

SALTO Participation and Information Think Tank:

# A seat at the table for everyone

Promoting inclusive youth participation  
through the EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027





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# Introduction

The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 based around the terms Engage, Empower and Connect places youth participation right at the forefront of youth policy.<sup>1</sup> Its objectives talk of ‘fostering youth participation in democratic life’ and ‘supporting social and civic engagement’. Its guiding principles stipulate that ‘all policies and activities concerning young people should uphold young people’s right to participate in the development, implementation and follow-up of policies affecting them, by means of meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations’. This element of the strategy can be understood as part of a longer discourse stretching back more than 20 years within European youth policy, increasingly concerned with young people’s low trust in political institutions, falling youth voter rates and rising populism,<sup>2</sup> and seeing the promotion of a wide range of approaches to participation as a potential solution to this challenge.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the EU Youth Strategy gives special attention to ‘youth risking marginalisation’, and calls on member states to promote the ‘inclusive democratic participation of all young people’. It embraces inclusion and non-discrimination, and states the intention of promoting ‘activities and policies that are inclusive for all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities and/or those whose voices may be overlooked’. But what does it mean to think about youth participation inclusively? That is to say, participation which enables young people from **all** social backgrounds and groups to influence decision making? **This paper aims to consider how inclusive youth participation can be promoted through the concrete tools foreseen in the EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027.** Section 1 explores what we mean by inclusive youth participation, and the methods which can support it. Section 2 looks at how this might be developed with three key elements of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2017 :- EU Youth Dialogue, Erasmus+ Programme: Youth Chapter and European Solidarity Corps.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01)

<sup>2</sup> Farrow, A. (2018) Salto Think Tank on Participation: Closer to the edge of participation and activism. Salto Participation and Information Resource Centre. Tallinn.

<sup>3</sup> Crowley, A. and Moxon, D. (2017) New and Innovative forms of Participation in Decision Making Processes. Council of Europe. Strasbourg.

## SALTO-YOUTH Participation and Information Resource Centre

SALTO-YOUTH Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) supports the capacity building of young people, youth workers, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme, the European Commission and other stakeholders in involving young people in decision-making processes. In 2018, SALTO PI established an international think tank on youth participation with the aim of co-creating solutions for increasing young people’s active participation in society, particularly in decision-making. From an open call, a network of experts, policy-makers and practitioners were selected to join the think tank and attend the inaugural meeting in Estonia in April 2018. The think tank aims to improve and strengthen youth participation and programming across Europe.

This paper does not represent an official position or statement from SALTO-PI, or any other organisations linked to the members of the Think Tank.



# Section 1: What do we mean by inclusive youth participation?

## Fewer opportunities or just unorganised?

Historically, youth participation and inclusion have often been considered alongside the concept of 'organised' youth - i.e. young people who are members of youth organisations.<sup>4</sup> It was sometimes implied or assumed that organised groups of young people are not intrinsically diverse, and that youth organisations are not completely open to young people from a wide range of social backgrounds. As a result, the term unorganised young people has become used as a byword for young people who are excluded or marginalised generally within society, and used interchangeably with the concept of young people with fewer opportunities. However, the two concepts are quite different. Within this paper we define them as follows<sup>5</sup>,

- **Young people with fewer opportunities**<sup>6</sup> are young people that are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because they face one or more situations and obstacles. These can be either social, economic or geographical obstacles, disabilities, educational difficulties, cultural differences or health problems. By definition, young people with fewer opportunities usually have less opportunities to get involved with participation activities.
- **Unorganised young people** - Young people who are not members of youth organisations. These young people are not necessarily those with fewer opportunities, though they may well be. Young people in this group may still also be active in their communities, through other forms of participation such as volunteering or involvement in social movements.

Separating these concepts has important implications when considering what we mean by inclusive youth participation. Firstly, as far as we are aware, no substantial research has been undertaken to comprehensively assess the diversity of the membership of youth organisations across Europe. Despite this, many individual organisations such as the British Youth Council through its diversity monitoring,<sup>7</sup> the European Union of Death Youth, or Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations, demonstrate their potential to be accessible to marginalised groups. Overall though, claims that youth organisations are not embracing diversity of membership, or are not inclusive enough can neither be proved nor disproved. Secondly, not all youth organisations are politically active, and being a member of one does not automatically mean being engaged in the participation activities of that organisation.

***Inclusive participation means ensuring that young people from all backgrounds can influence decision making.***

As a result, debates about organised vs. unorganised young people are of limited use when considering what we mean by inclusive participation. **Inclusive participation means ensuring that young people from all backgrounds can influence decision making.** This means taking account of the social, economic and

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4 See, for example, Ciorbaru, A., Liakopoulos, A., Evans, J., Berg, C., Lagree, J., Lauritzen, P., and Ingledow, M., (2005) Youth policy in Malta. Council of Europe. Strasbourg. pp 87, or for an exploration of the development of policy concerns regarding including organised youth see Faché, W., (2012) "The origins and development of open youth centres and their operating characteristic in Flanders" in The history of youth work in Europe: Relevance for Today's Youth Policy Volume 3, eds. Coussée, F., Williamson, H., and Verschelden, G., Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

5 As authors we find both of these terms to be deficit based and would prefer alternative terminology with a stronger connection to equalities and human rights frameworks. However, we find it necessary to use these terms here as a result of their frequent use within European youth policy.

6 The Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth. (2018). Glossary on Youth Young people with fewer opportunities. Retrieved 14th February 2018 from The Youth Partnership Website.

7 British Youth Council, (2017), Annual Review: Our Youth Voice Journey 2016-17, BYC, London.

cultural backgrounds of young people who get involved in participation activities and then taking additional affirmative measures to promote the participation of those groups who are frequently excluded from getting involved. For the EU Youth Strategy to support the participation of all young people there is a need, therefore, for a strong focus on promoting the participation of young people with fewer opportunities. Within this context, youth organisations may have an important role in reaching out to and enabling participation of young people from marginalised backgrounds, provided the organisations themselves are able to work inclusively.

## Are alternative forms of participation more socially inclusive?

The EU Youth Strategy states 'to be as inclusive as possible and adapt to existing and upcoming challenges, exploring new and alternative forms of participation is essential.' However, what is meant by new and alternative forms of participation is not clearly specified. Crowley and Moxon (2017) see it as an ill-defined term simply meaning anything other than membership of formal organisation, and voting.<sup>8</sup> Emphasis on alternative forms of participation is essentially an emphasis on something other than youth organisations. That is to say, an emphasis on reaching unorganised young people. As discussed above, this is not the same as emphasising diversity and inclusion.

Based on a survey of youth participation stakeholders, Crowley and Moxon (2017) demonstrate that alternative forms of youth participation are perceived as no more or less likely to be inclusive than traditional forms. They conclude it is the way the form is applied and utilised that makes the practice inclusive.<sup>9</sup> Thus, just as youth organisations might exclude or include young people based on the methods of practice and operation, so could any alternative form of participation. What becomes important to consider therefore is not what form of participation is used, but how that form is implemented, and **the extent to which any specific project or programme reaches young people from socially excluded groups. It cannot be assumed that an alternative form will be more inclusive just because it is alternative.**

*...it should not be assumed that any one form of participation is more inclusive than another.*

That said, experimenting with new forms does at the very least provide the potential for creating more inclusive methods. For example, online forms of participation may give methods of reaching millions rather than thousands of young people. But it should not be assumed that any one form of participation is more inclusive. Instead, all forms of youth participation should be valued and scrutinised by the extent to which diverse social groups of young people have been involved; they must be expected to monitor who they exclude, and to improve their methods to include them.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*



# What methods make youth participation inclusive?

The principles of using inclusive and non-discriminatory approaches are well defined in a wide number of international treaties and standards.<sup>10</sup> The EU Youth Strategy vision to 'promote inclusive democratic participation of all young people' can be understood within the context of these approaches and draw on some of these principles. Arguably, these regulations all have the goal to promote and to ensure social inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities or experiencing marginalisation or social exclusion. In this regard, when discussing **social inclusion**, it is necessary to mention this been defined as **'the process of promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity'**.<sup>11</sup>

*All young people should have equal and equitable opportunity to be involved in participation.*

The term inclusive participation represents an ideal. Working towards it means using methods that ensure all young people have the equal and equitable opportunity to be involved in participatory or decision-making processes, without discrimination on any grounds. Inclusive participation means using methods and approaches that are accessible to all and take into consideration the individual needs of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities or at risk of marginalisation or social exclusion.

This means using methods and approaches that are accessible to all and take into consideration the individual needs of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities or at risk of marginalisation or social exclusion. This means that all institutional platforms conceived for youth participation, such as youth parliaments, local youth councils, schools councils, state institutions, etc., have a duty to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness in their activities. Moreover, it is required to consider and to be sensitive to multiple forms of discrimination experienced by young people with fewer opportunities or marginalised groups, and establish forms of empowerment for everyone.

## Actions to promote inclusive participation

### Legislative, strategic, and policy approaches to guarantee inclusive participation

- Ensure youth policies take into consideration the diversity among young people, which requires many different approaches in order to foster their participation in society. Strengthen legislation and policies promoting youth rights and challenging discrimination;
- Create legislation, frameworks and processes to ensure data on the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities within participation activities is collected and used as a performance indicator for the EU Youth Strategy and other youth policies;
- Ensure the active involvement of young people, especially young people with fewer opportunities in the development of youth policy so their voices are reflected in policies and programmes at the national or European level. For example, through co-management structures and co-design;
- Foresee a dedicated budget to support the participation of young people with fewer opportunities; If possible, this should be promoted through accessible and effective participatory budgeting mechanisms as well as youth participation in youth budget monitoring processes at local, national and EU level.

<sup>10</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art.19); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (art.12) and General comment number 12 by the UN Committee of the Rights of the Child; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (art.5, 7,9), etc.

<sup>11</sup> Khan, S. (2009) Topic guide on Social Exclusion. Governance and Social Development Resource Centre. Birmingham.

## Awareness raising and capacity building to guarantee inclusive participation

- Provide training and empowering activities specifically for young people with fewer opportunities to build their capacity as active citizens, young leaders and advocates;
- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns promoting the importance of inclusive participation, encouraging young people with fewer opportunities to stand up for their rights and participate in decision making processes;
- Provide training to staff and volunteers supporting participation activities in relation to young people with fewer opportunities: their specific needs, their challenges for accessing the participation activities, how to communicate with them and the barriers that they are facing in the process of social inclusion.

## Accessible activities to guarantee inclusive participation

- Ensure all participation platforms are culturally sensitive to young people from all communities;
- Create inclusive and non-discriminatory spaces in order to ensure a welcoming atmosphere for young people with fewer opportunities in participation activities and during events. At the same time, foster understanding regarding the importance of non-discrimination, tolerance, social inclusion and respect among young people, using intercultural contacts and learning activities within participation activities;
- Examine and eliminate all obstacles faced by young people with fewer opportunities in their participation process (e.g. language diversity and translation, religion and breaks for praying, accessibility of information regarding the opportunities, etc.);
- When supporting participation of disabled young people, ensure that accessibility of spaces, transportation, information and communications systems do not generate real or perceived inequality with other young people. For instance, by using multiple languages, display of text, braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language and human-readers when needed;
- Promote engagement of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities through new technologies. Develop specific technology-based programmes in order to reach young people from isolated or remote areas or with special needs;
- Involve young people with fewer opportunities in developing and designing participation activities and ensure activities are designed in accordance to the 'universal design principles'.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> See, Nasar, J.L., and Evans-Cowley, J. (2007). Universal design and visitability: from accessibility to zoning. Ohio State University, Ohio. - and - Maisel, J.L., Steinfeld, E., Basnar, M. Smith, K. and Beth Tauke, M., (2017) Inclusive Design: Implementation and Evaluation. Routledge. London

## Outreach through youth friendly services to guarantee inclusive participation

- Recognise that engagement in youth friendly services can provide a pathway into participation activities for many young people. Ensure that those services are fully accessible and take in consideration diversity and individual needs among young people with fewer opportunities;
- Develop and ensure the sustainability of outreach activities that promote youth participation and provide viable tools to work with young people from hard-to-reach areas, or with young people with fewer opportunities;
- Developing cross-sectoral outreach strategies (working with key actors, such as medical institutions, social workers, teachers etc.) in order to create links between youth-friendly services and youth participation activities.





# Section 2: Promoting inclusive youth participation through the EU Youth Strategy

## The EU Youth Dialogue

Within the EU Youth Strategy, the EU Youth Dialogue highlights the importance of addressing EU-related topics at all levels and with young people from diverse backgrounds. Diversity monitoring within the VIth cycle of the structured dialogue between the EU and young people indicates that the consultation elements of the dialogue were relatively successful at engaging young people with fewer opportunities.<sup>13</sup> However, many aspects of the consultations were limited to completing questionnaires or taking part in focus groups. The more extended in-depth dialogue which occurred at the EU youth conferences, was substantially less inclusive of young people with fewer opportunities. To fulfil the EU Youth Strategy vision, the new EU Youth Dialogue, therefore, faces a double challenge. Firstly, ensuring all elements of the dialogue are fully accessible to young people with fewer opportunities, especially at European level, and secondly ensuring that the extensive outreach enables meaningful conversation and dialogue at local, regional and national level.



***Youth organisations strive, across Europe, to mobilise, empower, include and motivate an ever-growing range of young people.***

Before analysing some possible innovative actions to reach these ends, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of effective collaboration between youth organisations and other actors involved such as National Agencies of Erasmus+ and ministries responsible for youth. Youth organisations and those active therein strive, across Europe, to mobilise, empower, include and motivate an ever-growing range of young people, often in conditions of limited or non-existent recognition, resources and in adverse political contexts, not least

in the presence, in some countries and territories more than in others, of shrinking spaces within the broader context of civil society. The following ideas, therefore, are intended to be realised in close cooperation and partnership with youth organisations, national, regional and local youth councils, and those representing them, in a concerted effort towards inclusive participation and empowerment.

**Idea 1 ▶ Cause driven participation** - It is now well demonstrated that most young people are more motivated by causes they care about than to have their voice heard in formal structures of representation.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the EU Youth Dialogue process has to provide mechanisms to create *cause driven participation* and offer space for these young people to influence decision-making. In this respect, the Youth Goals can serve as causes around which young people can get civically engaged, while always keeping the agenda flexible and open to other topics that may become relevant for young people, in the time frame of 2019-2027.

<sup>13</sup> Bárta, O. and Moxon, D. (2018) VIth Cycle of Structured Dialogue Consultation Methodology. Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of European-Commission. Sophia. - and - D. and Bárta, O (2018) EUYC Vienna, 2018: Mapping of Participants Backgrounds. Austrian Presidency of Council of the European Commission. Vienna

<sup>14</sup> Cammaerts, B., Bruter, M., Banaji, S., Harrison, S. and Anstead, N. (2013). Youth Participation in Democratic Life. LSE Enterprise. London.

**Idea 2 ▶ Continuous dialogue outside of the conference structure.** Widening the forms of participation used, particularly through digital methods and working with online influencers offers many opportunities to move to a continuous dialogue with young people. 16% of young Europeans use social media to make public their political ideas;<sup>15</sup> the EU Youth Dialogue could be used to channel the energy and interest young people to show these 'alternative spaces of participation' directly to the polling stations. These forms of participation provide the opportunity to break the divide between consultation and involvement in decision making, by creating continuous channels for dialogue with large numbers of young people, that can occur outside of a traditional conference structure. This means having a continuous conversation about the importance of casting the ballot, the mechanisms young citizens have to keep politicians accountable, but also to encourage young people to run for elections. Rethinking the spaces of youth participation and dialogue can lead to opening up the already existing structures. However, to work inclusively, when using digital tools to implement the EU Youth Dialogue, it will be necessary to have in place mechanisms to collect data on where and how young people participate. This means enabling young people to rate and review the tools used and monitoring which backgrounds they are from.

**Idea 3 ▶ Using localised dialogue to promote a pro-European message and positive image of political institutions.** The EU Youth Dialogue, as a process, represents a window of opportunities to

*The EU Youth Dialogue is an opportunity to reinforce local and regional democracy and make young people more aware of the positive impact of the EU.*

change how young people are engaged with and view public institutions across the EU. It can enable them to move from feeling disconnected from the formal political system, to being involved in youth-led spaces where the conversation about the European Union and democracy is alive. The EU Youth Dialogue is an opportunity to reinforce local and regional democracy and make young people more aware of the positive impact of the EU at local level

by using the results of local consultations to mainstream youth voices in all policy areas and levels, and with new actors. Doing this means creating mechanisms through which the results of the EU Youth Dialogue are truly reflected and made visible in policies at all levels, but in particular at local level, where young people can and should be able to see the results of their engagement. This requires commitment from local and regional political actors to fully take account of the outcomes of the EU Youth Dialogue and engage in the related debates.

**Idea 4 ▶ Affirmative measures to increase diversity of participants within the EU Youth Dialogue.** The EU Youth Dialogue gives an opportunity to reflect on the concept of 'power' and how we make sure the created mechanisms really empower all young people, and reach out to those who are not already involved. Based on the methods defined in section one of this paper, concrete actions that would make a positive difference to EU Youth Dialogue could include;

- Assessing the accessibility of all youth dialogue activities, in order to ensure they provide culturally sensitive and inclusive platforms;
- Involving young people from diverse backgrounds directly in the design of new EU Youth Dialogue activities;
- Monitoring the diversity of participants involved in the EU Youth Dialogue in order to identify excluded groups and take affirmative steps to include them;
- Developing a clear outreach strategy to target young people with fewer opportunities and ensuring this is sufficiently resourced within the EU Youth Dialogue. Outreach strategies should be promoted through youth organisation, digital tools and youth friendly services;
- Creating specific financing mechanisms to support the accessibility needs of young people with fewer opportunities who wish to participate in EU Youth Dialogue activities and support the Youth Goals.

<sup>15</sup> Eurostat.(2017). Being young in Europe today. Retrieved 15/02/2018 from Eurostat website

# Erasmus+: Youth In Action

The next years will be crucial for youth policy and programme implementation in the EU and will shape and be shaped by the social and political changes across Europe, young people's attitudes and participation in our communities. The European Commission has sent an important message by proposing to double the funding of the Erasmus+ Programme in the period 2021-2027. With this increase in funds, the Youth chapter of Erasmus+ can be more focused and stronger in enabling quality youth participation *across all aspects of civil and democratic life*. To do so all actors involved must move beyond conceiving participation as limited to a particular type of 'participation projects' (currently, Key action 3) or simply involving young people in designing projects. Erasmus+ also needs to get better at building a recognition for youth participation. While most projects strengthen, either directly or indirectly, active citizenship and youth participation, most beneficiaries are not aware that the programme seeks to support democratic citizenship and participation in civil society and democratic life – in part because the underlying concepts remain either unexplained or too abstract.<sup>16</sup> National Agencies responsible for Erasmus+, and other key stakeholders now have an opportunity to think strategically about how to use the programme to create large scale change in the way young people can express their voices across society. Clear vision and leadership in this regard may substantially increase the extent to which young people are able to influence both youth policy and wider social and political life.

***National Agencies responsible for Erasmus+, have an opportunity to think strategically about how to use Erasmus+ to create large scale change in the way young people can express their voices across society.***

At the same time, the Erasmus+ programme needs to be used in a way that reinforces the diversity and social inclusion agenda of the EU Youth Strategy. Transforming the role that the programme plays within youth participation should mean transforming the way it supports the participation of young people with fewer opportunities and raises the profile of minority voices. Young people with fewer opportunities generally benefit more from Erasmus+ mobility projects than others<sup>17</sup> and aligning and refining the concepts of inclusion and participation within the programme has the potential to greatly benefit marginalised young people. This new cycle of implementation is an opportunity to reimagine the outreach strategies and applicant support process, as well as the process for awarding funds, monitoring the progress and in disseminating the results. Whilst the current programme is good at reaching disadvantaged young people, it is recognised there is a need to do more.<sup>18</sup>

A number of ideas can support inclusive youth participation within the programme;

***E+ projects can enable and support the voices of young people with fewer opportunities within society and public life.***

**Idea 1** ▶ **Emphasis on participation and inclusion, and how they are combined across all key actions.** This does not mean just focusing on how young people with fewer opportunities are included as project participants, or how participants are involved in the project design (although both are still valid objectives). It means considering how projects enable and support the voices of young people with fewer opportunities within society and public life. This question should inform both the programme priorities, and strategic implementation, including funding decisions.

<sup>16</sup> Bammer, D., Fennes, H., Karsten, A. (2017) RAY MON: Exploring Erasmus+: Youth in Action from the perspective of project participants and project leaders. Generation and Educational Science Institute Vienna. - And - Karsten, A (2019) Contents Summary of the Keynote: 'Turbocharging Erasmus+ Youth in Action – what can be learned from research for the new generation?' retrieved 13/02/2018 from RAY Website

<sup>17</sup> Geudens, T., Hagleitner, W., Labadie, F., and Stevens, F. International youth projects benefit most those with fewer opportunities retrieved 23/02/2019 from Salto Youth Website

<sup>18</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of The Regions: Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) (SWD(2018) 40 final)

**Idea 2 ▶ Reducing the complexity of the application process.** Currently, it relies on filling out a complex application form that favours those who are familiar with 'project language'. Easy access through less complex application procedures and forms, as well as a supportive and inclusive approach to informing and connecting young people from diverse backgrounds with the programme opportunities.

**Idea 3 ▶ A wider or more flexible range of key actions,** to enable a greater variety of forms and types of participation to be funded and to move away from the idea that only one type of action/format (like the Key Action 3 in the current Erasmus+) is 'the participation action'. Though many National Agencies have expanded the envelope of what can be done through current key actions, as a framework they are still based on a relatively prescriptive set of project formats, this makes the innovation and the development of new styles and forms of project challenging. It is also argued by youth organisations that the focus on individual mobilities and projects moves emphasis away from core funding for youth organisations.<sup>19</sup> Prescriptive formats also makes it challenging to resource forms of participation which do not fit neatly into a specific project format, such as social movement based work, socially-active artists, canvassing or popular protest.

**Idea 4 ▶ A key action to advance Youth Goals.** As the outcome of a large scale participation process, the Youth Goals are a concrete demonstration of what can happen when taking into account young people's views. Besides using Youth Goals as general themes and priorities for projects, Erasmus+ could also provide smaller grants (e.g. 1000-5000 Euro) to individuals who wish to take some specific action to advance the goals. This could provide participants with a low threshold entry point into the programme, a way to support cause-driven participation, and further demonstrate a political commitment to having the programme's priorities being shaped by young people's views.

## European Solidarity Corps

Within the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), 'solidarity activity' means an activity aimed at addressing unmet societal needs for the benefit of a community, developed in relation to different areas.<sup>20</sup> The areas of youth work, inclusion, citizenship and democratic participation relate most

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directly to youth participation, but projects in other areas may also do so, depending on the perspective and specific project objectives. Volunteering within ESC and solidarity projects could therefore be used to strengthen youth civil society and support the participation of young people in decision making in any form. This would be particularly true if the ESC projects became significantly more focused on these two areas.

The new format - local solidarity projects lasting up to 12 months - in particular would open an easy way for young people to exert influence at local level in addressing problems seen through their eyes, and creating solutions of their own. Such projects have potential in creating campaigns or platforms for expressing their views and influencing decisions on issues that they care about or affect them and the community they live in.

ESC would therefore provide a space for involving young people in decision making, mainstreaming youth participation, developing alternative and innovative forms of youth participation or pathways to participation for young people with fewer opportunities (inclusive participation) etc. The key to exploring and reaching this potential lies in the positioning and

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<sup>19</sup> European Youth Forum (2018) Shadow Report on the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Youth Chapter. YFJ. Brussels.

<sup>20</sup> Regulation (EU) 2018/1475 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 October 2018 laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, Regulation (EU) No 1293/2013 and Decision No 1313/2013/EU PE/47/2018/REV/1

strategic communication of ESC, as well as in support by National Agencies which needs still to be developed and aligned. It also requires empowering young people and strengthening their role as active citizens, change makers or influencers at the forefront of the programme.

There is already a clear emphasis on inclusion throughout the current ESC Programme Guide.<sup>21</sup> Measures already within ESC to provide additional funding to accommodate the needs of young people with fewer opportunities and an emphasis on multilingualism are especially useful for achieving this goal. ESC also includes project formats that are 'particularly appropriate for inclusion groups'.<sup>22</sup>

One of the risks here is that ESC becomes divided into 'inclusion projects' aimed at young people with fewer opportunities, and other projects which do not reach out to this target group. This may give the message that some projects can define themselves to be 'non-inclusion' projects. That is to say, project applicants may believe it is unnecessary to make efforts to reach a wider and more diverse range of young people in their project, unless they would be running a specifically labelled 'inclusion project'. This may have the overall unfortunate effect of excluding young people with fewer opportunities from many parts of the ESC programme.

***One of the risks here is that ESC becomes divided into 'inclusion projects' aimed at young people with fewer opportunities, and other projects which do not reach out to this target group.***

While 'inclusion projects' do have value and there are many reasons to run them, National Agencies should ensure that all successfully funded projects consider how they can be inclusive and accessible. A strong emphasis on inclusion within the quality label process may help to achieve this goal. Based on the ideas outlined in section one of this paper this could mean;

***All ESC funded projects should consider how they can be inclusive and accessible.***

- ESC awareness raising targeted at young people with fewer opportunities to encourage them to participate in ESC;
- Encouraging ESC projects to foster or promote the active citizenship of young people with fewer opportunities;
- Ensuring that all ESC projects are accessible, and that accessibility forms part of the decision making with regard to project funding;
- Developing outreach strategies to enable ESC projects to provide a pathway to other forms of participation such as youth dialogue, youth councils, etc.;
- Monitoring of the backgrounds of participants in order to identify which groups may be persistently excluded from ESC and taking affirmative steps to include them.

It will also be necessary to consider exactly how 'inclusion projects' enable their participants to be sustainably included within society. Enabling a young person from a marginalised background to take part in ESC is desirable. However, it is not the same as using ESC to promote the inclusion of that person in wider society. This requires that as a result of ESC participants become more fully included in, for example, local community, education, employment or other parts of the society. In the case of inclusive participation this means ensuring that as a result of ESC participants are more able to influence public and civil decision making after the end of their involvement. Here a strong emphasis on the outcomes of inclusion projects will be useful, in both phases of project design and evaluation. It might be necessary to review the existing Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy to take this aspect into account.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> European Commission (2018) European Solidarity Corps Guide 2018 Call. pp. 4

<sup>22</sup> ibid

<sup>23</sup> European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture (2014) Erasmus + Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the Field of Youth.

# Conclusion

Youth participation in civic and political lives of our societies becomes crucial in the current state of affairs, with Europe witnessing a wave of decline in young people's engagement in representative participation. From offering young people a seat at the table of decision making to supporting

***The EU Youth Strategy has the potential to play an essential role in promoting sustainable democratic societies.***

and recognising the large variety of youth participation forms, the EU Youth Strategy has the potential to play an essential role in promoting sustainable democratic societies. Although youth participation was recognised as a priority in various policies before, the EU Youth strategy represents probably the most significant attempt to fully

embrace youth participation throughout an EU framework, and to design youth policy around the philosophy of engaging and empowering young people at all levels and through different forms and actions.

As a result, the EU Youth Strategy and programmes have the potential to transform the way young citizens engage in public life, building their skills, enhancing their critical thinking and developing the necessary attitudes to participate in multicultural communities. It also has the potential to transform the way public institutions engage with young people, and the wide ranges of programmes and options offered can enable a multitude of ways for the state at all levels to connect to young citizens.

Few would object to the idea that this transformation should reach young people from all backgrounds. Our call for youth participation to be inclusive is one many people reading this paper will have heard before, and will agree with. However, how this vision can be achieved is something that has caused much debate and division in recent years. We argue that moving towards inclusive youth participation requires;

- Ensuring that all participation programmes, activities, platforms and projects are fully accessible; Developing outreach strategies and activities to engage with young people with fewer opportunities in participation, based on youth friendly services;
- Delivering capacity-building and awareness raising activities both for young people with fewer opportunities and actors who should be expected to engage with them;
- Establishing clear legislative, strategic and policy frameworks to support the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in youth participation.

Underpinning this we believe that ending the unhelpful narrative of 'reaching unorganised young people' and instead focusing on 'reaching young people with fewer opportunities' is necessary. Any forms of participation, including those established by youth organisations, can be operated inclusively if there is commitment to do so. Many youth organisations have gone a long way to demonstrating their ability to support minority voices, particularly as voices of dissent against unfavourable political climates.

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In line with this though, it should no longer be acceptable to make claims that particular forms of participation, types of project, or organisations are inclusive, unless this claim is clearly substantiated. This applies both to the work of youth organisations and to other forms of

participation such as digital platforms. Actors in receipt of public funds to support youth participation should be expected to monitor and demonstrate the proportion of young people with fewer opportunities in their activities and evaluate the extent to which their work enables minority voices to be heard. This kind of critical analysis and scrutiny should form the basis of public funding allocation and strategic decisions at all levels.

***Meaningful youth participation is possible only by giving voice to the voiceless and opening up participation and decision-making spaces. Accessibility and inclusiveness remain two key word.***

Meaningful youth participation is possible only by giving voice to the voiceless and opening up participation and decision making spaces. Accessibility and inclusiveness remain two key words which need to be reflected in the allocation of funds for youth activities, through strong monitoring mechanisms to ensure young people from all backgrounds are heard and a paradigm shift in power-sharing on all decisions that impact the present and future of the young generation occurs.

Finally, in a digital era, youth participation cannot be discussed without considering online spaces and opportunities and how young people make use of online tools. The EU Youth Strategy encourages and recognises that young people do use online platforms, social media and virtual spaces to express their political views. These tools have the potential to reach not thousands, but millions of young people if they can be utilised effectively. But, as with face to face programmes, this still requires the same level of scrutiny over who is being reached and what backgrounds they are from.

Throughout all youth participation however, the fundamental challenge still remains to shift all this energy of young people towards the polls by increasing youth turnout in large scale democratic processes, such as the European Parliament elections, starting from 2019. Low youth voter turnout and lack of trust in political institutions is the context within which all youth participation projects take place. Whatever approach we take to inclusive youth participation through the EU Youth Strategy, it is still necessary to reinvigorate young people's belief in democracy and its formal institutions and mechanisms.



