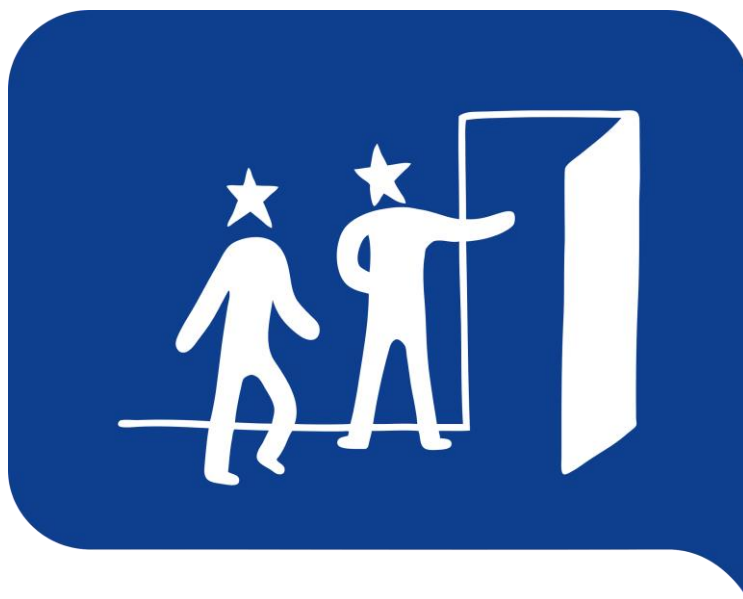


Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 1

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them, although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development.

YG#9 Target 1: Ensure young people can adequately influence all areas of society and all parts of the decision-making processes, from agenda setting to implementation, monitoring and evaluation through youth-friendly and accessible mechanisms and structures, ensuring that policies respond to the needs of young people.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What measures/actions can be implemented to ensure young people influence policy and decision making at all levels?

Key topics in this report: Youth councils, school councils, transparency in decision making, civic education, meaningful participation, awareness raising

*Report by Dr. Dan Moxon - Director, People Dialogue and Change,
Member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the partnership between
the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth.*

Target 1: Ensuring young people have influence on decision making

The youth dialogue activities asked participants what kind of actions/measures should be taken to ensure that young people can adequately influence all areas of society and all parts of the decision-making processes, from agenda setting to implementation, monitoring and evaluation through youth-friendly and accessible mechanisms and structures, ensuring that policies respond to the needs of young people.

Wider context: What is meaningful youth participation?

Across the working groups there were relatively common ideas reported about how youth participation initiatives should be undertaken, and the principles which might lead to effective or meaningful participation. They were:

- **Education has an important role to play** in making young people's democratic engagement stronger.
- Young people need to be properly **prepared, supported** and informed for participation activities.
- **Participation should be inclusive** and support young people from a range of different backgrounds and political perspectives, enabling dialogue between them.
- **Long-term, consistent and regular approaches** are beneficial for meaningful participation.
- **Participation should not be tokenistic** – it should have the possibility to lead to meaningful change.
- Public bodies and decision makers should **communicate with young people in a transparent way** about decision making. Policy makers should make it clear how the participation process with young people will unfold, how their opinion will be taken into consideration and to what extent their demands can be realised.
- **Participation activities** should be safe for young people to take part in, and our democracies should value and promote young people's participation generally.
- Some of the most effective spaces to revitalise the decision-making processes are **the spaces the young people use the most**. Therefore, schools and youth organisations and social media should be considered as spaces for democratic participation.
- **Representative structures**, such as youth councils or youth organisations, have a valuable role to play and require resources to fulfil this role.

The INGYO roundtable also highlighted the importance of connecting youth participation to young people's rights.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

Consultation reports showed two overarching themes. Firstly, increasing awareness, communication and transparency of decision making and, secondly, improving existing methods of participation.

Increasing awareness, communication and transparency of decision making

The need to **increase young people's awareness and understanding** of politics, policy making and the possibility for participation was raised throughout the consultation. This included both how state institutions made policy and also how projects and programmes about youth participation functioned.

There was also a phenomenon that, when asked about how the youth policy could be assisted, the answers [given by young people] would lead to already happening programs, initiatives or workers. Which could imply that the workers, programs or platforms that already exist forgets to prime itself time to time and to promote in understandable communication youth friendly matter.

Lithuanian National Working Group Report

However, increasing awareness may not be a solution on its own. It seems that many young people who are aware, may not like some aspects of what they see.

A key message from the consultation was **negativism from young people toward political parties and politicians**, as well as general perception that young people are not listened to by the state. For some working groups, this included **low trust and faith in political figures**, and perceptions of **corruption** or **lack of transparency** in public institutions.

[One of the barriers is] corruption – which leads to frustration among young people and drives them to indifference. A feeling from young people that their needs are invalid and are not important... discouraging them to express their views... People who are about to take action often are discouraged by this invalidation.

Cypriot National Working Group Report

Young people do not want to join youth wings of political parties for fear that this will affect their careers in the future. They, therefore, prefer to be part of apolitical organisations. They also do not believe that young political organisations have any real influence on political parties' politics. Politics is not attractive to them and the fact that their surroundings condemn them for it. Young people consider politics to be amoral

The Czech Republic National Working Group Report

This is closely connected to **the perception that young people do not have enough influence** on policy making, and that **youth participation projects do not create enough change**.

The government hears our ideas but does not implement them for real.

Luxembourgish National Working Group Report

One issue was that when change does occur as a result of participation projects it is rarely communicated back to young people.

A general problem is the lack of information after meetings. Several organization representatives addressed that politicians, political parties, Ministries and government agencies [should] give feedback to youths and share information of the implementation of the political processes. The feedback needs to be in a transparent manner so youths can monitor political processes and assess whether the processes are youth friendly.

Swedish National Working Group Report

The INGYO roundtable explored this topic. Policy makers stated there was generally a good desire to make change based on young people's views. However, policy makers' ability to act was often limited, as they are accountable to a range of stakeholders, especially electoral representatives and the outcome of elections. As a result they are rarely able to act independently or implement recommendation swiftly. This was particularly complex at EU level.

A need for **public bodies to communicate more transparently about how policy decisions are made was identified** in the consultations. This was said to be challenging for some of the complex processes within the EU. Political processes, especially at EU level, were often described as **distant and disconnected** from young people's lives.

At times everything really seems to happen higher up and far away, so they said that they would need 'more accessibility' if they really had to go for influencing policy and decision making.

Maltese National Working Group Report

Some working groups highlighted that this sense of distance and limited influence which young people have has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has made the self-isolating and social distancing even worse and left no space or hope for young people to change this situation. They feel powerless against contemporary political culture.

Slovakian National Working Group Report

Overall, **ineffective communication by Governments and policy makers** about how decision making occurs is closely linked to young people's lack of trust and perception that they lack influence. Although there is still a desire to **increase the influence of young people**, the lack of transparency and limited feedback when change does happen may contribute to

these issues. Communicating with young people more effectively about how decisions and policies are made and how these processes can be influenced is key. Part of this means communicating effectively about what level of influence youth participation projects and young people can expect to have within complex democratic systems like the EU.

Regardless, in general, young people find that a change is needed in options and avenues to formal participation and more transparency, clarity and real influencing power in participatory processes.

Portuguese National Working Group Report

Improving existing methods of participation

A need to improve some of the current tools and methods for supporting young people's participation was identified:

- **Local youth councils** (and similar bodies) were said to be not visible enough to young people. Co-operation and communication between youth councils and decision makers was said to be poor. Decision makers do not take sufficient account of the views of youth councils or co-operate effectively with them.
- **School or student councils** (and similar bodies) are also not visible enough to young people and are said to be functioning poorly. In some cases they function more as 'event agencies' to organise student social activities.
- **Citizenship education in schools** (and other formal education settings) was identified as exceptionally poor and delivered on a too-limited scale.

The INGYO roundtable explored some of these issues. Civil society representatives identified that increasing visibility and outreach required an increase in funding. The roundtable discussed the importance of developing participation methods which allowed **for dialogue and differences of ideas**. This was said to allow the development of new policy ideas and creating democratic compromises, rather than one side pushing only for their position.

Possible actions and measures

Various suggestions to achieve Youth Goal #9 Target 1 were made. These can be summarised into several major categories.

1) Promoting and improving schools and universities as spaces for democracy and youth participation.

This meant encouraging democratic processes within schools (and similar bodies), supporting the co-management process inside them, promoting learner autonomy and involving young people in planning curriculum. **Improving school or student councils** was an important part of this but **creating a participation culture** across all aspects of the schools was also key.

2) Improving political and civic education.

Suggestions focused on increasing the quality and amount of political and civic education young people received. High school and university settings were the main suggestions for how/where this was delivered. However, some working groups emphasised the role of primary schools or non-formal education.

3) More direct meetings and regular contact between young people and politicians.

This included meetings in schools, through youth organisations and in municipal projects. The style of interaction was important. The need to present policy makers and politicians as being equal to young people, have two-way communication and use accessible language was key. Some working groups suggested that youth wings of political parties may have a role to play in this. One of the major functions was to make elected representatives accessible and relatable to young people, particularly at local level.

4) Hosting roundtables and dialogue events between policy makers and young people.

Building on suggestion three, there were calls for roundtable-style events that enabled young people and decision makers to discuss policy ideas and identify solutions and improvements for their communities. These suggestions emphasised detailed, two-way discussion, allowing new ideas to be generated. Examples of participatory cafes in Estonia and territorial co-construction spaces in France were given. An important feature was ensuring that ideas were then carried forward from events into policy. Some working groups suggested a formalised process to enable this, such as participatory budgeting and co-management agreements.

5) Improving youth councils (and similar bodies), particularly at local level.

This meant clearer co-operation agreements between youth councils and decision makers and ensuring all municipalities have local youth councils. Some working groups described the need for a legislative basis for this. There was a general desire that municipalities, school authorities and similar should more systematically co-operate with representative structures such as school councils, student unions and youth organisations.

6) Improving communication campaigns and strategies of public bodies to

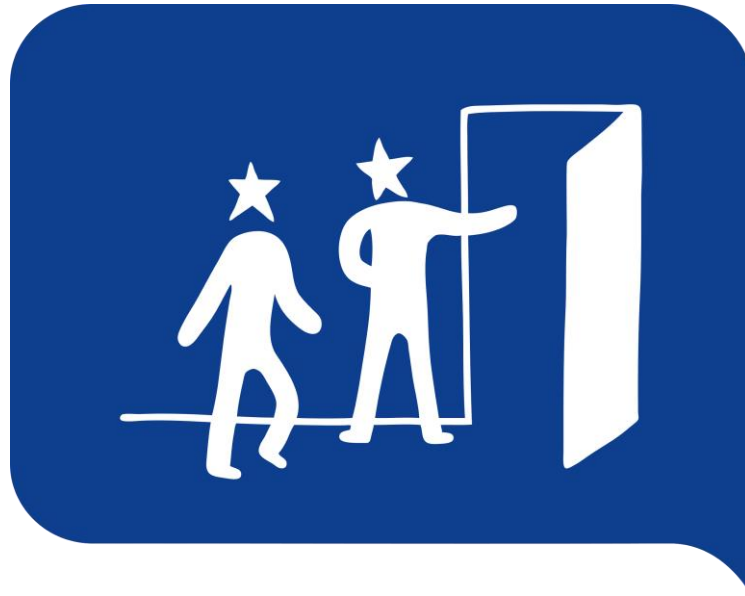
ensure youth friendly accessible information is available about decision making. This includes information about the possibility to participate, the outcome of participation initiatives and the workings of policy makers generally. Communication materials should be accessible, age appropriate, and enable young people to monitor and be aware of political processes. The importance of online and social media approaches were stressed. (See Report 7 for more discussion on youth information.)

7) Regular, consistent and systematic approaches to consultation with young people from Governments and municipalities. Through surveys, polls and online tools.

A general theme was **the value of supporting youth participation at local level**. This was seen to be the place that was least distant from young people's lives and where they could have the most impact. Participation at local level was said to create pathways to participation at National or European level. Alongside the suggestions above, **there was some discussion of youth work, non-formal education and youth spaces** such as youth clubs. These topics are covered in other reports from this cycle.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 2

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them, although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development.

YG#9 Target 2: Ensure equal access to everyday decision making for all young people from different backgrounds.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What actions/measures should be implemented to ensure young people from different backgrounds have access to decision-making processes?

Key topics in this report: Inclusion, marginalised groups, inequality, civic and political education, youth information, outreach programmes

*Report by Dr. Dan Moxon - Director, People Dialogue and Change,
Member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the partnership between
the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth.*

Target 2: Ensuring equal access to participation

Wider context: What is meant by equal access to decision making?

A number of common ideas about inequality and participation were found across the Working Group Reports. It was generally understood that **young people are not a homogenous group** and **some young people are marginalised** or have fewer opportunities compared to others. Some working groups and the INGYO roundtable highlighted that COVID-19 had increased levels of marginalisation among young people.

There seems to be overall belief, among both working groups and young participants, that **social inequality affects access to participation**. The causes of unequal access to participation are interlinked with social inequality in all aspects of life.

Young people in Germany see inequality in the access to participation processes as a huge problem. Unequal opportunities of participation are not only a problem in political decision making but also in everyday life.

German Working Group Report

A relevant point highlighted by the target group was that their idea of youth participation and accessibility related both with getting information for all and getting concrete involvement in decision making for all and with everyone.

Italian Working Group Report

The groups of young people said to be excluded from participation reflected the list of 'young people with fewer opportunities'¹ within the Erasmus+ programme, with two notable additions:

- **Age.** Some working groups said the younger you were, the more difficult it was to be involved in participation.
- **Young people with limited digital access** were said to be more likely to be excluded from participation. This overlapped with young people in rural areas (who might have poor internet connection) and young people with disabilities (who might find the technology used unsuitable for their needs).

As a result of this social inequality, it was claimed that **youth participation projects and initiatives will not be accessed equally** by young people from all backgrounds, **unless active steps are taken** to include marginalised young people.

Youth policies open spaces for dialogue with young people, but it is most often the least marginalized young people who express themselves.

French Working Group Report

¹ See the SALTO Inclusion and Diversity website [to view this list](#) of groups.

It was often articulated that there was a duty on those responsible for participation programmes and democratic decision making to ensure participation initiatives are inclusive:

The responsibility of involving young people from all backgrounds lays on the organisations and the decision-making bodies, as they should be the ones who reach out to minority groups and equalize chances when it comes to political involvement.

Hungarian Working Group Report

Involving youth with different backgrounds in decision-making processes is not a 'nice-to-have' but can have an added value for the process as such, as it might lead to unforeseen outcomes and ensure higher approval by the people affected by the policy.

Austrian National Working Group Report

Overall, social inclusion within society generally cannot be separated from inclusion within participation.

The first step should be general and equal integration in society, and afterwards the decision-making processes could occur not only by our initiative, but organically and naturally.

Lithuanian National Working Group Report

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

As well as the role of social inequality, three specific barriers preventing participation of young people from marginalised backgrounds were identified within working group reports:

1. **Poor quality of political and civic education in schools.** A particular concern was inconsistencies between schools resulting in young people from some areas receiving much worse education than others. Poor political and civic education was also something said to be affecting young people from all backgrounds, and is explored more in Report 1.
2. **Limited access to information about decision making and participation programmes.** A particular concern was that information about the European level might often be in English, excluding people who do not speak English. Similar issues were identified nationally in countries with linguistic minority groups. There was also concern that information was not available in multiple formats, and not suitable for people with visual or hearing impairments. Information was also said to be complex and not youth friendly. This particularly affected those young people with lower levels of education or with communication disabilities. Access to information is also explored more in Reports 1 and 7.
3. **Limited representation of people from minority backgrounds in politics and participation generally.** The lack of role models in politics, or an individual's belief that participation projects were not attended by young people from marginalised backgrounds was said to be demotivating.

In addition to this it was clear that there are some barriers which are specific to particular groups:

- Young people in rural areas may be excluded from participation activities by **poor transport**.
- Some young people may be excluded by **limited digital access or digital skills**.
- Young people in **low income situations** may be excluded by participation fees, costs of traveling to activities, or being unable to commit to volunteering time as they need to work.

Possible actions and measures

While many participants and reports expressed that participation should be 'open to all young people' or 'include people from all backgrounds', ideas for how this might be achieved were more limited.

Two major areas of solutions discussed repeated the suggestions for improving participation generally. These were the need to **improve civic and political education** and **access to information** (see Reports 1 and 7 for more detail). Emphasis was also placed on the importance of **translating communication materials**, and being **aware of the digital divide**.

The use of social networks is also a key to reaching more marginalised young people and listening to their particular experiences. However, as many young people experience the digital divide, they cannot be reached through digital platforms. Activities on the field, on the street, are therefore still needed.

Belgian Working Group Report - Flemish Community

A relevant point highlighted by the target group was that their idea of youth participation and accessibility related both with getting information for all and getting concrete involvement in decision making for all and with everyone.

Italian National Working Group Report

Some working groups highlighted that there was a need to **dedicate more resources** (either financial or human resources) **to ensuring existing participation programmes were more inclusive**. This meant committing portions of budgets to outreach activities, removing barriers that might prevent participation in meetings, and increasing the resources available for supporting inclusion within participation projects generally. There was a sense that the many methods of participation were, for the most part, suitable for young people from a wide variety of backgrounds. What was required was a stronger commitment to working accessible within them (for more on budget, see Report 6).

However, a number of working groups and participants did highlight the need to **have targeted or tailor-made participation programmes** specifically for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Ideas in this area included:

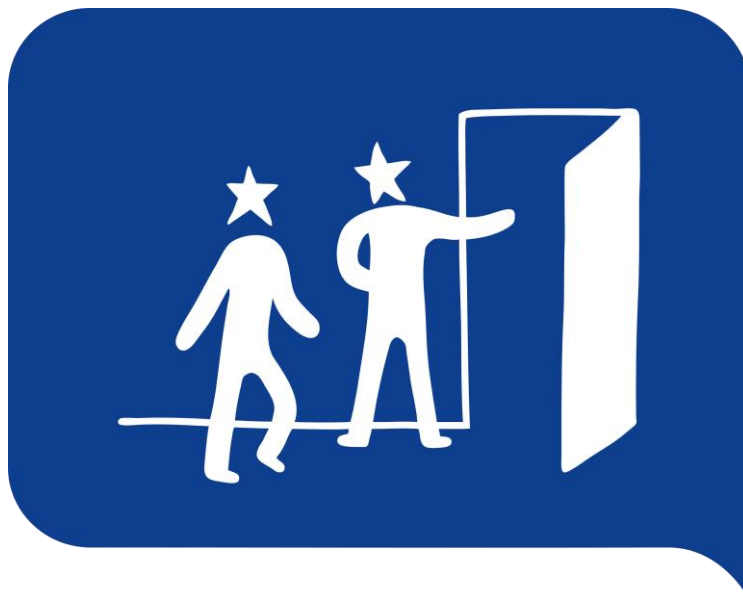
- **Dedicated youth spaces** for young people from marginalised backgrounds.
- **Training and support programmes** to encourage young people from marginalised backgrounds to enter politics.
- **Participation outreach programmes** run by civil society organisations who work with specific marginalised groups.

- Initiatives **promoting diversity of leadership within participation structures** and youth civil society.
- **Development of networks, co-ordination and infrastructure** linking existing participation projects to social workers, or civil society organisations working with young people from marginalised backgrounds.
- **Peer-to-peer programmes**, or programmes which relied strongly on role models. Where young people engaged in participation could engage others. These were said to be particularly valuable when the peer leaders were from marginalised backgrounds themselves.
- **Use of personal financial incentives** for young people from marginalised backgrounds to rescue or remove financial barriers to participation.

Among participants, there were some who disagreed with the concept of dedicated youth spaces for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Similarly, the idea of quotas was discussed by some, and this was also controversial.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 3

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them, although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development.

YG#9 Target 3: Increase youth participation and thus equal representation in the electoral process as well as in elected bodies and other decision-making organs at all levels of society.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What measures/actions can be implemented to increase young people's representation in electoral bodies?

Key topics in this report: Elections, voting, politicians, political parties, votes at 16, quotas, representation

Note: The findings in this report overlap with Report 1. Both reports should be read together.

*Report by Dr. Dan Moxon - Director, People Dialogue and Change,
Member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the partnership between
the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth.*

Target 3: Participation in elections and representation in elected bodies

Wider context: Creating youth friendly politics

Many participants reported a view that the adult generation's prejudices affected young people's participation in electoral systems. Parts of the electoral system are seen as 'old-established' and not treating young people's views seriously and with respect.

There is a lot of prejudice against young people in decision-making roles. Young people are considered inexperienced and lack credibility. Thus, they face a lot of barriers not only inside political structures to be in an electing position but also from society in general, that does not consider them competent and capable of holding office.

Portuguese National Working Group Report

Young people often face problems in elected local policy bodies. They are considered too young; they are not respected. There is a need to change the understanding of politics. Moreover, participants felt that the opinions of young people need to be taken more seriously. This would definitely motivate young people to consider participating in electoral processes more.

Maltese National Working Group Report

There was a perception that politics serves the interests of the older generations and does not represent young people or focus on youth issues.

Political contents seem to be made for elder people and that's why parents and grand-parents are more interested in politics. Young people's topics should be more addressed in politics to motivate youngsters to participate.

Luxembourgish Working Group Report

Not 'feeling represented' was linked to the **low trust in political systems**, and **feeling of distance from decision making**, especially at EU level. These issues are discussed more in Report 1.

Some working groups highlighted that the 'choice not to participate' in elections was an important part of democracy. For some young people **not voting was a way of showing discontent**.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

One of the major barriers to engaging young people in democratic elections is the quality of politicians and political parties.

When asked what prevents young people from running in elections or being elected to representative bodies, [young people] answered that it is a stereotype

about politics that they are there for the sake of party or personal interest before the interests of the community.

Croatian National Working Group Report

Young people do not understand politics as current politicians present it. They also consider most of the election spots of individual political parties to be bizarre and not attractive to them. They feel that they are not yet affected by politics, they do not know why they should address the presented topics.

The Czech Republic National Working Group Report

Politicians should act more in line with the reality and needs of young people and take appropriate measures for them.

Belgian Working Group Report - French Speaking Community

Participants reported that Parliaments and other elected bodies have too few young people within them. Young people were also concerned about lack of diversity among politicians.

Young people do not feel that existing political parties represent them and their ideas... the majority of elected MPs are either lawyers or doctors, therefore there is no representation of all people in the Parliament [and] they don't feel represented by current politicians.

Cypriot National Working Group Report

In addition, it was suggested there was a need for better quality, objective information about electoral candidates, and electoral processes, particularly in the lead up to elections.

When it came to standing for election, the general context that political parties and bodies are often not welcoming and respectful of young people was a barrier. Some specific barriers were also identified:

- The cost of running as a candidate.
- The length of terms of office may not fit well with education or work.
- High minimum ages to stand for elections in some countries.
- The need to be involved with a political party when you may not support all causes.

Possible actions and measures:

Across the consultation there was a general belief that increasing young people's involvement in the electoral processes and bodies required creating **a new form of politics that is youth friendly** and more **inclusive of young people** and their concerns. This linked to the issue of building trust and reducing distance from public bodies discussed in Report 1.

Many suggestions made through the consultation were circular. It was said that in order to engage more young people in representative politics, politics needed to become more representative of young people.

Being 'represented' meant a range of things. It included

- Younger electoral candidates/politicians.

- Candidates/politicians from more diverse social backgrounds.
- More political discussion of issues relevant to young people.
- Candidates/politicians who will take on board young people's views and communicate with young people well in public.

Concrete steps to achieve representation and engagement were not always clearly defined. Although many ideas were suggested, **there did not seem to be a strong consensus for one or two specific measures** that would be the key to solving the issues. The general tone of recommendations, indicated many young people believe the solutions are based on **changing political systems, politicians and parties**, as much as, if not more than, on **educating and informing young people** about politics. Within this context, a range of measures and actions were proposed across the working group reports.

Calls for improving **political and civic education** (see Report 1 for a full discussion) and increasing access to youth friendly, trustworthy, **objective information on elections, political candidates and their positions** (see Reports 1 and 7).

Strengthening youth participation structures and youth civil society. This was said by some to encourage wider electoral engagement (see Report 1 for a discussion on *how* these structures might be strengthened). One theme was the development of structures which closely modelled or shadowed existing electoral structures such as simulation or shadow Parliaments.

[One solution is] the involvement and participation of young people not only in the Youth Council – Youth Committee of the municipality but also in a number of similar committees of the municipalities like the culture, environment, development, accessibility and others.

Greek National Working Group Report

Increasing opportunities for **direct contact between politicians and young people** was suggested (see Report 1 for details of *how* this might be implemented). This was partly connected to the need to promote political role models and relatable political figures.

A good measure is when another young person is active or running for council and publishing/disseminating their stories and experiences. It is important to point out the value that the young person gets from it. Think about whether and how young people will benefit... There must be a reward or strong intrinsic motivation (e.g. in the form of role models).

Estonian National Working Group Report

Some groups suggested ensuring **politicians could communicate effectively and authentically with young people**, particularly through **social media**.

The most important thing is that politicians communicate clearly, take young people seriously, listen to their input and provide follow up. Only a few young people could name politicians who they saw as role models and who knew how to communicate with young people. Politicians that were mentioned either shared the same religion as them or were really good at explaining what they did and why. Organise

campaigns targeted at young people and improve social media presence of those active in electoral bodies.

The Netherlands National Working Group Report

The Austrian National Working Group warned about **'Boomer-Cringe'** when politicians use social media poorly (see Report 5 for more on the cultural competences young people expect in digital communication).

It is not enough for politicians to think they can get a Tik-Tok account and communicate there in their old way. New platforms are developing new patterns of language and expression, and specific skills are needed to express themselves on these platforms without making fools of themselves. Moreover, authenticity in online spaces is important.

Related suggestions also included **job shadowing schemes** where young people could work alongside politicians for a day and build up connections.

Lowering voting age to 16 was a topic that divided the opinions of young participants. Some working groups reported only support for lowering the voting age. Others, particularly those who explored the topic extensively reported mixed opinions amongst young people. Denmark, who explored it extensively, concluded the majority of their participants were against votes at 16. A key debate seemed to be ensuring 16 year olds had enough political knowledge and education.

If it were lowered, there should be a lot of information campaigns, more political education at schools, support for media literacy skills and more information of candidates and parties beforehand.

Finnish National Working Group Report

The EUYD8 *qualitative* consultation cannot provide an accurate estimation of how much support exists for votes at 16 when opinions are divided. However, the upcoming survey may do. The 2018 youth dialogue survey showed only a slight majority toward votes at 16, with much greater support among younger age groups.¹

The topic of age quotas or some form of age regulation within parties or electoral bodies was discussed by few working groups. When discussed, this **generally divided opinions** among young people and did not enjoy widespread support. There were suggestions made about the need to **strengthen or improve the youth wings of political parties**, though what that would mean in practice was not described in detail. Other suggestions described the need for **political parties to conduct outreach** and communication activities targeted at young people.

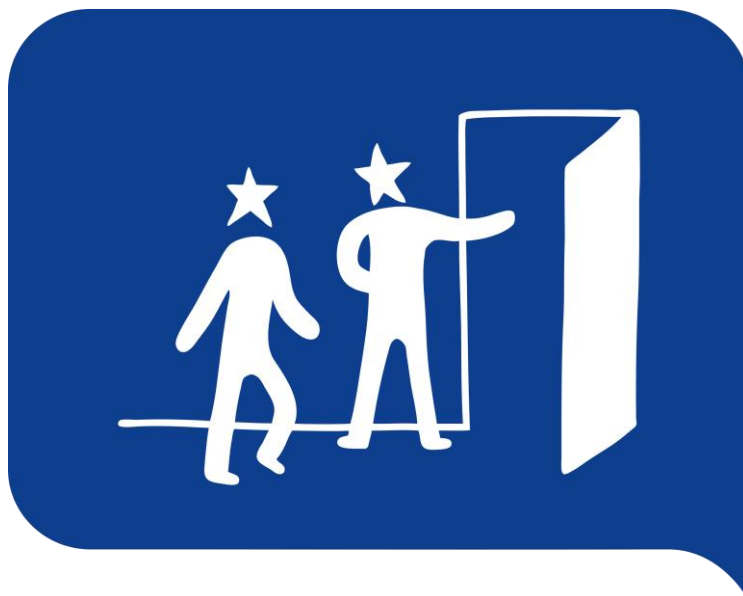
A small number of working groups reported suggestions around **making the process of voting more accessible**, such as through online voting for transport in rural areas. There

¹ See section 3.16, Bárta, O & Moxon, D. (2018). Structured Dialogue VI Cycle Consultations: Quantitative Data Analyses. Zenodo. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3716297>

were also suggestions to **remove some of the barriers to standing for election**, such as lower minimum ages or providing financial support.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 4

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development

YG#9 Target 4: Provide youth-led physical facilities and infrastructures called youth spaces defined by being autonomous, open and safe, accessible to all, offering professional support for development and ensuring opportunities for youth participation.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What kind of physical facilities and infrastructures should be available to young people and what actions/measures should be taken to ensure that they are autonomous, open, safe and accessible?

Key topics in this report: youth-led spaces, co-management of spaces, youth centres, schools, space and place, hybrid spaces.

Report by Dr. Maria-Carmen Pantea - *Member of the Advisory group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the EU – Council of Europe youth partnership.*

Target 4: Ensuring physical youth spaces

The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants what kind of physical facilities and infrastructures should be available to young people and what actions/measures should be taken to ensure that they are autonomous, open, participative, safe and accessible. This section presents some of the main findings.

Wider context: why physical youth spaces matter?

Participation is spatial. Although youth centres are often seen as the embodiment of youth spaces, a common message from young people was that participation takes place in a large diversity of settings. Young people shape, create, take and lose space. Different physical spaces enable different social relations, levels of autonomy and capacities to influence decisions. Space is inherently, relational, subjective yet, political and dynamic. When young people attach meaning, history and a sense of belonging to spaces, these become *places*. An analysis of young people's rapport with physical space, is, thus, one about the kind of relations they develop *among* themselves and about their relations *with* institutions.

Many activities suggest a shrinking of the physical spaces for young people. Many were temporarily closed during the pandemic, but some participants had reasons to believe that many will not recommence their activity after the sanitary crisis. **Financial limitations on local municipalities** may hinder the operational capacity of the youth physical spaces. In addition, there are concerns that the persistent financial interests involved in the real estate sector will continue to lead to the closing of some youth centres. The [film](#) produced by Megan Atkinson, a young woman from Ireland, denounces the selling of community spaces to private entities (Image below).



Image from the film 'Space and Participation', produced by Megan Atkinson, a young participant from Ireland, as part of a film competition.

The **meanings of physical spaces** for young people changed in the aftermath of Covid-19. Young people expressed the need for alternative, *third spaces* to the home and school. This was seen as highly relevant for the young people struggling without a safe environment in family, those experiencing loneliness and mental health issues. A recurrent expectation was for youth and community centres **to cater for the emerging social, emotional and mental health concerns** that young people have.

Reports conveyed the anticipation that after the Covid-19 crisis, young people will feel the need to **reappropriate the physical spaces** and will expect these to deliver more services, including assistance with psychological issues like loneliness, bullying victimization, anxiety, depression etc. Yet, the assumption that young people will just come back, should not be taken without prudence. Some youth workers expressed their concern that the most vulnerable young people may be hard(er) to engage:

especially girls and young women have withdrawn from public spaces since the first lockdown. However, many of them need spaces to exchange and develop away from families in groups of peers.

Austrian National Working Group Report.

Thus, a shared understanding was that youth workers need to be more **proactive in reaching the 'hard to reach' young people** in ways that are responsive to their needs. Also, many participants anticipated that the **future of youth spaces will be hybrid**, with many young people opting to engage online because of barriers, personal choice or when it comes to issues, they consider 'too sensitive to be addressed off-line'. According to them, youth spaces have to evolve in ways that incorporate digitalisation in ways that add value and are not seen as an alternative.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

National Working Groups Reports demonstrate a strong **awareness of issues of privilege and disadvantage, resilience and vulnerability**, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19. Participants spoke at length about how social class, ethnicity, location and recent mental health concerns permeate youth spaces. Young participants saw themselves as **diverse in many ways** and **respectful of others' diversities**. Reports were permeated by high awareness of the internal divides and youth cultural norms that are at work among young people and which may go unnoticed by adults. The role of youth centres as enablers of action in **small towns and in rural areas** was repeatedly stated:

Youth workers in rural areas should also focus on planning youth programs and providing spaces where young people can carry out activities of their own. By including young people who do not have access to youth work yet, more young people will be able to participate actively [...] Programs need to be designed in a way that empowers young people to carry out activities independently and gives them the opportunity to become partners instead of users.

Slovenian Working Group Report.

Space is gendered and concerns on the inequitable use of space among women, men, young people who identify as LGBTQ+ emerged frequently. Concerns over women's safety in public spaces were also expressed during activities. Several participants in the INGYO roundtable stated the importance for youth workers to be sensitive to the power dynamics shaping communities and the ways these permeate the use of physical spaces.

There is a continuum among spaces of different kinds. Attitudes acquired in a space, feed into another; a space prepares for another. This is why the large majority of reports made persistent claims that **schools are not doing enough** to socialise young people into participation, by providing conceptual knowledge and by enabling experiential learning (e.g. by creating spaces for young people to self-organise, by organising regular debates with politicians or by making the internal processes, more democratic):

It is important that student councils, unions and youth organizations have physical meeting rooms where they can operate at the school. This is not the case to today as these spaces can be taken away from one day to another. Guaranteed physical spaces should be a priority.

Swedish National Working Group Report.

Living in polarized societies, **young people are, also, politically divided**. According to the reports, young people are increasingly aware of the difference in opinions and they expect youth spaces, community centres etc, to cater for the large variety of convictions, values and political orientations. This is, nevertheless, easier said than done, especially in the context of increased radicalisation, as highlighted in the International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable.

Invariably, youth spaces enable and strengthen **political socialisation**. Yet, ways to ensure their political neutrality and if youth facilities (such as centres, clubs, etc) need to be politically neutral, were contentious issues. A strongly shared opinion was that youth spaces need to be independent of political interference, yet, to enable political engagement, should young people decide to do so. The importance for those in managerial structures of youth facilities not to be part of political parties, was emphasised in the Romanian Working Group Report. In the same time, the opinion that 'youth organizations do not have an obligation to political neutrality' was stressed in the German Working Group Report, whilst participants in the German speaking community of Belgium argued that by having the aspiration of being democratic, youth work *is, inherently, political*.

Possible actions and measures

Regardless of the kinds of youth spaces available in their countries, a common message from the participants was that they feel the infrastructures in place are **not enough** or that the way they are structured, managed or the kind of services provided **do not fit their needs**. A general understanding among the young people consulted was that **they need more spaces** that are **youth friendly**, **close** to their communities, **free and safe**. To participants, the physical spaces need to be **inclusive**, with the necessary accommodations for the young people with disabilities and adapted to the different age groups and cultures.

Discussions on the **multiple functions** that youth spaces could meet were vibrant and

abundant in ideas for change. Participants imagined complex, large youth centres, based on the model of hubs that enable social networking, cooperation, engagement in various projects. Youth centres with libraries, conference-rooms, offices for counselling and accommodation for international volunteers or unstructured spaces for hanging up were only few of the changes young people would like to see in their community/ youth centres.

The expectation for youth centres to be open 24/7, to assist young people in handling complex psychological issues, was articulated in many reports. Assisting young people in the aftermath of Covid-19 created the **need for specialised staff**, competent in providing counselling and support to the young people struggling with multiple emotional and social concerns (anxiety, depression, abuse, bullying etc).

Participants claimed more spaces, but were also in favour of a **fluid use of spaces**, when other solutions are unavailable. For instance, some participants proposed the possibility to book spaces in public institutions outside opening hours (libraries, local councils, schools, universities). These are bottom-up solutions able to creatively drive change in communities:

Meet young people where they are: their neighbourhood, school, sports clubs, a youth care institute or youth club. To be as inclusive as possible, it is vital to operate within their primary living environment and avoid unnecessary barriers.

Dutch Working Group Report.

According to a very high number of reports, **youth spaces need to be green**. Participants expressed their concern for environmental sustainability and proposed reliance on renewable sources of energy in youth spaces and the use of green spaces (including rural outdoor areas and public gardens). Bold measures for **combating illegal logging** were also demanded from Romanian participants (Photo below).



Photo submitted by Claudia-Elena Brehuescu, a young participant, as part of a photo competition exploring the themes of the Youth Dialogue in Romania. It is described by the young person as such: *Among young people, deforestation is a major concern. The forestry companies doing the logging and the authorities that allow this to happen need to be held accountable.*

The **management of youth spaces** was an intensely discussed issue. Indeed, the general consensus was that **youth spaces need to be youth-led**, conveying a sense of ownership, self-efficacy, responsibility and community engagement to the young people. However, some participants were reserved on young people's managerial skills and time to commit to administrative issues. Besides, as youth centres have high membership turnover and short institutional memory, the need for **continuity** was expressed. It mattered in administrative terms and also, psychologically, for the young people building trustful relationships with the staff. Proposed solutions were: training of young people in management, peer-mentoring, rotation and co-management based on a quota representation, hiring of permanent staff, co-sharing of spaces with established organisations that can enhance the capacity, logistical administration by local municipalities and the employment of young people in youth centres based on social entrepreneurship models.

Young participants had strong opinions on the ways urban space is being used, unused and misused. They reclaim their common '**right to the city**' as a co-created space (Photo below). Participants supported the revitalisation of depleted communities and were in favour of **repurposing the urban voids into public spaces**, to which they can attach a meaning to. Some participants reacted to the marketisation of public spaces and called for increased public accountability in order to maintain the youth spaces, public and consumption-free. To them, this is important for civic participation and social inclusion:

Youth work services should not be privatised or run by for profit providers, to ensure the needs of young people are placed above profits.

Irish National Working Group Report.

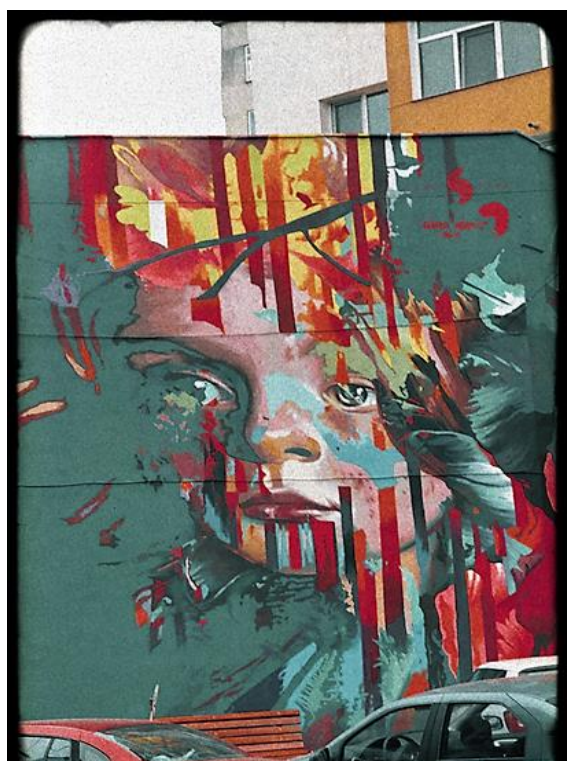


Photo submitted by Yamila Ecaterina Oprescu, a young participant, as part of a photo competition exploring the themes of the Youth Dialogue in Romania.

It is described by the young person as such:
Art embraces us anywhere we walk in the world. So, why not create art ourselves and thus, to embrace other young people like us?

A cross-cutting theme was that young people **want to be consulted** in any decisions on urban planning that concerns them: either because they use the spaces (e.g., libraries, schools, community centres etc), or because the decisions will impact their lives on the long term (e.g.,

road infrastructure increasing carbon emissions). Austrian participants raised the need for a serious public debate on the **political implications of the withdrawal of young people** from public spaces because of the pandemic.

In order for physical spaces to become places of dialogue and participation, young participants argued there are certain **prerequisites**: competent youth workers with longer engagement with the same group and with the necessary tools to engage young people; supportive staff with capacity to assist and engage young people in difficult life situations; democratic management that searches for inclusion and equity; a certain stability of funding and location; mandatory and non-tokenistic youth representation at local level where decisions on the use of space are being made.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 5

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development

YG#9 Target 5: Ensure safe virtual youth spaces are accessible to every young person which provide access to information and services as well as ensure opportunities for youth participation.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: How can virtual spaces and tools be used to increase young people's participation?

Key topics in this report: digital gap, digitalisation of public services, digital competences, hate speech, fake news, help-seeking platforms, hybrid spaces.

Report by Dr. Maria-Carmen Pantea - *Member of the Advisory group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the EU – Council of Europe youth partnership.*

Target 5: Ensuring Digitalised Youth Spaces

The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants how can digitalised spaces and tools be used to increase young people's participation in democratic processes. EUYD7¹ already featured extensive dialogue about digitalised youth spaces, especially in relation to youth work and rural areas. The National Working Groups tried not to duplicate these discussions. This section presents some of the main findings of the current cycle. As *the online* is not a parallel, autonomous and self-contained 'world' or 'space', but a loose reflection and continuation of the physical spaces, the report will use the term 'digitalised space/s'.

Wider context: why digitalised youth spaces matter?

Digital **technologies**, including the **digitalisation of public services** enable citizens' participation in decision-making processes in more direct and collaborative ways. Based on online tools, young people can demand more democratic dynamics in the public space, removal of barriers and fast decisions. They are able to catalyse civic engagement through digital petitions, participatory budgeting, activist YouTube channels etc.

In order to participate and benefit from digitalised spaces, and to manage the risks, young people need **digital competences**, especially given the younger age of those entering the Internet. Since 2013, the European Commission identified and updated the key components of digital competence in the areas of digital literacy, communication, creation of content, safety and problem-solving. The young people taking part in Youth Dialogue are part of the generation that benefited from **DigComp 2.0**, a tool that influenced the digital experiences in education and training, employment and lifelong learning

The **Covid-19 crisis** brought to the fore some of the unsolved tensions in young people's relationship with the digitalised world, its possibilities and limitations for participation. By analysing young people's experiences *online* during the Covid-19 crisis, decision makers can better support their participation. As the activities within the Youth Dialogue indicate, there is a lot to learn about how young people use the Internet, about the value, the limitations and the paradoxes of using digitalised spaces for youth participation.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

To the young participants, political participation is embedded in their use of social media. They like *the online*, but they do not idealize it. They know it has limitations. Discussions on the digitalised space were, invariably, shaped by the experiences during the Covid-19 crisis. There was **no consensus** on the effectiveness of the digitalised space for participation during the pandemic. Opinions ranged from acknowledging the obvious advantages of the online options, to complaints on the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable young people.

On the positive side, participants suggested the abrupt reliance on the *online* during Covid-

¹ The report of the EUYD7 is accessible [here](#).

19, **raised the level of possibility** among some young people who would not have participated, otherwise. For instance, *the online* allowed engagement with topics some young people found too 'sensitive' for *offline* activities. The loose structure of digitalised spaces seemed appealing to many participants. For others, in order to discuss personal concerns, *the offline* remains paramount. On the negative side, *the online* allows **easier disengagement** and can easily lead to **oversaturation**. Digital divides, socio-economic barriers, competing priorities, the need to cope with emotional exhaustion, hindered the participation of '**hard to reach**' young people. As argued in the Slovakian National Working Group Report, young people's overall assessment was that 'virtual spaces are not very inclusive but also not very participatory'.

While in the previous consultation the insufficient transport infrastructure was mentioned as an obstacle to rural young people's participation, nowadays the lack of internet access is significantly impeding young people's involvement in formal and non-formal education as well as limiting their further participation in decision-making.

Portuguese National Working Group Report

To many participants, the need for **safe, inclusive and accessible** digitalised spaces will remain post-pandemic. This may happen because of choice, because of time needed to adjust to *the offline*, because of topics, the outreach or because of various barriers in accessing physical spaces. Yet, participants were aware of the structural constraints of the digitalised spaces. As argued in the Estonian Working Group Report, the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that one can, at best, 'prevent the decline' of youth participation, yet, not to achieve growth through online means alone. Thus, a consensus was built on the idea that **the future will be hybrid** with *the online* and *the offline* being used, for meeting, ideally, different functions. To them, *the online* works well for introducing major issues, opening debate and for awareness rising. Yet, for trust building, large-scale community development and meaningful conversations, physical spaces were considered ideal. A common message from young people was that the value of digitalised spaces should be **not to replace, but to enhance** the offline participation:

the community that you are also interested in, it also dies when you only meet people online. Because when you meet people for online meetings, everything is over as soon as the meeting is over, because you leave it there. But if you met physically somewhere, you would sit for five minutes before and half an hour after the event and talk. It changes the whole community.

Danish National Working Group Report.

Participants expressed their distress when **insufficiently participatory consultations** are miss-used for validating **pre-designed policy solutions**. They were in favour of having consultation processes that are genuinely participatory and followed by concrete structural changes. To them, social media is a tool for authentic participation (*via* stories, polls, news, questions etc.), not merely a communication tool ('talking-shop', as expressed during an activity). To many young people, the 'business-like' format of the tools used during the Covid-19 crisis (Zoom, online conferences etc) call for a makeover in order to stimulate participation. Participants expressed their need for digitalised spaces that are more **creative** in format, accessible, engaging and able to **go beyond mere discussions/ consultations**.

The negative psychological implications of digitalised spaces were extensively discussed. Many participants spoke at length about the harmful effects of **cyberbullying, virtual peer pressure or hate speech**. The excessive screen time was linked with social isolation and anxiety for some young people. The Covid-19 crisis put youth workers in the situation of **responding to young people's emotional and psychological** needs online, without always being guided on the ways to proceed and how to protect themselves from burnout:

Youth workers' flexibility enabled young people to keep on expressing their concerns throughout the crisis. They have somehow become the "receptacle" for young people's malaise. It is important to recognise the role of the Youth Sector during this crisis but also outside it, to build the post-Covid society.

French National Working Group Report.

Although participants were aware of the manipulative potential of the digitalised spaces, they were concerned there are insufficient opportunities for the majority of young people to acquire **digital competences**. As argued in several reports, although young people are increasingly digital, they are more likely to interact as 'consumers of media', than as autonomous producers of content. Speaking more generally about their peers, participants argued that many are insufficiently aware of underlying mechanisms that may be manipulative (e.g. algorithms, censorship, commercial interests, biases of representation etc), or, on the contrary, are untrusting to online content and unwilling to commit.

Possible actions and measures

Covid-19 crisis generated **high expectations** related to digitalised participation. According to the reports from National Working Groups, it is very likely for young people to remain tuned to *the online* and to demand more of their needs to be met there. In addition, they expect more **help-seeking platforms** to be made available in order to address mental health concerns: either by providing information on the services available, either by directly supporting young people. The need for **more specialised professionals** offering help through the digitalised spaces (notably, social workers and psychologists), was a frequent proposal.

Overcoming the digital gap by **public investments in infrastructure** ranked high in participants' accounts. However, discussions suggested that in order to reach the most disadvantaged young people, the online tools need to be accompanied by personal and tailored, **offline strategies**. As European countries are more diverse, **accessibility** of websites and platforms in different languages and for people with visual impairments became important for participants. A demand for more conferences and training courses to be free of charge, was also voiced.

All reports demonstrated that young people have **very high expectations** from the digitalised spaces: in terms of content provision and possibilities to (re)act. They want digitalised spaces for participation to be engaging, easy to use and fun; to provide immediate clarification, fast feedback, quick fixes, to be concise and clear. If possible, to incorporate gamification tools. Participants cherish the possibilities to **follow and contact decision makers** via social media and would welcome politicians addressing the young people in simple language *through* the social media tools young people are using.

...young people think that politics should be present where youngsters are, i.e. social networks like YouTube or Instagram. In this way, they do not have to take another step to another platform.

Belgium, German speaking community, Working Group Report.

The advantage of online participation is the anonymity, the availability of an online environment for young people, but also the speed of making the decision ("It takes me only a few minutes to check it and if the content is interesting, I'll click on it and join").

Slovakian Working Group Report.

Social media, apps and online gaming can be used to engage young people in virtual spaces for youth participation.

Irish Working Group Report.

Participants' high expectations can be linked to the other online media young people are generally exposed to (e.g., entertainment, social media, consumption etc). These spaces are shaped by new business models that prioritize **concision, simplicity, instant gratification**. Young people may extend the expectations shaped in these online spaces to their approach to civic and political participation (*online* and *offline*). But policy processes require time and depth; they take place in more hectic environments, and are based on complex processes of analysis. Occasionally, young people remarked the difficulty of meeting their demands.

A common message from participants referred to the need for authorities (all levels) to ease the **access to public information and decision-making processes**. They proposed authorities to co-produce (together with young people) **dedicated, youth-friendly platforms/channels** where input on issues on the public agenda can be provided in real-time from young people themselves. These spaces should be continuously updated and engaging². Genuine access to consultations on **climate-related measures** and **urban planning** ranked high in participants' accounts. They demanded more information about the EU and more transparency about political decision-making processes at the EU level, as well. A suggestion from the German participants was to extend an online tool used in Germany to assess the impact of legislation on young people (Youth Check).

Although digitalised spaces bring to the fore intergenerational divides, participants argued that **adult mentorship** is important for supporting young people in using and contributing online to public decision making. Several participants argued that young people need to be educated/supported about how to discuss controversial topics. The International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable also came to the conclusion that Europe needs more intergenerational dialogue and cooperation, which is important for all. Whilst some participants related to participation as a right independent of civic competence, for many others, the need for preparedness emerged as a concern. They would like to engage in an informed, competent way in decision making processes *via* online tools.

Whose reasonability is preparing young people for taking part in such processes?

² For more on the co-management of a single-entry-point to access information, see the report on *Information*.

Opinions ranged from the moral reasonability of the authorities/ political leadership organising the consultations, to youth work and youth organisational structures that are experienced in peer mentorship and civic participation. As suggested in the activities, the challenge is to enable young people to acquire the knowledge on citizenship, the skills and the democratic culture of decision making, yet in ways that are embedded in digitalised spaces shaped by gamification, instant gratification, fast feedback, excitement, concision and fun. Moving from gaming to learning, or incorporating the two in ways that do not compromise depth and complexity of participation, is a task that requires increasingly creative solutions.

Online hate speech, cyber-bullying and the **protection of personal data** online were frequent concerns. Young participants called for stronger privacy laws and policies addressing cyber-bullying: easier reporting systems available locally and also specialised social interventions addressing the rehabilitation of bullies. Calls for media education of quality were repeatedly made in order to address also the **fake news** phenomenon³. A cross-cutting theme was that any digitalised space aiming to foster youth participation needs strategies to prevent **hate speech** and **cyberbullying** and to be proactive in reaching diverse young people.

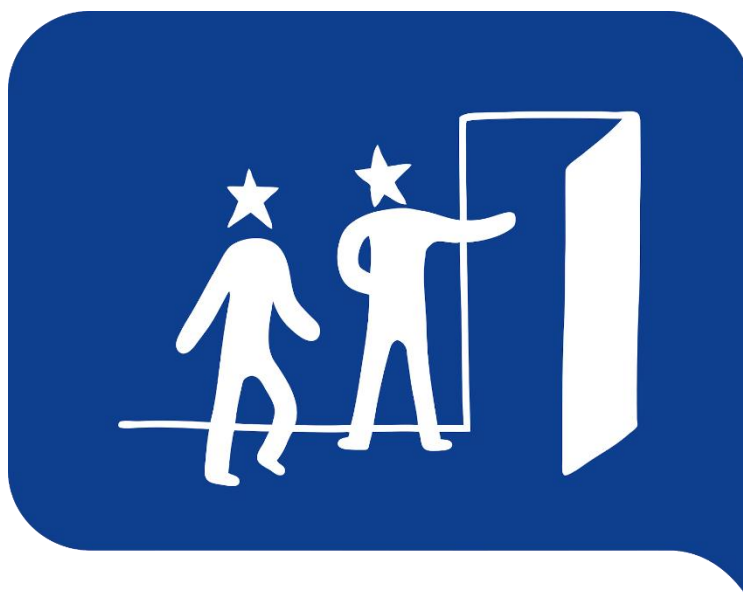
There was a strong consensus that those interested to reach and engage young people online (politicians, youth workers etc), need **culturally competent strategies**. Young people move quickly from a platform to another. Each has its own tacit communication codes which are not replicable on another platform/ channel etc. What works for a particular age group, is disconcerting or perceived as inauthentic to another. Online platforms emerge and fall out of fashion very fast. As one participant from Luxemburg stated, now, ‘very few young people use Facebook’, despite many activities being promoted there. Keeping up with the dynamic online environment is not an easy task and many participants signalled the risk for youth workers and decision-makers to lag behind, whilst young people ‘move to the next platform’ (Irish participant).

Several participants argued that youth work and decision makers need to rely on **systematic research** and overcome established assumptions about what, when, how and why young people use the Internet. They called for young people’s participatory practices online to benefit from robust research, in the same way as young people’s consumption behaviours are being researched by market-driven companies, yet, for different purposes.

³ For more on media literacy, see the Report on *Information*.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 6

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development

YG#9 Target 6: Ensure sustainable funding, common recognition and development of quality youth work in order to strengthen youth organisations and their role in inclusion, participation and non-formal education.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What measures/actions should be taken to develop smart youth work so it appropriately supports young people's participation?

Key topics in this report: *participatory budgeting, investments in infrastructure, financial stability, autonomy, funding requirements, bottom-up initiatives, recognition of youth work.*

Report by Dr. Maria-Carmen Pantea - *Member of the Advisory group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the EU – Council of Europe youth partnership.*

Target 6: Ensuring sustainable funding for youth participation

By and large, **youth work** is ‘a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes’¹. In order to integrate technological developments in youth participation and empowerment, ‘**smart youth work**’ emerged as a more recent ‘innovative development of youth work encompassing digital youth work practice, and including a research, quality and policy component’². The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants what measures/actions should be taken to develop smart youth work so it appropriately supports young people’s participation. The topic of promotion and recognition of youth work has already been explored extensively under the Finnish Presidency in EUYD7³. The National Working Groups tried not to duplicate these discussions.

Recent context, new developments

Activities suggested there is a **large heterogeneity** among youth organisations in regard to their capacity to secure funding for their activities. They have different levels of stability, financial regimes, relations with the government and agendas (e.g., provision of social services, advocacy etc) and face different financial challenges. Some rely on stable funding from state authorities or private donors; some are large, well established and more resilient. Yet, according to participants, grass-root organisations, those that are more recent or which represent minority groups, face more financial difficulties.

Participants welcomed the provisional agreement for a substantial **increase of the budget of the new Erasmus+ programme** for the period 2021-2027. They appreciated this would enable a greater focus on inclusion, quality, creativity and innovation in youth participation.

Discussions on funding revolved not only in relation to the need for increased budgets. They touched upon issues related to the quality of these processes and the mechanisms to ensure that money is used with **transparency**, with **equity**, in ways that are true to the **mission of youth work** and based on **youth participation**. There was a strong agreement that in order to engage in advocacy work, youth organizations should be **free of political interference**. There was, yet, **no consensus** on how independence can be best ensured.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

Youth organisations always had a **high turnover** of staff and volunteers and thus, a short institutional memory. Many participants were concerned that the Covid-19 crisis will further

¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work.

² The Council of the European Union (2017) ‘Council conclusions on smart youth work’. *Official Journal of the European Union*. C 418/2.

³ The report is accessible [here](#).

decline the quality of employment in youth work and in youth organisation. *Precarisation* was related to economic security, the amount and the type of funding for organisations. But it was also discussed in relation to the **legal status** and **social recognition** of the youth work occupation. The absence of social security coverage for youth workers and even the inexistence of the occupation in the official nomenclator were major concerns. Grant-based financial solutions were considered insufficiently predictable and unable to cover staff costs.

Many participants worried that **intermittent funding** poses limitations on organisations' capacity to plan and to engage young people in long-term democratic processes. The **drift from advocacy and activism to service provision** in order to comply with various grant requirements and for ensuring organisational survival, was considered a major deterrent to democratic participation. To participants, youth work is a critical consciousness builder which requires **ongoing support**. Thus, the **structures of participation need to be permanent** and with **wider outreach** in terms of location and in relation to groups of young people.

Opinions on the **entities providing financial support** for youth participation, varied during the Youth Dialogue activities. At stake, were the political strings attached to funding. At one end of the spectrum, a largely shared idea was that 'quality youth work has to be ensured by the national government' (Finnish Working Group Report). A distinct and transparent **public fund for youth initiatives** was largely endorsed. At times, debates over the local vs. national budgeting were held. Although the general tendency was to favour local, de-centralised funding decisions, several participants argued that national allocations are better placed for balancing inevitable regional discrepancies:

... centres should be set up and funded by the national initiative, not a regional one. Because poorer regions often do not have the finances to run these centres, and there is a risk that young people will lose the opportunity to participate in their activities. However, we didn't find a match on this topic during the discussions.

Slovakian Working Group report.

However, in order to ensure the political independence of youth spaces, a mechanism of direct European funding was proposed by participants in Hungary:

... these spaces should be independent, meaning that ideally, they would receive funding and professional advice from the EU, so that they do not depend on the current government of the country or on NGOs.

Hungarian National Working Group Report.

Often, participants were concerned that beneath the debates on funding, there are sometimes underlying legal pre-conditions that pose severe limitations. The elusive **legal recognition of youth work** as an occupation in some countries and the pending status of several **national laws on youth** were discussed.

Possible Actions and Measures

To participants, the **employment status of youth workers** needs to ensure predictability and thus, to allow for meaningful relations with young people to build up. They considered that funding should be wisely managed, in order to respond to the new demands on youth work in the Covid-19 context. Activities stressed there is a need for **additional support staff** (e.g., psychologists, social workers, mentors, specialists in linking education and disability etc.). There was a large consensus that such positions need to be financially supported on a continuous basis, in order to establish trust, to enable long term interventions and to convey a sense of stability in young people's lives:

this profession [youth work] must be well paid and prestigious because low salaries equal huge rotation/volatility. Youth centre workers should be very mature and able to advise youth organizations, policymakers, informal youth groups, etc.

Lithuanian Working Group Report.

During activities, a consensus was built around the idea that while all young people undergo a recent decrease in wellbeing, some are more disadvantaged than others. The International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable stressed that the pandemic had impacted on those who were most marginalised more strongly. Indeed, young participants argued that youth work needs to be more **proactive** in reaching the 'hard to reach' young people. This needs **additional financial efforts** and **equity in allocations**. Importantly, many participants demanded funding criteria that do not prioritize the **scale of change** at the expense of **meaningful, long-term interventions** with highly disadvantaged young people (e.g. long term support, mentoring etc). Hiring more young people in youth organisations was considered a sensible choice in order to expand the outreach solutions.

To many participants, the abrupt reliance on the internet during Covid-19, brought to the fore the need for **better prepared youth workers**. Further preparation was considered needed in the area of **digital youth work**⁴ and in order to address young people's **emerging psychological needs**: social isolation, mental health issues (depressive states, anxiety, bullying, domestic violence etc). Better training of youth workers and volunteers in ways that protect from **secondary stress** and **burnout** was considered needed. These recent challenges call for the revision of previous financial priorities.

State **investments in infrastructure** were repeatedly referred to, in order to tackle the insufficient **physical spaces** and the **digital gap**. Thus, provision of free devices, availability of work-spaces with free internet access were often mentioned. Occasionally, the 'right to internet' was put forward. In addition, several solutions called for **complex investments and logistical arrangements** (e.g., mobile caravans to increase young people's capacity to organise in remote areas).

More **context-specific measures** were also mentioned. For instance, to revise the eligibility criteria that exclude from funding organisations doing online activities (Belgium, Flemish Community); the correction of the financial conditions for youth workers in Hungary, currently

⁴ For more discussions on digitalised youth work, see the *Report on Target 5: Ensuring Digitalised Youth Spaces*.

‘underpaid and lacking social security’; **paid summer internships in public institutions**, a proposal from Spanish participants.

Whether funding should be **long term or based on short-term projects**, was a matter of debate. According to the majority of participants, long-term funding ensures sustainability, continuity of activities and a necessary predictability. For others, however, funding for short-term projects was preferable, as it allows new volunteers to experience/ experiment with social involvement without long term commitments (Lithuanian Working Group Report).

Several activities emphasised the value of **participatory budgeting** for local youth organisations: both for meeting relevant financial objectives and in relation to the process of democratic deliberation and decision-making. In addition, many participants expressed their need for funding requirements to be accessible and youth-friendly. The importance of supporting the **bottom-up, youth-led initiatives** was often raised, for instance by having informal groups eligible for (municipal) micro-funding (Bulgarian Working Group). More trainings of young people in project management, **friendlier and less bureaucratic funding procedures** were cross-cutting demands:

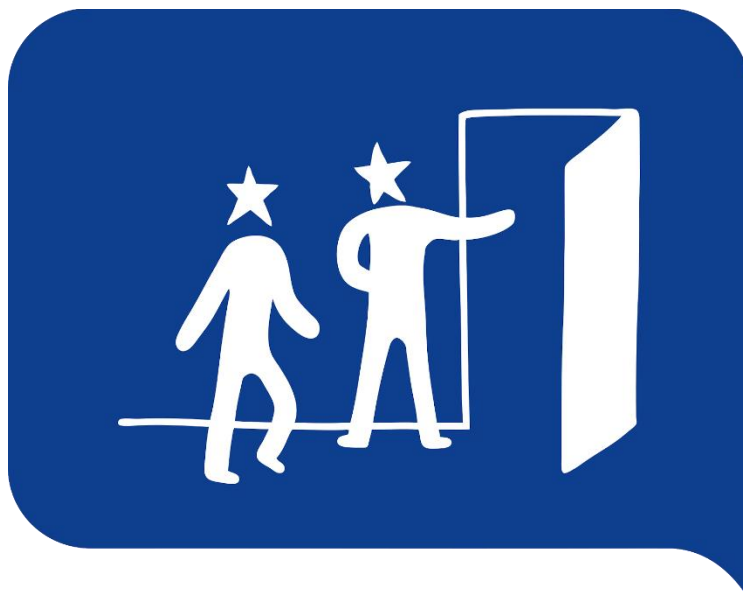
...one can change the criteria for various funds and thus support the involvement of young people to a greater extent. Part of the solution to getting young people more involved can thus lie in formal criteria funds and by making it easier to apply for support.

Denmark Working Group Report.

A general consensus was built around the idea that, in order to ensure youth participation, **financial support alone, does not suffice**. Invariably, discussions on funding intersected the continuing debates on the **recognition of youth work**. Participants noticed that the European Commission and Member States need to provide, besides funding, other resources, as well: support structures, such as **legislative framework, networks and training**; formal and political **recognition** of youth work and non-formal learning.

Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 7

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development

YG#9 Target 7: Provide youth-friendly, relevant, comprehensive information, also developed by and with young people, in order to enable youth participation.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What actions/ measures can be implemented to ensure young people have access to youth-friendly, relevant and comprehensive information to participate in decision making processes and society at large?

Key topics in this report: *co-production of information, fake news, hate speech, media literacy, critical thinking, centralised information, youth-friendly information, transparency.*

Report by Dr. Maria-Carmen Pantea - *Member of the Advisory group of the Pool of European Youth Researchers co-ordinated by the EU – Council of Europe youth partnership.*

Target 7: Providing youth-friendly, relevant information

The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants what actions/ measures can be implemented to ensure young people have access to youth-friendly, relevant and comprehensive information to participate in decision making processes and society at large.

Wider context, new developments

Participants argue they have a wide access to information, but find much of it unreliable and have an insufficient capacity to assess its quality. Who produces information and what is left out, based on what/ whose criteria/ agenda, for whom etc. became pertinent dilemmas during activities. The emerging challenges are thus, to create enabling circumstances for increasingly younger age groups to filter the information they are bombarded with, to report inappropriate content and to **(co)produce** friendly and reliable information.

Youth Dialogue activities demonstrated high **awareness** that **fake news and online propaganda** became more sophisticated and that social media is targeted for circulating inaccurate information. Indeed, research shows that unlike older generation, young people are more sceptical and critical when exposed to fake news and they share it less¹. Even so, participants stressed that often, young people have insufficient skills to access, retrieve and use the information. In these situations, they may feel confused and inclined to access obscure sources of information.

Participants called for information that is **reliable, clear and concise** on a range of issues they find relevant: from local consultations, to climate change, mental health, career choices, volunteering, leisure, housing, urban planning, curriculum and much more. One could link young people's demands for information that is clear, concise, accessible, yet comprehensive and fun, to the expectations created in other online environments they are exposed to. Definitely, **'relevance' is highly subjective**, dynamic, context-specific and diverse. Thus, decision-makers need increased awareness at how *their* arguments on **'youth relevance'** are, indeed, aligned with what young people find important.

What matters about this topic to young people?

A major cross-cutting theme was the high level of **confusion** experienced by young people when searching for information on public matters. Some reports conveyed the idea that many young people are politically disengaged because of being insufficiently aware of the complex ways in which politics influence their lives. According to them, a discussion of young people's relationship with the world of information should start from asking **why information of quality**

¹ Brashier, N.M. and Schacter, D. L. (2020) 'Aging in an Era of Fake News', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 29(3): 316-323.

matters to the young people and how they can be persuaded that **‘it is important to care about politics’**:

Youth-friendly information can therefore help people to understand how you can cast your vote or how you can participate in your community, on a national level or within the EU. However, first one should make it clear why it is important to care about politics, only then you can share substantive information.

Dutch Working Group Report.

As emphasised in the The International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable, the insufficient political preparedness was a concern also in relation to young people with representative roles. A general consensus built around the idea that there are **not enough channels that are trustful and youth friendly**, from where they could draw reliable and updated **information on politics**. Schools fear allegations of political partisanship and thus, have limited possibilities for passing information on political issues and even less for authentic debates. Youth work may also, prioritize a less controversial stance in relation to politics². Occasionally, the idea that political parties are insufficiently proactive in reaching unaffiliated young people, emerged. According to several participants from a minority background, the weak parental support may be a major deterrent to public participation, as well. A void of political preparedness among young people was a frequent concern:

One of the major obstacles for young people in Slovakia to enter decision-making processes is a lack of civic preparedness. The formal education system fails; civic education is too theoretical in focus; it does not allow the effective development of civic competencies. Schools are, by definition apolitical [...]. This causes a fundamental problem when debating political and civic issues with pupils and youth.

Slovakian Working Group Report.

Who is not getting useful information was a major concern. Several young people argued that **‘schools are not equal’** and they can deepen the socio-economic divides. One example was the limited citizenship education (including media literacy) in **initial vocational education and training** (VET) as compared with general education. According to several participants, this hinders the capacity of the young people in VET to fully engage as citizens, whilst enabling the participation of others:

Also, socio-economic background can hinder participation. As an example, a student of a vocational school said that they have much less information about active citizenship in their studies compared to high school students.

Finnish Working Group Report.

The ability to process information does not depend on age: There is no reason why a young person should understand less than an adult. It depends more on socio-economic background. So, we need to fight against socio-economic inequalities that are at work at every level of society.

French Working Group Report.

² For more on the tension between political socialisation and political neutrality in youth organisations/ centres/ clubs, see the *Report on Target 4: Ensuring physical youth spaces*.

Participants also recalled coming across **hate speech** on social networks, mostly on Facebook, in the news on refugees and in the public comments on ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. Many were aware of some 'tips and tricks' on how to detect fake news, but they were also concerned that their peers may not have the opportunity to learn about this. In addition, discussions unfolded a sense of unease in relation to the **(miss)use of personal data** from social media:

Everyone considers their privacy endangered, especially because of social networks and various internet portals that seek consent for the processing of private data. They are most worried about Facebook and Instagram. They think that it is very easy to hack a mobile phone and turn on the camera or microphone on the mobile phone.

Croatian Working Group Report.

Many participants suggested young people do not need other kinds of information than adults, but a **friendlier format**. Participants considered that the information on public matters generated by authorities at all levels, is overly technical, instead of being easy, fast, clear, 'snackable and with humour'. They were concerned about the insufficient accessibility of public information in multiple languages for ethnic minorities or with audio/ video transcripts for young people having sensory impairments³. The poor access to information on their rights among the **vulnerable young people in alternative care** settings or among **those leaving care**, was highlighted.

Possible Actions and Measures

A key proposal was for the **state institutions** (especially those dealing primarily with young people, such as social welfare agencies), to allocate on their websites a **separate section to the vulnerable young people**. This section should contain information on the services available, the way of accessing them autonomously and contact data for persons able to assist further. According to participants, the **format of information should be creative and diversified** to include visuals, factsheets, videos or podcasts.

One of the most recurrent demands was for a **single-entry-point** to access reliable information about the political decisions and 'all opportunities for participation'. The need for a 'centralised' source of information emerged as a reaction to an increasing state of confusion experienced online by young people when accessing information on civic and political participation, on employment, education, volunteering and training opportunities. A technical configuration in the form of a '*button of the young person*', to help in crisis situations, was proposed. Portuguese participants were in favour of a virtual platform, connected to national and European sources and accompanied by a 'traditional source of information' such as a youth centre. Other participants proposed the **co-management** of such centralised websites/ channels/ services by **(local) authorities and youth councils**, and the introduction of a 'quality label'.

³ The *Report on Target 2: Ensuring equal access to participation*, also covers issues related to accessibility of information in minority languages.

Still, participants did not deeply engage with the **technical and political dilemmas** attached to a centralised information source in a world where 'relevance' is highly subjective, where online information is inherently de-centralised, bottom-up and any selection, prone to bias and redundancy. The risks of further disengagement was noticed, however:

The main issue with this is that they [the centralised sites/ pages/ platforms] would need to be constantly updated. Finding information that is not up to date will discourage young people and would make them look elsewhere to obtain their information, increasing the risk that they encounter fake or mis-information.

Maltese Working Group Report.

To participants, information is necessary for influencing change. Activities demonstrated an ethos that is **solution focused** and based on co-participation. A frequent proposal was for **unmediated information exchange with decision-makers**, from local to European level:

... how useful could be developing an app to collect and respond to the doubts, worries and inquiries from European youth. This way, it could help decision takers to know in a more direct communication what Young people want without any interference. Later, this information could be used to publish in the media or networks to aware the population about the situations that Young people face nowadays.

Spanish Working Group Report.

Many participants emphasised the role of **youth work** as enabler of **critical thinking and media literacy**. However, as organisations have, inevitably, a limited outreach, mainstreaming critical thinking within the **school curricula**, was considered necessary. Young participants also called for classes of critical media education in all schools (including VET). The proposed content would include, besides detecting and reporting fake news and hate speech, also advocacy issues on media ownership, algorithms and post-truth politics.

Young participants called for **bolder legislation** to ensure that the content produced for enhancing youth democratic participation is reliable, that fake news and hate speech is filtered out; that perpetrators are stopped and the victims are supported. An important mission of these legal mechanisms would be to hold social media companies accountable, as, to the young people, the root causes are the business models prioritizing the number of visualisations at the expense of accuracy. Many participants demanded stronger European and national legislation, able to protect young people from the dangers of fake news, propaganda, hate speech, online violence and violent radicalisation, threats to privacy, including unauthorised use and misuse of data.

To participants, information needs not only to be made available, but **co-produced** with young people and **proactively disseminated**. A more intense promotion of EU politics on social media and a wider dissemination of the EU Youth Dialogue and EU Youth conferences were proposed. More inclusive information campaigns, especially in rural areas, with the help of town halls, though civic organisations were suggested by Romanian participants. Increased **transparency** of the information on internal activities and decisions of the **National Youth**

Councils was proposed⁴. To participants, this would increase the sense of representation and belonging among young people from a range of different backgrounds.

⁴ For more information on this, see the *Report on Target 1: Ensuring young people have influence*.