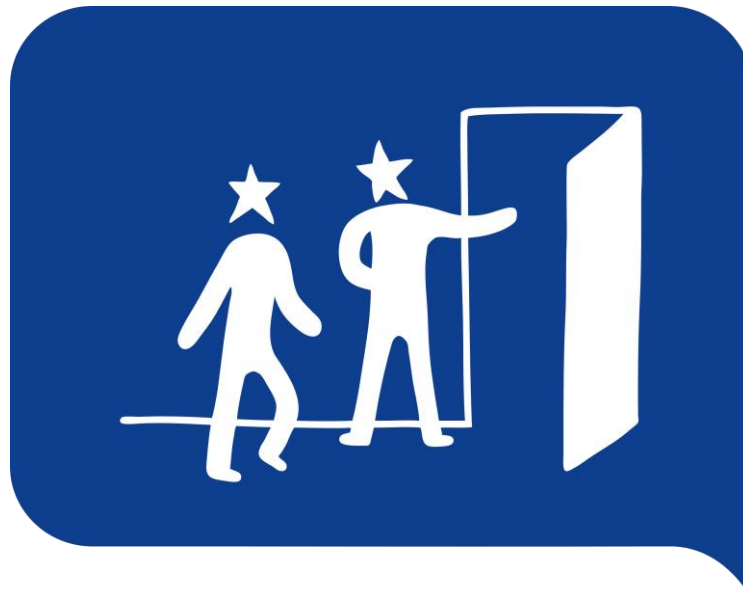




Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 4

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.

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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.