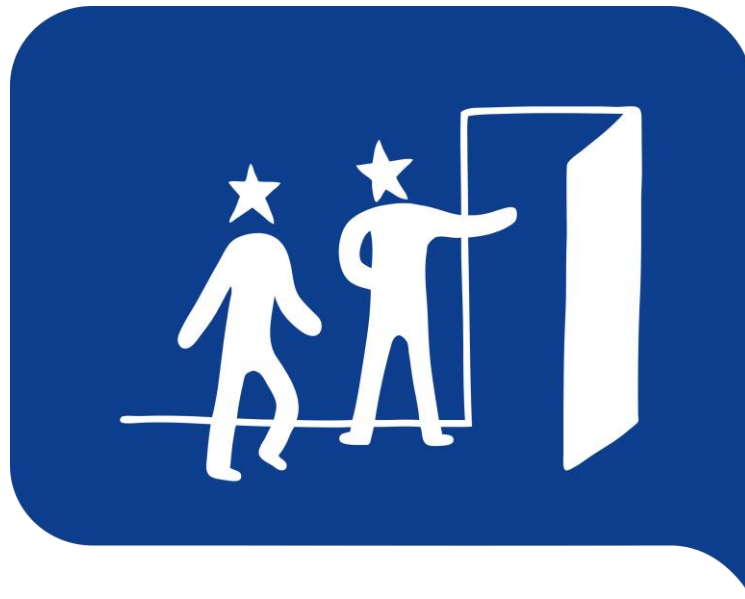# Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 1

*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

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

# 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·*
>
> Portugese 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.