administrative processes, empowering them to take independent action and creating intersections between them and decision makers. Subsequently, it aimed to acquaint decision makers with young people's cultures, creativity and ways of thinking, thereby simplifying bureaucratic processes and enhancing adults' ability to interact and negotiate with youth. This necessitated transcending the traditional youth participation mantra. The French example demonstrated that consciously breaking away from established forms of youth participation can lead to innovative practices.

Changing epistemologies of youth perspective

This chapter discusses three global threats to youth work and youth policy. It is important to look at the ways they affect epistemologies: what are the nature, origins and limits of the knowledge that is framed around the concept of youth perspective?

Youth perspective in early youth policy plans

During the period of "rational planning" in the 1960s and 1970s, governments and municipalities started to run cross-sectoral youth policy plans. At the time almost 100 municipal youth policy plans were carried out in Finland. The idea was simple. First, a representative youth survey on the wishes and concerns of young people to cover the youth perspective was carried out. Next, youth-related experts from relevant municipal sectors gathered and, based on the survey result and the views of the experts, a five-year cross-agency youth policy plan

was drafted to mainstream the youth perspective across the municipality. The plan was adopted by the municipal council. However, enthusiasm for the youth policy plans withered away for many reasons. A survey was a limited source of knowledge on youth perspective. The epistemological base of youth perspective was perceived in too simplistic terms.

Advent of “super wicked problems” (2012)

Climate change gradually developed into a “truly wicked problem” (Levin et al. 2012). It appeared to concern everybody, accelerated in its importance and seemed urgent, complex and, even for scientists, difficult to explain. Almost all young people are seriously worried about climate change but still seem to lack even the rudimentary facts about it. Research (UNICEF-Gallup 2023 World Poll) has shown that only half of young people know what the term “climate change” actually means. Another half mistakenly think it refers to “the seasonal changes in weather that occur every year”.

Another “super wicked problem” is digitalisation. The social regulation of AI is a typical issue dividing citizens into fierce opponents and ardent supporters – and not even the computer scientists know how it is developing (Andersson and Rainie 2023). As an example, a Stanford study reveals that “82% of students don’t know when news is fake. Teens absorb social media news without considering the source” (Stanford Graduate School for Education 2016). Young people are ardent digital users, but many lack knowledge and a critical approach. Rather than trusting in a well-informed youth perspective, the authors of this chapter tend to agree with Furlong and Cartmel’s (2007) notion of “epistemological fallacy” and Côté’s (2013) “false consciousness”, which refer to the inability of young people to analyse how structural factors such as social class and the economy affect their understanding or ability to critically reflect on how global corporations such as the oil industry and the tech industry, with their vast research and lobby machinery, affect their lives. For youth perspective there is a totally new, truly wicked, epistemological set-up.

The post-anthropocentric epistemology of youth perspective

Defining youth, sociologists tend to look at the relationship between young people and society. To put it categorically, youth perception is either constructing society (“youth changing society”) or society is constructing its youth (“integrating them into society”). Climate change, however, is a game changer: it has introduced a post-anthropocentric view of society – a new epistemological setting in which youth perspective is not constructed as a dualistic relationship between the young person and the rest of human society, but rather through an interaction between, and side by side with, the young person, the human world and the non-human world. This is called the more-than-human world. Philosopher David Abrams (who originally coined the term in 2016) says: “the realm of humankind is a subset within a larger set – that the human world is necessarily embedded within, permeated by, and indeed dependent upon the more-than-human world that exceeds it” (Abram 2024: 342). A plethora of research has emerged on what

this means to youth work (Gorman et al. 2024a; Gorman et al. 2024b; Bessant and Watts 2024; Pisani 2023). If young people and youth workers want to reach beyond the Anthropocene and understand themselves as agents in the more-than-human world, old dichotomies of subaltern youth versus powerful adults, active youth participation versus old adult structures, or defective youth versus complete adults must be discarded. These dichotomies are secondary and useless, while relationships between youth and the non-human world are essential. Youth should be regarded as equal to and in collaboration with adults, animals, plants and nature. The most urgent task is to combat climate warming – also in local youth work (Gorman et al. 2024a: 126). This opens another new epistemology of youth perspectives.

Self-reflection on youth structures and doctrines

Historical reflection on youth work (Siurala 2016: 174) suggests that an obstacle to resilience is “reluctance to face alternative perceptions of youth work”. Such alternative perceptions include alternative forms of youth agency and youth representation, and alternative ways of gathering and managing expertise on youth. We argue that the youth field should go back to its roots and critically assess its historical path dependence and institutionally constructed thinking, structures and doctrines (Kalala and Siurala 2023).

Path dependence of youth policy institutions: are today’s youth policy structures prisoners of their own history?

European youth policy structures originated from the concept of youth non-governmental organisations (YNGO)s as advocates for youth within public policy, which can be traced back to a 1960 UNESCO report (1960: 35). Since then, looking at the bodies representing youth and youth work in national and international organisations, youth work and youth have become almost synonymous with youth organisations. This was especially the case during the zeitgeist period after 1968, which saw the creation of European and national youth structures taken over by youth organisations and their umbrella organisations. The youth organisations were further strengthened by governmental youth policy makers in 1980 when the Council of Europe’s Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) was established as a co-managing partner with the youth organisations. Shortly thereafter, youth researchers became involved within the Council of Europe, with their role solidified after the decisions of the 2nd Youth Ministers Conference in 1988 in Oslo. However, the research community has been hesitant to embed itself within the decision-making structures of the youth field, and youth organisations have not fully embraced their involvement, but rather operated in a relationship of “mutual ignorance” (Zentner 2016: 74-75). Nevertheless, the concept of a “magic triangle” encompassing youth work, youth policy and youth research was at least formally established, “characterised by tensions, representation, not co-operation” (Lauritzen 2006: 16). In the practice of decision making in European and most national youth structures, youth organisations, driven by their focus on youth participation and representation, maintained the dominant position,

together with the governments. Researchers (Zentner 2016: 75) and young people who were not part of youth organisations remained on the periphery.

Youth work is a social construct whose creation must be understood in the wider context of the political, economic and social conditions in which it developed (Davies 2005). Path dependence can explain how youth work was historically constructed. The central idea is that early sequences of choices can set in motion a course of events that becomes self-reinforcing over time (Rosenbloom and Cashore 2019: 69). It is a process through which organisations can become prisoners of their own history unable to change their course in the face of new challenges. Do historically constructed youth structures still adequately capture and support the current agency of young people? Are the youth policy sectors reacting quickly to today's youth concerns such as climate warming and democratic backsliding? Could the development of the current youth policy structures have taken a different path? To re-adapt to any such inertia or stagnation, one must understand how the process of path dependence has evolved (Scott and Lutz-Ley 2020).

Beyond the established concept of youth perspective – Discursive institutionalism as a lens

Research suggests that the concepts, policies and activities we currently uphold are often derived from a succession of interpretations shaped by prevailing narratives. Blyth (2002: vii-viii) posits that “if enough people believe in a particular idea or argument, it becomes important as a means to explain behaviour, regardless of its relation to the ‘real’ world”. Integrated youth policies seem to suggest that services for young people are most effectively developed by incorporating young people or their young representatives into the decision-making processes of all matters concerning them. Youth participation thus becomes a “discursive institution” perpetuated through the texts and communications of youth units within national ministries and the youth organisation bodies, including their national, European and international umbrella organisations. Cairney (2019) argues that discursive institutions, such as widely endorsed beliefs in the power of youth participation, may exhibit hesitation or even hostility towards alternative initiatives and criticism.

Historical analysis of constructivist institutionalism can deepen our understanding of how contemporary policies are shaped by path dependencies rooted in past rhetoric, ideas, ideologies, mandates and administrative patterns within youth organisations, governmental bodies and European institutions. Analysis of the discourses can reveal how these structures were initially constructed and why they later became resistant to new initiatives. Critical questions arise: what were the pivotal junctures and turning points that established the contemporary institutional agenda? How did foundational ideas such as the youth organisations’ credo, “there are no better experts on youth than young people themselves” originate from movements in the 1970s? In what ways were these ideas legitimised by decision makers? How did they become officially consolidated within institutional frameworks? Furthermore, how were attempts to contest or question these ideas managed? Finally, is it perhaps symptomatic that such research has not been commissioned.

Gender mainstreaming and youth mainstreaming

As Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach note in their chapter, youth mainstreaming is a normative political strategy. Feminist studies have looked at the values and ideologies behind gender mainstreaming. They argue that gender policies have been transmuted into seemingly neutral bureaucratic techniques, as documented in Australia, Canada and Sweden. However, Paterson and Scala (2021: 50-52) argue that “mainstreaming gender into ‘neutral’ bureaucracy is anything but neutral; rather, it is an institution that both shapes and is shaped by white capitalist hetero patriarchy” – the masculine power hegemony.

There is a parallel with youth mainstreaming. The objective has been to promote a youth perspective into broader societal decision-making processes. The standard approach has been mandating youth organisations to represent and be advocates for young people and their interests. The creation of ostensibly neutral bureaucratic techniques – such as youth councils, youth parliaments, youth surveys, youth hearings, websites on youth expectations, structural dialogues and youth dialogues – constitute legitimate forms of listening to the voices of young people. Nevertheless, these voices remain consultative and are ultimately subject to the discretion of adult decision makers, who may choose to implement or disregard them. Researchers have demonstrated the tokenistic nature of these techniques (Siurala and Turkia 2012: 82; Han and Ahn 2020: 16).

An illustrative example is the annual “voice of young people” events in Helsinki, held across most of the 60 youth centres and schools in the city. Recognised as a pioneering model of youth participation in Europe, these events bring together young people in groups to discuss their expectations for improving the city. Following their own seminars, they draw up proposals for public encounters with local and government decision makers. These proposals, along with the responses from decision makers, were compiled into written initiatives. The initiatives were then officially submitted by the Youth Department to the relevant city departments for consideration and implementation. A follow-up conducted six months later indicated that many of the initiatives were still awaiting discussion or implementation,²⁸ suggesting that further attention could be given to strengthening the administration’s responsiveness to youth proposals.

Youth climate movements mobilised millions of young people worldwide, who took to the streets demanding evidence-based governmental action to halt climate warming. In an impact study, Han and Ahn (2020: 16) conclude “youth activist groups have been simply brushed aside as immature ... The world leaders of the countries with the highest levels of emissions, for instance, simply dismissed the youth climate activists, including Thunberg”.

The ostensibly neutral bureaucratic techniques designed to listen to the voices of young people face a persistent limitation: while young people are heard, little concrete action often follows. Analogous to the experiences with gender

28. This participation activity, although not formally documented, was closely witnessed by the author (Siurala) in his capacity as the incumbent Director of Youth Services.

mainstreaming, youth representation hegemony can be manifested through seemingly “neutral” administrative solutions that, in practice, perpetuate the power and influence of adult assumptions. This dynamic reflects what we term the “integration assumption” – the prevailing expectation among adults and existing societal structures that young people are simply immature adults to be efficiently integrated into the existing social order. It is therefore not “neutral” to be guided by what might be called “the integrative society’s regime” or “adult hegemony”.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to explore the variety of angles and standpoints for clarifying concepts such as youth perspective. We argue that “youth perspective” is a monolithic category – one that resists plurality, nuance and change. Youth perspective is sometimes taken at face value without considering its social, political or commercial effects and contexts. We look at the importance of climate change and digitalisation to young people and their difficulties with establishing clear youth perspectives. This plurality of orientations calls for a plurality of forms of youth expression and awareness-raising activities of educators such as youth workers.

In its current use, the concept also seems to have an ingrained dualism, sometimes even antagonism, between young people and adults, diverting attention from more essential controversies between many young people, economic structures, large corporate interests and “extractivist” logics. Furthermore, climate change has introduced a more-than-human world, where ecocentric ethics suggest the imperative is no longer youth versus adults, but rather youth and adults working together to combat climate warming (Gorman et al. 2024a) and to create a human rights-based digital world. These developments call for a critical reassessment of epistemological foundations of youth perspective, taking into account the evolving context in which it is embedded and mobilised.

The chapter has also highlighted how global threats – climate change, digital harm and democratic backsliding driven by illiberal politics/populism – have been slow to make their way onto the youth work and youth policy agendas. Far-right and illiberal parties contribute to a deformation of democratic institutions, including those supporting youth work. In this context, many actors adopt strategies of neutrality: “sitting on the fence”, “keeping their heads down” or avoiding politically sensitive topics.

An alternative approach calls for youth policy and youth practice to acknowledge that many of today’s global threats directly concern young people, even if not traditionally within the youth field’s scope. Raising awareness among young people and youth professionals is essential. To open perspectives, it may be reasonable to diversify the existing monolithic youth work concept to include new actors and areas of expertise. This can begin with critical self-reflection on today’s youth representation mandate, such as path dependency (are today’s youth policy structures prisoners of their own history?) and discursive institutionalism (how is the contemporary policy rhetoric and the narrative of youth perspective historically constructed?).

Finally, the chapter drew a parallel between gender mainstreaming and promoting a youth perspective. Research showed (Paterson and Scala 2021: 50-52) that, as an administrative practice, gender mainstreaming can become a seemingly “neutral” bureaucratic technology that in practice reinforces the status quo – in this case, masculine hegemony. The question for youth policy is therefore: does promoting youth perspective, under current political conditions, risk reinforcing an existing society hegemony?

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Chapter 5

An intersectional approach to youth mainstreaming in the EU

Carlotta von Westerholt

Youth mainstreaming posits that it is essential to incorporate young people's diverse perspectives into all phases of political processes, policies, institutions and programmes that affect them. Therefore, a youth consultation in the developing phase of a policy is not enough. Youth mainstreaming goes beyond upstream participation and includes youth perspectives during the whole process from preparation and design via implementation to monitoring and evaluation. The policies in question are not limited to what has traditionally been considered youth policy and thus open up other policy areas for the incorporation of young people's interests and opinions. Youth mainstreaming has to be a part of a structured process, which may involve direct consultation of young people or their representatives (European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024: 5).

With youth mainstreaming, governments and political decision makers can foster more coherent design and implementation as well as better co-ordination of measures and programmes for young people. Furthermore, the qualitative representation and involvement of young people in decision making on a political level increases their trust in democratic institutions. And it plays a part in their motivation to contribute to them in the future (European Youth Forum 2020: 8-9).

Youth mainstreaming and other approaches to mainstreaming – for example, for age or disability and, probably the best known, gender mainstreaming – are picking up speed at a European level. Until now, they have coexisted but this chapter suggests they should rather be bundled into overarching intersectional mainstreaming. Intersectional mainstreaming takes into account the fact that different forms of discrimination can overlap and exist at the same time within one person. So, intersectional mainstreaming is needed to adequately address the lived realities of all people and to create measures to overcome all forms of discrimination, which fall through the gaps with a simple coexistence of different mainstreaming approaches.

In 2019, the European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen launched a Union of Equality. This can be seen as a first attempt at using an intersectional approach to combine and link several equality strategies focusing on various disadvantaged groups (Lange 2024a). In her second term, which started in December 2024, Commission President von der Leyen called for the “mainstreaming of equality considerations” in EU policy, legislation and funding programmes in her mission letter to the new Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, Hadja Lahbib (Leyen 2024). This indicates a continued commitment to mainstreaming.

This chapter will introduce the idea of fostering an intersectional approach in youth mainstreaming, but also other mainstreaming approaches in order to further strengthen a range of social groups without playing off different forms of discrimination against each other. The concepts of youth and gender mainstreaming are presented as examples to illustrate intersections and openings for future approaches.

The interaction between youth and other social categories

Young people’s identity is not solely shaped by their age. Age is but one part of their identity, which intersects with other social categories, such as race, class or gender. Young people are therefore a heterogeneous group with a wide range of identities, which are affected to varying degrees by exclusion and discrimination or, on the flip side, by privilege. Young women*,²⁹ young LGBTIQ* people, young Roma, young people with disabilities, young people of colour and other groups are more severely disadvantaged in terms of their rights and the representation of their perspectives than others due to their intersecting marginalisations (Council of the European Union 2024: 4). Besides, vulnerable young people increasingly come from rural areas or low-income families and/or have a migrant background. And still, many intersecting identities are not even mentioned in this list, underlining the complexity of the issue. At the same time, it becomes clear that youth mainstreaming needs an intersectional approach. This entails taking the variety of intersecting forms of identities of young people into account during the whole policy process: the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Westerholt, Lange and Lux 2024: 5).

To adequately consider the interactions of social inequalities and power relations, the concept of intersectionality offers a possible approach. The origin of intersectionality lies in Black feminism, the African American labour movement

29. The terms “women*” and “men*” are used to raise awareness of the social construction of gender. The asterisk (*) is meant to include all persons who identify as women* and men* and thus to move away from a binary language that describes only cis-hetero people. If spellings deviating from the gender star (*) appear in this chapter, these have been adopted as self-designations from the original text or it is clear that only women and/or only men are meant, for example in legal texts or if the persons named have explicitly assigned themselves to one of the two genders. The Observatory (n.d.) provides more information on the use of language in this text, as well as an extensive glossary.

and critical race theory. Even before coining the term “intersectionality”, the work of these movements addressed intersections of race and gender, and depending on the movement, class and sexuality. The establishment of the term “intersectionality” is attributed to legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (Cole 2009: 170-171). Crenshaw defines intersectionality as “a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking” (Crenshaw 1989: 149). So, intersectionality recognises that different forms of discrimination can simultaneously exist, influence and reinforce each other. Originally focusing on anti-discrimination law and policies, intersectionality is now seen in broader policy-making purposes. The European Commission’s vision of a Union of Equality, consisting of different strategies for equality of social groups like LGBTIQ* equality, anti-racism and gender equality, is one example of this development.

In the current discourse, a “gender first” understanding of intersectionality seems dominant. This means that intersecting categories start from the category of women* and are paired with other categories in a second step. This focus leads to a more inclusive gender equality policy by acknowledging different inequalities and their intersections with the concept of gender. But intersectionality at its core takes a stance against binarism and essentialism. By only using intersectionality with a “gender first” understanding, binarism is promoted and non-binary groups are often excluded. Furthermore, it can lead to pitting different groups against each other and jeopardise solidarity between marginalised groups. The gender first approach also undermines the road to gender equality for all (La Berbera, Cassain and Caravantes 2024; Lombardo and Verloo 2009). When looking at the intersections of youth with other social categories, a gender first approach would lead to a gap, neglecting the unique lived experiences from, for example, male* young people with disabilities or from ethnic minorities.

At the same time, the gender first focus is linked to the fact that in the area of mainstreaming the concept of gender mainstreaming is widely known and already established in some structures. The section “Using what is already there” also looks at gender mainstreaming and connects it to youth mainstreaming in order to bring the concepts closer together.

By looking at the broader picture and being open to collaborate and join forces, future measures could be more effective and inclusive. The following part looks at youth mainstreaming as well as mainstreaming in general and how it can apply an intersectional approach to include all vulnerable groups in its endeavours.

How to develop youth mainstreaming in accordance with other mainstreaming approaches

Different mainstreaming concepts exist, with gender mainstreaming being the most commonplace and familiar. The EU institutions have pledged to implement gender-mainstreaming structures since the mid-1990s. Even though the effectiveness of EU gender mainstreaming structures is disputed in academia

(see Mergaert and Minto 2021), there are lessons learned as well as tried-and-tested instruments to effectively design and implement mainstreaming (Shreeves 2019). These lessons could be helpful while looking at less tried-and-tested youth mainstreaming, which is now receiving increasing attention in the European political sphere. Furthermore, there are youth mainstreaming instruments in other forums which have existed for some time and from which institutions like the EU could learn while developing their own approach. Additionally, demands for an intersectional understanding of gender equality in the EU exist, which could be addressed by intersectional mainstreaming. This would entail intersectional approaches being integrated into political processes, as well as requiring the monitoring and consideration of the effects of political and policy measures on vulnerable groups (Lux 2024: 12-13).

Using what is already there

The concepts and instruments of youth mainstreaming in the EU known to date see youth participation as an integral part of it. The EU aims to consistently take into account the perspectives of young people in all policy areas. By doing so, the EU wants to appreciate young people's opinions and experiences and thus stand up against adultist structures. Adultist structures are those in which young people are not given the opportunity to participate, even though the outcomes affect them directly or indirectly. With its youth mainstreaming approach, EU policy can become more inclusive and complement other forms of youth participation (Westerholt, Lange and Lux 2024). But it is important to note that youth mainstreaming goes beyond just the participation of young people and does not necessarily need direct youth participation.

Youth mainstreaming instruments at the European level are in their infancy and cannot be analysed at the moment. Nevertheless, there are measures that can be understood as tools to promote youth mainstreaming. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 is the strategic framework for youth policy co-operation in the EU. It consists of different instruments and measures, which include elements favouring youth mainstreaming. The interim evaluation of the strategy also concludes that the strategy itself indeed promotes youth participation and youth mainstreaming across all EU policy areas (European Commission 2024a: 2). The Youth Strategy promotes youth mainstreaming by pursuing a dual approach when integrating measures into various policy areas, as well as implementing measures in youth policy specifically. According to the interim evaluation, the importance of youth issues for decision makers would decrease without the strategy and its dual approach, cross-sectoral co-operation and youth mainstreaming at EU level would be restricted and progress in national youth policies would be slowed down (European Commission 2024a: 9-10). At the same time, European policy initiatives since the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which at least mention young people, rarely refer to the strategy. However, it is clear that youth are increasingly being mainstreamed into other policy areas, which is one of the aims of the strategy's dual approach. The question of the strategy's impact on this development still needs to be critically examined (Hofmann-van de Poll and Williamson 2021: 8).

Based on the three core areas of participation, exchange and empowerment, one of the strategy's key aspects is active youth participation. In addition to the core areas, 11 European Youth Goals are anchored in the strategy. These were developed by young people in the run-up to the sixth cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue. By creating synergies between youth policy measures and other policy areas relevant to young people's lives, the European Youth Goals are to be achieved (Council of the European Union 2018). The effectiveness of the dual approach and the consequences of discounting it show that it is crucial to understand youth mainstreaming separately from pure youth policies and to integrate it broadly. There is still scope for the strategy in terms of better access to comprehensive data for stakeholders and target-group-oriented communication on the progress of the strategy and on funded activities that go beyond funding opportunities (European Commission 2024a: 8). This indicates that there are still gaps that need to be filled on the way to meaningful youth participation and subsequent youth mainstreaming.

Various EU institutions demanded and proposed the development of an EU youth test/check as a youth mainstreaming tool. The European Commission then announced the introduction of an EU Youth Check in the beginning of 2024. With the youth check, the policy impact on young people should be taken into account at all stages of future policy-making processes (European Commission 2024a; European Commission 2024b; European Commission 2024c: 10). The Commission aims to utilise the youth check for new relevant initiatives in its annual work programme from 2025 onwards. During the introduction of the EU Youth Check the following four key phases were presented: assessment of youth relevance; youth consultations, when an initiative of the Commission has been identified as relevant to young people; impact assessment; scrutiny and assessment by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board. Each phase is further defined and includes different stakeholders like youth correspondents and the EU Youth Stakeholders Group or instruments like the Commission's Better Regulation tools (European Commission 2024c: 5). The process is currently being tested and fine-tuned. Therefore, no statement can yet be made about the implementation and effectiveness of the youth check. The focus should be on how effectively young people's perspectives are taken into account, which groups of young people are included and whether their inclusion goes beyond mere consultation.

Compared to the Commission's work with youth mainstreaming, the Council of Europe has already been dedicated to developing youth policy and youth work at the local, national and European levels since 1972 (Council of Europe n.d.). The co-management system within its Youth Department guarantees 50:50 parity between governments and young civil society in decision making, thus creating a pioneering model of youth participation. The system also prepares young generations to take responsibility for shaping the future society they want. Countries such as Croatia, Lithuania and Finland have at times adopted elements of a co-management system for youth policy programmes at the national level. Other countries have implemented such a system at a municipal level. These include Germany, Portugal and Estonia (Future Policy n.d.). Although the co-management system is considered good practice for youth participation, it does not fully meet

the requirements of youth mainstreaming. By exclusively involving young people in youth policy decision making, it fails to include young people's perspectives in a wide range of policy areas that are not traditionally considered to be youth policies. However, in May 2023, the Council of Europe adopted the Reykjavik Declaration, which highlights the essential role of young people and their advocacy groups in strengthening democracy. To this end, the Council of Europe has launched new initiatives relating to the declaration and its implementation. These include measures to incorporate the perspectives of young people into its activities more effectively (Council of Europe 2023; Joint Council on Youth 2023). An evaluation of the integration of youth perspectives shows that progress is being made and the Reykjavik Declaration provides a clear vision and a reference framework. Nevertheless, due to the Council of Europe's complex structure, development is somewhat unco-ordinated. Although interinstitutional co-operation is improving, it is not yet organisation-wide, meaning that young people's perspectives are still being excluded from parts of the decision-making process (Directorate of Internal Oversight 2025).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been addressing youth participation and youth mainstreaming in its processes for some time as well. In November 2024, the OECD launched its Youth Policy Toolkit. Based on five pillars (skills and competencies, support for young people in the labour market, social inclusion and well-being of young people, trust in government and political institutions, and administrative and technical capacities to combat age discrimination), the toolkit presents practical advice and best practices for countries designing and implementing policies for young people. Within the toolkit, the OECD acknowledges that young people are a heterogeneous group and emphasises the importance of intersectionality in youth policies (OECD 2024).

Both approaches to establishing youth mainstreaming efforts in the organisation can be used as examples from which the EU and member states can learn while developing their own measures.

In contrast to youth mainstreaming, the EU has a wealth of experience with gender mainstreaming processes. Since the end of the 1990s, gender mainstreaming has been a practice in the EU and has helped to advance measures for gender equality within the institutions. In 1997, the EU committed to gender mainstreaming in all its policies. Implementation, however, remains incomplete. For example, the salience of gender and gender mainstreaming issues on the agenda of the European Parliament must be further increased, which is crucial for its effectiveness. And the communication inside the EU institutions and outside the institutions with other stakeholders needs to be strengthened (European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs 2018). To support gender mainstreaming and gender equality in general in the EU, committees on women's* politics in the different institutions were established.

The European Commission set up the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in 2008, which includes observers from civil society. Another driving force behind gender mainstreaming and gender equality is the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), established by the European Commission

in 2010. EIGE produces and edits statistical data on gender inequality in the EU (Lux 2024). Equality data are crucial to uncover gaps in existing or planned policies. Furthermore, the high-level group on gender mainstreaming, consisting of national representatives working on gender mainstreaming, supports the gender mainstreaming efforts of the Commission (European Commission n.d.). Another high-level group co-ordinated by the Commission, which further pushes for gender equality beyond a binary understanding, is on non-discrimination, equality and diversity, with a subgroup on LGBTIQ* issues (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers 2024: 17).

Besides the European Commission, the European Parliament declared its commitment to gender mainstreaming in 2003. This makes it one of the few parliaments in the world which has committed to gender mainstreaming (Lux 2024: 9). The gender mainstreaming efforts of the parliament are supported by its Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM Committee), the High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity, and a gender mainstreaming network operating in the committees and delegations to bring a gender dimension into their work (Shreeves 2019: 2).

While there has been a clear institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming structures, it is not certain that these structures will be successful, particularly if they are set up in parallel to existing decision-making structures and thus can find it difficult to effect change in the wider institution. The same goes for youth mainstreaming. Simply committing to it on paper is not enough; implementation needs to be monitored and supported by various bodies.

The introduction of the Union of Equality by von der Leyen in 2019, and its declaration to intersectionality in its policy making, was widely welcomed and was regarded as a step forward to equality for all. Under the Union of Equality, the following five strategies are listed as core elements: the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025; the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025; the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025; the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020-2030; and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. This is a first attempt to bundle several strategies for the equality of disadvantaged groups in the EU by using an intersectional approach. The aim is to mainstream equality altogether and build on comparable data to combat discrimination (Lange 2024b). The different strategies are all united under the roof of the Union of Equality with similar running times, which can be understood as a certain parallelism. Nevertheless, to truly integrate the strategies, it must go much further. This requires an overlapping monitoring and analysis to discover a common path so as to create synergies. Such an overarching strategy would strengthen co-operation and co-ordination between institutions and lead to more coherent action in different areas. However, an overarching strategy cannot completely replace specific equality strategies. Rather, it should be accompanied by specific equality strategies that focus on the individual needs and situations of different social groups (Crowley 2024: 14).

The strategies bundled together under the Union of Equality therefore have equality mainstreaming as one aim. However, the mainstreaming approach is

only one part of the Union of Equality and its strategies and should go hand in hand with the strategies' various other measures, like targeted equality policies. The goal of equality mainstreaming is to include the diverse perspectives of marginalised groups who might not have access to other participatory instruments in EU measures throughout all policy fields. Equality policies, for example, are aimed at the specific needs of the individual groups to which they refer and their equality. The equality strategies under the Union of Equality incorporate both specific equality policies, targeting existing disadvantages, and equality mainstreaming, adapting general provisions (Crowley 2024: 16).

In her second term as President of the Commission, von der Leyen has pledged to continue the Union of Equality. At the same time, there is no longer a stand-alone Commissioner for Equality like Helena Dalli in von der Leyen's first term of office, which many stakeholders in the (gender) equality field have criticised (see European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network et al. 2024; Hubert 2024). But in her mission letter to Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management Lahbib, von der Leyen also calls for different measures to be taken under the umbrella of the Union of Equality. Initially, equality was at the end of the list, but it has recently been moved to the beginning. This is probably von der Leyen's response to pressure from civil society. Lahbib will be responsible for renewing the Gender Equality Strategy, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the EU Anti-racism Action Plan, besides spearheading the implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework and updating the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Another important task will be to mainstream equality considerations appropriately in EU policies, legislation and funding programmes (Leyen (von der) 2024: 7).

Beyond the mission letter and her responsibilities described there, Lahbib should join forces with the new Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef, among other commissioners, to better integrate youth and intergenerational justice as well as perspectives from other vulnerable groups into the Union of Equality. The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities already calls for youth-specific measures, for instance strengthening national youth strategies, to improve the integration and equality of young people with disabilities (European Commission 2021). The wider co-operation can help to move away from a gender-first focus on the strategies and open the doors to overcome binarism and be more inclusive.

Looking more closely at the existing mainstreaming and equality structures, it becomes clear that these still need to be extended, especially when it comes to the representation and participation of under-represented groups like women*, LGBTIQ* people, BIPoC*,³⁰ young people and people of ethnic and religious minorities. Their integration into gender but also other mainstreaming approaches in all institutions must be realised (see Equinox 2021; Roig et al. 2019). Here, the call for a more intersectional approach to mainstreaming comes into play. Various mainstreaming approaches targeting different social groups

30. Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.

should not simply coexist but rather work together and promote one another. Existing mainstreaming instruments should be analysed to see where they can be opened up to other groups and contribute to more just policy processes for all.

Despite the many approaches that can be used and/or deepened for an intersectional approach to mainstreaming, there are still hurdles along the way, which are highlighted below.

Hurdles on the way to a more intersectional understanding of mainstreaming

Societal inequalities and related power structures fundamentally hinder efforts for effective intersectional mainstreaming efforts. Patriarchal structures, social inequality and adultism can form barriers to intersectional mainstreaming and political participation.

Patriarchal structures, for instance, build on a binary understanding of gender, which brings with it the aforementioned problem of binarism. An increased influence of reactionary forces in the European Parliament, for example, has led to gender policy becoming more controversial and gender equality being understood restrictively. A binary understanding of gender as “women” and “men” continues to be held up against an inclusive understanding of gender, which posits gender as a spectrum (Kantola and Lombardo 2024).³¹ A binary understanding of gender needs to be pushed back and overcome in order to include the perspectives of trans, non-binary and inter* persons and thus allow for an expansive implementation of intersectionality.

Social inequality and economic interests also have a severe impact on politics. This is also reflected in the fact that civic education is rarely sufficient to equip young people with the required skills to participate in policy processes (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola 2024: 11). Here, social background plays a huge role in favour of young people with a higher level of education and from high-income households in contrast to their peers (TUI Stiftung 2024: 9-10). This makes it clear once again that young people are a heterogeneous group and existing societal power structures skew opportunities for some young people more than for others.

Besides the EU's limited (legislative) competences, especially in the area of social policy, its institutions are not equally accessible for experts and civil society organisations, leading to an imbalance of perspectives. Different academics and civil society actors criticised this selectiveness for especially ignoring the diverse lived realities in the field of sex work, anti-racism and intersectionality per se (see FitzGerald and Freedman 2021). This can lead to an enforced competitiveness between organisations working for different marginalised groups when applying for much-needed international EU funding, which can undermine the original efforts to promote equality for all (Maďarová and Valkovičová 2020). Financial instruments that promote collaboration, like Horizon's European Partnerships,

31. This is not only a problem in the European Parliament, but also partly affects other (EU) institutions, organisations and civil society organisations, even those that promote feminist views.

reduced their number of partnerships (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024: 32). This could increase competition or force organisations to merge.

The issue of difficult or sometimes even denied access also arises in the youth field. Participation at the institutional level is difficult for young people, and there is already resistance within umbrella youth organisations to broader access to participation. These organisations are mainly adult-led and they act to defend their own interests (Focus Group 2017). Even after the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, obstacles remain. At an institutional level, structures and norms are not designed for youth engagement, particularly with regard to new forms of engagement. This can lead to young people feeling excluded (Deželan 2023).

Another hurdle on the way to a more meaningful mainstreaming of different target groups is neoliberal economic policies. The European debate on economic governance focuses on labour market participation, competitiveness and limiting public debt. However, not enough attention is paid to aspects like adequate payment and improvement of care work or social justice. Therefore, measures which are needed in these areas fade into the background more quickly and are overshadowed by short-sighted economic policies (Lux 2024: 10). This hampers the success rate of mainstreaming approaches that champion the interests of marginalised groups in these areas.

Concerning the many different aspects of equal access, one area which has become more and more relevant lately is the unequal access to the use of new technologies and to engagement with digital formats. The term to describe this phenomenon is “the digital divide”. The divide is caused on the one hand by technical issues, such as the lack of internet connection, and on the other hand by the lack of social capital, such as income, education and knowledge (Pick and Sarkar 2015). In the EU, 2.4% of citizens were not able to afford an internet connection in 2022. The percentage of citizens living at risk of poverty is significantly higher (Jones 2023). All this leads to a continuing cycle of discrimination when not addressed correctly by policies promoting new forms of participation.

Before explaining the next hurdle in the way, another theoretical term needs to be addressed: adultism. Adultism is the discrimination of young people based on the attributed superiority of adults and inferiority of young people. Everybody has been or is a young person, which means that adultism is a form of discrimination everyone experiences in their life. Unlike other forms of discrimination, however, it can be outgrown (Bostancı and Hornung 2023: 133-134). In politics and legislation, adultist structures exclude young people from policy measures and laws affecting them directly or indirectly. When looking at the intersection of youth with other social categories, it becomes clear that adultism often occurs together with other forms of discrimination. Thus, it is important to view adultism and the struggle to overcome it using an intersectional approach (Westerholt, Lange and Lux 2024: 4). One challenge in the implementation of youth mainstreaming lies in the fact that adults

have so far developed most forms of youth participation. Although adults can incorporate young people's perspectives based on facts to a certain extent, an adult-centred perspective cannot be ruled out. Due to existing social conditions, this adult-centred perspective often means that the contributions of young people are devalued, and that they continue to be met with stereotypical assumptions about their skills and competences. Their individual experiences and views, which should actually be seen as enriching, are discredited and their importance denied (OECD 2020: 138). If young people and their contributions are also met with the same devaluation within youth mainstreaming processes and their points of view are not taken seriously, this contradicts the fundamental endeavour of this approach.

The often-assumed superiority of adults (see King 2024; Fletcher 2024) can lead to the use of political power and short-sighted political decisions to benefit middle-aged persons, sometimes at the cost of present and future generations. In this context, costs based on frictions in political processes, like lack of legitimacy or short-term gaps in delivery, can arise for the younger generation, which does not hold power. Challenges for future generations include climate catastrophe, loss of biodiversity and the risks associated with new technologies (Göpel and Arhelger 2010: 7). This indicates that present political decisions have different implications for different generations, including those who have not yet been born. In this context, demographic change and the ageing of many societies are particularly challenging, especially in the areas of social, tax and environmental policy. Governments must find solutions to distribute costs and benefit entitlements more fairly between current and future generations (OECD 2020: 25).

Fostering an environment where young people can actively engage with in topics that are relevant to them is a crucial precondition for effective youth mainstreaming. There are several challenges to creating such an environment.

First, existing institutions and their underlying structures are designed by and for adults, making them adult-centric, both intentionally and unintentionally. The political participation of young people, for example, is limited by unfavourable contexts, like age limitations for voting and entering the political arena (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola 2024: 11). Similar challenges can be seen in regard to gender mainstreaming, which have been countered by the establishment of structures. This emphasises the importance of the feminist governance structures introduced by the European Parliament to promote feminist policies, such as the FEMM Committee and a gender mainstreaming network for all parliamentary committees (Kantola and Lombardo 2024).

Second, even organisations, institutions or governments trying to promote youth participation come across challenges like insufficient resources, limited technical capacity and unclear ownership (Lelwic-Ojeda and Akintola 2024: 12). This once again emphasises the importance of establishing structures that help to implement mainstreaming measures.

That these inequalities are so fundamental and structural might make it seem daunting to challenge them. But it also makes chipping away at them all the more crucial for the betterment of living conditions for all.

Conclusions

Mainstreaming structures and approaches in the EU are at different stages of development, but a number of points can be identified as to how they can be improved overall. Their resources, capacities, competences and real impact on broader EU policy making must be expanded to avoid superficial application. The EU's plans to advance youth mainstreaming, together with the fact that the Commission under von der Leyen wants to apply intersectional approaches in its work, are other important steps for equality and equal participation of all young people.

Now the planned processes need to be implemented effectively and in a co-ordinated manner. And it is crucial to open up further spaces for intersectionality within youth mainstreaming (Westerholt, Lange and Lux 2024: 21-22). This does not apply only to youth mainstreaming. Mainstreaming approaches in general need to go beyond binarism and to include the perspectives, lived experiences and representation of various (vulnerable) groups. To apply this and work on it with the appropriate sensitivity, a systematic integration of stakeholders from these groups in policy-making processes is needed. This systematic integration needs to keep in mind that not everybody or every group has the same access to participate in existing structures. Access should not be based on the assumption that social groups, such as young people, are homogeneous and that everyone who belongs to that group automatically enjoys the same opportunities for participation.

Furthermore, an intersectional understanding of mainstreaming processes, like youth mainstreaming and gender mainstreaming, builds solidarity between minoritised and vulnerable groups, which is of advantage for the movement for equality in general. It is important that strategies, like the Union of Equality, which call for an intersectional approach also commit to one, and do not let the individual strategies run side by side in the sense of reflecting multiple disadvantages rather than intersectionality.

This chapter has sought to provide food for thought on why intersectionality should be integrated into youth mainstreaming and other mainstreaming efforts in the EU and its member states, and also beyond. If youth mainstreaming in the EU seeks to be of benefit to all young people, an intersectional approach and intersectional mainstreaming as the end goal, rather than many parallel mainstreaming approaches, are crucial. It has been shown that narrow political approaches and pitting different forms of discrimination or groups against each other are detrimental to efforts to achieve equality for all. So, existing and new mainstreaming structures, no matter in what field and on what level, should be extended and linked. Finally, greater co-operation between groups affected by intersectional discrimination in order to promote mutual solidarity is needed. Equal participation of all young people in social and political life can only be guaranteed if all diversity is taken into account in youth mainstreaming, in mainstreaming approaches in general and in the implementation of political measures.

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Chapter 6

Questioning gender mainstreaming – The Erasmus+ programme as an example

Marie Daviet

Manon Flausch once wrote: “Erasmus+ could do more to promote gender equality” (Flausch 2017). Originally, upon its creation in 1987, the Erasmus programme only concerned students, and it allowed them to spend a semester or a full year at another European university, with this period recognised as part of their academic studies while they also benefited from a scholarship. Erasmus became Erasmus+ in 2014, to highlight the new scope of the programme. Indeed, if it still concerns mobility in the field of higher education, it now gathers all former European programmes in the field of education and training, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Youth in Action. As a result, Erasmus+ encompasses six different sectors: higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult education, youth and sport (European Commission 2024). For each sector, three key actions can be implemented. The first is related to individual or group mobility, and the second to strategic partnerships, which refers to the creation and exchanges of innovative practices. The third aims at supporting political reform (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2013). Therefore, youth organisations now rely on the Erasmus+ programme to obtain European funding that will help them implement different activities such as youth exchanges or the mobility of youth workers. It has to be noted that Erasmus+ is one of the major instruments for financing European Union youth policy.

The Erasmus+ programme must take into account gender equality in its actions, as with every programme and every policy enacted by the European Union (EU). Indeed, since the 1990s, the EU has been using a new tool to decrease gender inequalities: gender mainstreaming. This concept means that gender issues should be addressed at every stage of the policy process and in every policy, and therefore that gender should be fully taken into account in youth policy. However, in 2017, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) wrote that, even though gender is particularly relevant in youth policies, it is insufficiently taken into consideration in research and policy documents.

Policy can be understood as decisions taken by a central authority and the tools used to implement them. Yet the sociology of public action invites us to consider not only the sole role of central authority but also the role of local actors, and different elements that can impact a policy's implementation, such

as the diversity of stakeholders or actors, including social actors, volunteers in non-profit organisation or the level of action (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2012). In the case of the Erasmus+ programme and the youth sector, this implies the need to question how the European Commission, as well as the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and National Agencies, take gender into account, through a study of the documents they produce, and also to question the understanding and implementation of gender mainstreaming within non-profit organisations, in order to better understand the critical analysis made by EIGE (2017) outlined above. Moreover, public action considers different steps of the policy-making process, from initial ideas to implementation. In this chapter, the focus will be dedicated to the implementation, when the policy adopted is put into action by local authorities or local actors. This chapter will dive into the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the Erasmus+ programme in order to gauge its comprehension by local actors involved in non-profit organisations acting at the regional level and their capacities to integrate a gender dimension into their actions.

This chapter is based on a study conducted by the author in 2022. Within this work, European documents, namely EU regulations and the Erasmus+ programme guide, were studied. At the same time, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with people working in French non-profit organisations. They were either volunteering for or employed by those organisations. The interviews aimed to understand their working context and the importance attached to gender equality and the place it finds in their actions.

The origins of gender mainstreaming and its current definition in the EU will be discussed first. Then the level of dedication to a gender perspective in European documents will be analysed to highlight its weak presence, followed by a presentation of its implementation by workers in non-profit organisations, which faces several constraints.

Dealing with inequalities: the European policy framework

From the Treaty of Rome to gender mainstreaming

The EU and, before it, the European Economic Community (EEC) have been identified as driving forces when it comes to gender equality (Milewski and Sénac 2014). The first commitment to gender equality came in the economic sector, as can be seen from Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome, which states that men and women must be paid the same amount for the same work. This represents the “founding dimension of gender equality in the European project”, according to Françoise Milewski and Réjane Sénac (2014: 189). The scope of gender equality policies later broadened, starting in the 1970s: equality of access to training, equality of working conditions (Directive 76/207/EEC) and then a principle of equality in terms of social security (Directive 79/7/EEC). Finally, a new tool was adopted in the 1990s: gender mainstreaming. Teresa Rees, quoted in an article from Mark Pollack and Emilie Hafner-Burton (2000), identifies three different

approaches to gender equality in the EU. First of all, the 1970s corresponded to a period of equal treatment. More specifically, various directives enriched the fight against inequalities within the work field (Stratigaki 2008). Then, the 1980s were characterised by positive action, which meant creating the conditions to make equality happen. The creation of specific funding (Jacquot 2006), such as the Daphne programme, whose aim was to fight gender-based violence, was part of this approach. Gender mainstreaming corresponds to the final phase and could be “a potentially revolutionary concept” (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000: 434).

Gender mainstreaming was adopted by the EU in a favourable context at the international and European levels. Indeed, in 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women organised by the United Nations (UN) in Beijing (China) (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000; Sénac 2006), gender mainstreaming was adopted as a new instrument to fight gender inequalities. That same year, at the European level, new states had joined the EU: Austria, Finland and Sweden. These three states were sensitive to issues related to gender equality and had already adopted measures at the national level (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000; Jacquot 2009). As a result, the EU seized on this tool. In 1996, the European Commission published its first communication, and a year later it issued a strategic document which defined the political strategy of the EU (Jacquot 2009). The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 21 September 1997 following the Fourth World Conference on Women. It was in favour of further action on gender equality (Sénac 2006). The integration of gender mainstreaming as a new tool to reduce gender inequalities materialised in the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997 (Jacquot 2006; Zimmerman 2010). Thus, Article 13 stipulates:

Without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and within the limits of the powers conferred by it upon the Community, the Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European Parliament, may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

This article confirms the EU’s competences in terms of fighting discriminations.

Gender mainstreaming: a strategic tool to challenge systematic gender inequalities

In its 1996 communication, the European Commission defined gender mainstreaming as:

not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women, but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account at the planning stage their possible effects on the respective situations of men and women (gender perspective). (European Commission 1996)

This strategy has been portrayed as “the tool that allows a deconstruction of those phenomena through a constant examination of public policies in terms of their differential effects on the situations women and men”³² (Jacquot 2006: 35).

32. Translation by the author.

More recently, gender mainstreaming has been defined as:

a transformative policy tool for real social change that has a strong focus on the deeper structural conditions of relations between women and men by also developing a comprehensive connection of gender to other inequality issues, such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, age and class. (Vida 2021: 28)

With regard to these three definitions, it is possible to note that gender mainstreaming is about taking gender into account in every policy, at each step from its design to its evaluation. It requires adopting a gender perspective, to consider policies and their effect with a gender lens. According to Vida, gender mainstreaming can encompass intersectionality, which would help to think of discriminations in a more global way. Furthermore, this link between multiple forms of discrimination refers to Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam. Its implementation provokes a lot of enthusiasm, since it resembles a tool that could transform gender relations (Jacquot 2006; Vida 2021), but it also raises a lot of questions. Indeed, this new instrument contains an important paradox, which lies in its implementation. New professionals who are not trained nor skilled in gender studies, and who are not aware of or who do not care about this topic, need to take gender equality into account in their working practice (Perrier 2006, 2015; Jacquot 2013). But is this feasible? We might wonder how a person who is not informed about or committed to gender equality will implement action in favour of mainstreaming gender. Studying the role that gender plays in the activities of non-profit organisations financed by the Erasmus+ programme will show us the limitations that aspirations to gender mainstreaming may face.

A limited consideration of gender in the European programme

Following on from the methodology developed by Maria Stratigaki (2008), two different documents produced by the EU will be examined to better understand the place dedicated to gender in the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 programme. Those documents are Regulation 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council, which established the Erasmus+ programme, and the Erasmus+ programme guide from 2019.

Erasmus+: a limited consideration of gender in the core documents

The two documents that are studied are quite different in their scope. Regulation 1288/2013 has a strong legal importance, as it is a legal act, which must be enforced. It specifies the Erasmus+ programme's modes of implementation. The programme guide is a tool for organisations that request and benefit from EU funding. It details rules and the conditions of participation, as well as the programme's functioning. With the adoption of gender mainstreaming at the EU level, we might expect some references to gender in those two documents. We will thus analyse the documents from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective to understand the extent to which the gender dimension is considered.

From a quantitative perspective, it has to be noted that the level of reference made to gender equality is very small. In the regulation, issues related to gender equality appear twice, in the same article, three times if we count a reference in the appendix. In the programme guide, the number of references is slightly higher, yet still extremely low. If we count wording such as “equality between women and men” and “gender”, it appears about 20 times throughout the 333-page document. There is, however, no specific section dedicated to gender equality, as is the case in other programmes like Horizon Europe. This brief analysis confirms the study of the European Institute for Gender Equality, which noted in 2017 that European documents related to youth policy were not taking the gender dimension sufficiently into account.

Gender appears as a general framework that needs to be respected. In the regulation, “equality between men and women” is mentioned in Article 7, which is a reminder of the legal framework, namely the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The guide specifies that one of the Erasmus+ programme’s objectives is to promote European values, which include gender equality. Apart from being intertwined with the EU legal framework, gender also appears as a theme to be taken into account in the evaluation of the actions financed under the programme. Indeed, the appendix to the regulation notes that organisations need to count “the number of young people engaged in mobility actions supported by the Programme, by country, action and gender”. Last but not least, if there is a higher number of references to gender issues in the guide, it is because they are partly linked to sectors considered to be less favourable to gender equality, such as the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and sport sectors. It should be highlighted that it does not include the youth sector, for which only the legal framework and mention of gender in the social obstacles apply. Furthermore, in both documents, gender is one of many forms of discrimination. It is one criterion that is not thought of in an intersectional way but rather as part of a list. For example, in the programme guide, gender appears in the section “Equity and inclusion”, in the fifth point dedicated to social obstacles, which include age, ethnicity or addictions. As a result, gender becomes dispersed across multiple forms of discrimination. This meets the analysis of Stratigaki (2008) in her study of the European Social Fund (ESF), which shows that after 2006 there was a shift in gender equality policy. The framework now regards every form of discrimination with the same intensity, and this is symbolised by the use of the expression “equal opportunities”. Indeed, in the Erasmus+ programme guide, gender is only one obstacle among others that stand in the way of equal opportunities.

A lack of support from the European Education and Culture Executive Agency and national Erasmus+ agencies

Not only does the gender dimension barely appear in the regulation and the guide, but the documents do not provide any useful information on how organisations are to integrate it into their working practices. As mentioned previously, its integration seems linked only to the general legal framework that prevails. As a result, it can be considered a “theoretical obligation”, a term

coined by Gwenaëlle Perrier (2006: 70), who studied the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the European Social Fund. She explains that in the ESF gender must be taken into account but there is no control over this and no sanction if this is not observed. The situation of the Erasmus+ programme is similar. The programme calls for the promotion of certain values and invites organisations to respect them, but nothing indicates that follow-up action will be taken on this topic by the executive agency of the Erasmus+ programme or by the National Agencies of the Erasmus+ programme. As a result, integrating a gender dimension into their activities depends on the goodwill of non-profit organisations and their employees and volunteers. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming implies that those who have no knowledge of gender issues are required to take them into account. It can hinder the actual implementation of a gender perspective (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000; Perrier 2015). One solution may be to provide non-profit organisations implementing the programme with technical support such as training, a specific web page and examples of good practices. Yet, there is next to no such support. The programme guide, which is the document referred to when implementing an activity financed by the Erasmus+ programme, contains no help regarding this topic. There is no theoretical background, no definition of what “gender” or “sexual orientation” mean, and no link to resources to find that information. The Erasmus+ programme is managed at different levels by the Executive Agency based in Brussels, which published the programme guide and manages some specific initiatives, and National Agencies. At the European level, examples of projects can provide some tools for other organisations. It is also interesting that a new resource was developed in 2023, after the end of the previous Erasmus+ programme: dedicated Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities (SALTO) on inclusion and diversity. In France, there are two National Agencies, with one specifically dedicated to the youth sector. When one looks at its website, there is no specific webinar, factsheet or any resources that could help non-profit organisations that want to integrate a gender dimension into their activities but feel they lack the knowledge to do so without extra help.

An insufficient availability of sex-disaggregated data

If gender is barely taken into consideration in the documents supporting the programme, it is no more so at a later stage of the policy process. Indeed, even though organisations that are implementing the programme are required to count the number of participants according to certain characteristics, including gender, data are scarcely available, even though data are important to build a better policy, to keep track and to evaluate impacts. At the European level, it is difficult to find precise data that would allow a study of the youth sector programme's execution from a gender perspective. If we take the example of France, a study that concerned the programme Youth in Action³³ (2007-2013) was published in 2017. Even though it concerns the previous programming

33. The programme Youth in action concerned non-formal mobilities (volunteering action, youth exchange, youth workers' mobility). It was integrated into the Erasmus+ programme in 2014.

period, it is interesting to note that women benefited from the programme more than men – 66% of the participants were women (Labadie 2017).

A new study was published more recently, in 2022. Presented in the form of a factsheet, the data are slightly more detailed and show that 59% of participants in activities related to the youth sector were women and this number rises to 62% when it comes more specifically to volunteering and youth exchange (Paisley and Zimmer 2022). Yet this does not give us any more detail about the length of the activity or the choice of country. It would be interesting to find out about the countries in which women and men volunteer, the kinds of non-profit organisations they join and whether they prefer short-term or long-term activity. Moreover, statistical data are not enough because they do not give any insight into the reason people choose to take part in a European activity. For instance, international mobility is often presented as a tool for improving the chances of finding a job. However, volunteering can be seen either as a “super-volunteering” – an intensive kind of voluntary work – or as a form of underemployment, counterbalancing the difficulty of finding a job (Simonet 2012). The feedback of participants would be interesting for understanding why they decided to participate in an Erasmus+ activity within the youth sector and if there are differences between participants based on their gender.

Between a favourable context for gender equality and internal and systematic obstacles within the youth sector

The study of these two different texts shows that the framework provided by the regulation and the programme guide is rather scarce when it comes to a gender dimension. Yet, based on the sociology of public action, policy is also made by local stakeholders who have a certain understanding of the policy. In the case of the Erasmus+ programme youth sector, this includes those working in non-profit organisations who are applying for Erasmus+ funding and are then managing projects.

If the general context regarding discrimination and gender equality appears to be rather favourable in non-profit organisations, numerous obstacles hinder the actual implementation of gender mainstreaming.

Youth sector: a favourable context for gender equality

The youth sector is rather favourable to gender equality and the fight against discrimination (Raibaud 2006; Amsellem-Mainguy, Cortéséro and Porte 2018). Based on material collected in 2022, which includes seven semi-structured interviews with people working in different French non-profit organisations receiving Erasmus+ funding, it appears that all these non-profit organisations implemented measures related to gender equality to a certain extent. Three different organisations had internal regulations. For one non-profit organisation, a “charter of values” had been implemented. In another one, gender equality was presented as a core value, which could be found in certain actions, such as the use of gender-inclusive language, but also through a document adopted

during its 2021 general assembly, which integrates issues related to gender. A third organisation had adopted a motion on gender. A third organisation had adopted a motion on gender, in which a short theoretical background and a definition of gender was integrated. The motion shows the close link between this NGO and gender equality, as we can see with the following quotation: "it is therefore committed to tackle exclusion, racism, sexism... It is thus engaged in deconstructing stereotypes (gender, intercultural)".³⁴ The three different texts have been developed by the biggest non-profit organisations interviewed for this study. These three organisations employ about 30 workers each, located in different offices in various cities.

Moreover, it appears that the Erasmus+ programme is also used by some non-profit organisations to work on topics related to gender equality and gender issues. Within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, non-profit organisations can organise youth exchanges. These are exchanges involving young people from at least two countries on a specific topic over a maximum period of three weeks. The president of a non-profit organisation explained that one exchange concerned discrimination related to sexual orientation, because it appeared to be an issue on a previous youth exchange. The non-profit organisation's members invited experts and professors to explain and discuss the topic, and used resources created by the Council of Europe. This shows that the non-profit organisation was in a position to find relevant resources. At the end of the youth exchange, participants had changed their mind and used less homophobic discourse. The same non-profit organisation organised another exchange on machismo. It was initiated by a volunteer who had knowledge of this topic as a result of her studies. She created resources that can now be used by other members of the organisation. Having competences and skills but also an interest on the topic is therefore helpful to discussing those topics, but this depends on the non-profit organisations themselves rather than the legal framework. This was also highlighted by Gwenaëlle Perrier (2006) in her study of the ESF. She indicated that the will and capacity of actors were important to the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Even though this chapter focuses on a different programme and a different field, the needs are similar.

From skills to time: a lack of resources from local stakeholders

"I just don't have the time."

Despite a general will to deal with gender studies and integrate the gender dimension into their work, non-profit organisations and the people working for them face various obstacles that hinder their capacity to mainstream gender. From seven interviews conducted in 2022, it appeared that all seven people working in non-profit organisations had a strong commitment to their work, which was reflected in the time they spent at work. Five announced that they worked overtime. For example, one person said, "I receive a salary for what I am doing but there is always some volunteer work left to do". A sixth person was a volunteer, yet

34. This quotation comes from a document adopted at the 2021 general assembly of a French NGO.

it has been calculated during an audit that she spends about 70 hours every week working for the non-profit organisation she is involved with. Furthermore, all of those involved in European project management actually take on a wide variety of different tasks, which include consortium building, supporting young people, administrative tasks, grant applications, project follow-up and involvement in local and European networks among other things. Considering both the high number of working hours performed and the multiplicity of tasks, we can imagine that it is difficult for those workers and volunteers to develop new skills to better mainstream gender in their non-profit organisations' activities. This was clearly stated by one person, who declared, "I would dream of submitting a project to connect with feminist non-profit organisations in Europe and elsewhere and do something around that. That would be amazing. But I just don't have the time."

Youth workers are not (always) gender experts

Before gender mainstreaming, equality policy was supported and implemented by specialists who were often feminists (Jacquot 2013) and, as a result, skilled. They were "equality professionals" and their work was directly concerned with the implementation of the equality policy. Yet, as explained by Perrier (2015), contrary to equality policies, gender mainstreaming is a tool that requires taking gender into account in all public policies and at every step. This results in the involvement of a greater number of actors, who are not all trained, involved or even interested in gender equality issues. The people interviewed were what might be called "equality laypersons" (Perrier 2015), as opposed to "equality professionals". Here the individuals still need to implement gender mainstreaming but this is far from being their only task and they sometimes lack the skills to implement it. Their core tasks concern project management or the support of young people. Moreover, their academic backgrounds are varied, from accounting to social economic sciences or social work. The latter might include some aspects of gender studies, though this was not mentioned. As a result, they are not gender experts. This lack of specific skills can be seen in some answers received during the interview, when interviewees were asked about their understanding of "gender". For some, this refers to both gender identity and sexual orientation, without being certain of the answer. For others, the only answer given concerned gender balance. This confirms that, even in the youth sector, a lot of people are not familiar with the concept of gender and the underlying challenges, which clearly undermines their capacities to handle it. This inevitably hinders the application of gender mainstreaming.

Gender: a non-priority topic in the youth sector

If people working in the field of youth mobility and managing Erasmus+ funding lack the time, resources and skills to deal with the gender dimension in their work, they also do not see it as a key topic. Indeed, at the European level, in the programme guide, gender is listed among many other obstacles to overcome. In the different non-profit organisations, when people are asked about obstacles young people face when wanting to take part in a European activity, either a volunteer opportunity or a youth exchange, other topics are mentioned. This includes the place where a young person lives, in a rural

area or a disadvantaged neighbourhood for instance, which can hinder their participation because of the distance or a lack of information. Those obstacles can also be economic or linked to a disability. As a result, gender is not considered as an obstacle, despite what the programme guide states, and this is similar to Perrier's findings, which show that gender is also not seen as a relevant variable in the field she is studying.

Conclusions

While gender mainstreaming is a tool that has been adopted across the European Union since the 1990s, requiring gender to be taken into account in every European policy and at every step of it, this chapter's study of youth policy and more precisely the Erasmus+ programme allows us to highlight the limitations of such a tool. Even in a favourable context such as the youth sector, taking gender into account is fraught with difficulties. The lack of consideration to gender equality in the programme guide tends to result in no more than a theoretical obligation for workers and volunteers implementing Erasmus+ activities to comply with, without any constraints or support to help apply this concept. In addition, various obstacles hinder the capacity of non-profit organisations to implement gender mainstreaming, including a lack of time, perhaps limited knowledge of the topic and the focus on other key topics that are often viewed as greater obstacles to young people's participation in the Erasmus+ programme.

This chapter shows that the legal framework is not enough to guarantee the proper implementation of a concept, in this case gender. Mainstreaming gender requires not only inclusion in the legal framework; it also requires providing resources to those responsible for its implementation. While central authorities can ease its implementation thanks to the legal framework and resources, success also depends on local actors who may lack the understanding, the time or even the willingness to take gender into account.

Mainstreaming is therefore an interesting policy tool, but one that faces a number of contradictions that hamper its effectiveness, whether with gender mainstreaming, diversity mainstreaming or youth mainstreaming.

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Section 3

National experiences from the youth sector

Across Europe, a growing number of policy initiatives seek to embed the concerns, rights and perspectives of young people into the fabric of governance. This section brings together several national case studies – Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Lithuania and France – to examine how youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective are implemented through both institutional mechanisms and participatory practices. Framed as a response to intergenerational inequalities and the structural marginalisation of youth, these contributions explore the design, function and efficacy of tools such as youth checks, regional and local youth councils, participatory service-learning schemes and educational initiatives. Together, they offer a critical insight into how youth-specific approaches intersect with broader administrative and political processes, and what conditions are necessary to make youth participation both meaningful and effective.

Taken together, the chapters in this section demonstrate that neither youth mainstreaming nor youth perspective can be reduced to a policy instrument or a procedural add-on. Rather, they emerge as key components of a dynamic mode of governance that mobilises administrative instrumentation and participatory innovation. From legally codified tools such as the German youth check, to community-based service learning in the Netherlands and pedagogically structured civic engagement in Lithuania, each case highlights key enabling factors – political leadership, interministerial co-ordination and institutional capacity – as well as persistent implementation gaps, including constrained power-sharing, symbolic participation and uneven policy commitment.

Chapter 7

Conceptualising and implementing youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as national policy goals

Dan Moxon, Marko Kovačić and Veronica Ştefan

The objective of promoting youth mainstreaming and integrating a youth perspective into policy making is now a paramount concern in the documentation of both the European Commission and the Council of Europe, respectively, as well as at the national level in many European countries. This chapter provides the key conclusions and findings of a study conducted by the authors during 2024, for the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, namely “Learning from national and local approaches to youth mainstreaming and use of youth perspective in policy making across Europe” (Moxon, Kovačić and Ştefan 2025). The study was based on in-depth case study analysis of national initiatives related to youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective in France, Malta, Ireland, Croatia, Germany, Austria, Finland and the Flemish Community of Belgium, as well as a review of relevant academic literature and European policy. The chapter sets out a conceptualisation and framework for youth mainstreaming/youth perspective as a policy concept that can be implemented at the national level. It seeks to add to the emerging conceptualisation of these terms, which are still relatively new within the youth field and not fully defined.

Youth mainstreaming and youth perspective at national level

At the time of producing the study, the terms “youth mainstreaming” and “youth perspective” were not yet fully defined, and the concepts, policies and practices needed to support them were still under development. Both the European Commission and the Council of Europe position their agendas within the context of democracy, with the European Commission conceptualising youth mainstreaming as a tool for improving policy decisions based on meaningful youth participation, and the Council of Europe conceptualising the integration of a youth perspective as a way to strengthen democratic institutions.

Data on the national and local use of youth mainstreaming and the utilisation of youth perspectives in fields outside of youth policy are somewhat limited. There has been rapid development and discussion relating to them throughout Europe, though most identified examples are within EU countries. A European Commission-led analysis of youth mainstreaming within 35 European countries participating in the Youth Wiki indicates that in about half of the countries analysed (n=18) youth issues can be taken into consideration in the drafting of legislation limited to the youth policy field (European Commission, EACEA and Youth Wiki 2024). In the other half (17), the assessment can cover legislation in any policy field that has repercussions for young people.

In the authors' study (Moxon, Kovačić and Ștefan 2025), which involved an in-depth exploration of these concepts in eight European countries, it was clear that the national actors involved have not necessarily set out to implement youth mainstreaming or youth perspective as defined by the European institutions. Developments in all studied national cases occurred either before or in parallel with the policy discussion at that pan-European level. Research interviewees used terms like "mainstreaming" or "youth perspective" in a relatively flexible manner, rather than as a clear signifier of a link or reference to policy at EU or Council of Europe level.

The youth mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas require that youth policy makers operate in new ways and stimulate or lead interaction with policy actors who are, at least in name, outside the youth field. Likewise, these agendas require policy makers outside the youth field to engage more deeply with youth-focused policy making and even young people themselves. It is also clear that the intention for both agendas is to lead to better policy in relation to young people. Youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are based on the recognition that the lives of young people are impacted by measures designed in the context of many policy areas and that there is a need to ensure that consideration of young people and their rights is not confined to youth-specific policies, but rather integrated into a multisectoral approach across all policy areas (European Commission, EACEA and Youth Wiki 2024).

The promotion of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas is therefore underpinned by encouraging sectors outside the youth field to adopt specific value-based positions (see below) with regard to young people and how they are affected, as a group,³⁵ by policy making. These value-based positions (see below) might be regarded as established in the youth field, but new to other sectors. Adopting them across all sectors could be seen as a prerequisite for the implementation of youth mainstreaming or the integration of youth perspective. The values resonate with other mainstreaming approaches such as child rights mainstreaming (United Nations 2023). Furthermore, it is a commitment to such values that stimulates change in the mechanism of policy making across and between sectors.

35. Though it should be recognised that youth is intersected by other identities such as ethnicity and class, and young people, like any social group, are not necessarily a homogeneous group.

The value-based positions can be defined as follows.

- 1. Recognition of the rights and status of young people.** Young people are a distinct social group, with a range of common social concerns and experiences. The concerns and interests of young people can often be unique compared to other social groups. This uniqueness arises because young people as a social group face specific disadvantages and forms of marginalisation in comparison to other age groups. This intergenerational inequality can include things such as economic and labour market disadvantages or a lack of representation within democratic decision making (Deželan 2024a, 2024b). The uniqueness can also arise from the relative lack of autonomy young people experience compared to older social groups, in that youth is fundamentally a transitional phase from dependence to independence. As a social group, youth is also intersected by other identities such as gender and ethnicity. While young people may have a strong level of common concerns and interests, they are also not a homogeneous group, and their experiences and perspectives may vary with other intersections. Above all, young people are rights holders (Williamson and Côté 2022). There is no international legislation dedicated to the specific rights of young people. However, they are still entitled to the rights offered to all persons through international legislation on human rights, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter, the EU Treaty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and other accompanying frameworks. The principles of equality and non-discrimination within these frameworks, therefore, place consideration of the concerns and interests of young people equal to those of other social groups when policies are made.
- 2. Acknowledgement that all areas of policy can potentially have distinct effects on young people.** All areas of policy have the potential to impact young people's lives and are therefore relevant to young people. Young people also have distinct and specific needs arising from their unequal and reduced access to resources and socio-economic status compared to older generations (what Alanen (2009) refers to as marginalisation within the generational order but might also be termed "intergenerational unfairness" in policy). This means that policies can affect young people in distinct and unique ways. Therefore, if the human rights and concerns of young people are not taken into account during policy making, policies may indirectly discriminate against young people and increase intergenerational inequality or fail to support intergenerational fairness.
- 3. Commitment to considering youth perspective(s) and young people's human rights when making policy.** Distinct mechanisms and processes are needed to take into account the concerns and rights of young people when creating policy. Youth participation mechanisms can be used to identify common viewpoints held among young people on a particular policy agenda, in order for these (varying) perspectives to be better taken into account when making policy. Young people are experts in their own lives, able to express their concerns and needs, and can identify how their

rights can be better upheld. Therefore, the incorporation of the perspectives and voices of young people into policy making can help to better inform policy by generating new insights and knowledge. Alongside this, other policy mechanisms that do not, strictly speaking, require participatory methods, such as regulatory impact assessment and cross-sector bodies, will further ensure that the rights and concerns of young people can be fully taken into account when making policy.

A further value position might be posited that citizen engagement in policy making/youth participation has benefits as a tool for improving the quality of policy, but this position requires deeper exploration. Most of the European-level policies on mainstreaming and youth perspectives (Deželan et al. Chapter 15), as well as the small body of literature on youth mainstreaming (Deželan 2024b; Seneviratne 2017), place strong emphasis on the connection to youth participation. In its fullest sense, youth participation refers to the active citizenship of young people, as well as their ability and agency to influence democratic life (Kiilakoski 2020; Deželan, Bacalso and Lodeserto 2023). However, youth participation is not synonymous with youth participation in decision making/policy making (PARTISPACE 2018). There are some forms of youth participation, such as volunteering and civic activism, which do not seek to provide a direct conduit for youth perspectives into policy-making institutions (Crowley and Moxon 2017; Gretschel et al. 2014). These forms of participation are therefore less relevant to the youth perspective and mainstreaming agendas, which are fundamentally about shaping policy. Thus, a general policy to promote youth participation will not always promote the forms of youth participation required by the youth mainstreaming and youth perspective approaches.

Furthermore, considering the range of participatory mechanisms that can be used to involve young people in policy making, there is no one method or form that is accepted as the most effective (Gretschel et al. 2014). Instead, different methods deliver different messages and voices (youth perspectives) and may be more or less valuable depending on the context (Crowley and Moxon 2017).

Research on “youth voice” identifies that young people do not have a universally shared, homogeneous view of the world or a universally held youth perspective (Hartung 2017). As with any group of people, individual opinions, values and beliefs will vary among individuals. Young people hold a common generational standpoint from which they speak, which is framed by being marginalised within intergenerational relationships and which leads to a level of common concerns and interests (see Alanen’s (2009) concept of generational order). This is also intersected by other social identities such as race, class and gender (Moxon 2023).

A participatory mechanism to involve young people in policy making can be said to generate and create a specific youth perspective. The youth perspective coming from such participatory mechanisms is generated by a combination of interactions between i. the young people involved in the participation mechanism; ii. the nature and quality of the participation mechanisms used; the context in which the participation occurs; and iii. the dialogue between young people and with other actors in the participation mechanism (Moxon 2023).

Different participatory mechanisms may produce different youth perspectives. These varying youth perspectives will all bring different levels of utility and value to policy making, but no method can produce a definitive youth perspective.

Despite this, the use of participatory mechanisms within the context of the youth mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas creates expectations on policy makers to engage seriously with the messages coming through these mechanisms. This means creating a realistic possibility for these messages to have an impact on the content of policy to ensure young people's involvement is not tokenistic (Kiilakoski 2020). Importantly, as the perspectives of young people are only one consideration when making policy (Williamson, Fras and Lavchyan 2021), tensions and conflicts will arise between realising the aspirations of young people and other policy drivers. As a result, for mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas to avoid tokenism and manage this tension ethically, consideration should be given to developing "meaningful" participatory mechanisms (see Bárta et al. 2021: 23 for an exploration of "meaningful" participation).

Learning from the national-level implementation

Within the authors' research (Moxon, Kovačić and Ștefan 2025), seven national examples and one local example of youth mainstreaming/implementation of youth perspectives were explored in depth as case studies. These case studies illustrated the range of approaches that have been taken to the youth mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas. Most of the initiatives were relatively new and could be considered exploratory or even experimental. Even the most long-standing example in France has been through a series of iterative developments. Although there are differences between the cases, several common approaches, key mechanisms and lessons learned could be identified.

Based on the cases, youth mainstreaming can be defined as "a cross-sector policy process implemented to enable institutions to improve policy making with regard to young people" (Moxon, Kovacic and Stefan 2025: 46). When established, the goals of this process are:

- ▶ ensuring the rights and perspectives of young people are taken into account when policy is made by policy sectors outside the youth field;
- ▶ ensuring that new policy outside the youth field contributes to a reduction of intergenerational inequality (or at least does not increase it), that is, ensuring new policy measures do not have disproportionate negative impacts on the lives of young people or erode their rights in some other manner by creating unjust disparity in resources and socio-economic status between generations (Seneviratne 2017).

However, the intention to promote youth mainstreaming and encourage its adoption can also be understood as a specific goal for the youth policy field. In most of the case studies, the youth field is a critical enabler, catalyst and support mechanism that encourages other policy fields to adopt the two goals above. The role of youth policy actors expands to take on the role of championing the

rights and concerns of young people across and between other policy sectors. The youth field also provides the practical means to enable other sectors to better take account of the rights and perspectives of young people.

Several concrete policy mechanisms required for the implementation of youth mainstreaming can also be identified. These were common across many, but not all, of the case studies in this study. First, a commitment from senior political leaders to reorganise policy making is required. Across the case studies, it can be seen that a decision to reorganise policy making in this way typically falls under the authority of the executive level of government. Youth mainstreaming requires a shift in the organisation of policy making. Its adoption moves consideration of young people from an exclusively youth sector to all (or at least more) policy sectors. Implementation of youth mainstreaming requires, in the first instance, support from senior governmental figures or bodies (Camarinhas 2019) and especially those who have the power to determine the remit and interaction of different policy sectors under their leadership.

Second, enabling legislation, regulation and strategy may be necessary to permit existing government departments or ministries to begin operating in a different manner and achieve such a reorganisation. Depending on the context, such legislation might need to:

- ▶ permit or require non-youth sector policy actors to address the topic of youth;
- ▶ permit or require youth sector policy actors to provide capacity, resources and expertise to other policy actors;
- ▶ define the governance mechanisms for interaction between policy actors and fields in relation to the topic of youth.

Third, specific mechanisms for cross-sectoral/cross-ministerial interaction must be established, potentially attached to a national strategy and with some form of national co-ordination mechanism. The movement of the youth priority out of the exclusive competence of the ministries of youth (or equivalent) to a cross-sector competence necessitates a mechanism to co-ordinate and govern how the topic of youth is addressed within policy making, such as a cross-sector youth committee. One of the key functions of this seems to be the determination of which upcoming policies might require the most in-depth consideration vis-à-vis the concerns of young people. While the aspiration of youth mainstreaming might be to consider young people in all policy fields, many of the case study examples found it necessary, in practice, to determine which policies required consideration or assessment in relation to young people; in some cases, this even led to prioritisation of some policy areas within national strategies. This is likely to be driven in part by resource limitations.

Fourth, when it is determined which policies require in-depth consideration with regard to young people, specific methods and capacity are needed to assess these policies. In the cases above, these assessments fall into two categories:

- ▶ Participatory mechanisms to produce and integrate the views of young people on a particular policy (Seneviratne 2017);

- ▶ technical processes to assess the impact of policies on young people (European Commission, EACEA and Youth Wiki 2024).

From the cases, it is clear that organisational capacity is needed to conduct these assessments. In many, but not all, cases studied, this capacity was provided by youth sector actors.

Across the case studies, it was evident that a wide range of participatory approaches were used to identify the voices of young people on specific policies. These included the following.

- ▶ Deliberative methods, where dialogue with young people takes place through in-depth workshops, feedback sessions or even youth assemblies; these methods occur on a task-and-finish basis, address a specific topic or policy and may occur with different young people each time they are deployed.
- ▶ Permanent youth advisory groups or forums, where young people, often from youth organisations, are selected as representatives or a representative voice of young people and can be consulted regularly on upcoming policy priorities.
- ▶ Digital consultation tools, which enable a wider number of young people to submit their views on a policy without the need to join an activity or group.
- ▶ Joint advisory structures, where young people and experts or sector representatives jointly form an advisory board, co-managing their work and input to policy making.

The lack of any common form or method of participation among the cases suggests that there is no form or model of youth participation that is specifically suited to youth mainstreaming.³⁶ However, in those cases which employed participatory methods, all of the participatory processes used were institutionalised processes, that is, forms of participation that can be set up and maintained by state institutions. It is also clear that the exclusive purpose of the participatory mechanisms in all of these cases was to enable young people to comment on, be involved in, or in some way express an opinion to influence policy making. In the cases that employed youth participation methods, none of the participatory mechanisms identified were especially new. Instead, they all reflected participatory approaches to involve young people in policy making that have already been widely used within youth policy. Most interestingly, in several of the national cases studied, the use of youth participation mechanisms was highly limited or ad hoc. In contrast to other national examples, participatory methods were not central to the approach to youth mainstreaming taken within these countries. This suggests that the youth participation mechanism might not be as central to the mainstreaming agenda as some of the literature (like Seneviratne 2017) claims. It is possible then that youth mainstreaming can be developed without the use of participatory mechanisms (though it could be argued that this is less desirable).

36. Although some forms of youth participation, such as civic activism, electoral participation and volunteering, can be ruled out. These are not by design methods that can be deployed by state authorities to gauge young people's voices on a topic.

It is also notable that in most case studies, there was no formal commitment to co-decision making or power-sharing with young people, and participatory mechanisms were often only consultative in nature. Many advocates for youth participation have long suggested that such sharing of power with young people is the highest level of participation (Kiilakoski 2020) and therefore the most desirable approach. However, the importance of full power-sharing is also disputed in the literature on participation for a number of reasons. First, it is argued that young people should have a choice regarding their participation, and the appropriate degree of their participation should be tailored to the needs of participants, rather than aspiring to any specific ideal (Treseder and Crowley 2001). Second, it is argued that lower levels of power-sharing may be a necessary first step towards higher levels (Lansdown 2018). Third, it is argued that the understanding of power as a property that individuals may have, rather than an action that people may exert, is too conceptually limited as a method for understanding participation (Gallagher 2008). It should be further noted that meaningful participation does not per se require power-sharing, only clarity as to how power is shared (Bárta et al. 2021). Last, it can be questioned why young people should formally hold power to direct a public policy that affects many different social groups, instead of this power being shared by a more widely representative mixed-age group of citizens; writing on citizens/civic participation argues that participatory mechanisms should strive to achieve full representation of all groups affected by a policy (Michels 2011). Despite this, the recent literature on youth mainstreaming still generally calls for power-sharing (Deželan 2024b; Seneviratne 2017). The lack of power-sharing within the cases in the authors' study suggests that it may not be essential to the mainstreaming agenda. Seemingly, significant progress can be made with only consultative approaches to engaging young people. Indeed, if the purpose of youth mainstreaming is to influence and improve policy making, it could be argued that one measure of successful youth participation is the extent to which the participation provided useful, usable and timely information and intelligence to policy makers in order to improve the content of policy (Bárta and Moxon 2022).

Alongside participatory mechanisms, a central feature of youth mainstreaming within many of the national cases was the use of tools (such as youth tests and youth checks) to somehow assess or predict the impact of policies on young people *ex ante* during the policy-drafting stage. These tools allow policy or legislation proposed by a state body to be scrutinised for any unintended consequences on young people, allowing for potential changes to be made. The most developed approaches set out a framework of pre-specified domains against which the potential effect of legislation or policy making was evaluated.

Rather than being participatory, these tools were often expert driven. They therefore do not constitute the integration of young people's views into policy making. Nevertheless, youth impact assessments such as youth checks are part of the growing youth mainstreaming agenda. The use of such tools adds further weight to the idea that youth mainstreaming is a broader approach than simply the development of participatory mechanisms in sectors outside the youth field.

All of the impact assessment tools within these cases were, in some way, still under development or revision. Most had only been implemented a relatively small

number of times, and nearly all cases identified a need for further development. There is potential then for further development, perhaps at the international level, of indicator banks, frameworks and assessment criteria, against which legislation can be critiqued. A human rights-based framework might serve as the foundation for this, in that tools could be developed to assess how upcoming policies impact the human rights of young people as defined by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Conclusion: towards a model of youth mainstreaming

At the heart of the mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas lies an intention to reorganise the mechanisms and approach to policy making in relation to young people. They both promote consideration of youth outside of the domain of youth policy, or more accurately, outside of the exclusive domain of youth policy actors, such as national ministries with responsibilities for youth. As the national case studies in this research demonstrate, the mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas encourage policy actors outside the youth domain to explicitly consider how their policies relate to and affect young people. This requires cross-sectoral governance mechanisms to determine how and when “non-youth” policies are to come under scrutiny vis-à-vis young people. This requires support from youth sector policy makers to both encourage mainstreaming and support its implementation. It also requires political support from more senior policy actors with the power to determine how policy fields interact together, as well as potentially enabling legislation to achieve new ways of working.

The ultimate goal of mainstreaming/youth perspective agendas is not simply to mainstream but instead to improve policy making in all fields with regard to young people and thereby strengthen democratic processes. This is based on the value propositions that all fields of policy can affect young people, often in specific and unintended ways, and that young people can be understood as a defined group of rights holders, with common but not homogeneous needs. These needs and rights, however, are often marginalised in comparison to other social groups, and therefore mainstreaming is needed as a way to prevent this.

Both the mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas heavily emphasise the role of youth participation. The mainstreaming agenda can be understood as distinct from policy agendas to promote youth participation in democratic life. With regard to their intersection with participation, the mainstreaming agenda is concerned with youth participation in policy making. Specifically, the mainstreaming agenda promotes the use of state-deployed participatory mechanisms that can gather the views of young people on specific issues and policies while such policies are under development. The forms of participation that are suitable for this (such as advisory councils, consultations and co-management) and the standards of meaningful participation (Bárta et al. 2021: 23) that can be adopted to support it are already well defined within existing literature on youth participation. But it can be understood that the involvement of young people in policy making is only one form of youth participation in democratic life.

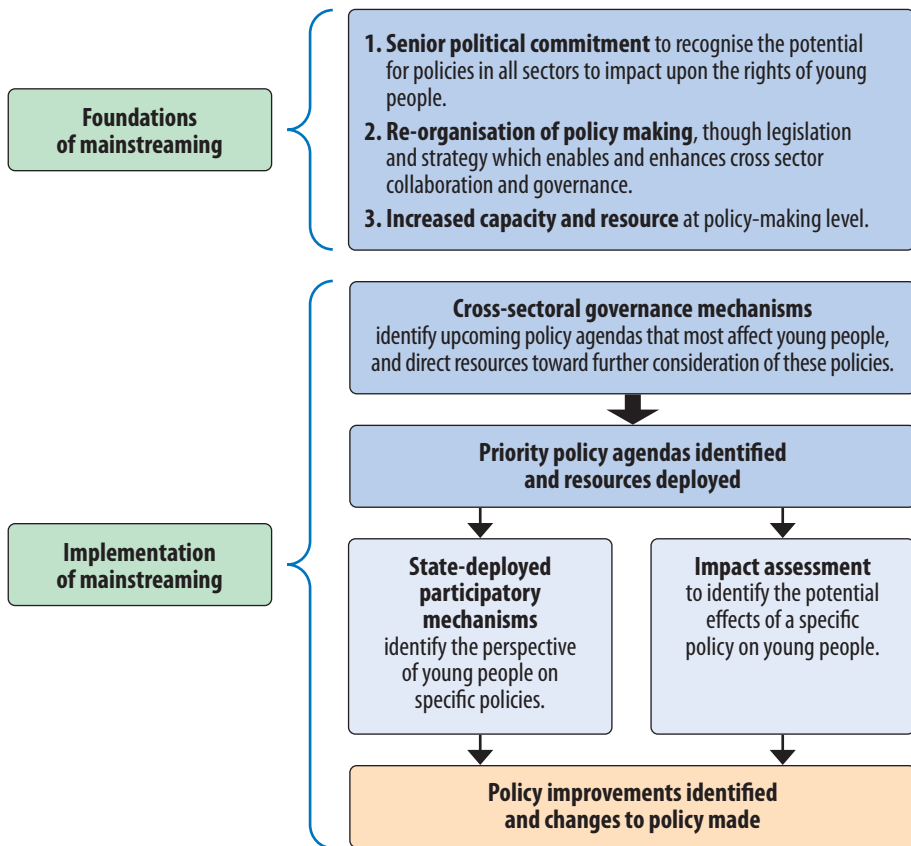
One of the interesting findings of this research is that the use of participatory mechanisms may not be as central to the mainstreaming and youth perspective agenda as previously thought. Many of the national cases use participatory mechanisms that are ad hoc or relatively limited. Across nearly all cases, strong commitments to formal power-sharing between young people and policy makers are not in place. More importantly, though, the participatory mechanism is not the central transformative factor that leads to mainstreaming. Instead, mainstreaming is typically driven by policy reorganisation and cross-sectoral collaboration, and then participatory mechanisms are typically used as a tool through which policies are assessed, once a commitment to mainstreaming is in place.

Within many of the case studies, the use of regulatory impact assessment (*ex ante* evaluations) of policy is also an instrumental tool with which policies are assessed with regard to young people. These can be understood as technical expert-led processes, which seek to understand the effect a policy might have on young people (such as with youth checks). There is strong value in undertaking a technical assessment of policies and how they impact young people. Furthermore, this approach can be distinguished from the use of participatory mechanisms to understand young people's views on a particular policy. Exactly what indicators or dimensions might be considered a technical assessment is not always clear, or indeed fully developed in many of the cases studied. There is a great opportunity for international bodies, such as the Council of Europe, to create some sort of indicator framework that can be used by member states to assess policy. The obvious construct on which to base this would be the human and social rights of young people. This would also help define and shape the mainstreaming and youth perspective agendas. It would further imply clearly that the goal of mainstreaming and youth perspective is to improve upcoming policies so that they better support the rights of young people.

A final point of note is that, while the theoretical goal of mainstreaming and youth perspectives might be to ensure all policy fields better promote the rights of young people, this may be rhetorical in practice. Nearly all national cases demonstrate that mainstreaming requires additional capacity, often of the youth sector actors who provide the practical support. Many cases have responded by prioritising which policies and policy fields are to undergo detailed assessment, in order to make the best use of capacity. A more pragmatic goal for youth mainstreaming might be to ensure that the rights of young people are considered in all policies to the greatest extent possible with available resources, with the greatest scrutiny given to policies likely to have the most effect on young people's rights and lives.

Based on the findings of this study, a draft model of youth mainstreaming is shown in the diagram below, divided into two sections. First, the foundations of youth mainstreaming, which reflect the conditions needed within a national government (or equivalent cross-sector policy-making body) to establish youth mainstreaming. Second, the implementation of youth mainstreaming, which reflects the ongoing processes used once mainstreaming has been established. The extent to which this model also reflects the youth perspective agenda will depend on how the Council of Europe defines, develops and distinguishes its idea of the youth perspective from that of youth mainstreaming.

Figure 1 – Draft model of youth mainstreaming



It should be recognised that this model is, like all models, a simplification of the more complex reality of policy making and to some extent idealised. It assumes that specific policies can be named and identified as being put through a mainstreaming process or assessment, leading to clearly identifiable changes within said policies. This was not necessarily identifiable in all of the cases within this research. While some cases could articulate policies that had been addressed within their mainstreaming approaches, others also operated in a more generalised manner, providing mechanisms for feedback on general policy areas to influence the working of government more holistically. A particular absence across many of the cases was the lack of evaluation and monitoring of the effect of mainstreaming on policy formulation. To some extent, this is because many cases were relatively new in their approach. However, it also reflects the fact that tracking and monitoring influence on policy agendas is generally a challenging endeavour that may not be possible in practical terms. Such evaluation problems have long been identified by those seeking to evaluate the impact of advocacy (Coates and David 2002) or participation (Crowley 2012). Put simply, identifying what government policy might have looked like in the

absence of the mainstreaming process, identifying how policy content is different where mainstreaming is present, and attributing any identifiable changes to mainstreaming mechanisms alone is likely to be challenging and perhaps even unachievable in practical terms.

It can also be said that this model primarily reflects mainstreaming within policy design. There may still be the potential to add further functions and mechanisms that relate to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy within this. Moving forward, as the practice, theory and transnational policy on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective develop, it is likely that more comprehensive models and understandings of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective can be developed.

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Chapter 8

Integrating youth perspectives into policy making – Lessons learned from the German youth check

Rebecca Romes-Larsen and Viktoria Abendroth

In recent years, youth-specific regulatory impact assessment has become an increasingly recognised tool for taking the perspectives of the young generation into account. In the European Union (EU), only Austria, France and Germany carry out an *ex ante* regulatory impact assessment (RIA) at the national level (OECD 2020: 55). At the regional level, Flanders in Belgium (KomJC 2022a: 6) and Thuringia in Germany (FÖV 2022) have introduced youth-specific RIA tools, to assess the impact of legislative proposals on the young generation. What distinguishes the German youth check from RIA tools in other countries is the fact that it is carried out by a scientific institution outside the government.

The youth check was introduced in 2017, after the 15th Report on Children and Youth stated that national policy lacked a specific approach in the field of youth policy (BMFSFJ 2017: 41). Often, youth has not been seen as a distinct stage of life with specific challenges that differ from those of other age groups. The introduction of the youth check was an important measure for integrating the youth perspective into the legislative process and to highlight both intended and unintended effects of proposed legislation. The youth check examines draft legislation from all ministries of the German Federal Government with regard to their impact on young people between the ages of 12 and 27. The youth check is carried out by the Competence Centre Youth-Check (ComYC), a project of the National Institute of Public Administration Germany (NIPAG). The decision on whether draft legislation has specific effects on young people is made by the ComYC.

The objective of this chapter is to introduce the concept of the German youth check to a wider international public and to present the effects as well as the limitations of the instrument from the perspective of the ComYC. We refer to the youth check at the federal level unless otherwise specified. The chapter will take a look at the international debate on youth checks and give an outlook on recent developments at the international level regarding youth-specific RIA tools.

The youth check in Germany

The youth check is an RIA tool designed to assess the potential impact of proposed legislation on young people between the ages of 12 and 27. First, we take a closer look at how the German youth check was developed and implemented and how it relates to the German Youth Strategy (BMFSFJ 2019), as well as the concept of youth mainstreaming. We also explain how the youth check is integrated into the legislative process and how the assessment tool is structured. Furthermore, the different versions of the youth check are presented. We describe how young people's perspectives are included in the youth check and the work of the ComYC. In conclusion, we show the impact of the youth check on policy making and describe the limitations of the assessment tool.

Youth check in the context of youth mainstreaming

The youth check serves as an important measure for taking into account the youth perspective at an early stage in the legislative process and can therefore be described as a measure of youth mainstreaming. Youth mainstreaming refers to “the integration of a youth perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes that concern and affect young people” (European Commission 2024a: 5). The term youth mainstreaming plays a minor role in the German discussion and is more commonly used at European level (Hofmann-van de Poll 2024). Nevertheless, Germany has developed several measures to integrate the youth perspective into government actions that fit the definition above. From 2015 onwards, the Federal Ministry for Youth implemented various measures following the concept of “independent youth policy” to focus on the interests and needs of young people between 12 and 27 years of age (BMFSFJ 2024). Independent youth policy sees youth as a stage of life with age-specific challenges and aims to align social and political actions with the interests of young people (jugendgerecht. de – Arbeitsstelle Eigenständige Jugendpolitik 2020: 7) Therefore “Independent Youth Policy puts the interests and needs of young people at the centre of all cross-sectoral activities relating to youth policy” (European Commission 2025).

In December 2019, Germany introduced the federal government's youth strategy, which is based on the independent youth policy (European Commission 2025) with the slogan “Shared responsibility: a policy for, with and by young people” (BMFSFJ 2020). The aim of the youth strategy is to strengthen the interests of young people in Germany. The youth check is a measure in the field of action “Future, intergenerational dialogue, youth vision” and is mentioned there as an offer of advice and support throughout the legislative process (BMFSFJ 2020: 7; BMFSFJ 2019: 41).

The idea behind the German youth check and its development

The idea behind the youth check came from the realisation that young people's interests are considered less often in day-to-day politics in Germany than those of other age groups (BMFSFJ 2017: 41). Moreover, young people can be affected

by legislative proposals from all policy areas even though their interests are not always considered. The youth check intends to make the potential effects of proposed legislation on the young generation visible and to contribute to more youth-friendly legislation. The German youth check was initially a demand from the expert community in the field of youth. National stakeholder associations, such as the German Federal Youth Council, advocated the introduction of a youth check in Germany (DBJR 2016).

In the coalition agreement of 2013, the German Government stated the objective of developing a youth check in collaboration with youth organisations (Deutscher Bundestag 2013: 101). A participatory process with experts in the field of youth and with involvement of the Federal Ministry for Youth was started to further develop the concept of a youth check (DBJR 2016). In 2016 the NIPAG was commissioned to develop the assessment tool and the methodology of the youth check in collaboration with the experts (FÖV 2016). In August 2017, the ComYC was established as a project of the NIPAG with the objective of conducting the youth check and further developing the methodology (FÖV 2017). The first youth check was published in April 2018.

The youth check in the legislative process

The youth check is carried out at an early stage in the legislative process. Like other RIA tools, its purpose is to demonstrate the potential consequences of proposed legislation during the draft stage of the legislative proposal. The objective is that changes to the draft bill can still be made during the legislative process, thus preventing unintended consequences.

Most legislative proposals in Germany are initially drafted by the federal ministries and subsequently introduced by the federal government to the German Parliament. The ComYC is responsible only for legislative proposals by the federal government. In general, RIA is only conducted for draft bills of the German Government. It is not carried out for draft bills of the German Parliament.

In the pre-parliamentary stage of law making in Germany, draft bills are drawn up in the lead ministry and subsequently co-ordinated with other ministries as part of the interdepartmental co-ordination process (Bundesregierung 2024: 35, paragraph 45, sentence 1). This involves the inclusion of all ministries whose policy areas are potentially affected by the draft bill. Each draft bill of a federal ministry includes a description of the anticipated regulatory impact, including effects on public budgets as well as the costs for citizens or the public administration (Bundesregierung 2024: 33-34, paragraph 44).

During the interdepartmental co-ordination process, draft bills are forwarded to the federal states, the national associations of local authorities and selected stakeholder associations for comment (Bundesregierung 2024: 36-37, paragraph 47). In this pre-parliamentary stage, amendments to the bill are usually made as a result of the hearing process. The youth check is carried out during this time. After this process, the bill is adopted by the German Government and then forwarded to the German Parliament as a government bill.

The ComYC receives bills either through the Federal Ministry for Youth or by monitoring the ministerial websites. All federal ministries are supposed to publish their legislative proposals on their websites during the public hearing stage of the legislative process. However, there is often a delay regarding the timely publication of draft bills on the ministerial websites.

If the ComYC detects and confirms specific effects on young people in draft legislation, a youth check is carried out and subsequently transmitted to the Federal Ministry for Youth. From there, the youth check is forwarded to the respective lead ministry.

As soon as the government bill is adopted, the ComYC examines whether there have been any changes in the draft that may have an impact on young people. Should this be the case, an updated youth check referring to the government bill will be published.

The youth check assessment

The youth check is based on a standardised assessment tool consisting of an assessment chart and assessment process. Both are described in more detail below.

Assessment chart

The assessment chart was developed by the NIPAG in a participatory process involving the input of youth experts prior to the establishment of the ComYC (FÖV 2016; DBJR 2016). The ComYC continues to use the assessment chart, which is constantly being reviewed and adjusted. Young people are also involved as experts through participatory events (KomJC 2018; KomJC 2022b: 29). The assessment chart consists of six areas of life and 11 impact dimensions. The areas of life reflect the everyday worlds of young people, while the impact dimensions represent aspects that are important for young people in the respective areas of life. The combination of an area of life and an impact dimension provides an indication of how a measure could affect young people. The areas of life serve to identify where the proposed legislation could have an effect while the impact dimensions reflect how these effects might impact young people.

The six areas of life

- ▶ Family
- ▶ Leisure
- ▶ Education/work
- ▶ Environment/health
- ▶ Politics/society
- ▶ Digital world

The 11 impact dimensions

- ▶ Participation opportunities
- ▶ Educational conditions and opportunities
- ▶ Health effects
- ▶ Individual rights
- ▶ Financial effects

- ▶ Media access and use
- ▶ Mobility
- ▶ Protection against discrimination and stigmatisation
- ▶ Protection against violence
- ▶ Self-determination and independence
- ▶ Social relationships

Given the diverse life circumstances of young people, the ComYC aims to point out the potential effects of proposed legislation on different demographic groups of young people.

Assessment process

During the preliminary assessment, the ComYC determines whether young people are specifically affected by the proposed legislation. A youth-specific effect is defined as one that differs in its potential impact on young people compared to other age groups. If relevant effects on young people between the ages of 12 and 27 are identified during the preliminary assessment, the main assessment is conducted to systematically examine possible effects. Which impact dimensions are affected in the areas of young people's lives is therefore examined. The result of this process is a youth check.

Publication channels and versions of the youth check

The results of the assessment process are presented in a standardised youth check and sent to the ministry responsible for the draft bill by the Federal Ministry for Youth. All youth checks are subsequently published on the ComYC's website, thus ensuring that the youth check is available to a public that is interested in politics, public administration and the expert community. In order to draw attention to them, new youth checks, are promoted via the ComYC's social media accounts and the ComYC's newsletter.

Over time, different versions of the youth check have been developed, focusing on different target groups. All versions are available on the ComYC's website.³⁷

Main versions

- ▶ Youth check referring to a draft bill from a federal ministry
- ▶ Youth check referring to a government bill

The youth check is published in a standardised version. Each youth check referring to a bill from a federal ministry or to a government bill is characterised by the following features:

- ▶ a summary of the main potential effects on young people;
- ▶ a description of the affected groups of young people;
- ▶ a description of the amendment of the law and its potential impact on young people. The relevant legal passages of the bill are described in combination with the possible impact on young people.

37. See www.jugend-check.de.

In addition to the main versions, two brief versions of the youth check are produced that address specific target groups and provide a concise overview of the potential impact of the proposed legislation: These are a brief version for members of the German Parliament (Kurzfassung Bundestag) and a brief version for young people (Kurzfassung Jugend-Seite). The brief version for the German Parliament is sent to the members of the responsible committees of the German Bundestag and published on the ComYC's website. The brief version for young people is published on the ComYC's youth website.

Integrating young people's perspectives into the youth check

The youth check is a scientific analysis that shows the impact of draft legislation on young people. The potential effects are described in an objective manner. It serves as a basis for evidence-based policy making and helps to raise awareness of young people's concerns and circumstances among policy makers. The ComYC does not involve young people in the process of regulatory impact assessment in its day-to-day work. One reason for that is the fact that the youth check occurs at an early stage in the legislative process. The ComYC has no control over the timing of the publication of a draft legislation by the lead ministry. As time is a limited resource in the German legislative process, the ComYC has approximately between one and two weeks to carry out a youth check. Since there is no prior notice when a legislative proposal will be published, participation events cannot be planned with sufficient time in advance.

If the participation of young people in the youth check is desired by policy makers, a federal ministry would have to give access to a draft legislation at an early point in the legislative process. The ComYC offers all federal ministries an RIA of draft legislation or specific points of the draft in combination with youth participation on request. If requested, the ComYC could provide a written assessment in combination with youth participation. The perspectives of young people on the draft legislation and the effects on their own life could be identified in a participation event, evaluated by the ComYC and possibly integrated into the RIA.

One example of how young people's perspectives can be integrated into the youth check can be found at the state level in Thuringia. Thuringia is the first federal state to introduce a youth check for federal state laws, and additional youth participation for specific draft laws. The youth check in Thuringia is carried out by the Youth Check Thuringia project bureau at the NIPAG. Thuringia is testing out various participation formats such as a "youth team", consisting of 50 young people chosen through a double random selection procedure, who were invited to contribute their perspectives on draft legislation with specific relevance to young people (FÖV 2024).

Participation formats

It is of great importance to the ComYC to reflect the realities and perspectives of young people between the ages of 12 and 27 and to involve them in its work and the adjustment of the assessment chart. Therefore, the ComYC has developed a variety of formats designed to incorporate the perspectives of young people.

The selection of young people is based on various criteria such as gender, place of residence and age in order to achieve a group as diverse as possible.

In the context of youth audits, up to 70 young people from all over Germany are invited to discuss and exchange views on a range of general issues, as well as on the work of the ComYC. The perspectives shared by the young people can serve to provide constructive feedback and to stimulate new ideas for the ComYC's work.

The ComYC also organises participation events to involve young people in the impact assessment of selected legislative proposals at an early stage of the legislative process. During these events, planned projects are discussed on the basis of a key issue paper or a similar document. The aim is to gather young people's experiences and perspectives on the planned legislation. The results of these events are evaluated and may be included in the youth check when the draft legislation is published.

Youth website

The ComYC presents information on the youth check in a youth-friendly format on its own youth website.³⁸ In order to give young people an overview of how legislative proposals affect their lives, the ComYC publishes a summary of the main results of each youth check on this website. This version uses easy-to-understand language and explains technical terms. The aim is to enable young people to understand the impact of draft legislation on their lives and to advocate changes if necessary.

Effects and limitations of the youth check

Since its introduction, the German youth check has proven to be an effective RIA tool to show the intended as well as the unintended effects of proposed legislation on young people. During the 19th legislative period (2017-2021), the ComYC examined 543 legislative proposals (including draft bills from the federal ministries and government bills) and published 126 youth checks (96 youth checks referring to the draft bill from a federal ministry and 30 youth checks referring to a government bill) (KomJC 2022b:19).

Moreover, the youth check shows that legislation across policy areas can have an impact on the young generation. The ComYC identified specific impacts on young people in legislative proposals from 11 out of 14 ministries during the 19th legislative period (KomJC 2022b: 8). Therefore, it is not only youth-related draft legislation that has a specific impact on young people. Legislation in other policy areas, such as social, health and transport policy, also has a significant impact on the young generation. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all federal ministries introduce legislative proposals for their own policy areas.

Because of its objectivity, the youth check receives attention and feedback from the ministerial administration and politicians. This can be observed in supporting statements to the youth check by members of parliament or when the effects

38. See mein.jugend-check.de.

mentioned in the youth check are considered. Furthermore, the decision to support an external organisation to conduct the youth check has proven to be a success. With the NIPAG as the project executing organisation of the ComYC it was ensured that the instrument is free from political influence. The credibility of the youth check has been enhanced by the fact that the NIPAG is a nationally and internationally recognised institute with many years of experience in the field of RIA. It was clear from the outset that the youth check should be distinct from the statements made by the youth organisations and therefore should not be carried out by these or other youth stakeholder organisations. Consequently, the German youth check is carried out by an external institution and an interdisciplinary team that employs scientific methods in its work.

Prior to the start of the youth check, concerns were raised that the youth check would become a tool for judging legislative projects. This initial scepticism has been overcome over time and cross-party acceptance has been achieved. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the youth check does not characterise proposed legislation as youth-friendly or not youth-friendly but provides an objective description of possible impacts based on scientific data. It is up to policy makers to decide to what extent the results of the youth check are considered in the subsequent process. Nevertheless, policy makers can use the results of the youth check to incorporate the youth perspective in their decision making.

Despite the efficacy of the German youth check as an RIA tool, there is no legal obligation to conduct the youth check. The task of the ComYC is to assess the impact of proposed legislation on young people and to carry out the youth check. In the absence of a legal obligation, the ComYC receives draft legislation from the Federal Ministry for Youth at the beginning of the public hearing process. However, the Federal Ministry for Youth is only involved when its own policy areas are affected. Therefore, there is a gap between those drafts that are known to the ministry and those that are not. The lack of a legal obligation to conduct the youth check can cause a delay until draft legislation is available to the ComYC. In addition, the ComYC needs to monitor all ministry websites to ensure that draft legislation is monitored across policy areas. It is only through this monitoring that nearly all legislative proposals can be reviewed for their impact on young people. However, it is possible that the ComYC receives draft legislation with such a delay that a youth check cannot be conducted in a timely manner. In these cases, it is not possible to send the youth check back by the deadline for the hearing process.

The fact that the youth check in Germany is carried out only for legislative proposals from the federal government is sometimes mentioned as a limitation of the instrument. However, RIA is conducted only for draft bills of the federal ministries and not for drafts introduced by members of the German Parliament. Regarding the law-making process, it is generally only drafts introduced by the German Government that have a chance to pass parliament. It is therefore reasonable to concentrate available resources on those drafts that will become law and thereby have an impact on the lives of young people.

The youth check contributes to more youth-oriented legislation as it helps to take

young people into account at an early stage in the legislative process. Given the national significance of the youth check, the Federal Ministry for Youth committed to promoting the youth check on a long-term basis from 2023 onwards. Between 2017 and 2022, the ComYC was funded in two project periods. As the only scientific institution in Germany that carries out an accompanying RIA (*ex ante* assessment) for all federal government bills, the youth check fills a gap in the existing better regulation toolkit and contributes to evidence-based policy making in Germany.

International developments and discussions regarding the youth check

The international debate on the incorporation of the perspective of young people into legislation has become increasingly important in recent years. In the light of this, the concept of youth mainstreaming has become more recognised, based on the idea that “young people are impacted by measures designed in the context of manifold policy areas” (European Commission 2024a: 7).

In May 2022 the ComYC hosted the first International Conference on Regulatory Impact Assessment for the Young Generation in Berlin (KomJC 2022a). Speakers from Germany, Austria and Flanders were invited to talk about RIA procedures and youth-specific RIA in their respective countries. Their presentations were complemented by a keynote speech in which findings from the OECD regarding young people’s attitudes towards politics and the development of youth-friendly policies across the OECD member states were presented.

The conference revealed that all youth-specific RIA tools in the EU differ in how and by whom they are executed as well as in their legal embedding and the degree to which they are mandatory. They also differ in terms of the age groups considered: while Austria and Flanders include children from birth in the impact assessment, the German youth check focuses on the 12-27 age group (KomJC 2022a: 6). A conscious decision was made in Germany to focus on youth and not to incorporate the child perspective because the concerns of children and young people are different. Germany is also the only country where the youth check is conducted outside of the ministerial administration and is carried out by a scientific institution.

After the realisation that the pandemic “caused young people to sacrifice many key life experiences” (European Union 2023: 2), the European Commission declared 2022 the European Year of Youth. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that in times of crisis, young people’s concerns are often subordinated. It has also shown that such crises have a distinct impact on young people at this stage of their lives. In its communication on the European Year of Youth, the European Commission announced at the beginning of 2024 the intention to integrate young people’s perspectives into policy making by introducing a youth check (European Commission 2024b: 4). The European youth check is intended to be part of the policy-making process and should consist of four stages: assessment of youth relevance; youth consultations; impact assessment and scrutiny (European Commission 2024b: 5). In the mission letter to Glenn Micallef, the

designated EU Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, the implementation of the youth check is announced as part of the new Commission's work (European Commission 2024c: 5).

In addition to the developments at the European level, it is also interesting to look at the OECD member states. In 2020, the OECD conducted an analysis of governance tools with the objective of generating youth-responsive policy outcomes. In its publication "Governance for youth, trust and intergenerational justice", the OECD found that only four out of 28 countries use RIA tools to consider youth more systematically in policy making and legislation. According to the OECD, *ex ante* RIA tools are used in Austria, France, Germany and New Zealand (OECD 2020: 55).

Despite the existence of significant variation between youth-specific RIA tools across the EU, they are unified by the objective of making legislation more youth-friendly and raising awareness about the concerns of young people.

Conclusions

The German youth check has proven to be an efficient RIA tool. With its innovative approach, the youth check fills a gap in the existing better regulation toolkit. The German youth check is distinguished from other RIA tools by the use of a scientific methodology, by its foundation on a standardised assessment tool and by the external institution responsible for conducting the youth check. The youth check thereby contributes to evidence-based policy making without increasing the workload of the ministerial administration.

The youth check is embedded in a variety of youth mainstreaming measures in Germany. These measures aim at considering the interests and needs of young people. The German youth check is an important element of the independent youth policy (BMFSFJ 2024) and part of the federal government's youth strategy (BMFSFJ 2019: 41) and, as such, plays a pivotal role in more comprehensive approaches to integrating the youth perspective into policy making and government actions.

Youth-specific RIA is an adequate addition to the process of incorporating the perspectives of young people into legislation. With the youth check, the youth perspective can be considered from an early stage in the legislative process. It is thereby an efficient tool for evidence-based policy making. However, it is important to provide the necessary conditions for carrying out the youth check, such as funding and access to legislative proposals.

The existing youth-specific RIA tools at the national and regional levels can function as best-practice examples for other member states and for considering the developments at the European level.

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Chapter 9

Improving youth participation in local policy: reframing the narrative

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Actively involving youth in the decisions that affect their lives is more than just an end in itself. It is a crucial means of creating effective public services and policies and contributes to democratic structures (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford 2013). Youth participation – defined here as “a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives” (Checkoway 2011) – remains an ongoing challenge for local governments. Barriers such as lack of trust, limited inclusivity and short-term approaches hinder its full potential. Youth participation in local policies is one of the aspects of the broader concept of “youth mainstreaming”. Youth mainstreaming involves integrating youth perspectives into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes that concern and affect young people – and youth participation can be one way to do this (European Commission European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024). Additionally, youth mainstreaming seeks to reshape institutional and policy-making processes to create space and opportunities for young people to contribute to decisions that influence their lives (European Commission European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2024). We see the two concepts as deeply interconnected, as participation provides the insights and legitimacy necessary for effective mainstreaming, while mainstreaming also ensures that the outcomes of participation are integrated into policy structures (Kudva and Driskell 2009).

This chapter introduces design theory as a new perspective for identifying and addressing the current challenges and barriers to youth participation and its implementation for municipalities. The central question guiding this chapter is: How can a design-based approach contribute to enhancing youth participation in local policy making and address systemic barriers to youth mainstreaming? Through a case study in Rotterdam (in the Netherlands), we investigate how a design-based approach, grounded in design theory, can enhance youth participation processes in local policy by “reframing” the challenges surrounding youth involvement.

Method

A transdisciplinary team of experts in sociology, psychology, public administration and design collaborated over a period of approximately two years, using the frame innovation method to explore the challenges of youth participation in Rotterdam. This design method is particularly suited for complex social problems (Dorst 2015). One of the goals was to reframe the issue and generate unique insights and innovative strategies, which could potentially reshape youth participation in the city and provide valuable lessons for other municipalities facing similar challenges surrounding youth mainstreaming.

Below is an overview of the methods used in this study. A more detailed discussion will follow later in the chapter.

Frame innovation method

Framing involves redefining a problem in a way that reveals new solutions and perspectives. A frame is a conceptual lens that offers a fresh approach to addressing an issue, often drawing from metaphors or parallel situations with similar underlying dynamics. This approach shifts focus from conventional problem definitions to deeper systemic themes that inform innovative strategies.

The research followed the eight steps of the frame creation approach; these steps might seem a bit abstract but will be illustrated with the case study in Rotterdam.

- ▶ Archaeology – Analysing the historical development of the issue of youth participation and its current framing.
- ▶ Paradox – Identifying complexities and contradictions that make the issue of youth participation difficult to resolve.
- ▶ Context – Understanding direct stakeholders, their values and their perspectives.
- ▶ Field – Exploring the broader ecosystem and indirect stakeholders.
- ▶ Themes – Identifying deep human motivations that shape the issue.
- ▶ Frames – Detecting patterns among themes to construct new frames and approaches.
- ▶ Futures – Envisaging possible outcomes and value propositions for stakeholders.
- ▶ Transformation – Developing strategies for implementing the new approach.

Co-creation and research through design

A participatory approach was central to the research process. Throughout the study, multiple co-creation sessions were conducted to engage stakeholders and gather insights. Some of these sessions incorporated cultural probes, a method that collects qualitative data through photographs, drawings and written responses (Sanders and Stappers 2014). These probes provide a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and emotions.

This participatory research aligns with the research through design approach, where “design activities, along with designed artefacts, are established as the chief elements in the process of generating and communicating knowledge” (Stappers and Giaccardi 2011). Each co-creation session functions as a research activity aimed at gathering meaningful insights, not only from the outcomes (such as collages) but also from the process of collaboration and dialogue with stakeholders. The knowledge generated through these interactions informs the development of new perspectives on youth participation and mainstreaming.

Chapter overview

This chapter begins with an exploration of youth participation, its current state and the challenges municipalities face in implementing it. Next, we introduce design theory and its application to complex social issues, including youth participation. A case study in Rotterdam illustrates the potential of a design-based approach – more specifically the frame innovation method – to rethink how issues surrounding youth participation are approached. This new approach enhanced, among other things, the way stakeholders engaged in discussions about their unmet needs and aspirations, fostering more meaningful and productive conversations around youth participation. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of this design-based approach and propose future directions for research and practice.

Youth participation: a buzz word or potential instrument for societal change?

Increased interest in youth participation

Policy makers increasingly expect young citizens to be actively involved in policy development (Dedding and Aussems 2024). This aspiration is reflected in the rise of youth participation initiatives over recent years, from podcasts to long-term programmes (UNICEF NL n.d.; Democracy Reloading 2024).³⁹ The professionalisation of youth participation is seemingly gaining momentum.

This increased interest in youth participation may not come as a surprise, given the multiple benefits that are associated with it. First, involving youth in discussions about issues that affect them can help create public services and policies that are more aligned with their needs (Checkoway 2011; Macauley et al. 2022). Such a participatory approach provides a practical framework for making youth concerns visible and actionable across various policy domains, thus supporting more inclusive and comprehensive youth mainstreaming. Second, engaging youth in decision making aligns with the fundamental need of young people and emerging adults to contribute to society (Fuligni 2019). Moreover,

39. See also <https://speakingminds.nl/>, www.njr.nl/nl/projecten/local-collective/ and <https://vng.nl/artikelen/projectpagina-jongerenparticipatie>.

the active involvement of youth may lead to processes yielding multiple positive outcomes, including increased self-confidence, improved mental well-being, social relations, skills and knowledge, better academic performance, and a stronger sense of belonging (Checkoway 2011; Macauley et al. 2022). In addition to this, Conner and Cosner (2016) reported an increase in trust in government by young people who participated and developed an insider perspective on democratic processes. This sense of trust and belonging can play a vital role in strengthening democratic culture, besides being a powerful driver of societal change.

Despite this increased attention and commitment to youth participation, it remains challenging to move beyond just talking about participation to actual implementation where young people are active participants in shaping the policies that affect their lives. There are significant gaps in how youth participation is implemented and some challenges seem to be difficult to overcome. Therefore, the next paragraph will zoom in on the current context and challenges concerning youth participation.

Challenges to implementing youth participation

In recent years, municipalities (specifically) and governments (in general) have faced numerous challenges to their efforts to engage a diverse youth population effectively. Based on an international scoping review, three common barriers have been identified in the development and implementation of youth participation, especially municipal youth councils: adultism; representativeness and connections to communities; and organisational infrastructure and support (Augsberger, Collins and Howard 2023). On a national level, in the Netherlands the challenges are related to these barriers. A first challenge is the experienced chasm between youth and policy makers. In a study of 3 446 young people in the Netherlands, more than half experienced a lack of trust between them and policy makers because the latter group think “they are always right”. Young people also indicated that they feel policy makers do not have much interest in them (I&O Research et al. 2021). These signals in an early stage of adulthood can impact the relationship between local government and their young citizens. When expectations from the government conflict with what is received by citizens, this creates a gap leading to dissatisfaction and distrust and ultimately weaker participation in democratic processes (Weymouth and Hartz-Karp 2019).

A second challenge is to include a wide range of voices and diverse perspectives from youth. Although there is increasing recognition of the importance of youth participation in policy making, the opportunities to participate are often standardised, lacking consideration for a variety of preferences and insufficiently tailored to various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Numerous studies have shown that certain groups of adolescents, including those with a lower socio-economic status, are less likely to participate (Horwath, Kalyva and Spyru 2012; Gazit and Perry-Hazan 2020; Checkoway 2011). According to Augsberger et al. (2018), young people engaged in structures such as youth councils reported that they did not feel they represented the youth in the neighbourhoods they

served and that their priorities might not align with what is important for the youth in the community. This would interfere with the potential effect of creating public services tailored to the needs of youth, because it risks not taking into account the needs and challenges of youth who have not yet participated.

A third challenge is that many youth participation initiatives fail to sustain long-term involvement. Most instances of youth participation are short-term, are focused on specific issues and are not sustained over longer periods of time (Fierloos et al. 2024). Interviews with local public officials from Dutch municipalities reveal that, despite considerable efforts to innovate and adapt, many challenges persist (Fierloos et al. 2024). We suggest that these challenges are not just to be found in the operational spheres but instead reflect deeper systemic issues.

Addressing these issues is not only important for the positive development of youth into adulthood but also for contributing to strong democratic societies. Youth participation, as part of civic participation, is one of the most relevant features of democracy in addition to a free and open society (Sjoberg, Mellon and Peixoto 2017). Within the framework of youth mainstreaming, this participation goes beyond individual engagement – it serves as a structural approach to ensure that young people’s perspectives are systematically embedded in policy and decision-making processes. By institutionalising youth perspectives, youth mainstreaming not only strengthens democratic governance but also fosters trust in government. When these challenges are not addressed, they risk eroding young people’s confidence in institutions, whereas meaningful inclusion can be a driving force for local economic development and the effectiveness of governmental decisions (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford 2013).

Addressing these systemic issues requires more than surface-level solutions; it demands a shift in perspective to critically examine the underlying factors that perpetuate these challenges. Rather than continuing to seek quick fixes and repeat similar solutions, municipalities might consider reframing the situation, to shed a new perspective on deeper underlying issues. We explore whether design theory may help with this, with the ultimate goal of discovering new opportunities for effective change.

Introducing design theory to youth participation

Using design theory to tackle youth participation problems

This section introduces design theory as a potential starting point for enhancing youth mainstreaming. By including a short history of how design theory has changed over the years, we examine how a design approach can be applied to shed new light on systemic, complex societal problems, such as the challenges and factors affecting the integration of youth perspectives into policy making.

In the past, design was often considered the final step in development. It focused mainly on adding aesthetic value to physical products (Brown 2008). Traditional design disciplines such as architecture, industrial design and graphic design

focused on creating functional and aesthetically pleasing objects. During the Industrial Revolution, design also became focused on manufacturing, improving efficiency and often designing for mass production (Dormer 1993).

The focus shifted from objects to systems and processes in the mid-20th century. In *The sciences of the artificial* (1969), Herbert Simon introduced design as a way of problem-solving that might be useful beyond the traditional disciplines mentioned before (Simon 1996). This idea inspired “design thinking”, an approach that emphasises human-centred, iterative problem-solving and cross-disciplinary collaboration to address complex (wicked) challenges.

Another connected term – social design – emerged in the 1960s. Victor Papanek wrote about design’s purpose (and responsibility) to improve societal well-being and address systemic issues. Influenced by fields like anthropology, sociology and economics, Papanek’s, and also Margolin’s, work emphasised designing for human needs rather than market demands and the importance of considering equity, sustainability and community impact (Papanek 1971; Margolin 2002).

Today, the scope of design has broadened significantly, with design recognised as a transdisciplinary practice that moves fluidly between creating tangible products and addressing intangible social, cultural and organisational challenges. (For a more detailed examination of the design field, please see: Buchanan 1992; Dorst 2010; Atkinson and Oppenheimer 2016; Bayazit 2004).

This shift underscores the potential of design as a tool for navigating the challenges of our time; we currently live in unprecedented times where the complexity of our world presents us with dynamic and interconnected societal challenges. In design theory, these are often referred to as “wicked problems” (Van Uffelen, Vermaas and Pesch 2024; Rittel and Webber 1973). To address these complexities, more individuals, companies, institutions and governments are turning to design theory and the expertise of designers (Dorst 2010; Buchanan 1992). One reason for this might be that designers frequently encounter scenarios filled with numerous variables and uncertainties (Cash, Gonçalves and Dorst 2023). Designers once focused – only – on creating a product or service, using their skills, methods and mindset to uncover people’s values, empathise with the target audience, define their needs, generate hundreds of ideas in brainstorming sessions and develop prototypes that could be quickly tested and refined – testing, testing and testing again. Those same skills and methods are now being applied to tackle societal and social challenges, rather than just producing artefacts (Krippendorff 2005; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla and Çetinkaya 2013; Taimur, Peukert and Pearce 2023). Still driven by iterative ingenuity, designers are now testing, experimenting and empathising to address complex issues that cannot be solved with a single, straightforward solution. Their role has evolved, with institutions integrating designers early in the process to create solutions that better meet human needs and desires (Brown 2008). Thus, the focus of design has shifted away from solely the final product or artefact to the problem-solving capabilities of designers (Van Uffelen, Vermaas and Pesch 2024).

Design thinking and social design are two examples of the design approaches that push human-centred perspectives forward in terms of what design can

entail. By using design methods and creative practices, designers aim to change current situations into preferred ones (Simon 1996), by fostering innovation and (systemic) change (Brown and Katz 2009; Cross 2011; De Koning and Van Der Bijl-Brouwer 2024).

Dorst (2011) explains why people from a variety of fields are increasingly drawn to design in general: designers have been tackling complex and open-ended problems for years, through empathy, prototyping and multidisciplinary collaboration (UK Design Council 2013). Arguably, the most important practice of designers is designing iteratively, which allows for both our understanding of the problem and possible solutions to co-evolve together (Cash, Gonçalves and Dorst 2023). Today, public organisations around the globe are increasingly experimenting with design methods (van der Bijl-Brouwer and Dorst 2017; McGann, Blomkamp and Lewis 2018). To link this to youth participation and youth mainstreaming, we can build on the idea that design practices can support public organisations in engaging young people meaningfully. By examining the systemic challenges that hinder authentic youth involvement, design practices offer an approach for co-creating innovative futures that might address these barriers and ensure young people are actively included in the decision-making process.

The frame innovation method

There seems to be potential in the union of design and participation (for enhancing youth participation). Dorst (2010) proposes that a reason for this might be designers' critical ability to create new approaches to problem situations – what is known as “framing”. Focusing on framing might be a useful lens to face the challenges encountered when it comes to youth participation. To understand what framing is, let us first break down problem situations into the following aspects.

- ▶ The goal or the outcome – What do we want to achieve?
- ▶ The method or the how – How are we going to solve the problem?
- ▶ The solution or the what – What is created to achieve this?

Using a fictional example, if the envisaged outcome is that young people should be heard in policy making, the *hows* might be approached through the lens of civil servants' attitudes: emphasising clear feedback, goal-setting, language use and incentive systems. Or another *how* might revolve around creating tools aimed at fostering understanding between groups. The *what* would then be the specific solution. For instance, a serious game that helps people define a common goal for a participation session.

When we reframe problems, we shift the focus away from the *what* – instead of immediately coming up with new solutions, we first reconsider the *outcome* and the *how*. Together, the *outcome* and the *how* form a “frame” or the way the problem is viewed and understood (Schön and Rein 1994). These frames are implicit and subjective and have to be negotiated (Hey, Joyce and Beckman 2007). By revisiting the underlying frames, we can better understand how these challenges are shaped and identify ways to approach them that go beyond surface-level solutions.

Expert designers are adept at reframing problems, moving beyond initial assumptions. They negotiate between multiple frames and solutions (*whats*) while the designer tries to understand the problem. They do not just stick to the original problem framing but instead tackle the wider complexity of the situation, which allows for more innovative and effective solutions (Dorst 2018).

When addressing a long-standing issue – like improving youth participation in policy making – where many *whats* (solutions/actions) have already been attempted, stakeholders might become too accustomed to the existing framing of the problem. They may mistakenly accept the outcome or goal as the only truth, which can limit their ability to see new possibilities. For example, of course the goal is to ensure diversity of voices in youth participation! This perhaps unconscious framing drives how people currently try to solve the issues surrounding this topic. However, these efforts seem insufficient, as the challenge of creating meaningful youth participation remains unresolved. This does not mean that ensuring diversity of voices is not a good goal to strive for, but it does mean that perhaps other framings of the problem space might reveal new ways to approach issues.

This is where a well-known design method can come into play: the frame innovation method (Dorst 2015). There are many other design approaches that are very insightful and useful in their own right, like generative design (Sanders and Stappers 2012) or design thinking (Baldassarre et al. 2024), which we will not explore in this chapter. Most of these design approaches also include an element of framing but they also generate solutions iteratively and empathically. The frame innovation method was chosen for this context because it focuses primarily on redefining the problem itself. It challenges existing assumptions to uncover perspectives that are often overlooked – which was considered essential in this context. This design method emphasises the importance of defining a problem in a way that uncovers previously overlooked perspectives. A new frame provides a fresh lens for tackling an issue, often utilising metaphors or parallels that share underlying themes. Effective frames typically offer a new ways of understanding the problem and include principles that suggest various paths forward. Essentially, a frame acts as a proposition: “If we consider the problem from this angle and adopt the associated working principle, we may achieve the desired outcome”.

While the ability to frame problems is a universal human trait (Dorst 2015), it holds particular significance in design professions. Reframing involves shifting the perception of a problem, which can lead to innovative perspectives and solutions. This process is iterative, requiring designers to continually reassess and refine their understanding of the problem and potential solutions, which co-evolve together (Cash, Gonçalves and Dorst 2023).

The frame innovation method is specifically structured to facilitate this reframing process, but many other design methods and mindsets also incorporate reframing, even if it is not their primary focus. It is crucial to emphasise that the frame innovation method should not be viewed as the sole means of reframing problems or as a rigid framework. Nevertheless, it provides valuable guidance on how to approach the reframing of issues.

Dorst's frame innovation method comprises eight steps designed to tackle complex problems by broadening the context and identifying underlying themes for action: Archaeology, Paradox, Context, Field, Themes, Frames, Futures and Transformation.

The method and its steps might still seem somewhat abstract, so let us illustrate this specific design approach and its potential impact on youth participation with a case study from Rotterdam.

Case study: design research project in Rotterdam

Background to the Healthy Start initiative

In September 2023, a two-year design project was launched following a motion by the city council to involve children and youth more systematically in policies affecting them. Rotterdam committed to developing a youth participation framework in 2024 (Burgemeester en wethouders van Rotterdam 2021). This commitment, alongside Rotterdam's openness to experimentation and its support for conducting (design) research, made it a fitting testing ground for this project.

The project was part of the Healthy Start programme, a collaborative effort involving Delft University of Technology, Erasmus Medical Centre and Erasmus University Rotterdam. One of the key objectives of the initiative was to enhance youth engagement in local governance, ensuring that youth have a voice in the policies that affect their lives (Healthy Start – Convergence 2025). One part of this two-year project was applying the frame innovation method to uncover new strategies and solutions for engaging youth in the policy-making process in Rotterdam. This part was led by a design student within the transdisciplinary team over the course of six months.

To illustrate how the frame innovation method was applied in practice, we now delve into this case study in Rotterdam, outlining the key steps taken throughout the process. The following sections detail how the team systematically analysed and redefined the problem of youth participation in policy making.

The first steps, archaeology and paradox, involved analysing the current framing of the problem. This included understanding how both municipal officials and youth approach the issue, their current actions and the assumptions underpinning their efforts. These steps were crucial for "de-framing" the problem before attempting to reframe it. The analysis revealed how stakeholders have unconsciously framed youth participation, often defining it as "Youth are not sufficiently heard in policy making for issues that affect their lives". This framing heavily influences how the problem is approached, with efforts typically focused on improving civil servants' attitudes and processes – providing tips on how to organise these "participation meetings", for example, how to give feedback and what language to use. However, despite these efforts, meaningful youth participation remained elusive. That might be because there appear to be deadlocks that keep stakeholders from

moving forward: paradoxes that underlie the complexities of youth participation in policy making. The following is an example of an important paradox that both the municipality and young people face.

- ▶ Because young people and policy makers are far removed from each other's worlds, it is essential for good policy that they engage in meaningful conversations.
- ▶ Because those conversations need to be meaningful, it is important that there is first a certain level of understanding of each other's worlds.

These two “because” statements lead to a stalemate: one cannot happen without the other. By identifying multiple deadlocks like this in the case study, it became clearer why the issues surrounding youth participation and mainstreaming are so difficult to solve. They also help explain why previous solutions or recommendations have not fully addressed the complexity of the issue. The first two steps of the frame innovation method had thus been taken to “de-frame” the problem: the paradoxes showed that the current framing might not be effective in addressing persistent issues surrounding youth participation and mainstreaming, so there was still a need to reconsider how the issue was approached.

Figure 1 – Engaging civil servants creatively to learn more about their values, goals and worries



The next steps, context and the field, aimed at understanding stakeholders and potential future stakeholders. This understanding of their values was achieved through engaging stakeholders in various design activities. For example, policy advisers (n=50) were engaged in creative sessions at Het Timmerhuis (Figure 1), a city hall housing many municipal services, and during dialogues with young individuals (n=6) in a sounding board group (Figure 3) and youth at the Rotterdam Blaak library (n=27). Stimulating and provocative prompts were used (Figures 2 and 3). This project and the insights gained are also built upon

19 in-depth interviews with policy makers and 12 best-practice interviews with representatives of organisations dedicated to improving youth participation in policy making in Rotterdam and other parts of the Netherlands (Fierloos, Brinke and Buuren 2023; Fierloos et al. 2024).

By involving a range of stakeholders and employing creative practices, the project sought to capture a comprehensive view of the problem dynamics. This participatory approach helped to identify the values and concerns of both current and potential stakeholders.

Figure 2 – Two examples of creative prompts used during the project:
on the left a prompt (three easels) asking youth what role they would want to play in collaboration with the municipality; on the right a prompt (three easels and a mirror) asking civil servants how they think youth in Rotterdam view them and how they want to be viewed



Figure 3 – On the left, the results of asking young people at Rotterdam Blaak library which role they would want to play when interacting with people from the municipality about certain topics (Innovator, Co-discussant, Rebel, Leader, Collaborator, Observer): on the right, a timeline showing a timeline youth from a sounding board group created to visualise their contact with the municipality



In the steps relating to themes – frames and futures – insights about human motivations and values gathered from design activities were used to develop new approaches to the problem. This phase aimed to identify patterns and create innovative frames through an iterative process of reflection on the themes. Stakeholder interviews and organised activities were analysed to better understand their perspectives. The analysis involved inductive coding – mainly physical, using sticky notes – and categorising interview responses and design activity outcomes to identify recurring themes. Similar ideas were grouped to uncover patterns in stakeholders’ motivations and values.

In two sessions with a transdisciplinary group of 12 stakeholders, a collaborative environment fostered creative engagement with the themes. Through ideation and discussion, the collective insights of this diverse group helped reimagine the problem space. Visual creative techniques, such as clustering, were used to map out relationships between concepts (Figure 5), enabling patterns to emerge. This hands-on approach helped identify frames that were relevant to the problem as well as those that were not. More details on the approach can be found in a report by the designer (Osinga 2024).

Figure 4 – A frame creation session with a transdisciplinary group of stakeholders



The results of the case study in Rotterdam

Reframing the challenges based on key themes led to new strategies for improving youth participation. These themes were built on the values identified during creative sessions and clustered from the context and fieldwork. The new frames, co-created with a group of nine stakeholders and designers, provided fresh perspectives on youth participation and helped propose alternative strategies for engaging youth in municipal policy making (Osinga 2024).

The themes were explored not only from stakeholder perspectives but also through scientific literature, researcher experience and art (Osinga 2024). In the

Rotterdam case study, four key themes emerged, representing the values of the stakeholders involved in the design process. These themes, reflecting the motivations and interactions of stakeholders within the municipal context, formed the foundation for new frames to address youth participation in policy making. They are as follows.



1. Open hearts, open minds. This theme emphasises the importance of stakeholders engaging with one another openly and empathetically, challenging existing stereotypes and biases. For instance, it was revealed that civil servants may fear being perceived negatively (as boring or lazy), while young people often feel they are viewed as inexperienced or immature. Overcoming these mutual stereotypes is essential for establishing genuine connections and fostering trust.



2. Navigating the unknown. This theme highlights the journey of discovery that both officials and young people must embark on to explore new perspectives and solutions. Often, neither party knows exactly what to expect from participation sessions, making the process daunting. Understanding stakeholders' comfort zones and finding ways to stretch them without causing discomfort is key to fostering more effective participation.



3. Driven by responsibility. This theme explores the motivations behind participation. Is it viewed as a chore, an obligation or a meaningful engagement? Both young people and officials often see participation as an imposed responsibility rather than a genuinely motivated effort. Identifying what triggers a sense of responsibility and when participants consider something important is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation.



4. What you do matters. This theme addresses the perception of participation as a "youth safari", where officials cherry-pick information that suits their needs. Both young people and officials can feel powerless, at different levels, within the complex municipal system. This powerlessness is often due to not seeing the outcomes of their efforts. Making participants feel that their contributions have a tangible impact is vital for meaningful engagement. Nevertheless, the power imbalance is felt more strongly by youth.

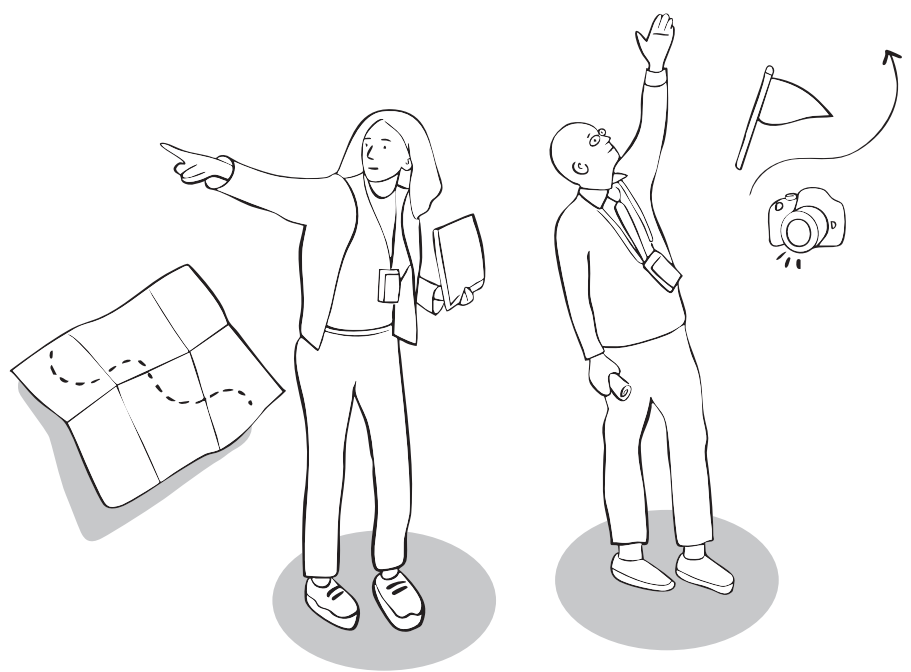
Using themes to reframe the problem space and imagine new futures

The sixth step of the frame innovation method focuses on identifying and developing frames by using themes to reframe the problem space. This creative process involves iteration, reflection and synthesis, where insights are reviewed, patterns identified and new approaches proposed. By reframing the problem, we can embrace its complexity and expand the scope for potential solutions. A well-considered frame changes how a problem is perceived, approached and addressed. Essentially, it proposes that adopting certain patterns of relationships, like a metaphor, will yield positive outcomes.

For example, in this project, one frame was developed based on the theme “navigating the unknown”. Youth participation can be reframed as a journey or “travelling”. In this frame, young people and officials are seen as “travellers”, with some being experienced and requiring only occasional guidance, while others need more comprehensive support. This frame allows us to imagine a municipal “travel agency” for participation, providing tailored guidance and resources.

When participation is viewed in this way, it becomes less intimidating and more accessible. Participants can choose activities that interest them, prepare for challenges and better understand expectations. This frame and corresponding future proposes a more dynamic, flexible approach to engagement, with a focus on preparation, support and reflection throughout the participatory process.

Figure 5 – An illustration of the frame exploring youth participation as travelling



Similarly, if we expand on the “open hearts, open minds” theme, we can reframe the issue as a challenge of fostering open and empathetic collaboration despite stereotypes. This second frame, based on the theme, suggests connecting over common interests and breaking down formal barriers. By rethinking these roles to better fit everyone’s wants and needs, involvement shifts from obligation to enthusiasm. This could lead to rethinking how we facilitate conversations about the roles individuals can and want to play in municipal participation. Alternatively, we might introduce a future platform that encourages stakeholders to discover common interests beyond their professional roles, allowing them to connect on a more personal level.

These two frames resonated with various stakeholders. The effects of (adopting) these frames are discussed in more detail in the next section. This was established through two semi-structured interviews with civil servants and young people from a sounding board group in the municipality (n=7) and two co-creation sessions over the rest of the course of the Healthy Start project with around 15 civil servants.

Impact and potential for broader application

Impact on youth participation in Rotterdam

What impact did the application of this method have in Rotterdam? Preliminary feedback on the frames and futures from stakeholders – both civil servants and young people – from a sounding board group of the municipality has been positive. As noted earlier, the frame innovation method is not focused on providing immediate solutions but rather on uncovering new ways to frame, approach and discuss issues, which was appropriate for the context of this six-month project. In Rotterdam, this approach improved the way stakeholders engaged in conversations about their unmet needs and aspirations related to the issue. About the travel frame, a civil servant remarked during an interview:

Some people also don't know where to start. Because the fear of talking to the young people is quite present ... It would be good to have guidance on how to engage in such a conversation. For example, what is expectation management and how do you ensure that expectations are clearly communicated both ways?

And this civil servant immediately started to form ideas based on this metaphor:

And maybe even trainees could also be involved in it? But also, people with firsthand experience, or perhaps even young people themselves who are part of that department. And that everyone can just walk in [to this travel agency] with their policy document or with their question like, hey, I don't know what to do.

Both civil servants and youth said that they felt heard and seen in the resulting themes and frames, a crucial factor that validated their experiences and emotions. About the "open hearts, open minds" frame, a civil servant said:

Well, the first thing that comes to mind is that it's very recognisable ... That interaction, it's just not there, and there's no connection and no common ground to be found. Yes, I'm also a resident of this neighbourhood, or I also have children who visit the youth hub, you know? I think that's very important ... That they also have some sort of recognition of this is someone from the municipality, but besides that, it's just a person.

Stakeholders – both young people and civil servants – noted that these frames helped them clarify feelings and thoughts that they had struggled to express before in a way that was clear and concise.

This newfound clarity not only empowered them but also provided a solid foundation for future discussions. For example, in two subsequent discussions with individuals who were not involved in the project, the term "travel agency" was repeatedly used to better articulate their unmet needs and hopes for the

future. It provided both a starting point and a reference for conversations: “What does a travel agency do well that we are still missing within the municipality?” By being integrated into the everyday language of the civil servants, we notice that the frame is being adopted.

In this case study, the frames were applied to help a specific group of stakeholders rethink their approaches and envisage alternative futures. However, the transformation and thus integration of these frames more broadly within the municipality remains a work in progress that continues beyond the scope of this particular six-month project.

Benefits and limitations of the approach

Let us summarise the benefits this specific design approach brought to the municipality of Rotterdam.

Reframing challenges

The frames developed through this case study provided a fresh perspective on the problem of youth participation in policy making. Rooted in the themes of “open hearts, open minds”; “navigating the unknown”; “driven by responsibility”; and “what you do matters”, these frames offered innovative viewpoints for tackling challenges and seizing opportunities in this field. Applying these frames revealed future possibilities that could add value for stakeholders. By ensuring that everyone involved feels seen, in control and ready to engage, we can move beyond repetitive solutions that have failed to take root and instead pursue innovations that might truly make a difference.

Transdisciplinary approach

While not directly tied to the frame innovation method, this approach is grounded in design theory and emphasises the importance of co-creating with those impacted by the problem. A design-driven approach often asks for a participatory process that includes all stakeholders – not just young people and policy makers but also teachers, parents, youth hubs, researchers and council members.

Common understanding and language

One of the benefits of this method was that establishing a shared understanding and common language among stakeholders facilitates collaboration. For example, the concept of a travel agency allowed stakeholders to intuitively grasp what was missing from their previous problem framing, making discussions about needs and potential changes more accessible. Such metaphors or terms serve as powerful tools for initiating meaningful dialogues about gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Limitations of the frame innovation method

Despite its potential, the frame innovation method has notable limitations. A significant risk is the tendency to jump too quickly to conclusions and solutions.

For instance, while the metaphor of a travel agency can effectively highlight what stakeholders feel is lacking, it may also lead to a narrow focus on that specific solution. Stakeholders might assume that establishing a youth participation travel agency will resolve all issues. A quick-fix mentality may undermine the method's richness, as it neglects underlying challenges such as navigating uncertainty, expanding comfort zones and managing the chaos of the participatory process. Multiple solutions might still be explored based on a single frame; however, this is not the focus of the method.

Furthermore, while a new design cycle would ideally be necessary to build upon these initial insights, there is a risk that no further action will be taken; there will be no transformation. It requires motivated individuals who not only see the potential for improvement but are also committed to pursuing it. Otherwise, the method may simply be regarded as an interesting perspective, without leading to substantial change, especially in large, bureaucratic organisations like municipalities.

This ties into broader structural limitations. In highly procedural settings, the openness and flexibility required by the method often clash with organisational norms, which prioritise efficiency, clear outcomes and stability over experimentation and ambiguity – essential elements of participatory and design-driven processes. The challenge of creating a new frame may conflict with established ways of working and the lack of time or resources to iterate on these insights further can limit its effectiveness.

Research has shown that principles of design may not always be easily implemented in public organisations (Lewis, McGann and Blomkamp 2020; Bason and Austin 2021). As a result, implementation of specific design practices and methods – like the frame innovation method – as quick fixes in this context may lead to misunderstandings, resistance, rejection and incompatibility. There is still much work to be done to better integrate design approaches within public organisations (Brinkman et al. 2023).

Moreover, political forces will play a significant role in the success of such methods. Without strong support from political leadership, the innovative approaches uncovered through the method may struggle to gain traction. It is important to involve leaders who are willing to embrace the uncertainty that comes with design-driven processes, and if that willingness is lacking, the method's potential for fostering meaningful change can be severely limited.

Implications for other municipalities in the European Union

The intention of this chapter is not to suggest that civil servants and stakeholders adopt the frame innovation method outright. The process might be too ambiguous and solutions found could be overly simplified. Moreover, directly applying the frames and themes from Rotterdam to other municipalities is not straightforward. Each context is unique, and while similar themes may emerge, it is important to consider their specific circumstances.

What, then, are the implications for other municipalities? The message of this chapter has two key aspects. First, stakeholders need to recognise that the core

issue may not lie in the solutions themselves but in how the problem is framed. In many municipalities, the same solutions are often proposed repeatedly, yet the underlying issue persists. This suggests the problem may be framed in a way that prevents genuine progress. After years of addressing the same issue, it becomes easy to fall into a fixed pattern of thinking.

Reflecting on the Rotterdam case study, a shift in focus may be more effective. Design theory, with its emphasis on a co-evolution process of reflecting on and discussing both the core problem and solutions, offers a valuable approach. Instead of continually searching for solutions to the familiar issue of “youth not being meaningfully involved in policy making”, municipalities should consider identifying unaddressed problems that might inspire fresh solutions and new perspectives.

Second, this chapter advocates broader transdisciplinary collaboration between design experts and local governments to improve youth participation. Designers, familiar with reframing problems as part of their practice, could play a key role. Techniques such as context mapping (Sleeswijk Visser et al. 2005), research through design (Stappers and Giaccardi 2014) and creative facilitation (Heijne and van der Meer 2019) make designers well suited to this task. Beyond any specific method, municipalities might benefit from engaging external designers, who can offer a fresh outlook that transcends the boundaries and rules of methods.

Future directions

For policy makers navigating the complex balance of various interests and immediate political pressures, advocating greater collaboration with designers can yield significant benefits. In a landscape that often prioritises quick results and visible solutions, the long-term impact of participatory processes is frequently overlooked. Designers possess a unique skill set in crafting innovative, user-centred approaches. By emphasising the value of integrating design into policy development, policy makers can illustrate how such collaboration, though it may not always produce immediate outcomes, leads to more thoughtful and sustainable solutions. This strategy helps bridge the gap between short-term political objectives and the gradual yet vital progress achieved through genuine participatory methods. The importance of multiple disciplines in collaboration can also be highlighted; designers alone will not solve the problem. By supporting this collaborative approach, policy makers can more effectively address the diverse needs and interests of their communities while fostering long-term, meaningful change.

While the frame innovation method does offer a structured approach, it can also often serve as a guiding set of principles that designers can interpret and adapt. This flexibility can be challenging for those without a design background, as the process may seem too ambiguous or fuzzy to be practical. Future research could explore how designers might take on more substantial roles in transdisciplinary projects. Additionally, when collaboration with designers does occur, future studies could investigate how the insights and solutions generated can be seamlessly integrated into stakeholders’ practices. How can a newly developed, perhaps still

conceptual, framework or perspective be effectively embedded and sustained within an organisation? What role can designers play in this integration?

These avenues for future research could provide valuable insights into how design can improve youth participation in policy making.

Conclusions

Youth participation is vital for integrating young people's perspectives into local governance, yet achieving meaningful involvement remains a challenge. This chapter introduced a design-based approach, grounded in design theory, to offer fresh insights into youth participation. Using the case study of Rotterdam, we examined how the synergy between design approaches and youth participation can create new opportunities for change and improvement.

Rather than focusing on solutions, this method, which builds on specific design skills, encourages a rethinking of the problem itself, offering a broader, more human-centred approach to engagement. Ultimately, the reframing potential of design approaches can help break free from the repetitive solutions that have failed to address the underlying issues in youth participation. Other municipalities might involve design (experts) in their work to gain a fresh perspective on current "wicked problems" they might be facing.

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Chapter 10

Serving communities, finding one's voice: reflections from an innovative Dutch youth policy in practice

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Maatschappelijke Diensttijd (MDT), translated as “social service time”, is an innovative youth policy that offers social service experiences to young citizens in the Netherlands, with the aim of enabling young people to contribute and participate in society actively (VVD et al. 2017). Some MDT programmes focus on reaching out to youth on the margins of society, offering them opportunities to discover through social service their talents that remain too often unseen. This chapter focuses on how this latter type of youth-led programme contributes to integrating the youth perspective. Central to this type of voluntary service learning is the active involvement of young people in decision-making processes, enabling them to conceptualise, design and implement activities with the support of youth workers (Contour de Twern 2022). This emphasis on youth-led participation not only stimulates the exploration of young people's talents but is also instrumental in driving and initiating meaningful community engagement to foster youth mainstreaming.

We begin by providing an overview of the MDT policy, discussing its history and journey so far, the approach of and the theory behind the programme. After some methodological notes, we delve into some good practices within MDT through the case study of Next Up, an MDT project that champions youth organising (facilitated by the professional youth work organisation R-Newt). The described practices are further illuminated by reflections from professionals to provide a deeper understanding of how particular elements contribute to integrating youth perspectives, namely, concerning the importance of more effectively integrating marginalised youth voices: if and how they contribute autonomy and agency in youth-led decision making. Finally, we reflect on the main lessons learned from the Dutch initiative and hope to inspire other countries in the EU at a time of a changing domestic political landscape and uncertainty about the MDT programme's future in the Netherlands.

The history of MDT

Before the implementation of MDT, or social service time, in 2018, there was significant debate in the Netherlands about introducing mandatory community service for young people. Proponents argued that it could foster social engagement and responsibility, while critics were concerned about potential infringements on young people's autonomy and leakage of intrinsic motivation. To this day, this debate is far from over. However, over the past few years a non-obligatory type of social service has been developed and implemented.

MDT aims to foster talent development, social networking and community service among young people aged 12 to 30 (ZonMw n.d.; VVD et al. 2017). MDT offers a range of youth-led initiatives, from organising neighbourhood football games to hosting book clubs for LGBTQIA+ youth. For all participants in MDT, admission is free and participation is voluntary, allowing young people to select programmes that best align with their interests and needs.

Since its introduction, MDT has evolved from pilot projects to a nationwide policy. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the programme's adaptability, with shifts towards digital and hybrid formats.⁴⁰ Despite these advancements, MDT faces challenges such as strengthening collaborations with educational institutions and addressing regional disparities in project availability. Also, MDT recently entered a more established phase, including a higher level of formalisation, which brings its own difficulties.

To date, 6 500 youth organisations and 150 000 young people have participated in MDT, demonstrating its broad reach (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2023). While MDT has been a driver for volunteering across the board, it has proven particularly valuable for marginalised youth who may feel disconnected from society, such as those from low-income households, early school leavers and individuals receiving outpatient youth care (Statistics Netherlands 2022). These groups often lack opportunities for skill development and social inclusion, making MDT a critical tool for fostering inclusion, empowerment and a sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2024).

Whereas traditional volunteer work often involves predetermined tasks, MDT offers a structured personal and professional development approach. These projects empower young people to own their projects, which are fully supported by mentors and stakeholders. This youth-centric approach fosters deeper connections, positioning MDT as a more comprehensive and impactful experience. The evaluation also reveals that 61% of respondents reported a positive impact of MDT on their motivation to contribute to society, with 29% indicating MDT had a beneficial effect on their education or job prospects (Statistics Netherlands 2022).

40. See doemeemetmdt.nl.

Approach of the programme

MDT is built on three foundational pillars: “discover yourself”; “develop yourself”; and “do it yourself”. These principles guide the programme’s approach, ensuring participants contribute to society while experiencing personal and professional growth. MDT offers five distinct programme types, each varying in duration, guidance and time commitment.

All MDT initiatives follow a structured process: recruitment, intake (where participants’ motivations and needs are assessed), tailored training, volunteer work and a reflection phase where experiences are evaluated for continuous improvement. Decision making about the policy programme is organised in youth-led committees. Young people are also involved in knowledge production about the programme as co-researchers. Some are even invited to help with the auditing process.

One of the participants (female, 19) recalls:

After my MDT, I received a call on Instagram for the MDT youth panel, and I immediately felt addressed. I was elected, and now I am considering MDT’s development. Sometimes, I give my opinion on the design of a certificate and other times, I give tips on involving young people. The question is always different, and my opinion is always valued. I don’t have many people around me to discuss politics and social issues. It quickly turns to fashion and social media. Now I can talk about serious topics with people my age and make an impact.

Youth organisations across the Netherlands are pivotal in implementing MDT’s principles through programmes for marginalised participants. These organisations can design their initiatives within the MDT framework, provided they adhere to three core pillars: careful implementation, professional attention to the context and target group, and high-quality guidance by competent staff. Guidance ensures that participants remain engaged and can develop their skills. Youth organisations are also vital to recruiting participants, often through schools or social media campaigns. A meaningful MDT network focused on community development is built. Organisations meeting these criteria are awarded the MDT-proof label, which encourages continuous improvement (Maatschappelijke Diensttijd n.d.).

For example, youth work organisations such as DOCK, VenzoSwazoom and Dynamo in Amsterdam collaborate on MDT through the initiative known as Youngsterdam. One notable project under this initiative is a cooking challenge to promote healthy eating among young people. Another effective example is the Marokko Challenge organised by Dynamo Jongeren. Twenty-five young people from Dynamo, a youth organisation in Amsterdam, travelled to Morocco as part of their MDT experience. With the money they raised in Amsterdam, they organised sports events for children, delivered donations and supplies to orphanages and provided support in areas affected by the 2023 earthquake. This initiative aimed not only to empower local youth but also to foster personal growth among the participants, who developed leadership skills, cultural awareness and a sense of social responsibility.

Over the past year, our research group has focused on studying MDT within the context of Next Up. This programme, offered by the youth work organisation R-Newt in Tilburg and Dordrecht, empowers vulnerable youth aged 12 to 30 by encouraging them to develop initiatives that benefit others. Participants must contribute 80 hours of volunteer work over three to six months.

Next Up showcases the diversity of MDT initiatives, ranging from small-scale youth-led organising, like establishing a book club for LGBTQIA+ youth, to larger projects, like organising a festival featuring local talents. For instance, the youth-led ENA initiative – a year-round programme for youth at risk of loneliness and mental health vulnerabilities – promotes mental well-being, openness and new friendships by organising dinner parties, excursions and support groups, focusing attention on young informal caregivers and participating in the national week against solitude (Week tegen Eenzaamheid).

Next Up has engaged almost 3 000 young people and collaborated with 22 organisations, including educational institutions, healthcare providers, welfare services, cultural organisations and municipalities. While Next Up operates within the broader MDT framework, it distinguishes itself through intensive guidance and coaching, focusing on initiative development and talent cultivation using the youth organising methodology (Awad et al. 2018; personal communication, 23 May 2024).

The theory behind Next Up

Next Up contributes to youth mainstreaming as it is deployed according to the principles of youth organising theory. Youth organising is a community-based approach that empowers people to collectively identify, analyse and address issues impacting their lives through public action and advocacy. This approach combines elements of community organising and positive youth development, emphasising the capacity of young people to effect social and political change. The key components of youth organising (NYU Steinhardt 2024) are as follows.

- ▶ **Collective action:** young people work together to build power and advocate solutions to community problems.
- ▶ **Leadership development:** participants develop organising skills, including outreach, facilitation, research and public speaking.
- ▶ **Critical consciousness:** young people analyse social issues through the lens of race, class and other systems of oppression.
- ▶ **Civic engagement:** participants engage in authentic civic tasks such as discussing social issues, developing action plans and negotiating with decision makers.
- ▶ **Youth-led spaces:** organisations strive to be genuinely youth-led, often using consensus decision-making models.

Following these principles, Next Up operates on a demand-driven basis, meaning the initiatives stem directly from the interests and needs expressed by the young people involved, ensuring their projects are both relevant and impactful. After all, Next Up motivates young people to take full responsibility for and leadership

of their initiatives, contrasting with some more traditional youth work methods (Delgado and Staples 2008; Awad et al. 2018). This approach prioritises ownership, connection and trust, giving young people the space to define their frameworks with adult coaches as equals, supporting and adapting to their needs and tapping into the experiential knowledge available in the group. In this chapter, we will further focus on Next Up, examining how its unique approach within MDT facilitates the personal growth of its participants while strengthening their ability to effect meaningful change in their communities. Through this study of Next Up, we want to identify the critical elements of youth work that we believe have contributed to integrating youth perspectives in decision making.

Methodology

Over the years, the Youth Spot research group from Amsterdam has been involved in several studies of MDT in the Netherlands. For this chapter, we wanted to use thick descriptions of real-world situations (Geertz 1973). Thick descriptions are detailed analysis that uncovers the social and cultural significance of the action. For example: "Someone winks as part of a joke, where the wink carries a shared cultural meaning understood only by insiders." Hence, we contacted practitioners involved in this work and asked them if they would like to co-author this chapter. Katie and Bas, who work as youth workers for Next Up, responded positively. To stimulate the co-creative process, we adopted collaborative research methods. The researchers were introduced to the local practice through interactive focus groups and semi-structured interviews with coaches and participants. However, this also proved challenging in terms of "getting a grip" on the entire MDT reality. It became clear from the start that the particular initiative of Next Up itself encompasses many activities, reaches out to a wide variety of target groups and invites engagement of varying degrees. Consequently, it was decided to zoom in on one particular project of the very broad Next Up catalogue. Katie and Bas helped to flesh out this initiative by collaborating on the first draft. They also responded to our questions and shared their unique experiences and insights through quotes integrated into the text. Although we tried to account for the validity of our findings in this collaboration, we should note the explorative nature of this contribution, as it was based on preliminary and highly contextual data.

Key elements

This section explores the elements that seem pivotal within youth decision-making processes in the context of MDT. These are illustrated within the context of the Next Up Camping MDT Initiative by the young people of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA). This case study serves as an example of the successful integration of youth perspectives into the design and implementation of youth programming.

Looking deeper into the set-up of Next Up through the theoretical lens of youth organising allows us to identify the defining (methodical) ingredients of these youth-led activities. By examining these ingredients, we expect to better grasp the

integration of the youth perspective(s). While these elements were found in the context of Next Up, youth workers across Europe may find valuable insights that can be adapted to their own contexts of youth participation.

From our research, the following key elements were identified.

- ▶ Demand-driven approach: how a focus on the needs and interests of the youth drives engagement.
- ▶ Safety net: the proverbial safety net was created by youth workers for marginalised groups who experienced a lack of safety in society.
- ▶ Hands-on or hands-off approach: balancing the youth work actions between a hands-on and a hands-off approach.
- ▶ Building cohesion: fostering a sense of community by encouraging young people to seek support from each other.
- ▶ Sustaining motivation: the importance of keeping young people motivated and engaged, using MDT as a means rather than an end.

These are illustrated within the context of the Next Up Camping MDT Initiative by young people from the Gender and Sexuality Alliance. Box 1 provides an insight into the case study of the LGBTQIA+ youth camp MDT initiative. This case highlights how giving young people a central role in decision making can significantly enhance their sense of equality and engagement in a marginalised group context. After introducing the case, the five elements of MDT will be explained regarding the case, with some supporting references to the research literature.



Box 1 – Case study: the camp by and for LGBTQIA+ youth

The camp, organised by young people who identify with LGBTQIA+ orientation, responded to the lack of support they received from their social circles. They aimed to create a safe and inclusive space where young people could be themselves, share experiences and build new friendships. LGBTQIA+ youth often face social isolation, loneliness and mental health challenges due to insufficient support from their surroundings. Despite some initial challenges, these young people devised an innovative solution: organising a camp to foster mutual positive support. Youth worker Katie collaborated closely with the young people to make this camp a reality within the context of the local MDT programme of Next Up.

Element 1: demand-driven approach

The coaches' responsiveness to the participants' demands is the first notable element in Next Up activities. More particularly, they respond to the needs of young people willing to organise themselves around a part of their identities that they do not always feel invited to share with others. The first idea of the camp started after an alcohol-related incident because they were not feeling well. The youth workers asked the participants: "What would be a positive way to be there for each other? What positive steps can you take together?"

Establishing this connection with young people generated a plethora of ideas.

Because the young people themselves established the initiative, it was not seen as a burdensome task but as an empowering opportunity from the start. The youth worker played a crucial role in supporting this process. She encouraged the young people by offering compliments and asking guiding questions like “How do you envisage this?” and “What do you need to make this a success?” This approach empowered the young people to take ownership of the planning. Regular meetings kept the momentum going, ensuring enthusiasm and continuous input. Youth worker Katie explains: “Setting up the camp was not perceived as an obligation but as something they wholeheartedly embraced. The camp allowed them to engage positively with each other and utilise their strengths”.

Self-organising this camp was experienced as a meaningful way to cope with shared challenges. This may explain why the camp proved transformative, promoting a positive dynamic within the group and enabling each member to contribute their unique skills.

Element 2: the youth worker as a safety net

Taking young people’s wishes seriously and giving young people a central role in decision making from the beginning can significantly enhance their sense of equality and engagement, particularly within marginalised groups. For these groups to engage, there needs to be a form of protection against failure or risk. Therefore, in Next Up, the youth worker acts as a safety net: young people are empowered to make decisions while having supportive guidance available. The facilitator’s role was proactive but subtle, balancing guiding young people with allowing them space to grow. This approach refers to one of the methodical principles of youth work, learning by doing (Sonneveld 2022).

Protection and trust are prerequisites for helping to build autonomy and agency. Safety nets are provided by building trustful relationships, giving attention to self-belief and confidence, and ensuring there is ample time and space to explore vital questions and foster positive interactions. The youth workers stress the importance of taking small steps and gradually increasing responsibilities. In this process, always keep checking in with the participants: How do we feel about this? Are we on the same page? Or would you do this differently? Young people who are supported by a safety net will eventually feel confident they can do something “wrong”, enabling true and deep learning. While providing space for young people is important, it is equally essential not to leave them to navigate this space alone. This balance highlights the added value of the MDT programme, where autonomy does not develop spontaneously but requires intentional effort. Youth workers play a vital role in helping young people find this autonomy.

Element 3: hands-on and hands-off approach

The third element refers to balancing the youth work actions between a hands-on and a hands-off approach. The role is to facilitate and support while continuing to follow up on the young person's wishes and demands: "Together, we seek what motivates them."

Young people were responsible for outlining the GSA camp programme, but some gaps remained in the planning. Instead of stepping in to fill these gaps, the professionals trusted the young people to handle them independently. This hands-off approach allowed the participants to organise tasks, such as preparing meals and managing their downtime, which fostered a sense of responsibility and independence. As Katie noted, "By creating space for them to think and decide actively, we ensured they were invested in making the camp successful".

One such notable decision made by the young people was to sleep in a dormitory instead of tents. This choice was based on the anticipation of rain and the consideration of social dynamics within the group. This decision-making process aligns with the principles of positive youth development, which emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles and make decisions that directly affect their lives (Lerner et al. 2005). By allowing the participants to navigate these decisions, the professionals empowered them and reinforced their investment in the camp's success.

Element 4: building cohesion

This approach also helps build a sense of community by encouraging young people to seek support from each other. One indicator of this is the improvement in group dynamics. Before the camp, the group faced internal tensions from previous incidents. However, the collaborative effort of planning the camp provided a renewed sense of purpose and unity. Each participant contributed according to their strengths and experiences during a brainstorming session. One young person took on the task of drawing up the camp layout, another suggested games inspired by their Scouting experience, and others compiled lists of necessary supplies. When the issue of someone not having a sleeping mat arose, the group worked together to find a solution by sharing their possessions.

As Katie observed, the young people initiated ideas such as creating a group chat for planning and volunteering to do the grocery shopping together. Through this process, they were able to apply their skills and engage positively, which helped alleviate any lingering negative feelings. The collaborative planning resolved existing tensions and fostered a strong sense of community and shared responsibility.

Element 5: sustaining motivation

The final element refers to the importance of keeping young people motivated and engaged, using the MDT programme as a means rather than an end in itself. Coaches underline the importance of trusting young people and working

from this foundation of trust to build motivation. However, some threats to motivation are difficult to control. A common problem in youth work provision is caused by the structures and rules that need to be navigated before one can organise an activity based on the demands of young people:

Without MDT, you will soon end up in a less attractive stream of subsidies and expectations, which, in my opinion, already makes the pressure on performance so great that it is no longer attractive for young people to take it on.

Delays demotivate both professionals and young people, who grow up in a culture that promotes distraction and instant gratification. This may explain why some participants experience democratic decision processes as tiresome and demotivating. It is, therefore, key that Next Up coaches are trained to recognise moments critical for sustaining motivation. Moreover, the project's pace enhances participants' motivation. The youth work organisation allows Next Up coaches and participants to make quick decisions and have access to immediate support and the necessary budget. Thanks to this internal policy, some ideas or wishes can be fulfilled in a couple of weeks instead of waiting for months until a request is approved. "Accessible, small-scale, close bonds based on trust are a must when it comes to fostering this growth with these young people," Katie concluded.

Challenges within MDT

Both Next Up coaches and the young people participating face various challenges in their engagement with MDT projects. The most pressing issues can be categorised into three types: 1. methodological, 2. organisational and 3. policy-related. They all require a nuanced understanding and approach as all have consequences for the quality of the activities and, ultimately, for the integration of youth perspectives.

First, methodological challenges are addressed such as how to engage with young people in the programme, given the pedagogical significance of its unpredictable nature. Organisational challenges are then examined such as the importance of professional development in MDT, emphasising the need for expertise and the development of a clear professional profile. Finally, policy-related challenges are discussed such as navigating policy governance, involving young people in meetings and collaborating with partners.

Methodical challenges

One significant challenge is accepting the tension between fostering autonomy and safeguarding the young group during the implementation of projects. Next Up coaches function as safety nets. Therefore, a recurring challenge is to navigate between offering safe spaces and brave spaces for development. At the beginning of each project, safety is ensured by investment in the right conditions for feeling welcome and heard. During the project, when more trust has been built among participants, Next Up coaches invite the young people to increasingly take more

risks. However, all activities remain voluntary. If one of the participants is not ready to take a bolder step, they will be met with invitation, not coercion. As a youth worker, it is crucial to anticipate and visualise when things may start falling apart. What is your role when the participants make ineffective decisions? How do you avoid an attitude that the participants may consider judgmental or condescending? But also, how do I keep them safe? We see the pedagogical significance of this unpredictable nature of the programme.

However, not all organisations allow for mistakes made by young people. Not all funders and collaborating organisations are well informed that a failed project in terms of outcome can be a successful project regarding learning opportunities, which brings about a more (inter)organisational challenge. Some professionals, faced with this external pressure to succeed fast, might be tempted to focus too much on the result and start taking over. With the MDT initiative called ENA (*Even Niet Alleen* in Dutch, which translates into English as “temporarily not alone”), Katie observed instances where young people devised plans, but the execution diverged significantly from the initial discussions. “It can be tempting to take over and direct the process when things go awry. However, allowing the youth to navigate these challenges fosters the most growth. Even if the evening does not go as planned, it can still be a success,” Katie noted. This hands-off approach often results in the young people feeling a greater sense of responsibility and reduces peer criticism.

Organisational challenges

As with all social interventions, a lot depends on Next Up’s preparation, a shared sense of urgency and a clear direction on what to do with the relevant partner organisations and stakeholders. Next Up invests in introducing the same “language” to the institutions and organisations with which it works, such as schools, youth care providers, libraries and cultural organisations. What are our shared goals? And what is the role of every organisation in pursuing these goals?

Next Up emphasises quality guidance during the process and does not merely push participants through the programme; instead, it focuses on the end product (output-oriented focus). Quality guidance starts with properly introducing the tasks of coaches by participating in the work of more experienced coaches. At the start of their career as coaches, they receive training on the work at Next Up. Afterwards, all coaches meet weekly with the co-ordinator, discussing case studies from practice and personal issues. One-on-one support is also available for the coaches. Finally, the coaches received training on didactic skills from a professor.

Notably, coaches are not necessarily trained as youth workers. Coaches are sometimes youth workers, but they can also be experts by experience. Sometimes, they have participated in Next Up and developed apparently relevant competencies (though see below), making them deployable and employable as coaches. In addition, some coaches have had experience in the creative sector and are experts in a particular field in relation to a specific target group or activity that matches the interests of the participating young people. For example, several coaches are DJs or professional gamers. Hence, coaches represent a broad spectrum of (sub) cultural sectors.

According to our respondents, Next Up coaches' strengths lie in their connection with the specific environments of young people. The corresponding challenge is that because they are not necessarily youth workers, some Next Up coaches demonstrate a lack of knowledge and empathy when they guide groups outside their subcultural comfort zone or network. This challenge underlines the importance of determining the competences needed to be a coach at Next Up. A two-year research project on this dimension of professionalisation is underway. To date, it is unclear what competences a Next Up coach needs to ensure that vulnerable youth are optimally supported and that equal participation is pursued.

Policy-related challenges

As noted earlier in the chapter, MDT has grown exponentially nationwide. With this expansion, the programme has also been subjected to new instruments for measurement and administration. While these evaluation tools aim to monitor the programme's quality, they also harbour the risk of taking up the scarce and valuable time of social-educational professionals, who are now obliged to report and account for all their actions throughout the process. This creates the following challenge: the more MDT professionalises, the more rules, requirements and paperwork are added – a challenge Lipsky (1980) identified when he indicated the need for “street-level bureaucrats” to exercise (administrative) discretion.

In a requirement that would have been unthinkable when the programme was designed, young participants are now asked to share their data (such as name, gender, address) and to accept much more intrusive forms of evaluation and administration, including a detailed timesheet. These new requirements impact Next Up's strategy as many of the young people in marginalised positions in society already have a distrust of institutions: “We now have to think about how we can deal with some government rules, how we can deal with them in such a way that the quality remains intact.”

One of the strategies adopted is akin to “circumventing”: how professional youth workers experience and mediate professional knowledge in the current policy context where a managerial and performative culture dominates (Scott-McKinley 2024). Bas Krans notes:

The steps in an MDT journey, such as introduction, intake, brainstorming, etc., can also occur earlier or in a different order. However, the new requirements do not allow for this tailor-made approach. It makes us wonder: who benefits if we – when filling in the information – have to repeat all the steps again and again, only to meet the evaluation forms?

The national political decision making creates another significant critical challenge. Current events (summer 2024) urge us to reflect on what it means that the MDT project was recently put on hold (or, according to some, eliminated) by the newly formed coalition in the Netherlands. This study shows that, unless an improved version is developed and implemented shortly, the current political climate is creating extra obstacles to integrating youth perspectives in policy making.

This political shift also highlights the issues attached to the successful organisation of opportunities for volunteer work. Because of the identified principles of autonomy and agency, MDT can never be expected to produce similar results if it becomes a duty – as some conservative political parties advocate.

Main lessons learned

MDT Next Up is a form of youth participation that enables the exploration of talents, meaningful encounters and service towards others. Exploring this youth-led practice has resulted in an overview of the relevant elements to consider in programmes aimed at youth mainstreaming. In the words of one of the participants:

MDT has helped me with developing my talents. It has also introduced me to different young people and adults and given me the space and time to create, invent or develop something myself. Through collaboration, I could come to a conclusion on various projects, from which I learned a lot. I was allowed to decide for myself what I wanted to do as a volunteer, allowing me to decide when I could attend. For example, I learned to be independent and responsible and ask for help when I felt it was needed.

Together, the following key elements and challenges comprise Next Up's DNA.

- ▶ Demand-driven approach
- ▶ Youth workers as a safety net
- ▶ Hands-on and hands-off approach
- ▶ Working on social cohesion
- ▶ Sustaining motivation

As Next Up has an especially positive impact on young people from the margins of society, we suggest that these elements be considered in every attempt to integrate youth perspectives into decision making throughout Europe. Indeed, the identified elements contribute to autonomy and (collective) agency if certain critical conditions are met: a methodical skillset for the coaches, the right organisational conditions and youth policies built on trust and long-term goals.

Autonomy emerges as a central feature of Next Up. It deserves consideration in every form of service learning as it enhances intrinsic motivation, an essential driver of voluntary longer-term trajectories. The Next Up programme contains elements consistent with the "self-determination theory" as developed by Ryan and Deci (1985) in their seminal work on intrinsic motivation. Autonomy, competence and relatedness are all facilitated and stimulated to foster intrinsic motivation and well-being. Young participants in Next Up are not only facilitated to explore autonomy but are also motivated to find their voice and express a form of agency. Next to autonomy, a second pivotal concept is agency, as it refers to the experience of having a voice in decision making that increases the grip on one's life and future. Youth participation in decision-making processes is linked to increased empowerment and self-efficacy. Zeldin et al. (2014) highlight that youth engagement in planning and decision making enhances their sense of agency and responsibility.

As explained, Next Up is based on the principles of youth organising. Youth organising is a powerful approach to engaging young people in social change and community development. It involves principles that empower young people, build their leadership skills and enable them to create meaningful impact. Moreover, this methodology is often associated internationally with political action and policy change.

In general, MDT initiatives in the Netherlands do not primarily focus on the activist aspect but take a more instrumental approach aimed at a form of service provided by young people to communities. As a consequence, not all Next Up activities are geared towards political action. We could identify some room for improvement there, or we could observe that this approach is more in line with the demands of the local context: if a need is identified, the workers do not shy away from addressing injustice or questioning power imbalances. One of the youth workers explained:

On certain difficult topics, we ensure that young people hear each other and form a community. One of my colleagues has formed a group of ex-homeless people, and we are constantly working on ensuring everyone has a voice. In such a way, young people with a home are invited to help their peers. This creates a sense of agency – not at the administrative/policy level, but at the local/community level.

In the example above, the youth workers explicitly take the side of an oppressed group of citizens, outside the group of Next Up participants. However, in some cases, this political action is less significant, other than the coaching of the participating young people with certain risks. Because of these big differences within the same initiative, the value of Next Up is hard to pin down yet apparent for all those involved. Therefore, the final word is for Katie:

MDT offers an opportunity to take young people's ideas to another level. Mainly because it does not have to be just dreams because, through support, coaching and financial resources, they can get to the dream they have to contribute to the theme they find important. I think the strength of MDT is that it can connect with everything that's already there, with the youth workers in the neighbourhood and other activities or places where young people come.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the uncertainties of the Dutch policies on MDT, it is safe to say that the form of service learning studied in the context of the Next Up project is a type of youth work that enhances autonomy and agency. To push the integration of youth perspectives to a higher level, we need to facilitate voluntary service learning as a catalyst for youth participation and mainstreaming. This type of learning cannot be enforced by formalising the approach or by making it obligatory. It requires a youth (work) policy based on trust and optimism. We hope that there are still countries out there in the EU that acknowledge the importance of these initiatives for working towards more substantial and more inclusive democracies.

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Chapter 11

The role of Spanish youth councils in integrating youth perspectives into policy-making processes

Alonso Escamilla and Paula Gonzalo

Youth perspectives have increasingly become a focal point in European policy making (Deželan, Petković and Taru 2025), reflecting a growing recognition of the vital role young people play in shaping the future of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, of which 27 are also member states of the European Union. At the European level, the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Council of the European Union 2018) and the Youth Sector Strategy 2030 of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2020) stress the importance of youth engagement and participation in the democratic process. These strategies recognise that mainstreaming youth participation results in policies that are more sensitive to young peoples' needs, especially in the areas of education, employment and social integration. It should be noted that youth mainstreaming is related to youth participation and is often used as a single term. However, they differ in scope: whereas youth participation deals with the engagement of young people in decision-making processes, youth mainstreaming entails incorporating youth perspectives into all political domains. This close relationship nevertheless further reinforces the position of participation as a mechanism and a product of mainstreaming. For instance, there are opportunities for youth participation, such as the EU Youth Dialogue,⁴¹ through which young people engage with policy makers to ensure the mainstreaming of young voices in EU decision-making processes (European Youth Portal 2025).

41. The Spanish Youth Council (together with the support of regional youth councils) is the entity responsible for gathering the perspectives of young people in Spain and presenting them at the EU Youth Dialogue Events (CJE 2024).

To comprehend how youth perspectives are included at the national level, it is crucial to examine each member state separately, as, despite the European framework offering overarching goals, their application is not uniform across the member states due to different sociopolitical contexts and institutional structures. In this way, the objectives of this chapter are twofold: first, to analyse the ways in which regional youth councils in Spain promote the integration of youth perspectives into policy making in their communities; second, to discover the challenges and opportunities that may concern the engagement of young people's participation in political activities and, thus, suggest some potential improvements in youth policies at both regional and national levels.

For this purpose, the chapter is structured as follows. First, brief information is provided about what youth councils are and the implications that the regional youth councils have had for channelling the voice of young people. Second, the socio-economic context of youth in the autonomous communities under study (Madrid, Extremadura and Castilla y León) is explored in order to understand the characteristics of each territory. Third, after the description of the youth situation in Spain, the methodology and scope of the study are introduced. Next, the role of the regional youth councils is examined, focusing on their approaches to promoting youth engagement in the policy-making processes. Finally, the implications of these findings for future policy development are considered alongside recommendations for further increasing youth engagement in decision-making processes.

Youth, youth councils and youth perspectives in Spain

Undoubtedly, young people in Spain have been changing and evolving in line with the socio-economic, political and cultural change that has taken place in the country since the end of the dictatorship on 20 November 1975, the approval of the current Spanish Constitution on 6 December 1978 (where the process of institutional transition from dictatorship to democracy culminates), the accession to the EU on 1 January 1986 and globalisation (Feixa 2006). However, several authors point out that since the 15M Movement,⁴² young people have moved away from the more conventional political scene to become protagonists in the country's social and political movements, especially in response to disaffection with traditional models and institutions (Tejerina and Perugorria 2012; Pablo and Salas 2013).

In this sense, in the last two decades youth councils in Spain (at national, regional and local levels) have been able to channel the voice of young people freely and effectively; to collectively represent their problems, concerns and aspirations; and to empower them and provide them with tools so that they have the ability to participate fully in their communities (Hernández-Diez 2022). In this way, the

42. According to Pablo and Salas (2013), the 15M Movement, also called Indignados Movements, was a citizens' response, especially from young people, to promote a more participatory and inclusive democracy for the 2011 elections in Spain (where its main activity was spontaneous and peaceful encampments in squares in different cities around the country).

Spanish Youth Council, the regional youth councils and the local youth councils throughout Spain have played a fundamental role in giving their youth greater weight in the public sphere.

This is due to the fact that in Spain the youth councils are public bodies under private law, with their own legal personality and attached to the ministry responsible for youth affairs. On this basis, the youth councils are made up of youth associations and organisations (belonging to different sectors)⁴³ circumscribed in their communities. These organisations in turn elect, in a plenary or general assembly, the presidency and its permanent commission (for a period of two years), which carry out the agreements of the plenary and exercise the representative functions of their Youth Council (Clua, Ferran-Ferrer and Terren 2018).

At the academic level, several authors agree that youth councils are places where young people come together to discuss, debate and act on issues of public interest that concern them (Taft and Gordon 2013). At a structural level, youth councils are platforms that bring together a diversity of youth entities to foster youth participation and influence the design of public policies by allowing them to voice their concerns and propose solutions (Martin et al. 2007). In turn, more youth representation in politics leads to policies that better fit their needs and thus improve the quality of life of young people (Clua, Ferran-Ferrer and Terren 2018). On a practical level, youth councils are not only spaces to create a reflective social conversation focused on public issues, but also where young people, as a heterogeneous group, relate to their peers and the context in which they participate (Feringa and Tonkens 2017).

Despite the above, there is still a long way to go for Spanish young people to be fully represented and for their perspectives to be truly incorporated into decision making. At European level, for example, in 2022 the European Youth Forum (YFJ) proposed creating the EU Youth Test with the aim of integrating young people into all European policies. Along the same lines, Austria, France and Germany had also, a few years earlier, opted to create a youth impact assessment tool to ensure that youth perspectives are taken into account in policy making (YFJ 2022). In the case of Spain, however, there is still no similar tool to ensure that policies really take into account the repercussions they might have on young people.

Therefore, in addition to the fact that this study will be the first to address the reality of this issue in Spain, it is hoped that it can contribute to, at the very least, generating a debate among all political, social and youth actors on how to incorporate youth perspectives into policy-making processes. This is important, in particular, because youth policies, in order to respond to the current demands of young people, cannot be designed just with the analysis and tools of the past (Moreno 2015).

43. In general, the youth associations or organisations belonging to the regional youth councils are local youth councils, trade unions, political organisations, socio-educational bodies and student bodies.

Madrid, Extremadura and Castilla y León from a youth perspective

Madrid

The Community of Madrid has a total population of over 7 million, with around 1.4 million of them being young people⁴⁴ (INE 2024). The situation for them is quite complex, reflecting the diversity within the population. Madrid's youth unemployment rate stands at 18% for those under 25, a concerning figure, but it is still the lowest among the three autonomous communities analysed in this chapter. The percentage of young people aged 15 to 25 who are neither studying nor working is 8.94%, with men making up the majority (CaixaBank 2024a).

Youth autonomy and housing access are also pressing issues, alongside unemployment. In 2023, the youth autonomy rate⁴⁵ in Madrid was 17%, marking an improvement from previous years despite a 7.7% increase in rental prices in the region. However, this figure remains below pre-pandemic levels and the 2008 economic recession. According to the 2023 Autonomy Observatory⁴⁶ of the Community of Madrid, a young person on a median salary would need to allocate over 100% of their income to rent a property alone, and it would take 6.2 years' worth of their entire salary to afford a house deposit. These challenges exacerbate mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, among Madrid's youth (CJE 2023).

Currently, the Community of Madrid does not have a youth strategy. Instead, it has launched a Youth Employment Plan for 2024 and 2025 (Community of Madrid 2023), with the main goal of improving employment opportunities for young people in Madrid by reducing unemployment to a range between 6% and 8%. The total budget for the measures included in the Youth Employment Strategy 2024-2025 is €200 million, which will be invested across three strategic pillars:

- ▶ a public service model focused on young people;
- ▶ skills training and development;
- ▶ employment promotion.

44. Different autonomous communities define "youth" using varying age ranges. For the sake of consistency and comparison in this study, the age range of 14 to 30 has been used, aligning with the eligibility criteria for the European Youth Card in Spain, which applies uniformly across the country (INJUVE 2023).

45. Youth autonomy refers to young people who are registered as "reference person", "spouse" or "person not related to a relative" in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of the Spanish National Statistics Institute. Based on the above, the youth autonomy rate refers to the share (%) of the young population (16-29 years old) not living in the same household as the total population of this same age group.

46. The Autonomy Observatory is an analytical tool developed by the Spanish Youth Council. It studies the socio-demographic situation of young people in Spain, especially focusing on their employment, housing and autonomy rates. The data provided are broken down by autonomous communities.

Although the development methodology of this Youth Employment Plan does not mention the Community of Madrid Youth Council as a key participant in its design, it includes data collection through interviews with young people and surveys of those actively seeking employment, thus incorporating the real perspective of this population group as a foundation for analysis.

Extremadura

Extremadura is the least populated autonomous community in this analysis, with just over 1 million inhabitants, around 180 000 of whom are aged between 14 and 30. However, it has the highest youth unemployment rate for those under 25 (39%) (INE 2024), and the highest percentage of young people who are neither studying nor working (9.4%) (CaixaBank 2024b). Additionally, young people who were employed in this region faced a higher risk of having a temporary contract than in any other autonomous community (CJE 2023).

Despite having the lowest median rent in all of Spain, a young person in Extremadura would need to spend more than half of their salary on rent if living alone, as the average monthly income in 2023 was less than €1 000. Consequently, Extremadura has the lowest youth autonomy rate in Spain, at just 13.6%. Furthermore, the region is predominantly rural, which makes it difficult for young people to establish a future within their own community due to a lack of employment and educational opportunities (CJE 2023).

The VII Youth Plan of Extremadura was developed by the Youth Institute of Extremadura, an independent body under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports of the autonomous community, to address the issues of the young people of Extremadura (Youth Institute of Extremadura 2021). This strategic plan organised youth policies from 2021 to 2024 through an integrated approach to co-ordinate and highlight the measures implemented, promote the opportunities offered to young people and ensure the regional government's support in protecting their rights. All measures fell under the following areas of action.

- ▶ Addressing the demographic challenge, encouraging youth return and improving rural life for young people.
- ▶ Improving employment and entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Supporting sustainable development and the green and circular economy.
- ▶ Facilitating autonomy and access to housing.
- ▶ Enhancing equal access for youth to the digital society.
- ▶ Fighting for equality and against gender-based violence among young people.
- ▶ Paying attention to diverse and plural youth.
- ▶ Promoting healthy habits and youth health.
- ▶ Encouraging leisure, sports and cultural activities.
- ▶ Supporting volunteering, associations and youth participation.
- ▶ Cross-cutting actions.

The VII Youth Plan of Extremadura (2021-2024) was defined through a process of active listening and discussions with the youth collective of the region, in collaboration with the Extremadura Youth Council. This initiative emphasised continuous monitoring and evaluation to adapt to youth needs and, over the four-year period, the plan was allocated more than €600 million.

Castilla y León

In Castilla y León, a region with a population of approximately 2.4 million, about 370 000 residents are classified as young people. The economic challenges they face are significant, with the unemployment rate for those under 25 reaching 30% (INE 2024). Furthermore, 8.2% of young people aged 15-25 have not participated in education, employment or training programmes (CaixaBank 2024c).

Castilla y León also faces the problem of a decrease in the youth autonomy rate, which fell to 14.7% in 2023. In addition to other challenges stands, the region has a negative migration balance of -4.4% between autonomous communities, which means that a larger number of young people are leaving Castilla y León than those moving to it. This outflow worsens already existing demographic problems in the local economy and community organisation, thereby further harming future opportunities for the young people that remain. Temporary work, moreover, is still greatly over-represented among the young labour force of Castilla y León. This is due to the fact that young people aged 16-24 in this community who are in part-time jobs represent 40.9%, compared to 13.5% at the national level (UGT 2024). In addition, the economic burden of independent living is considerable, since monthly rent takes up more than half of the median income of a young person in Castilla y León (CJE 2023).

The current youth policy of Castilla y León is outlined in the V Strategic Youth Plan (Junta de Castilla y León 2022). This plan started in 2022 and will remain in effect until 2025. The institution responsible for drafting the plan is the Ministry of Family and Equal Opportunities of Castilla y León. The main objective of this document is to compile, define and describe the various approaches, principles and measures of all the entities responsible for youth affairs in the region, namely, the Youth Institute, the youth council and the ministries of the Junta of Castilla y León, in order to co-ordinate the development of youth policies in this area. In this way, the plan seeks to protect young people's rights and promote their development and participation in the political, social, economic and cultural progress of the region.

To achieve this, the plan was allocated an average of €130 million per year during its four-year duration. In total, the plan has approximately €520 million to meet its objectives. The resources of the V Strategic Youth Plan are divided into 167 specific measures, grouped into the following 10 themes.

- ▶ Employment, talent attraction/retention and entrepreneurship
- ▶ Education, training and mobility
- ▶ Autonomy/housing
- ▶ Healthy living/quality of life

- ▶ Participation, associations and volunteering
- ▶ Rural development and environment
- ▶ Culture, sport, leisure and free time
- ▶ Equal opportunities, inclusion, diversity and values
- ▶ Information, awareness and social research
- ▶ Interinstitutional co-operation and process improvement

With the intention of developing a strategic plan by and for young people, the ministry engaged the main youth stakeholders, particularly the 49 youth organisations of the Castilla y León Youth Council, along with the involvement of over 20 000 unaffiliated young people.

Finally, after analysing all the characteristics of the autonomous communities, a summary of the key information is included in Table 1 to facilitate comparisons between the three regions of study.

Table 1 – Comparison of indicators and youth strategic plans in Madrid, Extremadura and Castilla y León

Indicator	AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY		
	Madrid	Extremadura	Castilla y León
Total population	7 million	1 million	2.4 million
Youth population	1.4 million	180 000	370 000
Youth unemployment rate (under 25)	18%	39%	30%
Youth NEET rate (not in education, employment or training)	8.94%	9.4%	8.2%
Youth autonomy rate	17%	13.6%	14.7%
Rent affordability (share of income spent on rent)	Over 100%	Over 50%	Over 50%
Youth strategic plan	Youth Employment Plan (2024-2025) Budget: €200 million	VII Youth Plan (2021-2024) Budget: €600 million	V Strategic Youth Plan (2022-2025) Budget: €520 million
Main objective(s)	A public service model focused on youth	Addressing the demographic challenge, encouraging youth return, improving rural youth life	Employment, talent attraction/retention entrepreneurship

Methodology

In this study, the qualitative methodological approach was based on in-depth interviews, with the aim of collecting data and learning about the experience of the regional youth councils, as well as their member organisations, in incorporating youth perspectives into the political processes of their autonomous communities. This methodology was chosen because it allowed for a flexible framework of action that did not limit the depth and breadth of the responses.

To this end, between June and September 2024, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted virtually through Meet or Teams. The qualitative data collected from the interviews were analysed using MAXQDA software. The aim was to identify commonalities between the participating organisations and to draw up thematic categories with the main findings. Representatives⁴⁷ of the institutions shown in Table 2 participated in these meetings.

Table 2 – Regional youth councils and member entities interviewed

AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY	ORGANISATION	LEVEL OF ACTION	TYPE OF ENTITY
Community of Madrid	Community of Madrid Youth Council	Regional	Youth council
	Alcobendas Youth Council	Local	Youth council
	Fuenlabrada Youth Council	Local	Youth council
	RUGE Madrid	Regional	Trade union
Extremadura	Extremadura Youth Council	Regional	Youth council
	Cáceres Youth Council	Local	Youth council
	Scouts Extremadura	Regional	Socio-educational entity
Castilla y León	Castilla y León Youth Council	Regional	Youth council
	Local Youth Council of Valladolid	Local	Youth council
	Béjar Youth Council	Local	Youth council
	Scouts Castilla y León	Regional	Socio-educational entity

47. The researchers extend an acknowledgement to the organisations and their representatives who took part in this research.

On the other hand, the interview guide contained questions related to the following aspects: first, the main youth priorities in each of their communities; second, the approach to promoting the civic, political and democratic participation of their youth; and, third, the relationship with the public administration and policy makers. Fourth, the frameworks and tools they used to incorporate youth perspectives in decision making in their autonomous communities. Fifth, the factors that facilitated or hindered this incorporation of youth perspectives in decision making and policy processes in their communities.

Finally, it should be noted that the representatives of the 11 organisations interviewed participated in this research voluntarily. At the same time, the researchers followed all the necessary protocols regarding the processing of personal data to achieve the purpose of this study.

The experience of the regional youth councils in incorporating the youth perspective in their communities

This chapter examines the role of regional youth councils in terms of the opportunities and barriers they face in incorporating youth perspectives in their communities. The main experiences are summarised below.

- ▶ Youth councils (and associations) can become amplifiers of youth perspectives.
- ▶ Learning to participate from childhood and creating civic spaces (formal and non-formal) allows youth perspectives to flourish.
- ▶ Political immediacy and short-sightedness prevent the broadening of youth perspectives in policy decisions.
- ▶ Changes in government slow down the incorporation of youth perspectives into policy decisions.

Youth councils (and associations) can become amplifiers of youth perspectives

Article 48 of the Spanish Constitution stipulates that politicians shall promote the conditions for the participation of young people in political, social, economic and cultural development. In this way, the youth councils of Spain at local, regional and national levels are established by law as recognised and valid interlocutors to represent young people and convey their proposals and issues to political figures or bodies that have the capacity to act on these matters. The youth councils are independent and democratic organisations in their structure and operation, composed of member entities from various fields. The plurality of these entities is a key factor in promoting participation and the formation of associations among a greater number of young people, thus reflecting the diversity that exists in each autonomous community through the youth councils.

[The council] is characterised by being quite plural. There is a lot of diversity and sensitivities that are represented by different organisations ... Because at the end of the day the council is characterised by allowing access as a member entity to all types of organisations, as long as they meet certain prerequisites, but in general it does reflect a lot of diversity ... where there are many different points of view expressed.

Moreover, it is crucial to focus attention on the step preceding the impact of the councils. That is, the importance of youth associations as a way to gather all the perspectives of young people and to offer a platform where they can bring their points of view to the councils' agendas, ensuring these requests continue to be elevated to regional governments. However, despite being one of the fundamental roles of the youth councils, promoting youth associations is not an easy task – especially considering factors like the change in young people's relationship models after the pandemic or the lack of free time on account of the aforementioned situation that young people face regarding employability, autonomy and mental health.

We have realised that youth participation is a point that has been very weak after the pandemic. Independent socialisation models have been created, so to speak, everyone meets at home, through videogames, many meetings through social networks ... So, this hinders youth participation a lot.

Therefore, the regional youth councils agree that it is important not to wait for young people to come to the councils, but for the councils to go to the spaces and environments where young people are and socialise. This includes physical places like schools or leisure centres, but also virtual spaces such as social media. Moreover, many regional youth councils have launched activities for non-associated young people with a twofold objective: first, not to leave non-associated individuals behind when gathering information or including them in decision-making processes; second, to introduce them to the youth councils in case, at some point in the future, they decide to associate and multiply their impact.

The great challenge is that information, no matter how many projects you create, is useless if it does not reach young people. So, we have to be where young people are. You have to be in the high schools, you have to be in the sports centres, you have to be in the library. You have to be there.

Then, on a more informal level, we have started to interview young people in leisure spaces so that they can make their proposals or identify the problems of young people and make proposals about what they need. This way it is easier to reach all kinds of people ... They tend to be in more informal spaces because we think that we should not wait for young people to come and make proposals, but rather we should go out and look for them.

According to the interviewees, the issues that most concern and occupy young people today are employment, housing and mental health. In response to these pressing matters, regional youth councils have been successful in bringing mental health to the forefront of the public agenda, particularly by offering training programmes in schools and developing policy recommendations aimed at improving youth mental health support. Similarly, they have worked to address housing accessibility, highlighting the barriers young people face in securing affordable accommodation.

Other proposals have been accepted, such as the one on mental health – in high schools. We carried out a questionnaire; we hired a psychologist to give these workshops; he is doing an advocacy bulletin and a report with the conclusions, to transfer these findings to the government, for the need to advocate on mental health.

We not only work with the public administration, but we also try to collaborate with private companies so that they also take youth into account. Especially with regard to employment. We work with ... an association of companies and we collaborate with them to make an impact, so that there are good ... salaries, and to try to address some of the needs of young people.

Learning to participate from childhood and creating civic spaces (formal and non-formal) allows youth perspectives to flourish

Based on our analysis, the organisations interviewed point out that civic, democratic and political participation needs to be taught from childhood in order for youth perspectives to flourish. This is because they perceive that one of the main obstacles preventing young people from exercising active citizenship is that they have not yet learned how to participate, they do not know what resources they have or they have the feeling that decision-making spaces are very distant and intimidating (Pušnik 2023). In contrast, when young people have been learning and participating since they were young, they clearly see how they are able to incorporate their concerns into political decisions (Alcántara Hernández and Cerón Islas 2022).

Well, there is a very important factor that we have ... in mind, to give young people the opportunity to participate and to be part of the political processes, [and that] is to have an early education in participation ... not only to receive content from school but also [to learn about] the social reality.

According to the organisations interviewed, the mere establishment of policies or structures does not guarantee the effective participation of young people. Therefore, they all highlight the importance of continuing to promote and reinforce citizenship education from an early age, so that young people can participate in youth associations, share their concerns, be part of youth councils, draw up recommendations and be able to bring their youth perspectives to political authorities.

Following this line, interviewees point out that another factor that facilitates the incorporation of young people is youth councils creating various civic spaces (informal, formal, face-to-face and/or virtual) within their activities and structures. As a result, different young people have a choice of places to meet with their peers, establish contacts and forge alliances. These also represent safe spaces where they can participate, freely express their opinions and recognise the diversity of their peers. In turn, this enables young people themselves to identify common needs, agree on positions and develop proposals for improvement (Zeldin et al. 2017). In other words, civic spaces ensure that youth perspectives are authentic and do not fall into tokenism, decoration or adult-centrism (Blanchet-Cohen and Torres 2024).

If we want to have an impact on associations, we do it through our activities and through the working groups. In feminism we have had violet coffees, where women forge bonds and sisterhood. In rural youth, for the last three years, we have been holding congresses. In research, we have a cross-border seminar ... We also hold summer and autumn schools, with high-school youth, so that they can co-operate and get to know each other, so that they know what the world of associations is, how to create an association to encourage participation at all levels.

At the same time, all entities agree that, when presenting proposals for improvement to political authorities, it is essential to have a single interlocutor with a single position, so that youth perspectives are really taken into account. To ensure this, regional youth councils play a fundamental role in bringing together, representing and fighting for all the voices of young people when it comes to incorporating youth perspectives into their communities.

Political immediacy and short-sightedness prevent the broadening of youth perspectives in policy decisions

One of the main factors preventing the inclusion of youth perspectives in political decision making is the urgency with which governments and political authorities are often compelled to implement policies. This rush to action leaves little room for thorough consultation with young people or consideration of their viewpoints. Furthermore, the way the political system is structured adds to this challenge. Policies must be presented by a parliamentary group and evidence suggests that, if a policy comes from a right-wing group, it is frequently rejected by those on the left, and vice versa.

This polarisation of the political climate reduces co-operation between parties and weakens the prospects of incorporating young people's perspectives and concerns into sustainable policy frameworks. In some instances, even when youth organisations or youth representatives are involved, their views are sidelined by the political fight between the parties involved. Hence, the policies can only represent the dominant authority rather than develop solutions for the problems that young people face, making it very difficult for youth perspectives to be established firmly enough to influence decision-making processes, and therefore their opinions remain marginalised and their potential impact limited.

At the political level, it is difficult to achieve this transversality, especially when political parties are involved. If we present a proposal, and for this to happen it has to be backed by a political party, the opposing party will throw it out.

Following this line, another factor that hinders the inclusion of youth perspectives in political decisions is the misconception that only the policies that include the tag "youth" in them are relevant to young people, overlooking the fact that all policies affect young people in some way. For instance, this results in the perception that there is no need to include young people in the development of housing laws or transport policies. Therefore, young people's viewpoints are not fully included in the formulation of policies that impact their lives. This exclusion further intensifies young people's feeling of alienation from

the political process and thus undermines their confidence in the system, even though it can also present challenges.

With the Autonomy Observatory, we have done a lot of policy advocacy and what we saw was that the call for rental subsidies did not take into account the large number of young people who were sharing flats. We carried out this dialogue with the Councillor for Housing, Architecture and Urban Planning, so that young people who were sharing flats could be included in the call for rental subsidies.

The marginalisation of young people is further exacerbated by the problem that youth are perceived as the future or the next generation rather than as present and active citizens in society. Continuing to exclude young people from formulations of policies that shape their daily life reinforces the cycle of exclusion and under-representation.

We, young people, also say that we are the present, we are not the future, that we should stop seeing ourselves as something far away, that in 30 years we will be active citizens, but that we already are and we have to be taken into account in policies.

At the end of the day, we need to be heard on all these issues because we have a lot to talk about and a lot of opinions to give. I think that's what our politicians should do: give us a voice in all these issues because in the end youth is not a specific area, it's a global area and ... we are the present and the future of our town and our city.

Changes in government slow down the incorporation of youth perspectives into policy decisions

In general terms, the organisations interviewed indicated that the regional youth councils have a good relationship with public administrations and autonomous governments, where they note that they are increasingly being taken into account when addressing youth issues in their localities and communities. It is considered important that steps are taken by the autonomous governments to consider the regional youth councils as more affirmative potential partners when it comes to deliberating and designing public policies, to ensure that young people are taken into account.

The relationship with the current government and other institutions is good. They are the highest authorities. We make the demands known to the different parliamentary groups. When we hold an event, an inauguration or a closing ceremony, they attend and count on us for debates, for a plenary assembly, or any other event. We have a connection with the government, with the current government, and with past governments. It hasn't been bad.

Despite the above, interviewees state that another of the main barriers they face to incorporating youth perspectives into policy decisions in their communities is democratic bureaucracy itself. Traditionally, public policy is characterised by the fact that it involves multiple interactions between a range of different bodies and thus unfolds in complex systems (Mueller 2020). That is to say, once regional youth councils start the process of presenting their recommendations, they have to go through several filters and various layers of policy making until, if they survive these steps, the youth perspective can reach the political decision makers or the autonomous assemblies.

I would say that the biggest obstacle ... is the institutional process ... You have to go through many steps to get to the person who can have the most impact or who is the decision maker.

As part of this democratic bureaucracy, there is also another dynamic that slows down the incorporation of youth perspectives: the continuity of policies in the face of changes in government. This is because governmental phase transitions can lead to unexpected and unannounced changes in public policy that increase the likelihood of failure (Mueller 2020). The organisations interviewed point out that they have often been working on an issue for a long time with a particular cabinet member or decision maker, and when there is a change of government that interlocutor disappears, a new person enters and they have to start all over again from scratch, preventing youth perspectives from being consolidated and from being taken into account.

When it comes to influencing policy, it's more complicated. Because we often get meetings cancelled. Or on other occasions we have them, but the person with whom we had the issue or the proposal has already left, and now there is another person and that person has no idea what we are talking about, when everything was already decided with the previous person ... You have to start again from scratch with a new person when we have already been working on the proposal for months.

Conclusions

Overall, regional youth councils appear to possess the ability to exert political influence and elevate the perspectives of young people within the public agenda. They achieve this by consolidating the voices of young people into a unified platform, fostering associationism and organising a variety of civic spaces in diverse formats. These actions enable young individuals to connect with one another, cultivate a sense of belonging and openly share their needs and aspirations. By facilitating these interactions, regional youth councils help transform the collective concerns of young people into well-crafted political proposals, thereby ensuring that the interests and viewpoints of the younger generation are effectively represented and addressed in policy-making processes.

As a result of the above, the three regional youth councils (and their member organisations) are aware of the importance of creating, consolidating, renewing and protecting civic spaces. This is of paramount importance because it is in these contexts that young people can acquire knowledge and competences for effective community participation (Augsberger et al. 2018), and that youth positions cannot be labelled as only one profile or coming from a particular group. Although our analysis refers to the need for these spaces to take into account all young people (especially with different backgrounds), it does not identify whether this is actually achieved when it comes to incorporating youth perspectives into the political processes of the communities studied. Ensuring such diversity is essential, as often, even if not consciously or deliberately, it can create a misrepresentation of youth voices within a community, due to the participation of the same people from the same social groups (Wyness 2001; Nairn, Sligo and Freeman 2006; Ferber and Matthew 2015).

The results of the study should be taken with some caution, given its methodological limitations. First, the small sample is clearly not representative of the three study communities nor of all the member entities that make up the regional youth councils. Second, there is no input from policy makers or regional governments when it comes to incorporating (or not) youth perspectives. Therefore, although the existing data shed light on some interesting issues, the results shown here are not intended to be generalisable. In this sense, it is necessary for future research to expand the sample in terms of the number of entities interviewed, as well as to air the perspective of political decision makers, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of regional youth councils in incorporating youth perspectives into their communities.

Nevertheless, we would like to conclude with some recommendations that represent a considerable challenge for the three autonomous communities (and therefore also for Spain and the rest of Europe). Taking into account the fact that, despite the differences between the sociodemographic and budget conditions among autonomous communities, the need to include youth perspectives in policy-making processes is constant. To that end, it is essential to continue promoting civic, social and democratic education from an early age, beginning in childhood and within formal schooling. Equally important is the encouragement of associationism, so that young people become familiar with participation – understanding what it is, how to engage and when to take part – and incorporate it naturally into their lives. This progression can start with involvement in initiatives like the Child-Friendly Cities programme, followed by joining various associations and becoming active in youth councils (Escamilla and Molina 2024). As young people move through these stages, they gain the knowledge, confidence and skills necessary to influence their surroundings and, ultimately, even to serve as councillors in their local town halls (and to be aware of the value of developing youth mainstreaming from the perspective of policy makers!).

Based on what we have seen in this study, a second recommendation is to explore the possibility of creating a Spanish youth test that would allow all regional and national policies to be assessed for the impact that their implementation will have on young people. In this sense, regional youth councils would have another tool for achieving a meaningful interaction with their young people (especially those from vulnerable backgrounds) to identify needs and agree on recommendations, as well as to highlight to policy makers the relevance of youth perspectives and to make them aware of the negative impact that the policies they approve could have on young people.

Likewise, when we consider the creation of a Spanish youth test, we also see it as a framework for action that ensures a continuous evaluation that is maintained regardless of the government or political interlocutor at any given time. As mentioned by the organisations interviewed, it is important that youth policies are not dependent on or affected by changes of governments. As the EESC points out in regard to the EU Youth Test, it will also be necessary for the results of the Spanish youth test to be binding and available in the public domain in order to ensure transparency and understanding of why a measure has been approved or rejected (EESC 2022). Although we are aware that it is not a magic wand and there is not yet sufficient evidence of its effectiveness, it could mean that regional youth councils do not have to start all policy formulation from scratch when there is a change

of political interlocutor. Otherwise, it seems difficult for youth perspectives to be consolidated in the political decisions of the Spanish autonomous communities.

This chapter was intended to contribute ideas and insights on how to incorporate youth perspectives into political decision making at every level – local, regional, national and European – as well as across all member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe. To achieve meaningful change for young people, we must ensure that they are fully recognised and included as key stakeholders in shaping the policies that affect their lives today and in the future.

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Chapter 12

Empowering youth councils in Italy: advancing participation and policy responsiveness beyond tokenism

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In Italy, the declining engagement of younger cohorts in conventional political activities, along with the demographic shift towards an older population, has led to diminished policy responsiveness and effectiveness in addressing the concerns and interests of youth. This chapter investigates the potential impact of local youth councils (LYCs) on youth participation in formal politics and mainstreaming.

It draws on various electoral, social and learning theories and conducts in-the-field interviews to compare a variety of methods employed by regions and cities around Italy to encourage youth engagement.

The findings suggest LYCs are an effective way to promote youth mainstreaming directly and indirectly. Directly, LYCs give young people power of scrutiny, transforming traditional power structures and enabling youth to participate in development planning across various sectors by exercising their influence and voices. Indirectly, these councils leverage factors influencing youth voter turnout outside traditional family-influenced politics: political socialisation, social capital, past behaviours and entry points to formal politics.

However, the extent of their influence depends on authenticity and support provided by local governmental bodies, equitable access to LYCs, the ability to avoid elitism and tokenism, and investment in the skills of young participants so they can exercise accurate and informed influence on decision-making processes. In this way, the chapter concludes by presenting a valuable framework for overcoming the risk of perpetuating youth disenfranchisement through incorrect implementation of LYCs, thereby promoting more effective and genuine youth mainstreaming, policy effectiveness and social cohesion.

Methodology

This research was conducted by interviewing members of the LYCs, along with councillors and mayors of Italian cities and regions where the LYCs have already been established. We used the theories-in-use approach that relies on one-to-one dialogues enabling interviewees to have an active role in the relative thesis development process (Zeithaml et al. 2020). Applying this methodology, we began our research by taking our cues directly from the 21 interviewees' ideas starting from the same three questions.

- ▶ In your experience, what were the main difficulties in promoting and passing a regulation to establish a youth council in your municipality or region?
- ▶ Do you think that the LYC succeeds in/can effectively represent the needs of young people in your local community?
- ▶ Do you think that the LYC succeeds in/can influence public policies?

We analysed data collected during the interviews and compared them with data from other participants, identifying common themes and emerging issues related to youth councils in Italy, covering 12 municipal and eight regional youth councils.

The Italian context of youth participation and youth policy effectiveness

The declining engagement of youth

The declining engagement of younger generations in Italy's political system, combined with the demographic shift towards an older population, has significantly diminished the responsiveness of political institutions to youth concerns. The youngest age group, the under-35s, has gone from being the population segment that votes the most (91% in 1992) to the one that votes the least (57% in 2022), conveying a large disparity in the level of voter participation relative to older age cohorts (Itanes 2023).

Furthermore, youth representation in formal political institutions is alarmingly low: those aged 18 to 29 account for just .69% of the Chamber of Deputies, and local government representation of under-30s has dropped to 18%, down from 22% in 2016 (ANCI 2023; Chamber of Deputies 2022).

Young people are shifting from institutional forms of political participation (such as elections and mass organisations), favouring more micro-cause-oriented or place-based forms (riots, occupations, petitions and online activism) and participating in movements like Fridays for Future (FFF) and Non una di meno (the Italian feminist movement tied to Ni una menos).

Limited space for youth agendas

These unconventional approaches to political participation do not seem to have affected the political system's long-term responsiveness. For instance, despite the

FFF movement prompting a great response in Italy, Italy continues to show major delays in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations members in 2015 (ASviS 2022). Moreover, the Italian parties with the most members questioning the human impact on climate change or its very existence are those in the actual governing majority (Pagella Politica 2023). This disconnection between youth-driven political movements and the formal political system reflects the broader challenge of translating informal political engagement into institutional responsiveness.

In fact, researchers demonstrate how political processes tend to favour voters over non-voters (Macedo et. al. 2005), wealthy over less affluent (Levine 2015) and participants in formal organisations (political parties) over non-participants (Aldrich 2011).

Hence, politicians avoid reflecting in their policies the demands of the youth cohort, whose size and voting influence are decreasing, leading to unequal policies (Lijphart 1997). For example, despite Italy having one of the highest youth NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates in the European Union, it allocates one of the smallest shares of resources to youth in its national NextGen EU plans (Bruno Visentini Foundation 2022).

Therefore, in light of future demographic trends being expected to worsen the situation, it is imperative to promote structures and practices that, in the short term, incorporate the perspectives of young people as genuine contributions to the political process and, in the long term, enable full and active participation of younger generations in formal politics, ensuring they become a significant and stable force capable of influencing political outcomes.

The role of youth councils in Italy

Legislative framework and evolution

Thirty-three years have passed since the approval in 1992 of the original European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (Council of Europe 2003), following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1989). According to the charter, issued by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe:

The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies ... Participation and active citizenship are about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities to contribute to building a better society. (Council of Europe 2003: 1)

Youth inclusion and participation are not ends but rather means to strengthen local communities, making them more inclusive, democratic and prosperous. To this extent, the charter identifies instruments such as youth councils, youth parliaments and youth forums as optimal tools for ensuring effective youth participation in a democratic society.

The advocacy promoted by these international guidelines has encouraged Italian regions to take action by implementing laws regulating youth participation policies and practices. Thus, despite the absence of a national framework law on youth policies, Italian regions have enacted regional laws to govern the civic representation of young people at both regional and local levels.

Specifically, 19 out of 20 regions, including the autonomous provinces, have enacted a youth policy law. Among them, 17 have introduced specific regulations that guarantee formal spaces for representation and civic participation for new generations at the regional level. While only a few have extended these regulations to the municipal level, there is potential for further improvement as municipalities have the option to independently establish spaces for youth civic participation.

Regional variations and methods of youth participation

The most commonly provided tool for participation in regional and local regulations is the youth council/forum/parliament (from now on referred to simply as an LYC), through which local authorities aim to establish a dialogue and collaboration with young people living in their territories.

The creation of LYCs can stem from different sources “sometimes driven by the initiative of the administration, while other times it emerges from the grassroots efforts of active young people”, as noted by the President of the Sardinia region LYC.

LYCs, typically composed of people between the ages of 14 and 35, participate voluntarily to provide opinions, proposals and projects aimed at influencing local administrations on issues relevant to the territory’s youth. However, in the absence of national legislation, positive proactive approaches conducted by Italian regions and municipalities have resulted in a very heterogeneous situation.

Structure and composition of LYCs

Regions seem to interpret regional youth councils as representative bodies for intermediary groups and youth associations: participants are nominated by youth organisations of political parties, provincial student councils and most representative not-for-profit associations. In the Campania region, the regional youth council was instead composed of delegates from the local youth council, establishing a model of territorial representation and an “institutional chain” that begins at the local level and extends to the highest regional institutions.

Conversely, at the municipal level where LYCs are formed, the direct election of council members is preferred. This system allows the local youth electorate within the eligible age range to participate freely, guaranteeing a broader direct involvement of young people in decision-making processes.

However, it is worth noting that some cities have chosen to adopt a dual system. This system, which includes certain quotas of representation for student, collegiate or territorial association bodies alongside elections, is designed to “allow more people to join the councils and incorporate a wider range of perspectives”, as highlighted by a councillor responsible for youth policy in Cagliari.

For effective functioning, communication and support between political bodies and youth councils are often established outside formal legal frameworks. Typically, a co-ordinating figure, such as the mayor or a city councillor, acts as a liaison between the two entities. These relationships are nurtured through various means such as regularly scheduled meetings, informal gatherings or even more direct methods like WhatsApp groups. For example, in Naples, a WhatsApp group between LYCs and the designated councilman/councilwoman serves as an accessible way to stay in constant touch, fostering ongoing communication and collaboration.

We established a real exchange relationship through which the young people who are part of the LYC know that for any issue they can summon the designated alderman, they can have the mayor or the executive participate. (Member of the Pesaro LYC)

Some LYCs also receive support from administrative structures, as happens in the autonomous province of Trento, where the Youth Policy Office performs “an important secretarial, support and assistance function” for the LYC, according to an officer in Trento’s Youth Policy Office. This support is crucial, particularly in the early stages of the local body’s existence, in order to allow members to familiarise themselves with the local youth policy framework. It also facilitates “knowledge transfer”, the structured sharing of information, practices and institutional memory (such as rules of procedure, budget cycles, broader orientation to the youth policy framework) between administrative staff and young representatives, helping prevent political interference or tokenism from the administration or elected officials.

Activities of LYCs

LYCs usually have two main powers: consultative power regarding policies implemented by the city/region, and propositional power, which involves drawing up policy proposals, encouraging discussion between institutions and young people on strategic issues and thus mainstreaming youth issues across various policy areas. However, the interviews suggest that LYCs focus mainly on practical projects aimed at youth participation, rather than advancing proper regulatory interventions.

For instance, a large part of the work of LYCs is focused on local urban locations, in order to make them accessible for youth associations. To achieve this, LYCs act as process facilitators and mediate between the needs of local youth and local institutions.

One example is the Ossigeno project, carried out by Pesaro’s LYC, which aims to create a meeting space for young people while serving as a cultural hub for events and networking to foster a sense of ownership among youth over the city’s public spaces.

At the same time, LYCs work alongside municipalities during emergencies. For instance, the Second Municipality of Rome’s LYC participated in the distribution of groceries to the elderly during the Covid-19 lockdown, while Labico’s LYC was part of a joint project to provide Italian lessons and integration initiatives for Ukrainians arriving in the area.

In Potenza, the LYC addressed the issue of accessibility in urban spaces. Engaging directly with young people facing these obstacles daily, the initiative facilitated a dialogue with the municipal administration, leading to the development of a comprehensive accessibility project that encouraged businesses and stores to implement accessibility improvements.

Consequently, these councils are embedded in the youth community, connecting various youth realities present in the territory, building and maintaining collaborative networks with volunteering organisations and other youth associations. Moreover, they work on collecting and disseminating information to monitor and communicate progress and the conditions of the young population around their territory.

Moreover, LYCs can often directly implement and organise projects and events. To establish these projects, LYCs conduct, in addition to ordinary formal procedures, internal committee reunions and engagement with the local youth community, and also discuss in detail issues affecting young people in their administrative context or international issues.

We have organised ourselves into thematic groups, but we don't have the rigidity of what a council committee or other working bodies might have, making us more flexible and interchangeable. (Member of the Sardinia LYC)

Unfortunately, most LYCs are not equipped with direct, clear and predetermined funding. Lazio is the only region providing annual contributions to individual municipal youth councils, allowing them to organise activities and projects and thereby offering concrete support for youth participation at the local level.

Opportunities

Investing in young people's meaningful civic participation through LYCs has at least a double benefit: serving as platforms for early political socialisation and for youth to scrutinise and influence local governance.

Overcoming the impact of social reproduction on youth political engagement

The growing disengagement from formal politics described above is reinforced by deeper social dynamics. Family background, societal status and education play a significant role in determining political behaviour (Bourdieu 1984).

Usually, negative attitudes of youth cohorts concerning politics are part of an innate political life cycle. However, because voter turnout does not tend to increase over the life course (Itanes 2023), other elements better predict the level of political participation: political socialisation and early investment in social capital outside the family context (Sears and Valentino 1997; McFarland and Thomas 2006), past voting behaviours (Plutzer 2002) and the availability of entry points for political engagement (Quintelier 2007).

Consequently, addressing the effects of this social reproduction requires targeted interventions during adolescence and early adulthood. Early social learning and engagement can encourage young people to become more involved in formal politics, helping them break free from the patterns of political behaviour passed down from parents or their backgrounds (Putnam 2000). In this context, LYCs can serve as effective platforms to leverage many of these predictors.

Increasing political socialisation and social capital

By promoting peer and intergenerational interactions, LYCs encourage co-operative behaviours and enhance young people's connectedness to their communities and political institutions. Based on the affective theory of social exchange (Lawler 2001), LYCs can develop a social network of mutual trust, social norms, reciprocity and greater youth integration within communities (Putnam 2000), leading young people to develop a sense of internal self-efficacy and social trust as triggers for more significant social capital (Smith 1999).

With the LYC dialogues have arisen even outside the LYC that would not have arisen spontaneously ... between realities that before did not even know each other and instead actually organised activities together. (President of the Terni Youth Council)

Individual young people participating in LYCs focus on thinking about governance in terms of effectiveness and results, developing a variety of soft, social and emotional skills (like public speaking, teamwork or problem-solving) that can equip them with employability benefits and connect them with educational and occupational opportunities (Levine 2015).

The LYC is a great testing ground for young people; they have become familiar with many processes. I believe that they grow politically, as well as personally and professionally, for what they will do in the future, even through these steps. (Mayor of Sestri Levante)

By empowering young participants to lead projects and initiatives, LYCs foster a culture of active citizenship, encouraging young people to become future community leaders and increasing volunteerism among young people, including those outside LYCs (Shephard and Patrikios 2013). Volunteerism during the transition to adulthood has a significant positive effect on future political activities. In fact, engaging in volunteer activities fosters productive forms of social capital, including reciprocity and social trust (McFarland and Thomas 2006).

We are realising today that we have fostered the creation of other associations in the area and the engagement of youth who were not interested in politics. For example, thanks to our activities, other young people created the "Proloco Giovani" of Isernia or we have contributed to the creation of the first youth centre in Isernia. (President of the Isernia Youth Forum)

Counterbalancing past behaviours

LYCs have the ability to counterbalance past behaviours, increase political literacy among youth and engage young people early (Bárta, Boldt and Lavizzari 2021), increasing their future commitment, thus helping to safeguard a democracy that is currently at risk (Council of Europe 2023).

Campbell's (Campbell, Gurin and Miller 1954) theory of internal political efficacy suggests individuals are more likely to participate in politics when they feel competent and capable of influencing political outcomes. Nevertheless, Levine (2015) considers that starting to vote in adulthood can have a higher cost, as it requires time to become familiar with political structures, parties and the voting process. LYCs avoid these by imparting political literacy during adolescence and early adulthood, which is an ideal environment for situated learning where young people develop a deeper understanding of political processes and gain confidence in their ability to participate.

Young people have studied, shown interest, delved deeper and built the mechanism; they have interacted with the municipal secretary ... they have become familiar with many political processes. (Mayor of Sestri Levante)

Moreover, drawing on the concept of voting as a habit (Franklin et al. 2004), when elections are the basis of LYCs, this offers experience to build and practise voting know-how and learn the habit of voting, leaving a turnout footprint for future behaviours. Furthermore, entering the electoral rally for LYCs can give young people the experience of political competition at a lower level and increase voter turnout in adulthood (Campbell, Gurin and Miller 1954).

Regarding this last point, LYCs offer a crucial alternative pathway into the political system, serving as platforms to recruit and empower youth in political life (Levine 2015). By providing a new entry point into the political system, LYCs have the potential to reverse the trend of declining youth representation in formal political institutions and encourage greater political engagement.

Thanks to this experience, many more opportunities open up, leading to a different kind of political engagement: the older ones are running for city council or neighbourhood councils, and students are pursuing the path of the Student Council, which they hadn't even considered before. (Councillor for youth policies from the municipality of Pesaro)

Impact on community

Nowadays, when communities and societies are more complex than ever and social cohesion seems to be faltering, genuinely engaging young people does not just mean making symbolic gestures. It means enhancing the effectiveness of decision-making processes and rebuilding trust in public institutions, providing concrete responses to pressing issues of our time.

Protecting intergenerational solidarity and addressing social justice

Despite accounting for a quarter of the European population, individuals under 35 remain one of the most under-represented demographics in decision-making processes. Not surprisingly, levels of inequality in our society are increasingly dependent on individuals' various ages: according to the World Health Organization, ageism is the third leading cause of discrimination globally. For instance, current Italian millennials are 17% poorer than their parents (Rahman and Tomlinson 2018).

Establishing and empowering genuine LYCs within local decision-making processes would uphold principles of intergenerational solidarity and strengthen social cohesion, in line with Council of the European Union's conclusions on promoting youth mainstreaming in policy decision-making processes in the European Union (Council of the European Union 2023). Increasing the number of voices heard in democratic life is essential because the more actively engaged people are, the stronger the mandate and legitimacy of the democratic system become.

I remember the first meeting with the young people; trust was missing – they saw the youth council as just another empty promise. However, through our work, disillusionment with institutions is fading, and today the young people are taking a proactive approach, engaging with all departments on various local issues, not just youth policies. They are actively rebuilding trust and synergy with the institutions, as we had hoped. (Councillor from the municipality of Pesaro)

Enhancing informed decision making and policy effectiveness

In addition to added value for the overall health of democracy, policy makers and civil servants who interact with LYCs gain new insights into decisions that need to be made. It is impossible to assume that an adult-oriented approach to designing and implementing a youth agenda serves youth effectively by default. Not surprisingly, low representation of youth in Italian formal politics has led to the design and implementation of policies that are not sufficiently responsive or effective for addressing the needs of the younger generation (Tuorto 2018).

Because in the end, only we young people truly know our problems, our interests and weaknesses, and what we want to be done. We know what our real needs are and, as a result, how to solve them, of course with the help of adults. This is why it's a benefit to have young people getting involved, that's for sure. (President of the Cosenza LYC)

Consequently, youth should be considered a “sensitive environmental parameter” (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001) in policy making, especially since they are the generation that will face the long-term consequences of today's decisions. Through engaging youth directly, it is possible to determine “what public services and policies are effective and where they fall short”, as noted by a councillor responsible for youth policy in Cagliari. To this extent, LYCs “make a huge difference” and make democratic participation “much more effective” as LYCs “help guide the administration more comprehensively, taking into greater account what young people, students and youth truly care about, much more than before”, as emphasised by the Mayor of Sestri Levante.

Thinking about children and young people, who are often the least heard, as a “sensitive environment parameter” will lead to more equitable public policies and stronger intergenerational justice, as youth would represent the needs of all, “the city considered as a large ecosystem, which today is seriously ill” (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001).

In this regard, many LYCs expand their focus beyond traditional “youth policies”, advocating and implementing cross-cutting policies addressing issues that affect

everyone. For example, in the Sardinia Region, LYCs developed an awareness project on plastic and waste recycling, having “an impact not only on youth welfare but also on the welfare of the entire city of Cabras, which is quite a large town, and which [thanks to the project] has objectively become cleaner”, according to the President of the Sardinia Youth Council. This example, along with those mentioned in the previous paragraphs, highlights the far-reaching impact LYCs can have, and there are countless more stories like these.

At the same time, by giving young people a structured environment to voice their opinions and engage in local governance, youth councils also positively affect the community, as youth-driven initiatives can induce more informed, inclusive and innovative policy outcomes. An excellent example of this can be seen in the municipality of Labico. Driven by the momentum created by the youth council, the town took the initiative to participate in the “LazioAggrega” grant programme offered by the Lazio region, culminating in the opening of Labico’s first youth centre.

Furthermore, active participation enhances a sense of ownership of policies and initiatives, which is a critical factor in ensuring their legitimisation and long-term effectiveness (OECD 2017).

Enabling youth mainstreaming

Finally, LYCs can address the concerns of informal youth movements that placing youth issues in the hands of politics might suppress young people’s radicalism. In fact, “young people feel uncomfortable raising their voices within institutions because there’s this sense of ‘they won’t listen to me anyway’”, as the President of Bolzano Province LYC stated. As previously analysed, in recent years, young people have increasingly turned to informal forms of participation (OECD 2020), which allow for greater expression of individual values and focus on specific or place-based issues.

Instead, LYCs enable young people to engage directly with matters affecting them, free from the limitations often imposed by formal political structures. These councils give young people the power of scrutiny, transforming traditional power structures and enabling youth to participate in development planning across various sectors by exercising their influence and voices. Moreover, municipal youth councils, perhaps even more than regional ones, have the potential to meet this need by providing space for young people to develop and implement local initiatives. Empowering municipal youth councils to support such localised activities can bridge the gap between formal governance structures and the informal movements resonating with younger generations.

This shift in power structure allows young people not only put forward their perspective but also to monitor and intervene to ensure the effective inclusion of their proposals in the decision-making process as youth mainstreaming takes shape. So finally, LYCs open up institutions to scrutiny, enabling and safeguarding youth mainstreaming.

Barriers to youth councils

Youth councils hold the potential to impact both the participants involved and the wider community. However, the extent of their influence depends on the support provided by local governmental bodies, equitable access to LYCs, the ability to avoid elitism and tokenism, and investment in the skills of young participants, so that they can exercise real and informed influence on decision-making processes.

Allowing for tokenistic behaviour

LYCs exist within the tension between adult control and youth autonomy, and they always have to strive to find the right balance (Holtom, Watkins and Williamson 2015). While adult guidance is necessary to ensure youth councils operate within legal and institutional frameworks, excessive oversight can co-opt youth agendas, stifling innovation and limiting councils' ability to address truly relevant issues to younger generations.

A tokenistic dynamic creates a barrier to councils' effectiveness, as young participants may feel disillusioned or disengaged if they perceive their input is not taken seriously or they are not trusted to lead. In fact, young people engaging with LYCs are expecting these councils to provide space for their individual identities, aligning with the motivations that often draw them towards unconventional forms of political engagement (such as FFF). Tokenism risks deepening youth disenfranchisement and further eroding the already fragile trust between young people and formal political institutions.

These risk turning LYCs into a "window dressing operation, even if they appeared with only good intentions", as noted by the President of Isernia's LYC. One factor that gives rise to tokenism is often the gap in experience and administrative skills between LYC members and local government officials. When youth are not equipped with the skills to critically engage with complex administrative or legal constraints, their contribution risks being disregarded.

With regard to community impacts, studies like Collins, Augsberger and Gecker (2016) demonstrate that youth-led models for LYCs, where young people take on leadership roles and have significant influence over decisions, are more successful not only in strengthening trust with institutions but also in creating meaningful impacts on public policies and communities.

When LYCs are more autonomous, "youth are capable of making an impact, bringing back free proposals with respect to what the adults' expectations are", as reported by the councillor responsible for youth policy in the municipality of Pesaro.

Sustaining long-term engagement

Youth councils often struggle to keep young people engaged over the long term, particularly if participants feel their contributions are not making a difference or

if the council's activities do not align with their interests anymore, as noted by the councillor responsible for youth policy in the municipality of Labico.

Initially there was tremendous participation. But now we find ourselves in a moment of great fragility because the young people who started with the forum, who created it with me, have graduated, started finding jobs, found homes – life happens, you know.

On the other hand, a slow generational turnover, due to terms lasting up to five years and participation open to individuals up to 35 years old, can severely limit the introduction of new perspectives, reduce opportunities for younger members and impede their access to leadership roles, as the councillor responsible for youth policy in Labico suggests: “The main challenge for the forum is generational change: the world is changing rapidly and continuous adaptation is needed to represent the new generations”. This lack of renewal prevents LYCs from effectively addressing the evolving needs and concerns of younger generations.

Reinforcing social inequality

Given that LYCs are a voluntary commitment, young people first and foremost need skills, knowledge and resources to access them (McFarland and Thomas 2006). Expanding on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, individuals from higher social classes find it easier to access the education and resources required to engage in LYCs and, consequently, to assert dominance within these environments.

Regional youth councils, which are different from LYCs because they are primarily composed of representatives from youth organisations, risk representing only the “elite” of already “active” youth. Competition-driven selection through elections, more typical for LYCs and primarily used by cities, can also favour individuals from more populous neighbourhoods or those with greater social capital who can rely on broader networks and more resources, even if unintentionally.

As a result, LYCs may lack the voices of youth with fewer social resources or less engagement in democratic life, which leads to imbalances in a limited diversity of perspectives within the councils and the reproduction of the very representational gap they were created to bridge. The failure to effectively engage with socially excluded groups may result in LYCs reinforcing existing inequalities (Wyness 2009). Without specific interventions by public authorities, LYCs risk reinforcing this elitist structure, reducing their potential to serve as inclusive and representative platforms for youth participation.

Limiting the scope of LYCs

A significant obstacle to the effectiveness of LYCs is related to their level of politicisation, which increases when they are integrated into larger, more formal political structures, such as regional governing bodies. While LYCs offer a space for youth involvement in smaller towns, where political interference is lower, their independence diminishes as they become part of established political structures.

In these contexts, LYCs often become tools for electoral campaigns or politically motivated initiatives, narrowing the scope of broader political discourse.

As a result, excessive influence from political actors diminishes the autonomy of young people, leaving key decisions to adults and creating room for tokenism. This limited scope stands in direct contrast to the principles of youth mainstreaming, advocating the genuine integration of a youth perspective into all stages of policy making.

Recommendations

By overcoming barriers and leveraging opportunities, LYCs can become more inclusive, effective and responsive mechanisms for youth participation, ensuring that young people are active contributors to developing and implementing public policies across various sectors. This chapter proposes a framework for overcoming the risk of perpetuating youth disenfranchisement through the incorrect implementation of LYCs, thereby promoting more effective and genuine youth mainstreaming, policy effectiveness and social cohesion.

Defining national standards: ensuring mandatory consultation, larger scope, funding and training

The national government should establish standard guidelines for LYCs across all regions and municipalities, while allowing flexibility for local adaptation; for instance, in areas with minority linguistic communities, LYC functioning rules might ensure active representation of minority interests and perspectives.

First, LYCs should have the formal right not only to propose projects and policies directly to the executive body but also to be officially consulted to provide advisory opinions on any public youth policy enacted by the local administration. This ensures municipalities cannot restrict LYCs' participation in potentially contentious issues, safeguarding their role in influencing various policies.

Second, LYCs must expand their scope beyond traditional youth policies, "becoming a body that is part of the very core of the administration, rather than a detached entity, supporting the administration on city-wide issues" (Mayor of Sestri Levante) and contributing to the creation of more inclusive and responsive public policies.

Third, to protect young people from the risks of tokenism and manipulation increasing the autonomy and effectiveness of LYCs, regions should allocate funds specifically for LYCs, following the example of the Lazio region, which incentivises municipalities based on the level of effective integration of LYCs into their decision-making processes. To the same extent, regions should equip young people with administrative, technical and governance-related skills, following the example set by the autonomous province of Trento.

Fourth, LYC members should follow the age guidelines set forth by the European Commission and the Council of Europe; the definition of youth can extend

from age 13 to 30. This range allows for alignment with other European youth initiatives, facilitating co-ordination with broader European youth policies.

Increasing co-ordination among LYCs

To reinforce the policy capacity of LYCs, regions must ensure co-ordination between LYCs within the same territory. Every region should create a regional youth council, composed of representatives of each local youth council, following the example of the Campania Region. This would enable LYCs to collaborate on broader issues beyond the local level and where individual youth councils would have limited impact (such as public transport or climate mitigation).

Addressing elitism and enhancing representativeness

Municipalities should prioritise an election system over the nomination process when selecting members for LYCs. This would allow a broader cross-section of young people to get engaged. Election-based approaches also reduce the risk of elitism that can emerge with nominations, where selected individuals might be drawn from limited social circles or predefined networks.

However, even in the case of elections, an effort is required to ensure genuine representation by territory, age and background. For instance, in Naples, quotas prevent over-representation in larger neighbourhoods. In Sestri Levante and the second municipality of Rome, elections are open to non-residents and non-citizens who live or work in the municipality (for example, off-site students and young people without citizenship), to reduce marginalisation; finally, to engage harder-to-reach groups (like those defined as NEET), extensive and comprehensive communication campaigns are implemented, targeting key touchpoints frequented by young people.

Communication and engagement strategies

For LYCs to function effectively, it is important to establish a close relationship between them and political bodies. An example of this practice can be seen in Naples, where the deputy mayor maintains a WhatsApp group with LYC members. At the same time, it is strategic to foster a dialogue between LYCs and the youth community in order to reduce elitism and increase responsiveness. For instance, local administrations should dedicate sections of their websites and social media channels to the opportunities and activities of LYCs, who should also implement a communication strategy (using social media or newsletters, for instance).

Shortening term length and ensuring its independence from the mayoral office

A three-year term for LYC members can be considered an optimal length, considering the usual five-year term of the municipal legislature. Since young people age quickly out of the category defined as “youth”, a shorter term permits more individuals to participate over time while still enabling the council to

complete long-term projects and initiatives. This staggered arrangement allows for a healthy turnover of youth representatives while also providing continuity.

At the same time, the stability of the LYC should not be directly tied to the mayor's tenure. If a mayor leaves office, the LYC must continue to operate independently. Youth councils serve the broader youth community and must maintain continuity regardless of political shifts in executive leadership. This will guarantee that young people's voices are consistently represented throughout the entire LYC cycle, reducing the risk of politicisation and allowing the council to maintain a focus on youth engagement and administration rather than on electoral politics.

Conclusion

Youth mainstreaming is about integrating youth perspectives along every step of the policy life cycle, from designing to monitoring, across all areas that influence and affect young people's lives (Council of the European Union 2023). The findings suggest how LYCs could be tremendous tools to integrate youth perspectives into local decision making, as they provide an institutional and fair space for young people to engage directly with governance. Consequently, LYCs can empower the younger generation to have a say in decisions impacting their lives and local government to include youth perspectives in public policies, reinforcing the principles of youth mainstreaming.

However, the extent of their strength depends on their genuineness. First of all, local institutions must cede power and leave room for youth autonomy, while still supporting LYCs with appropriate but limited guidance. Moreover, training and capacity-building activities enable participants to develop and present their viewpoints not just on youth-specific matters but also across the broader spectrum of public policy, thus pursuing youth mainstreaming and gaining greater capacity to avoid potential tokenistic attitudes.

Next to fighting tokenism, it is crucial to guarantee authentic representativeness within LYCs. To this extent, direct election processes for the composition of youth councils should be preferred over nomination processes, thus increasing, with some of the precautions described in the research, the possibility of including a broader cross-section of young people.

Moreover, the strength of LYCs can be enhanced by overcoming the legislative disparity currently present across various Italian regions. It is therefore necessary to promote an Italian national framework standardising the role of LYCs and introducing mechanisms to safeguard their role, such as making it mandatory to consult LYCs at least on matters directly impacting their lives.

Finally, for LYCs to achieve their potential to promote youth mainstreaming, structural reforms are crucial to support their autonomy, representativeness and financial sustainability, and to enable them to maintain a balanced approach between regulatory focus and practical projects. By addressing these challenges, LYCs can serve as more than platforms for youth engagement – they can function as key mechanisms for integrating youth perspectives into the heart of governance.

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Chapter 13

Engaging the youth in political participation: a case study of the Lithuanian College of Democracy

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Contemporary challenges – such as declining democratic satisfaction among young people, increasing social exclusion, the impact of digitalisation and Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine – shape youth attitudes and encourage new forms of youth political activism. Low levels of youth civic engagement, such as an involvement in political parties or voting, are increasingly being observed (Kitanova 2020). At the same time, however, the growing need for young people to be heard by decision makers and to participate in these processes poses new challenges for society to which it is necessary to find solutions.

Political participation is an essential element of an active civil society and a democratic state: young people have a unique opportunity to contribute to political decision making and shape public policies that determine their future. Early youth engagement in civic activities and decision-making processes in public governance has also been extensively studied by scholars (Owen and Irion-Groth 2024; Patrick 2002; Kvieskienė et al. 2021b).

Efforts to involve young people in political participation processes are identified in European Union (EU) policy, which has been supplemented by significant documents in order to ensure youth mainstreaming (Council of the European Union 2023). The establishment of a new concept – youth mainstreaming – shows the European Union’s commitment and determination to promote not only youth civic activism but also a holistic approach to engaging young people in political participation and decision-making processes. In this chapter, youth mainstreaming is understood as integrating youth perspectives into all stages of policy making, including the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes that impact young people (European Commission 2024).

In this context, it is important to emphasise that vulnerable youth, including those described as NEET (not in education, employment or training), often face additional barriers that limit their opportunities to engage in political engagement and decision-making processes (Celiešienė and Bakšytė 2022; Kvieskienė and Celiešienė 2023; Kvieskienė et al. 2021a). Engagement in political participation by these groups often requires additional efforts, resources and appropriate facilitation measures to ensure their full participation.

This chapter aims to analyse the engagement of youth in political participation, using a case study of the Lithuanian College of Democracy (LCD).

The article addresses the following tasks:

- ▶ to analyse the methods and practices LCD uses to promote youth political participation;
- ▶ to assess the impact of these practices on youth empowerment and social inclusion;
- ▶ to identify how these practices can be adapted to strengthen youth participation in politics and public governance.

This chapter therefore aims to contribute to the discussion on youth political participation by examining the innovative practices implemented by LCD. Over the past three decades, this civic organisation has implemented various initiatives aimed at strengthening youth political empowerment and social inclusion. This chapter presents case studies of three projects implemented by LCD, which reveal practices to help overcome barriers to youth political participation and encourage their active involvement in public governance processes. A participatory action research methodology (Cornish et al. 2023) was implemented in all of these projects. Content analyses based on project reports, participant evaluations and other related documents (Celiešienė et al 2023; Celiešienė and Bakšytė 2022; Lithuanian College of Democracy 2021, 2024a and 2024b; Kvieskaitė 2011) are analysed to reveal what factors determine the success of youth political participation and what practices can be adapted in other contexts.

EU policies on engaging youth in political participation

The European Union has made youth mainstreaming a central pillar of its policies to ensure that young people's needs, priorities and perspectives are embedded across all policy areas. The European Youth Strategy 2019-2027 emphasises the importance of youth empowerment, social inclusion and active participation in democratic processes. By promoting cross-sectoral co-operation, the EU aims to create policies that reflect the diversity of young people and address their unique challenges.

The European Union has made youth mainstreaming a key policy priority, with the aim of ensuring that the needs and perspectives of young people are included in all stages of policy making and implementation. The goal

is for young people have real opportunities to participate in decision making on all policies that directly affect their lives. Youth mainstreaming involves integrating the youth perspective into policy development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It is important not only to include youth needs in policy, but also to create mechanisms that allow young people to actively participate in decision-making processes (European Commission 2024). These aspirations are reinforced in several strategic documents and initiatives (European Commission 2024; Council of the European Union 2023) of the European Union, each of which contributes to the implementation of the principles of the youth integration.

One of the main documents that consolidates the youth dimension is the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Council of the European Union 2018). The strategy outlines a comprehensive framework for youth empowerment, addressing issues such as education, employment and active citizenship. The strategy encourages EU institutions and member states to put in place mechanisms to ensure the participation of young people in policy making, emphasising that only by integrating the youth dimension as a priority across different policy areas can their needs and prospects be properly assessed. Key initiatives, such as the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+, provide young people with opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences that foster their personal and professional growth.

Youth participation is an essential condition for legitimising any political process and increasing its effectiveness, as well as for giving young people the opportunity to trust and believe in European institutions and strengthen their ties with Europe (Council of the European Union 2023).

An important step in implementing the youth dimension was the European Year of Youth in 2022, which highlighted the importance of youth participation and made it a key priority for the EU action in the field of the youth policy (European Union n.d.). This initiative addressed the demands of young people to integrate their perspectives into all the relevant EU policies. It is worth noting that in order to put its ambitions into practice, the European Commission has initiated an action plan to strengthen the participation and engagement of young people in decision making and broader civic engagement (European Commission n.d.).

While EU policies are placing more emphasis on youth mainstreaming, certain groups of youth, such as those referred to as NEET, require additional efforts to ensure their inclusion, particularly those facing vulnerabilities due to socio-economic hardships or geographic isolation, who may need extra support to overcome their exclusion from education, employment or training. Vulnerable NEET youth, particularly in rural areas, face unique challenges that require tailored, community-based approaches to improve their social inclusion and quality of life (Ferreira et al. 2024; Kvieskienė et al. 2021a; Kvieskienė et al. 2022). In order to achieve an equitable integration of all youth groups, inclusion in mainstream policies (such as education and employment strategies) could be enriched with specific measures targeting vulnerable groups. The inclusion of

problem-based methods, and the development of capacity for facilitators and partnerships with local organisations, are essential to provide tailored support for NEETs (Celiešienė and Bakšytė 2022).

Overall, EU strategic documents highlight the importance of youth empowerment, social inclusion and participation in democratic processes. Also, member states have implemented various policies and good practices, some of which are based on project activities. Meanwhile, certain excluded groups, such as NEET youth, require additional efforts and tailored measures to ensure their social inclusion. Being NEET adversely impacts the young person in particular and society as a whole. NEETs may experience social insecurity, future employment issues, health problems and lack of political and social engagement (Eurofound 2012). Thus, strengthening youth mainstreaming requires the implementation of targeted policies and programmes that directly address the challenges faced by vulnerable and excluded youth. By expanding the scope of youth mainstreaming to explicitly include vulnerable groups, the EU can ensure that its policies are inclusive and effective.

Case studies: initiatives of the Lithuanian College of Democracy

Empowering youth voice for positive change

The Lithuanian College of Democracy is a civic society organisation that functions as a scientific think tank, focused on implementing practical education and social projects and initiatives while creating evidence-based practices. Over the past 30 years, various youth participation projects and initiatives in civic activities have been implemented by the college, with the aim of promoting democratic values, social innovation and active citizenship among young people. Three selected cases are presented here. The cases were selected based on the following criteria: 1. the methodology of the activities was focused on public policy; 2. the participants (youth) were directly involved in political processes and decision making; 3. socially vulnerable groups, including NEETs, participated in the activities; 4. the solutions presented by youth were directly presented to politicians.

Youth empowerment: Project Citizen

Project Citizen, developed by the Civic Education Center (USA), is focused on public policy formation and solving problems relevant to communities.

The goal: To promote responsible participation in local and national government by helping students learn how to monitor and influence public policy.

Overview: Although Project Citizen itself was implemented in Lithuania from 2000 to 2010, this specific case, which was based on participatory action research and is part of a dissertation (Kvieskaitė 2011), was implemented between 2007 and 2010. During this period, three cycles of the programme were implemented: 55 students participated in 2007-2008, 44 students in 2008-2009 and 60 students in 2009-2010 (Kvieskaitė 2011). The activities were organised with the involvement

of second-year students from the Institute of Social Communication at Vilnius Pedagogical University, who acted as key sources of information and researchers.

During lectures on citizenship and non-governmental organisations, students were introduced to the Project Citizen methodology, which they later applied when working with a specific class in different Lithuanian schools. During the programme, students identified the most relevant civic-community problems for their class, substantiated them with data and surveys, searched for possible solutions and prepared action plans (Kvieskaitė 2011). At the end, the students presented their prepared solutions to politicians in the Seimas [Parliament] of the Republic of Lithuania.

Youth mainstreaming: Youth4Change

The goal: The Youth Voice: Empowering Positive Change (Youth4Change) project, implemented between 2022 and 2024 (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2024a), aimed to empower children and young people to participate in political processes, respond to their needs and develop an innovative tool for open dialogue with decision makers, and to strengthen inclusive democracy.

Overview: This project, implemented in collaboration with Europe's People's Forum (Denmark), focused on socially vulnerable youth, particularly in rural areas. The activities included civic education lectures, public decision-making missions, gender equality game-based discussions and a media seminar entitled "Fake Cake". At the heart of the project was the Project Citizen methodology, a participatory approach that empowers youth to solve civic-community problems, express their views and engage in local decision-making processes. This methodology helped participants collaborate in teams, develop proposals and present them to local authorities, such as the mayor and the Trakai district administration. Notably, the programme included professional political consultations, supporting youth to prepare presentations on their findings and ideas. In total, 25 schools from rural areas and 23 urban schools (involving young people aged 16 to 18) participated in the project. The results included a good practice guide, a study on youth empowerment in politics and policy recommendations, all partly funded by the Erasmus+ programme.

Youth political engagement: Game Changers

The goal: "Young students as political game changers developing an easy-to-use model for secondary schools to help engage young students in politics based on their own interests and their 21st-century culture", the Game Changers project, implemented between 2019 and 2021, aimed to promote political engagement and democratic activism among young people through open learning and innovative methodologies.

Overview: The project included a variety of activities, ranging from deconstructing traditional political discourse, in which students analysed and questioned concepts such as "democracy" or "civic participation", to political research in local communities and in the global virtual space. Students were encouraged to act as "political detectives", research political processes, communicate with

politicians and civic groups, and develop plans to address local and global problems (Lithuanian College of Democracy n.d.). These activities resulted in the development of guidelines for secondary schools on how to engage young people in politics, and the project output included scientific insights, video material and policy recommendations for European Union policy makers. The project activities were carried out by five classes from different countries, each consisting of between 16 and 27 children and young people, with ages ranging from 12 to 18 years old.

The project was implemented by eight partners from five European countries (Lithuania, Greece, Slovenia, Turkey and Spain), involving schools and teachers in international co-operation. The activities were partly funded by the Erasmus+ programme.

In general, all presented projects focus on youth engagement in political participation, with a clear emphasis on the public policy and decision-making processes. Special attention was given to empowering vulnerable groups for active citizenship and political participation.

Bridging policy and practice: lessons learned

Analyses of the Lithuanian College of Democracy's Project Citizen, Youth4Change and Game Changers projects' reports, publications and documentations (Celiešienė et al. 2023; Celiešienė and Bakšytė 2022; Lithuanian College of Democracy 2021, 2024a and 2024b; Kvieskaitė 2011) highlight how to promote youth political participation and bridge the gap between policy frameworks and practical implementation, with an emphasis on the inclusion of vulnerable youth in decision-making processes.

Impact and needs: adapting methodologies for youth civic engagement

One of the key lessons across all three projects was the importance of adapting methodologies to effectively engage a wide range of youth groups. The Project Citizen method is based on how practical, problem-based methods enable young people to identify and propose solutions to real-life community problems (Vontz et al. 2000 and 2002; Owen and Irion-Groth 2020 and 2024; Kvieskaitė 2011). By presenting their proposals to policy makers in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, students gained confidence in their ability to influence public decision making.

Youth4Change highlighted the effectiveness of combining civic education with media literacy and participatory modelling to engage young people in policy governance. The project's collaboration with policy makers, such as the Trakai municipality, demonstrated how local involvement can make decision-making processes more accessible to young people (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2024b). The discussions that were organised with the Trakai city administration revealed the potential of young people, through their initiatives, to influence local governance and the decision-making process within policies.

Game changers disclosed the power of gamification approaches to stimulate young people's interest in politics: the activity "Detectives around Europe" not only developed critical thinking skills but also allowed young people to creatively solve complex political problems (Lithuanian College of Democracy n.d.). Game Changers extended this connection with its activities to include an international dimension, providing young people with the opportunity to engage with peers and policy makers across Europe and featured a meeting with a member of the European Parliament.

Challenges and strategies for inclusive youth participation

Challenges in terms of ensuring equitable participation, especially among rural and socio-economically disadvantaged young people, affected all three projects. Project Citizen revealed that the differences in class can affect the group dynamics and participation. To overcome these barriers, additional activities were necessary and the inclusion of digital tools helped to facilitate the processes: in implementing the activities, social media platforms were used, e-mail groups were created and blogs were developed. This helped establish continuous communication among young people and encouraged their active participation (Kvieskaitė 2011). Youth4Change emphasised the need for long-term support structures to maintain young people's engagement after the project had ended. The policy paper (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2024c) revealed that in order to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable youth groups in decision making, it is necessary to develop additional mechanisms. The Youth4Change project noted that rural youth are less likely to participate in political activities due to limited resources and opportunities. In order to reduce this gap, the project adapted the intergenerational programme Atrask.eu (Atrask.eu 2022), which brought together vulnerable youth and seniors. Atrask.eu is an intergenerational initiative to learn about regional legends through tourist routes that was created by vulnerable youth and seniors. However, consistent resources and institutional support are necessary to support such initiatives (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2024c). Game Changers emphasised that, while games are an effective means of inclusion, their success depends on the readiness of educators to apply innovative teaching methods (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2021).

It is important to emphasise that all three projects presented strengthened the crucial role of creating direct interaction between young people and decision makers to build trust in democratic institutions.

Engaging decision makers and promoting youth impact

All projects emphasised the importance of engaging with decision makers. Through Project Citizen, young people experienced the decision-making process themselves as they presented their projects to members of parliament, thus gaining a deeper understanding of how policies are formed. It is noted that the competence of teachers and facilitators was the key factor in the success of the projects. Trained teachers helped students learn to work in teams and develop critical thinking, and with their help young people gained the self-confidence to solve real community problems (Kvieskaitė 2011).

The Youth4Change project involved the mayor of the Trakai district municipality in discussions with young people, providing feedback on local issues and encouraging youth involvement in decision making at the local level (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2024a). Meanwhile, Game Changers involved international partners, including members of the European Parliament, giving young people an opportunity to discuss political processes and decisions at an international level (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2021). The common theme of the projects was supporting youth impact through youth integration and the need to translate a short-term commitment into long-term systemic change. While the projects have been successful in developing civic competences, their broader impact on policy making remains unexplored. In Project Citizen, student suggestions, such as advocating a switch to e-textbooks to ease the burden of carrying physical textbooks daily, led to practical long-term changes (Kvieskaitė 2011). In this context, it is assumed that aligning project outcomes with local and national policy agendas could increase their sustainability and scalability (Lithuanian College of Democracy 2021 and 2024a; Kvieskaitė 2011).

Conclusions

The findings from the three case studies demonstrate that democratic renewal and fostering youth engagement require innovative educational practices and comprehensive policy reforms. Embedding youth mainstreaming into governance frameworks may create a supportive ecosystem that empowers young people and strengthens the foundations of inclusive and resilient democracies. The European Commission encourages the comprehensive incorporation of youth perspectives into all stages of policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Employing a youth mainstreaming approach across a range of policy areas affecting young people's lives would ensure that their voices are represented and their needs addressed in a systematic and effective manner (Council of the European Union 2021).

The meaningful engagement of young people in democratic life demands a co-ordinated approach that extends beyond a single programme or method. Non-formal education and learning techniques, including focus groups, case studies and hands-on civic projects, are essential for tapping into young people's latent interest in politics and aligning political activities with their values and experiences. The broad implementation of youth mainstreaming is essential to ensure that young people's rights, needs and participation are prioritised in the development of an inclusive and sustainable democratic society (Bacalso and Deželan 2023; Deželan 2024). The Lithuanian College of Democracy's initiatives illustrate how young people can practically engage in civic decision making.

This analysis has highlighted key factors influencing the success of initiatives aimed at fostering youth political participation and bridging the gap between policy and practice. Elements such as topicality and clarity of the presented project ideas for young people, the programme design and methodology, and engaging collaboration with key stakeholders may create a foundation for

empowering young people, enhancing their civic competences and fostering trust in democratic processes (Kvieskienė et al. 2021b; Riano and Irion-Groth 2021).

The programme design and methodology proved to be pivotal, as innovative approaches tailored to local contexts were particularly effective in engaging a range of youth groups. Practical, hands-on activities that align with real-life governance challenges allowed participants to develop critical thinking skills and the confidence to influence decisions. Teachers and facilitators, as mediators of these methodologies, contributed to equipping young people with the skills necessary for meaningful participation. Trained educators guided and empowered students, who were initially interested in civic participation but lacked the specific knowledge to navigate complex societal issues, while fostering collaborative problem solving and active engagement.

The collaboration with key stakeholders – from municipal authorities to policy makers at national and international levels – provided young people with valuable opportunities to connect with governance processes. These partnerships enhanced the credibility of the youth initiatives and bridged gaps between local efforts and broader policy frameworks.

The analysis also revealed significant challenges, particularly in terms of ensuring the equitable inclusion of vulnerable young people. Socio-economically disadvantaged groups and those in rural areas often face barriers to participation because of limited resources and structural inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires the development of additional mechanisms, such as targeted outreach programmes, sustained mentorship and long-term resource allocation. Moreover, embedding the youth perspectives into policy-making systems demands systemic changes that go beyond the project life cycles.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of these initiatives underscores the importance of well-designed programmes, skilled facilitators and stakeholder collaboration. To ensure sustainability and inclusivity, future efforts must be focused on addressing barriers to participation and creating mechanisms that empower all young people – particularly those from vulnerable groups – to actively engage in democratic processes. These lessons serve as a blueprint for designing inclusive, effective initiatives that foster long-term trust and participation in public policy governance at local, national and international levels.

Limitations

This case study is based on data gathered from ongoing projects, focusing on the impact observed during the implementation phase. However, a comprehensive assessment of long-term outcomes would require further research.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that the direct activities were conducted by teachers or pedagogy students, while the research groups involved scholars specialising in education. These resources may influence both the effectiveness of the project and the presented results.

Moreover, the evaluation of results relies exclusively on studies conducted during the project's implementation, as well as documents and reports prepared for ongoing activities.

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Chapter 14

Supporting young people with disabilities to develop their psychosocial skills, with a view to empowerment and health promotion: the Tabacap project⁴⁸

Éric Le Grand, Christine Ferron and Séverine Lafitte

In France, at the end of 2018, almost 170 000 children and teenagers with disabilities were being cared for and supported in specific structures. Of these, 25 400 were under the care of Child Welfare (Aide Sociale à l'Enfance – ASE), in addition to 6 600 young adults over the age of 20. More than 436 000 children under the age of 12 and 214 000 teenagers with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream secondary schools (for those aged 12 to 18) (Bergeron 2022). This population, whether affected by a physical or a mental disability, face many vulnerabilities that hinder their transition to adulthood, according to indicators commonly accepted as indicative of this transition, which is based on empowerment and identity building, such as access to independent housing, entry to the job market, social networks and forming stable relationships.

The overall state of health of this population is altered by these vulnerabilities, yet the health promotion and preventive initiatives aimed at them are still very much fragmented and poorly supported by health policies. Similarly, there is little reference in these policies to the social inequalities in health that can impact on the integration of these young people into society.

With this in mind, from 2018 to 2021, seven establishments catering for young people with disabilities were included by the Health Promotion Federation (Fédération Promotion Santé) and its regional branches in the Tabacap project in several French regions (Bourgogne Franche-Comté, Brittany, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Ile-de-France). The initial aim of the project was to develop psychosocial skills-building programmes for young people with disabilities, with a view to preventing the onset of smoking or limiting tobacco consumption. The decision to work on the basis of psychosocial skills development was

48. This project received financial support from the National Addiction Fund (Fonds de Lutte Contre les Addictions), managed by the National Health and Social Security Fund (Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie) in France.

based on the principle of increasing the self-determination and empowerment of young people with regard to the problem of smoking and facilitating their effective participation in the health programmes that concern them. In fact, the participation of young people, especially those with disabilities, remains very limited, particularly in the French context.

After reviewing the role of youth participation in the field of health and addressing the issue of disability in the transition to adulthood, we will present the Tabacap project. Thus, this chapter does not present a research study, but rather details a health promotion intervention and the lessons that can be learned from its evaluation. Several sources were used to collect the data contributing to the evaluation.

- ▶ Seven pilot report sheets were produced. Their purpose was to compile detailed activity reports on the pilot schemes that were carried out.
- ▶ Seven qualitative evaluation interviews were conducted with all stakeholders involved in the pilot settings. Based on both realistic assessment and capitalisation on experience, these interviews were carried out to highlight the context, mechanisms and effects of the pilot schemes.
- ▶ Nine comprehensive online questionnaires were collected from all project stakeholders: medico-social and health promotion professionals, and local and national partners.

Youth health promotion in France: current situation

On 14 October 2024, the Youth Council of the World Health Organization, Europe section, published the “Youth Declaration on Creating Healthy Societies. Building Well-being, Resilience, and Trust”. Drawn up by 26 young representatives from different European countries, this declaration calls for the participation of young people in the development of policies and programmes that concern them, particularly in health.

While this “health” declaration resonates with the European Commission’s 2001 “White paper on youth”, one of the major themes of which was “No democracy without participation” (European Commission 2001), it appears that, in France, there is still a long way to go to achieve this objective of youth participation. It can also be observed that public authorities do little to encourage young people’s involvement and experiential knowledge in the field of health (Amsellem-Mainguy and Le Grand 2014).

Indeed, public health policy hardly seems to support the legitimate and necessary requirement to take into account the needs and expectations of young people in the health field while, paradoxically, healthcare democracy has been enshrined in law since 2002. Several examples illustrate the lack of consideration given to young people’s participation in the development of healthcare and prevention policies tailored to their needs and expectations. In February 2013, the Interministerial Youth Committee set up by the French Government set

out two general objectives to part 12 of the Youth Priority action plan: first, to “strengthen the representation of young people in the public arena”; second, to “encourage and support dialogue with young people in order to consider them as creators and users of solutions on the subjects that concern them” (CIJ 2013). This dynamic was first anchored – through different forms – in the strengthening of the dialogue between all the ministries concerned with youth issues and youth organisations, or directly with young people. An analysis of these dynamics (Richez 2014) showed that, while all the ministries had organised meetings in various forms, the Ministry of Health was the only one that did not engage in this dialogue, with the idea that it was neither relevant nor necessary.

In parallel with this national situation, local initiatives that can strengthen young people’s participation in the field of health remain relatively absent in political discourse and in professionals’ practices. For example, the recent evaluation of the Future-Oriented Investment Youth Programme aimed at developing integrated youth policies, carried out between 2015 and 2019, shows that young people’s health remains a non-explored area within this programme (ANRU 2024). These two examples show that the participation of young people in the development of health policies remains unaccounted for, reflecting the way young people’s health is considered.

In the first example, the ministerial viewpoint, relayed by regional health agencies, refers to a definition of an at-risk young person, who must be protected – sometimes against their will. The need to prevent risky behaviour (in relation to, for example, sexuality, addictions or mental health) in adolescents and young people is then mentioned. However, this statement omits the role of experimental behaviour as a necessary foundation for building a young person’s identity or the imperative of acting on the social determinants of health that reveal and amplify the social inequalities leading to these risky behaviours. In the case of the Future-Oriented Investment Youth Programme, one of the reasons for the failure to take health issues into account is linked both to the practices of youth professionals and to the segmentation of public youth policies, which relegate health to a curative dimension that is primarily the responsibility of medical doctors (Isaac-Sibille and Bareigts 2018; Martinot and Nyadanu 2022).

This dominant model of a definition of health that is curative and based on the individual responsibility of young people for their health, whether good or bad, obscures several points. The first crucial element is the importance of health determinants that are external to young people and have an impact on their social integration trajectory towards adulthood. For example, being a young person in a rural environment, with no means of mobility, can lead to a limited access to healthcare services as well as to quality training, education and employment. From a public policy point of view, the recent reduction in housing subsidies and, at the same time, the rising cost of living will lead to a precarious situation for young students. This situation has consequences for their health, particularly as regards the lack of access to healthcare and the development of addiction and mental health problems (Bugeja-Bloch and Frouillou 2024). For the most disadvantaged young people with few qualifications attending the “local missions” (structures offering comprehensive support in the field of

social and professional integration), their poor living conditions (for example, difficulty in finding accommodation or being mobile, lack of social recognition, absence of family support, financial precariousness and stigmatisation by public authorities as being unsuccessful (Le Grand 2018; Kamara 2021)) are leading to the development of a number of health issues such as loss of self-esteem, increased addiction, isolation and psychological fragility. There are numerous examples of determinants outside the young person's control that influence their state of health and that do not depend solely on the young person's willingness or unwillingness to preserve it. These determinants have been well documented by young people themselves, notably by the European Youth Forum (Quinn and Maraffa, 2023).

Analysing the Covid-19 health crisis, Amsellem-Mainguy and Lardeux (2022) show, on the basis of various studies, that "young people are the 'collateral' victims of the health crisis". Indeed, while its impact on young people's mental health has been well documented to date, it appears to be differentiated according to the category of young people concerned. The Covid crisis had a greater impact on young people from working-class backgrounds (especially as far as mental health is concerned) than on those from higher social classes. In addition, according to these authors, this crisis and its consequences (as successive lockdowns took their toll) had a huge impact on the transition to adulthood, because of the absence of sociability, delayed departure from the parental home, job insecurity through the elimination of "small jobs" and greater school selection. These consequences accentuated inequalities in education, gender, ethnicity, geography and social, economic and cultural status. Thus, while the general precariousness of youth is to be noted, systemic inequalities are being reinforced, increasing the difficulties of transition and the trajectories of young people towards adulthood. The positive or negative state of health of the young population, depending on their social and economic position, is above all a reflection of existing inequalities within French society.

As the World Health Organization (WHO) report on social determinants emphasised in December 2008, social inequalities in health are the results of social injustice that kills on a massive scale. Their existence and persistence raise the question not only of social justice but also, for young people, of the positioning of public policies to help or hinder their transition to adulthood. Indeed, as the same report points out, inequalities in health are not due to chance, they are the result of systematic social injustice. Thus, the health of young people needs to be analysed – not in terms of their individual responsibility alone, but also in the light of existing social relations between young people and public authorities, as well as the economic and social situations of young people, which lead to social advantages or disadvantages as they move towards adulthood.

Despite awareness of the existence of these social inequalities in health, health policies still promote health programmes based on individuals, making each young person responsible for their own health and not giving them the opportunity to express their views or to influence the policies that concern them. Similarly, health policies do not consider young people's trajectories. Using Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes, health policy for young people

is more in line with “hard policies” based on individual responsibility, negation of social determinants and sometimes the stigmatisation of young people’s health behaviours. In this way, health may act as either a benefit or a barrier in the transition to adulthood.

While this situation applies to the entire youth population, certain segments of the population, such as young people with disabilities, are even less involved in projects than others. And even if legislative advances have been made, they are particularly poorly integrated into the processes of transitions to adulthood. As Bodin and Douat (2015) point out, access to adult status for young people with disabilities is a socially situated difficulty, reflecting social inequalities: “Talking about youth with disabilities is not talking about a group distinguished from ordinary youth by its health problems alone. We are talking about a group of young people who, for the most part, belong to the least privileged strata of the social world”, and may be despised because of their low level of education and lack of qualifications.

Ebersold and Cordazzo’s (2015) work on young people with mental disabilities shows the extent to which society’s view of disability and the difficulties in coordinating professionals to support these young people lead to delayed entry into adulthood. Similarly, studies carried out in local missions on the issue of disability (Le Grand Moisselin-Delangle 2018) show that “young people may refuse to talk about their health problems and/or obtain the Recognition of the Quality of Handicapped Worker (RQTH)”, fearing that this recognition will slow them down in their social and professional integration and that they will not be considered as “a young person like the others, wishing to have his or her own home, a steady relationship, a job”.

The dominant political vision of young people and their health has led to the development of prevention programmes that do not consider either the young person’s overall situation or their “opinion”. However, another dynamic is developing in France based on health promotion that integrates the young person as a resource for their own health and not as a problem to be solved. This initiative, which aims at reducing social inequalities, is rooted in an empowerment process.

The conceptual framework of health promotion

Health promotion is a set of specialised public health practices aimed at empowering individuals and groups to influence their living conditions and health, using intervention strategies such as health education, community organisation, environmental action, political advocacy and reorientation of the healthcare sector (Ferron 2021). This definition is based on the five priority areas for action set out in the Ottawa Charter (WHO 1986). Health education occupies a pivotal position within this document because it gives the charter both coherence and feasibility. Through health education, people acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to become involved in the other four areas of the charter: challenging politicians on their responsibility for public

health; improving their living and working environments; expressing themselves in public debates on health and its determinants; and moving the healthcare system towards greater democracy and participation. The definition of health education that corresponds to this view is that of Deschamps (1984), in which the major challenge of health education is:

to give every citizen the ability to take part in the debate about their health and quality of life and the factors that determine it, about the measures taken to ensure their health and well-being, about local or institutional health policies ... [and] to enable them to play a part in health democracy.

Its main objective “is not to talk to the public about their health, but to give them the ability to talk about their health and the factors that constrain or promote it, the choices to be made, the decisions to be taken, autonomy and social justice”. It is an ethical project that recognises the expertise of the population in health matters and wishes to draw on this expertise to help all partners in health education to move forward, with a collective view on promoting health across the whole population and in all settings.

The main aim of health promotion as a whole is to empower people, that is, to develop their ability to acquire power socially, politically, economically and psychologically by several means: 1. access to information, knowledge and skills; 2. involvement in decision-making processes; 3. the ability to formulate demands on institutions and decision-making structures; 4. self-efficacy, community participation and perceived control (Zimmerman 2002). This individual empowerment must be accompanied by two other levels of empowerment, community and organisational. Community empowerment is defined as “a process of social action by which individuals, communities and organisations gain control over their lives by changing their social and political environment in order to increase equity and improve their quality of life” (Wallerstein 1992).

Regarding organisational empowerment, a systematic review (Laverack and Pratley 2018) provided further information on the relationship between empowerment, public policy and governments/decision makers, emphasising the importance of the organisation and functioning of governments in empowering people. It explains that

countries with better governance, accountable public institutions that are responsive to a broad constituency, strong civil societies and fair legal frameworks are generally more effective in implementing reforms that target disadvantaged populations and empower citizens.

As Wallerstein and Wiggins (2018) state:

the vast majority of youth empowerment interventions aim to modulate behaviour by increasing protective factors and reducing risk factors. While these interventions are neither harmless nor useless, it is necessary to give priority to those which are explicitly designed to strengthen young people’s collective power to act by involving them in advocacy for the transformation of neighbourhoods and schools so that they become health promoting environments.

Among the strategies for empowering young people in terms of health, the reinforcement of psychosocial skills is playing an increasingly important role. The

recognition of the relevance of this approach is due to the many studies that have demonstrated its convincing nature, particularly with children and adolescents.

The development of psychosocial skills: an avenue for modern health education

According to the first definition given by WHO in 1997, psychosocial skills are “each person’s ability to cope with the challenges and demands of everyday life, and to engage in behaviours that are both positive and appropriate in their interactions with others”. These skills play a fundamental role in health promotion, particularly “when the problems encountered by individuals are linked to behaviours that are themselves the results of difficulties in managing the stresses and strains inherent in life in society” (WHO 1997).

This key definition of psychosocial skills immediately establishes them as crucial assets for universal prevention, as part of prevention interventions targeting the entire population, whatever their state of health or exposure to risk or protective factors. The development of psychosocial skills is potentially part of all five health promotion intervention strategies, as it strengthens people’s ability to act in a way that is more favourable to their health, to participate in collective projects to promote health, to transform their material and social environments, to express themselves in public debates on political decisions affecting their health, and to contribute to ensuring that health services respond better to the needs of the people they care for.

Today’s accepted definition of psychosocial skills describes them as:

a coherent and interrelated set of psychological capacities (cognitive, emotional and social), involving knowledge, intrapsychic processes and specific behaviours, which make it possible to increase autonomy and power (empowerment), to maintain a state of psychological well-being, to promote optimal individual functioning and to develop constructive interactions. (Santé publique France 2022).

In all, Santé publique France (the National Public Health Agency) identifies nine general skills that are:

essential to the psychosocial development of children and young people, whatever their culture: three cognitive skills (self-awareness, the ability to control oneself and the ability to take constructive decisions); three emotional skills (being aware of one’s emotions and stress, regulating one’s emotions and managing stress) and three social skills (communicating constructively, developing constructive relationships and resolving difficulties).

Not only is health promotion still underdeveloped in settings for people with disabilities, but the most widely recognised educational approach to health – the development of psychosocial skills – is rarely applied to young people with disabilities. Young people with disabilities are still involved in top-down, injunctive and not very participative educational approaches, which are notoriously ineffective. This represents a major source of inequity and a major loss of opportunity for these young people.

The role of psychosocial skills in promoting the health and empowerment of young people with disabilities

It was within this conceptual and methodological framework that the Health Promotion Federation, a national French NGO, set up the Tabacap project “Preventing smoking among people with disabilities by developing their psychosocial skills” between 2018 and 2021, supported by the National Addiction Fund run by the National Health and Social Security Agency.

The project was based on the observation that health promotion is underdeveloped in the medico-social sector for young people with disabilities, even though this sector can act on several determinants that promote the health and well-being of the young people it supports, as well as that of its professionals. Medico-social settings are particularly ill-equipped when it comes to increasing the participation of the people they care for. The professionals who work there have neither the time nor the skills needed to add a participatory dimension to the care of young people. The whole point of the health promotion approach, which can be applied to any living environment, is to equip and support these professionals to change their practices, not by adding to their workload but by changing the way they care for young people. These transformations will have two consequences: they will change the way professionals look at young people; and they will create conditions for young people to exercise their power to act in medical and social settings. According to the professionals who take care of these young people, disability-related issues hinder any idea of participation (in terms of the empowerment process), even though participation is also enshrined in disability legislation. Similarly, professionals can feel powerless to tackle the issue of participation. It is therefore necessary to create a framework conducive to this participation, while adapting to the characteristics of the public.

Description of the Tabacap project

This project was implemented in seven establishments in several regions of France. It involved some 50 professionals (including social workers, educators, health professionals and health service managers) with – depending on the size of the establishments involved – the participation of between 50 and 100 young people per establishment.

Objectives

The general aims of the Tabacap project were to equip and support professionals in medico-social establishments and services to prevent the use of tobacco (extended to other psychoactive substances), with a view to setting up psychosocial skills development programmes for young people with disabilities. The project also had several specific objectives:

- ▶ to identify approaches, methods and tools for developing psychosocial skills to help prevent the use of tobacco or other psychoactive substances, which are adapted or could be adapted to people with disabilities in social

and medico-social facilities, by conducting an international literature search to identify successful or promising initiatives on the subject;

- ▶ to confirm or adapt the methods and tools identified to young people with disabilities;
- ▶ to experiment with approaches/tools for developing psychosocial skills within volunteer social and medico-social facilities, integrating them into an overall health promotion approach (action on the general organisation of establishments, action on their material and human environments, development of participative approaches, optimisation of the use of health services);
- ▶ to capitalise on the lessons learned from the pilot scheme – to identify the conditions favourable to their implementation, the “key functions” playing a central role in their effectiveness and the effects obtained – and make them available at the national level.

Methods

To achieve these objectives, several steps were taken.

1. Identification of methods and tools

One main component was to identify successful or promising initiatives on the subject through an international literature search. Another was to identify existing methods and actions in social and medico-social facilities on the theme. At the same time, librarians from the Health Promotion Federation were asked to search bibliographical databases and databases of teaching tools. The work of the librarians consisted of selecting the data in the literature and the most relevant tools for the project.

2. Adaptation of methods and tools

The methods and tools identified were the subjects of in-depth discussions within the Health Promotion Federation in order to work on their production, adaptation or enhancement. This co-construction phase was also a time for selecting social and medico-social facilities to volunteer to take part in the pilot scheme.

Particular attention was paid to health literacy, in other words people's ability to: 1. identify, search for, find and understand health information; 2. assess the quality of this information and communicate it to others; and 3. use this information in such a way as to maintain or improve their health and that of those around them. The Health Promotion Federation has acquired solid expertise in this field, enabling this dimension to be taken into account in the production of tools.

3. Implementation of the pilot scheme in social and medico-social facilities

A test phase was set up with the volunteer social and medico-social facilities selected in several French regions. The federation's methodological support

skills were fully used to test the methods and tools, with the aim of modelling them and producing a joint product that would be made widely available, via the Psychosocial Skills Binder website.⁴⁹

4. Evaluation and pooling

The Health Promotion Federation supported and monitored the projects at the volunteer social and medico-social facilities; moreover, it supported the evaluation of the approach, observed the short-term effects and identified the obstacles and benefits to propose appropriate adjustments and to refine the methods and tools in order to take better account of the diversity of situations and disabilities.

A pooling day was organised as an opportunity to capitalise on and to promote the pilot scheme and above all to share related information during a time of appropriation conducive to exchanges. This national sharing and modelling approach encouraged the production of a catalogue of interventions. The aim was to extend these initiatives across France by making the results available to social and medico-social facilities. This generalisation was based on regional and local initiatives with the support of local funding bodies and operators.

Results

The pilot scheme encountered numerous difficulties during the project deployment period (2019-2021). Among them, four were the most striking, and means had to be created to overcome them.

1. The health context

The Covid-19 health crisis and the restrictive measures taken at national level represented a major constraint that suddenly slowed down or even completely halted the actions planned for 2020. The social and medico-social facilities experienced complex situations that had an impact on the way the structures operated, as well as on the professional teams and the young people they served. However, it was finally possible to restart the process in the establishments initially involved.

Maintaining links with the Health Promotion Federation and working on psychosocial skills has helped to re-mobilise management and teams, taking account of the context and people's life experiences and enabling all those involved to adapt. Paradoxically, the pilot scheme and the difficulties posed by the health crisis provided an opportunity to address sensitive issues, express emotions and deepen professional relationships in the wake of situations that were difficult to manage (such as the emergence of Covid contamination clusters).

2. Human resources

The lack of human resources and the turnover of professionals are recurring difficulties faced by social and medico-social facilities. Fluctuating human

49. See www.cartablecps.org/page-0-0-0.html.

resources and the presence of professionals who are sometimes less qualified, or without adequate qualifications or training, do not always make it possible to anchor a project in the long term and to work on a common culture.

The creation of a resource group, the involvement of management, and the provision and use of shared tools have helped to welcome new arrivals and to maintain the dynamic within the social and medico-social facilities. Identifying external partners and being able to draw on existing resources (such as tools, documentation and methodological support) are important factors that have helped to create and maintain a shared culture.

3. Complex situation management

Managing complex or emergency situations remains a priority for social and medico-social facilities and can hamper the planning of prevention and health promotion initiatives.

The support of an external partner such as the Health Promotion Federation is important to provide a framework and to guarantee continuity and motivation in the implementation of a project. Carrying out a project-based approach that enables progress to be measured is motivating.

4. Organisational and structural changes

The medico-social environment is undergoing major evolution, with legislative, social and economic changes impacting the practices of professionals, the organisation of facilities and the way disability is viewed. These simultaneous changes mean that professionals need to be able to mobilise and adapt by working on a coherent pathway (individual and collective) and developing a range of services tailored to the current demands and needs of the public (such as inclusive housing).

The work on psychosocial skills is aimed at supporting the inclusion and integration of people with disabilities, as young people who have recently arrived or are moving from one institution to another can be destabilised and display risky behaviour. Out-of-home schemes and inclusive living will develop over the next few years, and social and medico-social facilities must start preparing young people now to live independently while remaining open to other life prospects. This desire is also expressed by young people, who want to be able to take charge of their own lives, whereas in the past a young person arriving in an institution was expected to stay there for the rest of their life. Strengthening their psychosocial skills better equips young people with disabilities to move beyond their categorisation as a disabled person" and to overcome the stigma they face, and makes it more likely for them to be considered as citizens who can actively contribute to the life of the society they are part of.

The Health Promotion Federation provided expertise and local support to several social and medico-social facilities, including those remote in rural areas.

The short-term effects of interventions

The perceived effects remain modest but are promising in view of the cumulative difficulties that have impacted the course of the pilot scheme. These effects are positive and can be classified into three categories: the structure and its operation; community life; and the young people involved (users).

- ▶ **The structure and its operation.** The opening of a dialogue between management and professionals on subjects of common interest has led to an increase in skills on both sides (the managers/heads of service also put themselves in a position to learn). Similarly, service projects have been overhauled to take account of the social skills, and principles such as self-determination have been incorporated into the establishment's project (in the form of projects and activities). Last, cross-disciplinary work has helped to break down the barriers between professions and services and to create dedicated spaces or redesign living areas to make room for experience and empowerment.
- ▶ **Community life and living together.** The increase in knowledge (concepts, theoretical contributions) and the links with the practices and activities developed have helped to strengthen a shared culture in health promotion. The co-construction of tools in small groups not only improved communication between professionals but also gave everyone a sense of shared usefulness. In the same vein, starting from what already existed and comparing certain practices opened the door to broader ambitions (integration, for example) for the public. Finally, this community goes beyond the professionals to include the possibility of involving young people's families in tackling the issue of disability and representation in terms of addiction prevention and health promotion.
- ▶ **The young people involved (users).** Giving young people the opportunity to express their needs and wishes has helped to increase their self-confidence, to "dare" to share and identify their emotions and to better position themselves in the face of certain reactions. These various elements have helped to increase the power of young people to act. In fact, representations of addiction prevention have moved away from a vision centred on stopping drug use towards support for reducing consumption and action on the causes of consumption (emotional management, risk perception, relational issues such as social desirability). Moreover, these elements led to a better identification of the possibilities for emancipation and empowerment of young individuals. The integration of psychosocial skills into young people's daily lives through individual and collective care is considered a major benefit.

The effects observed in the short term are positive and deserve to be monitored in the long term. The objective of equipping professionals has been achieved, with tools and aids enabling them to continue the actions and provide responses tailored to their professional situations.

There have been no negative effects from the pilot schemes, apart from a feeling of frustration, as the momentum created with the Health Promotion Federation is coming to an end with the completion of the national project. Alternatives are being sought to continue the collaboration and prospects for future work are being considered.

Obstacles to and tools for change

Several strands of change need to be implemented in order to act on the three levels of empowerment essential to promote young people's health from a health promotion perspective. The Tabacap project first identified the obstacles to these changes, then the measures to be taken to overcome them. These obstacles consisted of various difficulties inherent in the implementation of health promotion approaches in an environment that is not very open to such approaches.

- ▶ The lack of a shared language for health promotion and health education common to all sectors concerned (health promotion, addiction prevention, medico-social) among professionals, and health literacy issues in young people with disabilities.
- ▶ The inadequacy of institutional frameworks regarding the participation of young people and the principles of health promotion.
- ▶ Professionals' feeling that they lack the legitimacy to intervene in health promotion and the ability to implement participatory methods with young people.
- ▶ The difficulty of engaging participants in the pilot scheme over the long term, which may require specific efforts to motivate them over time.

Several practical measures have been put in place as far as the partnership with young people is concerned, to overcome these obstacles.

- ▶ The development of methodological aids for professionals.
- ▶ A toolkit for working with young people with disabilities.
- ▶ A skills reference framework/psychosocial skills booklet, highlighting the progress made by young people with disabilities within the project and the development of their abilities in terms of making decisions and choices.
- ▶ A road map for the establishment or service, to guide it towards the integration of health promotion and the strengthening of psychosocial skills on a day-to-day basis, through changes to the environment and professional posture.
- ▶ A certificate "recognising cross-disciplinary skills in relation to employability and qualifications" to be awarded to young people at the end of the pilot scheme.

The Tabacap project also resulted in recommendations for the transferability of initiatives.

- ▶ The need to base interventions on a participatory diagnosis of the situation, including of young people's needs and resources.
- ▶ As a prerequisite to developing psychosocial skills, the enhancement of the skills already used on a day-to-day basis by young people with disabilities.
- ▶ The challenge of moving from the theory of psychosocial skills to practice, including a participatory and experiential methodology.
- ▶ Expanding the initiatives to other areas than health (such as professional integration) that also benefit from strengthening the psychosocial skills of young people in care and the educational skills of staff.

Consideration should be given to the ways in which the initiatives are to be evaluated, and emphasis placed on the need to develop indicators with young people.

Conclusions

The project has had the benefit of raising the public health profile of an invisible population: young people with disabilities.

It has shown that young people with disabilities can have a say in their health, their living environments, their relational and social lives, and their personal projects. It has also demonstrated that these young people have a great deal of experiential knowledge and skills. By gradually adapting their stance, professionals have moved away from a solely risk-based approach to adopt an approach based on young people's resources and ability to participate. Similarly, the opening up of external partnerships (like structures specialising in addiction prevention or sexual health), facilitated by the acquisition of a common language and a better understanding of the needs of young people with disabilities, has enabled these external structures to adapt to the needs of these groups in terms of reception and prevention. These developments are the foundations on which each young person can build in their local context, to be supported in their transition to adulthood.

The acquisition of psychosocial skills as part of a participatory and experiential pedagogy appears to be vital for the transition to adulthood. Indeed, the widespread development of these skills is now politically supported and legitimised in France, via the "Multisectoral national strategy for the development of psychosocial skills in children and young people – 2022-2037" (French Government 2022). This strategy is part of a drive to strengthen young people's citizenship, participation and health.

In the case of young people with disabilities, giving them a say in their own health and empowering them to act has highlighted the obstacles to, and the requirements needed for, their transition to adulthood within the institutions responsible for supporting them in this transition. It also enabled

recommendations to be drawn up for action at individual, collective and organisational levels, to be implemented to support both the young people concerned and the professionals in charge of their education and health promotion. In particular, taking participation into account also means fighting against the reproduction of social and professional inequalities affecting young disabled people. Local initiatives exist to increase the participation of young people in the development of health policies. Although these initiatives are still in the minority, and too often confined to the local level, they are promising experiments in terms of bringing about changes in the attitudes of professionals in the field and decision makers, so that the needs and expectations of the young population are genuinely taken into account.

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Section 4

Practices beyond the (European) youth sector

This section offers case-driven analyses of how youth mainstreaming or youth perspective are, or are not, integrated within international governance structures and transnational policy fields. Across domains as diverse as anti-corruption, climate justice, cultural heritage and environmental governance, the chapters in this section expose persistent asymmetries – legal, procedural and epistemic – that continue to marginalise youth voices despite rhetorical commitments. From demands for a comprehensive, inclusive and integrity-based anti-corruption framework to critiques of top-down governance in the heritage field, and from strategic climate litigation to structured participation in global environmental decision making, this section underscores the urgent need for international institutions to move beyond symbolic engagement.

Yet the chapters also showcase a repertoire of innovative practices through which young people resist tokenism and seek to institutionalise their role in policy design, development and implementation. Only by embedding youth mainstreaming and youth perspective at the core of governance can global policy begin to address meaningfully the intergenerational aspects of the crises it confronts, along with the broader democratic challenges these produce.

Chapter 15

Youth mainstreaming and youth perspective: an analysis of the key features demonstrated by international governmental organisations

Tomaž Deželan, Slađana Petković and Marti Taru

Introduction

Youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective have increasingly taken central stage in the European youth policy agenda. There is a widespread notion that initiatives like the European Economic and Social Committee's Youth Test,⁵⁰ different impact assessment mechanisms and various other tools offer a good chance to address the problems of young people, be it their exclusion from institutional politics, hostile labour market conditions or any other public policy issue affecting the position and welfare of young people. The rights-based approach dominating these initiatives, based on the understanding that young people are rights holders, have specific needs and should not be denied access to some of the rights granted to them because of their young age, can thus be understood as an inclusive practice that shifts the focus from the consequences of discriminatory practices to their causes, allowing the injustice caused or reinforced by policy to be pre-empted and corrected.

The inclusion of young people and their voices in policy making has long been a priority of the youth sector and the Youth Partnership's biannual work plan also enabled the study upon which this chapter is based, which analyses international organisations' approaches to youth perspective and youth mainstreaming (Deželan, Petković and Taru 2025). The chapter covers several relevant international governmental organisations: the Council of Europe, the European Union/European

50. See www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/eu-youth-test-eesc.

Commission (EU/EC), the Economic and Social Committee of the EU (EESC), the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). These organisations proved relevant for our study as they navigate dynamic sociopolitical landscapes shaped by geopolitical, technological and demographic shifts, and foster collaborative networks and stakeholder engagement, while adapting their governance approaches to remain effective at addressing evolving global challenges and member needs.

A range of data-collection and analysis techniques were used in the quest to appropriately examine the views of international organisations and relevant stakeholders on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective, from traditional desk research to basic qualitative research, particularly by:

- ▶ reviewing available institutional documentation on the processes (websites, annual reports, special reports, studies, preparatory materials for various initiatives, agenda items and minutes of internal bodies);
- ▶ studying scientific and professional publications, Pool of European Youth Researchers publications and external studies published on the topic (Deželan 2024 and 2025);
- ▶ conducting and analysing a series of in-depth interviews with representatives and former staff of selected institutions (EC, European Economic and Social Committee, OSCE, Commonwealth Secretariat), interviews with relevant stakeholders (European Youth Forum), interviews with representatives of the United Nations and the OECD;
- ▶ (active) participation in relevant events on the topic that authors of this study attended as experts and external observers, diligently taking notes on the dynamics and content of these processes (for example, a Council of Europe consultation meeting on the preparation of a reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective in September 2025).

The chapter initially describes the processes employed by relevant international organisations under the framework of youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective, and then analyses the relevance of the youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective debate. It will also attempt to identify enablers for these processes in the international organisations' forums.

Overview of international organisations' experience with youth mainstreaming

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has institutionalised youth engagement through its Youth Department, part of the Directorate for Democratic Participation within the Directorate General for Democracy and Human Dignity, implementing the

Youth Sector Strategy 2030. The European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ)⁵¹ includes representatives from ministries or bodies responsible for youth issues across the 50 states parties to the European Cultural Convention. The CDEJ promotes governmental co-operation, facilitates comparisons of national youth policies, exchanges best practices and drafts standardising texts. The Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ),⁵² with 30 representatives from non-governmental youth organisations, provides opinions on youth sector activities and ensures young people's involvement in other Council of Europe activities. These bodies converge in the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ)⁵³ and the Programming Committee on Youth (CPJ),⁵⁴ which serve as co-decision entities. The European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest are permanent structures supporting the Council of Europe's youth policy. The European Youth Foundation,⁵⁵ with an annual budget of approximately €3.7 million, provides financial and educational support for European youth initiatives.⁵⁶

Recently, the Council of Europe has emphasised integrating young people's perspectives into all its activities, ensuring their views, opinions and experiences shape decisions about Europe's future. This push for youth engagement gained momentum at the May 2023 Reykjavik Summit,⁵⁷ where young people demanded inclusion in setting the summit's agenda and participation in discussions, asserting that "youthless politics is useless politics". Although no youth representatives attended the summit, the Reykjavik Declaration (Council of Europe 2023b) recognised young people as vital actors and equal partners in shaping Europe's future. It urged incorporating the youth perspective into intergovernmental and other deliberations, sparking debates on involving youth in topics like bioethics, torture prevention and gender-based violence. This approach values young people's unique perspectives in improving policies, not as a replacement for representative democracy but to ensure that they have a meaningful say in decisions affecting their lives.

European Union

The European Union's commitment to youth involvement in policy making began with the 1999 Council Resolution on Youth Participation (Council of Ministers 1999), which urged the Commission to prioritise young people's interests as a guiding principle across all relevant policy areas. It called for an assessment of the impact of community-level measures on young people's living conditions and an identification of ways to incorporate their interests. The 2001 White Paper on "A new impetus for European youth" (European Commission 2002) laid the

51. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/cdej>.

52. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/advisory-council-on-youth.

53. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/joint-council-on-youth.

54. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programming-committee.

55. See www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation.

56. See www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-foundation1.

57. See www.coe.int/en/web/cm/summits.

foundation for youth mainstreaming, establishing a cross-sectoral approach as a cornerstone of EU youth policy. This approach ensures young people have a voice in policies affecting them, fostering effective governance in the youth field (Council of the European Union 2018).

The Council conclusions of November 2023 (Council of the European Union 2023) on promoting youth mainstreaming defined it as an approach that integrates young people's perspectives and needs into policy formulation, monitoring, evaluation and decision-making processes. Mainstreaming ensures that youth challenges are not addressed in isolation but are embedded within broader policy frameworks, creating cohesive and inclusive policies (*ibid.*). The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Council of the European Union 2018) reinforces youth mainstreaming and participation as core principles, calling on the Commission and member states to establish mechanisms for involving young people in policy development. Recognising that decisions in various policy areas have long-term impacts on young Europeans and that they are often under-represented in decision-making structures, the strategy emphasises the need for youth involvement in developing, implementing and evaluating policies. Instruments like the EU Youth Dialogue⁵⁸ and EU youth programmes (Erasmus+ and the EU Solidarity Corps)⁵⁹ support this goal by ensuring youth-specific needs are considered across policy areas (Council of the European Union 2018). To facilitate youth mainstreaming, the Commission employs a comprehensive set of tools, including youth regulatory impact assessments (RIAs), evaluations, stakeholder consultations and co-operative mechanisms such as the open method of co-ordination and structured dialogue with young people, youth organisations, researchers and policy makers. These tools help assess the impact of legislation on young people across a variety of policy fields, ensuring their perspectives shape outcomes.

The Conference on the Future of Europe⁶⁰ highlighted the demand for greater youth influence in policy making, with all voting components advocating enhanced youth participation. In its communication "Conference on the future of Europe – Putting vision into concrete action", the Commission committed to a coherent approach to youth involvement, including systematic participation in citizens' panels, smaller deliberative co-creation processes and a focus on assessing policies' impact on young people. The European Year of Youth 2022⁶¹ made youth participation a central priority, amplifying calls to integrate youth perspectives into relevant EU policies. Building on this legacy, the Commission plans to introduce a "youth check" mechanism to evaluate the impact of EU policies on young people during the design phase, ensuring their needs and perspectives are embedded from the outset. Following the 2024 Communication on the European

58. See https://youth.europa.eu/eu-youth-dialogue_en.

59. See https://youth.europa.eu/home_en.

60. See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en.

61. See https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth_en.

Year of Youth (European Commission 2024), Youth Policy Dialogues⁶² were introduced to strengthen young people's voices in shaping policies. These dialogues provide opportunities for direct, meaningful annual interactions between youth and European commissioners on upcoming policy initiatives. Additionally, a Youth Advisory Board will be established to advise on issues relevant to young people, to offer feedback on Commission proposals and to further embed youth perspectives in EU policy making.

European Economic and Social Committee

The European Economic and Social Committee has prioritised integrating youth voices into its work and EU decision making. Recent initiatives include the 2021 opinion "Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process", in collaboration with the European Youth Forum and Generation Climate Europe; and support for the European Year of Youth 2022 through a dedicated opinion, a co-ordination group and the 2022 resolution "The long-lasting legacy of the European Year of Youth: youth mainstreaming and empowerment". Since 2010, the EESC has organised "Your Europe, Your Say!" (YEYS), an annual youth event.

In September 2022, the EESC became the first EU institution to adopt the EU Youth Test, committing to youth impact assessments. In July 2023, it launched a pilot project to implement the youth impact assessment tool within its opinion-forming process, inviting specialised sections to select pilot opinions for youth relevance, with young people directly involved in consultations. That same month, the EESC Bureau established the EESC Youth Group to enhance youth engagement. In April 2024, the EESC approved a methodology for the EU Youth Test,⁶³ enabling youth representatives to collaborate with EESC members during opinion drafting. These efforts, particularly since the early 2020s, demonstrate the EESC's commitment to making youth engagement a core component of its work as an EU constitutional institution.

The United Nations

The UN Youth Office,⁶⁴ established by General Assembly Resolution 76/306, prioritises meaningful youth engagement, as outlined in the Secretary-General's 2023 Policy Brief on Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes (United Nations 2023). The UN Youth Office promotes youth involvement across all UN pillars – sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian action – guided by the UN system-wide youth strategy, Youth2030 (United Nations 2018). This strategy aims to strengthen youth participation, advocacy and voices for a peaceful, just and sustainable world through a mainstreaming approach. This involves integrating youth engagement

62. See https://commission.europa.eu/topics/youth/youth-dialogues_en#:~:text=Youth%20Policy%20Dialogues%20are%20designed,initiatives%20the%20Commission%20is%20preparing.

63. See www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/eu-youth-test-eesc.

64. See <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en>.

across all UN entities and fostering partnerships with young people and their organisations through and formal and informal mechanisms to ensure rights-based participation (United Nations 2018: 10).

To advance youth rights and civic engagement, the UN mainstreams human rights by promoting young people's participation in public affairs within treaty bodies, special procedures and other human rights mechanisms, while protecting young human rights defenders (United Nations 2018: 14). The Youth2030 reporting process tracks progress through key performance indicators on meaningful youth engagement, with UN country teams and entities reporting on their efforts. Examples of good practice⁶⁵ from the UN system's work with and for youth can be drawn from Youth2030 (for example Scorecard⁶⁶).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasises youth agency, empowerment and participation as essential for a just society. By empowering young people, UNESCO ensures their full participation as equal partners, recognising them not only as beneficiaries but also as active agents in designing and implementing programmes (UNESCO 2002). This approach strengthens youth contributions to global goals, enhancing their role in shaping a sustainable future.

The Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Secretariat⁶⁷ prioritises youth engagement, integrating young people into its work since its inception in 1964. Youth is a focal issue, with initiatives like the Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting (CYMM),⁶⁸ held every four years, including a Youth Leaders Forum and Stakeholders Forum since 1992. The Commonwealth Youth Awards for Excellence in Development Work, launched in 2012, recognise young people's contributions to global development goals. The Youth Worker Awards, which started in 2013, and Youth Work Week, celebrated since 2012 (1993 in the UK), highlight youth and youth workers' achievements. A blog, "Your Commonwealth", showcases youth perspectives. In February 2023, 13 youth networks and eight working groups were active.

The Commonwealth has progressively strengthened youth involvement, with significant advancements in the 2010s through targeted actions and organisational structures. Youth voices remain clearly articulated. The Commonwealth Youth Programme⁶⁹ defines youth mainstreaming as assessing the implications of actions – legislation, policies or programmes – for youth across all levels. This strategy integrates youth concerns into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies in political, economic and social spheres, ensuring equal benefits and addressing inequalities (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 3). This approach embeds youth perspectives to foster equitable outcomes.

65. See www.unyouth2030.com/resourcestools.

66. See <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en/youth2030/scorecards>.

67. See <https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us>.

68. See <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/youth-ministers-meetings>.

69. See <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-work/youth>.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

The OECD has long addressed youth issues, focusing on education, employment, unemployment and social inclusion, particularly after the global economic crisis. In May 2013, OECD ministers adopted the OECD Action Plan for Youth (OECD 2013), outlining measures to mitigate recession impacts on young people. The EU co-funded Youth Inclusion Project (2017-2018) produced studies on youth well-being and a methodological guide for assessing it. The 2018 OECD Youth Stocktaking Report (OECD 2018) was the first to evaluate public governance arrangements for effective youth engagement, drawing on OECD expertise in open government, gender equality, public-sector innovation, budgeting and regulatory policy. The 2020 Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice report (OECD 2020) highlighted the importance of including youth in governance processes to foster trust and justice across generations. Institutionalised youth participation began in 2021 with Youthwise, the OECD Youth Advisory Board,⁷⁰ comprising young people aged 18 to 30 from diverse fields like artificial intelligence, education, environment, technology, gender equality, health, law and climate. Youthwise aims to enhance understanding of OECD policy making among youth and to integrate their perspectives into the organisation's work.

The 2022 Council Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People (OECD 2022) emphasises promoting youth social inclusion and well-being, particularly for vulnerable groups, through policies spanning education, employment, participation and governance. Youth mainstreaming as an approach systematically incorporates youth needs into policy making, moving beyond an “adult-by-default” perspective. The recommendation (ibid.) provides policy standards in four areas: collecting age-disaggregated data, promoting integrated youth policy making, strengthening meaningful youth participation in decision making, and using public management tools like regulatory and budgetary impact assessments to anticipate policy impacts on youth. The OECD Youth Policy Toolkit,⁷¹ launched in November 2024, supports the 2022 recommendation by offering practical guidance and best practices for policy makers. It addresses youth challenges in education, skills, employment, entrepreneurship, health, social inclusion, public participation and governance, ensuring policies are inclusive and responsive to young people's unique needs.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The OSCE integrates youth voices through the Special Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office for Youth, who leads conflict prevention, resolution and rehabilitation efforts in the OSCE region, engaging directly with relevant parties. Youth mainstreaming at OSCE is a strategic approach to integrate youth perspectives into security dimensions by engaging young people in policy discussions, addressing their needs in policies and projects and assessing the impact of actions on youth (Hess and Stošić 2021). Youth engagement was

70. See www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/youthwise.html.

71. See www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/11/oecd-youth-policy-toolkit_3de4a9f0.html.

formalised during Switzerland's 2014 chairmanship with the model OSCE project, where youth ambassadors (aged 18 to 30) from each OSCE country participated in work simulations.

This initiative led to the 2014 Ministerial Council Declaration on Youth (OSCE 2014), which recognised young people's potential to contribute to economic, political and social development across the OSCE's politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions. Further decisions on youth were adopted in 2015 and 2018, emphasising their significance. The OSCE views youth as contributors to peace and security, activism, sustainability, inclusion and education, among other areas. Young people participate in initiatives supporting vibrant democracy, democratic institutions, national minority integration and media freedom. They are also involved in programmes at six local OSCE missions, in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia, ensuring their perspectives shape the organisation's efforts to promote security and co-operation.

Terminological and conceptual boundaries of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective

The overview of the structures and processes at some of the most important institutions at the international level when it comes to young people and youth as a target group provides a wealth of data that make them suitable examples for examining the genealogies, the conceptual features, the practical instruments and the enablers that have led to these instruments and conceptual innovations, but also the terminological dilemmas that accompany these processes. The collected documents and documented practices are accompanied by nine interviews with current or former representatives of the institutions under study, which helped the research team to piece together the documentary evidence on the "youth mainstreaming entities", as well as to rationalise certain idiosyncratic steps taken by the organisations.

Conceptual dimensions of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective

Various definitions of youth mainstreaming go back to the definition of gender mainstreaming in the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which emphasises that mainstreaming is a process that aims to achieve equality (United Nations 1997). Mainstreaming therefore stresses equal participation in all areas of life and is about ensuring equity and justice for people belonging to a particular group (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017: 3), as well as a matter of social justice (Sefotho 2015, 1): It aims to promote the equity perspective throughout the policy-making process, from conception to implementation to review and all stages in between (Donaghy 2004: 393) and is a strategy that ultimately aims to ensure the implicit integration of different perspectives into various processes, institutions and policies (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 12). Furthermore, it points to a youth-responsive approach by involving young women and men in policy discussions

and programmatic processes; being responsive to the needs of youth and taking them into account in every area and phase of a policy or project; and assessing the impact of a planned action on young people (Hess and Stošić 2021).

Likewise, it can represent a commitment to mainstream youth by incorporating it across all units and work of the organisation through formal as well as informal mechanisms (United Nations 2018: 10). Rather than focusing on the policy process and the political-administrative regulatory tools available to policy makers, some organisations emphasise the importance of youth agency and empowerment as a prerequisite for a desired society. Empowering young people should ensure and strengthen their full participation as equal and valuable partners, especially since young people are not only subjects for whom various measures and activities are carried out but also people with whom programmes should be planned and implemented (UNESCO 2002).

The currently prevailing definition of youth mainstreaming in the Council Conclusions of the Spanish EU Presidency, which explicitly mentions youth mainstreaming, recognises the need to include the youth perspective in the policy process, including decision making, essentially urging representation but also warning against the common practice of isolating young people's challenges and concerns (Council of the European Union 2023: fn. 1). Policy processes need to be developed and reorganised with the aim of including an equality perspective in all policy areas at all levels (Council of Europe 1998). The concerns, visions and contributions of young people need to be fully considered by all ministries as well as by other institutions and organisations. This definition, therefore, also pushes for more comprehensive and better regulation that has an impact on policy through a cross-sectoral approach.

Youth mainstreaming is also a matter of normalising young people and issues relevant to them for a wider (policy) audience (Sirakova 2024; Papp 2024). Mainstreaming is therefore about the recognition and normalisation of the engagement of young people in areas that impact their lives but have not necessarily been considered so far. Likewise, youth mainstreaming is creating a space that enables young people to contribute to outcomes, an approach or even a strategy to ensure youth-centred policies and policy outcomes (Robinson 2024). As the experiences of various organisations such as the Commonwealth Secretariat or the EESC show, it is about "giving young people the opportunity to come to the table, to the decision makers' table, in a more systematic and robust way" (Repanšek 2024). It should be a deliberate initiative to create a partnership with young people in the process of formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes.

The conceptual framework of the analysed definitions of youth mainstreaming offered by respective international governmental organisations (and their bodies) points to several core dimensions associated with the term:

- ▶ ensuring the participation and engagement of young people and the organisations that represent them in decision making or dialogue, including through the creation of venues;

- ▶ normalising the presence of young people and their representation in policy making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes;
- ▶ the principle of partnership or even “co-management” between young people and the organisation to collaborate on incorporating young people’s views and priorities;
- ▶ the integration of youth perspectives into different policies, across different sectors, processes, institutions and programmes;
- ▶ the empowerment of young people through active engagement in the process and the goal of achieving equality rather than perpetuating inequality.

Common grounds of youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective debate

The definitions of “youth mainstreaming” systematically refer to the importance of considering the position of young people, but different international organisations deal with this differently. The original definition refers to the relevance of the concerns and experiences of the target groups, in this case young people, as an integral dimension of policy making (United Nations 1997). It thus refers to the relevance of available data about the target group, as well as to a representation based on the experiences gathered during the process of transition to adulthood.

The OSCE definition, on the other hand, uses an umbrella term – “perspectives” – for the various concerns, experiences and needs with the systematic and meaningful integration of “youth perspectives” in different dimensions of security (Hess and Stošić 2021). It focuses on the importance of the processes that reveal these perspectives, thus emphasising the relevance of representation. Moreover, perspectives signal the views based on accumulated experiences rather than the needs and concerns to be addressed for young people. In this way, perspectives also demonstrate agency and a move away from passively accepting the support offered by others, but also the fact that there is a plurality and not just one perspective when it comes to young people.

With “an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people” (Council of the European Union 2023: fn. 1), the Council of the EU points to a rather narrow view of perspective, usually obtained through representation and excluding needs identified from other forms of data that allow for greater generalisations (like surveys or official statistics). At the same time, the perspectives in practice are broader than what young people tell institutions. The insights (needs) do not necessarily come only from young people, but also from youth workers, youth researchers and others. In practice, this means setting up procedures (such as interministerial committees, interministerial co-ordination groups or youth focal points) to ensure that youth priorities are integrated into all policy areas (European Commission 2024: 7).

The Council of Europe, on the other hand, focuses on meaningful youth participation that recognises the contribution of young people rather than the mere participation of young people in policy making. To be precise, all definitions

of youth mainstreaming or youth perspective(s) include participation as one of its core components. All of them also go beyond the “participation plus” approach, where organisations are not merely engaged in processes of improved youth participation. However, some of them devote more attention to its meaningfulness than others. In addition to the plural nature of the perspectives – encompassing a variety of opinions, views and experiences of young people⁷² – there is a strong indication of the favoured model of generating youth perspectives through the meaningful participation of young people, where young people’s voices are heard and accompanied by the data generated through a variety of supporting methods.

The discussion on (the integration of) youth perspectives and youth mainstreaming must go further rather than just focusing on terminology. However, this requires a level of common understanding: 1. the two terms should be used synonymously;⁷³ 2. the term “youth perspectives” should be used exclusively in the plural form; and 3. the perspectives and needs of young people must also be demonstrated also, though not exclusively, through the active engagement of young people.

Enablers and tools of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives

Enablers of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives

Every youth mainstreaming process or process of integrating youth perspectives is idiosyncratic, has its own reasons and specific objectives, and is subjected to numerous contextual factors. The political will of the organisation, especially its leadership, and the presence of high-level change agents, proves to be one of the most important factors for the introduction and implementation of youth mainstreaming processes. This occurs when leaders see this process as one of the most important commitments during their tenure (Repanšek 2024; Stošić 2024; Deininger 2024). Systemically, this was observed in the EU’s Year of Youth process and its consequences, as well as in the Council of Europe’s Reykjavik Declaration. The allocation of resources – human or financial – earmarked for youth mainstreaming also demonstrates the seriousness of leadership commitment and, if adequate, is one of the key factors for impact (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008).

72. Youth literature and youth researchers systematically point to the problem that policy makers and non-youth researchers often portray young people as a coherent group, although the needs and views within the group of young people (for example 15-29-year-olds) may be more diverse than between different population groups (young people, middle-aged people and older people, for instance). Therefore, a singular formulation may lead non-youth experts to wrongly assume that there is only one set of needs, views and experiences of young people.

73. For a more detailed explanation of the rationale behind the consistent plural use of the term “perspectives”, see Deželan, Petković and Taru (2025).

A vital factor for the implementation of youth mainstreaming processes is also the involvement of key stakeholders to create ownership of the process and its results and to neutralise internal resistance. This includes adequate stakeholder mapping and the development of tools for their involvement and contribution to the process (Papp 2024). Decision makers are among the most important stakeholders, as their commitment to the process is of immense political, policy and financial importance, and can play a crucial role in the success of mainstreaming. The experience gained through the participation of young people is also important (Robinson 2024). The success of youth mainstreaming ultimately depends on the involvement of young people, because participatory and representative decision-making mechanisms require an appropriate level of involvement in decisions that affect their lives. Responsive institutions and a strong commitment from individuals and civil society organisations representing them are prerequisites for successful youth mainstreaming (Papp 2024). This translates to the direct participation of young people, the involvement of institutions with competences and interest in various youth-relevant policy areas and the involvement of organisations by and for young people (Repanšek 2024; Sirakova 2024).

On a broader level, social norms and prevailing values (respect for human rights and democracy, non-discrimination, gender equality, tolerance) determine the fate of such youth-oriented mechanisms. The broad acceptance of youth rights is one of the most important factors for the successful integration of youth perspectives into the life of an organisation. Through the goal of equity, youth rights should be clearly articulated and operationalised in the documents and mechanisms that govern the process (Stošić 2024). Organisational norms and culture play an important role in the acceptance or rejection of youth mainstreaming, as the perception of young people as equal and the awareness of and resilience to discriminatory practices vary greatly from organisation to organisation, sometimes even from department to department within the same organisation (Stošić 2024; Deiningner 2024). The existence of quality improvement mechanisms, of an overall quality culture and of capacity-building mechanisms as part of staff development policies; the focus on positive social impact; and the development of democratic mechanisms and culture within and outside the organisation have an important impact on the ability of organisations to integrate youth perspectives (UNFPA et al. 2021).

Professionalism in general, and the provision of data and experience in particular, is another key element that enables an adequate scientific representation of the observed processes (UNFPA et al. 2021). Focusing on the deteriorating conditions and challenging policy areas of young people requires an evidence-based approach that allows the processes to be data- and outcome-driven. This approach should be based on a set of robust data-collection and data-analysis procedures that enable relevant stakeholders to assess the situation of young people using a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators (OECD 2020; Commonwealth Secretariat 2017).

The normative commitments and concerns, as well as the evidence base, provide a solid foundation for successful mainstreaming practice (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017; Hess and Stošić 2021; OECD 2020) and point to a systemic and

strategic approach to youth mainstreaming, which includes the need for continuing application of the mechanism that must demonstrate positive outcomes and impact for young people in the setting in which it is used (organisation, sector or policy area, for example). This is also linked to cross-sectoral co-operation, which ensures that youth perspectives are integrated into different policies and areas at different levels (Sirakova 2024). It prevents functional differentiation of different subsystems and allows for the harmonisation of interventions through various mechanisms of cross-sectoral policy co-operation, including through the supportive role of youth co-ordinators and youth correspondents.

But probably the strongest driving force is the challenges facing young people. Youth mainstreaming must be based on a clear awareness of the unequal and unfair position of young people compared to other population groups. It is a response to broader crises that affect individuals other than young people and go beyond traditional youth policies (youth employment, education, transitions). For example, the threats to security and the radicalisation of youth, especially after a series of violent attacks (for example, the attack at the Parisian concert hall Bataclan), have clearly contributed to the greater integration of youth perspectives into security-oriented organisations (Deininger 2024; Stošić 2024). AIDS and the Covid-19 pandemic have led to similar responses in health-oriented organisations (the World Health Organization, for example). Added to that is the fact that young people are becoming more visible and, in some ways, more vocal. New repertoires of their political engagement have allowed them to bypass their representative institutions and voice their concerns directly through new platforms. As political institutions are very receptive to such platforms, especially due to their impact on public perception and audience ratings, the concerns voiced in such a way create leverage for a greater inclusion of youth perspectives (Papp 2024; Sirakova 2024).

The above-mentioned enabling factors that aspiring organisations should seek to ensure do not guarantee successful youth mainstreaming; however, they do create the necessary preconditions for the problems of young people to be recognised as relevant and for young people themselves to be positively impacted.

Tools of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives and contexts guiding them

The accumulated practice shows several tools that effectively address the situation of young people and can be considered relevant for this broad frame of youth mainstreaming. The first is the regulatory impact assessment in the field of youth, which provides information on the expected costs and benefits of the proposed regulation for young people (European Commission 2024). The tools that fall into this category have been used in the past at national and sub-national levels and can also currently be seen in the form of EU youth tests and checks, including the EU Youth Test pilot project from the European Economic and Social Committee, the EU impact assessment tools developed under the Better Regulation framework and the EU Youth Check plan, which involves a multistage process to assess relevance, possible consultation and impact (European Commission 2024: 10).

The Council of Europe's co-management system is an example of the integration of youth perspectives in terms of the participation and representation of young people. It allows joint reflection and co-production that gives young Europeans a voice, in the form of the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ), composed of representatives of youth NGOs and networks, and exchange with the authorities responsible for youth issues meeting as the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ). The Joint Council for Youth (CMJ), as a co-management body, brings together the CCJ and the CDEJ, which leads to joint decisions on the priorities, programmes and budget of the youth sector, and implements the Youth Sector Strategy 2030. The co-management is limited to the youth sector and cannot be transferred to the work of other bodies of the organisation because of its regulatory framework. However, the CCJ primarily contributes as a participant in the work of a number of the Organisation's intergovernmental committees, may advise a committee or body on specific issues or deliverables at its invitation, and engages in informal exchanges of views with other bodies and structures of the Organisation (Council of Europe 2023a).

An example of the mechanisms focusing on cross-sectoral co-operation and knowledge dispersion on youth is the position of a youth co-ordinator. Recognising the importance of coherent communication with young people, the role of the co-ordinator is to mainstream youth perspectives into all stages of the policy-making process (design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation) in all areas that affect young people's lives. In the case of the EU Youth Coordinator, this implies the facilitation of a group of stakeholders and correspondents, promoting the integration of youth perspectives (including input from the EU Youth Dialogue) into all relevant policies, strengthening co-operation between the different parts of the institution dealing with youth issues and raising awareness of EU opportunities for young people (European Commission 2024). A similar, albeit different, role is played by the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, whose main tasks are to increase youth participation in the intergovernmental space, harness the potential of young people within the UN system and engage and mobilise young people as a whole (UN Youth Office 2024).

The aforementioned dialogue with young people, which takes many forms and is common at various levels, offers another opportunity to promote youth perspectives. The EU Youth Dialogue, formerly known as the structured dialogue, is a dialogue with young people and youth organisations involving policy and decision makers as well as experts, researchers and other relevant civil society bodies. It serves as a forum for continual joint reflection and consultation on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European co-operation in the youth field. It builds on the achievements of previous dialogue processes with the aim of involving more decision makers and young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in decision-making processes and in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (European Union 2024).

An immensely important step in youth mainstreaming is the youth analysis, in which the relevant policies, legislation, institutional settings, organisational environments and available programmes are examined (Robinson 2024; Papp 2024). This analysis also includes a situation analysis, where the internal

and external environment is examined to understand the organisation's capabilities, customers and operational environment with regard to youth. Youth analysis involves the active participation of young people who provide insights into the context, institutions and processes as well as being active researchers at different stages of the research (Repanšek 2024). Youth analysis provides a basis for identifying measures to address the problem as well as for planning and budgeting processes. In programme planning, policy needs to be translated into operational plans in collaboration with youth, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that are discussed with a wider group of stakeholders (Papp 2024). The implementation phase relies on programmed and adequately budgeted plans, dedicated implementation structures coupled with participatory monitoring and evaluation, and appropriate sustainability commitments. Effective communication of the results of youth mainstreaming to external and internal stakeholders is also crucial for the sustainability of youth mainstreaming.

Institutional practice informs other sources of data, expertise and knowledge about young people that provide important information about youth perspectives. These include data from various representative surveys (such as the Youth Eurobarometer) that serve as a counterbalance to the voice provided by young people within youth civil society through their representative organisations (Sirakova 2024). As these surveys represent the entire population of young people, including the vast majority of young people outside organisations, these data provide a strong reinforcement, or calibration, of the input voiced by youth through other processes. Additional evidence is provided by various dashboards and indicators. Various youth indices serve a similar purpose (Papp 2024).

Additional sources of relevant information on youth perspectives can be drawn from services used and/or research funded by other institutions working in the same field or dealing with at least some of the same issues (European Parliament, European Commission, OECD, Council of Europe, UN, etc.). This research, especially regular research on the condition and performance of young people, has wider benefits and provides information that can inform policy making. In addition, one-off research initiatives carried out under various non-youth-focused research programmes (like Horizon 2020, European Research Council grants) provide valuable information for mainstreaming. An additional source of data is various youth programmes, either through their evaluation or their meaningful programming, some of whose strands are directly aimed at integrating youth perspectives into the policy-making process.

Last but not least, insights from National Agencies and other fund operators (like the European Youth Foundation) that financially manage the programmes provide important contextual data, as well as information on the initiatives that work well at street level and have the potential for scaling up and broader policy relevance, especially as these structures operate with a specific meta-knowledge that is beyond the reach of conventional youth-targeted surveys and is immensely valuable for programme designers.

Conclusion

Youth mainstreaming and the (integration) of youth perspective(s) are becoming a popular term in (European) policy discourses, as the realisation that outdated policy structures have left damaging gaps in the inclusion and representation of young people. As youth mainstreaming offers a space where inclusion and representation are firmly established and can flourish, one might have expected an endless list of attempts to implement this approach in various organisations. Indeed, there are promising initiatives that incorporate the principles of youth mainstreaming (such as the UN Programming Handbook on Youth, Peace and Security (UNFPA et al. 2021) and the EU Youth Strategy); however, few of these initiatives have truly integrated all the core principles and premises of youth mainstreaming. The field is still evolving and one could say that organisations are competing in their attempts to introduce mainstreaming mechanisms, but the organisations are not there yet. The aim of this chapter is not to commend organisations for their efforts and willingness to take up the difficult and sometimes politically unattractive challenge of youth equity and disengagement from institutional politics. Despite their noble efforts, which certainly should be and are recognised, these and other organisations will benefit more from learning what works, where the common challenges lie and what more they could do to move closer to their own goal of youth equity.

The growing awareness of existing problems and frequency of attempts to introduce youth mainstreaming suggests that we should view these initiatives, or even a movement, as an ongoing process and understand the current situation as a growing dynamic rather than an end state. As with so many other social issues and struggles, mainstreaming youth may prove to be less of a destination and more of a journey. With the goal of putting young people on an equal footing, youth mainstreaming requires strong political commitments, youth-centred institutions and high levels of youth and stakeholder participation, which are sometimes difficult to secure simultaneously.

Regardless of these system-changing commitments, smaller steps can be taken to create conditions for such change. As there are challenges of related terminology that lead to confusion among stakeholders, among the low hanging fruits is a consistent use of conceptually coherent terms depicting youth mainstreaming. Furthermore, the upscaling of successful mainstreaming initiatives to other policy areas and other levels of government – thus building on the positive evidence base – also creates momentum and offers policy-learning opportunities for aspiring organisations. Robust forms of youth participation, with which institutions are already very familiar, provide direct experience of the impact of such initiatives and create a broad and much-needed support base for profound systemic change. And this can only be achieved through the development of practical and directly applicable tools that can support decision makers in their daily efforts to create more favourable conditions for young people, a practice that has already been institutionalised by some organisations. The dream thus starts with small steps that every committed organisation can take before it makes any major sacrifices or takes any political gambles.

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Chapter 16

Integrating a youth perspective into anti-corruption policies: what the Council of Europe can learn from the United Nations

Irina Lonean

Youth is not a policy sector. It is a life period, which makes all policies potentially relevant for young people. In Europe, the youth policy is defined as aspiring “to create conditions for learning, opportunity and experience, which enable young people to develop knowledge, skills and competencies” for active political, civic and public participation (Şerban and Barber 2018). In the context of this definition, a few sectors and areas are usually more obviously linked to the needs and aspirations of young people. These are youth work, education, health, well-being, sport, housing, employment and entrepreneurship, culture, environment and climate protection, and good and open governance. Moreover, young people are, or should be, increasingly included as important stakeholders, with distinct needs to be considered, in decisions regarding human rights, social inclusion, accessibility, gender equality, peace and security and digitalisation (Deželan 2024).

The Reykjavik Declaration of the 4th Summit of Heads of States and Governments of the Council of Europe started a process of incorporating a youth perspective into the Council of Europe’s “intergovernmental and other deliberations” regardless of the sector (Council of Europe 2023). The declaration underlines that integrating a youth perspective is aligned with the established principle of youth participation in decision making, a principle endorsed by the Council of Europe’s co-managed youth sector.

The definition of the youth perspective can be linked to Roger Hart's ladder of children and youth participation (Hart 1997). The integration of youth perspectives in all intergovernmental deliberations of the Council of Europe seems to represent a clear and comprehensive approach to putting into practice one of the high levels of the ladder of children and youth participation (young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults, specific to a co-decision and co-creation process) for the entire organisation, not only for the Youth Department and youth-specific deliberations. In this conceptual framework, the integration of the youth perspective is a form of meaningful, inclusive and impactful participation in decision making, the implementation of decisions and the monitoring and evaluation of decisions. This means engaging young people as subjects in the process, rather than treating them as objects of studies, analyses and assessments.

This chapter presents a brief overview of the integration of a youth perspective into anti-corruption efforts. This is important because ensuring meaningful participation of youth in decisions on preventing and fighting corruption, as well as upholding the rule of law, is instrumental in fostering trust in democratic institutions and political processes. We know that corruption weakens democracy (Transparency International 2019) and that young people are drawn to strong, populist and non-democratic leaders (Filipova 2024). In this context, integrating a youth perspective into anti-corruption work may contribute to strengthening democracy.

However, this process of integration – into anti-corruption policy and other related topics such as the independence of the judiciary – is a relatively challenging topic and arguably a new phenomenon, as suggested later in this chapter. The participation of young people in anti-corruption policy is relevant from several perspectives, considering the exposure of young people to corruption. The process needs to be complemented by research into the effects of corruption and the potential impact of anti-corruption decisions on young people.

The Council of Europe was a pioneer among intergovernmental organisations for its anti-corruption work and its initiative to involve young people in these efforts. It opened for signature the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption and the Civil Law Convention on Corruption in 1999 (Council of Europe 2019a and 2019b) and the work of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) started the same year. In 2017, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 2192 (2017) entitled “Youth against corruption”, one of the first documents on youth and corruption adopted by an intergovernmental organisation. However, despite the early start, there are few good practices for engaging young people in decisions and mainstreaming youth in the anti-corruption work of the Council of Europe. In the context of the Reykjavik Declaration and the promotion of a youth perspective in the organisation's deliberation and intergovernmental work, it may be useful for the Council of Europe to restart its work with young people against corruption.

The activities carried out in the last few years by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as other national and intergovernmental initiatives linked to the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), provide some examples

of good practice on the integration of the youth perspective into its anti-corruption activity. They can also provide information on possible challenges. Other examples come from civil society, especially from the initiatives of Transparency International, and from youth-led organisations in different countries.

This chapter is based on desk research. It presents examples provided by the UNODC, based on public information, including legal and analytical documents published by the UNODC. It also involved reviewing documents published by the Transparency International Secretariat and the chapters of Transparency International, as well as information published on their website.⁷⁴ The information published on the website of the Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment (GRACE)⁷⁵ is particularly relevant for this chapter and is also presented. The website of GRECO⁷⁶ and documents published by GRECO were analysed in order to understand how the youth perspective is and can be integrated into the anti-corruption work of the Council of Europe.

The chapter examines first the research on the effects of corruption on young people and their opinions on it. The first part of the chapter shows that young people are negatively affected by corruption and, in some contexts, they are differently or more affected than adults. They also hold distinct views on corruption compared to adults, and this highlights the importance of integrating a youth perspective into anti-corruption debates and decisions. A presentation of anti-corruption education follows, using examples from national and international organisations. Anti-corruption education currently represents the primary approach to engaging young people in activities against corruption, but studies show mixed outcomes from these activities. The next part of the chapter presents anti-corruption initiatives that engage young people beyond education programmes, as the research and experiments on anti-corruption education suggest that learning activities are important but not sufficient to discourage corrupt behaviour and to promote integrity at both individual and societal levels. The chapter also examines the anti-corruption activity of the Council of Europe and its existing youth engagement activities. Finally, a brief section discusses the meaningfulness of youth participation in anti-corruption efforts and in the presented examples, leading to the conclusions, which include a reflection on good practices that can inspire the Council of Europe to integrate a youth perspective into its intergovernmental work on anti-corruption.

Corruption: a concern for young people

The literature exploring the particular impact of corruption or anti-corruption policies on young people is fairly new and limited. Few studies explore the opinions of young people on corruption and their exposure to corruption, and there are even fewer studies exploring their direct experience with or

74. Transparency International, available at www.transparency.org/en/.

75. United Nations, Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment, available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/index.html>.

76. Group of States against Corruption, available at www.coe.int/en/web/greco.

participation in corruption. However, existing research shows that young people are disproportionately affected by corruption, compared to adults. They also hold different opinions on corruption. This leads to the need to integrate a youth perspective into anti-corruption efforts, as the existing literature shows that the youth perspective may be different from the perspective of older persons (Bergin 2024; UNODC and World Economic Forum 2015).

Before presenting the existing data, however, two definitions are needed for the two main concepts used here: “corruption” and “young people”. In this chapter, “corruption” is understood as defined by Transparency International: “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”. In this definition the “abuse” is understood as a “misuse or mistreatment” of “entrusted power”. The “entrusted power” is understood as a legitimate authority granted to decision makers or other officials to “act with integrity to advance the public good”. The “private gain” is understood as “self-serving benefits (financial, material, political or social) that accrue to individuals or specific interest groups at the expense of society at large” (Bullock and Jenkins 2020).

“Young people” is used in a broad sense, as the existing research on young people and corruption refers to age groups such as 18-29 years old, 18-30 years old, 18-34 years old and 18-35 years old. Policies and practices of involving young people in anti-corruption are also targeted at different age ranges. Among the existing initiatives, many target secondary or tertiary education students, without clearly defining the age of the target groups. Others target professionals (for example, young programmers or young artists), and they usually include people up to 35 years old (for example, the Coding4Integrity initiative under GRACE, or the Fair Play artists movement, both described below in this chapter).

As a group of people further from political and economic power compared to older and more experienced citizens, young people are considered to be more impacted by corruption as victims (Bergin 2024; Bullock and Jenkins 2020). Young people are disproportionately affected by corruption in the education system, as they are the main beneficiaries of this system. From barriers that prevent access to education, to extortion or collusion regarding exams and diplomas, and sexual exploitation, young people are direct victims of corruption in education. Moreover, young people are indirectly, but very seriously, affected by other forms of corruption in education. Corruption diminishes the resources available for schools and universities, leading to inappropriate infrastructure, unqualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms and reduced quality of education (Transparency International 2013).

Young people are also especially vulnerable to corruption in the healthcare system, affecting their access to medical treatment, sexual and reproductive health information and counselling, but also exposing them to addictions through the existence of black-market drugs sales that are sheltered by corrupt authorities (Bergin 2024).

Young people are also affected by corruption when looking for a job. Studies show that in different countries youth unemployment increases if corruption

increases and young people perceive that unemployment is linked to corruption and that their chances of being employed are significantly diminished by corruption and nepotism in recruitment for public service, including jobs in public administration, education, social assistance, healthcare, culture, police and security (Bergin 2024; Mchunu 2019; Bouzid 2016; UNODC and World Economic Forum 2015).

Corruption has been recently further linked with emigration and the “brain drain” phenomenon (Özerim and Beharić 2024). For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the perception of corruption is associated with the desire or plan to emigrate, especially among young people under 30 years old (Begović et al. 2020).

Another intuitive effect of corruption on young people may be political alienation or political protest, including support and votes for anti-system and extremist parties and political movements, radicalisation and even support for terrorist groups (Institute for Security Studies 2016; Transparency International Defence and Security 2017), but very few studies explore this hypothesis. An analysis of 100 countries for the period 2002-2012 shows that in countries with both high levels of perceived corruption and a large youth population (over 19% of the country's population), political protests and political violence are more frequent compared to countries that do not meet those two criteria (Farzanegan and Witthuhn 2017).

Considering the negative impact of corruption, most existing studies, including the larger survey on corruption, the Global Corruption Barometer by Transparency International, with results for different regions of the world (Transparency International 2021), confirm the intuition that young people do not tolerate corruption, disapprove of corruption and think corruption harms their lives and chances of development. A youth-focused multinational survey, the MY World 2014 survey by the World Economic Forum, shows that 72% of young people considered that corruption is holding their country back and is causing lost opportunities for their generation. Some 40% considered that corruption is jeopardising their job, family or security or that of someone they know, though 10% considered corruption to be necessary in society (Bergin 2024; UNODC and World Economic Forum 2015).

However, the proportion of young people who consider corruption practices acceptable varies between countries and usually reflects the differences that can be identified at the population level. In countries where a larger proportion of the population accept corruption as a social practice, this attitude is more prevalent among young people (Bergin 2024; see also the data from Transparency International 2021). At the national level, the existing data show, therefore, a mixed picture. The reference to Chile Transparente is no longer available on the internet. Surprising results come from surveys conducted by the Latvian authorities, which report that young people are the most willing to use informal solutions to “solve issues they face” with the public administration (UNODC 2024a). Similarly, in South Africa, while 62% of young people did not participate in corruption, 67% accepted it as normal to pay a bribe to access public services (Corruption Watch 2020). Moreover, older data from the World

Values Survey 2004 show that 20 years ago young people (18-30 years old) were more likely than adults over 30 years old to believe corruption is sometimes justified (Torgler and Valev 2006).

On the other hand, in general, young people have less direct experience of corruption compared to some other, older groups. The Global Corruption Barometer from Transparency International in 2021 and 2022 (Transparency International 2022) shows that in some regions (such as the Caribbean and Asia) young people (18-34 years old) are more likely to pay a bribe compared to people over 55 years old, but not compared to adults aged between 35 and 54 years old, who remain the most exposed to direct experience of corruption. Some studies focus specifically on youth exposure to corruption. For example, the Kenyan Institute of Economic Affairs shows that 46% of young people paid a bribe to government officials in 2016-2017. However, this study does not compare young people with other age groups (Institute of Economic Affairs, Kenya 2021).

Anti-corruption education

Currently, most initiatives engaging young people with anti-corruption efforts do not focus on youth participation in policy making or decision making to prevent and fight corruption. Rather, anti-corruption education is the most frequent way of engaging young people in corruption- and anti-corruption-related issues. This makes sense as anti-corruption education is the first form of action needed to engage young people meaningfully in any type of anti-corruption initiative (UNODC 2024b).

Following the political declaration of the special session of the United Nations General Assembly against corruption in June 2021, which placed “anti-corruption education and training at the core of a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to promote transparency, accountability, integrity and a culture of rejection of corruption as a basis for preventing and countering corruption”,⁷⁷ the UNODC launched the Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment. This builds on previous initiatives like Education for Justice (E4J) and Anti-Corruption Academic (ACAD) initiatives, but it is much more focused and accessible through the online portal.

The need for anti-corruption and integrity education is supported by research showing that, despite the impact of corruption on their lives, young people are not able to define basic concepts such as integrity and corruption, and are therefore not ready to participate in any debate on anti-corruption initiatives (Sihombing 2018).

GRACE includes learning materials for primary and secondary education; a university module series on anti-corruption, integrity and ethics; and a youth-led platform led by a YouthLED Advisory Board that participated

77. United Nations, Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment, available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/index.html>.

in the development of step-by-step guidelines for young people and youth organisations to take action against corruption and contributed to organising Anti-Corruption Hackathons. GRACE also supported the creation of the Policy Guide for National Anti-Corruption Authorities on Meaningful Youth Engagement in Anti-Corruption Work together with the Independent Commission against Corruption, Hong Kong, China (ICAC) and the International Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities.⁷⁸

The YouthLED Advisory Board includes young leaders (18-30 years old), selected through a competitive process that assessed their engagement and commitment to youth participation, youth empowerment and UN values such as peace and sustainability, ethics and integrity. The YouthLED Advisory Board has multiple functions, including providing strategic advice to UNODC on the development of GRACE, enabling larger consultations with young people within the framework determined by UNCAC's provisions, advocating and promoting learning opportunities and good practices of youth engagement in anti-corruption initiatives.⁷⁹

Although examples of good practices can be also identified at the national level (Bergin 2024), they remain limited in both scope and period of implementation and no comprehensive national anti-corruption education programme is in place.

There is a limited body of research on ethical education and training and its effects. This shows the positive effect of ethical training on moral judgment among business students when the research was based on self-reporting results from learning processes (Shaub 1994; Gautschi and Jones 1998; Desplaces 2007). However, the effects of ethical education and training on decisions and behaviour show mixed results. These studies are based on experimental (Banerjee and Mitra 2018) or quasi-experimental (Mayhew and Murphy 2008) designs. Only one recent study focuses on specific integrity and anti-corruption (not general ethics) education (Borcan et. al. 2023). The reviewed studies generally show limited effects from educational programmes alone. Ethical behaviour seems to be better stimulated by a combination of training and public pressure (Borcan et. al. 2023; Mayhew and Murphy 2008).

More specifically, Borcan et. al. (2023) show that anti-corruption education can have positive effects on attitudes that include disapproval of corruption and support for avoiding corruption, but only when combined with reinforcing social norms. The study employed a lab-in-the-field experimental design. In 2021, law students in Ukraine took part in an online 12-hour integrity training course, including theoretical information and interactive workshops. Post-training, students were involved in a simulated game where they needed to act as intermediaries for bribery, a scenario possible in their future careers as lawyers. During the game, only some of the students were informed about their

78. United Nations, Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment, available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/index.html>.

79. Presentation of YouthLED, available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/en/youth-empowerment/YouthLED.html>.

participation in the integrity training of the other participants in the simulated bribery situation. There are two interesting findings from this experiment. The training generated results on moral awareness and reduced corrupt behaviour:

- ▶ among the first-year students, who were less adapted, integrated or prepared for a corrupt academic or professional environment; and
- ▶ when students perceived that integrity is an accepted and preferred norm among their peers, namely when they were informed that other participants in the bribery game had also been participants in the integrity and anti-corruption training.

Unfortunately, the effect of the training alone on reducing corrupt behaviour, without the reinforcing social norms, was not statistically significant (Borcan et. al. 2023). This shows the need for education measures and additional and broader initiatives that mobilise large social groups. Institutional reforms prioritising transparency and reinforcing integrity as an organisational norm in this way are also needed.

Young people and anti-corruption initiatives

Although less often, other examples of youth engagement in anti-corruption initiatives are provided by UNODC, and also by youth-led initiatives. They acknowledge that anti-corruption education is not enough to ensure that a youth perspective is integrated into anti-corruption efforts in a meaningful way.

In December 2019, the draft resolution of the Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption mentioned that the General Assembly “encourages the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, subject to the availability of extrabudgetary resources, to organise a youth forum to discuss ways for young people to contribute to efforts to prevent and counter corruption” (UNODC 2019). A formal resolution has yet to be published, but in 2023 the United States Government submitted to the Conference of the States Parties the “Road map to strengthening the role of non-governmental actors (young people, academia and civil society) in the fight against corruption” (UNODC 2023). This was followed in 2024 by a Note by the Secretariat (UNODC) entitled “The negative effects of corruption on women and youth and the role played by women and youth in preventing and combating corruption” (UNODC 2024b). These documents complement the activity of UNODC in the area of anti-corruption education under the GRACE initiative.

There are several forms of mobilisation involving young activists in anti-corruption movements, including representative groups of students (Wickberg 2013). In Thailand, Khon Kaen University’s College of Local Administration, with support from UNDP, initiated the Thai Youth Anti-Corruption Network in 2012. As it grew from 35 to over 4 000 members, the network transitioned from actions focused on the university to nationwide awareness campaigns against corruption (Bergin 2024; Independent Commission against Corruption of Mauritius 2019). In Hungary, a group of students co-operated with Transparency International

Hungary to develop a platform for reporting corruption under the format of an “alternative tourist guidebook” (Transparency International 2022). Other examples include Reacción Juvenil de Cambio Paraguay, where young people prepared and engaged their fellow students to monitor public spending as an anti-corruption activity, focusing on identifying irregularities in the allocation of funds and expenditure (Bergin 2024). The Accountability Lab in Nepal involves civil servants identified as ethical leaders who mentor young people as “integrity trendsetters” (Bentley and Mullard 2019).

Digital tools are also used and promoted in youth-led initiatives as part of the solution for fighting corruption and as a means of involving more young people in anti-corruption actions. In Kosovo, young programmers have been involved in a hackathon to develop digital monitoring tools to raise transparency and accountability in public institutions (Neziri 2015). Similar hackathons entitled Coding4Integrity were organised under the UNODC GRACE initiative in 2021, 2022 and 2023 with the participation of over 300 young programmers (up to 35 years old) from Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa (in the Africa Hackathon in 2021), from Brazil and Mexico (in the Brazil Hackathon in 2022 and the Mexico Hackathon in 2023) and from Arab countries (in the Arab Hackathon in 2023).⁸⁰

Another way of mobilising young people against corruption is through art. The Fair Play artists’ movement is “a global platform for young artists to express themselves through music and the arts, to connect with global change makers fighting corruption and amplify these messages”.⁸¹ Nationally, Transparency International Fiji mobilised around 150 young people, mainly artists, to raise awareness of the damage caused by corruption concerning the climate, civil rights and liberties, and public resources (Transparency International 2023).

The anti-corruption activity of the Council of Europe and youth engagement

There are two Council of Europe conventions on anti-corruption policies.

- ▶ The Criminal Law Convention on Corruption (ETS No. 173) was adopted in 1999 to set up a robust legal framework for the criminalisation of corruption, in various forms, in the Council of Europe’s member states. It includes provisions related to bribery, trading in influence, laundering of proceeds of corruption and account offences. The convention covers the regulation as criminal offences of corruption acts of or related to national, foreign and international officials and provisions on jurisdictions and international judicial co-operation on corruption-related issues. It is complemented by the Additional Protocol to the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption (ETS No. 191) including clear provisions on the criminalisation of corruption by

80. GRACE hackathons available at <https://grace.unodc.org/grace/en/youth-empowerment/digital-innovation.html>.

81. Fair Play initiative, available at www.anticorruptionmusic.org.

arbitrators exercising their functions under national laws on arbitration or in international arbitration courts.

- ▶ The Civil Law Convention on Corruption (ETS No. 174) was also adopted in 1999 and is among the first international legal instruments to address corruption from the civil law perspective. It establishes standards for confiscation, compensation for damage resulting from corruption and protection of whistleblowers.

In contrast to the United Nations Convention against Corruption, the Council of Europe Conventions on Corruption do not include provisions on corruption prevention policies. In the context of citizen participation and especially youth participation in anti-corruption policies and initiatives, corruption prevention policies are of great importance. Citizens, including young people, can be involved in monitoring public officials' activities and identifying cases where corruption could have occurred, or they can be involved in monitoring judiciary activity against corruption from the perspective of the criminal cases and regarding the awarding of damages and compensation. However, there are a lot more opportunities for civic participation concerning corruption prevention policies:

Council of Europe conventions are, however, complemented by soft-law documents, mainly recommendations from the Committee of Ministers but also recommendations from the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe,⁸² covering corruption prevention measures:

- ▶ Resolution Res(97)24 on the twenty guiding principles for the fight against corruption.
- ▶ Recommendation 60 (1999) on the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives.
- ▶ Resolution 79 (1999) on the political integrity of local and regional elected representatives.
- ▶ Recommendation 86 (2000) on the financial transparency of political parties and their democratic functioning at the regional level.
- ▶ Resolution 105 (2000) on the financial transparency of political parties and their democratic functioning at the regional level.
- ▶ Recommendation No. R (2000) 10 on codes of conduct for public officials, including a model code of conduct for public officials.
- ▶ Recommendation No. R (2003) 4 on common rules against corruption in the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns.
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)7 on the protection of whistleblowers, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 30 April 2014 and explanatory memorandum.

82. A list of legal instruments and other texts adopted by the Council of Europe bodies used in GRECO evaluations is available at www.coe.int/en/web/greco/documents/legal-instruments-and-other-texts.

- Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)2 on the legal regulation of lobbying activities in the context of public decision making.

The Council of Europe provides continual support and monitoring of anti-corruption policies in member states through its Group of States against Corruption. GRECO monitors compliance with anti-corruption standards, including those set out in the Criminal Convention on Corruption and the Civil Law Convention on Corruption, but it is not limited to these. The 20 guiding principles for the fight against corruption and the recommendations and resolutions of the Committee of Ministers and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities are important sources for the standards promoted by GRECO. The evaluation reports from GRECO provide recommendations on legislative and policy reforms needed in Council of Europe member states, and a procedure of follow-up on recommendations is in place. States are given several years to implement recommendations, and follow-up reports detailing the progress of implementation are drafted and published. GRECO evaluations have been organised in structured evaluation rounds, starting in 2000 and covering, until 2024, six rounds dedicated to several themes, including elements related to criminalisation and to corruption prevention.⁸³

A review of a sample of GRECO evaluations was conducted for this chapter, covering all GRECO evaluations from the fifth round focusing on preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments, and all GRECO evaluations for Bulgaria and Romania.⁸⁴ GRECO evaluations do not include information on youth engagement in the monitored anti-corruption legislation and policies, and youth participation or engagement does not appear to be connected with the anti-corruption priorities of the monitored countries. Moreover, GRECO evaluations do not consider the effects of corruption on young people or whether the anti-corruption legislation and policies are missing or are of poor quality.

GRECO has developed a pilot education training module on corruption and anti-corruption together with the Federation for Education in Europe (FEDE). The training was developed in 2019 based on testing and feedback from young people and is being conducted regularly by FEDE as part of its course “European Culture and Citizenship”. The course is delivered in FEDE’s network of schools, reaching over 10 000 students every year (GRECO 2019). In addition to this, GRECO representatives also participate in summer schools focused on promoting

83. Themes covered by GRECO evaluations include: independence, specialisation and means available to national bodies engaged in the prevention and fight against corruption; the extent and scope of immunities; identification, seizure and confiscation of proceeds from corruption; public administration and corruption (auditing systems; conflicts of interest); prevention of legal persons being used as shields for corruption; tax and financial legislation to counter corruption; links between corruption, organised crime and money laundering; incriminations provided for in the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption; transparency of party funding; prevention of corruption in respect of members of parliament, judges and prosecutors; preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law-enforcement agencies; preventing corruption and promoting integrity at the sub-national level. More information is available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/evaluations>.

84. All GRECO evaluation reports are available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/evaluations>.

integrity aspects and raising awareness of corruption-related issues. However, these initiatives do not specifically target young people.

Supporting learning on corruption and anti-corruption, the Economic Crime and Co-operation Division, in co-operation with the Department for the Implementation of Human Rights, Justice and Legal Co-operation Standards developed an introduction to the prevention of corruption online course as part of the HELP online courses.⁸⁵ HELP stands for the Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals programme and includes a large variety of topics based on the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as other Council of Europe instruments, including the conventions and recommendations on corruption.

Targeting young people, the Council of Europe implements several programmes on human rights education, including the Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) programme of the Education Department,⁸⁶ and the human rights education activities organised by the Youth Department. Most activities on human rights education with young people are based on *Compass*,⁸⁷ the manual first published by the Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe in 2022. However, GRECO and the Economic Crime and Co-operation Division do not participate in these initiatives. And, except for the training module developed by GRECO in collaboration with FEDE, no other initiative focuses on youth as a target group and on anti-corruption as a specific topic.

Both the youth sector of the Council of Europe⁸⁸ and the bodies working on anti-corruption recognise the importance of providing young people with information and learning about human rights, the rule of law and democratic political participation. Learning activities may include sessions promoting integrity in communities and society, as well as some elements raising awareness and understanding of corruption as a hindering factor for human rights and democracy. However, the desk research conducted for this chapter did not reveal systematic anti-corruption learning activities that are presented in a comprehensive way by the Council of Europe structures.

Given the importance of anti-corruption to democracy, including its contribution to improving political participation and democratic culture (Duri and Bak 2022), youth engagement in the anti-corruption work of the Council of Europe should clearly be strengthened. Following the provisions of the Reykjavik Declaration,

85. Information on HELP online courses is available at www.coe.int/en/web/greco/help-online-courses.

86. Information on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) programme available at www.coe.int/en/web/edc.

87. The entire manual and its history are available both in a print version and online at www.coe.int/en/web/compass.

88. The youth sector of the Council of Europe is represented by the Joint Council on Youth, the European Steering Committee on Youth, the Advisory Council on Youth and the Youth Department, its instruments and its partners, according to the explanatory memorandum to the Youth Sector Strategy 2030.

the integration of a youth perspective into the anti-corruption intergovernmental work of the Council of Europe, especially in the work of GRECO, could be the next step.

Meaningful youth participation in anti-corruption initiatives

The criteria for meaningful youth participation have been analysed in previous years. These include informing and preparing young people for engagement/participation through learning and capacity-building opportunities; allowing young people to express their ideas and opinions with due authority, and to be accorded respect, in horizontal working structures; ensuring transparency and accountability in the processes where young people participate; ensuring inclusiveness and diversity of youth participation; and taking into account the opinion of young people in decision making (Bárta, Boldt and Lavizzari 2021). These criteria are convergent with those established by the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) of the Council of Europe in the conceptualisation of the youth perspective:

- ▶ an attitude – think with youth;
- ▶ an experience – learn from and with youth;
- ▶ a skill – participate with youth;
- ▶ an action – act with and for youth.⁸⁹

Only GRACE and a limited number of university-based initiatives meet the criteria for meaningful youth participation. These initiatives are the only ones that include giving a voice to young people in an inclusive way and capacity-building and learning activities about corruption for young people. They also provide for horizontal working structures and activities to inform young people about the results of their participation.

Most of the other initiatives are either limited to learning activities or involve young people in anti-corruption action without providing learning opportunities about corruption. Additionally, these initiatives often lack opportunities for constructive dialogue between young people and decision makers regarding the necessary anti-corruption reforms. These initiatives are not a good example of integrating a youth perspective on anti-corruption policies. Due to their limited scope and the fact that they often disconnect learning about corruption from participation in anti-corruption activities, it is unlikely that they will effectively ensure that anti-corruption policies address the needs and expectations of young people. As a result, this may lead to a lack of trust in these policies, a perception of widespread and hard-to-avoid corruption, and therefore increased acceptance of corrupt behaviour among young people.

89. The youth perspective is available on the Council of Europe website at www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-perspective-2.

Conclusions

Corruption is a significant risk to the quality of life and the development and transition of young people, as shown by the data presented in this chapter. In a nutshell:

- ▶ corruption is more detrimental and costly for people with less power, and young people are usually considered to be in this category because of their limited access to both material and symbolic resources during their transition to, or at the beginning of, their adult life;
- ▶ corruption affects the accessibility and quality of education, therefore hindering the learning and development of children and young people, and also affects other public services essential for young people, such as healthcare and housing;
- ▶ corruption limits the effectiveness of civic and political participation, including youth participation, as in a highly corrupt system the decisions taken serve particular interests, not citizens' needs and expectations expressed through civic and political participation;
- ▶ corruption poses a major risk to security and peace and therefore significantly endangers the safety of young people.

While the Council of Europe has pioneered anti-corruption international standards and is a leading organisation in the promotion and monitoring of these standards through GRECO evaluations, youth engagement in these activities remains limited for now to a training module. The review of GRECO's documents does not show a strong systematic promotion of youth participation in anti-corruption policy development or evaluation. This may hinder the Organisation's efforts to support young people to participate in revitalising pluralist democracies, as provided by the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, and to strengthen trust in democratic processes, which as research shows are promoted by anti-corruption policies.

At the same time, existing literature and documents show that anti-corruption education is needed, because as a single measure to fight corruption it is not enough. Ethics, integrity and anti-corruption education need to be complemented by a clear promotion of social norms and a broader awareness in society at large about the costs of corruption and the benefits of integrity.

Some good practices for youth engagement in anti-corruption initiatives exist. They are led internationally by UNODC, which also established a YouthLED Integrity Advisory Board. They represent a meaningful engagement of youth leaders with a large intergovernmental organisation and a form of promoting youth engagement in anti-corruption worldwide. Initiatives of civil society organisations, especially Transparency International and its chapters around the world, present interesting examples of youth engagement in anti-corruption. However, meaningful youth engagement in anti-corruption initiatives is still rare and poorly documented. There are not enough good practice examples, and

what exists is fragmented and not able, without significant institutional efforts, to support the rapid development of a more extensive practice.

In this context, following the provisions of the Reykjavik Declaration regarding the integration of a youth perspective in intergovernmental work and other deliberations of the Council of Europe, a youth perspective on the anti-corruption activities of the Council of Europe is necessary and would be beneficial to address the challenges of corruption. The Council of Europe can strengthen its role as a leader in the field of anti-corruption, combining the efforts of GRECO and the Economic Crime and Co-operation Division with those of the Youth Department and the Joint Council on Youth, through its structure of co-management. There is a need for comprehensive youth engagement programmes, including learning activities on corruption and anti-corruption; youth empowerment and youth engagement activities on themes focusing on or related to public ethics, integrity and anti-corruption; youth research regarding the effects of corruption on young people and attitudes towards and experiences of corruption among young people; and the co-creation and co-management of anti-corruption initiatives.

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Chapter 17

Embedding youth perspectives in climate litigation and movements

Ria Das and Sia Das

Humanity is facing a triple planetary crisis with youth and children bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. Sadly, the world's response to this crisis has so far been lackadaisical and piecemeal. Despite being disproportionately impacted, children and youth are often excluded from contributing and participating in legal and political decision-making spaces. This deliberate reticence by governments to deal with the climate crisis has finally prompted young people across the world to respond through climate litigation and movements to assert claims for intergenerational justice. The concept of intergenerational equity, with its concomitant requirement of intergenerational responsibility, forms a critical part of any anthropocentric reading of the climate crisis (Rogers 2020). This chapter reflects on the symbolic and political power of contemporary youth climate litigation and activist movements in integrating youth perspectives.

Climate change litigation refers to those cases that include “climate” as part of the lawsuit and involve material issues on climate mitigation, adaptation and climate science (Yale University 2023). However, climate justice is increasingly being recognised, with young people at the forefront through youth-led climate litigation cases in numerous jurisdictions, such as India, Pakistan, the Netherlands, the United States and Uganda to name a few, where young people are launching lawsuits against their governments (UNEP 2023).

Youth perspectives are becoming central in climate litigation as young activists are stepping into the legal arena, shaping arguments from their viewpoints, asserting their rights to a healthy environment and demanding accountability from their governments and corporations for their climate inaction. In climate lawsuits initiated by children and youth, we hear their authentic perspectives as they turn to adult forums to safeguard their future. These lawsuits are serving as instruments through which youth and children can articulate their perspectives (Rogers 2020).

The symbolic relationship between youth movements and climate litigation has seen an upward trajectory with the integration of youth perspectives on advancing climate justice into environmental rule of law. This chapter demonstrates how precedents have been set through the integration of youth perspectives in climate litigation, highlighting children and young people as agents of change and emphasising the importance of integrating their perspectives into climate change governance and legal frameworks.

Research methodology

As climate litigation emerges as a powerful strategy in the climate action toolkit, young people are increasingly turning to courts to hold governments and corporations to account for their role in the climate crisis. This chapter maps youth-led climate litigation cases, outlining their significance, key challenges and the potential ways in which they may continue to develop in the future. To present a detailed picture of youth mainstreaming and youth participation through youth-led climate litigation cases, the chapter compares youth-led climate litigation in the USA and the Europe, focusing on *Juliana v. United States* and *Held v. Montana* in the US; and *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others*, wherein a complaint was brought before the European Court of Human Rights, and *Saachi and Others v. Argentina and Others* in Europe, wherein 16 children filed a petition alleging that Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey violated their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and brought a suit before the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The US case studies were specifically chosen as both cases emphasise intergenerational justice, and both analyse how constitutional frameworks are being used to challenge climate inaction. The Juliana case raised the legal question of whether the US Government's failure to address climate change violates constitutional principles such as equal protection and due process. Similarly, *Held v. Montana* also centred around constitutional rights, but specifically focused on the state's obligation to safeguard the environment as guaranteed by the state constitution, providing an opportunity to examine how different levels of government address youth claims on environmental protection. In contrast, Europe has seen a surge in climate litigation in recent years, with high-profile and innovative cases, especially regarding human rights and government accountability. The two European court cases – Duarte Agostinho and Saachi – have been selected for a particular reason: these petitions demonstrate a potential shift in the nature of international human rights law. These cases showcase how international human rights law may be changing in a way that encompasses human–environment connections. It is also evident from these cases that international human rights are becoming more participatory for youth litigants. These two cases highlight a growing human rights-based approach, where governments are held responsible for failing to protect their citizens from climate change, that is influencing courts globally. By comparing these European cases with the US, the research will examine how differing legal frameworks – human rights in Europe and constitutional/environmental arguments in the US – shape the trajectory of youth-led climate litigation and impact policy, public

awareness and youth activism. These four cases were selected for their focus on intergenerational justice, equitable access to legal systems and their significance in climate justice.

Evolution

Role of youth in climate advocacy

Youth participation in politics and activism is not new. Young people have played significant roles in various movements, such as labour movements, anti-war campaigns and protests, environmental justice, the US civil rights movement, feminism and immigrant rights movements (Costanza-Chock 2012).

The importance of mainstreaming various societal groups was recognised very early by the international communities. Severn Cullis-Suzuki, a young activist who is, famously, known for her work in ensuring intergenerational justice during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, is one prominent instance of youth involvement in climate advocacy.

It was the resurgence of activism beginning in 2018, marked by Greta Thunberg's solitary school strike in front of the Swedish Parliament, that catalysed a global movement with the establishment of a movement called Fridays for Future. This marked the beginning of young people's active participation through youth-led organisations in international climate discussions, such as through the establishment of YOUNGO, a constituency representing youth within the UN climate negotiations.

What is relatively new in the climate justice movement is the current landscape of revolutionary power that equips youth to take their activism from the streets to the doors of power. Today's youth movements differ from those in the past – they focus on structured advocacy, legal strategy and intersectionality. Speaking of intersectionality, the movements in the past particularly emphasised a singular issue, as was observed during the US civil rights movement or protests against the Vietnam war. However, youth movements today are different as they adopt an interdisciplinary approach, weaving environmental issues together with broader societal, economic and systemic change.

One of the most game-changing evolutions in the climate movement is the structured advocacy and proactive engagement with policy making and legal avenues. Young people are continually educating and equipping themselves to navigate complex systems, communicating directly with law and policy makers. Initiatives like the World's Youth for Climate Justice (WYCJ n.d.), a global youth-led initiative, exemplify how young people are learning to articulate their demands, not just in public demonstrations but also through formal legal channels that can effect change at the governmental level. WYCJ was the driving force behind mobilising states to submit their responses on the advisory opinion to the International Court of Justice regarding state obligations on the protection of present and future generations from the impacts of the climate crisis. They were able to achieve this through strategic advocacy, direct engagement with diplomatic missions and collaboration with community service organisations.

Emergence of youth-led climate litigation

The evolution of environmental law and emergence of climate litigation can be traced back to the late 1980s (Setzer and Higham 2021). However, youth-led climate litigation evolved and emerged only in the 1990s with the case of *Oposa v. Factoran* in the Philippines, which was led by 43 young students who decided to sue their governments, seeking protection against deforestation (*Oposa v. Factoran* 1993). This movement emerged as a powerful influence for youth to contribute their perspectives and narratives to efforts to address the impacts of climate change on their futures.

To keep up with the momentum, organisations such as Our Children's Trust, founded in 2010, have played a key role in providing legal services and aid to secure young people's right to a safe environment through youth-led climate litigation, by filing lawsuits throughout the US and inspiring and mainstreaming youth voices globally. One of them is the prominent case of *Juliana v. United States*, which was filed in 2015 by 21 young people in America, asserting an infringement of their constitutional right to life, liberty and property by the federal government because of its failure to provide adequate measures against climate change.

Understanding the relationship between youth movements, protests and youth-led litigation in advancing youth perspectives and participation

Youth perspectives in climate litigation can empower them to assert their rights and interests effectively by allowing them to meaningfully engage in processes that affect their lives. The integration of youth perspectives into the legal process can act as a tool to shift the narrative of the issue from a "technical" to a "rights-based" issue, giving space for youth rights to be prioritised (UNDP 2023). A similar shift in narrative has been observed in the rulings in cases like *Held v. Montana*, where the court recognised the rights of youth to a clean and healthy environment, highlighting the role of courts in safeguarding the rights of young people. Since children and youth are disproportionately impacted by climate change, the inclusion of their voices and perspectives can enhance participation and ensure policies address the needs of youth. Similarly, this approach has been quite dominant in documents such as the 2001 European Commission White Paper on youth, which continues to influence European Union (EU) strategies and programmes for inclusive governance and youth participation (European Commission 2001).

Youth-led litigation can be a strong force in amplifying these movements and integrating youth perspectives into legal frameworks, such as in cases like *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others* (2022) heard in the European Court of Human Rights. It also sparked discussions within the European Union, bringing attention to the rights of young people and future generations. The youth perspectives and legal arguments in these cases led by young people encouraged EU policy makers to integrate the needs and perspectives of young people while developing climate-related policies. It highlighted the disproportionate impact of climate change on young people and the need to prioritise youth rights and perspectives (Hettihewa 2023). Similarly, in *Sacchi and Others v. Argentina and*

Others, the complaint by 16 young people before the UN Committee on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) highlighted the state's obligations to mitigate climate change and its impact on youth globally.

Even though the decisions in these cases were not in favour of the young people, the discourse around the cases of both Duarte and Saachi have profoundly influenced the courts around the world by bringing to attention a broader understanding of environmental rights. These youth-led litigation cases have given rise to conversations around incorporating youth voices in policy making. The EU has become conscious of the need to integrate young people's rights and needs.

Youth climate movements are powerful tools for highlighting youth perspectives against the climate crisis. Movements such as Fridays for Future have mobilised youth across the world to demand climate justice. Most often these movements have leveraged the momentum from the grassroots efforts to pursue litigation against governments and businesses accountable for climate change (Nisbett 2023). One such prominent case, *Held v. Montana*, emerged from community engagements and activism highlighting environmental injustices. These later prompted 16 young plaintiffs to approach the Montana First Judicial District court to file against the state's reliance on fossil fuel extraction, which they claimed violated their right to a clean and healthy environment. Such lawsuits highlight the symbiotic relationship between youth movements and youth-led litigation and the importance of integrating youth perspectives into all levels of decision making on the climate.

Youth-led climate cases: navigating challenges and legal benefits in the USA and Europe

"Youth-led" is defined to include cases with plaintiffs who are 1. named children and young people; 2. an NGO led by children and young people; or 3. a class of children and young people. Another trend in climate change litigation is "youth leadership" (Donger 2022). As of 2024, with the growing support of NGOs and law firms, approximately 34 climate-related lawsuits had been filed by young people, bringing climate cases against the state and federal governments (Vittal 2024). These cases show the growing trend for youth-led climate litigation around the world, where young people are knocking on the doors of the courts and relying on rights-based legal theories to bring their claims for current and future generations.

Case overview of youth-led climate cases in the USA: *Juliana v. United States and Held v. Montana*

Juliana v. United States

In August 2015, 21 youth plaintiffs, all aged 22 years or younger, the plaintiffs, represented by the non-profit organisation Our Children's Trust, including Martinez, a member of Earth Guardians and the climate scientist Dr. James Hansen as a guardian of Future Generations, filed a lawsuit in the United States Federal District Court for the District of Oregon against the United

States, the president and various federal government officials. It was alleged that the industrial-scale burning of fossil fuels was causing catastrophic and destabilising impacts on the global climate and threatening the plaintiffs' right to a healthy, habitable living environment.

The plaintiffs alleged that the "nation's climate system" was critical to their rights to life, liberty and property and that the defendants had violated their substantive due process rights by allowing fossil fuel production, consumption and combustion at "dangerous levels". The plaintiffs also asserted an equal protection claim based on the government's denial to them of fundamental rights afforded to prior and present generations. They also asserted violations of rights secured by the Ninth Amendment, which the plaintiffs said protects "the right to be sustained by our country's vital natural systems, including our climate system" (US Constitution, amendment IX). The plaintiffs also alleged that the defendants failed to fulfil their obligations under the public trust doctrine. The plaintiffs sought a ruling to the effect that the United States government violated their fundamental right to "a climate system capable of sustaining human life". This right, the plaintiffs contended, arose under the due process clause of the United States Constitution, which states that no person shall, due to the interference of the federal government, "be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process". In their complaint, the plaintiffs urged the court to compel the defendants to take steps to reduce carbon dioxide emissions so that atmospheric CO₂ concentrations do not exceed 350 parts per million by 2100.

Pre-trial hearings were held in March 2016. In support of its motions to dismiss the case, the US contended that the plaintiffs lacked constitutional standing to sue because they had not alleged a particularised harm that was traceable to defendants' actions. Also, the US contended that there was "no constitutional right to a pollution-free environment", the plaintiffs had not stated a constitutional claim and federal courts lacked jurisdiction over public trust doctrine lawsuits because such claims arise under state law.

On 29 December 2016, the US District Court in Oregon agreed to take up the case. On the defendants' motion to dismiss the petition, Judge Aiken outlined a substantive due process right to a climate system capable of supporting human life, allowing the plaintiffs the opportunity to demonstrate that this right had been violated during the subsequent trial. Judge Aiken observed (Juliana 217 F. Supp. 3d at 31-32):

The idea is that certain rights may be necessary to enable the exercise of other rights, whether enumerated or unenumerated ... Exercising my "reasoned judgment", I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society. Just as marriage is the "foundation of the family", a stable climate system is quite literally "the foundation of society", without which there would be neither civilisation nor progress.

However, on 1 May 2024, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (Federal Appellate Court) ordered, "The district court is instructed to dismiss the case forthwith for lack of Article III standing, without leave to amend". Regardless of one's perspective on the merits of the case, this case was dismissed after nearly a decade of legal battles, before the first witness could even testify.

Held v. Montana

On 13 March 2020, 16 children and young people from Montana, then aged between 2 and 18, filed a lawsuit alleging that Montana was violating their constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment. This case challenged the constitutionality of Montana's fossil fuel-based state energy policy and the exception that barred state officials from considering climate change in environmental reviews of energy policies. This case became the first constitutional climate trial in US history. On 4 August 2023, Judge Kathy Seeley of the Montana 1st Judicial District Court handed down a landmark ruling in favour of the young Montanan climate activists (*Held v. Montana* 2023).

A Montana trial court ruled that the youth plaintiffs had standing in their claims that the provision of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prohibiting consideration of greenhouse gas emissions and corresponding climate change impacts in its environmental reviews (the MEPA Limitation) violated the Montana Constitution because "it removes the only preventative, equitable relief available to the public and MEPA litigants". The court also held that the plaintiffs had an inalienable right to a clean and healthy environment, "which includes climate as part of the environmental life-support system".

The court further found that "what happens in Montana has a real impact on fossil fuel energy systems, CO₂ emissions, and global warming" and that the state defendants' actions to permit fossil fuel activities with no environmental review of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change increased Montana's emissions and "exacerbate anthropogenic climate change and cause further harms to Montana's environment and its citizens, especially its youth".

In addition, the court found that the plaintiffs had proved standing to bring their claims that injuries caused to their mental and physical health, homes and property, recreational, spiritual and aesthetic interests, tribal and cultural traditions, economic security and happiness were caused by carbon emissions for which state defendants were liable (although the court said mental health injuries "directly resulting from state inaction or counterproductive action on climate change" did not on their own establish a cognisable injury). The court concluded that "every additional ton" of greenhouse gas emissions exacerbated the plaintiffs' injuries. The court further found that there was a reasonable traceable link between the state's disregard for greenhouse gas emissions under the MEPA Limitation and the plaintiffs' injuries and that the plaintiffs revealed redressability because the state defendants could deny permits for fossil fuel activities that would result in unconstitutional levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

This decision has a crucial signalling role. In a larger sense, the decision gives a positive signal of judicial receptiveness from the claimant's standpoint, which may be invigorating for young people, climate campaigners and their advocates. By way of example, the US Environmental Protection Agency issued a statement hailing the decision as "setting a precedent for intergenerational accountability and environmental justice". Such a strong decision in favour of the claimants in *Held v. Montana* may suggest greater prospects for youth-led climate lawsuits from the claimant's standpoint and will likely shape the form of climate litigation in the future.

To conclude, both cases represent significant milestones in youth-led climate litigation, highlighting the inherent challenges facing young people, as well as the potential success for future climate litigation. While the *Held v. Montana* case resulted in a favourable decision for youth, the *Juliana v. United States* case decision illustrated the complex challenges in the evolving landscape of youth-led climate litigation.

Youth-led climate cases in Europe

Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others

Six applicants, all nationals living in Portugal, brought a complaint directly before the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) that there had been a breach of Articles 23, 8 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, leading to existing and future impacts of climate change attributable to their home country and 32 other states, specifically in relation to smoke from wildfires in the Portugal region in 2017, affected their physical and mental well-being. The complainants alleged that, by not meeting the Paris Agreement's goal of keeping global warming to below 1.5 degrees Celsius, the respondents had violated their human rights. According to the plaintiffs, European countries have exceeded global carbon levels that are consistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement, and hence failed to satisfy climate emission targets. Such actions are an alleged breach of fundamental rights protected under the European Convention on Human Rights, including the right to life, freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment, privacy, family life and freedom from discrimination.

On 9 April 2024, the Court declared the application inadmissible. With respect to extraterritorial jurisdiction, the Court found no grounds to expand the judicial application as requested by the applicants. Territorial jurisdiction was therefore only established in respect of Portugal, and the complaint was declared inadmissible against other respondent states. Nonetheless, because the applicants had failed to exhaust domestic remedies in Portugal, the complaint against Portugal was also deemed inadmissible. However, in its analysis, the Court agreed with the applicants on certain points, namely that: 1. climate change has special features; 2. states have ultimate control over public and private emissions on their territories; 3. emissions have adverse effects on the rights of people outside a state's borders "and thus outside the remit of that state's democratic process"; and 4. climate change is a problem "of a truly existential nature for humankind, in a way that sets it apart from other cause-and-effect situations". It is pertinent to note that this case presented arguments about states' fair shares and the harmonisation of human rights law with the international climate law regime.

Sacchi and Others v. Argentina and Others

In 2019, 16 children and young people (then aged between 8 and 17, filed a petition alleging that Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey had violated their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and brought a suit before the United Nations Committee on the

Rights of the Child (CRC). The child petitioners brought the suit against five countries – Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey – alleging that the state parties' acts and omissions regarding climate change had caused the petitioners harm and violated their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). They alleged that the five countries had not cut their fossil fuel emissions and had failed to encourage the world's biggest emitters to curb carbon pollution. The child petitioners relied heavily on the human rights framework provided under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They referenced the convention's articles on the right to life (Article 6), the right to health (Article 24) and the right of Indigenous children to their own customs (Article 30). Additionally, they also contended that the respondent states' climate change policy had failed to adequately take into account the best interests of children as a group (Article 3) in their policies in respect of climate change. Additionally, it was argued that all 16 petitioners fell under the jurisdiction of all of the respondents. They relied on extraterritorial jurisdiction, which can, under certain conditions, extend the human rights obligations of countries outside their territorial boundaries. The petitioners argued that the harm caused to them was judicable because the acts of the states parties had led to effects felt outside their territories. It is pertinent that each of the respondents' states has ratified the UNCRC.

The CRC did not issue a final ruling on the merits of the case. Instead, it took a preliminary procedural decision on whether it had the jurisdiction to hear the complaint and whether the complaint was admissible under the procedures of law. The CRC declared the communication inadmissible due to the failure to exhaust domestic remedies. However, the committee did conclude that a state party can be held accountable for the negative impact of its failure to mitigate climate change on the rights of children both within and outside its territory. Committee member Ann Skelton observed that:

Emitting states are responsible for the negative impact of the emissions originating in their territory on the rights of children – even those children who may be located abroad. The collective nature of the causes of the climate change must not absolve a state from its individual responsibility.

Jurisdiction was therefore established from the perspective that the potential harm to children's rights from a state's carbon emissions was "reasonably foreseeable" to the state party. The committee therefore did not differentiate between the responsibility the state might have for emissions directly caused by state actors rather than non-state actors. The committee also concluded that the petitioners had established that they had experienced a sufficient level of harm in order to justify their "victim status".

This case is considered groundbreaking because it brought together the issues of climate change and children's rights. It highlighted the increasing convergence between environmental law and human rights law. Moreover, despite the unfavourable decision, the committee recognised the duty of the states to protect children from the foreseeable harm that results from climate change. This reasoning is highly relevant for all future climate rights youth litigants.

To conclude, in both the Duarte and the Sacchi cases, the courts rejected the youth plaintiffs' claims primarily on legal grounds, with issues being related to jurisdiction and procedural challenges. In the case of Duarte, the claim was rejected primarily because of the issue of territorial jurisdiction and legal standing as the court determined that it had the jurisdiction to hear the complaint against Portugal and not against other respondent states and, therefore, the complaint was declared inadmissible against other respondent states. However, the complaint against Portugal was dismissed as the applicants had failed to exhaust domestic remedies in Portugal. Similarly, the Sacchi case was dismissed primarily on the ground that the plaintiffs had not exhausted all domestic remedies before bringing their complaint to the international level. These decisions indicate some of the procedural challenges that climate cases will face in the future. While the committee recognised the victim status and established that it had jurisdiction over the case, it found the case inadmissible because of its failure to exhaust domestic remedies. It gave rise to a new challenge with regard to the admissibility of the decision, beyond the exhaustion of domestic remedies.

Challenges of youth-led climate litigation

For several years, young people have been involved in litigation to address environmental harm (OHCHR 2023a). Youth-led cases are still relatively unusual, in large part because of the enormous challenges that children and young people face in accessing court systems (Bakker 2020). Some barriers to justice are situational. There is almost a total absence of education for children to inform them of potential legal avenues to remedy infringements of rights (Grover 2018). Moreover, the financial burdens of litigation exclude it from being a viable option for most, especially marginalised, children (Donger 2022). Other barriers are legal. Historically, children have been treated as "objects and not subjects of the law", as the property of their parents rather than rights-bearing individuals (Woodhouse 2009). Although there is now almost universal recognition that children are legal persons with their own interests, they are still overwhelmingly required to approach courts through a guardian ad litem, who instructs the lawyer and makes decisions on how to proceed. Very few countries have nuanced rules that account for the different and evolving capacities of individual children in legal processes (Child Rights International Network 2016). These challenges are detailed below.

Legal standing

One of the most difficult aspects of climate lawsuits for youth litigants is overcoming the procedural challenges, particularly in establishing legal standing. To provide a basis for standing, the impacts must count as injuries, which they probably do; be caused by the defendant; and be remediable by a court. The best precedents for the plaintiffs are *Held v. Montana* and *Massachusetts v. Environment Protection Agency* (2007), where the Supreme Court accorded the state standing on the harm caused by rising sea levels in a climate change case. *Held v. Montana* was founded on a particular constitutional principle, in which

the constitution contained a right. The case highlighted the legal boundaries within which the courts operate, thus setting a precedent for how courts should deal with lawsuits brought by youth plaintiffs, claims that are different from other lawsuits against state actions. In contrast, in *Juliana v. United States* the case was eventually dismissed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on the grounds that it lacked standing on the part of the plaintiffs, highlighting the challenges that young litigants face while proving their cases in a court of law. Similarly, both the Duarte and Sacchi cases present challenges regarding the issue of legal standing – issues concerning victim status, extraterritorial jurisdiction and exhaustion of domestic remedies. The critical point here is the victim status of the young people, where the responding states have placed strong emphasis on the fact that these young people are not victims as they are unable to show the direct and specific impact of climate change. In summary, although the young applicants' case was potentially strong on its specific merits, they faced significant legal challenges when it came to the question of admissibility on the issue of legal standing.

Complex legal frameworks and limited resources

Another challenge faced by youth-led cases is having to contend with the complex legal frameworks surrounding climate policy and constitutional law. These examples illustrate a terrain filled with complex laws and regulations that can hinder young people in the litigation process. In *Juliana v. United States*, the plaintiffs faced the challenge of revising the interpretation of the complex constitutional rights regarding climate issues, a procedure that requires substantial legal knowledge. Similarly, in *Held v. Montana*, a provision in the Montana Environmental Policy Act prevented state agencies from considering climate concerns, requiring a fully fledged legal challenge requiring clarity in constitutional law. Moreover, in both the cases, youth-led organisations often operated with limited funds, which hindered access to legal representation and the ability to engage necessary research. Such high costs associated with processing cases across jurisdictions lead to discouragement among youth litigants from engaging in the process effectively (*Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others* 2022). In the cases of Duarte and Sacchi, the litigants encountered serious procedural hurdles that hindered their ability to effectively pursue their claims. In the Duarte case, the Court ruled the case inadmissible mainly because of the applicants' failure to exhaust domestic remedies in their home states. Similarly, the Sacchi case was dismissed primarily on the ground that the plaintiffs had not exhausted all domestic remedies before bringing their complaint to the international level. The children claimed that exhaustion of domestic remedies would require them to engage in different laws and courts in several jurisdictions, which would be unduly onerous and burdensome. These complicated legal procedures present obstacles to justice that disproportionately impact youth litigants, especially as they are central to both challenges to the jurisdictional issues and the admissibility of the claims themselves. Furthermore, in the Duarte case, the applicants brought their case directly to the European Court of Human Rights, given the complexity of the case and their limited financial

means, as well as limited prospects of success in each of the 33 respondent states, which would have imposed an excessive and disproportionate burden on them.

Time consuming and energy intensive

The *Juliana v. United States* and *Held v. Montana* cases in the US and the cases of Duarte and Sacchi in Europe highlight the costs of these suits for young plaintiffs, particularly in relation to the management of their educational commitments. The Juliana case, which was filed in 2015, resulted in a drawn-out legal fight that lasted several years, involving a lengthy legal battle, and many court appearances and much legal work. This additional period can be a lost opportunity to learn and grow personally as the young people involved are often required to commit substantial time to legal activities rather than to their education. In the *Held v. Montana* case, the 16 young plaintiffs actively engaged in presenting evidence during trial proceedings, while also managing their studies. Similarly, the Duarte and Sacchi cases took up a lot of time because of various legal procedures and requirements.

A comparative look: human rights-based approach versus constitutional approaches in youth climate litigation

Youth-led climate cases in Europe are distinguished by their use of a human rights-based approach, which offers a more robust framework for arguing against state inaction on climate change. This system differs from the constitutional rights-based approach as seen in cases in the USA.

Constitutional rights-based approach in the USA

Success rates in the USA have differed from case to case. The case of *Juliana v. United States* saw numerous setbacks, highlighting the difficulties that young litigants face in the federal court. The main emphasis of both the Juliana and Held cases primarily focused on constitutional rights. *Held v. Montana* was a significant win for youth litigants, where the court recognised the constitutional right to a healthy environment, setting a precedent for future litigants (*Held v. Montana* 2023: paragraph 4). However, outcomes are less predictable in the broader context of federal law, where judges have been reluctant to link environmental concerns to constitutional rights.

The Juliana case faced dismissal by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeal after nearly a decade because of the complex procedure of establishing standing and proving the government's direct act of causing injuries to the plaintiff. The Ninth Circuit dismissed the case, thereby creating a broader trend in the US legal system. However, it is worth mentioning that Judge Aiken's decision to allow Juliana to proceed is widely regarded as a watershed moment because it demonstrated federal constitutional public trust and substantive due process concerning the rights to a stable climatic system capable of supporting human life (Ryan et. al 2018).

Human rights-based approach in Europe

Conversely, youth-led lawsuits in the Europe have achieved important legal milestones. The decision in *Sacchi v. Argentina* was based on arguments concerning human rights norms. This approach empowers youth claimants to advocate accountability based on international human rights standards that support their climate policies. Despite the Sacchi case being declared inadmissible for the claimants, it was a major win for future climate change complaints under the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as a result of the UN Committee's expansive ruling on the extraterritorial jurisdictional issue relating to climate change. This observation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that state policies impacting climate have direct consequences for the rights of youth established a precedent that future cases by youth claimants could be built upon (*Sacchi and Others v. Argentina and Others* 2021). Similarly, in the Duarte case, the petitioners based their arguments on how climate change violated their human rights, focusing directly on the European Convention on Human Rights. Despite the unfavourable outcome, this case serves as an example of the acknowledgement of rights on climate change and the potential possibility that future legal proceedings may use this framework for further climate action.

Both the USA and Europe are pivotal in the fight for climate justice through youth-led litigation. The success percentages demonstrate the complexities of each jurisdiction's legal systems; the US faces procedural challenges while Europe shows emerging favourable interpretations of climate rights that prioritise human rights.

Implications for future climate litigation

The different frameworks adopted by the USA and Europe highlight a critical difference in how climate right issues are litigated. Although both Duarte and Sacchi ultimately resulted in dismissal due to technical defects, the human rights-based approach and arguments have the potential to influence cases positively in the future by establishing the link between environmental degradation and fundamental rights. This approach is a strategic legal narrative that keeps the pressure on states to comply with their international human rights and climate change obligations.

In contrast, the procedural and substantial technicalities faced by youth-led actions in the USA show the inadequacies of relying solely on constitution-based arguments without any comprehensive environmental rights provisions. The Held case is, however, a glimmering beacon of hope; the framework based on the US Constitution will have wholesale systematic issues that may not adequately address the climate crisis vis-à-vis youth rights in the future.

Although the US and European youth-led climate cases have not yet consistently resulted in wins for the claimants, the human rights-based approach in Europe results in a more compelling legal mechanism for taking climate action. The legal recognition of climate change in the cases of Duarte and Sacchi as a significant human rights issue underscores the potential for future climate litigation to make significant strides in Europe. This approach provides a more accessible

path to justice for young climate litigants. In contrast, the US presents a more complex and often more restricted constitutional framework, with its own unique challenges and opportunities for young litigants. However, framing climate litigation within a human rights context could further enhance the effectiveness of climate litigation across all regions, broadening the way to justice for youth climate litigants in the future.

Conclusion

Youth-led climate litigation serves as an effective tool for integrating youth perspectives and fostering participation in environmental decision making. Regional, national and international strategic litigation has placed children and youth at the front and centre of our collective response to the climate emergency, both as advocates and as victims. The rise of youth-led climate litigation underscores the critical need to integrate young people's perspectives into environmental decision-making processes. The need to incorporate youth perspectives into climate governance has been increasingly recognised by the United Nations and various human rights bodies (OHCHR 2023b). This chapter has explored how youth and children are well placed to highlight their perspectives through powerful arguments for intergenerational justice.

Ultimately, the increasing trend of youth litigation in both the USA and Europe highlights a pivotal shift in how younger generations challenge environmental inaction and assert their rights. By navigating the legal system, young people are not only advocating immediate change but are also reshaping the conversation around climate issues and advancing their role as key stakeholders in the decision-making processes. This participatory approach is positioned to affect how policies are formed and enforced, and to promote a stronger, more inclusive climate justice narrative on a global scale.

However, there is a need for more consistent inclusion of youth perspectives in legal proceedings, clarifying and enforcing legal obligations towards young people, ensuring integrated advocacy strategies that involve collaboration between youth organisations and legal experts to provide support networks and resources. Looking ahead, the results of these litigations have the potential to significantly influence policy reforms and inspire further youth engagement in climate advocacy across the world.

Legal glossary

- ▶ Ninth Circuit Court – Cases in the federal system are initially heard in a US District Court (the trial court). If a party does not agree with the District Court's decision, they may appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court (or another relevant appellate court, depending on the region).
- ▶ Legal standing – This refers to the plaintiff's requirement to show that an injury is personal and direct and is of substantial harm to the plaintiff that it

can be redressed by the court. In the cases of Montana, Juliana and Sacchi, legal standing meant the youth plaintiffs' claim of direct harm caused to them by climate change.

- ▶ Due process – It is a constitutional guarantee that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.
- ▶ Domestic remedies – These are the legal options available within the legal system of a country that are to be pursued and exhausted before a case can be tried in an international court, usually in human rights cases, to allow local authorities to address grievances first.
- ▶ Victim status – This refers to the recognition of an individual or group as having suffered harm or injury, typically under human rights law, which grants them the right to seek redress or legal remedy for that harm.
- ▶ Advisory opinion – A formal legal opinion given by a court of legal authority in response to a request from a government body, international organisation or other authorised entity.

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Chapter 18

Young heritage professionals in EU cultural heritage policies, frameworks and initiatives

Meetali Gupta

In the international sphere, the introduction of heritage diplomacy and the understanding of heritage as a field in itself is quite recent. It was with the 1972 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention that the term "heritage" was first used in an international cultural context. This also marked a shift from cultural diplomacy to heritage diplomacy (Scott 2015). At the European Union (EU) level, however, the evolution of the heritage sector has been directly linked to that of culture. The very development of the EU integration project was greatly dependent on using "Europe's common heritage" as a means of unifying the member states and instilling a sense of belonging and identity among the EU community (Jakubowski, Hausler and Fiorentini 2015). The EU works through its many programmes and initiatives within culture and heritage to ensure that the cultural heritage within the member states is safeguarded and protected. Political discourses within the field have now reached a point where discussions centred around the importance of including culture (of which cultural heritage is a part) in different EU policies are becoming more prominent. However, what remains to be questioned and understood, to also ensure the growth and sustainability of the sector, is the involvement of young heritage professionals in these frameworks, work plans, initiatives and programmes. Precarious employment is an issue within the heritage sector, with a high level of self-employment and a lower level of job security (Eurostat 2023; Europeana Network Association 2019). In addition, there exists a significant gap between academia and the practical implementation of EU-funded projects by organisations, further causing a lack of intergenerational understanding and leading to selective representation in the field of heritage. Furthermore, the definitional challenge within the sector with respect to "heritage" and "young professionals" has led to a lack of certainty about the sectoral skills required for the labour

market, thereby affecting the development of policies for integration of these professionals in the field. This absence of understanding of the specific needs of young heritage professionals hinders their conscious inclusion in decision-making processes and does not help address the challenge of recruitment blocks where many heritage experts working in public institutions are reaching the age of retirement without passing their knowledge on to emerging young professionals, which makes it difficult to integrate (European Commission 2019b) young graduates into the labour market.

The research presented in this chapter is an attempt to briefly highlight the historical development of culture and cultural heritage in the European Union and to analyse how the various instruments proposed by EU institutions to safeguard European heritage, and their implementation through programmes, impact young professionals in the field. It focuses on understanding the ways in which young heritage professionals are included in European policies, frameworks and initiatives for the cultural heritage sector, with a further analysis of heritage organisations reporting to the EU Commission as experts on cultural heritage, through the lens of inclusivity. Lastly, it brings to the fore the challenges faced by the group of young heritage professionals that hinder their acknowledgement in youth mainstreaming processes, which leads to their limited inclusion in the discussions that shape the policies affecting them.

Methodology

The research follows a mixed research methodology, with qualitative and quantitative analyses supported by primary and secondary data sources. Divided into three broad working steps, the study begins by examining the strategic frameworks, agendas and communications of the European Commission and the consequent Work Plan 2023-2026 proposed by the member states and adopted by the Council of the European Union. The analysis focuses on the role of young heritage professionals in relation to the objectives outlined by these documents. Prior to this, a systematic literature review is conducted, referring to scientific literature on the study of the functioning of the European Union and its policy implementation methods, including scholarly work on the development of culture and heritage as a field in the EU.

The framework analysis is then followed by an in-depth understanding and review of selected programmes and initiatives funded by the European Union in the cultural and creative sector, focusing more on cultural heritage from an inclusivity perspective. The initiatives and programmes are selected based on their professional impact on young heritage professionals and the financial support they have received from the EU. The availability of sufficient official reporting and monitoring documents further influenced the choice of programmes and funded initiatives taken into consideration. The study thus considers those initiatives that were successfully completed by the year 2024 or that have been covered in at least one round of official monitoring applicable to the ongoing Work Plan (as of 2025). The official programme and project

monitoring reports and their corresponding programme websites along with scholarly articles are used as secondary resources for this analysis.⁹⁰

Lastly, the programmes and initiatives taken into consideration are cross-verified by desk research on the structure, working methods and involvement of young heritage professionals in the 25 organisations that are part of the Expert Group on Cultural Heritage reporting to the European Commission. This is complemented by statistical data and primary information collected through interviews⁹¹ with a diverse sample of professionals, including both emerging and established professionals working in some of these European and international heritage organisations. Any gaps identified are correlated with the challenges hindering the inclusion of young heritage professionals. The decision to focus on the Expert Group on Cultural Heritage reflects its unique combination of professional expertise with the involvement of both European and global organisations, making it an ideal consortium to analyse the inclusion of young heritage professionals. The interviews conducted were designed to place emphasis on the experience of the interviewee in the organisation in question; however, broader subjects related to young heritage professionals that came up during the research were also discussed to gain a variety of perspectives on the ongoing discourse.

Definitional challenges within heritage

With the expansion and widening of both the understanding and the definition of “heritage”, the heritage sector has become more inclusive in terms of encompassing new ideas while also creating issues and encountering challenges. The biggest difficulty to tackle is the lack of definition of a heritage professional, which originates from the lack of a definition for the heritage sector itself.

Within the EU, over the years, culture and heritage have become key areas of political and social discourse (Jakubowski, Hausler and Fiorentini 2015: 3). This said, no founding documents propose any strict or restrictive definition of culture and for this reason the legal basis of the Creative Europe programme, (the only current European Union programme specifically devoted to supporting culture), provides an open-ended definition of cultural and creative sectors (European Commission 2023i). In addition, though the EU provides a working definition of cultural heritage (European Commission 2023b), Zito, Eckersley and Turner (2019) note that conceptually it does not distinguish between culture and cultural heritage. This is also observed in the framework documents for culture, which use the terms “culture” and “cultural heritage” interchangeably.

90. The study in this chapter attempts to include possible good practice examples (from 2025), with sufficient monitoring or availability of publicly available official sources. However, the main scope of the study and the corresponding inferences made adhere to the timeline and the criteria mentioned.

91. The interviews were conducted between December 2023 and April 2024.

Nonetheless, the present study uses the definition provided by the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, or the Faro Convention. The Faro Convention defines cultural heritage as follows:

Cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time. (Council of Europe 2025a)

This interpretation moves away from defining cultural heritage primarily as an object but instead focuses more on the process, which considers the subjects affected by it, thus making it conceptually broader.

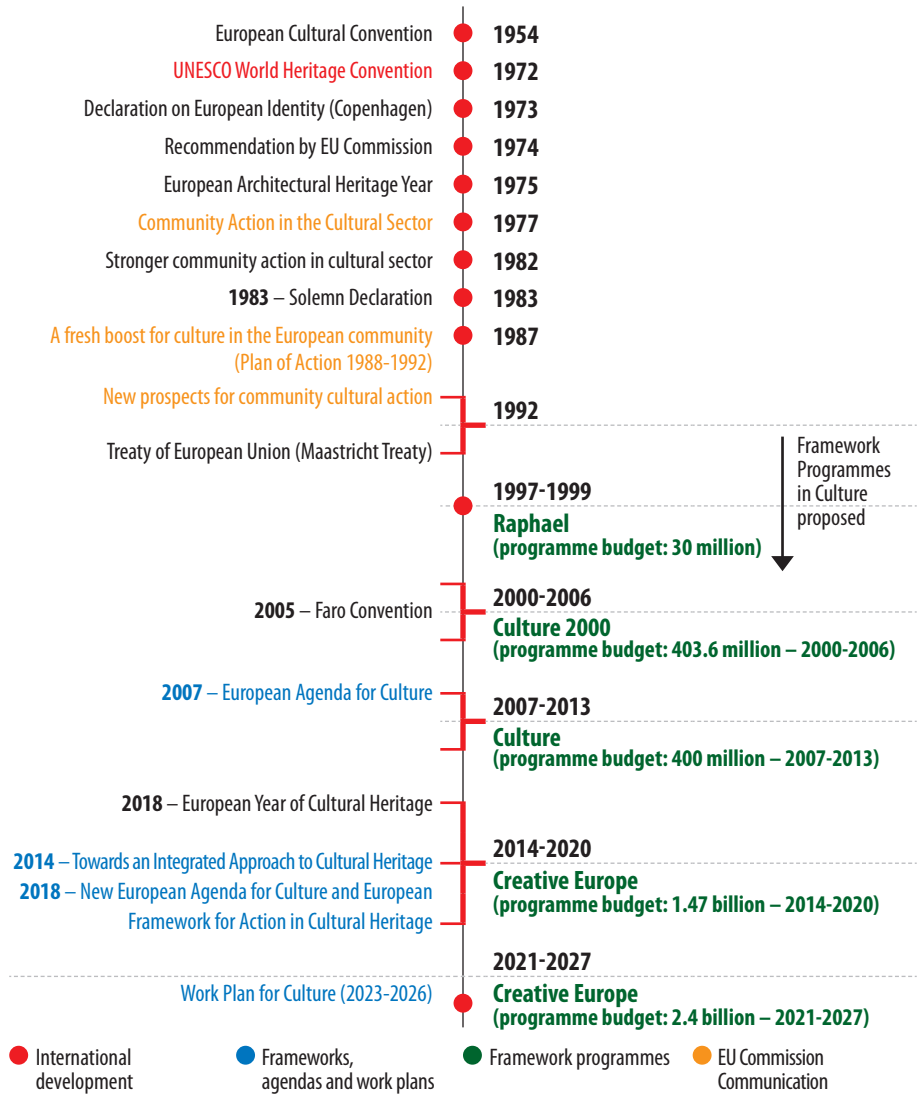
When analysing youth mainstreaming within EU cultural heritage policies, another dilemma is the absence of a definition for young professionals. Eurostat, the official statistics department for the EU, defines “young people” as those aged 15 to 29 (Eurostat 2022). In heritage, at the working level, this definitional challenge was, however, debated and discussed by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a global non-governmental organisation focused on the conservation and protection of heritage places (ICOMOS 2024) and a member of the EU Expert Group on Cultural Heritage (European Commission 2023a). Unlike the EU, ICOMOS moves away from the age-based restriction of defining “young” and considers the stage of the individual member, thereby considering any student or early-stage professional in heritage as an “emerging professional”.

EU cultural heritage policies and governance mechanisms

In the EU, Article 3.3 of the Treaty on European Union considers the cultural heritage of the member states to be “European” and confers on the European Union the responsibility of safeguarding and enhancing it (European Union 2016). Moreover, Article 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union understands that the EU’s competences in the field of culture are to “carry out actions to support, co-ordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States”. Thus, the European Union, with the intention of making use of the culture and heritage sector as a means of promoting the sense of belonging and identity, functions through its various frameworks, which take inspiration from these treaties (European Commission 2023b). Therefore, in matters concerning culture, heritage and youth, it only guides the member states through these frameworks and initiatives to propose their own laws and policies (European Commission 2023c).

The limited authority of the EU over cultural matters means that it relies mostly on informal methodologies, networks and NGOs to govern the activities in culture. These include the open method of co-ordination, Voices of Culture, Expert Group on Cultural Heritage, Reflection Group, the European Heritage Heads Forum and the European Heritage Alliance 3.3. This limitation, which pushes the EU to depend on a participatory governance system, could prove to be advantageous for young professionals in the sector; however, knowledge and systematic gaps, discussed later, often impede the involvement of young minds in the decision-making and implementational processes.

Figure 1 – Development of the cultural sector in the European Union



Source: Developed from text in Psychogiopoulou 2015 and Scott 2015.

The limited authority over cultural topics also restricts the financial resources received by the Directorate-General (DG) with responsibility for Culture, thereby pushing the policy objectives to be broader. Before the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the DG Culture was constrained by financial limitations and there being no specific programmes devoted to culture. It was only after the 1980s that it gained support for its programmes, which since 2000 have been grouped under the “Culture” Programme, as seen in Figure 1. Despite the limitations, through a reach-out strategy for other Commission services, DG Culture constantly made efforts to bring culture to the forefront in different policies (Littoz-Monnet 2012), thereby highlighting its importance in the political sphere within the EU. This said, with the increase in the

use of culture as a policy tool over the years, the budget allocation by the EU has also seen systematic changes, preceded by active advocacy and discussions.

From 2001 to 2010, only 1% of the EU's budget was dedicated to culture (Lähdesmäki 2016). The 2025 annual policy conversation called for a 2% commitment of the EU budget to culture and cultural heritage but, with respect to young heritage professionals, the debate itself and the mission letter for the Commissioner limited the conversation to the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals (Cultural Deal EU 2025a). Young people were, unfortunately, considered only as a consumer of culture entitled to a right to access to heritage (Cultural Deal EU 2025b), and young heritage professionals trained to work in the sector were not given the opportunity to provide their perspectives to the debate. Following this, for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, the Commission has proposed a new Agora EU programme, including culture as one of the strands under the Creative Europe programme with a budget of €1.796 billion (European Commission 2025; Culture Action Europe 2025). Cultural heritage, a subset of culture, is expected to benefit from this. However, a letter issued by the European Heritage Hub to the EU Commissioner advocates making cultural heritage a separate strand in EU cultural policy, pointing towards the requirement to acknowledge specific sectoral and professional needs and its distinct contribution to EU's cultural policy landscape (European Heritage Hub 2025b). This further proves that, with their unique skill sets, the cultural heritage sector and its professionals offer distinct and valuable expertise.

Inclusivity, ladder of participation and youth mainstreaming

Youth mainstreaming involves catering to the needs and challenges faced by young people by including their perspective in all levels of decision making: the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and projects (European Commission 2024). It advocates conducting direct consultation mechanisms with young people on policies that directly or indirectly affect them, thereby not only bridging the intergenerational gap and, fostering social equality and justice but also refraining from discriminating against young minds on the basis of their age. In the heritage sector, the definitional challenges underlined previously with respect to young professionals pose a restriction to their consideration in any discourse related to youth mainstreaming. Hence, the study uses inclusivity and the ladder of participation to better discuss the involvement of young heritage professionals in the EU cultural heritage landscape.

Within the EU, the concept of inclusivity has become more popular with globalisation and increasing social inequalities. In general, with respect to heritage governance, authorised heritage discourse (AHD) (Smith 2012: 1-10) continues to be widely acknowledged. This concept highlights the top-down approaches in the field, during the process of which some groups, mostly representational minorities, are left aside, especially in decision-making processes. The exclusion of such groups is the core basis for the relevance of AHD, even today. As opposed to AHD, the present analysis focuses on inclusive

heritage discourse (IHD), a concept introduced by Kisić (2016). IHD is not exclusionary and, for the proposed study, is understood as an approach that views inclusive growth in terms of the well-being not only of the receivers of heritage processes and those dominating the governance processes but also of those who might become the future facilitators of protecting heritage – young heritage professionals. However, even within IHD, one would have to be careful to consider whether participation in ensuring the well-being of the facilitators and receivers is actually window dressing or tokenism by those in power to show inclusiveness (Kisić 2016). In addition to this, the level of involvement of young heritage professionals within the heritage sector can be additionally understood using Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, further developed by Roger Hart for children and youth participation (Hart 1992; Council of Europe 2025b). This model could serve as a tool for cross-checking whether system mechanisms involve or fail to involve young people, as tested in sections of the present case, specifically for young heritage professionals.

Inclusion of young heritage professionals

The following part analyses the various agendas, frameworks and communications, and the corresponding work plan, for cultural heritage to identify existing gaps at policy level. This gap analysis is further tested at organisational level to understand the impact on young heritage professionals of the initiatives and programmes proposed or funded by the EU. Lastly, structured interviews with professionals working for the organisations that are stakeholders in such projects help us to comprehend the current challenges to making the sector inclusive for young heritage professionals.

Strategic frameworks for cultural heritage

The EU's initiatives in the cultural sector are based on policy co-ordination and the adoption of frameworks for action. The member states produce a multiannual work plan based on the priority areas and agendas put forward by the EU. This is then adopted by the European Council.

The strategic frameworks for cultural heritage consist of (European Commission 2023d):

1. Commission communication: Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe (European Commission 2014);
2. A New European Agenda for Culture (2018), following the 2007 European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2018);
3. European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2018) (European Commission 2019a);
4. The EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 (European Union 2022).

A qualitative analysis of the above helped to identify the theoretical and definitional gaps existing in the documents and the corresponding propositional gap in the objectives defined. The table below provides a summary of these limitations.

Table 1 – Analysis of the four main strategic frameworks for the cultural heritage sector in the EU

		COMMISSION COMMUNICATION (2014)	NEW EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR CULTURE (2018)	A EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION (2018)	WORK PLAN FOR CULTURE 2023-2026
Proposed or adopted by		European Commission	European Commission	European Commission	Member states, adopted by the European Council
Main aim		To make it clear that many public policies impacting heritage and heritage also have an impact on multiple policy areas.	To harness the full potential of culture to help build a more inclusive and fairer EU, supporting innovation, creativity and sustainable jobs and growth, and to highlight the role of cultural heritage and put culture at the centre of EU policies.	To ensure the legacy of the European Year of Cultural Heritage by proposing concrete plans for the future; it does mention an objective to boost skills in cultural heritage professionals and not cultural professionals.	
Types of limitations and gaps	Theoretical gap	No acknowledgement of the existence of young heritage professionals.	No acknowledgement of the existence of young heritage professionals but mention of some obstacles faced by the young trying to enter the field of culture.	No acknowledgement of the existence of young heritage professionals but desire to attract young generation to the sector.	No acknowledgement of the existence of young heritage professionals but desire to attract young generation to the sector.
	Definitional gap	No differentiation between young people and young emerging professionals in the field.	No differentiation between young people and young emerging professionals in the field.	No differentiation between young people and young emerging professionals in the field.	No differentiation between young/ emerging and established professionals in the field.
	Propositional gap	Limitation of young people to being receivers of training, education and voluntary services.	Limitation of young people to being receivers of training, education and mobility grants. No objective proposed to solve the nature of short-term contractual work in the sector, which was identified as impacting young people.	Mention the ERASMUS+, Discover EU and European Solidarity Corps programmes, limits the inclusion of young people in education and training. Limitation of its objectives to defining occupational profiles and developing frameworks to raise awareness to attract younger generations to the heritage professions but no consideration of the reasons for the lack of young professionals' presence.	The online platform proposed for analysing the working conditions of professionals does not consider young professionals specifically. The proposed statistical study on culture aims to intensify citizen participation among young people but does not consider employment rates specifically in the cultural heritage sector, look at them from an age perspective or offer insights into decision-making processes in culture.

The table shows that, throughout the four strategic frameworks for cultural heritage, there is no acknowledgement of young heritage professionals or even young cultural professionals who are entering the field to make a living. Though the New Agenda for Culture 2018 does mention some obstacles faced by young people, the lack of definition of who a young heritage professional is limits their role in the final objectives to being receivers of education, training and volunteering opportunities, and no solution is proposed for the short-term working contracts in the sector that affect young people. It is surprising to see that, while both the European Framework and the Work Plan for Culture wish to include or to attract more young people into the sector, neither proposes any study or objective to analyse the reason behind the lower participation than expected from the young. This, coupled with the aim of the framework to also define the occupational skills needed in the field, demonstrates a profound lack of clarity about what skills make a heritage professional. Lastly, it is quite clear from the strategic frameworks, that although heritage skills are understood to be separate from cultural skills, cultural heritage is not understood as a separate field but as something that is part of the culture and creative sector. Only the New European Agenda for Culture and the European Framework for Action give special attention to cultural heritage, but the Work Plan again falls short in this regard and simply proposes objectives for the cultural and creative sector overall. Nonetheless, the discourse does not specifically take young professionals into consideration in either of the fields.

The EU Youth Policy Dialogues (European Union 2025a), first held during the European Year of Youth in 2022, try to ascertain youth perspectives on policies and initiatives, but do not specifically address cultural heritage and young heritage professionals because cultural heritage is a sub-topic within culture. This is a missed opportunity to give a voice to this group with specific needs. Thus, despite the existence of working mechanisms, the generalisation makes young heritage professionals vulnerable to representational inequalities. Particularly for the group in question, the process does not incorporate elements of inclusive heritage discourse – and is unable to move towards the pluralistic understanding of heritage governance, also noted in the documents analysed. By including the voices of young heritage professionals heritage policies remain limited to non-participatory levels of the participation ladder. These policies have an unused potential to incorporate participatory techniques that are already established, including the policy dialogues.

EU programmes and initiatives

The EU has various instruments for achieving its goals. With respect to cultural heritage, there are numerous programmes and initiatives that function as either funding instruments or informational instruments to govern progress in the sector. However, while looking through these initiatives, we need to keep in mind that most of these apply to the entire culture and creative sector and not only to cultural heritage and the professionals in the sector. In addition, some EU-funded programmes, like Erasmus+, provide support to initiatives across multiple sectors, while others, like European Solidarity Corps (European Union 2025b), focus on volunteering opportunities for young people across sectors. Nonetheless, there are programmes that are particularly important for the development of the cultural

and creative sector on the whole and for carrying out activities for EU cultural heritage (European Commission 2023e). They include the following.

1. Educational initiatives: ERASMUS+; European Solidarity Corps.
2. Awareness and outreach initiatives: European Heritage Label; European Heritage Days; European Heritage Awards; European Capitals of Culture; Cultural Routes; Discover EU.
3. European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018.
4. Mapping and monitoring initiatives: interactive maps initiative; cultural and creative cities monitor; Cultural Gems; the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project by the European Parliament.
5. Digital initiatives: Europe's Digital Library.
6. Specific financial initiatives (European Commission 2023f): Culture EU funding guide for 2021-2027, Creative Europe 2021-2027, Horizon Europe, CERV – Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values, Cohesion Fund and European Regional Development Fund, New European Bauhaus (European Union 2025c).

There are crossovers in all of the above, with some initiatives also featuring in another category, but the reason for the above categorisation is based on the purpose behind the initiative. Therefore, the initiatives analysed for the present study are those with young people as the target audience in implementation or as receivers and the main EU programmes funding heritage projects and youth projects. This study considers “young” and not “young heritage professionals” because the terms are used interchangeably in the analysed documents, despite the latter having specific needs, as noted previously. Since the educational initiatives focus on training and awareness raising for the young, these form the first set to be considered. This includes the Erasmus+ programme. At the same time, since Creative Europe and Horizon Europe form the main funding pillars for the sector, it is wise to look closely into the cultural heritage projects funded by them, as they have a higher chance of giving meaningful opportunities to young heritage professionals. For these reasons, the Erasmus+ programme, Creative Europe 2021-2027 and Horizon Europe are afforded priority attention in this chapter.

A more in-depth analysis of the programmes above shows a clear inclination towards education, volunteering and training for the youth, as it was in the policy frameworks. The need to define skills in heritage as understood in the frameworks is also noticed in cultural heritage projects like CHARTER 2021-2024 (CHARTER 2024) and EU Heritage 2018-2020 (EU Heritage 2022), which are funded under Erasmus+. That said, the funding programmes of the EU have been noted to have limited impact on cultural and creative professionals' social and professional situations (European Parliament 2023).

The Erasmus+ programme aims to be inclusive by facilitating mobility schemes and digital learning mechanisms for heritage students and practitioners. On the other hand, its action programme HERITAGE-PRO 2018-2021 (ENCATC 2024; Kultur und Arbeit e.V. 2024) understands volunteering as giving a platform not only to heritage students and practitioners but also to those interested in contributing to heritage. This shows the existence of a very fine line between those who volunteer and those who might be future heritage practitioners, further raising a question

about the professionalism of the field, which is ideally a social construct. For if, through the pluralist and inclusive approach, those who participate in heritage and those who are part of the governance mechanism have interchangeable roles, the requirement of a specific skill set needed to call heritage a profession is diluted, thereby dissolving the need to have heritage as a profession altogether. I argue that young heritage professionals who are neither “mere volunteers” nor “experienced professionals” have a key role to play. They stand at the intersection of this debate and their very role determines whether heritage will or will not be a profession in the future. Furthermore, the programme does not help strengthen the employment contractual conditions by leaving the hosting institutions to decide the type of contract and its conditions (European Parliament 2023).

The Creative Europe programme, the flagship programme for the culture and creative sector in 2025, proves that cultural heritage is only a small part of the cultural sector. With most of its funding being accessed by the media strand (58%), cultural heritage placed under the cultural strand (33%) (European Commission 2021a) does not seem to enjoy the importance it was given in the New European Agenda of 2018 – a document the programme takes inspiration from (European Commission 2021b), and which aimed at a more inclusive European Union. Another important aspect is the limitation of the schemes and their consequent overlapping or similarity with Erasmus+. Creative Europe proposes residencies through initiatives like Culture Moves Europe (European Commission 2019c) and Magic Carpets (Magic Carpets 2020; European Commission 2021c), the majority of which are granted to artists. It thus relies on mobility schemes for the young, which was also the case with Erasmus+. This shows the constraints of the programme, which places limitations on the implementation of possible or different schemes that could target young professionals beyond education, training or upskilling initiatives and hinders their becoming active members who help shape the heritage industry. Thus, though the programme seems to include young people and early professionals, the scope of inclusion is adopted from the culture frameworks discussed above.

Horizon Europe, unlike Creative Europe, understands cultural heritage as a tool to face future challenges (Sonkoly and Vahtikari 2018). Like Erasmus+ and Creative Europe, it continues to fund initiatives aimed at mapping the sectoral skills. Despite this, it does not consider the present state of professionals and, in particular, young professionals whose future depends on the dynamics around the evolution of the sector. Therefore, though the programme creates synergies between other initiatives (European Commission 2020), the inclusivity budget allocation of the programme does not consider the needs of a variety of professional profiles in the heritage sector.

From these arguments, it becomes apparent that, much like the frameworks, the initiatives and programmes also restrict the role of young heritage professionals to education, volunteering and training. With heritage organisations as beneficiaries, the limitation to the participation of young professionals who are active in the field or will be its future custodians contradicts the principles of inclusion. Therefore, with respect to young heritage professionals, the selected programmes, together with the frameworks and agendas, fall short of adopting a truly participatory and pluralistic approach to heritage governance.

Challenges to youth mainstreaming in cultural heritage organisations

The constellation of the Expert Group on Cultural Heritage makes it an ideal consortium to analyse the inclusion of young heritage professionals. The group, which consists of member states, associated countries, European cultural heritage networks, civil society organisations and international organisations as well as EU institutions (European Commission 2023g), acts as a consultation platform that advises the Commission on European cultural heritage policies and on its funding programmes and initiatives, which are within the scope of the present research. At the organisational level, it presently has 25 organisations at European and international levels and meets twice a year (European Commission 2023h). Most European members of the group are also based in Brussels or The Hague and are thus close to the European Commission and Parliament. The group was formed in 2019 following the policy dialogue of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage. As a member of the group, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) continues to represent the interests of young people on policy matters (Erasmus Student Network 2025). However, owing to the gaps highlighted and noted in the development of frameworks and work plans and their implementation, there appears to be a need for specialised representation of young heritage professionals to give a voice to their unique challenges and concerns.

Structured interviews were conducted with people associated with the organisations that are part of the consortium. The selection of interviewees was influenced by their availability and willingness and the author's prior experience, which fostered personal connections with some of them. A total of 11 individuals were interviewed, of whom eight are or have been affiliated to organisations that are part of the expert group; one was the initiator of a student-run cultural heritage organisation in Europe; one works for the Ministry of Culture in the Netherlands; and another serves as president of a civil society organisation in the field of cultural heritage in Germany. Out of the 11 people interviewed, three were under the age of 30, while the rest were mid-career or experienced professionals.

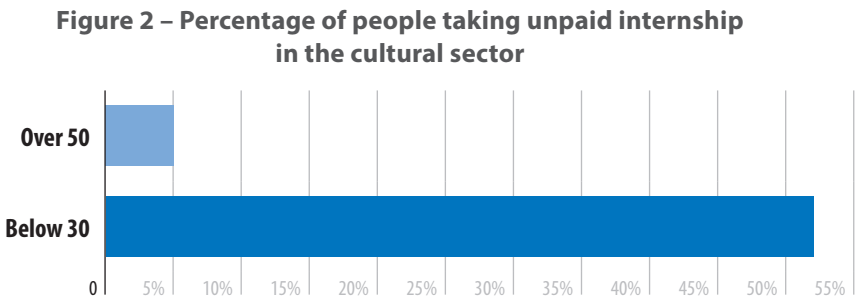
Working structure of organisations and power relations

Most organisations in the consortium are either co-funded by the European Union or have projects funded under EU programmes, with the majority of their funding from Horizon2020, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe or the Erasmus+ programmes. Given their close dependence on EU projects, it is not surprising that many of them have a designated European projects officer and their headquarters are also based in Brussels, Belgium. It is worth noting that the EU projects have a variety of partners, but the majority of them have secretariats in Brussels, and the method of partnership for these projects appears to be informal. Almost all of them are based on a membership structure with a board of directors, an executive committee and a secretariat, with the secretariat of most of them being small considering the variety of projects undertaken. This is different from the structure of international organisations like ICOMOS. International organisations, representing international interests, might have a European group, but they

generally also have national chapters and continent-specific representations. Such is the case for ICOMOS, ICOM and ICCROM to name a few.⁹²

The European organisations based in Brussels, in contrast, mostly represent their members who are based in different European countries. Many of those that deal with EU projects in heritage do not have a heritage expert or someone from the field in the secretariat. One of the interviewees and a former EU projects officer in one such organisation in Brussels explained that during her tenure the organisation had a couple of EU projects. However, within their own office no one had an academic background related to heritage or heritage studies. They would rely on experts when needed and sometimes collaborate with universities, but the in-house ability was oriented towards project management and communication activities. However, what is interesting is the number of interns taken on board by this organisation as part of the Erasmus+ programme. The interviewee mentioned that she worked with around eight interns over a span of two years, and most of them were young heritage professionals who had an academic base in cultural heritage. This points towards the priority given to project management skills, where organisations employ professionals, over heritage skills, where organisations tend to work with interns, within projects related to cultural heritage. From the perspective of inclusion of young heritage professionals, some organisations have mentorship and internship programmes, but most do not have any structured, financially supported mechanism to involve young professionals in the workforce.

Another interviewee, however, mentioned how few organisations are open to including “new professionals” who generally progress from a junior position to a middle position while working within the system. To incorporate new professionals, the organisation provides internship programmes, which are in many cases established through Erasmus+. This is the most common method adopted to welcome young professionals to the workforce. This was also proven in a quantitative survey of 237 creative and cultural workers, where 52% of people below the age of 30 undertook unpaid internships compared to only 5% who were over 50 (Figure 2).

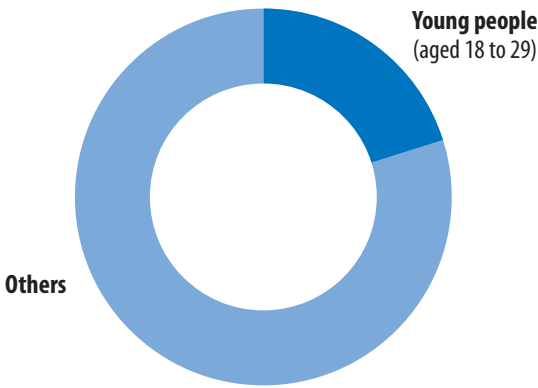


Source: Brook, Taylor and O'Brien 2020.

92. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), International Council of Museums (ICOM) and International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM).

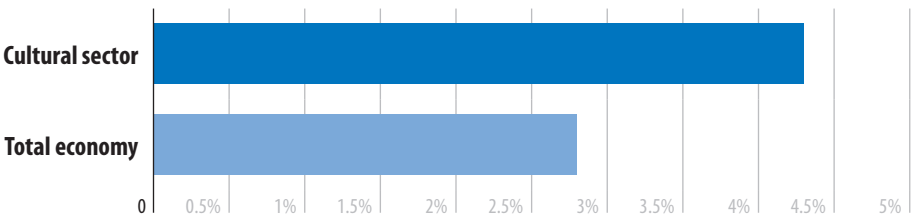
In addition, Eurostat reports reveal that only 20% of the cultural workforce is young (aged 18 to 29) and the percentage of employed people aged 65+ (4.3%) exceeds that of the total EU economy (2.8%) (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 – Employment by age in the cultural sector



Source: Eurostat (2018).

Figure 4 – Percentage of employed people aged 65+



Source: Eurostat (2023).

Vagueness of definitions and skill sets

The lack of clarity and absence of a homogeneous definition for a heterogeneous sector, as underlined previously, was also highlighted in the assessment report for sectoral working conditions, which notes the difficulty in defining a “cultural professional” (European Parliament 2023). This very vagueness or fluidity in definitions makes it difficult to define the skills needed to call heritage a profession, and which is further proven through funding of initiatives that aim to map sectoral skills. However, the interviews opened up the discussion on new justifications behind this vagueness.

One of the interviewees mentioned the elitist nature of heritage as a sector and how the definition of cultural heritage depends on what one does with it and not on what it means conceptually. This, in his opinion, makes it necessary to strike a balance between economics and heritage. Another interviewee, however, understood the necessity behind maintaining the fluidity of the definition, which helps to instrumentalise heritage into other fields. He also brought to light the need for heritage to exist as a separate field altogether, as in his opinion, its

coming under the umbrella of culture acts as a hindrance to its development as a profession. However, some other professionals expressed that heritage cannot survive independently and there is a requirement for cross-sectoral co-operation for its existence. Further elaborating on the difficulties behind the definitions, a professional explained how even within Germany different laws propose different understandings of cultural heritage, which thus makes it difficult to apply a single definition to all member states. Therefore, it can be inferred that most interviewees understood heritage to have different meanings for different people and preferred the broadness of scope over the limitations posed through definitions. Many also understood heritage as an additional specialisation that should always be supported by another qualification.

With respect to defining young professionals in the sector, while some said that by defining or designating them as “young” we facilitate their agency by giving it a name, thus helping to acknowledge the problems specific to them, they also asked whether limiting the discussion and designation to the age of a person, raises the question of who will start a discussion about those who have just entered the field but are not young in age. This very connotation and age restriction was considered disadvantageous by other professionals who mentioned, that despite still being emerging professionals in the field, their age makes them ineligible for many EU-funded opportunities and programmes. Thus, most interviewees did not see the shift from “young” to “emerging” or “age” to “stage” as disadvantageous for young professionals. However, since heritage is what one makes of it, experience in any field would count towards starting a career within heritage. Added to this is the societal belief that older means wiser, where the opinions of an older person who has more weight than that of someone who is young. Furthermore, most professionals struggling to enter the labour market with an academic background in heritage are indeed young. Using words like “emerging” or “new” not only distances this group from the age discussion, which is vital to understand their challenges, but also leads to their exclusion from the debate and discourse on youth mainstreaming within the EU.

That said, although a stage-wise definition of professionals was more accepted by the interviewees, the term “young” is extensively or interchangeably used to refer to emerging/new professionals in EU funding programmes and policies, which places an emphasis on young people and limits their inclusion to education, volunteering and training. Therefore, a shift in terminology may not further the debate until a shift in understanding and response to the needs of those in this group is given priority.

Volunteering and networking as a status quo

For young heritage professionals, volunteering may be a networking opportunity, but organisations exercise a power dominance whereby volunteering becomes prerequisite to enter the sector. In addition, many organisations also have a systematic process of membership, which makes it difficult for young professionals without any substantial experience to become a part of their closed community. Furthermore, the recognition given to an individual by such organisations through volunteering is, surprisingly, not limited to only young or

emerging professionals. In the world of heritage, it is a status that many wish to aspire to.

That said, some professionals also realise how volunteering can be misused by those in power to save costs. One of the interviewees said that people aiming to make a career in heritage should rather go for training programmes and not volunteering, which may be used by entities to avoid hiring an employee. The interviewee further emphasised that those volunteering are usually not people with unlimited time in hand or soon-to-be retirees, but are new professionals who are trying to make a career and to gain experience in the field. At the same time, a majority of the interviewees said that, for young professionals, volunteering is a powerful tool for building one's network, which is needed for professional establishment in the sector. In an interview, one young professional further underscored this importance by emphasising that the sector requires one to have good connections with established organisations, which places them in a powerful position. While volunteering is understood to be a way to network within the sector, it may also be used as a tool by established professionals within an organisation to maintain the status quo or become an essential requirement for young professionals to gain experience. Thus, one cannot negate the possibility that volunteering may be used as window dressing and to demonstrate inclusiveness by inviting young professionals on the pretext of gaining experience and building their network.

Conclusion

As seen from the research, despite the informal participatory approach adopted by the EU for heritage governance, there are gaps in the process of actively including a range of professional voices from the cultural heritage sector.

The strategic frameworks revealed an existing theoretical gap, with respect to recognising and acknowledging young heritage professionals as a group with specific needs and concerns. This further leads to a propositional gap where their voice is not proactively included in the proposed work plans and objectives and where they are addressed as receivers of education, training and volunteering initiatives. The lack of a process specifically targeting young heritage professionals' inclusion in decision making for policies and frameworks on cultural heritage makes them vulnerable to representational inequalities. A recent step in the direction of "access of young people to cultural heritage" (European Commission, WEU Talk 2025) in general youth policy dialogues is to be encouraged; however, a more focused and strategic approach to giving a voice to young heritage professionals is vital for the sector's sustainability. This would facilitate a pluralistic approach to heritage governance, thereby ensuring inclusiveness.

The EU programmes and initiatives selected for study in this chapter and inspired by these strategic frameworks tend to limit the inclusion of young professionals by positioning them primarily as participants in education, training and volunteering projects. While these projects successfully provide opportunities by

offering training or volunteering roles in exchange for intercultural experiences and networking, they may also exacerbate the vulnerability of young professionals in a sector that is heavily reliant on volunteer work and that lacks a clear competence framework.

When mapping the working structures and mechanisms of the 25 organisations that are part of the Expert Group on Cultural Heritage, a lack of a structured approach to including young heritage professionals in the workforce is noted. Presently, internship programmes, which do not always focus on mentoring but rather use the specific knowledge provided by heritage professionals on a rotating basis and with lower pay compared to regular staff, continue to be the main mechanism for including young heritage professionals in most organisations. That the majority of these organisations are based in Brussels, with almost all of them being part of EU projects that receive funds from the EU programmes, points to a lack of decentralisation of power. Despite recent initiatives like the European Heritage Hub (2025a), a pilot project that aims to create autonomous heritage hubs across the EU, the success and actual impact of these initiatives in terms of meeting the needs of young heritage professionals beyond education, training and volunteering requires substantial monitoring according to well-defined parameters. Furthermore, although the governance of the informal expert group includes “young voices” through the ESN, a specialised young heritage professionals group could assist in promoting the specific needs of young heritage professionals, especially in policy-shaping mechanisms targeted at cultural heritage. In this regard, an autonomous young professionals working group without any financial dependence or direct affiliation to the established organisations reporting to the Commission could represent their interests in an unbiased manner by avoiding tokenism.

This chapter has shown that the limitations posed by the official documents’ characterisation of young people as little more than receivers of education, training and volunteering opportunities go beyond these documents and are practised at different levels of implementation, including the funding programmes and the working structures of organisations managing these funding initiatives. Furthermore, as expressed by the interviewees, young heritage professionals depend not only on their skills but also on their networking abilities to attain professional stability. This puts them in a vulnerable position to become tokens of inclusivity by those in authority. Despite this, that the strategic frameworks are used as a reference for programmes and funding initiatives provides an opportunity to identify and include them as a group with specific needs and challenges. There is thus a possibility of moving towards a more inclusive approach by narrowing these gaps and consciously increasing their representation at different levels of governance.

Lastly, while the present research provides an analysis of challenges faced by young heritage professionals, a demographic study acknowledging the needs of this specific group of “young professionals” across sectors is vital for their consideration and inclusion in the youth mainstreaming process. This would ensure that the development of policies and initiatives affecting them is informed by the specific challenges faced by the group, and further facilitate their representation at all levels of decision making.

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Chapter 19

The Children and Youth Major Group to the United Nations Environment Programme: a model for youth engagement in global environmental governance

Olga Skaredina, Aseel Abo-Taleb and Zuhair Ahmed Kowshik

The world's population is currently younger than ever before, with Gen Z⁹³ accounting for one third of it. The most recent World Youth Report indicates that there are 1.2 billion people between the ages of 15 and 24, a number projected to increase to 1.3 billion by 2030 (Andersen 2024b; United Nations 2020). Acknowledged as critical agents of change, especially in the context of global environmental issues, young people actively engage in policy design, evaluation and implementation. The United Nations has reached several significant milestones in recognising and elevating the role of youth in intergovernmental decision making. These achievements include the designation of the first UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, the launch of the UN Youth2030 strategy, the establishment of the UN Youth Office, the appointment of the first Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs and, most recently, the adoption of the Pact for the Future. However, despite these advancements, barriers such as insufficient support, lack of inclusivity and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement continue to hinder youth participation (UNICEF Innocenti 2024; United Nations 2023; Bacalso, Barta and Moxon 2023).

93. Generation Z refers to people born between 1996 and 2010.

As the leading global environmental authority, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has long recognised the importance of working with and for young people. UNEP positions youth as critical drivers of change, capable of addressing pressing global challenges and offering innovative solutions that reflect both local and global contexts. By acknowledging the unique perspectives and expertise that youth can bring, UNEP emphasises its commitment to providing safe and open platforms for meaningful youth participation in environmental decision making (UNEP n.d.). As such, UNEP's approach to youth engagement is rooted in Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Rio Earth Summit. Agenda 21 emphasises the need to engage all sectors of society, including young people, to achieve sustainable development, and highlights the added value of diverse perspectives for promoting informed decision making (UN Conference on Environment and Development 1992). As Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu (2002) argue, civil society plays several key roles in global environmental governance, including collecting and disseminating information, contributing to agenda setting, providing input during policy development processes and advocating environmental justice. The inclusion of these diverse voices enriches policy making, ensures that under-represented voices are heard and holds intergovernmental organisations and member states accountable (Ivanova, Skaredina and Ariaz 2023).

To facilitate the participation of civil society in UN activities, Agenda 21 established nine major groups to represent different sectors of society, including children and youth. UNEP works in partnership with these major groups to integrate a broad range of knowledge and expertise into its activities, so that a diversity of voices is represented. In this context, UNEP operates under guiding principles that prioritise transparency, inclusivity and respect for diversity, while acknowledging the decision-making power of member states. Major groups engage across the three key levels of agenda setting, decision making and implementation, adding value not only by drawing attention to emerging environmental issues but also by facilitating the implementation of decisions and fostering accountability (UNEP 2020; Juras 2017). In addition, UNEP's approach to engagement is organised in three interdependent pillars: strengthening institutional management through transparent communication with civil society; bringing the expertise of civil society into negotiations at the policy level; and engaging civil society in the implementation of UNEP's work programmes at the programmatic level (UNEP 2004).

The Children and Youth Major Group (CYMG), one of the nine major groups established by Agenda 21, represents the interests of young people in global environmental governance. As the formal mechanism through which youth engage with UNEP, CYMG serves as a platform for young people⁹⁴ and youth organisations to contribute to policy discussions and decisions that affect the global environment. CYMG's role within UNEP is to amplify and include youth voices at all levels of decision making, helping to shape global environmental

94. UNEP defines young people as individuals below the age of 35.

policies that take into account the unique needs and perspectives of young people. UNEP works closely with CYMG to create meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in global environmental processes such as the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and other intergovernmental negotiations. This partnership between UNEP and CYMG is just one example of how intergovernmental organisations can facilitate youth mainstreaming and ensure that young people are recognised not only as stakeholders but also as essential contributors to decision making.

This chapter is co-authored by members of the Global Steering Committee of CYMG, each of whom has been actively involved in environmental decision making for more than three years. It draws on the autoethnographic experiences of the authors, who have consistently advocated meaningful youth engagement in global environmental governance processes and who have been extensively engaged in UNEP activities. Autoethnography, as a research method, allows scholars to use their personal experiences to describe and interpret broader social phenomena, in this case, youth mainstreaming in global environmental governance. This method involves rigorous self-reflection, often referred to as “reflexivity”, to interrogate the intersections between the self and societal structures, providing critical insights into how individual experiences are shaped by and contribute to larger systemic processes (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017; Probst 2015). Reflexivity, in this context, requires the authors to be aware of their dual roles as both participants in and observers of CYMG’s work, assessing how their involvement informs their understanding while also reflecting on how their perspectives are influenced by their positions within CYMG.

The chapter adopts CYMG’s theory of change, which focuses on capacity building, policy advocacy and expanded access as the basis for evaluating its activities, while also introducing an additional component – the enabling environment – as a critical element in promoting youth mainstreaming. To illustrate this, the authors selected the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6) as a case study. The decision to focus on UNEA-6 was made for two reasons: first, it was UNEP’s largest and most recent event in 2024, bringing together policy makers, civil society organisations and other stakeholders to address pressing environmental challenges; second, all three authors were directly involved in the preparatory process and proceedings of UNEA-6 from the CYMG side and, therefore, could reflect critically on CYMG’s engagement and the broader dynamics of youth participation in environmental decision making. While accounting for subjectivity, the authors integrate personal experiences with broader theories of youth participation, which allows for a nuanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities of youth mainstreaming that would not be evident from an external perspective. As such, the views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the authors, drawn from their collective knowledge and experience.

This chapter expands on the concept of youth mainstreaming in intergovernmental decision making. While youth mainstreaming is commonly defined as the systematic integration of youth perspectives into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes

that directly affect young people (European Commission 2024), this chapter demonstrates that the process is inherently two-way. Youth mainstreaming is not the sole responsibility of institutions; rather, it is a dynamic process that requires both institutional commitment and the proactive engagement of youth groups.

While institutions must sustain an enabling environment that integrates youth perspectives into their processes, young people should also demonstrate that they are credible rights holders who can be trusted and relied upon as equal stakeholders. We argue that youth mainstreaming in environmental decision making is achievable through consistent and strategic youth engagement: the success of youth mainstreaming depends on the sustained interaction of youth groups with intergovernmental organisations and member states. Repeated and ongoing youth advocacy helps build trust and credibility, demonstrating that young people can bring both expertise and lived experiences to the process. Over time, this trust encourages member states to consider youth priorities, integrate youth perspectives and mandate intergovernmental organisations like UNEP to actively work on youth mainstreaming.

We begin the chapter by providing an overview of UNEP's evolving strategy for youth engagement, drawing upon key programmes and initiatives that have shaped youth mainstreaming efforts. We then explore CYMG's organisational structure and introduce its theory of change for youth engagement in global environmental governance. Following this, a case study of CYMG's engagement at UNEA-6 demonstrates how strategic involvement builds trust and credibility, strengthening both the visibility and the substantive influence of youth in environmental decision making. The chapter continues by identifying the challenges and opportunities of youth mainstreaming and concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening youth engagement in global environmental governance, with implications for member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe. By examining the evolution and current state of youth engagement in environmental decision making, the chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how intergovernmental organisations can effectively mainstream youth perspectives in global governance more broadly.

Youth and the United Nations Environment Programme: from programmatic engagement to formal participation

Young people have always been central to social movements, playing a crucial role in challenging the status quo and advocating systemic change, justice and equity. As Azzopardi (2013) notes, youth possess a unique ability to speak truth to power in ways that resonate with their peers, making them critical to amplifying issues related to pressing societal challenges. This has been particularly evident with the growth of global youth environmental activism, which gained momentum in the 1990s as the "green movement" and attracted considerable support from younger generations. During this period, young people took on active roles in investigating, planning, monitoring and managing the environment within their communities. A significant moment in this shift came

in 1992 when 12-year-old Severn Cullis-Suzuki from Canada addressed global leaders at the Rio Earth Summit and spoke about environmental degradation and the responsibility of older generations to protect the environment (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2022).

In parallel with this global rise in youth activism, UNEP began to strengthen its youth engagement strategy, reflecting the growing recognition of young people as key stakeholders in addressing environmental challenges. Since its establishment in 1972, UNEP has progressively moved from ad hoc youth engagement to a more structured and formalised system of youth participation (Figure 1). The designation of 1985 as International Youth Year marked an early acknowledgement of the potential of youth in environmental advocacy and led to the creation of the UNEP Children and Youth Programme. Over the following decades, UNEP developed a range of global and regional initiatives, activities and networks to educate youth about the pressing environmental challenges and to amplify their voices in environmental decision making (UNEP 2001; 2002).

Building on this foundation, the adoption of the Tunza Youth Strategy in 2003 marked a shift towards a more cohesive framework for youth engagement, signalling UNEP's recognition of young people as critical stakeholders in global environmental efforts and their need for targeted support to enable meaningful participation. The word "Tunza" means "to treat with care or affection" in Kiswahili, a language widely spoken in eastern Africa, reflecting the strategy's focus on nurturing and empowering youth through capacity building, environmental awareness, information exchange and strengthened regional outreach. From 2003 to 2008, UNEP organised a series of international youth conferences and workshops, and established regional and subregional youth networks to involve young people in discussions about their role in addressing environmental challenges. While these initiatives provided valuable platforms for youth dialogue, they were limited in their ability to empower young people to directly influence environmental decision making. Materials such as *Tunza* magazine and children's storybooks raised awareness among younger audiences but reflected a top-down approach, whereby UNEP maintained control over the narrative rather than fostering reciprocal influence (UNEP 2005; Powell 2016). As a result, while the youth strategy was well intentioned and granted young people some freedom to shape aspects of their activities, it did not fully capitalise on their potential to participate meaningfully in environmental decision making.

In 2009, UNEP adopted a second Tunza strategy, which sought to align youth engagement with the organisation's medium-term strategy (2010-2013). This decision reflected UNEP's growing understanding that youth engagement needed to be more closely integrated with its broader organisational goals. However, the structural changes within UNEP during this period – the transition from the Governing Council to the United Nations Environment Assembly – led to the formation of CYMG in 2012 and the subsequent discontinuation of the Tunza strategy in 2013 to prevent overlap and duplication (Powell 2016). This shift in the institutional framework allowed UNEP to rethink its approach to youth participation, moving from a programmatic to a constituency-based approach

and aligning youth engagement with the broader UN framework for civil society participation under Agenda 21. By 2014, with the first session of UNEA and the solidification of CYMG's official mandate, UNEP's youth engagement became more structured, progressing beyond education and awareness raising towards formal participation and influence in governance processes.

The Children and Youth Major Group: a platform for youth engagement in global environmental governance

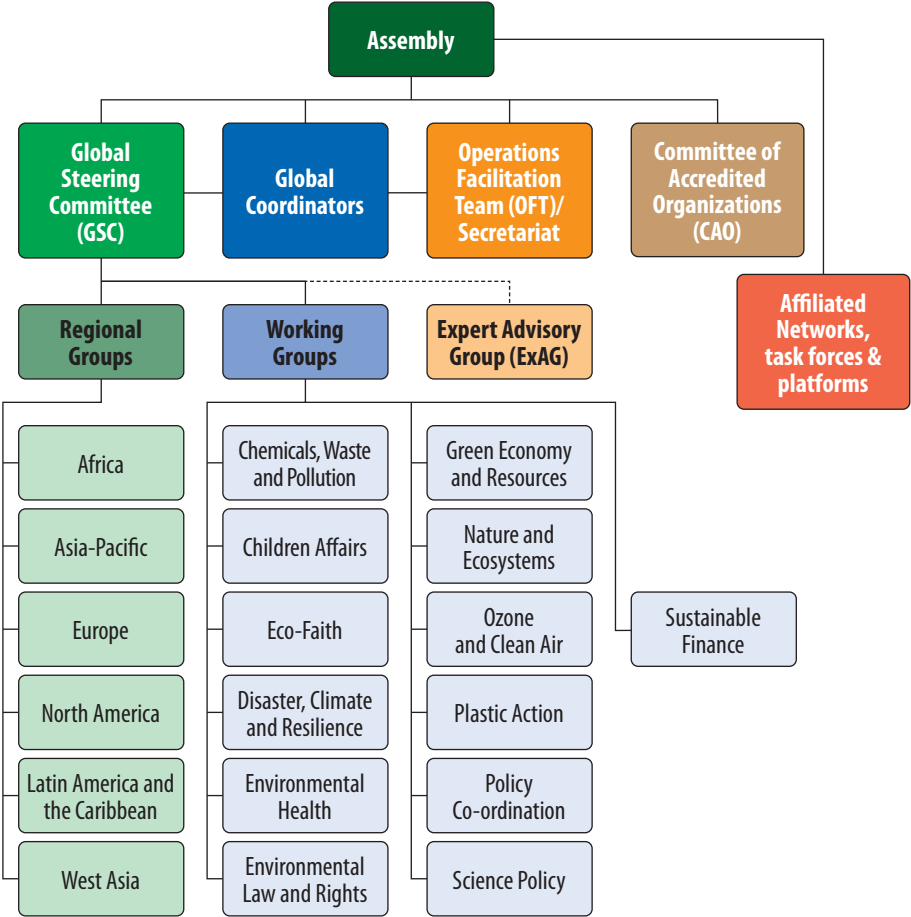
CYMG serves as the formal youth engagement mechanism of the United Nations Environment Programme, which represents youth networks, organisations and individuals committed to addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Established as a self-organised space for children and youth to engage with UNEP and broader global environmental governance processes, CYMG includes over 900 youth organisations – 59 of which are accredited by UNEP – and more than 9 000 individual members from over 100 countries (as of November 2024).

CYMG has a unique organisational structure that facilitates youth engagement at both local and global levels (Figure 1). Its six regional groups provide platforms for young people to discuss environmental issues specific to their geographical contexts, tailoring global priorities to local challenges while bringing forward regional concerns. These groups facilitate the follow-up of regional processes, help identify regional priorities and build relationships with member states representatives. For example, in 2024, CYMG actively participated in regional consultations in preparation for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution: youth participants learned about negotiating positions of for their regions and explored ways to align youth priorities, such as intergenerational equity and multistakeholder collaboration, with the broader agenda of like-minded countries. This cross-regional approach strengthens CYMG's capacity to tailor its advocacy and initiatives to the specific needs of different regions and promotes meaningful youth engagement in key global environmental governance processes.

In addition to regional groups, CYMG is structured around 13 thematic working groups, each focusing on key aspects of UNEP's work and addressing portfolios such as chemicals, waste and pollution, plastic action, environmental health, the green economy and resources, science policy and sustainable finance, among others. These thematic groups bring together young environmental experts and provide them with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to intergovernmental negotiations and policy discussions on environmental issues. For example, the Chemicals, Waste and Pollution Working Group helped translate the 2024 Global Waste Management Outlook into youth-friendly language, while the Green Economy and Resources Working Group contributed to a think piece by the International Resource Panel on designing sustainable consumption and production policies to reduce inequalities (UNEP 2024e; IRP 2024). Thus, by focusing on thematic areas, CYMG empowers young people to

participate in policy discussions, demonstrates the importance of expert-driven youth contributions that are substantive rather than symbolic and aligns youth expertise with UNEP’s broader environmental agenda and priority areas.

Figure 2 – CYMG’s organisational structure (as of November 2024)



Source: CYMG, www.cymgenvironment.net/institutional-framework.

While this organisational structure feeds into CYMG’s theory of change, with its primary goal of building youth capacity for meaningful engagement in environmental decision making, it is not without its challenges. For example, regional engagement within CYMG is very uneven, with large disparities in levels of activity and participation. The Asia-Pacific and Africa regions tend to be the most active, largely due to the strong presence of UNEP’s regional office in Bangkok, Thailand, and the organisation’s headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. These locations serve as hubs for UNEP-led events and activities, which provide frequent opportunities for young people in these regions to engage with global environmental governance processes. Notable examples of CYMG’s regional activities include participation in the 13th International Forum on Energy for

Sustainable Development and organisation of the Youth Forum on Climate Protection ahead of the 36th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol (both held in Bangkok in 2024), as well as regular engagement in the UNEP Working Group on Nitrogen and meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) in Nairobi.

In contrast, other regions face challenges to maintaining balanced engagement as a result of differences in capacities, resources and geopolitical factors. For example, geographical distance, time zones and the national policies of member states can limit opportunities for consistent participation, resulting in uneven levels of regional engagement. Addressing these imbalances is an area of growth for CYMG and a critical consideration for UNEP as it seeks to strengthen regional engagement with civil society and other stakeholders. To this end, CYMG has established a consultative process to explore ways to strengthen regional engagement, enhance the role of regional facilitators and increase the number of accredited organisations from each region. This process also aims to promote the active engagement of young people in regional ministerial environment forums and to organise regional youth forums, building on the successes of the Asia-Pacific Youth Environment Forum and the Latin America and Caribbean Youth Environment Forum (CYMG 2024e).

Similarly, thematic engagement within CYMG varies, with some working groups being more active than others. The reasons for this are often related to UNEP's existing portfolio of work. If UNEP has no active initiatives in a given area, the corresponding working group may become inactive unless its thematic facilitator takes proactive steps to seek broader opportunities for engagement. In addition, all CYMG roles – whether global co-ordinators, regional and thematic facilitators, or members – are voluntary and come without financial remuneration, which often limits the capacity of facilitators to dedicate time and resources to their responsibilities. As a result, strong leadership from global co-ordinators becomes critical: effective onboarding and mentoring can equip facilitators with the skills and confidence they need to take on greater leadership and ensure that their groups remain active. This leadership is also important for new members, who are often confused about how to engage with CYMG's structure and activities. Ensuring comprehensive onboarding for the Global Steering Committee and new members is another growth opportunity for CYMG as it aims to enhance its thematic engagement and expand youth access to environmental decision making.

CYMG's theory of change for youth empowerment

CYMG has been at the forefront of advocating the inclusion, empowerment and meaningful participation of young people across UNEP's activities and related environmental processes within the United Nations system. Its theory of change is inspired by the positive youth development (PYD) framework and the theory of engagement for fostering collective action among youth in leading environmental change (YLEC theory). The PYD framework suggests that, when young people are provided with the right skills, opportunities and supportive

relationships, they can contribute positively to their communities and society. It focuses on four key areas: assets, agency, contribution and enabling environment – all of which are reflected in the way CYMG approaches youth empowerment. The YLEC theory complements this by suggesting that, for youth to take effective environmental action, several facilitating factors need to be in place: motivation, comprehension, skills, self-efficacy and opportunity (Hickman, Riemer and the YLEC Collaborative 2016).

For CYMG, the first critical area is to bring together the necessary resources, skills and competences through capacity-building activities. This is the foundation for empowering young people to participate in global environmental governance processes. Through training sessions, workshops and thematic working groups, CYMG equips young people with the tools they need to navigate the multilateral environmental system. This includes knowledge of environmental science, policy literacy, negotiation skills and an understanding of intergovernmental settings. In this way, capacity building provides the “assets” within the PYD framework – tangible skills that enable youth to effectively engage in environmental decision making – and aligns with the YLEC theory by fostering comprehension and skill development. Between 2022 and 2024, CYMG organised over 120 webinars, workshops and other capacity-building activities.

Equally important is the development of a youth agency that allows young people to use their newly acquired skills and knowledge to influence environmental decision making through policy advocacy. CYMG facilitates this by drafting policy briefs, developing position papers and engaging in bilateral meetings with national and international authorities. This advocacy work is evidence-based and strategically positions youth as informed and active participants in environmental decision making. By giving young people opportunities to present their perspectives at major forums, CYMG reinforces their sense of agency, motivation and self-efficacy, all of which are key elements of both the PYD framework and the YLEC theory. Young people gain confidence in their capacity to effect change and demonstrate the power of self-efficacy as they lead discussions and initiatives, and see the tangible results of their engagement. The most recent example of effective policy advocacy is the CYMG’s leadership in facilitating youth engagement in the negotiations for the Global Plastics Treaty and the Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution.

CYMG also prioritises expanded access for youth to engage in global environmental governance. By increasing youth representation in intergovernmental meetings and organising youth-led side events at major international forums, CYMG breaks down traditional barriers to entry, ensuring that young people have a platform to be heard and to influence decisions at all levels of governance. In line with the PYD framework and the YLEC theory, CYMG’s approach recognises that providing young people with direct opportunities to contribute to environmental decision making – and to translate policy advocacy into action – is essential for sustaining their long-term engagement in global environmental governance. As a concrete example of this commitment, CYMG mobilised resources to support over 210 youth delegates to participate in international environmental conferences between 2022 and 2024.

This holistic, bottom-up approach ensures that young people remain actively engaged at all stages of decision making, from policy design to evaluation and implementation. By providing direct opportunities for youth to exercise their agency, CYMG empowers them to see their contributions reflected on a global scale, reinforcing their sense of ownership and impact in global environmental governance. Over time, these efforts help build trust and credibility, demonstrating the critical value of youth expertise and lived experiences in decision making and laying a strong foundation for youth mainstreaming.

While CYMG's theory of change is grounded in capacity building, policy advocacy and expanded access, our experiences as active participants in environmental decision making helped us identify a shortcoming: without an enabling institutional environment that fosters meaningful and long-term youth participation, these efforts often fail to reach their full potential. This realisation made us formally include an enabling institutional environment as an integral component of CYMG's theory of change. Importantly, this addition reflects CYMG's repeated advocacy for institutionalising youth participation and embedding the principle of intergenerational equity across all levels of decision making, thereby creating a more inclusive and participatory model of global environmental governance.

While UNEP has supported youth participation, particularly through strengthening CYMG's capacities and promoting more inclusive decision-making processes, youth mainstreaming remains constrained by institutional limitations. The inter-governmental nature of decision making and limited resources restrict the extent to which youth can be fully integrated into UNEP's governance structures. These limitations reflect broader tensions in global governance between the principle of state sovereignty and the push for more inclusive, participatory decision-making processes. Addressing these tensions requires not only procedural changes but also a shift in organisational culture to fully embrace youth contributions (Schroeder and Lovell 2012).

In the following part, we look into a case study that illustrates how CYMG's theory of change operates within real-world settings, with a focus on its participation in the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly. By examining the challenges to and successes of advocating youth inclusion within an institutional environment that both enables and constrains full participation, this case study highlights the broader potential of youth mainstreaming in global environmental governance.

Case study: CYMG's leadership and impact at UNEA-6 and beyond

CYMG's engagement at the United Nations Environment Assembly – the world's highest decision-making body on the environment – is a compelling example of its theory of change in action. At the opening plenary session of UNEA-6, a CYMG representative delivered a passionate address, urging global leaders to adopt more ambitious and inclusive environmental policies centred on the principles of intergenerational equity and effective multilateral governance.

We see the broken promises, the empty rhetoric, and the increasingly dire consequences of inaction. The young people of the world call upon you to ensure that we leave this UNEA more ambitious, more hopeful, and more aware of our collective responsibility in environmental governance. (CYMG 2024d)

Building capacity, advocacy and access for meaningful youth participation

In line with its mission to empower youth in environmental decision making and to promote evidence-based policy advocacy, CYMG began preparing for UNEA-6 months in advance. From December 2023 to February 2024, CYMG conducted a series of online consultations within and outside its network to develop clear, well-defined positions on each UNEA-6 draft resolution.⁹⁵ Parallel to these consultations, CYMG worked on drafting the Global Youth Declaration on Environment, a document that captured the collective demands, expectations and commitments of young people for addressing the triple planetary crisis (CYMG 2024c).

As a key component of its theory of change in building youth capacity, CYMG organised the Global Youth Environment Assembly (YEA) as an official associated event of UNEA-6. Held for the first time at the United Nations Office in Nairobi on 17 and 18 February 2024, the YEA brought together over 450 young individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage with key environmental processes, contribute to policy discussions and share their perspectives on critical environmental challenges. In an interview with the Child Rights International Network after UNEA-6, one CYMG member emphasised the importance of capacity building for navigating the intergovernmental settings:

UNEA is like the world's environmental parliament where important decisions are made, creating a basis for future laws at national and international levels. It highlights the problems we will face in the future ... UNEA might be less known than the climate COP because it can feel like a very technical expert space. It is difficult to get involved if you don't have a scientific background. There is also less civil society engagement – where they can often simplify and explain what is going on in the entire discourse. (Child Rights International Network 2024)

As such, through targeted capacity-building activities, including 17 thematic sessions on topics such as multilateral environmental agreements and science–policy interfaces, CYMG facilitated knowledge sharing and skill development among youth participants (CYMG 2024b). In addition, by fully funding 28 global delegates, four European delegates and 20 Kenyan delegates – alongside self-funded participants – CYMG underscored its commitment to expanding access and ensuring that diverse representative youth voices were present at the YEA, the Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives (OECPR) and UNEA-6.

At the heart of CYMG's policy advocacy at UNEA-6 was the Global Youth Declaration on Environment, which was formally presented to UNEP's executive director, Inger Andersen, key policy makers and member states during the YEA.

95. UNEA-6 concluded with the adoption of 15 resolutions out of 22 tabled, two decisions and a Ministerial Declaration.

The declaration resonated with the UNEA-6 audience, as Ms Andersen noted in her speech at the opening plenary session of the OECPR:

This [YEA] culminated in a Global Youth Declaration on Environment that they presented to me yesterday. Let me tell you, they did not hold back. The declaration is a clarion call from these young leaders that nothing less than the most ambitious UNEA will be enough. (Andersen 2024a)

The declaration emphasised two key messages. First, it called for the strengthening of the science–policy interface by engaging a broader range of stakeholders, including marginalised communities, Indigenous groups, youth organisations and grassroots movements, whose voices are often neglected in policy making. This approach aims to bridge the gap between policy design and implementation and to promote more inclusive and equitable policy solutions. Second, the declaration urged the institutionalisation of the principle of intergenerational equity. Building on the UNEA-5.2 Ministerial Declaration, which welcomed the 2022 Youth Environment Assembly, and the outcomes of Stockholm+50, which stressed the importance of intergenerational responsibility in sound policy making, the declaration called for the formal establishment of the Youth Environment Assembly as a core component of every future UNEA session. This includes the establishment of dedicated funding mechanisms to ensure youth representation at the highest levels of decision making – a step that would enable CYMG to institutionalise youth engagement and elevate it into meaningful contributions to policy design, evaluation and implementation (CYMG 2024a).

Building on the momentum from YEA, delegates from CYMG engaged with member states, UN agencies and civil society organisations throughout UNEA-6, advocating stronger environmental policies that address vulnerabilities among marginalised populations and emphasise justice and intergenerational equity. Youth delegates made their presence felt in negotiation rooms, often staying past midnight to follow the discussions and deliver interventions. For example, during Cluster A discussions,⁹⁶ youth delegates advocated for the use of language addressing the risks posed by hazardous chemicals and waste to vulnerable populations, including children, agricultural workers and women. While these recommendations were not included in the final resolutions, they received strong acknowledgement from several member states, demonstrating the impact of CYMG's advocacy efforts. In Cluster C,⁹⁷ youth delegates defended a resolution on climate justice proposed by Sri Lanka. When negotiations shifted the language from "climate justice" to "climate action", young people delivered an impassioned

96. Cluster A included resolutions on highly hazardous pesticides; the sound management of chemicals and waste; the promotion of regional co-operation to improve air quality globally; the combating of sand and dust storms; and the modification of solar radiation.

97. Cluster C included resolutions on fostering national action to address environmental challenges through increased co-operation between UNEA, UNEP and Multilateral Environmental Agreements; enhancing the role and viability of regional environment ministerial forums and regional offices in achieving multilateral co-operation to tackle environmental challenges; promoting a synergistic approach to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and to support sustainable development; and effective, inclusive and sustainable multilateral actions for climate justice.

statement emphasising the importance of justice-focused language to recognise the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalised communities. Although the resolution was ultimately withdrawn, CYMG's advocacy highlighted the persistent need for climate justice in global environmental discourse.

Institutional impact and long-term influence on youth engagement

While UNEA-6 did not ultimately formalise commitments to intergenerational equity, institutionalise the Youth Environment Assembly or position youth engagement as a cornerstone of inclusive decision making, the outcomes nonetheless highlighted the growing influence of CYMG and the incremental progress towards youth mainstreaming in global environmental governance. The UNEA-6 Ministerial Declaration welcomed the Youth Environment Assembly and recognised its role in fostering youth participation. While this recognition falls short of formalising youth representation, it highlights the progress CYMG has made in elevating youth voices in environmental decision making.

Beyond these immediate outcomes, CYMG's impact at UNEA-6 is evident in shifting organisational culture within UNEP and among member states. Following CYMG's strong presence and advocacy at UNEA-6, UNEP has increasingly integrated youth-related matters into the meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives. For example, UNEP's Youth and Education Programme – a four-year cross-divisional initiative designed to enhance youth skills and engagement in global environmental governance – reflects CYMG's ongoing advocacy for meaningful youth participation. Member states have also begun discussing the possibility of integrating youth and education priorities into UNEP's next medium-term strategy, acknowledging that youth voices should be a formal part of its work (UNEP 2024c; 2024b).

In addition, member states recognised the value of the Global Youth Environment Assembly as a recurring event within the UNEA framework. As such, they have requested UNEP to support future assemblies, with recommendations to align the YEA more closely with UNEA sessions to maximise its impact (UNEP 2024d; 2024a). This recognition by UNEP and member states demonstrates a growing acknowledgement of the CYMG's role, not only in mobilising youth voices but also in fostering channels for substantive contributions to environmental decision making. These actions reflect early steps towards institutionalising the YEA as a standing platform within UNEA, advancing a model where youth participation is structurally embedded, supported and promoted within an enabling institutional environment.

Conclusion

Youth mainstreaming stands for the systematic integration of youth perspectives, expertise and priorities into policy processes at all levels. It seeks to move towards a structural approach, ensuring that young people are recognised as critical

stakeholders in decision making and have substantive and ongoing roles. As a principle, youth mainstreaming aligns with the broader concept of inclusivity in global governance, which acknowledges that sustainable and effective policy outcomes can be achieved only if diverse voices are involved in shaping decisions.

This chapter demonstrates that youth mainstreaming in intergovernmental decision making requires consistent and strategic engagement of youth with intergovernmental organisations and member states, who are the ones sustaining an enabling institutional environment. Such an environment, when it is built in collaboration with youth groups and informed by youth perspectives, has the potential to address systemic challenges while creating new opportunities. A key challenge is the limited institutional support for youth voices within formal decision-making spaces, which often results in tokenistic rather than substantive engagement. Structural barriers – including limited formal mechanisms for youth participation, resistance to change within established governance frameworks and a lack of dedicated funding for consistent youth engagement – significantly restrict the extent to which youth perspectives can be fully integrated into the UNEP’s governance structures (UNICEF Innocenti 2024). While CYMG serves as UNEP’s formal youth engagement mechanism, its scope and impact are limited by its institutional design and the intergovernmental nature of the organisation, thereby constraining its efforts to broaden access to youth participation.

In addition, unequal access to knowledge and skills across regions, as well as the high level of policy literacy required for effective participation, can discourage young people from taking part in environmental decision making. This is exacerbated by perceptions that young people lack the experience or technical expertise necessary to provide substantive contributions, making it difficult for them to be seen as legitimate stakeholders (Checkoway 2011; Thew, Middlemiss and Paavola 2020). These barriers reinforce under-representation and constrain the prospective solutions that young people can offer. While CYMG strives to fill this gap through capacity building and policy advocacy, these efforts are themselves constrained by the voluntary nature of youth participation, the difficulty of sustaining consistent engagement and persistent funding limitations. Funding mainly involves costs related to maintaining CYMG’s digital presence, accessing online collaboration tools and software and ensuring adequate participation in key environmental processes.

Despite these challenges, youth groups like the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP demonstrate how structured, bottom-up youth engagement can build trust with policy makers, establish youth as credible voices in decision making and advance youth mainstreaming. Through capacity building, policy advocacy and expanded access, CYMG empowers young people to maximise their skills and agency to meaningfully engage in global environmental governance and advocate inclusivity and ambition to address pressing environmental challenges. In addition, the growing recognition of youth as critical stakeholders, supported by such frameworks as the recently adopted Pact for the Future and the UN Youth2030 strategy, signals a shift towards more inclusive governance models that actively seek and integrate youth perspectives at all stages of policy design, evaluation and implementation.

Advancing youth mainstreaming in global environmental governance requires formalising platforms like the Youth Environment Assembly as integral components of environmental decision making. While several European Union and Council of Europe countries have demonstrated strong support for youth engagement, they could further advance these efforts by being more open to youth perspectives, engaging proactively in bilateral meetings and fostering meaningful collaborations with young people. Establishing dedicated funding streams to support youth-led environmental projects and capacity-building programmes that equip young people for roles in environmental decision making would also enable more sustained and impactful contributions.

Formal youth representation could also be strengthened through structured programmes like the UN Youth Delegate Programme, which provides young people with opportunities to participate in intergovernmental meetings. This is an area where the EU and the Council of Europe could lead by example, as many of their member states already support this initiative. However, relatively few currently extend this support to UNEA, which limits the presence and impact of young people. The establishment of dedicated youth advisory boards within EU environmental authorities and the inclusion of youth representatives in all major EU-level environmental policy forums would further embed youth perspectives in decision-making processes. In addition, youth mainstreaming requires policies that prioritise intergenerational equity, ensuring that today's decisions consider the interests and needs of future generations and encouraging policy makers to weigh long-term impacts as well as immediate results. Member states of the EU and the Council of Europe that have policies to safeguard future generations could play a proactive role in bringing the principle of intergenerational equity to the forefront of policy discussions.

CYMG's engagement at UNEA-6 demonstrates that youth mainstreaming is an ongoing process that requires persistence, innovation and a shared commitment to inclusive governance. By adopting these approaches, intergovernmental organisations like UNEP can foster a more inclusive, dynamic and effective system of global governance that harnesses the power of youth engagement and integrates youth perspectives into decision making.

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Chapter 20

Conclusions and lessons learned – Unravelling the concepts of youth perspective and youth mainstreaming

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Over recent decades European youth policy has developed guidance within and around ideas such as meaningful youth participation, cross-sectoral policy, youth perspective and youth mainstreaming. Through debates, mutual exchange and peer learning, the Council of Europe, the European Union and the governments of many European countries (at national, regional and local levels) have each developed approaches to consider and integrate young people's perspectives, needs and interests systematically into their political decision making, policies and programmes.

These approaches originated as early as the 1960s (UNESCO), 1970s (Council of Europe) and 1980s (United Nations and the start of the Erasmus programme in the European Union), when there was increased political awareness that particular groups in society were systematically overlooked and needed their own (participation) strategies to take into account their needs during political decision making and policy development and implementation (Kalala and Siurala 2022). By the 1990s, one pioneering role in the area of youth was taken by the United Nations, which adopted its World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995, calling for "integrated youth policies and programmes" with mechanisms on a "multilevel and cross-sectoral basis" (United Nations 1995). In Europe, both the Council of Europe and the European Union steadily developed their own approaches. The Council of Europe stipulated the importance of involving young people in decisions affecting them, strengthening the role of the Advisory Council on Youth in its youth sector decision-making processes. The European Union declared cross-sectoral policy as well as youth participation as cornerstones of its youth strategies. Simultaneously, many national governments adopted elements of youth mainstreaming in their political processes, without defining or calling it as such. They include, for example, mechanisms like structural youth participation or youth checks.

These diverse global, European and national approaches are all advocated and justified by similar views regarding young people. First, though both a truism and a cliché that has become something of a broken record, young people are the future of society. Decisions taken today thus affect them most – not necessarily as the present generation of young people, but certainly later in life. Second, young people are not only future adults but they are also current citizens with their own rights and needs. Participation that respects a rights-based approach is thus a human right not only for adults but for children as well. As Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states, all children capable of forming their own views have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. Therefore, it follows from this position that a commitment to youth mainstreaming is based on a view of intergenerational fairness and inclusion. As young people have often not been taken into account in traditional decision making, mechanisms need to be established to ensure their inclusion.

In 2025, the rights-based approach of youth mainstreaming and meaningful youth participation coincided with reports of a democratic backlash from young people. Democratic political organisation and policy processes are heavily influenced by the opinions and preferences of people participating in formal ways, starting with elections. Electoral outcomes are, inevitably, often decisive in determining how policy develops and which policy fields get more political attention and subsequently more financial resources. In this context, youth policy, and young people as its target group, has often been neglected.

Research reveals recurrently that many young people are disconnected from traditional political participation channels. First, based on their age, some young people are denied electoral participation, as voting rights are granted differentially, at the age of 16, 17 or 18, depending on the country they are living in. Second, recent research shows that, even when young people can vote, they participate less in elections and engage less with other conventional practices of political participation compared to other age groups, which results in their being disproportionately less represented by the democratic political establishment (Deželan, Bacalso and Lodeserto 2023). Third, when young people do vote, recent elections show a tendency for young people to vote more for illiberal (right and left wing) leaders and parties, compared to other age groups. A few examples are the German federal elections in February 2025, the elections in Romania in December 2024 and May 2025, the elections in France in July 2024 and the European elections in June 2024. These results suggest that young people are losing trust in liberal democracy and its political institutions (Kwak et al. 2020).

Taking into account the perspectives, needs and interests of young people in political decision making, particularly through structural participation mechanisms, is thus considered to be a way of learning about – and experiencing – democracy. Therefore, integrating the perspectives, needs and interests of young people into the decision-making cycle and considering the effects of political decisions on young people are increasingly critical components of what democracy should mean, and a key for both the future and the quality

of democracy. In this political context, the subject of youth engagement in policy making is now higher on the agenda of intergovernmental institutions, European institutions, and national and local governments, as well as in youth organisations themselves.

This Youth Knowledge Book on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective has identified such rights-based and democratic approaches and aims for conceptual clarification based on both theoretical considerations and examples from practice. In doing so, it acknowledges the parallel and ongoing development of the practices of youth mainstreaming and integration of the youth perspective, as well as the need to grapple with conceptual definitions. The different chapters illuminate the concepts of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective from political, academic-theoretical and practical points of view. In this final chapter, the editors endeavour to draw together the central tenets of the chapters, suggesting that seven main strands of conclusions emerge.

Therefore, this concluding chapter starts with the question of why youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are important, together with the challenge of identifying what they are: the conceptualisation of youth mainstreaming and youth perspective. The latter is often deliberated through the policy lens of youth participation but, as the different chapters of this book show, it can also be formulated through youth research and youth work practice. As the development of institutional agendas at national, European and global level convey, the concept of youth mainstreaming can also be considered from different angles. However, to be effective, both youth mainstreaming processes and processes concerned with the integration of a youth perspective rely on political support and a political willingness to ensure their active implementation. These seven main strands of conclusions are elaborated upon in the next sections.

Why youth mainstreaming or a youth perspective?

A sometimes conscious and sometimes subconscious question present in the whole book is the question of why youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective in policy should be pressed for as a political priority, or even a basic political principle. The first argument, a rights-based approach, posits that participation in political processes is a fundamental right of all people and thus, with reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, also of young people:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations 1989)

The rights-based approach is upheld in most chapters of the book, and underlined in the theoretical conceptualisation of youth mainstreaming by Tomaž Deželan (2024), who considers the right to participation as a fundamental principle within it.

Beyond arguments about the value of and the right to youth participation, the poly-crisis young people in Europe are facing means that their perspectives, and subsequently the (political) commitment to “youth mainstreaming”, are now all the more important. The challenges facing young people, who have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and economic crises, just to name a few (for more, see Williamson 2024), that will eventually affect the whole of society in one way or another. Politics has already acknowledged the current situation of young people by developing a range of strategies and measures to mitigate some of the worst impacts of these crises, including strategies of youth mainstreaming (as an example, see Sirakova and Touykova in this book). There is a need for acknowledging and integrating the youth perspective into the broader fields of policy and decision-making processes.

Finally, the importance of youth education, empowerment and capacity building through youth mainstreaming is underlined. In complex policy fields that may have a significant impact on young people yet simultaneously have limited visibility for young people, such as environmental and climate policy (see Skaredina, Abo-Taleb and Kowshik in this book), or justice and anti-corruption policy (see Lonean in this book), ensuring relevant youth education is necessary – even a precondition – for meaningful participation and therefore youth mainstreaming. Young people, just like everybody else, need competences – knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical understanding – to participate. In complex policy fields, these may have to be learned. Providing young people with further resources, in addition to the ones mentioned here, is also helpful but, according to the contributions to this book, are of secondary importance.

Sorting the concepts

Aligned to the question of why these ideas are important is the question “What do they actually mean?”. How are youth mainstreaming and youth perspective actually understood, and what do they entail? One of the main conclusions of the book is undoubtedly that, from a practical point of view, youth mainstreaming and youth perspective as concepts are closely linked to youth participation. Most chapters discuss youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective in decision-making processes under the heading of youth integration, youth inclusion and youth participation. As such, in these chapters, youth mainstreaming is certainly conceptualised as a strategy to give young people a voice in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

However, as the more theoretical understandings of youth mainstreaming in the book show (see section 2), although youth participation is clearly related to youth mainstreaming and youth perspective, these concepts of youth participation, youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are not equivalent. Rather, the particular relationships between the concepts refer to youth participation as an earlier stage, a foundational principle or a prerequisite of mainstreaming. Following the broader differentiation of youth policy into youth

sector policy, policy that significantly addresses young people in other sectors, and policy that ignores or has minimal interest in young people yet affects their lives and prospects (see Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach in this book), youth mainstreaming generally incorporates the idea that youth participation needs to extend beyond youth sector policy. As a fundamental tenet of youth sector policy, youth mainstreaming turns youth participation into a key element in all areas of policy, to reflect on how policy may actively or inadvertently affect the lives of young people in both positive and negative ways.

Closely related is another aspect of youth mainstreaming, namely its initiation and leading by policy makers and public administrations in charge of drafting and implementing youth policy in a narrow sense. Examples are youth ministries (for example, Romes-Larsen and Abendroth in this book), the Youth Unit in the European Commission (see Sirakova and Touykova in this book) and the Joint Council on Youth at the Council of Europe (see Flessenkemper in this book). This does raise the question of to what extent mixing youth mainstreaming that is initiated by the youth sector but actually targets other sectors, with youth sector principles like participation, inclusion and integration, and that are just as much defined by the youth sector, would blur its short-term and long-term value. Thus, a participatory approach to mainstreaming is arguably too narrow and seems to come down to the question of how to conceptualise youth perspective. As some chapters assert, and it is an important observation, there is invariably more than one youth perspective and those perspectives of young people can derive from different sources, youth participation being just one of them (for example, in this book, Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach; Das and Das; and Gupta). Youth perspective, rather than being singular, must be considered as multi-perspective, relying on different sources as well as taking into account the diversity of young people (for example, in this book, von Westerholt). In its conceptualisation, a triangulation of methods retrieving youth perspective may increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of youth mainstreaming strategies.

The book's chapters also show that youth mainstreaming and youth perspective are not fixed concepts. They are open to interpretation and vary in their implementation. Moreover, the concepts of mainstreaming and perspective are not new, though their association with youth and youth policy are perhaps relatively new. This allows the authors of different chapters of the book to take inspiration from other concepts and theories, such as the copious literature on gender mainstreaming. Following up on neighbouring concepts of mainstreaming, the institutional definitions cited in the chapters do not necessarily relate to the EU or the Council of Europe. Other institutional definitions are mentioned in the book, including the definition developed at UN level in the 1990s in the context of gender mainstreaming:

attained through assessing the implications of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making target groups' concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that all groups benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. (United Nations 1997)

However, while the 1997 UN definition highlights the assessment of implications of decisions and policies on the target groups, the specific definition of the UN 2030 Youth Strategy underlines the engagement, partnership and participation of young people and organisations:

Incorporate across all entities of the UN and work relating to all UN pillars, the need to meaningfully and sustainably engage and partner with young people and their organisations, networks and movements, through formal and informal mechanisms and platforms to realise universal rights-based youth participation. (United Nations 2018)

This institutional definition allows for theoretical approaches included in the chapters of the book. First, mainstreaming can be understood in the context of the definition of youth policy (see Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach in this book). With the definition of youth policy in focus, the youth mainstreaming concept may be used to move from a narrow definition of youth policy (as only the policies that target young people with instruments and structures specific to the youth sector (such as youth-specific governance structures or youth organisations), to a multisectoral approach that considers all potential and implicit or explicit impacts of policy on young people. In this context, policies and decisions beyond the youth sector can be based on youth policy principles such as youth participation. Following this line of thought, processes of youth mainstreaming could lead to a situation where more policy makers and decision makers could consider themselves designing and/or implementing youth policy, thus giving youth policy a more prominent position within governmental policies. This could lead to increased resources and political power to promote youth interests.

Lessons from gender mainstreaming

With youth mainstreaming being considered as a rather new institutional (European) political project, several authors in this book anchored their discussions with consideration of and comparison to the older concept of gender mainstreaming. Tomaž Deželan, Slađjana Petković and Marti Taru point out that many of the definitions of youth mainstreaming are rooted in the definitions of gender mainstreaming, stressing equality and equal participation (Deželan/Petković/Taru in this book).

Through that reflection, gender mainstreaming brings grounds for concern and lessons to be learned rather than good practices, according to the pages of the book. Indeed, gender mainstreaming raises red flags for youth mainstreaming, including the phenomenon of “othering” (Cherry 2023; see Kalala and Siurala in this book), defined as a phenomenon wherein individuals or groups are categorised and labelled as not conforming to the norms of a social group, essentially creating a perception of belonging either to the in-group or the out-group. Such “othering” would exclude rather than include young people, as well as pointing to the risk of establishing a purely institutional and procedural approach that could be characterised, and of course criticised, as box ticking.

Moreover, the experience of gender mainstreaming, even in programmes where this is not perceived as challenging (as in the case of Erasmus+ programme),

suggests that it is limited by a theoretical approach, “without any constraints or support to help apply this concept” (see Daviet in this book). It is therefore essential for those institutions and organisations called on to implement mainstreaming to be equipped with the necessary resources, time and knowledge if the gender or youth perspective is to be promoted effectively in different policy fields.

Despite its limitations in both conceptualisation and implementation, gender mainstreaming remains the best-known mainstreaming initiative, and the most important source of inspiration for the development of the policy instruments for youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives at all stages of policy and decision making. However, gender mainstreaming has a clear and relatively easy-to-measure objective, represented by the reduction in gender inequality. Youth mainstreaming and the integration of the youth perspective have a more complex aim, and therefore additional challenges need to be considered.

Youth mainstreaming and youth perspective aspirations carry an expectation that they will contribute to designing and implementing policies that are beneficial for young people and are inclusive, leaving no young people behind with equitable consideration of different identities, levels of access to rights and services, and the diverse vulnerabilities of young people. For example, education policies should take into account not only more general child and human rights but also specific youth rights and the needs of different groups of young people. Youth mainstreaming and the integration of the youth perspective are also expected to mitigate the possible negative effects of policies on different groups of young people. This expectation is based on the assumption that unexpected effects of policies – whether they target a specific group of young people or if they fail to target young people at all – are capable of generating problems that may be very difficult to solve in the future. For example, economic policies are currently causing significant housing and employment issues for young people. Last, but patently not least, nowadays, in an age of rising anti-democratic political movements and non-liberal democracy in Europe, and given that young people are more likely to support these political movements, youth mainstreaming and the integration of the youth perspective are also expected to build young people’s trust in democratic institutions.

Youth mainstreaming, at least in theory and it is hoped in practice, is therefore a rather all-embracing wraparound concept, one that seeks to enable input from young people as policies are envisaged and enacted and that also ensures attention and, if necessary, revised action to achieve the desired impact on young people. This process demands, from the start, meaningful youth participation and the integration of a youth perspective; the end demands a youth test or check (though that may also be done, through an earlier *a priori* analysis or *ex ante* evaluation).

Whose perspectives?

The question of whose perspective is integrated into policy lies at the core of youth mainstreaming. The theoretical framework and approaches and the practical examples presented in this book underline the importance of considering the diversity of young people when planning specific youth

mainstreaming initiatives. Therefore, rather than discussing the integration of a youth perspective (singular) in deliberations and decisions, as for example was announced in relation to the Council of Europe by the Reykjavik Declaration, it may be better discussed as the integration of youth perspectives (plural) (see Flessenkemper in this book).

Young people's identities are shaped by multiple intersecting categories (including age, gender, race, socio-economic status, disability, migration status and sexual orientation). Treating these identities separately is routinely ineffective and often divisive, as this creates tensions and apparent contradictions between the needs and preferences of the same individuals when they are regarded and classified as having only one essential identity. Moreover, simple approaches to mainstreaming can generate competition between vulnerable and/or marginalised groups and therefore limit, instead of improve, access to resources and decision making. For these reasons, there is a powerful argument for an intersectional approach to mainstreaming, going beyond the already established gender mainstreaming, youth mainstreaming and other mainstreaming approaches targeting different social groups (see von Westerholt in this book).

Obtaining perspectives through youth participation

To obtain youth perspectives, most chapters in this book analyse practical approaches to meaningful youth participation as a means of promoting youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives into decision making. Osinga et al. discuss a design-based approach, rooted in design theory, as a good practice used to integrate youth perspectives in Rotterdam. This approach calls for moving away from focusing on a short-term project or a specific policy, and therefore short-term mobilisation of young people, and turning towards a participatory and interactive definition of problems and pathways for addressing and solving them. Such a co-design of policies through this broader and deeper understanding of young people's needs and aspirations is aimed at closing the trust gap between policy makers and young people, as well as diversity and inclusion gaps. Similar approaches were developed and adopted in youth work in the 1980s, when Audrey Mullender and Dave Ward coined the idea of "social action" youth work, injecting the important question of "why" in engagement with young people (rather than just "what" and "how"), and working together with them to resolve it (Mullender and Ward 1991; see also Williamson 1994).

Several other chapters mention further practical methods aimed at engaging young people and/or integrating young people's opinions, needs and expectations into policy making, decision making, implementation and the evaluation of policies. These methods have usually not arisen from specific theoretical and conceptual frameworks (as in the case of Osinga et al.). However, having been tested in practice, they allow for lessons to be learned and good practices to be identified: direct participation, indirect participation and rights-inclusive methods.

Direct participation by young people, with a recent but important focus on ensuring meaningfulness, represents the first method invoked to bring a youth

perspective and youth mainstreaming into European, national and local policies. The development of the EU Youth Dialogue (Sirakova and Touykova, and Hofmann-van de Poll and Rottach in this book; see also Lonean 2024) represents one example. Other examples are the participation of young people at regional level in Spain and at local level in Italy, informing, enabling and empowering youth councils to influence public policies (Escamilla and Gonzalo, and Sciarretta et al. in this book). Furthermore, methods such as young people organising themselves at community level represent an important inspiration for organising direct youth participation (Eppenhof et al. in this book).

Indirect participation by young people is a second method of integrating the youth perspective and youth mainstreaming into a range of policies. With the Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth and the Youth Department's co-management system, young people from various youth organisations are represented, through the Advisory Council on Youth, in the Council of Europe's decision-making structures in the field of youth (Williamson, Fras and Lavchyan 2021). Similarly, youth councils may bring young people's perspectives closer to decision makers, through youth organisations and youth leaders (Escamilla and Gonzalo, and Sciarretta et al. in this book). Other examples include youth consultative structures within the United Nations, such as the Children and Youth Major Group of the United Nations Environment Programme (Skaredina, Abo-Taleb and Kowshik in this book) or the Integrity Youth Advisory Body of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Lonean in this book). Such consultative structures as forms of indirect participation of young people are basically functioning as intermediaries between young people and decision makers. Their members, although not elected by young people, have legitimacy because through their work within civil society they can show a clear connection with larger groups of young people. Consultative structures also provide one means of empowerment and capacity building, as the members of the structures learn about policy processes and political dynamics, thus developing advocacy and negotiation skills in order to effectively promote the interests of young people.

The third way of participation is the use of rights-inclusive methods as key factors of meaningful youth participation and engagement, whether direct or indirect. They provide training for people working with young people (like youth workers or teachers) and encourage genuine stakeholder co-operation. The quality methods used in training and participatory measures, as well as the competences of youth participation facilitators, support the capacity of young people to influence policies and to convince a large range of stakeholders to integrate youth perspectives into their work (Eppenhof et al.; Kvieskienė, Stasytė and Celiešienė; and Le Grand, Ferron and Lafitte in this book).

Considering that the great majority of contributions in this book advocate a form of consultation and participation as a principle of youth mainstreaming, it is particularly interesting to note that Moxon, Kovačić and Štefan, analysing eight case studies from different countries, point out that participation is not a critical element of successful youth policy, and thus of mainstreaming (Moxon, Kovačić and Štefan in this book). At the same time however, the chapters provide enough evidence that the approach of youth mainstreaming as a purely administrative

process is not leading to good results, as the comparisons with gender mainstreaming show. A reflection on path dependency, as suggested by Kalala and Siurala in this book, may be helpful when it comes to youth policy making. The chapters of this book further provide evidence that a top-down controlled and tokenistic form of youth participation is not essential to youth policy. Even more, it is clear that youth participation may not be a prerequisite requirement in relation to the idea of youth mainstreaming, even though we believe that the injection of some kind of youth perspective, through youth participation, may be a valuable addition to the development and implementation of youth mainstreaming.

Obtaining youth perspectives through other means

Apart from (representative) participation as a means to obtain youth perspectives, the chapter by Tomaž Deželan, Slađana Petković and Marti Taru and the chapter by Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll and Andreas Rottach identify further categories: impact assessment, research, people working with young people and institutional co-ordination. Whereas participation can be categorised as perspectives by young people, the other categorisations are perspectives from young people.

Going beyond youth participation, youth tests or youth checks constitute a specific form of regulatory impact assessment focused on the expected impact of planned regulations on young people. They are an important practical method used by EU institutions and are gaining popularity in European countries (Sirakova and Touykova; Moxon, Kovačić and Štefan; and Romes-Larsen and Abendroth in this book; see also European Commission 2024b). Although organised very differently compared to mechanisms for youth participation, youth tests or checks have the potential to become well and clearly institutionalised, creating a strong, arguably necessary, although probably not sufficient, basis for youth mainstreaming.

A further type of consultation that indirectly captures youth perspectives is consultation with youth professionals (such as youth workers, teachers or trainers) and also other professionals who have a responsibility to remain informed about youth needs (such as doctors). These consultations bring into the policy debate an additional, enriching and well-informed “perspective on youth perspectives”. For decision makers, engagement with youth professionals may provide an important additional and sometimes alternative strategy and conduit to find out about the needs and concerns of young people, especially those who are hard to reach directly and are less represented by youth organisations and youth advisory structures.

Youth research, through instruments such as the EU Youth Report and many national youth reports or barometers, also contributes to bringing the youth perspective into policy making and thus also supporting youth mainstreaming. Together with the youth test and youth checks, youth research assists evidence-based decision making, complementing the “living experience” evidence provided through youth participation.

Two further methods are introduced in this book to promote the integration of a youth perspective into policy and decision making. First, the chapter by Ria and Sia Das shows that in fields that are of particular interest for young people, such as the environment and climate, there may be recourse to litigation and other types of legal action to make their concerns and opinions known. Although individual cases are not always successful, they can still create momentum, generate legal reasoning and support the future integration of youth perspectives into decision-making processes. Second, policy fields apparently not of great interest to a large number of young people still need to integrate their perspective to keep these fields relevant and up to date in a fast-changing world. In these cases, such as in the field of cultural heritage, engaging young professionals in projects, institutions and organisations is a good method to integrate youth perspectives (see Gupta in this book).

Related to this typology is the important observation that different research methodologies and different participation methodologies can generate different perspectives. It therefore needs a sensitivity on the part of researchers, practitioners, decision makers and young people to the idea that there is no such thing as a single youth perspective. The perspectives often acquired are only part of the enormous range of youth perspectives. In some cases, they may be plausibly representative; in other cases, they may just represent a section of a broader variance. This does not detract from the perspectives secured, nor from youth mainstreaming as a strategic approach to integrating young people's perspectives into decision-making processes. Rather, it asks for a sensitivity to language and an awareness about the limitations of the methodologies and approaches that have been used.

Furthermore, with so many different categories and forms of obtaining the perspectives on and of young people, it is worth noting that each has its own merits as well as its own limitations. It is therefore argued that for youth mainstreaming to be effective, it would benefit from a triangulation of methods to integrate young people's perspectives into decision-making processes. The participation of young people in decision-making processes, as those affected by policies, should be one cornerstone of this triangulation. The inclusion of researchers (through research or an independent regulatory impact assessment) and of practitioners (through people working with young people or young professionals) could and should provide the other corners of the triangulation. Obtaining youth perspectives for decision making through young people themselves, youth researchers and youth (work) practitioners would provide a more balanced reflection of the different groups of stakeholders influencing policy that affects young people.

Development of national, European and global institutional agendas

Over the course of the last few decades, many countries and international organisations have developed institutional agendas incorporating ideas of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives (see Moxon, Kovačić and Štefan; Deželan, Petković and Taru in this book). At the national level, youth mainstreaming or integrating youth perspectives into a broad range of policies can

inspire development at the European level, as well as in other countries, regions or cities. National examples from France, Malta, Ireland, Croatia, Austria, Finland and the Flemish Community of Belgium include complex frameworks, methodological tools and institutional structures, legal texts supporting youth mainstreaming or the integration of the youth perspectives into decision and policy making (Moxon, Kovačić and Ștefan in this book).

In Europe, incorporating the youth perspective and operationalising the concept of youth mainstreaming have gained recent prominence on the agendas of the Council of Europe and the European Union respectively, as part of a wider trend that has propelled young people and youth policies higher up the agenda of European institutions. For the European Union this development culminated with the European Year of Youth 2022, with both political prominence and resources allocated to young people and the youth field (European Commission 2024a). Although the concept of youth mainstreaming is now firmly associated with the European Year of Youth, it actually originated earlier. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, adopted in 2018, includes specific tools like the EU Youth Dialogue and EU youth programmes (such as Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps) to bolster youth involvement and participation in decision making. With the now established role of an EU Youth Coordinator, the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 follows the objective of enhancing cross-sectoral co-operation, and knowledge development and exchange on youth issues, within the European Commission services to support, among others, youth mainstreaming (see Sirakova and Touykova in this book). Since the first publications of the EU Youth Report, the EU has used a dual approach “to tackle youth-relevant issues on the one hand by mainstreaming initiatives across policy areas and on the other hand by specific initiatives in the youth sector” (Council of the European Union 2018). Although participation is not at all excluded, the documents published by the EU institutions also propose complementary tools, especially the youth check or youth test. The youth test is a form of regulatory impact assessment and implies the consideration of possible – planned and unplanned – effects on young people of decisions in policies and regulations. This can take the format of an *ex ante* evaluation or a more modest checklist (European Economic and Social Committee 2022; European Commission 2024b; Papp 2022).

For the Council of Europe, the Declaration at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik in 2023 started a process of incorporating a youth perspective into the Council of Europe’s “intergovernmental and other deliberations” (Council of Europe 2023). Due to its co-management system for the youth sector, within its Youth Directorate (latterly Youth Department), the Council of Europe has been a model for institutional youth engagement and participation in the development of youth policies even before 2023. However, as decided by political positions at the highest possible level, the Reykjavik Declaration represents the peak of the organisation’s support for youth engagement and the idea of taking the opinions of young people into decision-making processes beyond the youth sector (see Flessenkemper in this book), though there are some critical considerations to be taken into account when taking such a commitment forward (Council of Europe 2025).

Following the Reykjavik Declaration, the task of integrating the youth perspective has been undertaken not only by the Council of Europe Youth Department but also by all departments, committees and other bodies in the Organisation. The documents discussed and adopted by the co-management structures on youth within the Council of Europe underline the strong link between youth participation and the integration of the youth perspective, but also mention the importance of other methods and tools to develop: 1. an attitude of thinking with youth, based on and inspired by institutional frameworks similar to the co-management approach of the Council of Europe's statutory bodies on youth; 2. mutual intergenerational learning; 3. skills, spaces and methodologies for meaningful engagement and effective participation that is not tokenistic; 4. activities with and for youth, based on the principles of co-creation: young people are both the agents and the beneficiaries of policies, programmes and activities that target them and their peers (Joint Council on Youth 2023).

At a global level, United Nations structures such as UNICEF and UNESCO are promoting meaningful youth engagement and participation, with a clear focus on better adapting the youth engagement processes to youth needs and ensuring their impact in decisions. Other intergovernmental organisations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Commonwealth have also developed initiatives for youth engagement (see Deželan, Petković and Taru in this book). Following their views on youth mainstreaming, it is to be concluded that even in these institutions, mainstreaming processes are highly interlinked, if not quite considered equivalent, to youth participation and youth engagement.

Supporting youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives beyond the youth sector

As many elements of youth policy evolve outside of the youth sector per se, youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective as such are not bound to the youth sector either. On the contrary, the fundamental idea of mainstreaming and integration processes is that they are expected to happen outside the youth sector. As Etch Kalala and Lasse Siurala point out in their chapter, such processes touch upon the basics of co-operation and support. Co-operation between the youth sector and other sectors is an important success factor in youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives. However, such relationships, and the policy development and implementation that flows from them, are based on political will, political power and political championship of a youth agenda (on the dynamics of cross-sectoral co-operation, see Nico and Taru 2017; see also Williamson, Fras and Lavchyan 2021).

As the case of the youth check in Germany shows, mainstreaming processes rely heavily on the willingness of other sectors to engage and to clear a role for youth perspectives in their decision-making processes. Therefore, mainstreaming processes in general, and particularly those that intervene in existing processes

and procedures, have to be optimised in such a way that not only their additional value is recognised but it also outweighs the potential disadvantage of slowing down these existing processes and procedures. The youth check in Germany is an example of an intervention that is an additional step in the legislative process, but its benefit in terms of youth policy seems to be recognised by all policy sectors (Romes-Larsen and Abendroth in this book).

The question of support for youth mainstreaming and youth perspective processes is particularly important against the background of the role of the youth sector. Several examples of institutionalised forms of youth mainstreaming and the integration of youth perspectives in this book show the importance of the youth sector as both an advocate and an organiser of such processes (Sirakova and Touykova; Flessenkemper; Moxon, Kovačić and Ștefan; and Romes-Larsen and Abendroth in this book). However, in institutionalised settings such a role may also produce the danger of overloading the tasks, settings and resources of the youth sector. In the case of the Council of Europe, for example, the Directorate of Internal Oversight warns against too heavy a co-ordinating role for its Youth Department, while at the same time acknowledging the important work done to integrate a youth perspective into its co-management bodies (Council of Europe 2025). In order not to succumb to this, the youth sector therefore depends on the openness, willingness and resources of other sectors.

Youth mainstreaming thus faces a number of structural challenges related to politics that may make consistent implementation difficult. A central problem is that of political volatility. Changes in polity, policy and politics often lead to established and seemingly agreed priorities and structures not being pursued, or even being scrapped or abandoned. As the examples of the Spanish youth councils (Escamilla and Gonzalo in this book) and the Maatschappelijke Diensttijd (MDT) in the Netherlands (Eppenhof et al. in this book) show, even well-established and acknowledged programmes can lose support under new political constellations.

This leads to a second challenge, namely that of achieving sustainable political and institutional anchoring of youth mainstreaming processes and processes of integration of youth perspectives beyond election cycles. The existence of a legal framework, in this regard, is not enough. To actually implement youth mainstreaming sustainably, there is a need for cross-sectoral integration of youth perspectives, financial resources, qualified personnel and above all a profound understanding of youth policy issues. Without these prerequisites, any legal obligation – whether national hard law or European soft law – may remain little more than empty rhetoric.

Conclusions

Youth participation is now, certainly within youth sectors at all levels of governance, an established commitment, though there often remains some confusion and even dispute as to exactly how this should be done. Youth mainstreaming, encompassing all areas of policy and at all levels of governance

that prospectively touch young people's lives, is now, arguably, the elusive prize. Somewhere in between there is the idea of strengthening a youth perspective, whether this is little more than "participation+" (securing young people's voice and influence within wider youth policy arenas) or bringing together different sources of understanding of young people's lives (not just the experiences and perspectives of young people themselves but the views of youth professionals, the knowledge from youth research and others). This is, without doubt, the direction of travel, as youth has, for a number of reasons, become more prominent on the political agenda. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe want to enable and ensure that input from young people and their proxies is more robust across the piece, and that policy output for young people is optimised, through the minimisation of prospective negative consequences.

These are laudable aspirations and commendable commitments. Yet the contributions to this book suggest unequivocally that it is early days and that the ideas underpinning the belief in youth mainstreaming and the integration of a youth perspective remain very much a work in progress. Many questions vis-à-vis the concepts themselves, let alone the policy process and implementation in practice, are still unresolved. There are multiple tensions and dilemmas that still have to be addressed. There is clearly commitment to taking these ideas forward, but there is, equally, a need for caution, for sufficient time and space to explore different models and methods to ensure effective development. This book, hopefully, both informs and inspires reflection on the prospects and possibilities, as well as the pitfalls and problematics, in relation to these new framework concepts for shaping young people's voice, place and influence within the work of the European Union and the Council of Europe, and the subsequent flow of policies that affect their lives.

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Appendix 1

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on promoting youth mainstreaming in policy decision-making processes in the European Union (2023)



C/2023/1342

29.11.2023

**Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States
meeting within the Council on promoting youth mainstreaming ⁽¹⁾ in policy decision-making
processes in the European Union**

(C/2023/1342)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THAT:

1. The series of economic and social crises faced in recent years, together with the global COVID-19 health and climate crisis, as well as the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, among others, have had a profound impact on young people, exacerbating inequalities and violations of human rights, while accentuating the complexity of the challenges that young people in the European Union (EU) face every day. Addressing these challenges forms part of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 ⁽²⁾ and, in particular, of the European Youth Goal #3 'Inclusive societies'.
2. This exposure to successive crises has highlighted some of the pre-existing structural problems of our society. The complexity of the challenges that young people face has become more evident than ever, underlying the close relationship between factors such as access to employment, housing and quality education on equal terms with respect to social cohesion and, socio-emotional well-being, as well as political and societal participation, and the fulfilment of young people's expectations: a European Union of opportunities, where full enjoyment of the right to social justice is guaranteed ⁽³⁾.
3. Combating social exclusion, discrimination and violence of all kinds is a priority goal for the European Union. In particular, the principle of non-discrimination is a fundamental value of the European Union, enshrined in the Treaty establishing the European Community, in Articles 9, 10 and 18 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and in Articles 14, 21, 24, 32 and 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
4. Europeans aged between 16 and 29 years have a higher probability than the general population of experiencing serious material deprivation. In 2021, the risk of experiencing poverty or social exclusion was higher among 16-to-29-year-olds than in the general population (24.8 % compared to 21.6 %). This trend – a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion among youth – can be seen in nearly half (13 out of 27) of the EU Member States ⁽⁴⁾.
5. Opportunities for living independently continue to be insufficient, taking into account the difficulties that young people in the EU face in gaining access to housing, owing to job insecurity and the high cost of buying or renting, which is unaffordable for a large proportion of young people. Access to decent housing is a basic condition for

⁽¹⁾ In these conclusions, youth mainstreaming is understood as 'an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes. Mainstreaming ensures that the challenges and concerns inherent to young people are not addressed in isolation but are integrated cross-cuttingly into broader policy frameworks'.

⁽²⁾ 'Improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors—notably employment, education, health and social inclusion.'

⁽³⁾ According to the Flash Eurobarometer on youth and democracy carried out between 22 February 2022 and 4 March 2022: young people's most common expectation for the 2022 European Year of Youth (EYY) was for decision-makers to listen more closely to their demands and to act on them (72 %), and to support their personal, social and professional development (71 %). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reinforced young people's conviction that preserving peace, reinforcing international security and promoting international cooperation is the primary objective of the EU (37 %). The next highest expectations are for the EU to increase job opportunities for young people (33 %), to combat poverty and economic and social inequalities (32 %), as well as to promote environmentally friendly policies and combat climate change (31 %). Young people see not only mental and physical health and wellbeing (34 %), protecting the environment and combating climate change (34 %), but also education and training, including the free movement of learners (33 %), as the main focus areas for the EYY.

⁽⁴⁾ Eurostat. Statistics explained: Young people and social inclusion.

guaranteeing truly inclusive and egalitarian societies, as reflected in a European Parliament resolution ⁽⁹⁾ encouraging the EU to recognise access to decent and affordable housing as a human right, which is an even more pressing issue for young people ⁽⁹⁾.

6. The different forms of violence to which young Europeans are exposed represent another problem that needs to be addressed, with particular reference to the psychological violence linked to misinformation and disinformation and the impact of social networks on mental health. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights indicated in its 2021 ⁽¹⁰⁾ report that the rate of physical violence, harassment and cyberbullying was much higher among young people than in other age groups. Furthermore, the report highlighted the fact that LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and young women were especially vulnerable to violence and harassment. This is even more the case when young people are affected by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination or other disadvantages, as reflected in the Presidency conclusions on the safety of LGBTI persons in the European Union and the European Commission also adopted major strategies and action plans to promote a Union of equality ⁽¹¹⁾ ⁽¹²⁾.
7. According to the most recent European Parliament Youth Survey ⁽¹³⁾, 55 % of young people in the EU said that they understood little or nothing at all about the European Union. Most of the young people surveyed believed that they did not have much, or any, say over the important decisions, laws and policies affecting them ⁽¹⁴⁾. Young people are increasingly turning to non-institutional ways of expressing themselves politically. Such a development can be seen as essentially positive, but it is concerning if it is based on the perception that the European institutions do not provide young people with any possibility of being involved in decision-making processes or of addressing their needs and difficulties. Thus, a comprehensive approach to the challenges affecting young people requires their involvement and participation in public institutions and in policy-making processes, through both non-institutional and institutional forms of participation.
8. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) ⁽¹⁵⁾ stresses that it is important to carry out an assessment of the impact of the EU policy making processes on young people so as to take into account the needs and expectations of young people and of future generations and to offer a scope of application that includes all policy areas directly and indirectly affecting young people. An assessment of impact goes beyond the traditional area of youth policies.
9. In its resolution on the European Year of Youth 2022 (EYY) legacy the European Parliament ⁽¹⁶⁾ calls on the Commission to adopt a fully-fledged 'EU Youth Test' to ensure the meaningful engagement, participation and commitment of young people in the preparation of all EU policies, to establish a systematic impact assessment in its proposals to ensure that they promote and reflect the needs of young people and to take mitigating measures if they have a negative impact.
10. In its Charter on Youth and Democracy, the European Committee of the Regions ⁽¹⁷⁾ calls for an establishment of a youth-test mechanism to ensure that all new EU legislation and policy is subject to a youth focused impact assessment, including a consultation with youth organisations on the different levels and youth experts at EU level and the development of mitigating measures in the event that a negative impact is identified.

⁽⁹⁾ European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all (2019/2187(INI)).

⁽⁹⁾ As indicated by 2020 Eurostat figures, all EU Member States showed a higher rate of severe housing deprivation among young people than among the population as a whole.

⁽¹⁰⁾ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Rights Report 2021.

⁽¹¹⁾ Presidency conclusions on the safety of LGBTI persons in the European Union, 9942/23.

⁽¹²⁾ Five equality strategies were adopted in 2020 and 2021 to make progress towards a Union of Equality: the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 152 final); the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 698 final); the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 565 final); the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030 (COM(2020) 620 final); and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (COM(2021) 101 final).

⁽¹³⁾ Flash Eurobarometer, Report September 2021.

⁽¹⁴⁾ This feeling increases the more distant the sphere of governance under consideration: 53 % feel that they have little or no say over decisions, laws and policies affecting their local area, rising to 70 % for matters affecting the EU as a whole.

⁽¹⁵⁾ European Economic and Social Committee, EU Youth test (own-initiative opinion), 21 September 2022, SOC/728 -EESC-2022.

⁽¹⁶⁾ European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2022 on the European Year of Youth 2022 legacy (2022/2953(RSP)).

⁽¹⁷⁾ The Charter on Youth and Democracy. European Committee of the Regions, November 2022.

11. The report on the final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe calls for the introduction of a Youth-check of legislation, including both an impact assessment and a consultation mechanism with representatives of young people, when legislation is deemed to have an impact on young people and, as described in proposal 47, 'to ensure that all policy making at EU level is seen through a youth lens'. Furthermore, the report calls for the development of an EU 'Youth Test' of all new legislation and policy to ensure a 'youth focused impact assessment, including a consultation with young people' ⁽¹⁵⁾.

RECOGNISING THAT:

12. As highlighted in the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027: 'An increasing number of young people lack trust in the EU, and encounter difficulties in understanding its principles, values, and functioning. Democratic deficits in EU processes have also been identified as one of the reasons for rising Euroscepticism among young people' ⁽¹⁶⁾. Nevertheless, according to the Eurobarometer survey on youth and democracy in 2022, young people have some expectations of the EU, such as preserving peace, increasing job opportunities for young people, combating poverty and economic and social inequalities ⁽¹⁷⁾.
13. In the 6th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue consultations, carried out to give young people a voice in the process of designing the EU Youth Strategy, it became clear that young people had signalled that they felt underrepresented in decision-making processes and had a limited capacity to have a cross-cutting influence on all of the policies having an impact on the challenges they face at local, regional, national and European level. This perception remains present in the recently concluded 9th cycle of the Youth Dialogue, in which young people continue to demand 'appropriate measures to mainstream meaningful youth participation across all relevant policy fields' ⁽¹⁸⁾.
14. In June 2021, the Flash Eurobarometer youth survey indicated that one of the main expectations of young people was for society as a whole and for decision-makers in particular to listen more to their views and to address their needs. 33 % of young people gave such a response ⁽¹⁹⁾.
15. As the statistical evidence concerning ageism shows, age is a major discriminatory factor generating inequalities in our societies, as acknowledged by the World Health Organization ⁽²⁰⁾, and it is of vital importance that this should be taken in consideration when designing public policies relating to young people's issues, in order to protect the values of intergenerational solidarity as a fundamental pillar of social cohesion.
16. The transition from education and training to the labour market continues to be filled with obstacles for many young people in Europe, who face serious difficulties in finding decent jobs that will enable them to fully realise their life projects and have better prospects for the future.
17. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) represent a significant proportion of all young people in Europe. In 2021, 13,1 % of all 15 to 29-year-olds (i.e., more than 9.3 million individuals) were NEETs, with wide variations across the EU Member States. Moreover, the European Year of Skills ⁽²¹⁾ devotes special attention to this group.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Conference on the Future of Europe. Report on the final outcome, May 2022.

⁽¹⁶⁾ The Youth Goals resulting from the Structured Dialogue with Youth 2017-2018 state that 'Democratic deficits in EU processes have also been identified as one of the reasons for rising Euroscepticism among young people' and then propose specific measures relating to those deficits. European Youth Strategy, Annex 3.

⁽¹⁷⁾ See footnote 4.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the outcomes of the 9th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue, 2023/C 185/04.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Flash Eurobarometer, European Parliament Youth Survey, September 2021.

⁽²⁰⁾ The World Health Organization considers ageism to be the third main cause of discrimination worldwide.

⁽²¹⁾ Decision (EU) 2023/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills, OJ L 125, 11.5.2023, p. 1.

18. Unemployment affects young people to a greater extent and has a major impact on those in situations of social exclusion and those who live and work in at-risk regions across the EU Member States, including outermost regions ⁽²⁾. This indicates that young people's vulnerability as regards unemployment is exacerbated by the intersectionality of the different forms of inequality that affect them or by the different forms of exclusion that they experience ⁽²⁾ ⁽⁴⁾.
19. Education, work, housing and access to quality services are essential rights for all, including those who are beginning a new phase of life in a disadvantaged situation, or facing precarious employment prospects and other cross-cutting challenges that compound those inequalities, with the lack of opportunities reducing their chances of a better life and putting many young people in a weak position from the very start ⁽²⁾.
20. These disadvantages are increased exponentially in the case of young women, LGBTI youth, young people with migrant background, and young people with disabilities.
21. The climate crisis and the consequences of global warming have never been as urgent as they are today, and they are affecting young people's lives in particular. In order not to jeopardise the life chances of young people, structural, long-term and sustainable measures are needed in many policy areas, and they must be specifically targeted at young people facing multiple forms of discrimination or other disadvantages.
22. The upcoming Communication of the European Commission on the legacy of the European Year of Youth 2022, as well as the interim evaluation of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, offer an excellent opportunity for taking stock of past experiences and enhancing existing key youth policy tools ⁽⁶⁾, and for putting priorities such as the well-being of young people at the centre of policy-making and providing them with equal opportunities to realise their life plans free of violence and with full awareness and enjoyment of their rights ⁽⁷⁾.
23. The role played by the European Commission's EU Youth Coordinator, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation and mainstreaming, as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues within the European Commission services and working hand in hand with various stakeholders to ensure a coherent communication towards young people, was a major innovation that sprang from the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027.

CONSIDERING THAT:

24. All young people are a resource to society and all policies and activities concerning young people should uphold young people's right to participate in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies affecting them by means of meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations. Thus, the European Union, including through its programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, should work towards safeguarding the rights of young people, address their challenges and respond to their needs and expectations. In that way, an EU that invests in its own future and preserves its economic, social, and environmental sustainability can be ensured.
25. Young people are subjects of law with all of their potential, capabilities and talents that are essential for any society, and they should be fully incorporated into political processes and decision-making processes.

⁽²⁾ Eurostat, statistics explained: Youth unemployment, August 2022.

⁽³⁾ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/152 final.

⁽⁴⁾ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/698 final.

⁽⁵⁾ Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)3 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 21 January 2015.

⁽⁶⁾ Instruments as listed in EUYS section 3, Cooperate on the basis of instruments and governance.

⁽⁷⁾ See footnote 3.

26. The participation of young people is an essential condition for legitimising and increasing the efficiency of any political process, as well as for enabling young people to trust and believe in the European institutions, strengthening the ties that bind them to the identity and values of a Europe that must also commit to the future of its young people.
27. The young people of Europe comprise a complex and diverse population, and that the EU should guarantee that the design of youth-oriented policies takes a rights-based approach that mainstreams a youth perspective, enabling those policies to be truly inclusive and target all young people in all of the diversities that exist throughout Europe.
28. The lives of young people are shaped by policies rooted in manifold policy areas and on different levels of implementation. Hence, only through youth mainstreaming as a priority amongst different policy areas can it be ensured that the specific needs or effects for young people in envisaged policies or programmes are taken into account ⁽²⁹⁾.
29. Those European policies must also focus on well-being, mental health and healthcare, including collective reflection and subsequent political action to protect the role of young people in resource-sharing and their ability to influence decision-making processes from a generational standpoint, through intergenerational cooperation.

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS INVITED TO:

30. Enhance the youth mainstreaming in all policy areas, in line with the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the EYY, in order to promote the incorporation of a youth perspective in the development of EU policies. More specifically, mainstream a youth perspective in policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, applying that view to all areas affecting young people's lives, involving, as appropriate at EU level, the EU Youth Coordinator.
31. Ensure that the Commission's existing Better Regulation tools are used to their fullest, so that impacts on young people are taken into consideration in EU policymaking. Stronger incorporation of youth perspectives in policymaking could contribute to the objectives of an EU youth test.
32. Explore and further analyse the use of a regulatory impact assessment of EU policies on young people. This may include the possible application of an EU youth test. Such a youth test could be understood as an analytical tool that would assess the impact that EU policies have on young people. It could be inspired by models that already exist in some Member States.

THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION, PURSUANT TO THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY, IN THEIR RESPECTIVE AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, ARE INVITED TO:

33. Cooperate in the youth mainstreaming policy in all policy areas, when relevant, in line with the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, in order to promote the incorporation of a youth perspective in the development of policies in the EU. More specifically, foster youth mainstreaming in decision-making and policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, applying that view to all areas affecting young people's lives.
34. Improve cooperation, including mutual learning, between the European Commission, Member States, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders, including via existing practices such as peer-learning activities, on the implementation of inclusive approaches in public policies that analyse their impact on young people's lives.

⁽²⁹⁾ 'Reykjavik Declaration – United around our values', following the 4th summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, (16 and 17 May 2023, Reykjavik).

35. Encourage decision-making that is strongly grounded in evidence and empirical data ⁽²⁹⁾ and recognise that youth mainstreaming, and meaningful youth participation are essential in the development of public policies.
 36. Cooperate in the necessary efforts, together with the relevant stakeholders, to incorporate the youth dimension in the impact assessment and evaluation of policies in the EU in order to improve decision-making processes and enable young people in the EU to play an important role in defining their own future.
 37. Build on the achievements and the co-creative approach of the EYY and continue to generate multi-level engagement involving European institutions, Member States and young people in the EU, emphasising the values of transparency and accessibility, to generate a positive impact on the ties that bind young Europeans to the EU.
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⁽²⁹⁾ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1.

ANNEX

The promotion of youth policies has been constant in recent years, as shown by the following:

- The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, with its 11 European Youth Goals, designed for and representing the priorities of young people in Europe before the pandemic.
 - The emphasis on young people in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which establishes 20 key principles that are essential for fair and effective labour markets and social protection systems.
 - The adoption in 2020 of the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, which devotes special attention to young Europeans.
 - The commitment made in 2020 to apply the enhanced Youth Guarantee, which strengthened broad support for youth employment across the EU, with a more inclusive approach.
 - The designation of 2022 as the European Year of Youth, with the goal of enhancing, empowering and promoting new spaces and opportunities for young people to participate and play a leading role in Europe.
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Appendix 2

10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective (2025)



Presidency of Malta
Council of Europe
May - November 2025

Présidence de Malte
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2025

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Valletta, 9 October 2025

10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth

Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective

10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth

Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective

The specialised Ministers of the Council of Europe member States, on the occasion of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, “Young People for Democracy: Youth Perspective in Action”, jointly organised by the Council of Europe and Malta on 8 and 9 October 2025, Valletta, adopt the following Resolution:

1. welcoming the positive contribution and creative potential that young people bring to our democracies and to European unity, and convinced that developing with young people the conditions for their meaningful participation in democracy will strengthen mutual trust in constitutional democracy, democratic institutions and the shared civic space;
2. confident that the integration of young people’s views and needs in areas of policy-making that concern them, leads to more forward-looking, future-proof policies and strengthens participatory democracy;
3. having regard to the Declaration of the 4th Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik, in which the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe underlined the importance of a “youth perspective in the Organisation’s intergovernmental and other deliberations as youth participation in decision-making processes improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue”;
4. recalling the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, adopted at their 4th Summit held in 2023, in which they also committed to give priority “to supporting the participation of young persons in democratic life and decision-making processes, including through education about human rights and core democratic values, such as pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability”;
5. resolved to create new and innovative approaches to empowering young people and fostering their active citizenship, taking into account the values of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture¹ and the objectives of the European Year of Digital Citizenship Education 2025;
6. considering the Declaration of the Committee of Ministers, adopted at its 133rd Session in Strasbourg (May 2024, Strasbourg), on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Organisation, underlining the renewed and strengthened relationship between the Council of Europe and young people, and welcoming the adoption of the four elements articulating the youth perspective – Think with young people, Learn from and with young people, Participate with young people and Act with and for young people – to guide the development of a Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective ;
7. recalling the Council of Europe’s standards on young people’s access to rights, on young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods’ access to social rights, and on youth work, as set out in the relevant recommendations of the Committee of

1. The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture can be found via this link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

Ministers to member States and in the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education;²

8. taking into account the standards on young people's participation, set out in the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, and relevant recommendations and guidelines of the Committee of Ministers;³
9. drawing attention to Resolution [CM/Res\(2020\)2](#) on the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, which places emphasis on revitalising pluralistic democracy by increasing the capacity of youth civil society to advance participatory democracy and democratic citizenship, and on strengthening youth policy and youth work to remove barriers to youth participation;
10. recognising the Council of Europe's leading role in promoting youth participation through its innovative co-management system in the field of youth, which serves as a commendable model of co-operation between young people and public authorities in policy and decision-making processes, and its landmark instruments, namely the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest, the European Youth Foundation and the Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card;
11. convinced that young people and youth civil society organisations are powerful agents of change, bringing fresh insights and innovative solutions to the development of European societies, and playing an important role in opening public discourse;
12. expressing appreciation for the progress achieved by the Council of Europe and its youth sector since 1972 in fostering youth participation and putting young people's perspectives at the forefront of policy- and decision-making processes, and congratulating the youth statutory bodies for paving the way for significant developments in policy and action.

In view of the above:

13. We welcome the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, in appendix to this Resolution, as a unique and novel approach offering a practical path towards more dynamic and relevant policy making, so that young people's experiences, needs and interests are taken into account in all policy areas affecting them.
14. We underline that the Reference Framework is a significant and innovative instrument for strengthening democracy through youth participation, and for developing just and inclusive policies that benefit both current and future generations.
15. We agree that the youth perspective is structured around four interconnected conceptual elements:

2. Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers to member States: respectively [CM/Rec\(2016\)7](#) on young people's access to rights, [CM/Rec\(2015\)3](#) on the access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights, [CM/Rec\(2017\)4](#) on youth work, [CM/Rec\(2010\)7](#) on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

3. Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)6](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes; "Youth Participation 2.0" guidelines for enhancing youth participation at local, regional and national levels.

- a. Attitude: *Think with young people*: the mindset recognising young people as active contributors to policy making;
 - b. Experience: *Learn from and with young people*: the interactive processes enabling intergenerational learning, fostering mutual understanding and respect between policymakers and young people;
 - c. Skills: *Participate with young people*: the competencies needed for meaningful youth participation, grounded in democratic values like inclusion, pluralism, and non-discrimination;
 - d. Action: *Act with and for young people*: the commitment to actively including youth views and aspirations in the various stages of the policy cycle - deliberation, formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- 16.** We further agree that the effective integration of a youth perspective into policy work relies on two key factors: on the one hand, recognising young people as rights holders, valuing their knowledge, skills and perspectives, and ensuring their active participation in policymaking in areas concerning them, from the development of policies to their implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment; and, on the other, a sustained commitment from both policymakers and young people, grounded in intergenerational solidarity and collaboration and supported by adequate financial and human resources.
- 17.** We encourage the integration of a youth perspective into policy and decision-making processes in areas concerning youth through a step-by-step approach capitalising on context-specific realities and allowing each entity to assess its own starting position and how to move forward.
- 18.** We undertake to consider further integrating the youth perspective into national policies that concern young people, inspired by the Reference Framework, while taking into account the specific contexts of our member States, with a view to developing responsive, inclusive, and effective policies addressing the needs and aspirations of young people.
- 19. We invite the Council of Europe to:**
- a. support member States in their efforts to integrate a youth perspective into their policies, drawing on the Reference Framework, the expertise, resources and good practices of the Council of Europe youth sector, and promoting intergovernmental co-operation in the field of youth;
 - b. continue its work in this field and to mandate the Joint Council on Youth to develop practical tools (such as guidelines, checklists and training modules) to support the implementation of the Reference Framework and strengthen related capacity-building efforts;
 - c. prioritise efforts to integrate a youth perspective across the Organisation highlighting the importance of the Council of Europe Reference Framework, emphasising the central role of the Council of Europe's youth statutory bodies and Youth Department, particularly in providing high-quality support.

Appendix I to the Resolution

Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Young people⁴ and youth organisations are powerful agents of positive change, addressing societal challenges with creativity and determination. They play a key role in shaping public discourse on issues such as climate change, social justice, digital rights, and democratic participation and are committed to finding solutions to both local and global problems.
- 1.2. At the youth event “Confidence in tomorrow”, organised on the occasion of the Council of Europe’s 75th anniversary (May 2024), young people voiced their dedication to a democratic Europe and discussed their anxiety/worries about the state of democracy. They expressed frustration with democratic institutions that fail to protect human rights, uphold the rule of law, and promote peace. They shared a deep concern that their civic space is not only shrinking, but is actively under attack, highlighting the rise of authoritarianism and anti-democratic trends as key factors contributing to this decline, and emphasising the threat these pose to their ability to operate and advocate for rights and freedoms.⁵
- 1.3. Young people in Council of Europe member States face barriers to civic participation, demographic marginalisation, discrimination, economic insecurity and an unsafe digital environment which can, *inter alia*, discourage them from participating. As a result, member States face low youth voter turnout, which can be as low as 50% or less, depending on the type of election.⁶ Limited representation of young people in policymaking, in turn, creates a significant gap between policy decisions and their lived experiences. A 2022 survey shows that young people’s trust in their governments to adequately protect their rights has declined significantly.⁷
- 1.4. Furthermore, young people face a complex web of social challenges that prevent them from fully exercising their rights. They are especially vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, and health issues, both physical and mental. Barriers to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities remain, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups of young people.
- 1.5. As social and economic inequalities rise and challenges to the Council of Europe’s values persist, young people are losing trust in democracy and institutions and are exposed to social exclusion. They feel a real need for peace, and an environment that creates safe spaces where they can learn and grow, including through education that fosters critical thinking and civic engagement. By staying informed and involved in the policy and decision-making processes,

4. Youth is understood as a period of transitions to autonomy, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. There is no fixed age group for youth. The Council of Europe youth sector offers activities for young people aged 18 to 30. The broadest range of Council of Europe member States’ youth policies is from 12 to 35 years.

5. Confidence in Tomorrow youth event – participants’ message to Council of Europe duty bearers.

6. <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>.

7. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/delivering-for-youth-how-governments-can-put-young-people-at-the-centre-of-the-recovery_92c9d060-en/full-report.html.

they can contribute to creating a more inclusive and just future in an uncertain world, where the voices of all young people are heard and heeded. Developing and ensuring conditions for youth participation in democracy with young people themselves will also strengthen mutual trust in constitutional democracy, democratic institutions and the shared civic space.

2. The Council of Europe's work in the youth field and the emergence of a new Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective

- 2.1. For over 50 years, the Council of Europe has recognised the crucial role of young people and youth organisations in promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The Organisation has created structures that encourage youth participation, and their active involvement has been key to preserving and advancing these values. In the Youth Department, the co-management system, where young people and public authorities collaborate in policy- and decision-making processes, is a notable example. The European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest provide safe spaces for youth work, while the European Youth Foundation supports youth activities across member States. The Youth Partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe in the field of youth has fostered co-operation between the two Organisations on subjects of common interest.
- 2.2. Youth participation is embedded in various Council of Europe policies and initiatives. Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec(2006)14 on citizenship and participation of young people in public life emphasises the importance of young people's involvement in democracy, offering guidelines for member States on how to further this. The Organisation's Strategic Framework 2020 and its Roadmap on Civil Society Engagement with the Council of Europe 2024-2027⁸ both highlight the importance of youth participation in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The revised European Charter on Youth Participation of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities provides a set of principles, best practices and guidelines to enhance youth participation at local and regional levels. The Congress Resolution 152 (2023) stresses that participation should include the right, the means, and the opportunity for young people to engage in decision making, with adequate support. Concrete tools, such as the Partial Agreement on Youth Mobility through the Youth Card, also support young people's participation and facilitate their access to rights.
- 2.3. The 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe's 46 member States (May 2023) set out a novel approach for the Organisation, notably the integration of a youth perspective in its work, including intergovernmental and other activities. "We set the Council of Europe on a new path of increased transparency and co-operation with its stakeholders, with strengthened visibility and sufficient resources. This should include a youth perspective in the Organisation's intergovernmental and other deliberations as youth participation in decision-making processes improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue. We also call for a review and further reinforcement of the Organisation's outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions." Reykjavik Declaration, 16 May 2023.

8. SG/Inf(2023)28

9. Adopted as part of the Reykjavik Declaration.

- 2.4. The Reykjavik Principles for Democracy⁹ underlined the need “to invest in a democratic future by ensuring that everyone is able to play their role in democratic processes”, underlining that “priority will be given to supporting the participation of young persons in democratic life and decision-making processes, including through education about human rights and core democratic values, such as pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability”. They also reaffirmed that “civil society is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy and commit[ted] to supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence.”
- 2.5. The Reykjavik Declaration signals a clear commitment from the Council of Europe and member States to enhance youth participation in policy- and decision-making processes, with the opportunity to further strengthen political will, co-operation, resources and innovation in youth engagement.
- 2.6. At the level of both member States and the Council of Europe, the inclusion of a youth perspective can help counteract trends of non-participation of young people in democratic processes and declining trust in public institutions. It can further democratise policy making by enabling the development of policies based on dialogue and an intergenerational approach, which are likely to be more responsive to citizens’ needs and therefore have a direct impact on society as a whole. A broad participatory culture is a strong enabling factor for the youth perspective to thrive.
- 2.7. Consequently, the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) initiated work on a Reference Framework to integrate a youth perspective across diverse policy areas. The Reference Framework includes four conceptual elements: Think with young people, Learn from and with young people, Participate with young people and Act with and for young people. In 2024, the Committee of Ministers endorsed these elements to guide the preparation and implementation of the Reference Framework.
- 2.8. The Framework is designed to enhance collaboration between young people, youth civil society and political decision makers at national, regional and local levels, in line with the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 in policy and decision making. Moreover, it aims at supporting Council of Europe bodies and intergovernmental committees in their efforts to integrate a youth perspective in their work.
- 2.9. The Reference Framework is flexible, allowing users to adapt it to their specific contexts and needs, drawing on the expertise of the Council of Europe youth sector and other relevant experience. It is expected to evolve into a toolbox to further support the integration of a youth perspective, through practical tools such as training modules, checklists, guidelines and a compendium of good practices at all levels. Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities will accompany it.
- 2.10. The following sections are intended to provide guidance on the substantive and methodological foundations of the Reference Framework and how it can be implemented within the Council of Europe. The Reference Framework can also be used by member States.

3. The vision

- 3.1. Acknowledging the positive contribution and change that young people bring to democracy and European unity, and renewing commitment to the improvement of the living conditions and the protection and strengthening of the human rights of young people, the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective envisions:
 - a. participatory democracy – guaranteeing young people's meaningful participation in democratic processes, and enhancing the impact, relevance and resilience of public policies across Europe;
 - b. inclusive policies that benefit young people – present and future generations – across policy fields that affect them, while promoting transparency, equity, and open dialogue with diverse stakeholders.

4. The four conceptual elements of the “youth perspective”

- 4.1. A “youth perspective” is a strategic approach to policy and decision-making that ensures young people's experiences, needs, and interests are consistently included throughout the various stages of the policy process. It recognises the competent contributions of young people and ensures their meaningful participation. This approach aims to create more relevant and future-oriented policies by introducing structural changes in how policies are elaborated, adopted, adapted, implemented, and evaluated with and for young people.
- 4.2. A “youth perspective” can be approached through four interconnected conceptual elements: Think with young people, Learn from and with young people, Participate with young people and Act with and for young people. Each of these contributes to a comprehensive approach, and together they can foster meaningful youth engagement in policy processes. The elements are described as follows:
- 4.3. **Think with young people** – Attitude: the mindset recognising young people as active contributors to policymaking. This entails:
 - a. opening communication channels with young people and youth organisations and structures to understand better their aspirations, needs and concerns;
 - b. conducting research to understand the ambitions and experiences of young people, with a view to developing evidence-based policies;
 - c. challenging stereotypes and promoting respect for young people's perspectives and lived experiences.
- 4.4. **Learn from and with young people** – Experience: the interactive processes enabling intergenerational learning, fostering mutual understanding and respect between policymakers and young people. This entails:
 - a. encouraging open dialogue with a wide and diverse range of young people and creating an inclusive, empathetic environment with shared responsibility;
 - b. establishing or strengthening mechanisms that allow young people to contribute meaningfully to policy- and decision-making in the areas that concern them;
 - c. building and adapting participatory tools with young people that meet their diverse needs and foster solidarity and intergenerational learning.
- 4.5. **Participate with young people** – Skills: the competencies needed for meaningful youth participation, grounded in democratic values such as inclusion, pluralism and nondiscrimination. This involves:

- a. developing the capacity of policymakers, youth workers, young people and youth organisations and structures to enhance the skills needed for meaningful participation and effective intergenerational collaboration;
 - b. using accessible language and adapting methods for effective youth engagement;
 - c. co-developing tools for intergenerational decision-making and strengthening youth participation infrastructure.
- 4.6. **Act with and for young people** – Action: the commitment to actively include young people's views and aspirations in the policy cycle – deliberation, formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This involves:
- a. creating safe spaces for dialogue and meaningful youth participation;
 - b. allocating resources to jointly create policies that shape a sustainable and inclusive future;
 - c. ensuring proper follow-up to young people's proposals and implementation of agreed policy changes.
- 4.7. Together, these four conceptual elements lay the foundations for ensuring that young people's voices are meaningfully and sustainably integrated into policy and decisionmaking processes. However, integrating a youth perspective into policy processes requires the understanding that different institutions and structures may start from different points. The approach should be context specific, with each structure assessing its own starting point to make practical progress. The focus should be on continuous reflection and improvement, ensuring that young people's involvement is included across the various policy areas concerning youth.
- 4.8. Effective integration relies on two main factors:
- a. **Recognition of young people's knowledge, skills and perspectives:** recognising young people as rights holders, ensuring their active participation in policy and decision-making, from the development of policies to their implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including impact assessment.
 - b. **Commitment and resources:** integration of a youth perspective must be sustained over time, requiring both institutional commitment and adequate resources. The latter include:
 - i. financial resources: sufficient funding to support youth participation and the processes needed to integrate a youth perspective.
 - ii. human resources: dedicated staff time and capacity for effective crosssectoral collaboration to integrate youth perspectives into policy.

5. Guiding principles for integrating a youth perspective in decision-making processes

- 5.1. The principles for integrating a youth perspective in decision-making processes include:
- a. **young people as rights holders:** young people have specific needs that should be included across policy areas that concern them. They have the right to equal participation and to influence various stages of the policy cycle. Co-operation with the youth sector to adapt policy and decision-making processes, ensuring the effective incorporation of the views and aspirations of young people should be encouraged;

- b. **A human rights-based approach:** youth participation should be guided by the values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as outlined in the European Convention on Human Rights. Young people are diverse, with differences in age, gender, socio-economic background, and region, which can impact their ability to exercise their rights.
- c. **a cross-sectoral approach:** A youth perspective should be included in all sectors. Collaboration between entities in charge of youth policy and those in charge of other policy areas should be a focus, with transparent structures and adequate resources dedicated to youth engagement;
- d. **intergenerational justice and solidarity:** Integrating a youth perspective should consider fairness and mutual respect between generations, while also addressing the impact and consequences of today's decisions on both current and future generations of society;
- e. **interdisciplinary and multistakeholder co-operation:** Expertise from various fields, civil society, youth organisations, academia and advocacy groups should be systematically integrated to create fair and sustainable policies;
- f. **intersectionality:** Policies must address the barriers faced by young people from different backgrounds and intersecting identities, ensuring equitable participation, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups;
- g. **multilevel action:** Authorities at all levels should actively promote and facilitate the capacity-building of young people to engage in decision-making processes in the areas concerning them;
- h. **sustainability:** Long-term investment in youth leadership, civic education, and sustainable partnerships with youth structures is essential for meaningful participation. Mechanisms for integrating a youth perspective should be regularly assessed and adapted to ensure they remain relevant and responsive.

6. Practical guidance for integrating a youth perspective in decision-making processes

- 6.1. While the conceptual elements outlined in section 4 enable users to build a solid foundation for this process, the following three-phase approach describes in practical terms how a youth perspective can be fully implemented sequentially.
- 6.2. This approach builds on three consecutive phases: 1. Preparation, 2. Design and implementation and 3. Monitoring and evaluation, which need to be adapted to the different needs and contexts in the member States and at Council of Europe level.¹⁰ These three phases set the path for proposing or revising policies to meet the needs and protect the rights of young people.¹¹

10. At the level of the Council of Europe, specific complementary mechanisms and programmes for integrating a youth perspective exist, ranging from the appointment of youth rapporteurs and the employment of youth experts to the admission of young people's organisations as observers, to the participation of the Advisory Council in Youth in intergovernmental work and other activities. There are also complementary mechanisms and programmes at national, regional and local level, as identified in the study "Learning from national and local approaches to youth mainstreaming and use of youth perspective in policymaking across Europe".

11. Some proposals and concepts can be found in the study "Learning from national and local approaches to youth mainstreaming and use of youth perspective in policymaking across Europe" by Dan Moxon, Marko Kovačić, Veronica Ștefan, December 2024.

PHASE 1. PREPARATION

- 6.3. This phase involves setting a solid ground for integrating a youth perspective, with several key requirements.
- a. **High-level political commitment from senior policy actors** to support the integration of a youth perspective in policy areas that concern young people.
 - b. **Commitment from young people to actively participate in decision-making processes** once the high-level political commitment has been confirmed.
 - c. **Enabling standards and legislation** that help to shift policy making from a traditional sector-based approach to one that incorporates youth concerns across all policies. It may:
 - i. define governance mechanisms for policy interactions across sectors on youth-related matters;
 - ii. require actors outside the youth sector to engage with youth-related matters;
 - iii. enable the youth sector, including youth organisations, to share its expertise, while ensuring that other sectors contribute resources and actively support the integration of a youth perspective.
 - d. **Increased organisational capacity** by bolstering resources and skills in both the youth sector and other policy sectors to facilitate the integration of a youth perspective. Efforts should include:
 - i. capacity building for dialogue, information sharing, and co-designing tools;
 - ii. investments in creating and safeguarding spaces for youth participation, both formal and non-formal.

PHASE 2. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

- 6.4. This phase involves operationalising the integration of a youth perspective by identifying priority policies that have the most significant impact on young people, gathering input and adapting policies accordingly. This includes:
- a. **sustainable participatory mechanisms:** execute mechanisms for youth participation in policy deliberation at different stages, such as youth consultations, forums, advisory groups, or co-management structures. These should be developed collaboratively with young people and youth organisations to ensure meaningful participation;
 - b. **human rights-based expert impact assessments:** consider conducting assessments to evaluate how policies impact young people before making policy decisions (ex-ante) and after implementation (ex-post).

PHASE 3. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- 6.5. This phase aims to ensure the continued effective integration of a youth perspective, involving:
- a. **technical assessment:** evaluating how well youth perspectives are integrated in line with the Reference Framework;
 - b. **human rights-based monitoring and evaluation:** evaluations of the impact of policies on young people should be conducted after their implementation.

These assessments should involve young people and youth organisations, researchers, youth workers and policymakers, and use measurable indicators, including human rights indicators.

- 6.6. Institutions and structures interested in meaningfully integrating a youth perspective are encouraged to start by assessing their current position within this framework. From there, they can take concrete steps towards integrating a youth perspective into policy processes using the three-phase operational approach.

7. Commitment and support for the integration of a youth perspective

- 7.1. The integration of a youth perspective should continue to be a priority for the Council of Europe. It requires a proactive, long-term commitment and effort to make youth participation a core component of policymaking processes. Appropriate resources (both financial and human) and capacity building are needed to implement it successfully.
- 7.2. More specifically for the Council of Europe, it is important to:
- a. adopt an over-arching strategic approach, based on this Reference Framework, and an action plan to ensure the integration of a youth perspective across the Organisation;
 - b. encourage opportunities for mutual learning between Council of Europe staff, representations, and young people, based on the Youth Department's expertise and networks;
 - c. strengthen quality assurance and access to supporting tools and materials, recognising the central role of the Youth Department in this regard, and guidance to operationalise the Reference Framework;
 - d. continue supporting the integration of the youth perspective across different sectors, instruments and bodies, relying on the active contribution and expertise of the Advisory Council on Youth and its partner organisations.
- 7.3. Furthermore, when it comes to co-operation with member States and youth civil society organisations, the Youth Department, subject to appropriate resources, will:
- a. offer advice on participatory mechanisms and identify good practice to address sectoral needs across the Organisation and in member States, through its Joint Council on Youth;
 - b. continue empowering young people, promoting knowledge sharing and competence transfer by supporting youth representatives in advocacy work and campaigning, communities of practice and platforms for peer exchange;
 - c. step up policy assistance measures for member States (including youth policy advisory missions, peer reviews, 50/50 training models) to support the integration of a youth perspective in national policies and actions;
 - d. develop new tools (guidelines, checklists, training modules) to facilitate the practical implementation of the Reference Framework.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1. At the Reykjavik Summit, the Council of Europe and its member States reaffirmed their commitment to effective public policies and stronger democratic

institutions through open dialogue. This Reference Framework aims to honour this commitment by supporting the integration of a youth perspective in policy areas that concern young people. Integrating a youth perspective is not just a matter of inclusiveness, intergenerational justice and equity. It is a political need to create policies in an agile way that are both forward looking and responsive to the evolving needs of young people.

- 8.2. As the Council of Europe has shown, young people and youth organisations are powerful agents of positive change, bringing fresh insights and innovative solutions to pressing societal challenges. They are ready to express their needs and aspirations. Their involvement in relevant policy- and decision-making processes is essential to ensure policies are relevant, future-proof and adapted to dynamic realities.
- 8.3. The real challenge, however, is to ensure that young people's voices are heard, listened to and acted upon in a way that leads to meaningful and tangible policy changes. The Reference Framework provides a clear path for reforming policy making and transforming youth participation and engagement into a substantial force for change, bringing young people's demands to an equal standing across policy areas that concern them.
- 8.4. The successful integration of the Reference Framework depends on the continuous political will and commitment of institutions and policy makers, and the continuous engagement and support of young people and youth organisations. Young people have knowledge, skills and perspectives, and can bring expertise; they must be recognised as rights holders. Their meaningful participation should be ensured at every stage of policy development. Further, without the adaptation or adoption of policies that reflect the findings of consultation mechanisms and impact assessments, the youth perspective exercise risks being tokenistic and reinforcing the existing disconnect between young people and policy makers. For a lasting impact, the Reference Framework should also be supported by sufficient resources and a continuous process of reflection and improvement.
- 8.5. By committing to the Reference Framework and its implementation, the Council of Europe and European policy makers reaffirm their dedication to integrating a youth perspective in shaping a future of just and inclusive policies that will benefit both current and future generations.

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Etch Kalala is a political scientist and former youth organisation leader, engaged for over 18 years in youth participation and policy. Since 2017, he has been conducting doctoral research at the Arènes research centre at the University of Rennes, focusing on integrated youth policy. His work explores how youth issues are constructed, implemented and governed across sectors and levels, combining institutional ethnography, policy analysis and a multisited, transnational approach. His research draws on fieldwork in France (PIA Jeunesse) and Finland (Ohjaamo), using interviews, participant observation, photography, focus groups and historical archives. Etch teaches at the French School of Public Health (EHESP) and the University of Rennes. He holds master's degrees in public administration and in youth policy and practice. His recent publications include *Politiques intégrées de jeunesse: difficultés et leviers d'action* and *Lost in translation – Why aren't integrated youth policies implemented in practice?* (with L. Siurala).

Marko Kovačić is an associate professor at the University of Rijeka, where he works at the intersection of public policy and political sociology. He is head of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. His primary focus is youth policy, with a secondary interest in education policy. He is active in European youth policy arenas, serving on expert groups and contributing to EU Council presidencies as a youth policy expert. He co-authored Croatia's national system for certifying youth-friendly cities and supports local civic education initiatives. He has received

several academic and professional awards, serves on editorial boards and evaluates projects for European institutions. His education includes postdoctoral training at the University of Graz, a PhD in public policy (University of Ljubljana), two master's degrees (Central European University and University of Zagreb) and a visiting fellowship at University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona.

Zuhair Ahmed Kowshik is an elected global co-ordinator of the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP, where he facilitates youth participation in UN environmental governance processes, amplifying youth voices on the global stage. As a member of the youth advisory group of the Green Jobs for Youth Pact, jointly convened by the ILO, UNEP and UNICEF, he promotes green jobs and entrepreneurship among young people to confront the climate crisis and unsustainable resource consumption. As a co-chair of the Thematic Working Group on Environmental and Climate Action within the UN Asia-Pacific Interagency Network on Youth, he fosters dialogue, networking and resource sharing between UN agencies, civil society and youth networks. Zuhair moderates numerous platforms to empower youth to take on pivotal roles in the environmental dimension of sustainable development by offering action-based learning programmes centred on resilience and sustainability.

Bas Krans is a project manager at R-Newt, a professional youth work organisation. He has led the MDT project Next Up since 2022, helping young people to develop their talents. He was a board member of the Youth Express Network, a European network of youth organisations. He facilitated the participation of many young people and professional youth workers in European training exchanges (Erasmus+ and Council of Europe programmes). Within this context, projects focused on, for example, social rights and digital storytelling. He dedicates himself to supporting vulnerable youth in his work.

Professor Dr Giedrė Kvieskienė is one of Lithuania's leading scholars and practitioners in social pedagogy, youth policy, and child well-being. She is a professor at Vytautas Magnus University and Kazimieras Simonavičius University, and a pioneer of the positive socialisation theory in Lithuania, which integrates education, social policy and community-based support systems. Alongside her academic career, she has founded several non-governmental organisations, including one of Lithuania's first community-based temporary care homes for children living on the streets, Turn to Children, and the Lithuanian Association of Social Pedagogues. She serves as chair of the board of both organisations. She has published over 260 scientific works and is the editor-in-chief of the scientific journal *Social Education*.

Séverine Lafitte is a project co-ordinator with a master's degree in educational sciences, specialising in education, health, social affairs and prevention from the University of Lille 3 – Human and Social Sciences. She began her career as a health education project manager in a local authority in Pas-de-Calais and then joined the Fédération Promotion Santé (Health Promotion Federation) in 2013 as a project manager. Having become a project co-ordinator in 2016, she leads the federation's network and co-ordinates national-scale conventional projects with institutions and partners. She works specifically with the Youth Judicial

Protection Service (JJP) to facilitate the PJJ Promotrice de Santé initiative and develop the Tabacap project for people with disabilities.

Eric Le Grand, an independent researcher in health promotion, is a professor affiliated with the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Santé Publique (EHESP) and a member of Fédération Promotion Santé. His research on, by and for young people focuses on young people's involvement in health, peer health education, empowerment and participation. This work is part of a reflection on the links between popular education and health promotion, and on an approach linked to social and territorial inequalities (rural and urban environments). He is a member of the editorial board of Cahiers de l'action de l'Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire (INJEP) and of the journal *Santé Publique*.

Irene Licastro, originally from Rome, graduated with honours in economics from Sapienza University of Rome and studies violin at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in international economics at the Graduate Institute. She obtained a certificate in social sciences and humanities from Sciences Po Paris and won a research fellowship in international economics at City University of Hong Kong. She has been a member of the Gender Policy Commission of the Italian National Youth Council and the Provincial Student Council. She completed three years of student internship at the Bank of Italy, where she also represented young people at the National Financial Education Committee of the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance. Recently, she has collaborated on a research project on the impact of youth associationism in the job market for young professionals for the MET Research Center.

Irina Lonean holds a PhD in political science from Université Libre de Bruxelles and the University of Bucharest. She also has a BA in law and combines law and public policy studies to understand how policies become practices. She has over 15 years of experience in the field of youth, with a focus on youth inclusion and participation. She is also an expert in the monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects in the following sectors: youth, formal and non-formal education, employment, social inclusion, good governance, public participation and public integrity. Irina spent 12 years working for Romanian and international NGOs and think tanks with a mission to promote youth inclusion, human rights, democracy and integrity. She has conducted policy and programme evaluations for the Romanian government, EU institutions, the Council of Europe, UNICEF and Transparency International.

Dr Dan Moxon is the Director of People Dialogue and Change, a research and consultancy organisation specialising in the development of youth participation and youth policy. His work focuses on how children and young people can influence policy and practice, as well as the development of large-scale participatory structures and processes. Originally a youth worker at local and regional level in the north-west of England, he now works throughout Europe and beyond, supporting a variety of organisations to develop their approach to youth participation and youth policy. His doctorate focuses on theorising children and young people's voice and dialogue.

Susanna Osinga specialises in strategic and social design. She holds a master's degree in strategic product design from Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. Her graduation project used the frame innovation method to rethink youth participation in the municipality of Rotterdam, aligning with the Healthy Start initiative's goal of amplifying the voices of unheard youth from a transdisciplinary perspective. Following her graduation, Susanna remained dedicated to the Healthy Start initiative, applying her design expertise to numerous projects aimed at enhancing youth engagement and involvement. Her work continued to focus on fostering meaningful participation and ensuring that youth voices are integral to societal development and policy-making processes.

Sladana Petković is a senior youth researcher with an extensive experience of providing evidence-based advice to youth policy and youth work development in Europe and Central Asia. Through membership in the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) and PEYR Advisory group, she has conducted qualitative and quantitative research and comparative policy analysis, designed innovative data collection and educational tools, and contributed to various programmes and initiatives aligned with strategic priorities of the partner institutions and Youth Partnership. Her specific areas of expertise include youth policy, youth work, youth perspectives, youth mainstreaming, youth participation and activism, democracy, human rights, mental health and well-being, education and training, youth employment and employability (youth guarantee), social inclusion, monitoring and evaluation.

Rebecca Romes-Larsen is managing director of the Competence Centre Youth Check (ComYC) at the National Institute of Public Administration in Germany. She joined ComYC in 2018 and has long-standing experience in the field of youth-specific regulatory impact assessment.

Andreas Rottach is a sociologist and works as a senior researcher at the German Youth Institute in the Department of Youth and Youth Welfare Services at the Centre for European Youth Policy. He has worked on research projects in educational research and youth research at the Free University of Berlin and Kempten University of Applied Sciences. His current research focuses on youth policy research in the areas of youth work, youth and democracy, and European social reporting. His work also involves providing science-based advice to various stakeholders on issues relating to European youth policy.

Galileo Lorenzo Sciarretta, as head of youth policies at the Lazio Regional Government, managed a €20 million youth strategy, engaging over 300 000 young people. He increased youth participation by 1 000%, earned multiple awards and represented the government within the Intermediterranean Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), where he advocated the creation of the Mediterranean Youth Council. He also served as a policy adviser for the City of Rome, focusing on labour and vocational training policies. He had previously served as president of the Youth Council in Rome's 2nd municipality and contributed to research on youth organisation perspectives on the labour market for the MET Research Center. He holds a bachelor's degree in economics

and business from LUISS – Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali and is pursuing a master's degree from Roma Tre University, as well as an MPA from the London School of Economics.

Samira Shadid is a junior researcher at the Youth Spot research group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. She is studying *Maatschappelijke Diensttijd's* (MDT) practices at R-Newt (a professional youth work organisation). She was previously a social work teacher and a community organiser. In 2016, she initiated Bridging Amsterdam, a youth-led organising project where youngsters from various educational backgrounds collaborated to organise a festival.

Stijn Sieckelinck, PhD, is professor and head of the Youth Spot research group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. He earned his PhD at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and has conducted research at various institutions, including McGill University in Montreal, Canada. His work focuses on societal upbringing issues, such as a pedagogical perspective on youth radicalisation. In addition to his research, he is involved in method development and advises governments domestically and internationally.

Biliana Sirakova serves as the EU Youth Coordinator at the European Commission, where she has championed youth participation, empowerment and mainstreaming since 2021. She played a pivotal role in fostering collaboration and building networks between internal and external stakeholders during the 2022 European Year of Youth, led the drafting of the Commission Communication on the year, securing its strong legacy. She has spearheaded key initiatives, including the creation of the Commission Youth Network of youth correspondents, the rollout of the youth check process across the Commission and the launch of the EU Youth Stakeholders Group. With over 18 years of experience across the public, private and non-profit sectors, she brings expertise in partnership building, institutional capacity development and effective communication. She holds a degree in economics and management which is complemented by further studies into human resource management and teaching.

Dr Lasse Siurala is an experienced youth researcher and expert in youth policies who has managed youth services at local and international levels. He has been the Director of Youth Services at the City of Helsinki (with 400 youth workers) and the Director of Youth and Sports at the Council of Europe. Since 2014 he has worked as a lecturer in youth work at Tallinn University. Siurala has written articles and publications on youth participation, youth work, youth policy, management and digitalisation. He has audited youth services in the Netherlands (2012), Vietnam (2024) and the cities of Kotka (2016) and Ylöjärvi (2019) in Finland. He has developed a quality assessment tool for Finnish youth work and digital youth work for social services and a narrative evaluation instrument for youth work.

Olga Skaredina is a PhD student in public policy at Northeastern University in Boston, with a focus on sustainability and resilience. Combining her passion for global environmental governance with active engagement in youth advocacy, She actively explores the role of civil society, particularly children and youth, in intergovernmental processes within the United Nations. Her academic pursuits

extend to youth empowerment, emphasising the importance of an informed science–policy interface. Since March 2023, she has served as the science–policy thematic facilitator of the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. Her involvement as a youth representative extends to various UN meetings, including UNEA-6, OEWG 2 and 3: Science-Policy Panel, COP28, Bonn Climate Change Conference and ECOSOC Youth Forum. In her role as a PhD student and a project manager of the Global Environmental Governance Project, she conducts research into the role of small states in global environmental governance and diplomacy.

Dr Viktorija Stasytytė holds a PhD in economics and works in the fields of risk management, investment and social economics. She works as a senior researcher and as head of the doctoral school at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, and as a consultant at the Lithuanian College of Democracy. She has published more than 60 scientific publications in the field of sustainability, finance, investment and education. She is a managing editor of the *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, chair of the section “Green Economy and Sustainable Development” of the conference “Business and Management 2025”.

Veronica Ștefan is a professional with almost two decades of experience, working at the intersection of youth, education, policy and new technologies. She has been engaged in a variety of international initiatives, from research to public policy, capacity building and project management. Her recent work has focused on digital policies, participation in AI governance, AI literacy, the impact of new technologies on young people and the development and assessment of digital competences in formal and non-formal sectors. She has worked for different stakeholders, from the Council of Europe, UN agencies and European Union bodies to national and international private and public entities. Since 2021 she has led a series of international partnerships related to youth participation and digital transformation on behalf of the Estonian National Agency for Erasmus+ and the European Solidary Corps (HARNO).

Marti Taru, PhD, is a senior youth researcher with an extensive record of providing evidence-based advice on the development of youth policy and youth work in Europe. He has been involved in the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) since its inception and previously participated in the European Youth Researchers Network. He has also contributed through the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYF) network of national correspondents. His work spans the history of youth work, youth worker training, young people’s transitions to the labour market, cross-sectoral youth policy and the mainstreaming of youth issues in public policy. Alongside publications, he supports youth-sector events in roles such as rapporteur, facilitator and presenter.

Marta Touykova has over 20 years of experience in youth and education policy, international co-operation and European affairs. Currently serving as head of the sector for Youth Policy at the European Commission, she has played a key role in shaping initiatives that empower young people across Europe. She leads the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, driving co-operation and forging partnerships with EU member states and key youth stakeholders. Previously, she co-ordinated the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiatives and held positions

within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A political scientist by training, she holds a PhD from Sciences Po Paris and has taught European institutions and political systems at the same institution and authored peer-reviewed research on Bulgaria's democratic transition and political evolution.

Lindsay Vogelzang graduated in anthropology and development sociology (BSc) and international development studies (MSc) from universities in Utrecht and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork with youth organisations in Zambia, South Africa and the Netherlands. For the past 10 years, she has been actively engaged in the field of youth participation at local, national and international levels. As a former executive director of CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, she developed her expertise in youth participation in decision making, which led to the foundation of FUGE: governing with future generations, an organisation in which she develops non-formal education tools and programmes with partners in the higher educational sector, public sector and private sector, for example the Dutch National Agency, the Dutch Youth Institute, Impact Economy Foundation and Democracy Reloading. She is a team member of the 2100 network, an intergenerational movement transforming business and policy for well-being in 2100.

Wendy Wesseling PhD, is a senior researcher at the Youth Spot research group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Her research focuses on disadvantaged youth and their transition into adulthood, particularly the labour market. While she wrote her dissertation on tackling youth unemployment, her current work focuses more on preventing adverse outcomes. Part of this is the evaluation of Maatschappelijke Diensttijd (MDT), translated as "social service time", an innovative youth policy that offers social service experiences to young people in the Netherlands. She is also the programme leader for education and upbringing at the Knowledge Centre for the Study of Inequality in Amsterdam.

Carlotta von Westerholt is a research officer at the Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe, a project by the Institute for Social Work and Social Education. She analyses sociopolitical developments in Germany and other European member states, as well as at European level.

Howard Williamson is Professor of European Youth Policy at the University of South Wales, along with other academic positions elsewhere in the world. He is also a nationally qualified youth worker. Throughout his life he has combined research on a range of youth issues with practical youth work (he ran an open youth centre for 25 years) and has served as a high-level youth policy adviser at many levels of governance. He worked with the two European institutions for 40 years and has promoted at every level, albeit often critically, the case for youth space, voice, perspective and mainstreaming. For his services to young people, he was appointed, in 2002, a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and, in 2016, a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO).

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In the early 2020s, the European Commission and the Council of Europe undertook – almost simultaneously – to strengthen the voice, participation and decision making of young people in all aspects of their work, referring to this commitment as “youth mainstreaming” and establishing a “youth perspective” respectively.

While such terminology is hardly new, it presents new challenges for the youth sector in Europe and for the European policy environment beyond it. This Youth Knowledge Book seeks to move beyond the rhetoric, critically interrogating the ideas and aspirations around “youth mainstreaming” and “youth perspective” from a range of angles and standpoints.

Divided into four sections, the publication looks first at the background to these developments, describing the relevant work carried out by both European institutions. The second section presents some critical theoretical reflections on the concepts involved. In the following section, existing national experiences within the youth sector are described, with illustrations from across Europe of how to enable and ensure different forms of youth engagement, involving different groups of young people. The fourth section looks at practices beyond the European youth sector, including those of international governmental organisations and other policy sectors in Europe and beyond. The concluding chapter considers lessons learned, as well as future lessons to be learned if visions for embedding youth mainstreaming and cementing a youth perspective are to be fulfilled.

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