



SALTO-YOUTH
PARTICIPATION AND INFORMATION
RESOURCE CENTRE



Erasmus+

SALTO THINK TANK ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION: closer to the edge of participation and activism

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| SALTO-YOUTH Participation and Information Resource Centre | 4 |
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| The state of youth participation in 2018..... | 5 |
| Defining and understanding participation | 5 |
| Models of participation..... | 7 |
| The growing space for youth rights..... | 8 |
| The lack of youth data..... | 11 |
| Policy in an ageing continent..... | 12 |
| New trends in participation | 15 |
| Rising populism and nationalism across Europe | 15 |
| New and shifting forms of power | 18 |
| Use and influence of technology..... | 22 |
| Conclusion..... | 25 |

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.

Introduction

This paper has been co-created with thinkers from across the European continent to harness their collective expertise, experience and perspectives. The first section considers the state of youth participation and explores the models that assist in defining, analysing and evaluating participation. It particularly notes the lack of reliable and comprehensive data and provides an overview of the European policy landscape. Building on this foundation, the second section considers the new and emerging trends in participation and youth activism – such as threats from the far-right, shifting expectations and power and the use of technology as a tool for change.



The state of youth participation in 2018

A large body of research exists that explores the definition, purpose, application, and approaches to participation. In reviewing the current landscape for youth participation, this section will focus on the:

- current definitions and understanding of participation
- models of participation
- lack of quality data on youth
- policy landscape in an ageing Europe

This section discusses each of these areas in turn.

Defining and understanding participation

Youth participation is defined as “a process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them.”¹ While numerous definitions of youth participation exist, there are several underlying factors that provide consistency amongst the disparate understandings and interpretations of academics, policy-makers, institutions and thinkers:

Participation is a process – rather than a one-off event, participation is about the sustained engagement of young people in the decision-making process.

Participation happens at multiple levels – young people’s participation in decision-making happens in multiple spheres and at multiple levels, most frequently at the individual and local level (such as interpersonal, family, and schooling) but includes the regional, national and international arenas.

Participation is about power – participation in decision-making is about the sharing and distribution of power - from and between those that typically control the process to those they seek to engage.

¹ Farthing, R. (2012). Why Youth Participation? Some Justifications and Critiques of Youth Participation Using New Labour’s Youth Policies as a Case Study. *Youth & Policy*, 109, 71-97.

Participation goes beyond the political processes – though that is often the prime focus – and can include decision-making in healthcare, the workplace, education, and within social and economic life. In recognition, Brodie et al (2009) considered participation to occur in multiple spheres; the public, social and individual.² Within these spheres are

countless spaces, places and opportunities for participation to occur – particularly now through digital and e-participation.

The following table provides definitions and examples of participation within the three spheres:³

| Sphere | Description | Examples |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Public | Structures within existing decision-making structures and processes | Youth councils; youth parliaments; school councils; youth advisory panels; members and leaders of youth organisations or groups; voting; standing for election; organisational or institutional panel or committee; formal consultations. |
| Social | Formal/informal structures that are created outside political or organisational structures | Involvement in civil society organisations; social or cultural groups; community development; local service or project delivery; social movements; grassroots campaigns; housing associations; faith groups; informal networks; involvement in identity or interest groups. |
| Individual | Individual choices, decisions and interactions with the world | Involvement in decisions that directly impact the individuals such as judicial proceedings (e.g. divorcing parents); educational and healthcare matters; choices, decisions and behaviours as part of everyday life; personal morals, values or principles; religious beliefs; consumer choices. |

² Brodie, E., Cowling, E., Nissen, N., et al. (2009). Understanding participation: a literature review, *Pathways through Participation*.

³ Farrow, A. (2015). *Youth Policy Working Paper - child, youth and participation*. Retrieved from <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/participation-global-governance/youth-policy-working-paper-3-children-young-people-and-participation/>

Participation can range from an act of ethics when buying clothes to the design, delivery and evaluation of a public service affecting millions of citizens; involvement in a youth council or starting a viral hashtag; deciding which parents to live during a divorce case or leading a grassroots campaign for social policy change.

For the purposes of this paper, a separation is made between the *focus* of participation, as articulated by Brodie, and the *channels* that articulate *where* and *how* participation happens in practice. For example:

- **e-voting** or online participatory budgeting are *mechanisms* for public participation;
- **online platforms** often *facilitate* social movements/identity communities;
- **digital technology** provides greater individual personalisation of services and is a *mechanism* for expression and consumer choices.

As explored further in this paper, digitalisation has contributed to the rapidly changed expectations of involvement and power over many aspects of our lives.

Models of participation

Numerous models attempt to aid our understanding of participation.⁴ Despite their diversity – and at times, outright divergence – the models share underlying similarities:

- ▶ all note access to information and informed youth as necessary pre-conditions for participation;
- ▶ all are concerned with the re-distribution and sharing of power (though the extent varies);
- ▶ all agree that *something* should change as a result – though they aren't agreed on *what*.⁵

The differences within the models highlight the nuances in participation, particularly in terms of outcomes for young people, underlying assumptions, and the relationship between young people and adults. For example, in the *Ladder of Participation*, the 'best case' is seen as shared decision-making between adults and young people; but in the *Three-lens model*, young people are leaders of change rather than simply partners with adults. Similarly, while some academics believe that individual character benefits are positive outcomes of participation⁶, others see this as creating "a façade of engagement" that contributes "little more than fostering a generic and benign set of youth skills, competencies and character traits."⁷

⁴ Karsten, A. (2012). *Participation Models – Citizens, youth, online*. Retrieved from http://nonformality.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Participation_Models_20121118.pdf

⁵ Bacalso, C. (2016). *Conceptual models of youth participation - Evolution, convergences & divergences*. Unpublished presentation.

⁶ Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. (2010). *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*. Routledge.

⁷ Sukarieh, M., & Tannock, S. (2015). *Youth Rising? The politics of youth in the global economy*. Routledge.



Most interestingly is whether the emphasis of change should be on adults or young people: **is the aim for adults to change their approach and processes or is it the responsibility of young people to learn how to engage with adults in their space?** This has led some academics to note that participation is only encouraged when it fits “comfortably into the agendas of the organising adults.”⁸ The *Clarity model of participation* displays a continuum of power alongside six dimensions of participation: intriguingly, the model of a youth forum or council is positioned as adult power given it replicates adult structures.

The years in which the models were developed give a clue as to the major driver of youth participation: only one model out of the 36 was created before the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was agreed.

The growing space for youth rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the “most rapidly and widely ratified international human rights treaty in history”⁹ and **remains the dominant driver of child, adolescent and youth rights**. Despite reservations and amendments by member states in their national ratification, it is a comprehensive framework that demands actions by governments and provides an opportunity for scrutiny and accountability through state party reporting (and, in many cases, shadow reports produced by civil society groups).

Though it is article 12 of the UNCRC – *the right of children to express their opinions and have those taken into account when decisions are being made that affect their lives* – that is most famous amongst the participation community, the convention provides additional rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and thought; access to information and media; education, employment and health services; and protection from violence, war and tor-

⁸ Tisdall, K. (2008). 'Is the honeymoon over? Children and young people's participation in public decision making?' *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 16(3), 343-354.

⁹ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>



ture. While article 12 provides a general right to participate, it is realised only through the numerous other rights and processes in the convention. **Arguably, participation by itself is a meaningless endeavour.**

Building on the UNCRC, other conventions outline the rights of specific peoples and groups and the responsibility of others to ensure and support their participation. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) specifically notes that “persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others” with particular articles focusing on access to information, freedom of expression, and tailored infrastructure to

support this.¹⁰ Youth with disabilities, who may face double-discrimination, have a legal architecture to foster their active participation in decision-making processes.

The rights of children are embedded within models of participation. The *pathways to participation model*, which outlines a five-stage journey for youth involvement within organisational decision-making (and asks a series of questions aimed at adults about *their* readiness for youth participation), is one of few that includes a ‘minimum’ point that individuals ‘must achieve if you endorse’ the UNCRC.¹¹ Beyond listening and expression, adults must be ‘ready to take children’s views into account’, organisational processes must

¹⁰ United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention_accessible_pdf.pdf

¹¹ Shier, H. (2001). *Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations*, *Children and Society*, 15, 107-117. https://ipkl.gu.se/digitalAssets/1429/1429848_shier2001.pdf

enable it, and it should be a requirement to do so.¹²

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the UNCRC, has made significant interventions on the role of children and young people in society, particularly on their evolving capacity for decision-making and the ages at which adolescents should be able to independently “realise their rights, make decisions, express opinions, access services and be protected.”¹³ This has included recommendations such as the removal of age limits on young people consenting to medical treatment or the raising of the age at which they can be held criminally responsible.

Child and youth rights are additionally articulated in regional agreements, such as those in Africa, Europe, and Iberoamerica.¹⁴ At the European level, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms reaffirms citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.¹⁵ While not specific to young people, it notes the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers” (article 10).¹⁶ Principle 1 of the Council of Europe’s European Charter



on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life notes that “participation of young people in local and regional life must constitute part of a global policy of citizens’ participation in public life” and outlines the cross-sectoral policy areas where this can be realised.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Council of Europe’s Charter on Education Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2010) encourages member states, through formal and non-formal, means to strengthen the opportunities for young people to gain understanding, skills and competencies required for their active participation – particularly through the realisation of their rights.¹⁸ While many rights for children and young people

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Youth Policy Labs. (2015). *Age Matters! Age-related barriers to service access and the realisation of rights for children, adolescents and youth*. Retrieved from http://agemattersnow.org/downloads/YPL_Age_Matters_Final_Report.pdf

¹⁴ Regional agreements include the African Youth Charter, European Youth Strategy, Iberoamerica Convention on Youth Rights, and the Council of Europe’s Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

¹⁵ European Union. (2010). *European Convention on Human Right*. Retrieved from https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Council of Europe. (2012). *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Coe_youth/Participation/COE_charter_participation_2013_en.pdf

¹⁸ Council of Europe. (2010). *Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*. Retrieved from <https://edoc.coe.int/en/human-rights-education/5705-charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education-guidelines-for-educators.html>

are similar to those afforded all citizens, notably through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there is a fundamental difference: **it is recognised that young people will need the support and facilitation of adults (or others, such as their peers) to realise participation depending on their capacity.** Given this, young people's ability to influence decisions around them requires balance between participation and protection: **their individual right to a meaningful voice is a continual negotiation with the requirement on authorities to keep them safe – from others and themselves.**¹⁹

The rights of children and young people, particularly those of participation, are experienced through young people's formal and informal interactions with the state and civil society organisations, their families and communities, schools and the legal system. But understanding these interactions – and young people's experience of them – is challenging. Principally, this is due to a lack of data on what happens and what changes as a result.

The lack of youth data

When it comes to the evaluation of progress in participation across the world, there is a mixed picture. Out of the five domains in the Commonwealth's Youth Development Index (YDI), civic participation and political participation saw the biggest increases in scores in the 2016 edition compared to 2013.²⁰ While showing progress, civic participation is the lowest ranking domain overall meaning it is the worst performing aspect of a young person's life. Political participation ranks third out of the five domains, with any progress in this area due to a rise in the number of national youth policies since 2013.

The latest Youth Wellbeing Index highlights the challenging environment for young people. Despite improvements, only 11% of youth experience 'high' levels of wellbeing (the state of being happy, health or prosperous), with those that do coming from high-income countries. The index, which includes indicators that consider the perceptions of young people, notes that two out of three young people do not believe their government cares about their wants and needs.²¹ The newest index, the European Youth Forum's Youth Progress Index (2018), notes that higher-ranking countries were those that had higher levels of youth involved in civil society organisations.²²

¹⁹ Farrow, A. (2016). The rights of adolescents: the most important articulation of adolescent rights since 1989. Retrieved from <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/youth-childrens-rights/the-rights-of-adolescents-the-most-important-articulation-of-adolescent-rights-since-1989/>

²⁰ The five domains are: Political participation; Civic participation; Health and Well-being; Employment and opportunity; Education. See more at: <http://youthdevelopmentindex.org>

²¹ International Youth Foundation. (2017). *Global Youth Wellbeing Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.youthindex.org/sites/default/files/2017YouthWellbeingIndex.pdf>

²² European Youth Forum. (2017). *Youth Progress Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.youthforum.org/youth-progress-index>

Policy in an ageing continent

In the area of participation, there are numerous data gaps and challenges with the selection of indicators often limited to formal participation such as voting, the percentage of young MPs or undertaking volunteering²³ - such as the data produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.²⁴ While this data can be useful, particularly at encouraging political parties to be more gender and age balanced when choosing candidates, it is narrow and inadequate.

This poses real limitations to our understanding of how youth participation is actioned by individuals, supported by governments, and experienced in different parts of the world. Compared to other domains, such as education, employment or health, available measures of participation remain insufficient. As noted in the 2016 YDI report, “the paucity of consistent and comprehensive data coverage across countries” is one of the major limitations for the youth sector, particularly different age definitions, a lack of disaggregated data, and the use of national averages which masks inequalities within countries.

Across the EU, there are 90 million young people between the age of 15-29.²⁵ When broadened out to all those under the age of 30 years, there are 167 million people out of an EU population of 510 million.²⁶ Overall, the Union is greying, with the percentage of young people declining due to ageing populations and lower fertility rates.²⁷

At the national level, most countries in continental Europe have a youth policy that clearly articulates the aspirations for young people and the government’s policy and programmatic response. The State of Youth Policy (2014)²⁸ notes that 36 out of 44 countries in the region have a policy, with southern Europe countries making up half of the eight countries without one. Nearly all countries (42/44) have a recognised national youth council, with the exception of only Monaco and Bosnia & Herzegovina. **While neither a youth policy nor council indicates better outcomes for young people, they are indicative of a country’s commitment to responding to the needs, aspiration and challenges of its youth population and attempting to channel resources towards young people.**

²³ Bacalso, C. (2015). *Gaps, gapes and gulfs: data (or the lack thereof) on how youth participate around the world*. Retrieved from <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/participation-global-governance/gaps-gapes-and-gulfs-data-or-the-lack-thereof-on-how-youth-participate-around-the-world/>

²⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2017). *Data of youth participation*. Retrieved from <https://www.ipu.org/our-work/youth/data-youth-participation>

²⁵ Eurostat. (2017). *Being young in Europe today - executive summary*. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_executive_summary#Further_Eurostat_information

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cocco, F. (2018, March 28). Highest fertility rates in Europe still below ‘replenishment level’. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/d54e4fe8-3269-11e8-b5bf-23cb17fd1498>

²⁸ International Youth Foundation. (2017). *The 2016 Global Millennial Viewpoints Survey*. Retrieved from <https://www.iyfnetwork.org/sites/default/files/library/2016-Global-Millennial-Viewpoints-Survey.pdf>

European youth policy has largely been focused through the Erasmus+ programme. Over its lifetime, the Erasmus+ programme aims to support 400,000 youth exchanges, 100,000 voluntary placements, and directly assist 4 million young people and youth educators, with a budget of €14 billion.²⁹ Institutions across the continent have set up a number of mechanisms for participation, such as Structured Dialogue at the European Commission and the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe. However, these spaces are too frequently only accessible to a narrow proportion of the youth population, particularly those belonging to youth organisations. The development of the new EU Youth Strategy in 2018, with its emphasis on 'engage, connect, empower', is an opportunity to establish a new generation of EU youth programmes, with the ambition and resources required to include a significantly broader proportion of young people, particularly young refugees and migrants.³⁰

Despite this, young people face significant challenges and threats to their quality of life – especially when compared to previous generations. While European youth are highly educated³¹, a significant proportion of young people are not in education, employment or

training, and almost a third (27 million) are at risk of social exclusion or poverty.³² **Across the EU, median income is falling, income inequality is rising³³, and youth unemployment remains stubbornly high.³⁴**

This section has explored the current perspectives on youth participation from a more academic perspective. It has outlined the definitions, spaces and types of youth participation, our limited and challenged understanding of how participation is experienced and the difference it makes, and provided a snapshot look at the situation in Europe. The next section will explore the emerging trends and issues that affect young people and those seeking to increase youth participation in decision-making.

²⁹ European Commission. (n.d). *Erasmus+ - key figures*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/key-figures_en

³⁰ European Commission. (2018). *A renewed EU Youth Strategy proposed by the European Commission for 2019-2027*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/eu-youth-strategy-adopted_en

³¹ European Commission. (2017). *European Semester Thematic Factsheet – Tertiary Education Attainment*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/european-semester_thematic-factsheet_tertiary-education-attainment_en.pdf

³² European Commission. (2015). *Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)*. Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0429&from=EN>

³³ Eurostat. (2016). *Living standard statistics*. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Living_standard_statistics#Median_income_fell_most_for_the_unemployed

³⁴ Statista. (2018). *Youth unemployment rate in EU member states as of May 2018 (seasonally adjusted)*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266228/youth-unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/>



New trends in participation

When considering youth participation, it is important to consider changes in the external environment. In 2018, there are three key areas to explore:

- rising populism and nationalism across Europe
- new and shifting forms of power
- use and influence of technology

This section discusses each of these areas in turn.

Rising populism and nationalism across Europe

Europe is experiencing rising nationalism and a wave of populism.³⁵ In Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic - even in Sweden - populist parties have formed governments, are in the opposition, control regional governments, and have

harnessed significant support from a frustrated and disenfranchised electorate. They are often anti-Establishment, anti-European Union, anti-immigration, and more conservative in their social attitudes. **It promotes an alternative to the dominant values and principles of the EU and western democracy over the past decades** - globalisation, intercultural understanding, tolerance, mobility and trans-national cooperation.

Such parties are proving popular with young people. In France, the far-right Presidential candidate, Marie Le Pen, won 34% of the vote amongst 18-24-year olds in the final round of the election in 2017.³⁶ **Younger voters were more likely to support her than any other age group.**³⁷ In Italy, the recently-formed Five Star movement has the support of a third of those aged 18-28³⁸; in Austria, a quarter of youth supported the far-right party³⁹; in Poland, political outsiders and those with extreme views are increasing their support amongst the country's young people.⁴⁰

Politicians like Beppe Grillo in Italy, Victor Orban in Hungary or Donald Trump in the US use different, more emotional, narratives and communication mechanisms to elicit support from disillusioned sections of the electorate; legitimising their views, responding to their

³⁵ Chakelian, A. (2017, March 8). Rise of the nationalists: a guide to Europe's far-right parties. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/03/rise-nationalists-guide-europe-s-far-right-parties>

³⁶ Kentish, B. (2017, May 7). Nearly half of young French voters backed Marine Le Pen, projections suggest. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/nearly-half-young-french-voters-marine-le-pen-emmanuel-macron-french-election-2017-a7723291.html>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Schultheis, E. (2018, March 2). How Italy's Five-Star Movement Is Winning the Youth Vote. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/italys-populist-youth/554408/>

³⁹ Bleiker, C. (2015, December 14). Young people vote far-right in Europe. *Deutsche Welle*. Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/en/young-people-vote-far-right-in-europe/a-18917193>

⁴⁰ Zbytniewska, K. (2017, March 8). Survey: Polish youth support the radical right. *Euractiv*. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/opinion/survey-polish-youth-support-the-radical-right/>

sense of abandonment from mainstream parties, and offering an alternative that promises to elevate their prosperity and restore a sense of national pride.⁴¹ Anti-establishment sentiments are not exclusive to the right of the political spectrum: left-wing parties, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or the Labour Party in the UK are also adopting more populist messages focusing on anti-austerity, a rejection of neo-liberalism, and the promotion of nationalisation. Both groups focus on control – or the taking back of control – away from so-called ‘elites’ and back to their voters.⁴² For different groups, the elites are different people: politicians, bankers, liberals, progressives, the wealthy, interest groups, or the media.

Whatever the reasons, one thing is clear: a **significant minority of young people - though not a homogenous bloc in the electorate - are attracted to such parties.**

Whether this support is deep or sustained will require longitudinal research; however, far-right parties are currently connecting with young people sufficiently to gain their vote.

While it is not new for populist parties to appeal to young people – nor for young people to be attracted to them – a number of factors exacerbate the challenge of those seeking to provide an alternative:

- The **world young people grow up in today is fundamentally different** to the one of 10 or 20 years ago: youth unemployment is still too high; work remains too hard to find and precarious when entered; housing is unaffordable; mental health issues are increasingly common; and society is divided and fragmented.
- Politics is being **disrupted by social media**, which has transformed our ability to connect with each other – something populist politicians are good at harnessing – and has changed the nature of public discourse. The legal (and illegal) manipulation of social media content is a disturbing trend that risks undermining public trust in institutions and individuals.
- The **belief that democracy is positive is declining** as new generation experience – and feel the limitations of – the world’s prevailing system of government and representation. According to research by Harvard University and the University of Melbourne, young people have least trust in democracy than any other age group.⁴³

The **level of belief amongst 16-24-year olds that democracy is a ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ way of running a country is rising** compared to the same age group asked in the 1990s.⁴⁴ This

⁴¹ Lakoff, G., & Durán, G. (2018, January 13). Trump is using Twitter to manipulate the country. Here’s how to stop falling for it. *The Sacramento Bee*. Retrieved from <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/california-forum/article193085404.html>

⁴² Easton, G. (2018, July 11). How Jeremy Corbyn and the European left are reclaiming populism. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/07/how-jeremy-corbyn-and-european-left-are-reclaiming-populism>

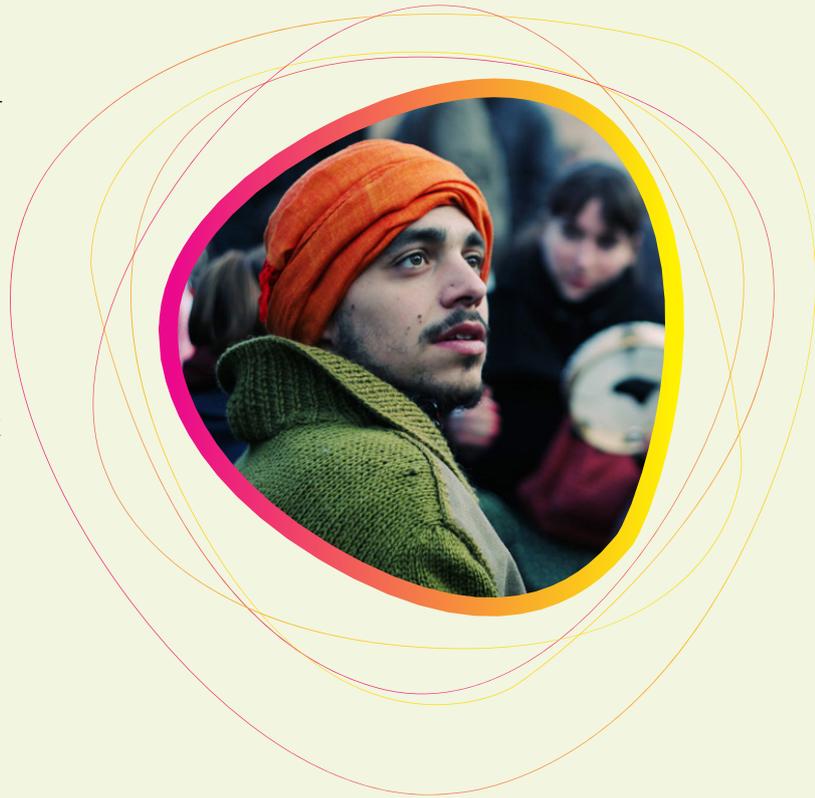
⁴³ Guilford, G. (2016, November 30). Harvard research suggests that an entire global generation has lost faith in democracy. *Quartz*. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/848031/harvard-research-suggests-that-an-entire-global-generation-has-lost-faith-in-democracy/>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

is not a matter of 'youth' always being sceptical of democracy: it is a matter of this particular generation of young people being sceptical. For those promoting youth participation – which often focuses on political engagement within existing democratic structures – this poses a significant challenge when encouraging young people to be involved, in fostering a belief that they can achieve change or even that such structures can have a positive impact on their life.

There has been significant research and interest in understanding why young people are disengaging from formal, political participation. This is seen through declining rates of voting⁴⁵, political party membership, or involvement with civil society organisations.⁴⁶ Much has been made of the notion that while young people are moving *away* from these mechanisms, they are involved in other forms of participation; they are at *least* engaging in politics. A more serious threat to democracy and youth participation is the debunking of this myth from two waves of the World Values Survey:

As a result, more recent generations are not just disengaged from the formal institutions of liberal democracy; they are also less likely to participate in non-conventional political activities, such as joining new social movements or participating in political protest.⁴⁷



While previous generations have also moved away from political structures and parties, this was matched by engagement in 'nonconventional' forms of political action. For young people, some thinkers believe this has not happened.

At best, the data is wrong or fails to capture young people's true involvement; at worst, it presents a significant challenge for our democracy.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Stefan Foa, R., & Mounk, Y. (2016). The democratic disconnect. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(3). Retrieved from <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Foa%26Mounk-27-3.pdf>

⁴⁶ Guilford, 2016.

⁴⁷ Solijonov, A. (2016). Voter turnout trends around the world. *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. Retrieved from <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ibid.



New and shifting forms of power

Never before have citizens - young people included - had the ability and propensity to craft the world around them to such an extent - from their love lives, earning money, having fun, learning, sharing and connecting.

Young people's growing dependency with democracy is therefore unsurprising: a vote every five years is no longer a sufficient way of engaging in decisions.

Technology provides access to information, opportunities and spaces to personalise their lives, immediately voice their opinion, and develop solutions to problems with little need for approval from others.

At the root of this is the abundance of power and control that individuals now have over their own lives and their communities. **Power, an element of participation too frequently absent from research and practice, is changing.**⁵⁰ The rise of *new power* versus *old power* is seen both in terms of the values at the heart of organisations and individuals, as well as the models and mechanisms through which power is exercised.

Most institutions, such as the European Union or the Council of Europe, are based on *old power* values. Both have traditional models of governance based on concentrated power that is "closed, inaccessible and leader-driven."⁵¹

This has led some to question the effectiveness of civic education as a way of strengthening young people's understanding of democracy and their role as citizens. Research suggests that even in countries that have introduced civic education as part of the formal education curriculum, such as the UK, Canada, Australia, the USA, France and Mexico, the effect has been "negligible" on "most standard indicators of normative political participation" – such as registering to vote and then voting.⁴⁹

At the European level, the new Youth Unit of the European Parliament, has been established to engage directly with young Europeans and encourage them to vote in the 2019 elections. However, the inability of traditional actors to respond is leading some to question where *power* now lies – and how it can be mobilised *outside* of conventional political processes.

⁴⁹ Manning, N., & Edwards, K. (2014). 'Why Has Civic Education Failed to Increase Young People's Political Participation?'. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(1). Retrieved from <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/1/5.html>

⁵⁰ Timms, H, & Heimans, J. (2018). *New Power – how it's changing the 21st century – and why you need to know*. United Kingdom: Pan Macmillan.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Old power values

Formal (representative) governance, managerism, institutionalism

Competition, exclusivity, resource consolidation

Confidentiality, discretion, separation between private and public spheres

Expertise, professionalism, specialization

Long-term affiliation and loyalty less overall participation

New power values

Informal (networked) governance, opt-in decision-making, self organization

Collaboration, crowd wisdom, sharing, open-sourcing

Radical transparency

Maker culture, "do it ourselves" ethic

Short-term conditional affiliation, more overall participation

Figure 1 - Old vs new power values that are reshaping the world around us.

The involvement of people, particularly in decision-making, is permitted in ways that are pre-defined and approved by the institution. For young people, they are invited into spaces of power with their participation bound within set limits and structures.⁵²

New power values - the mobilisation, participation and channelling of people - offer new ways of conceptualising involvement. Global research into youth organisations and youth

movements found that:

Through social networks and community mobilisation, young people are developing leadership and outreach skills and confidence. Particularly by using new technologies, young people are developing new models of power, in which power comes from knowledge, peer coordination and the ability to inspire others to participate.⁵³

⁵² Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis. *Institute of Development Studies*, 37(6). Retrieved from https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/finding_spaces_for_change.pdf

⁵³ Youth Policy Labs. (2015). *From Rhetoric to Action: Towards an Enabling Environment in the Sustainable Development Goals - Highlights from the report commissioned by the Case for Space initiative*. Retrieved from <http://restlessdevelopment.org/file/from-rhetoric-to-action-pdf>

With new power models, **young people are able to find cause-driven communities, engage in decentralised actions, share tools and collaborate with others** (in their physical, social and identity community), foster openness and autonomy amongst those involved, and create a 'do it yourself' form of participation.

Social movements, many of which are youth-led or youth-focused, rely on mobilising a crowd and surging that towards a decision-maker, an institution or a cause.

- **The power of #MarchForOurLives** is intensifying because students – not organisations – have responded to a wave of events and outrage in the USA over high school shootings.
- **The indignados movement** – founded in 2011 - became the third largest political party in the Spanish parliament in 2017 as Podemos turned a social movement into a political force.
- **#BlackLivesMatter has a decentralised model** with each chapter able to decide their own actions, with little hierarchy or coordinated actions.

Such movements evoke passion, mobilise people and emphasise the ability of individuals and communities to make change. While many of these movements started online, they blend with the physical world – as street protests, visible actions, and in-person meetings. The typical campaign actions happen, but *how*



they form and operate is different. **New power campaigns do not rely on traditional leaders and instead harness the willingness of individuals to contribute in different ways** – whether through providing funding, coordinating their own actions, or sharing their expertise.⁵⁴ In *new power*, there is an implicit *trust* in people.

However, the challenges to this, particularly in terms of decision-making, governance and genuine collaboration, will require further studies. The ability of Podemos, for example, to maintain a genuinely open and directly-democratic model will be tested as it takes control of city mayoralties or regional governments. Similarly, the sustainability of movements

⁵⁴ Heimans, J., & Timms, H. (2014). Understanding "New Power". *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2014/12/understanding-new-power>

is questionable – such as the challenges faced by Occupy movements around the world to sustain and channel the engagement of activists.

Furthermore, ***new power isn't necessarily progressive; it is an approach to power, not an ideology.*** Many of the anti-establishment, populist governments are harnessing new power as part of their political campaigns. They have relied on an insurgency of mobilised and active people to disrupt the existing system. From the Occupy movement and Podemos in Spain to Beppe Grillo in Italy and Donald Trump's campaign in the US, new power is central to the way change is happening in the world.

For young people, it is **unclear whether *new power* can offer the same level of protection and support to realise their rights to participation.** The emphasis in *new power* is largely on the individual within a crowd – but not necessarily part of a collaborative, encouraging community. While technology offers the possibility for those often excluded from traditional activism to participate in different ways, new – or similar - barriers are likely to arise.

There are key elements of citizen engagement – especially for young people – that will be crucial to successful participation in the future: an ability to inspire individuals; a willingness to radically distribute organising power; allow communities to create opportunities themselves; and be able to channel that energy towards a cause.

As young people's understanding of their role in society changes, so too will the citizenship education that is designed to support them. Formal and non-formal educators will need to understand the shifting forms of power, the changing expectations of engagement and influence from young people, and the mechanisms that can support that – potentially beyond and away from the ballot box and traditional representative structures.





Use and influence of technology

For many people, being 'online' is a permanent, continuous, and integrated aspect of their lives. Whether it is in relationships, employment, leisure or education, digital technology has radically changed the way in which society connects with other individuals and institutions. **Digital opportunities have created new spaces for adolescent and youth rights, beyond their *political* participation.**

With regard to specific aspects of participation captured in the UNCRC and UNCRPD, there have been significant advances in the use of technology to access courts for compliant,

access data held on them, make and access health services independently, and access credit and financial services.⁵⁵ New technology offers a genuinely new way of reaching people, supporting their participation and providing real-time responses, resolutions and rewards. It offers a genuinely new way of reaching people, supporting their participation and providing real-time responses, resolutions and rewards.⁵⁶

At the public and social sphere, digital technology can provide opportunities to overcome some of the distrust and apathy of citizens – particularly young people – with democracy.⁵⁷ The 2017 report by NESTA highlights a number of interesting initiatives being piloted:

⁵⁵ UNICEF. (2017). *The state of the world's children 2017 – children in a digital age*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC_2017_ENG_WEB.pdf

⁵⁶ Newsom, G. (2013). *Citizensville – how to take the town square digital and reinvent government*. Penguin Press.

⁵⁷ NESTA. (2017). *Digital democracy – the tools transforming political engagement*. Retrieved from https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/digital_democracy.pdf

- participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre;
- crowdsourcing local improvements in Iceland;
- engaging the public on controversial issues in Taiwan;
- legislative transparency in Brazil;
- tackling corruption in South Africa;
- and the crowdsourcing of legislative ideas – and the drafting of bills – in Finland, Estonia and France.

Particularly in places where civil society is closed or constrained, the ability to connect with like-minded people online increases the confidence and propensity of individuals to act in the physical world.

There is scope for development: most of the innovations focus on the expression of opinion, with little opportunity for involvement in *implementation* and *evaluation*. Similarly, while many governments seek involvement, few were providing the tools for closer accountability of government services, actions and decisions.

Digital technology can provide the space for greater scrutiny and feedback of the services, products and experiences of daily life. On a given day, a young person may give formal feedback (both qualitative and quantitative)

on a restaurant, their doctor, a taxi driver, or a book they've read. This raises their expectations to be heard and listened to on a more immediate basis when it comes to civic or political participation. **Unlike previous generations, young people have the ability to tweet, snap, or Instagram their views and direct them at the key decision makers.**

However, unless this feedback loop is closed, with young people able to see the difference their views made, the ubiquitous ask for feedback will likely decrease the value placed upon it. NESTA similarly concluded that without decent and robust evaluation of digital innovations we will not know “whether digital tools are broadening representation and increasing the legitimacy of decision-making.”⁵⁸

Formal participation structures have been criticised for the lack of feedback provided – both on individuals and on the impact of their efforts to achieve change.⁵⁹ **Measuring, understanding and articulating impact, particularly the outcomes for individuals, the policy changes, or the improvements in services, is a vital part of the participation journey.**⁶⁰ Digital tools provide real-time opportunities to gather feedback on meetings, events, actions, trainings or discussions to ensure better quality provision, greater rele-

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Davis, J. (2002). *Reconstructing 'Health Promotion' with Children and Young People: Practical Examples of Enabling Children and Young People to Change Policies and Services in Canada, England, Scotland and Australia*. European Conference: reducing Social Inequalities in Health among Children and Young People, Ministry of the Interior and Health, Copenhagen.

⁶⁰ Badham, B., Wade, H. (2010). Hear by Right: Standards Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People. *National Youth Agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Hear-By-Right-2010.pdf>



the municipal level, are equipped with these skills is a challenge due to the lack of professional recognition and limited opportunities for training and development.

For youth participation, there is both a change of attitudes and expectations arising from technology as well as the provision of tools and networks for young people to have their voices heard and create change on the issues they care about.⁶³ **Particularly in places where civil society is closed or constrained, the ability to connect with like-minded people online increases the confidence and propensity of individuals to act in the physical world.**

vance and the tailoring of a participation offer to individuals.

As well as giving feedback, young people (particularly the millennial generation) expect to receive feedback on their engagement, contribution and achievements.⁶¹ This provides challenges to the way in which those supporting youth participation behave and engage. A SALTO report on competencies of participation workers - those supporting youth participation at the municipal level - lists communicating with young people (such as through email, social media, text or phone), the incorporation of feedback and learning, and sharing of impact, as key skills for today's professionals.⁶² **Ensuring that those supporting youth participation, particularly at**

However, the risks of abuse and harm through their digital engagement should not be discounted, nor the inequality in digital literacy, access and competency. While these risks may be prevalent in offline, physical world engagement, **digital participation does not yet have the protection provisions and infrastructure that traditional participation opportunities have established** (eg, background checks on workers, clear code of conduct, or professional, supported engagement). This will require changes to the digital education and public policy.

⁶¹ Crumpacker, M., & Crumpacker, J.M. (2007). Succession planning and generational stereotypes: should HR consider age-based values and attitudes a relevant factor or a passing fad? *Public Personnel Management*, 36(4), 349-369

⁶² SALTO Youth Participation. (2017). *Democracy Reloaded - Mapping the competencies of municipal authority workers that support youth participation*. Unpublished report.

⁶³ Farrow, 2015.



Conclusion

Youth participation is well-understood, the benefits of it are accepted, and the profile of young people as a specific public policy group has been seen through the rise in youth policies, councils and emphasis on youth relevant issues.⁶⁴ **The involvement of young people in decision-making is a process, occurs at multiple levels, and is about the sharing and distribution of power.** While it doesn't, by virtue, have a specific set of values, it is rooted in human rights.

In 2018, the external environment in which participation is occurring is increasingly challenged by a wave of populism and nationalism across Europe. Young people are attracted to such parties and individuals – often anti-establishment, fostering a renewed sense of identity, and connecting with them on the issues that matter to them. **It is increasingly difficult for governments and traditional power brokers to achieve the change – at the**

scale and speed – that young people are demanding. The problems are often more complex due to globalisation and require multilateral collaboration – particularly on issues like tax, climate change, inequality, and security or natural resources.⁶⁵ Young people are impatient for change and the inability of governments to respond adequately and swiftly enough is a root cause of the problem.

Despite a “proliferation” of participation structures and significant investment in youth policies and programming, the evidence suggests that this may not be sufficient.⁶⁶ Young people are disillusioned with traditional forms of democratic engagement and participation in decision-making. This raises large questions about the conceptualisation of youth participation that dominates popular discourse and the practical opportunities for youth voice in public policy, services, and projects. **As a community focused on participation, are we**

⁶⁴ Youth Policy Labs, 2015.

⁶⁵ United Nations. (n.d). Global issues overview. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/global-issues-overview/>

⁶⁶ Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015.

being as effective as we would like? Most metrics – including youth-focused indices – suggest we have work to do.

The lack of engagement of young people in formal participation structures could be linked to the distance people feel from change – particularly with *old power* institutions. **A rise and channelling of *new power* – power that is “open, participatory and peer driven” – is changing the way individuals interact with institutions, campaigns and the world around them.** This is not simply about campaigns and activism – plenty of institutions can adopt *new power values* and models of business that harness the wisdom, creativity and skills of the crowd. To adopt a *new power* mindset, institutions need to trust people – particularly young people – and genuinely want to involve them to a much greater extent in processes and the real decisions that impact their lives. In this, there should be stronger recognition of less structured social movements alongside traditional youth organisations and structures.

The digital space creates new expectations and demands. The tools available have the potential to radically transform the way that citizen engagement in communities and civic life occurs. This will require an upskilling of those facilitating and supporting participation – and greater digital education to overcome the risks and vulnerabilities that young people face. For decision-makers, digital communications are a necessity and will require a changed narrative as well as a changed medium if policy debate is to attract young people.

In uncertain times, **participation practitioners must be clearer on the desired outcomes of youth involvement.** Opportunities that are both limited to a small selection of people or that offer only modest influence on decision-making will not be sufficient. Participation must be open to different voices – from young refugees that are new to the continent to those youth that are tempted by the politics of the far-right.

Finally, there must be a relentless focus on **why** youth involvement in society and civic life is essential. For young people this must be through meaningful engagement; for governments, this must be to address the fundamental challenges they face.



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