

Youth Partnership

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



Policy Paper¹

Young People, Solidarity and Democracy

Theme 2: Participation and Expression - Theme 3: Volunteering

Andreia Henriques

This section briefly explores, from a policy perspective, issues related to (1) underrepresentation and new forms of participation and (2) access to and recognition of volunteering opportunities. Other issues could be raised while tackling youth policy developments around Solidarity and Democracy. However, this section will only focus, as in the analytical part, on the discussions held in the thematic spaces of the symposium, under Pillar 2: Participation and Expression and Volunteering

Underrepresentation and New Forms of Participation

Youth Work and Youth Policy Challenges

Nowadays it is common to hear that young people are not interested anymore in politics. Studies give visibility to underrepresentation and reflect about the root causes of voting abstention and low engagement in political parties and governance institutions. As an example, according with the [global ranking of young parliamentarians](#), released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, young people under 30 make up only 1.9% of the world's 45,000

¹ The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states.

members of parliament. In 2016, Sweden was leading in single and lower houses representation with 12,3% of parliamentarians aged under 30 years old. However, the European reality is very diverse and countries such as Slovakia, France, Greece, Romania, Lithuania and Armenia scored less than 1%.

Youth work has an undeniable role in political education but sometimes also creates distance from the more formal political structures, mainly due to fears of tokenism and instrumentalisation. Youth organisations, such as youth branches of political parties, have in this case a key role to continue engaging the youngest generation and a challenge to deconstruct some narratives and practices that repel many from getting engaged. Youth work, as a non-formal education provider, can support “learning to participate” of young citizens to contribute to their understanding of the democratic system, promote their critical thinking and make available the necessary tools to get engaged in decision and policy making, implementation and evaluation of programmes and policies.

The [Treaty of Lisbon](#) refers to the need to encourage participation of young people in democratic life. Youth participation in civil society is also a key dimension of the [EU Youth Strategy](#) (Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)).

Although relevant to look at underrepresentation to interpret part of the reality of youth participation, discussions should not stick to the traditional understanding of political participation. There is the need to look at new trends that are a sign that politics for the millennial generation goes well beyond the representative democracy system and its traditional ways of engagement.

New ways of participation are attracting young people, some organisations and practitioners in the youth sector resist or are critical towards eParticipation² but “it can be argued that social networks present an opportunity for more democracy”³ as it allows to

² Understood as e-informing, e-engaging and e-enabling.

³ BONNICI, Clive (2015) “The role of the internet and social media: new forms of young people’s participation” in [Youth work and non-formal learning in Europe’s education landscape](#) (European Commission), p. 235

bring local issues to global attention and everyone can produce contents, share opinions and take (somehow limited) action. As highlighted in the publication "[New and Innovative Forms of Youth Participation in Decision Making Processes](#)"⁴, self-expression can gain another dimension and outreach when using internet and new communication technologies. But one can also argue that without a strategy to develop young peoples' skills to e-participate, we might end up widening the gap between social groups that have/have not the conditions assured to participate.

EParticipation goes beyond national borders, authorities and institutional frameworks. In a globalised world where many young people chose to engage online rather than offline in discussions related with current challenges that Europe is facing, it is important to promote digital literacy and human rights online (including political and commercial awareness around this media). The right to participation is intrinsically linked with the right of expression but it is not easy to set the rules online and from freedom of expression and hate speech, the line is very thin. In addition, eParticipation goes well beyond blogs and social networks. Online campaigning, information sharing, consultations, volunteering and even monitoring and reporting are all features that can be an opportunity to participate.

Apart from eParticipation, special attention could also be given to other forms of participation that are emerging around Europe such as more informal and grassroots initiatives: exchange systems at local level, popular assemblies in neighbourhoods, social labs (to identify and solve problems together on a voluntary basis) and that have a significant impact at local level.

Participation in our communities and at policy making level is key for development and social cohesion. Young people are engaged in political parties, youth organisations, local NGOs, faith-based organisations and many participate actively in an informal way, doing it within their local communities or in the big online community. However, there is still a significant part that is not engaged by option or because the youth sector, among others, are not able to reach them. In the case of young refugees and migrants, sometimes it is

⁴ COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2017), p. 17

difficult to access the right to participate, especially in the processes leading to decisions that affect them. In addition, participation at a more decision-making level is many times not youth-friendly, lacking creativity in the way to engage young people and not giving them enough space to propose and create. Informal groups have today more access to funding and participation spaces than some years ago but there is still space for improvement in facilitating access of non-organised youth to existing opportunities.

What has been done so far (at European level)?

To tackle issues of underrepresentation, initiatives have been promoted by institutions and civil society, such as the global campaign [Not too Young to Run](#) initiated by the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth⁵ that aims to convene existing efforts into a global movement and provide young people with a central platform through which to advocate.

Youth participation is a key issue for the Council of Europe. Through its Youth Department, the organisation has been a key reference in Europe in the development of [pedagogical resources](#) to support democratic citizenship education and equip youth workers to deliver quality educational activities. The Council of Europe trains young multipliers every year that are actively engaged at local, national and European level, to use a rights-based non-formal education approach in the activities organised by the youth organisations. The Council of Europe also strongly engages young people and youth organisations in its work. Known as the [co-management system](#), representatives from youth non-governmental organisations seat down in committees with government officials and together they discuss and decide on the priorities of the youth sector and make recommendations for future budgets and programmes of the organisation. These proposals are then considered and discussed by the Committee of Ministers, the Council of Europe's decision-making body.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe also has extensive work related with the participation of young people at local and regional level. The [Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#) (May

⁵ In partnership with United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement (YIAGA) and the European Youth Forum (YFJ).

2003) is an important advocacy reference for fostering cooperation between local authorities and the youth sector in Europe. Together with the Manual: [Have your Say!](#) (that is a tool to educate and act towards participation at local and regional level), it has strongly contributed to the creation of new spaces for participation, including the organisation of consultative processes for policy development and the creation of local youth councils.

In addition, one of the [2016-2017 strategic priorities](#) of the Council of Europe's youth sector focuses on supporting young people and member states in increasing the participation of young people in democratic processes. Through the [European Youth Foundation](#), the organisation provides financial support to youth activities at local and international level.

The European Union has a permanent consultative process that aims to engage young people in decision-making related with youth policy. The [Structured Dialogue](#) is a means of mutual communication between young people and decision-makers aiming to implement the priorities of European youth policy cooperation and to make young people's voice heard in the European policy-shaping process.

Despite all these efforts, underrepresentation of youth remains an issue and especially if we look at it from a gender, social and ethnic perspective. Young people, especially women, from migrant and minorities background still face challenges to have a say on decisions that affect them. Initiatives such as [Enter!](#) project (initiated by the youth sector of the Council of Europe in 2009) aimed at the development of youth policy and youth work responses to situations of exclusion, discrimination and violence affecting young people, particularly in multicultural disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Young people's access to social rights is a mean for their inclusion and participation in society.

Regarding eParticipation, the [No Hate Speech](#) Movement (Council of Europe), a youth-focused initiative that fights online hate speech and promotes human rights initiated in 2012 has been prolonged until the end of 2017. The campaign contributes to the implementation of the Council of Europe's Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies. The EU-CoE youth partnership also launched in October 2017 the "[Essentials Youth Policy](#)" online course, making use of new technologies as a way to further develop young people's

skills and foster their participation.

Future youth policy developments

How to better motivate and engage young people to be fully-fledged actors of democratic governance and to create an enabling environment for the development of youth-led participatory initiatives remains a challenge nowadays. In addition, how can we be prepared for increasing online participation practices and educate ourselves to be active but also responsible citizens in these spaces?

Below you can find some proposals of youth policy developments for consideration of youth workers, policy-makers and researchers that might inspire future youth policy making and youth work practices. The proposals listed are a result of the discussions and conclusions of the symposium, plus some additional suggestions identified through research by the author.

- **Youth participation could be integrated at all levels of governance and areas of public policy** - effective and meaningful youth participation could be integrated into policy and decision-making processes and youth participation incorporated and embedded across all areas of public policy, not just youth policy. Development of consultative bodies, youth councils, participatory budgets and other initiatives could be promoted.
- **National strategies to fight underrepresentation** – political parties and national authorities are invited to discuss different options such as the establishment of youth quotas (e.g. reserved seats, legislated quotas and or party quotas) to guarantee the representation of young people. Special attention could be given to young women and from marginalised groups. If relevant, open discussions that include the youth sector can be promoted around reducing the voting age and minimum age to become eligible to run for office.
- **Capacity-building on youth participation** – Practitioners and policy makers working with and for young people could be trained to incorporate effective youth participation approaches into their practice. In addition, formal and non-formal education systems could ensure that young people develop the skills, knowledge and

competencies required to participate in policy and decision-making processes. The youth sector, as non-formal education provider, could be involved.

- **Fostering peer-learning and co-operation between networks of young representatives** – networks of young parliamentarians, youth parliaments and youth councils could be promoted at European and national level to empower group members (enhancing legislative skills, fostering collaboration and raising awareness on youth issues in public policy).
- **Educating for and creating spaces of eParticipation** – the youth sector and governance structures are encouraged to develop youth-friendly eParticipation methodologies, including awareness raising, information sharing and more participatory approaches such as monitoring tasks. Such initiatives could be developed together with young people, based on their interests and practices of online participation and expression. Information and training on effective eParticipation could be provided to young people, youth workers, youth organisations and public authorities.
- **Research on underrepresentation and new forms of participation** – national authorities are encouraged to collect, report and publish data on the age of parliamentarians on a regular basis to assess progress and identify needs for action to ensure real participation of young people. Studies in understanding new trends on youth participation are also encouraged, especially on eParticipation and local initiatives.
- **Support to local, informal and innovative ways of participation** – existing programmes and funding could value proposals that represent new ways of engaging young people. Adaptability and transferability can be explored and disseminated. Local authorities can have a special role in creating the conditions for such practices.

Access to and Recognition of Volunteering Opportunities

Youth Work and Youth Policy Challenges

According to the [2015 State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Transforming Governance](#) more than 1 billion people volunteer in the world and the majority is engaged in local and

national assignments. Volunteers are key to support around the world the work of non-governmental organisations, social and political movements. Volunteerism is currently present and promoted by the public sector and more recently also by the private sector. However, not everyone has access to volunteering; in general, young male from urban areas have more opportunities than others, for example, from rural or marginalised groups' background.⁶

The reality of (youth) volunteerism is very diverse in Europe. There are several countries that have youth volunteering schemes promoted by national authorities such as the [National Citizen Service](#) in the UK (for young people aged 16-17 years old), the [Service Civique in France](#) (16-25 years old) and the [Servizio Civile Nazionale](#) (18-28 years old). They are many times created to complement formal education paths, as an alternative to military service and in close partnership with the civil society, creating volunteering opportunities from local to international level.

The format and approach of these schemes can vary from country to country. It is not the same to have punctual mobilisation of youth volunteers to support logistical organisation of youth and sports' large-scale events or to promote more structured opportunities that see volunteering assignments as an educational opportunity and that imply pedagogical and mentoring responsibilities for the promoters. In addition, legal environments and frameworks are also different and rights and duties are understood, promoted and protected in different ways (and consequently recognition also differs). The acknowledgement and valorisation of the value of volunteering experiences should be accompanied with personal and professional development of competences but also with the recognition of its impact in community development. In the last years, there has been the trend in the youth sector to link volunteering opportunities with the development of youth skills and employability.

There is the risk that volunteering work promoted by the youth sector is called to fill the gaps on issues that governments, are not being able to solve otherwise. This can create a

⁶ UNV (2015), p. 14

situation of being a volunteer meaning being at the same time an activist, or a human-rights defender. More than recognition in this case, young people might need protection. This means that future youth policy developments on volunteerism should take into consideration that *“the idea that volunteers only serve to support service delivery or are only involved in charitable activities is one that is limited and provides a superficial line of difference between volunteering and activism”*⁷.

What has been done so far (at European level)?

Despite different initiatives and opportunities in the last 30 years promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Union, there is still the need for further improvements in the volunteering field in Europe. The 2005 publication ["Charting the landscape of European youth voluntary activities"](#) and the report of the ["Study on Volunteering in the European Union"](#) (2010) have identified existing challenges related to, among others, the engagement of volunteers, the professionalisation of the sector, the lack of recognition and the risk of instrumentalisation of the voluntary sector. Both publications also highlighted the need to further work on legal frameworks, data collection and analysis and recognition of volunteers' competences.

The Council of the European Union has, with a [declaration](#) articulating the intention to address some of the challenges and to seize several of the opportunities, designated 2011— which also marked the 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers — the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (also known as the European Year on Volunteering – EYV2011). That year was a unique opportunity to give visibility to almost 100 million citizens in Europe of all ages that invest their time, talents and resources to make a positive contribution to society. The four main objectives of the Year were: to create an enabling and facilitating environment for volunteering in the EU; to empower volunteer organisations and improve the quality of volunteering; to reward and recognise volunteering activities; and to raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering. The EYV2011 was a milestone in the development of policy proposals at the civil society and institutional level.

⁷ United Nations Volunteers program (2015) [2015 State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Transforming Governance](#) (page 3)

The EYV2011 Alliance adopted the [Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe](#) that includes policy recommendations for a more efficient and effective policy framework in Europe to promote and support volunteers, volunteering, volunteer-involving organisations and their partners.

The 2011 European Commission Communication on [EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the Europe](#), highlighted the challenges mentioned in the 2010 study and pointed practical areas for future intervention (such as the integration of voluntary work experience and skills acquired through in the Europass documents and the 'European Skills Passport' and the funding of the pilot phase of what would be later called the EU Aid Volunteers initiative).

In the following years, volunteering opportunities and recognition of contributions continued to be promoted and included in a variety of Council of Europe and EU programmes and initiatives, such as in the funding of the European Youth Foundation, Erasmus+, Europe for Citizens, European Solidarity Corps, EU Aid Volunteers and also in the framework of 2013 European Year of Citizens. Below, you can find more details about some of the initiatives.

In 2014, the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe became the first European structure of its kind to officially acknowledge the work of thousands of youth work volunteers. The [VTR](#) (volunteer time recognition) method was introduced to valorise volunteer time contribution in grant applications and reports for work plans and international activities and for pilot activities. The methodology used to calculate VTR is based on specific criteria.

The [European Voluntary Service](#) (EVS) started in 1996. It has been part of Erasmus+ and it has offered young people aged 17-30 the chance to volunteer in another Member State as well as outside the EU. On the 20th anniversary of EVS, the European Commission has communicated an [EVS Factsheet and Impacts](#) which states that in twenty years, 100 000

volunteers between 17-30 years old had the opportunity to get engaged in initiatives with a duration between 2-12 months (in some cases shorter experiences such as 2 weeks).

More recently, other two initiatives were launched the [European Solidarity Corps](#) and the [EU Aid Volunteers](#). The European Solidarity Corps (launched in December 2016) allows young people to volunteer (or work) in projects for the benefit of communities and people around Europe. The European Solidarity Corps is open to people between the ages of 18 to 30. Concerns have been raised by the youth movement that this new initiative should be built on the success of EVS and not to replace it.

The second initiative is not limited to young people, the minimum age is 18 years but there is no upper limit. EU Aid Volunteers brings together volunteers and organisations from different countries, providing practical support to humanitarian aid projects and contributing to strengthening the local capacity and resilience of disaster-affected communities.

Other volunteerism-related initiatives include the [European Youth Portal](#) that has a [Volunteering Database](#) where young people can find information about current volunteering opportunities. The European Commission also supports Member States through the promotion of exchange of experiences through the Expert Group on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU.

In addition, the competences developed in the framework of informal and non-formal learning, such as in volunteering-related activities, have been also valued and tools have been developed and adapted for their recognition, for example through the [YouthPass](#). Recently these competences can also gain further recognition in the framework of the recent revision process of EuroPass and the Key Competences framework. At the Council of Europe level, the [European Portfolio for youth leaders and youth workers](#) *"is an online tool that helps individuals, teams and organisations doing youth work around Europe to understand their competence and to develop it more effectively"*.

The European and international youth movement namely the [European Youth Forum](#) (YFJ) and the [Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations](#) have been actively contributing for the promotion and recognition of voluntary activities. For example, the YFJ, approved in 2011 a [Resolution on the Rights Based Approach to Volunteering](#). This approach establishes volunteers and volunteering providers as active rights-holders and creates corresponding duties for responsibility-holders. In the framework of the European Year of Volunteering it was also developed a [Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers](#) that appeals to European, national, local authorities and all other relevant stakeholders for designing and updating policies related to volunteering.

At the global level, youth volunteerism has been high in the agenda in the last years and there are also other opportunities for young people to be engaged voluntarily in development and peace projects. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, in his Five-Year Action Agenda (2012-2016) recognised the enormous potential of young people to contribute positively to their societies and announced a specific measure to “create a UN youth volunteers programme under the umbrella of UN Volunteers”. As stated in the report (A/70/118) of the UN Secretary General [Integrating volunteering in the next decade](#), that includes a 2016-2030 Action Plan: *“youth volunteerism not only engages that large segment of the population in positive activities that contribute to peace and development, but also bolsters the personal growth and employability of young people.”*

Future Youth Policy Developments

How to promote volunteering opportunities assuring better access of young people from marginalised groups and stronger recognition of public institutions, private sector and society remain issues that need policy responses.

Below you can find some proposals of youth policy developments for consideration of youth workers, policy-makers and researchers that might inspire future youth policy making and youth work practices. The proposals listed are a result of the discussions and conclusions of the symposium, plus some additional suggestions identified through research by the author.

- **Relaunch youth volunteering in the European agenda** – other priorities such as youth employment should not overshadow the importance of supporting volunteerism. Local and national governments, and international institutions could work with civil society to ensure that policies, legislative frameworks, adequate funding and programmes are promoted and accessible.
- **Stronger recognition of youth volunteerism** – policy makers could emphasise the learning and social contribution made through voluntary activity, rather than focussing on volunteering as a pathway to employment. Initiatives such as media communications, youth volunteerism awards, promotion of recognition tools are some of the options available to recognise, celebrate, and promote the contribution that young volunteers make to society.
- **Promote quality volunteering opportunities** – European institutions and national and local partners are encouraged to work together to disseminate and advocate for the adoption and implementation of the [European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers](#).
- **Outreach and access to volunteering opportunities** – local and national governments, international institutions, NGOs, and formal education institutions could actively promote and raise awareness of volunteering amongst young people. Special outreach efforts to engage young people from rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds could be more clearly planned. Mentoring and financial support could be made available to assure equal access to volunteering opportunities (to organisations and to volunteers).
- **Fostering research on volunteerism** – digital mappings of volunteer-involving organisations could be undertaken to enable young people to identify volunteering opportunities (use as reference already existing practices such as websites and apps). Evidence on how volunteerism contributes to inclusion, integration and social cohesion is also a relevant focus of study to be considered.
- **Private sector commitment towards volunteering** – volunteering experiences could be more recognised and valued in the job market by the private sector. Employers could create the necessary conditions for a possible balance between work-volunteering activities. Different initiatives could be considered such as corporate

volunteering in co-operation with youth sector (coaching young entrepreneurs, supporting project management) and volunteering schemes to, allows use of working hours for engagement in volunteering activities (online and offline).