

Recommendations to Support Meaningful Youth Participation in Rural Areas



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Young people, particularly those residing in rural and remote areas, often face significant challenges when it comes to engaging in civic life and having their voices heard.

Active and meaningful participation in civic spaces is a fundamental right for all young people, especially those in rural communities. Youth participation and active citizenship are about young people having the right, the means, the space, the structures, the opportunities and the tools, as well as the full support to participate in and influence decision-making at all levels.

This document addresses the challenges and offers recommendations to enhance the participation and influence of young individuals in civic spaces within rural Europe.

Challenge

Limited access to physical spaces and platforms for youth to gather, express themselves, and organise in rural areas.

We recommend:

- To establish and support easily accessible, multi-purpose youth centers or community centers in rural areas that offer safe and inclusive spaces for meetings, workshops, cultural activities, and informal gatherings. These spaces should be co-designed with young people to ensure they meet their needs.
- To provide financial incentives and grants for the renovation or creation of youth-friendly public spaces in rural communities.
- To promote the use of existing facilities like schools and other public buildings for youth activities, reducing the need for new constructions and making existing infrastructure available.
- To maintain physical and emotional environments that are safe, inclusive, and supportive, allowing young people to feel at ease, express themselves freely, and participate without fear of judgment or insecurity.

Challenge

Lack of awareness and understanding among rural youth regarding existing civic participation opportunities and democratic processes.

We recommend:

- To integrate practical civic education into formal curricula, focusing on democratic processes, the role of youth organisations, and various avenues for advocacy and participation. This education should be interactive and also relevant to rural contexts, ensuring young people not only learn about democracy but also have the opportunity to practice it.
- To launch and support existing accessible and youth-friendly awareness campaigns (online and offline) about democratic participation, highlighting success stories of youth engagement in rural areas and providing clear information on how to get involved.
- To support the creation of simplified guides and resources (e.g., short videos, infographics, online platforms) explaining civic processes and opportunities in an engaging and easy-to-understand manner for rural youth.

Challenge

Limited inclusion of rural youth voices from decision-making processes at local, regional, and national levels.

We recommend:

- To establish or strengthen formal youth councils or rural youth parliaments in rural areas, empowering young people to identify issues, propose solutions, and directly engage with decision-makers. These bodies should be adequately funded and supported and should be open to all young people regardless of their social and/or ethnic origins.
- To adopt inclusive consultation methods that actively seek out and incorporate the perspectives of rural youth, including through youth focus groups and accessible public hearings held in rural locations.
- To include young people in existing citizens decision and policy making bodies at local level.

Challenge

Limited capacity building and training opportunities for rural youth to develop skills and competences in leadership, advocacy, and project management.

We recommend:

- To allocate dedicated funding for comprehensive training programs tailored for rural youth, covering topics such as public speaking, negotiation, policy analysis, fundraising, and digital advocacy. These programs should be accessible in rural areas and online.
- To develop mentorship and training programs that connect experienced civic leaders and professionals with rural youth, integrating practical civic participation skills into educational and vocational settings. These initiatives should offer guidance, support, networking opportunities, and certifications to enhance employability and civic engagement.

Challenge

Limited access to diverse and critical information sources

We recommend:

- To ensure and facilitate young people's access to a wide range of diverse and critical information sources, both online and offline. This includes supporting initiatives that enhance media literacy, critical thinking skills, and the ability to discern reliable information, alongside promoting youth-led media platforms for expression and information sharing.

Challenge

Rural areas often lack a strong and active youth sector, with youth and community organizations facing insufficient financial and systemic support. This hinders youth participation, weakens community development, and contributes to social and cultural decline as well as rural isolation among young people.

We recommend:

- To prioritise strategic investments and supportive policies that ensure the establishment, growth, and sustainability of a diverse and vibrant youth sector in rural areas. This includes dedicated funding, accessible infrastructure, and tailored capacity-building programs for both youth and community organisations.
- To engage directly with existing and emerging youth groups to identify their specific needs and provide targeted support, fostering an enabling environment where youth-led initiatives can thrive and contribute to the vitality of local social and cultural life.
- To promote youth participation and leadership in community initiatives, recognising the value of collective action, civic responsibility, and the essential role of youth and community organisations in combating rural isolation and enhancing quality of life.

Challenge

Existing sectoral policies often fail to adequately address the specific needs and challenges of young people living in rural areas, leading to disparities in social services and living conditions compared to urban areas.

We recommend:

- To ensure that all educational, employment, housing, transport, and other sectoral policies reflect and address the special needs of young people living in rural areas.
- To implement Rural Proofing in all policies at different levels.

Challenge

Perceived lack of relevance of participation to the daily lives of rural youth, leading to disengagement.

We recommend:

- To facilitate discussions and projects that connect global and national civic issues to local realities and challenges faced by rural youth, demonstrating the direct impact of policy decisions on their lives and communities.
- To involve rural youth in addressing local issues, such as environmental protection, local infrastructure, and cultural heritage, giving them ownership and agency.
- To highlight the achievements and contributions of rural youth in civic engagement, showcasing how their participation leads to positive change and inspiring others to get involved.

Challenge

Lack of willingness among established authorities to genuinely share power and decision-making responsibilities with young people.

We recommend:

- To actively foster a culture of genuine power-sharing and co-management with young people. This involves moving beyond tokenistic consultations to empower youth with direct influence over policies and projects that affect their lives. It requires a commitment to transparent decision-making processes, allocating real budgets and responsibilities to youth-led initiatives, and valuing youth perspectives as integral to effective governance.

Conclusion:

Meaningful youth participation is a fundamental right and a cornerstone of vibrant, resilient rural communities. This document highlights the multifaceted challenges that often hinder young people's active engagement, from limited access to physical and digital spaces to insufficient support for youth organisations and a lack of influence sharing by established authorities.

These recommendations offer a framework for fostering an environment where rural youth can engage as key actors and participate actively. By prioritising accessible spaces, robust civic education, equitable information access, and sustained financial and systemic support, we can empower young people to shape their own futures and the future of their communities. Fostering a culture of collaboration, providing necessary guidance, and ensuring safe and inclusive environments are crucial to unlocking the full potential of young people in rural areas.

Finally, investing in meaningful youth participation is an investment in the social, cultural, and economic vitality of rural Europe. It is a commitment to ensuring that no young voice is left unheard, and that the unique perspectives and energy of rural youth are recognised as indispensable resources for building a more democratic, inclusive, and thriving society.

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