



NPiY

NEW POWER in YOUTH

Youth involvement in decision-making: a matter of when and how, not if

Research on involvement of
young people in decision-
making of National Agencies
(2024)

"New Power in Youth SNAC is a Strategic Partnership between nine National Agencies for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps and three SALTO Resource Centres, coordinated by Estonian National Agency".

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

 **EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS**

New Power in Youth, 2025

Researcher: Artūrs Pokšāns

Co-researchers: Gianluca Rossino,
Wendla Johanna Schaper,
Seoyoung Park

Proofreading: Luisa Tölkebüroo |
Luisa Translation Agency

Design: Refleks Design Agency

Photos: Adobe Stock

We extend our gratitude to the participants - institutions and young people, as well as co-researchers, who dedicated their time and energy to contribute to knowledge building on this topic. We are also grateful to all National Agencies and other institutions for continuous efforts in involving their target groups in their decision-making.

This research was conducted in 2024, as part of the "New Power in Youth" Strategic Partnership between National Agencies and several SALTO Resource Centres. It contributes to one of its aims "Supporting the strategic development of youth participation in democratic life on local, national and European level". It also aligns with Aim 5 of the Youth Participation Strategy – to encourage National Agencies and other actors to involve young people when making decisions about the management and implementation in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes, and to take a quality approach to youth participation when doing so.

This publication was co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

Contents

Youth involvement in decision-making: a matter of when and how, not if

Research on involvement of young people in decision-making of National Agencies (2024)

Summary	4
Introduction	6
Methodology	9
Cases	12
Analysis	14
Challenges.	15
Culture of participation.	21
Looking forward: Recommendations and strategies for the future.	25

Summary



What is this research?

This report describes the results of research on youth involvement in decision-making in the work of several National Agencies and SALTO Participation & Information that took place throughout 2024.

What is youth involvement in decision-making?

In this report, youth involvement is defined as the **active participation of young people in decision-making processes** related to the operations of the agency or its components as well as their engagement in activities designed to support and enhance participation.

Why is it important?

The involvement of young people in decision-making is crucial to achieve Aim 5 of the Youth Participation Strategy: **“to encourage National Agencies and other actors to involve young people when making decisions about the management and implementation in the programmes and to take a quality approach to youth participation when doing so.”**¹ By achieving these goals, agencies can serve as an example for other state and international institutions on how to improve youth involvement in decision-making, subsequently improving both their operations and the quality of life and well-being of young people across Europe. This facilitates young people’s right to participate in all decisions affecting them as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child² as well

as in the Youth Participation Strategy and other relevant documents. Finally, this research serves to improve the quality and efficiency of National Agencies by addressing their main target group – young people – and improving both the ability of National Agencies to involve young people and the ability of young people to take part in the work of National Agencies.

How was the research conducted?

Five separate cases were chosen to explore the existing practices of involving young people in the decision-making of National Agencies and SALTOs in various ways, taking place during 2024. This was done through participatory qualitative research to explore the questions from the perspective of agencies and young people themselves. The research is based on 22 interviews with agency representatives and six interviews with young people as well as fieldnotes from two events where the lead researcher organised workshops and similar activities. The results were qualitatively analysed and compiled in this report.

¹ Youth Participation Strategy <https://participationpool.eu/resource-category/youth-participation/youth-participation-strategy>.

² Convention on the Rights of the Child. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.



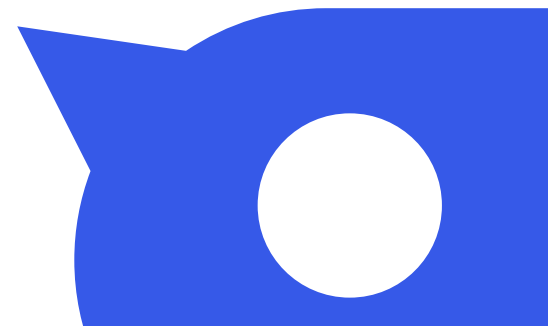
What were the main findings?

The findings show that while participation styles differ, key elements such as **caring about the needs of the young people, flexibility towards their other commitments and an inclusive approach towards the recruitment of participants** are necessary to achieve and maintain long-term involvement from young people. Participants noted various challenges affecting young people's involvement in decision-making but worked to overcome them and sought solutions. The impact of youth involvement varied across contexts, ranging from young people being consulted to being part of permanent decision-making groups.

Successful participation relies on **finding common ground between agencies and youth**, as both sides sometimes feel hesitant about cooperating due to a lack of experience with youth involvement in this fashion. A noteworthy example of how this has been overcome is allowing young people to manage the agency's social media, giving them creative control while adhering to a few guidelines.

Current agency practices emphasise **exploring activities over establishing long-term strategies**. Meaningful youth participation is **valuable for improving agency work** and should be seen as a **collaborative effort** rather than a service provided to young people.

Successful strategies for youth involvement:



Introduction

"I have a personal experience of being very young myself, when we occupied an old factory premises in the town where I was living. And then we came into contact with a factory owner and the local authorities on developing a place for young people in the small town [...]"
(Agency representative)

As outlined in a review of youth involvement in programme decision-making from 2014, it is a useful tool that not only enhances the work of agencies but also promotes the motivation of young people and builds their skills.³ The concern with youth involvement has given rise to a significant volume of research based on concepts such as adultism⁴ as well as the development of programmes such as ReSPECT.⁵ This indicates that **involvement in decision-making is a current and urgent issue for youth work and crucial for young people themselves**. In practical terms in an EU context, youth involvement is complicated by the presence of differing interpretations on participation and involvement. On the one hand, there is participation as defined in the EU policy documents and organisational strategies, and defined as "horizontal priority of the programmes". In the Youth Participation Strategy, what is emphasised is "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".⁶ On the other hand, there is the participation as it happens: the way youth workers, team leaders, National Agency staff and young people themselves embrace and embody the process of involving young people in the decision-making process throughout the agencies discussed in this report. As **participation is always a multifaceted concept that avoids simple definitions**, when confronted with questions of how it is realised in their daily work, many of the interview participants ended up falling back on the first definition, going on extended explanations of the importance of integration, adequate budget, and other familiar refrains.

3 Akiva, T., Cortina, K.S. & Smith, C. Involving Youth in Program Decision-Making: How Common and What Might it Do for Youth?. J Youth Adolescence 43, 1844–1860 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0183-y>.

4 Corney, T., Cooper, T., Shier, H., & Williamson, H. (2022). Youth participation: Adultism, human rights and professional youth work. Children & Society, 36, 677–690. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12526>.

5 Michail, S., Grace, R., Ng, J., & Shier, H. (2024). Cultivating child and youth decision-making: The principles and practices of the ReSPECT approach to professional development. Children & Society, 38, 1451–1470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12812>.

6 Youth Participation Strategy, 2022.

"There's participation, and creating this means support, et cetera, you need budget, and you need time to do these two things. You might not have the right skills in the team, but then it means, okay, I can subcontract. But subcontracting takes budget, but not just that, it's not a matter of being able, and it's not just about being willing and able to put money into such a thing. But also, first acknowledging where the gaps are in your own knowledge and then finding people that you can work with. And finding the time to liaison with those people in the middle of your tasks, which of course for SALTO is a priority but for national agencies who are tackling four horizontal priorities plus their own internal priorities, that might be influenced by their national policies. Plus, for each key action and each sector, there's vertical priorities and so on and so forth." (Agency representative)

In this report, we look at some examples from national agencies and SALTO PI (agencies) to explore meaningful youth involvement and how important it is in decision-making in the work of National Agencies, SALTOs and other relevant institutions. The second goal of the research is to identify the lessons learned for other institutions. The cases we draw upon in this report come from several European countries and also include SALTO PI as an international institution.⁷

Country	Institution	Case example
Germany	National Agency	Youth Advisory Board
Latvia	National Agency	Junior trainer programme
SALTO PI	International	Youth Participation Strategy Steering group
Estonia	National Agency	Involvement of young people with no experience in the programmes
Estonia	National Agency	Involvement of Europepers network

These particular cases were chosen to explore different ways how young people are and can be involved in the activities and the different forms their participation can take. These cases have different target groups, aims, and scales of young people being able to impact decisions, all to show the diversity other institutions can implement in their daily work. A more extended description of the cases can be found below.

⁷ For sake of anonymity in the report, we refer to all cases as agencies.



We extend our gratitude to the participating institutions for their involvement. As mentioned above in a somewhat paradoxical manner, while “doing participation” is something all participating institutions manage to achieve (if to varying degrees), talking about it seems more complicated. Nevertheless, members of the respective institutions agreed to be interviewed for the research and help us recruit young people to participate as co-researchers.

This research builds upon previous work conducted within the strategic partnership ‘New Power in Youth’,⁸ where 11 institutions (National Agencies and SALTO PI) were interviewed in 2022 about their practices for involving youth directly in their decision-making, resulting in a mapping report and aims to address particularly Aim 5 of the Youth Participation Strategy: “to encourage National Agencies and other actors to involve young people when making decisions about the management and implementation in the programmes, and to take a quality approach to youth

participation when doing so.” This research strives, among other things, to offer various models and learnings so that YPS stakeholders can “pilot models for youth involvement in decision-making within national programme management and implementation”⁹ (Youth Participation Strategy, 2022). This report was provided to the researcher to guide their work.

The report consists of four parts. First, I describe **each case** in detail to help readers orient themselves in the report. After that, I turn towards the **challenges** experienced by the research participants in their work with young people while also providing young people’s opinions on the issues, where relevant to the analysis. After that, I turn towards what I call, borrowing an expression from a research participant, **the culture of participation** to explore the ways in which agencies still succeed in facilitating the involvement of young people in decision-making processes. Finally, I conclude with a **summary** of the main points and **future recommendations**.

⁸ Mapping of Direct Youth Involvement in the Work of National Agencies Report (November 2022).

⁹ Youth Participation Strategy, 2022.

Methodology

The research is based on interviews with the involved parties as well as data gathered over several events in the form of discussions and presentations.

Interviews

The research is based on 16 semi-structured interviews with professionals from the respective organisations as well as six interviews with young people (22 interviews altogether). Due to the need to explore how the current projects impact youth participation, the interviews were carried out at the start of the year 2024 and towards the end of the year to compare the differences and lessons learned. This provided an **opportunity for reflection**—a crucial aspect in working on enhancing youth participation.

Participants in interviews with agency staff

The interviews of agency representatives were carried out by the principal researcher without the involvement of young people. The interview participants included both those who work directly with youth involvement as well as representatives from agency management to gain the perspective from both institutional level and those with direct experience. Interview data was transcribed and coded using qualitative data analysis software. The transcribed material is used throughout the report to illustrate interview fragments. These fragments have not been edited aside from a few cases where it was done to significantly improve their readability. In all other cases, fragments have been provided in unedited form to avoid changing the way of speaking of the participants and to draw attention to places where participants are hesitating, expressing emotions or other relevant information.





The data was managed by the principal researcher to maintain the anonymity and privacy of the research participants. After the conclusion of the research, the data will be destroyed. Upon request, the principal partner accepted anonymised transcripts.

The first batch of interviews was carried out from March to May 2024, while the second took place from October to November 2024.

Peer interviews

The research also included peer interviews conducted by four young

people who participated as co-researchers. They were involved in different project stages and capacities, including preparation of the research, development of the methodology, and interviewing. The choice to involve young people in the research process achieves two goals. First, this directly enhances the quality of the data; using a participatory approach **allows researchers to gain deeper insights** into young people's perspectives than interviewing or surveying allows. As it is **young people's right to participate in decisions affecting them**, this extends to research about them. Second, youth involvement in the research allows us to further the **empowerment of young people**, making sure that their voices are heard throughout all phases of the project, including evaluation.

The themes of the staff interviews were built upon the topics already explored in previous research:

- Overall context of the respective organisation
- Exploration of the current experience involving youth in activities and/or decision-making
- Good practice examples from the respective organisation
- Questions about the hopes and expectations for the current project (at the initial interviews)
- Reflections on the past months and how the project went, what worked, and what could be improved (at the review interviews)

Events and discussions

Data was collected at several events where the research data was presented to the involved parties. In these events, one online and one in-person, additional data was gathered from professionals as well as young people through workshops and discussions. The data gathered from the events was in the form of notes and co-created documents, which were later used in the analysis process as described below. The events were chosen on the basis of accessibility and appropriateness for the research topic, being either an event where young people could reflect on the questions proposed by the researcher or a large-scale event with various events for professionals, which allowed the researchers to observe how these questions are discussed by the relevant parties in a social context.

Ethics

All data processing in the project complies with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation), and the applicable complementary data protective laws and regulations of the European Union (EU), the European Economic Area (EEA), and their member states.

Information about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation that can be withdrawn at any time without any consequences, and the processing of personal data was given to young people and professionals either in writing or verbally.

If possible, interviews were carried out in physical meetings but most of the interviews were done using Zoom. Upon consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data is pseudonymised, with personal information not included in the final report.

The collected material consists of both field notes and audio files. Written material, such as transcribed excerpts from interviews, is stored on a password-protected computer, and physical printouts from the interviews are stored in folders in a locked cabinet. The transcripts were only accessible to the researcher in question. Collected material will be destroyed after the end of research; however, where national policy calls for archiving, transcribed and anonymised interview data will be prepared for archiving. Individual participants will remain anonymous in the publication of the material, for example, when quotations are used.

Cases

Germany, Youth Advisory Board

The board was created in 2019 and currently consists of 20 young people 16 –29 years old. The purpose of the Youth Advisory Board is to advise on the questions of youth policy and strategies. Board members have formed working groups on topics that they consider important, such as Sustainability, Inclusion and Diversity, Awareness, and Access to and Application of the Programmes, among others. As pointed out by co-researchers, all working groups work in a self-organised manner on self-defined tasks and goals. Some develop their own projects, e.g. workshops, others identify weak points in the programmes and write position papers on the necessary improvements, and others work closely together with the working groups of the National Agency (JfE). The Youth Advisory Board meets (at least) two times a year. These meetings are organised by JfE, and members of the Youth Advisory Board are always welcome to contribute to the programme, either by suggesting ideas in advance or spontaneously during the meetings.

Latvia, junior trainer programme

In Latvia, the case was to be centred around preparing an opportunity for a junior trainer as well as developing an institutional system for junior trainers. The

plan was to hire one junior trainer (aged 18+). However, this plan was adjusted during the year as the activity was folded into the national training of trainers where young people lead training activities as well as participate in developing and organising the training process.

SALTO PI, Youth Participation Strategy Steering group

The group consists of six youth representatives, all over 18 years old with programme experience from different European countries, working together with six stakeholders (European Commission, SALTO Inclusion & Diversity, ERYICA, RAY network, and aNational Agencies) to monitor, promote and review the Youth Participation Strategy as well as influence the decision-making of SALTO PI on youth participation.

Estonia, youth working group

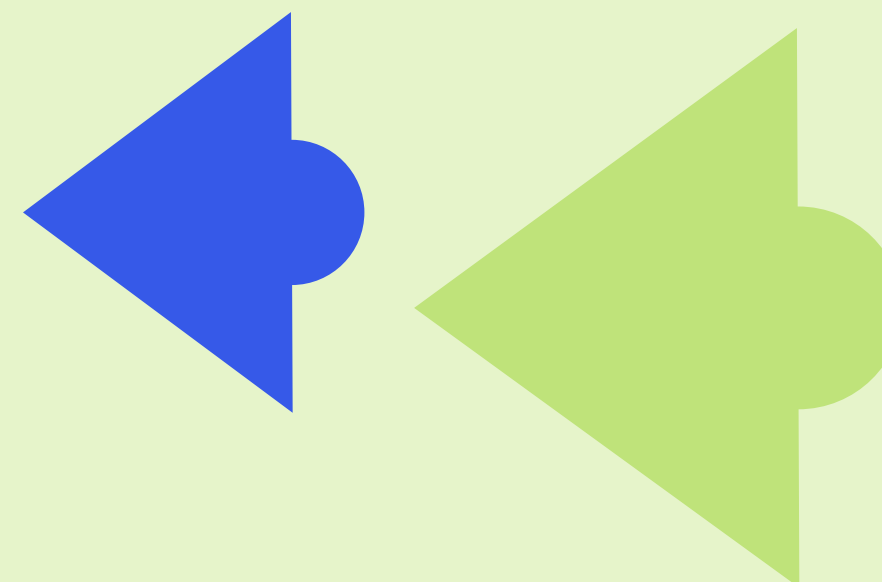
This case is different from the others in several ways. First, it took place as a single event over two days in March 2024, rather than over an extended period of time. Second, this is the only activity that was geared towards young people without

any experience with programmes. Nineteen young people participated in the event aged 14–18. The event was described as a “prolonged focus group with fixed topics” to learn more about the needs, preferences and obstacles of the young people to adjust the strategies and plans of the national agency.

Estonia, Europeers

This group represented the widest age range as it included 11 young people aged 14–30. The activity lasted for the duration of 2024 and included different activities geared towards the activities of the national agency and decision-making processes through training sessions:

“So, the first one was how to be a Europeer and the second one was a meeting with the Latvians. The third one was the Europeers Festival and then we had this, kind of, how they could be useful for the agency and what kind of feedback they have. And in addition, we had a weeklong, uh, Latvian youth festival that we attended to with, uh, informational activities, so they could just put the agenda together on what we offer to young people throughout the week.” (Agency representative)



In this case, participation in decision-making is mainly realised through the empowerment of young people and gathering feedback on the process of training and participation.

The young people involved in the cases of this research are simultaneously a very diverse and incredibly narrow group of young people. On the one hand, the participants vary greatly in age, and on the other, they are often part of the group of young people who are already active participants in youth programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. This has a very particular impact on the diversity of the groups. Although the interviewees are very concerned with making sure the groups are as diverse as possible, this is very complicated to achieve due to structural constraints such as lack of available transportation and other infrastructure or the precarious nature of the contemporary labour market for young people. Both of these contribute to reduced participation due to the inability to be present at the level expected from most programmes.

Analysis

Age

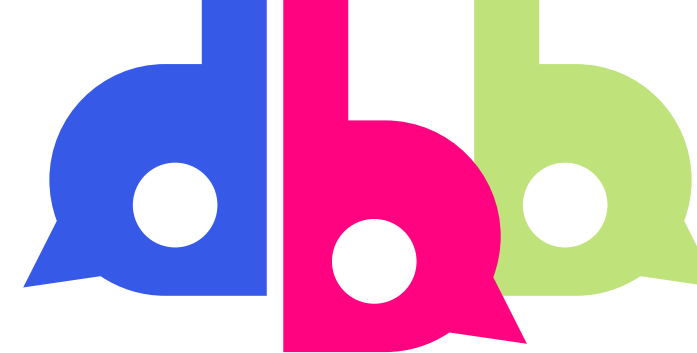
Research data indicates that while age is an important variable to consider when thinking of group dynamics in youth participation, it in itself is not a determinant of whether the young person will choose to participate in decision-making processes. In different agencies, the age of participants varied from 13 to 30, indicating that other factors might play a more important role than the age of participants.


"But the age gap is quite, quite big. The youngest one is 14 and the oldest was 30. So, it's a huge, huge age gap. "

"The youngest was 16 and the oldest 26, we have a good variety and you could be up to 30. We have a good diverse group in terms of experiences and backgrounds." (Young person)

"I would say that from my age group, not that I'm like super old, but also how they react on social media or when we talk on online, if they put the thumbs up to the message, it means that they are coming or not or what does it mean? And like we had discussed it, if they have to write back like yes, I'm coming, or thumbs up is enough for me to understand if they are coming or not." (Agency representative)

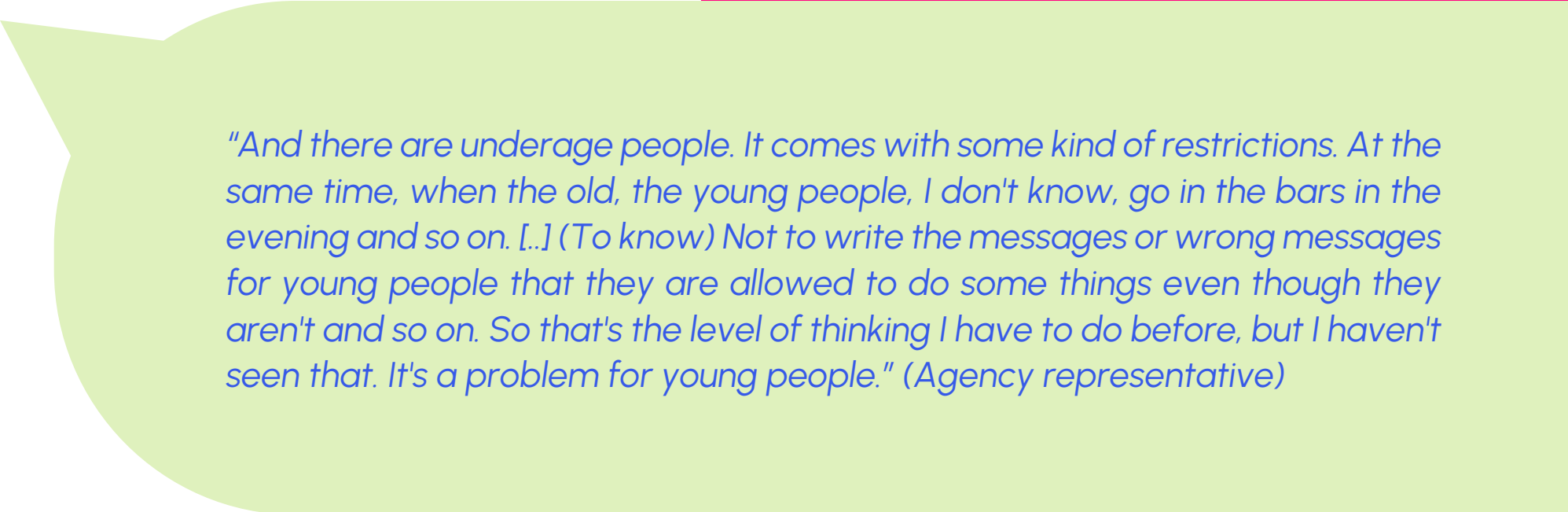
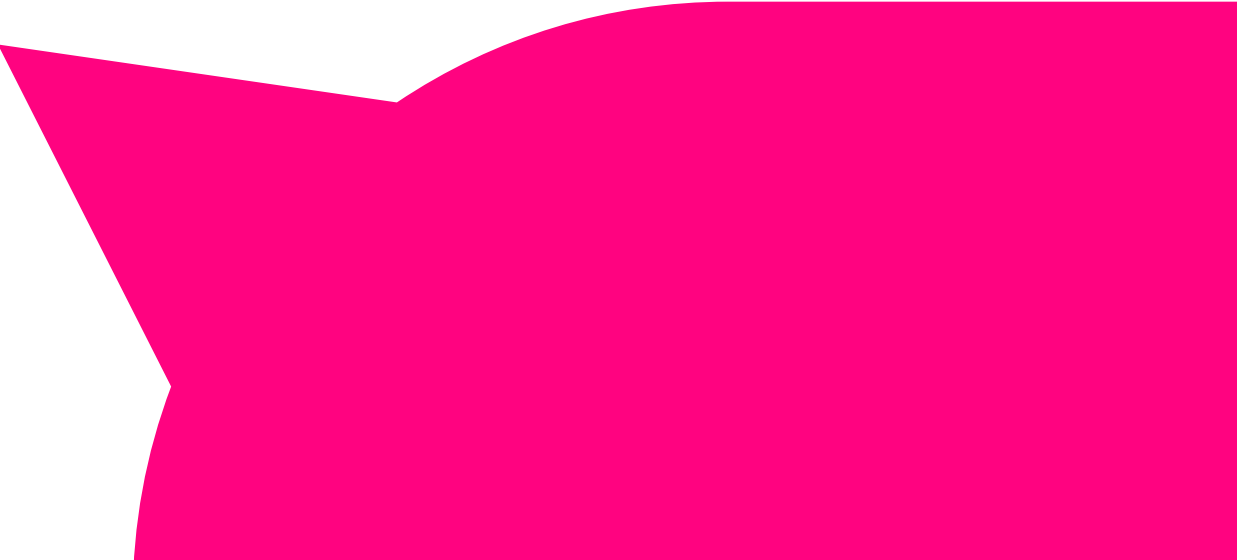
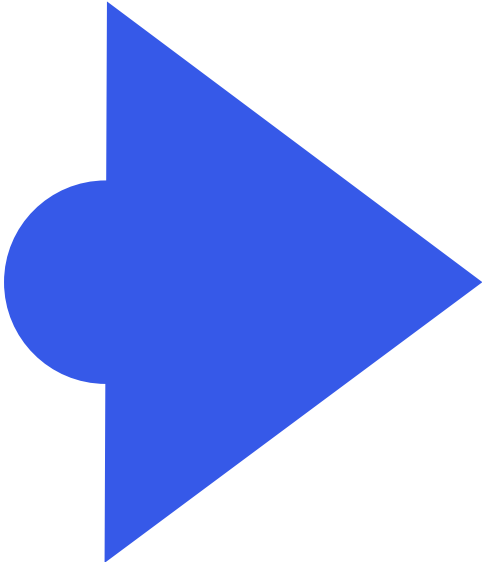
This indicates that the other factors discussed in this section should not be seen as a consequence of participants' age as adolescents or young adults but **rather as arising from the wider experience of young people**. For example, a university student may be unable to make time for activities due to their lecture schedule and work commitments and an adolescent teen who is still at school is preoccupied with their own studies as well as extracurricular activities.





The age of the participants, however, **does impact the structure of the groups**. Interviewees acknowledged the benefits of groups that included participants from different age groups; however, as remarked by several of the interviewees, management of different age groups poses another challenge for the facilitators.

Young people however saw this as a valuable experience and appreciated the added diversity that was brought to the groups through wider age ranges. Overall, for future projects, it would certainly be recommendable to maintain a wide age range while carrying out careful planning for how to manage the different needs of particular age groups.



"And there are underage people. It comes with some kind of restrictions. At the same time, when the old, the young people, I don't know, go in the bars in the evening and so on. [...] (To know) Not to write the messages or wrong messages for young people that they are allowed to do some things even though they aren't and so on. So that's the level of thinking I have to do before, but I haven't seen that. It's a problem for young people." (Agency representative)

Challenges



As mentioned above, most research participants were aware of the challenges to youth involvement and often reflected on both their experiences and the overall situation. From the interview data, I have identified four main obstacles to youth involvement in the decision-making of the work of National Agencies and SALTOS work.

Busyness

Following from the previous report, youth busyness again appeared as one of the main concerns. In almost every interview, research participants reflected on how attracting young people to any kind of participation is challenging due to the number of activities most of the young people involved in these mechanisms are already engaged in.

"For example, maybe one thing that we really didn't pay so much attention to before was that we were aware that the young people are very overwhelmed with all their work and school tasks and activities they are doing. But maybe we didn't realise specifically how hard it is for them to take part in any kind of activity the agencies are organising if it's happening even in the afternoons or in the evenings after a working day or school day." (Agency representative)

"[N]ext to the private life and, and school life, basically, so, it's the hobby education circles, going to theatre circle or music school or it's also sports. It's also all kinds of project-based activities. For the summer, there's the youth camps and youth work camps." (Agency representative)

This observation is in line with wider trends in Western society where young people are expected to be constantly busy and under perpetual and increasing social acceleration¹⁰. Participation in decision-making here emerges as yet another responsibility that the young person has to make time for. This is especially relevant when considering which young people take part in decision-making. As discussed above, **the ability to participate is predicated on having sufficient confidence and resources to take part**. This, however, puts agencies in direct competition not only with other youth work activities but also with many other activities such as extracurricular activities at school, vocational education, etc. While this is true for most youth work, I believe it is even more pronounced in the case of decision-making due to the unique profile of the young person necessary for this level of commitment and engagement.

This makes the Estonian youth working group an important case to consider as it provides an alternative approach by having a singular event to gather feedback instead of expecting an impossible commitment. This does not exclude other, more long-term forms of participation, which may exist in parallel or develop from this type of event.

Finally, it is important to point out that as outlined by young people during one of the events, **the reluctance to participate does not always stem directly from busyness** but rather from the expectation that participation will be a form of volunteering. This makes it more difficult to justify for working young people, who must choose additional activities carefully due to obligations in their workplaces as discussed in the following section.

¹⁰ Cuzzocrea, Valentina. "Rooted mobilities' in young people's narratives of the future: A peripheral case." *Current Sociology* 66.7 (2018): 1106-1123.

Remuneration

Aside from one of the cases, involvement in decision-making meant engaging in long-term commitment for the young people. Due to this, payment or compensation arose as one of the major questions for professionals when planning their activities. Some of the participants agreed with the argument made by Carlton et al.¹¹, among others, that **volunteering comes at a cost**, where choosing to spend time on volunteer activities means not having that time for employment or education, which directly impacts not only the future of young people but also structures who is able to participate in the activities in the first place:

These two excerpts illustrate the individual concerns that professionals had about paying young people for their contributions. While the first interview represents the more common approach among the agency representatives, the excerpt from the second interview shows the concerns that were also mentioned by other participants; however, this was the only instance where the participant discussed it in such a direct way. The issue of how remuneration should be done was ever-present, and research participants were keenly aware of the risks involved in making paid positions available. These concerns may serve as an explanation for why it was crucial for other participants to insist on the word compensation rather than payment, maintaining the separation between employment and volunteering. The notion of compensation also avoids the situation described in the second

Interviewee1: "It's kind of recompensation for the time they spend at meetings."

Interviewee2: "I think it's 100 euros per meeting and we refund their travel costs and board and lodging is given. And we are also helping them if they need to stay away from school or from their work, we give them support and they will also get a YouthPass¹²." (Agency representatives)

"They can always say no because it's on a voluntary basis and I'm super against offering young people money if it's not the job because then we are sending out the message that we are just offering the money. So, because in my sense you can always do some kind of working groups or community building and you can set the goals, but what happens if they don't reach the goals? Because that can always happen." (Agency representative)

fragment where the payment to the young person is tied to some specific goals that need to be reached. As the end goal becomes not the creation of strategy or participation in a set number of meetings but rather involvement itself, it allows the professionals to sidestep the question of achieving the set goals and rather concentrate on maintaining involvement and participation.

¹¹ Carlton, S., Nissen, S., Phillott, J., Sapsford, A., & Carpenter, L. (2022). 'The ability to change stuff up': volunteering as a young person within established organisations. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(5), 652 – 667. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2033188>.

¹² Youthpass is a European recognition instrument for identifying and documenting learning outcomes that are acquired in projects under the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. <https://www.youthpass.eu/en/>.



At the same time, these decisions were also significantly impacted by **structural constraints**, which often meant that regardless of the wishes of the agency staff, paying young people was either not possible or required different creative solutions.

Fragmentation

During the initial interviews, one of the main concerns for several agency representatives was the perceived fragmentation of national agencies as a structure. Several interviewees expressed the opinion that while they are convinced of the potential impact of their work on these involvement mechanisms and were able to attest to the impact it was already having on their own work, they were unsure **how to make sure this becomes part of a wider trend within the organisation:**

"I don't know. I rather have a feeling that the things we do when others do are then somehow more ambitious, or better, at least within the agency. I think we have that Advisory Council that has young people. I, for one, as a participation messenger, never found out who the young people were there. I could, of course, be more active in my search, but I thought it might still be on the agency's part to maybe offer me [the chance] to participate in this Advisory Board as well, if only to get acquainted." (Agency representative)

"Certainly, what we are doing now, and what I have already mentioned, is that we want to involve young people on a more systemic level. In other words, let it not just be from project to project or from one active colleague who has contact and established contact with young people to the next." (Agency representative)

*"Oh, well, in youth involvement the main challenge is always the capacity to understand the systems and processes and the uh, in this conversation, uh, be fully aware of the context, so we have to take care that we don't overcomplicate or we don't, uh, also, umm, and we take care that they are informed enough to be part of the conversations, and to be able to consult them in, uh, also their participation and make sure that they understand the role, of course, at my level where we have the conversation."
(Agency representative)*

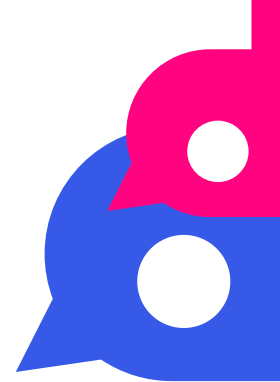
Agencies were often described as complex, multi-centred institutions where implementing any kind of meaningful change in the whole of the organisation would be difficult. This represents a particular challenge to be addressed when scaling up the activities due to the need to work with each department separately in order to enact change.

The maze of administrative tasks

As described above, even though the young people had positive experiences with participation, their experiences were often limited to particular parts of the decision-making process. As pointed out by several agency staff members, there is considerable difficulty in involving young people in the more administrative tasks of decision-making as these processes are often inaccessible due to the required knowledge base and capacity to deal with administrative and legal jargon, which is not something young people are always yet capable of doing.

This issue was also raised in the previous mapping report where the complexity of involving young people was described as being due to the inaccessibility of administrative processes. Young people themselves did not raise this as a problem as often and it did not appear in interviews. However, during some discussions at the events they reflected on how they feel that their involvement was more **restricted due to the way information exchange is organised** in the agencies.





Young people are also aware that this is the result of wider frameworks and the way work is organised in state and international organisations. They were aware that the administrative burden they encountered was a consequence of how programmes such as Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps are organised rather than only seeing it as an agency-level complication. However, this can sometimes serve as another reason to continue their involvement in order to **try to change the larger systems** and make them more accessible not only to young people but also to the wider public.

Diversity

In the previous mapping, maintaining the diversity of the groups was juxtaposed with choosing young people who are able to participate due to their knowledge and skills. This time, we can observe that while this still forms a part of the concern, there are additional dimensions that are considered by the agency staff members. The central concern for research participants was not whether diversity is necessary but rather how to

"I also struggled with how to avoid our own bias in the selection procedure. I couldn't make it, for example, anonymous because I wanted people to apply either by writing or by sending a video. Video is not anonymous. And text applications would also have to be gone through. Unfortunately, the diversity of the group is something that has to be thought of more in the future and how to combine this part of paying them for their time." (Agency representative)

ensure it. Participants mainly described **their attempts to ensure that diverse people are able to participate in the projects** while trying to avoid choosing their role for them, especially when considering the selection strategies.

The participants not only focused on discussing the challenges but also **recognised the value of involving diverse young people**, giving examples of how their perspective had changed thanks to contributions from young

people reflecting on their experiences. The ability to learn first-hand about the ways young people are a diverse group was **seen as the most valuable contribution**, which illustrates that in some cases the focus is kept on how young people can be useful to the agencies rather than the other way around. This represents a significant change in the way young people and their participation are traditionally viewed (for example, participation as a way for young people to develop skills) and can serve as a basis for more equal and effective collaboration in the future.

Research participants identified several ways in which they are working towards overcoming the complications they face. In one case, the professional pointed out that in order to overcome the difficulties of recruiting young people, **we can build on the systems already established** by other relevant institutions:

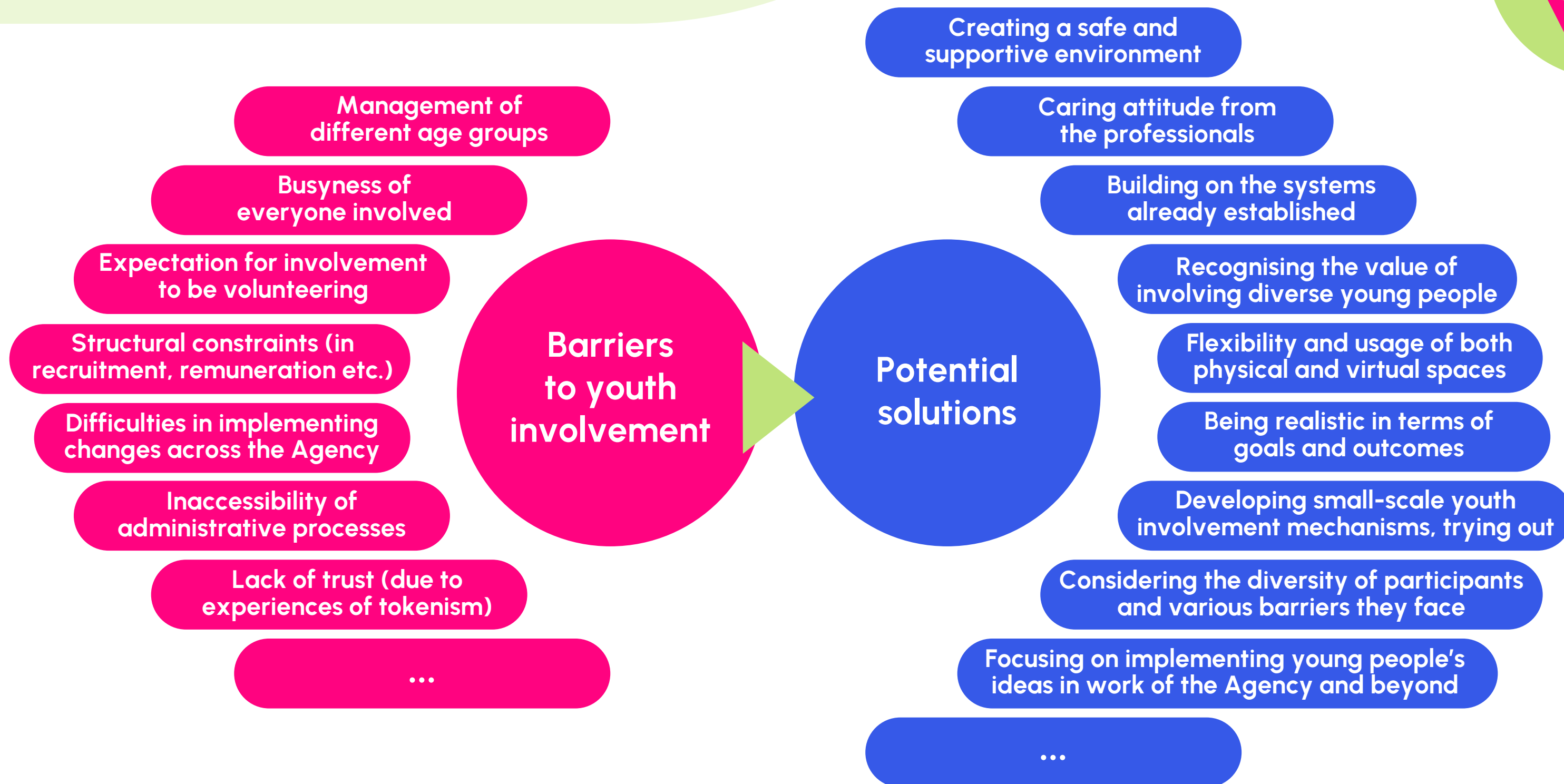
Building on established tools, the professional was able to include questions about the different needs of their participants without needing to invest a lot of time and effort in figuring out the way how to do so.

One of the concerns that, however, could not be overcome without careful planning beforehand was the involvement of people with disabilities for whom the accessibility of the physical environment is of utmost importance. This point can be extended to wider considerations of inclusive activities, such as digital environment and reliance on visual tools, methodology that requires active verbal participation, etc. As several research participants remarked on this point, I feel it is still important to emphasise that regardless of the type of approach (online, offline, hybrid) the agency takes, **it is crucial that the needs of different participants, including participants with disabilities and various barriers, are considered.**

"Basically, when I was creating this idea of this target group, when we were creating this like profile of who we are expecting there, then I was cooperating with my colleague who is responsible for monitoring basically. [They are] working with also the RAY research¹³ and also making all kinds of data analysis of the programs and of our work as well. [...] I pretty much took the idea from there a little bit, changed it to make it a little bit more understandable for people who are from outside the program, and I put it there for them to select." (Agency representative)

¹³ The RAY Network – Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes – is an open and self-governed European research network. <https://www.researchyouth.net/>.

Research insights: overcoming barriers to youth involvement



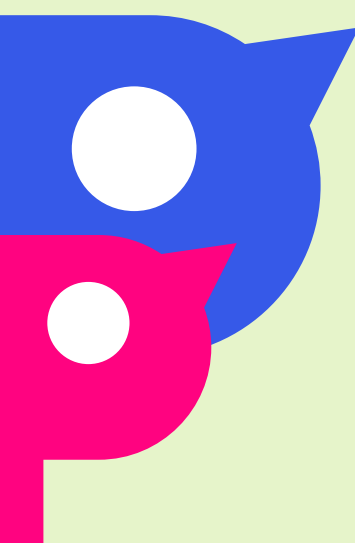
Culture of participation

Most institutional representatives were well versed in both the theoretical and practical implications of youth involvement in decision-making, referring to policy documents, research or specific concepts such as culture of participation. All this illustrated that the individuals involved in developing solutions for youth involvement were highly qualified for the task as well as personally dedicated. In this sense, even though most research participants referred to the need for support from management and preferably the respective ministries, in most cases, mechanisms of youth involvement in decision-making **were developed on the basis of actions of individual professionals** rather than as institutional change implemented from above.

All research participants **were aware of the importance of youth participation in decision-making**, with differences appearing only in what participation is, whether it counts as meaningful, and how successful the respective agency is in achieving youth participation in their work. In most cases, participation was either perceived as a goal in itself or participants referred to EU-level strategies or policies to explain the significance of participatory decision-

making. The attitudes towards youth participation in decision-making were also significantly impacted by the work the agency had already been involved in, with more experienced agency representatives generally being more cautious about what could be achieved compared to those who had started working only recently.

Overall, despite the often-voiced self-criticism, the research data shows that all of the involved agencies **are managing to create a culture of participation**. Research data indicates that creating a space for involving young people is a result of **creating a safe and supportive environment**. As young people have often had either no previous experience or an experience coloured by tokenism and lack of meaningful involvement, **establishing a place where the young person feels comfortable to attempt to be involved is paramount**. It bears reminding, however, that although several of the participants expressed a need for larger structural changes, interview data shows that this change is already taking place in the institutions due to the activities developed and supported by individual staff members. This is a crucial step as it sometimes also involves **taking ideas from young people and implementing them in the work of agencies**, which transcends the usual narrative of them being involved in some mechanisms. Involvement in decision-making here appears as **a result of experimentation** and small-scale activities as outlined in the following sections.







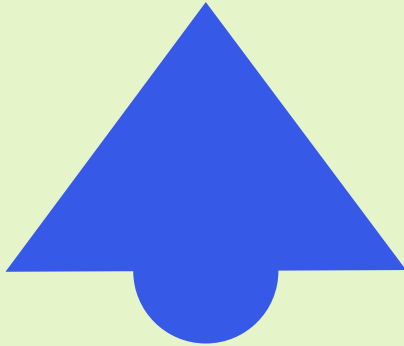
Importance of support and investment

Attention to detail and willingness to invest time and effort characterised all of the reviewed cases. This was recognised both by young people and professionals, where young people expressed their appreciation for the way the activities were run, and the professionals emphasised the importance of a supportive and inclusive approach while acknowledging the challenges arising from this approach.

"The atmosphere was nice and we had a very, very cozy place where we stayed. We had, like, the sitting area and throughout the event it felt very like comfortable. It didn't feel like we were pressured or anyhow. "(Young person)

"So, most of those things that we're organising, we really have to do them in a convenient time for the young people and not for us as the agency workers. So, our project writing camps– these bigger events what we are doing for the target group of young people anyways are happening. I tried Friday afternoons until Sunday, but there are also other things that we are doing [...] "
(Agency representative)

All research participants reflected on how young people were often initially hesitant to participate, which the professionals saw as the result of wider society, where **young people are accustomed to not being listened to or being included only in a tokenistic way**. However, it is important to recognise that the lack of trust from young people was not overcome through establishing strong procedural structures but rather through a **kind and caring attitude from the professionals**. Youth participation in decision-making was realised in cases where the professionals were able to move past statements about responsibilities and opportunities and instead meet young people where they are and invite them to participate in the way they find possible. As most of the young people participating were already overwhelmed with other activities, providing them with yet another activity would have added to the pressure, therefore diminishing their enthusiasm.

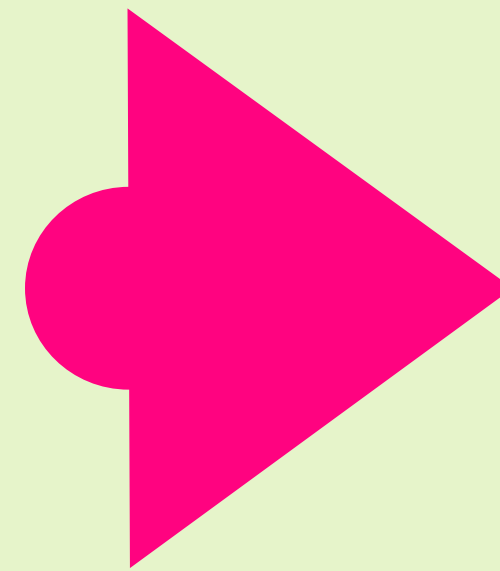


Meeting young people where they are instead of insisting on a strict form of activity emerged as crucial for making the activities work. One of the ways this was achieved was the **effective usage of both physical and virtual spaces**. Taking advantage of the flexibility and personal support awarded by virtual meetings without dismissing the importance of face-to-face meetings, the organisers were able to make sure that their participants were as supported as possible.

"So, there is probably like two types of communication, at least in my experience, because the official way, of course, is you write an e-mail or maybe you phone the office. But being in many events and working with them, I have like 3-4 groups, WhatsApp groups that we communicate through. So, for example, I remember quite often, with the national coordinator who works in the NA, we would just text or call each other and talk about what has to be done. So, quite an efficient form of communication." (Young person)

"We used to have a lot of those debates, where we are discussing the projects, assessing the quality and also having this direct feedback from the representatives of youth organisations [..]. But over time, this actually has decreased this kind of open debate, what we used to have in the past, because of the digital systems basically being developed over these 10 years so much, that now most of this evaluation committee work is done digitally. [..] Everything moves very fast around us, but it has also had its downfall in a sense, that we are still including young people into the evaluation committee, but it's more that there is less dialogue among the evaluation committee members." (Agency representative)

From an institutional perspective, the use of online communication was both a support tool and a cost-cutting measure. Representatives recognised the value of available tools while remaining mindful that the process should not be made entirely virtual, as this may bring unexpected consequences.



While the representatives stayed mindful of the need to support young people through digital means to avoid centring the activities around only a few events they would be able to finance, they were also aware that remaking activities to be completely digital would have a negative impact on involvement. For this reason, the mixed approach, with some events taking place online and some offline, was preferred by participants on both sides, representing a good example of a skilful and dedicated approach.

Significance of the bottom-up approach


Although the research participants maintained their critical perspective on whether they are achieving anything in their work, the research data indicates that in most places, participation is indeed enhanced and improved through the attempts described in this report. The aforementioned level of knowledge and skills possessed by the research participants allowed them to find different creative strategies to achieve the necessary changes within their organisations. While it is important not to disregard the role of organisational strategies, the overall trajectory seems to be reversed, where the professionals offer certain activities, which then start to affect the organisational level rather than the other way around. Therefore, when considering how youth involvement in decision-making might be realised in other agencies, **we should recognise the value of small-scale experiments** that may have an outsized effect on the wider organisation.

Looking forward: Recommendations and strategies for the future

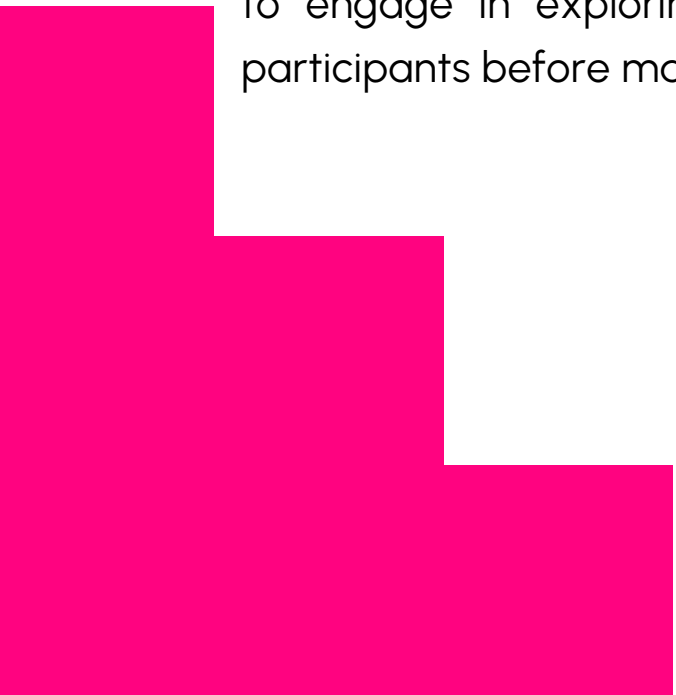

This research explored how meaningful youth involvement in decision-making is understood and realised within the work of national agencies. The data indicates that while the forms of participation vary between cases, the key elements are shared: **care, a willingness to try, organisational and/or individual level flexibility, and an emphasis on broadly rather than strictly defined participation.** The participants recognised many challenges that impact the ability of young people to participate in the decision-making process but worked towards overcoming them and kept finding different solutions. The level of impact young people could have on decision-making varied between countries and cases from consultations to being a part of decision-making groups and boards.

This ability to realise participation rests on the ability to find points of connection between agencies and young people. Both sides acknowledged that it was **at times difficult to cooperate due to previous experiences and deeply held beliefs.** Young people sometimes felt disillusioned about the effectiveness of their involvement, while the professionals were unable to see how to involve young people in a meaningful way. In these conditions, the successful cases are those who find points of cooperation that both sides can agree on. An example here is involving young people in redesigning, managing or creating content for the social media accounts of agencies.

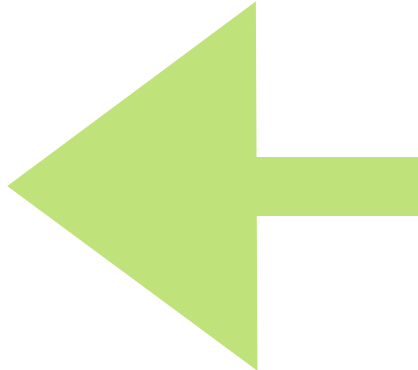
"And they also— it was up to them what they wanted to share on social media. We had the project Instagram page; it was theirs. We never had the password. Each [cohort] sent the password to the next. Of course, there were a few rules on what they could not publish. But apart from that, they had full creative control of the social media dissemination of the project." (Agency representative)



While young people may sometimes feel less confident to immediately jump into evaluating project applications, and in the same way, agency professionals may feel apprehensive about ceding that much control, social media is something that both sides can recognise as a field where young people are more likely to understand what needs to be done to make the posts attract the attention of the target groups. As the perception that young people are savvy internet users is shared across Europe, this approach is one that can certainly be a starting point for other national agencies. Nevertheless, it is important to stay mindful of how this might be a shared assumption about young people rather than a shared trait of every young person. Young people can also be reluctant to use social media or engage with this side of agency work in general, so we should always remember to engage in exploring the capacities of their participants before making any decisions.






It is also important to realise that the form of participation is going to be different depending on the young people present, their capacity to participate, and myriad other factors. For this reason, it is important to be realistic in terms of goals and **avoid trying to ask either too much or too little** of young people who are participating. While in one of the cases, youth participation is now a well-established process with young people who are willing and able to contribute on the level of consulting national level agencies and other state institutions, in another case, the agency starts from learning about the needs of young people through an event that takes place over several days and proceeds to feed the information gained from this event into their work. In order to avoid creating activities that have no uptake in the target group, this type of **consultative event** is something that is recommended for other contexts/institutions that are just starting to consider involving young people. Places with established mechanisms for youth




involvement could also work towards establishing consultative boards and various other mechanisms with each increasing level of involvement and participation.

Current approaches taken by agencies show that **it is more crucial to start exploring activities** rather than work towards establishing long-term strategies concerning participation, as by demonstrating that participation can be realised, regardless of scale, the likelihood that activities grow into a larger culture of participation increases significantly, unlike the development of long-term strategies, which were not seen to have this effect. In all cases, the participants reported that in realising their chosen activity, they left a positive impact on the daily work of their national agency.






Finally, for all participants, meaningful youth participation was something that had value in itself and **contributed towards improving the work of agencies** rather than something that needed to be provided to the young people for their benefit. This forms the final key component in deeming youth involvement in decision-making a success. By moving away from a paternalistic approach where the agency is the provider of opportunities and funding and towards realising **youth work as a participatory endeavour that brings benefits to both sides and to wider society, the question of youth participation in decision-making becomes not a matter of if, but when.**



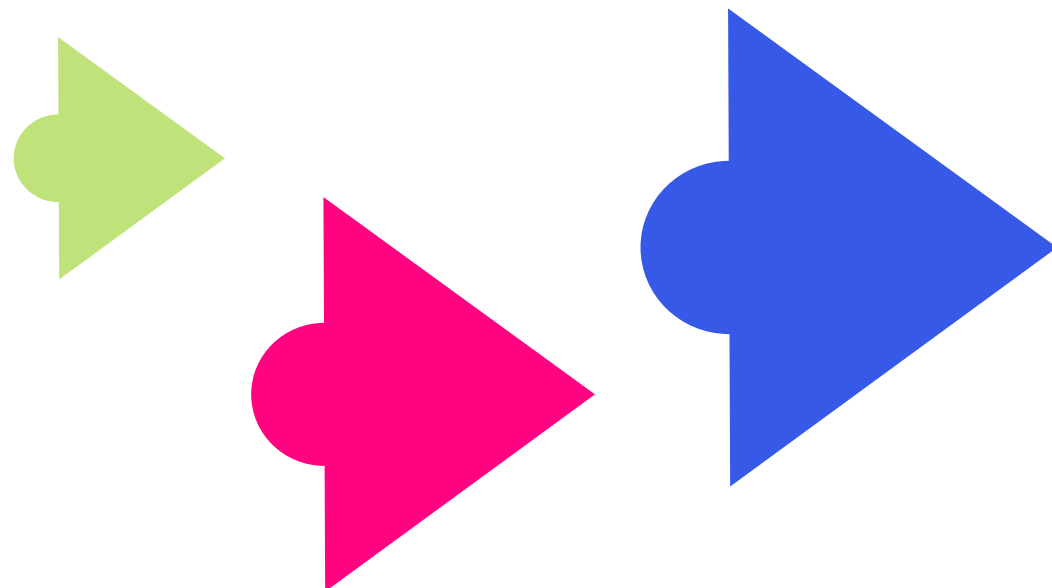
Turning towards follow-up and future research, several interviewees expressed the sentiment that they lack information on whether their activities are working. In order to explore this, it would be beneficial to study the impact of inclusion on programmes and carry out impact assessments of inclusion activities within national agencies. This research could include both a quantitative and a qualitative component that would evaluate the tangible outcomes of youth involvement in decision-making processes. By collecting actual numbers, such as changes in programme effectiveness, participant satisfaction, and engagement level, as well as firsthand accounts from young participants and agency representatives, the research could provide concrete evidence of the benefits of youth participation. This approach could establish a robust case for youth involvement in NAs, demonstrating not only its theoretical importance but also its practical impact on agency operations and decision-making outcomes.

Reflecting on the way youth participation in decision-making was realised in writing this report, it is important to acknowledge that it was subject to many of the same challenges described in this report. We also struggled with the busyness of the young people, rediscovered the importance of using the right tools for communication, and struggled to deliver on time and explain things in a way that others could understand. Involving



young people as co-researchers during programme evaluation, mapping or other research-related activities proves something that operates similarly to their involvement in programmes as described above.

The potential for improving the research is immense but requires careful planning, additional resources, and a certain rethinking of the usual research process. In the future, when involving young people as co-researchers, more attention should be paid to ensuring that effective and timely support is available, adjusting the schedule of research to allow for more a flexible and extended approach to planning, and allowing more time and resources for organising the training part of the participatory research to ensure that diverse young people can take part in the research process. This is not to disregard the work invested by the co-researchers in this report as their participation was exemplary. I thank all my co-researchers and I am grateful for their contributions to this report.



And how would you
involve young people
in decision-making?



NPIY
NEW POWER in YOUTH

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
EDUCATION AND YOUTH BOARD