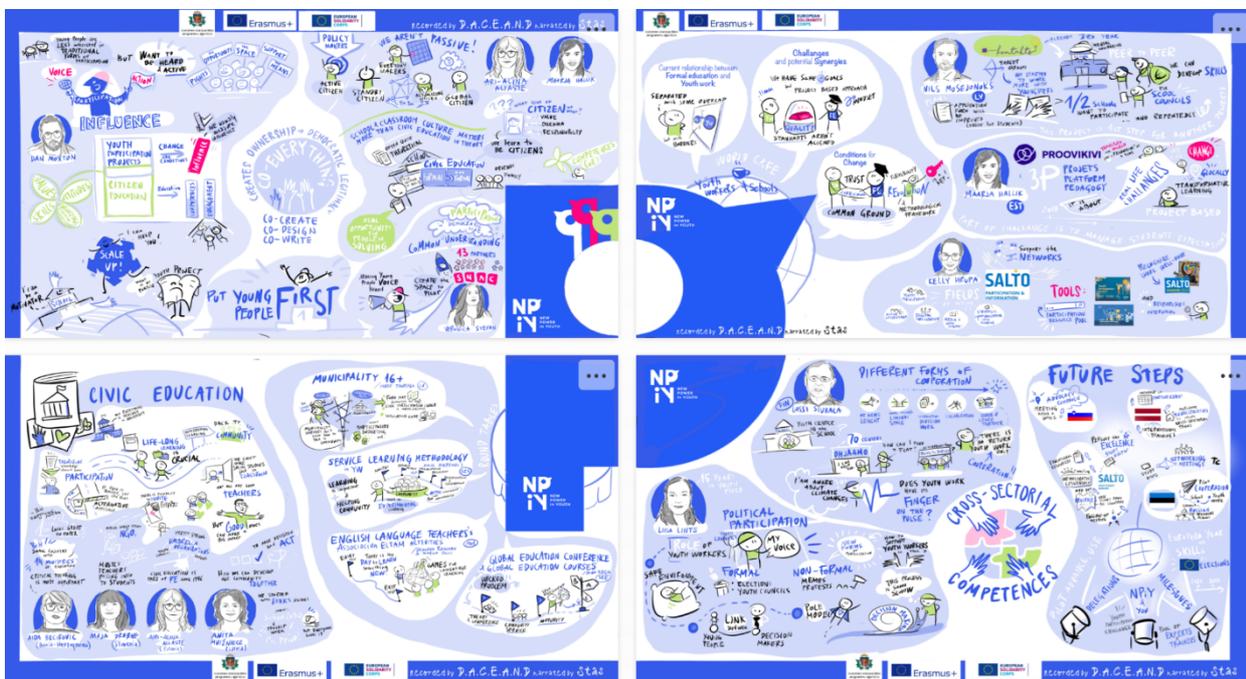


Cross-Sectoral Forum on Youth Participation in Democratic Life

28 November - 1 December 2023, Jūrmala, Latvia

Report Summary



The summary provides an overview of the key points and main ideas of the Forum. It serves as a quick reference, highlighting the main findings and essential concepts, while the report itself delves into the specifics and supporting details.

For a more in-depth understanding and to access the detailed information

[Check the full Forum Report](#)
[Watch the Forum Video Playlist](#)

Context

European countries have a diversity of approaches reflecting the richness in which youth participation is perceived. The Cross-Sectoral Forum on Youth Participation in Democratic Life has been designed as a vibrant space of learning and exchange focusing on **strategies for cross-sectoral collaboration among youth participation and civic education sectors** and sharing best practices aiming to support youth engagement.

The main aims were to:

- contribute to a shared understanding of youth participation in democratic life in both formal and non-formal sectors - what are the main concepts & approaches,
- create a space for mutual learning - including practices connected to school education & civic education citizenship as well as youth work sector & youth participation,
- identify key competences to advance cross-sectoral cooperation,
- inspire professionals from both sectors to identify avenues for working together and potentially develop joint projects in the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme,

The Forum was organised in the framework of New Power in Youth Strategic Partnership between several National Agencies (NAs) for Erasmus+ & European Solidarity Corps and SALTO Resource centres. Hosted by the Latvian NA, it brought together 40 experts from three countries (Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia) and a European region containing the Western Balkan countries (supported by South-East Europe SALTO Resource Centre).

Youth participation & Civic education

Democracy could be described as a work in progress, yet, too often, it can be for granted. Nurturing democracy is a must, and it takes many shapes. Youth participation and civic education are among the best-known options to equip and empower citizens in general, and young people in particular, with the right tools in order to make informed decisions and be actively involved in the democratic processes.

The Cross-Sectoral Forum on Youth Participation in Democratic Life was set up to bring together the worlds of youth and school education and to create long-lasting synergies by better understanding that youth participation and civic education are, essentially, two sides of the same coin.

Youth participation in democratic life is about individual young people and groups of young people having **the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support** to freely express their views, contribute to and influence societal decision making on matters affecting them, and be active within the democratic and civic life of our communities' (Youth Participation Strategy, SALTO PI).

Civic education (also known as citizen education or democracy education) can be broadly defined as the provision of information and learning experiences to equip and empower citizens to participate in democratic processes. As such, civic education is an approach that employs a range of different methods and is often used in combination with other participatory governance tools. (CIVICUS - Civic Education Toolkit by Jennifer Riethergen-McCracken)

The keynote speech of dr. Dan Moxon, based on the analytical paper prepared for the Forum - [“Youth participation in democratic life, youth participation projects and citizenship education - are they all the same thing”](#), addressed the connections between the youth and civic education sectors. Providing examples of what are the differences but most importantly, the commonalities between the two sectors. His presentation and paper provide a strong basis for understanding the main concepts and propose ways for further cooperation.

Youth participation in democratic life is about young people's ability to exercise their rights to influence and shape our communities and societies through either expressing their voice to decision-makers or by taking action to create positive social change. This relies on young people having the necessary competences to engage in democracy as well as on the environment, which should provide them with opportunities to do so. Citizenship education' is a term used in formal education to refer to educational activities that enable young people to develop the competences required to engage in democratic life. The primary goal of these projects is often to enable learners to have the necessary knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to then go on and engage in democracy throughout their lives.

In order to advance the agenda of both sectors, youth sector / non-formal education actors and formal education actors seeking to collaborate around youth participation and citizenship education should recognize that:

- youth participation in democratic life is a term referring to the way young people behave and interact with democracy,
- there is a distinction between youth participation in democratic life (the behaviour) and 'youth participation projects' (initiatives that support the behaviour and young people's interaction with democracy),
- citizenship education and youth participation projects are distinct but closely connected and overlapping concepts, since both seek to promote young people's participation in democratic life,
- citizenship education primarily encourages young people's participation in democratic life by developing the competences of young people,
- youth participation projects encourage young people's participation in democratic life by changing the conditions and possibilities around young people, and/or supporting young people's learning,
- experiential learning methods are identified as one of the more effective methods for influencing young people's democratic behaviour; non-formal methods can be delivered in both the formal and the non-formal sectors,
- when non-formal learning methods are applied to democracy, they require learners to actively engage with democracy. This means there is significant overlap between learning and active involvement.

When developing cross-sectoral education projects, it is important to consider and agree carefully if the priority and short-term outcome are to a) develop young people's competences or b) enable young people to influence/effect some sort of change during the project. These two priorities are not mutually exclusive, but at a project level, it is important to be clear about what sort of change or outcome is

realistically expected at the end of the project. In the longer term, both priorities will contribute to promoting participants' participation in democratic life.

Old and New forms of Youth Participation

Alina Allaste and Maarja HALLIK dived deeper in two complementary speeches on how youth participation is evolving, how new generations are expressing themselves, the challenges of the global society, theory versus practice or the importance of walking the talk for a healthy and vibrant democracy.

Democracy reports show that there is a democratic crisis under development. Young citizens are not that interested in traditional forms of participation (especially in political participation) while public action becomes more personal with new forms of expressing oneself due to social media and the presence of global issues in everyday lives. Also, there is a need to rethink governance and participation to allow more flexible and effective approaches to actually engage citizens and young people.

Some of the most participants' reflections on the topics above:

- Young people should not be expected to participate just like older generation; there is a need to ensure proper spaces that allow them to express themselves
- Consistent support and mentoring are needed to develop a disposition of enablement & empowerment with an ethical background
- Adults (professionals working with young people) need to build skills on how to engage young people in decision-making processes.

Cross-sectoral Cooperation

Participants' "collective intelligence" was put to good use through the World Cafe method, being engaged in effective conversations, generating ideas, being creative and transferring grassroots experiences. The results below reflect the main findings as expressed by the participants throughout the three rounds, each round focusing on a particular topic:

- **Current relations among formal education and youth work** need an open mind and heart. Sometimes, it might be perceived that formal education has "more power", but both sectors' goals are similar when it comes to youth participation. When cooperation happens - the "magic" happens as well, and the ones that benefit the most are young people and communities.
- **Exploring challenges and potential synergies.** Youth work and formal education have differences in the quality delivered, approaches taken, or even in the rhythm of the activities and the program life cycles. Coming together is not systematic and it takes effort to reach the desired synergy. More experiential learning needs to happen in both sectors. The competences need to be translated into the "common language" so that active participation is recognised and turned into valuable life skills (teamwork, problem solving, dialogues).
- **Conditions to improve cooperation.** Youth work and formal education have common ground and the same goals when it comes to developing democratic values. They both need to address each other's values and build trust in order to build a more systematic cooperation. Youth work may have a great impact on society, but often, the general public has little understanding of what it can offer. Relationships can be improved either by a top-down (from the ministry or

public authorities) or a bottom-up approach (just doing numerous projects to increase the recognition of youth work). Personal and professional development programmes addressing how to avoid burnout among youth workers and teachers are needed. Cooperation is not only about needs but also about what each has to offer.

Civic education programmes for young people

"Civic education is for everyone!" However, the national realities show that visions may differ from one country to another. An interactive panel explored four perspectives coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia, aiming to find the way to bring civic education closer to every young person. The panellists presented the various national curricula models, stressed the importance of supporting teachers in an effective manner and looked into the cooperation among the civic sector and formal education.

Citizenship education is part of national curricula in all countries, being integrated into the primary and secondary level curriculum with various content depending on each national reality. It is delivered in schools through three main approaches: as a stand-alone subject, as part of another subject or learning area, or as a cross-curricular dimension.

However, while, in principle, civic knowledge is well taken care of, it does not necessarily translate into active participation. Actual participation is below average compared to other countries, and in-school participation has been experiencing a downward trend. Civic education cannot be done in the classroom "bubble", there is a need for more efforts that transform theory into real world actions.

Competences for cross-sectoral participation

Dr. Lasse SIURALA from Aalto University mapped the various forms of cooperation, from silos to synergies, offering real-life experiences and a clear framework organised into three elements to understand how to strengthen collaboration: 1) organisation and management, 2) capacity and competencies and 3) youth engagement.

He also addressed the inherent cooperation risks. In order to successfully to navigate among them in such endeavours he advocates to keep in mind the core values of youth work, such as non-formal learning "a learner-centred and practice-based learning process which emphasises intrinsic motivation" or the usefulness of knowledge and critical thinking (rather than objective knowledge and memorising) which aims at identity growth, social change and integration into society.

Liisa LINTS from the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research and member of the Estonian Association of Youth Workers presented the main findings in the research carried out for her master thesis "The willingness of the youth worker to address issues related to political participation with young people". She stressed the role of youth workers to ensure a safe environment for young people while acting as a link for them to the decision makers, barriers such as tokenism and lack of meaningful involvement of the young people or the need of the youth workers to be actively supported.

Programmes for youth participation and cross-sectoral cooperation

Inspiration plays a key role in unlocking creativity while boosting motivation. During the Forum seven organisations that already managed to achieve results presented their results starting from the basic

cooperation principle. Learning from what is already working out there, with initiatives led by different types of stakeholders, was an excellent tool to get more engaged, confident and motivated participants in order to work together. The seven presentations are available in the [Forum Report](#).

Main conclusions and recommendations

The youth sector, together with non-formal education and formal education actors, works with the same target group (young people) and is engaged in activities to promote youth participation in democratic life. This means there may be opportunities for practice sharing, collaboration and enhancing each other's work. **Democracy does not stop or start at the doors of the school or the doors of the youth projects. Both sectors are part of a wider democratic culture and exist within a democratic environment that encompasses our society.**

The Cross-Sectoral Forum on Youth Participation in Democratic Life was a source of inspiration to share practical experiences and just a first step on many to come but reach in looking for ways to cooperate among the youth and education sector. Based on this first experience there were drafted 10 recommendations on how youth participation and civic education can collaborate effectively:

- **Human resources training** is a must. Investment in the professional development of civic educators and youth workers to enhance their capacity to deliver effective youth involvement should be linked with providing resources and training on innovative, engaging methods, facilitating discussions on complex issues, and creating relevant learning environments developing real social life skills.
- **Integrated curriculum and practical activities** are needed in order to ensure that young people not only learn but also exercise democratic principles, human rights, and active citizenship from an early age. Integrating civic education into various subjects and connecting it with youth participation activities carried out by various youth structures is essential to emphasise its relevance to real-world issues.
- **Experiential learning** provides hands-on experiences and develops a real-life learning culture that allows young people to engage in civic activities. Simulations, election simulations, debates, and community service-learning activities can offer practical experiences that enhance civic understanding and skills.
- **Encourage and support youth-led initiatives** within schools and communities in order to empower students and young people to take on leadership roles, organise events and activities, or address local issues. This has both the merit of enhancing their civic skills and demonstrating the value of their active participation.
- **Acknowledge and validate** the contributions of young people in civic engagement by celebrating their initiatives, projects and achievements to reinforce their importance in the community, offering a sense of belonging while being engaged in something meaningful and valuable.
- **Incorporate digital and media literacy** into civic education and youth participation. This way, the young people and students will be equipped with the critical thinking tools to evaluate information, navigate digital platforms responsibly, and engage in constructive online discourse.

- **Actively develop partnerships among schools and youth organisations.** The collaboration of schools with civil society organisations, NGOs, or youth groups, in addition to formal education, can provide students with exposure to diverse perspectives and real-world civic challenges while bringing additional resources and opportunities.
- **Promote critical thinking and emphasise critical thinking skills** within youth participation and civic education. Encouraging young people and students to analyse information, question assumptions, and develop their own informed opinions helps them to become active, avoid manipulation and aid in discerning facts from perceptions in democratic processes.
- **Mind the global and European perspectives,** while the new generations are more sensitive to global issues such as climate change or artificial intelligence that seem to have a bigger impact on their daily lives. Acknowledging the interconnectedness regarding global issues and fostering the understanding of the European institution's role highlights the importance of active participation in both local and European contexts.
- **Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of civic education and youth participation programs and adapt them to address evolving challenges and societal changes.** Feedback from young people, students, youth workers, educators, and other stakeholders to ensure the relevance and impact of civic education and youth participation initiatives are required for continuous evaluation and adaptation.

Last but not least, it is important to stress that there are so many narratives, each anchored in their specific context, that makes it difficult to identify a single meta-narrative. These conclusions and recommendations are a good starting point, however the continuation and focus of the discussions should be the way forward in the following years, both within New Power in Youth Strategic Partnership and at national level with the support of all participating stakeholders.