

# Everchanging Youth Participation in Everchanging Societies



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## Introduction

Things have always changed; change is part of life. But in the past decades and years, the pace of change seems to be picking up, and the Covid-19 pandemic showed us how fast things can be changing all of a sudden: literally from day to day.

How does youth participation work in these everchanging conditions? And how can youth work and youth workers help young people to take part in public matters in a meaningful way? Does the everchanging nature of the world around us mean we also need everchanging participation?

These are questions for today's article in which we will dig deeper into (1) what youth participation is, (2) with what aims it can happen, (3) in what environments it can happen, and (4) how all of that can help us keep on track when supporting young people in meaningful youth participation activities.

In the end, let's see if everchanging participation is needed for our everchanging societies, or if dotting the i's and crossing the t's can be the way to go.

## Everchanging Youth Participation?

In recent years, youth participation became somewhat of a mantra for young people, youth workers, and politicians alike. When youth participation is taken up, it is assumed that it needs to be good for young people (it does not), it is assumed that everyone knows what it is (not everybody does), and most importantly, it is assumed that all people around the table understand the term in the same way (they usually do not). Let's have a look at all these assumptions and point out how they can be damaging to youth participation even before any activities begin, or any policies are drafted.

**Youth participation is not a panacea.** Youth participation, just as any other domain, can lead to great results and impacts, as much as it can lead to young people being stuck in structures which do not fit their needs, expectations, or skills, and young people subsequently pull back, or worse, stay in the structures only to be conditioned to participate in activities that bring no results and that they do not believe in. Such participation is not good for young people and assuming any and all participation opportunities are necessarily and inherently "good for young people" can do more harm than good in these cases.

Youth participation is mentioned so often and in so many contexts that people who know its meaning often simply assume all other people in the (online) room know the meaning as well. Worse still, those who do not know the meaning may not even know they do not know it: Youth participation is about young people taking part, right?! Even in the more fortunate situation when all people in the room have some definitions of youth participation in their minds, it often is the case that these definitions differ based on different contexts people come from, but also simply based on the different angles they perceive youth participation from. I do not need to point out, that putting together young people, youth workers, and local politicians into one room would bring very different perspectives, and hence also very different meanings of youth participation to the table.

For all the reasons mentioned above, **defining what we mean by youth participation is crucial, and should not only be done here in a written text, but should also be done at the beginning of any youth work supported activity on youth participation, at the start of any youth participation process itself, and definitely at any policy debate.** Because without knowing what the youth participation means to all involved, youth participation can seem to be an everchanging term with no concrete meaning. And crafting youth participation to the needs, skills, and expectations of young people is

immensely hard when everyone who is involved uses their own understanding and standards to youth participation.

## **Define Youth Participation!**

Setting theoretical debates aside (for good overview of various approaches to defining the youth participation have a look at the study by [Crowley and Moxon 2017](#)), in this article, **youth political participation will be understood as active, voluntary engagement of young people from their citizen perspective in any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere** (Bárta, Boldt, Lavizzari forthcoming). Four bullet points can be distilled from the abovementioned definition to make it clearer and more down-to-earth. Crucial aspects of youth participation are (Bárta, Boldt, Lavizzari forthcoming):

- individuals' activities and action (as opposed to passive consumption, for instance),
- the voluntary nature of the act (as opposed to activities commanded by law, for instance),
- individuals' roles as citizens (as opposed to the role of policy makers, for instance),
- politics and the political system as the target of the act (as opposed to personal goals, for instance).

Now, in this frame of reference, we can already see that not all formats which are sometimes labelled as youth participation will live up to the definition above. For example, a youth parliament can only be considered a youth participation mechanism as long as it influences the public domain, for instance by making decisions on local matters. If a youth parliament only exists for the sake of existing, it ceases to be a youth participation mechanism and transforms into a role-play exercise in which young people have a chance to experience procedures of representative democracy. That is a great opportunity to have, but it is not a youth participation opportunity, and should not be presented as such.

As you can see, even this rather straightforward definition is already helpful in sorting out activities which are genuinely participatory, and those which (despite using participation-related titles) are not. Once you start debating it in your local youth club, you may discover there are many nuances, and push your own understanding of participatory processes. You may also discover that young people also have different ideas as to what counts as youth participation and settling down these differences can be immensely helpful in creating a safe and strong basis for further debates and activities.

As you can feel, this is just a beginning of the journey to deal with a seemingly everchanging concept of youth participation by having a really close look at what it stands for. In order to push forward, let's focus on the following important aspects of youth participation: aims of the participatory processes, and democratic environments in which the participatory processes take place.

## **Youth Participation towards What?**

One of crucial aspects of any youth participation process is its aim. Creating processes or mechanisms with no clear aim in mind is like building a house from the roof down: It simply does not work. There can be numerous concrete aims of youth participation: to influence climate change decisions on the national level (e.g., Danish Youth Climate Council, and Young professionals' participation in the Dutch Climate Agreement), to co-create mobile workshops (e.g., Vocational Labs, Estonia), to co-shape and co-design spatial development policies (e.g., Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning), to shape local youth policy (e.g., Gaia Municipal Plan, Portugal; and Thessaloniki, Greece), to establish participatory budgeting for young people (e.g., Cluj-Napoca, Romania), or to engage in constructive dialogue with

decision-makers (e.g., Deliberative Discussion Day, Finland; for details of all these initiatives, as well as many other, see [Borkowska-Waszak et al. 2020](#)).

In order to make aims of youth participation into a helpful tool rather than a confusing mess of concrete examples, let's focus on four broad categories into which youth participation aims can be divided (for further details see [Farthing 2012](#), and for further application to youth participation see Bárta, Boldt, Lavizzari forthcoming):

- **developing** young people,
- increasing **efficiency** of policies or practices,
- **empowering** young people,
- and delivering the **right** to participate to young people.

**Developmental aims of youth participation** are those which seek to provide young people with real-life experience and hence help young people to develop their skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values, in the youth participation domain. This is an important area, but it needs to go hand-in-hand with the abovementioned definition of youth participation, such as individual action and voluntary nature (i.e., not a compulsory frontal school course), and influence on politics or political system (i.e., not a simulation of parliamentary procedures, for instance). School parliaments that enable young people to really participate (and not only to passively be present to adults debating and making decisions), can be an example of a youth participation mechanism with developmental aims, but this type of aim is more or less explicitly present in many youth participation processes.

**Efficiency aims of youth participation** are those that wish to enable young people to provide their experience and expertise to improve policy decisions and policy implementation processes. This enables young people to become experts in some areas and help other bodies to develop such policies and procedures which best fit young people or some specific contexts young people have experience with. Youth advisory bodies working on various levels of policy, be it local round tables, or expert bodies of some ministries, are examples of concrete youth participation mechanisms aiming at increasing efficiency in different areas.

**Empowerment aims of youth participation** are those that seek to enable young people to make changes to the world around them. Power sharing and inclusive politics are two areas in which the empowerment aims are easy to see, as well as youth participation in decision-making. Youth-led initiatives, or youth commissions or councils, are all examples of youth participation activities aimed at empowering young people.

**Rights-based aims of youth participation** are such processes which focus on delivering the right to participate (as established by the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) as well as other documents) to the young people. In other words, youth participation aims at ensuring that all young people are able to participate in matters that concern them. Any initiatives to ensure voting rights of young people (e.g., lowering the voting age to 16), or quotas for young people in political processes, can be considered examples of rights-based youth participation.

The abovementioned broad areas into which aims of youth participation can be divided can also be combined and in reality, most of the youth participation activities will have aims from more than one of the abovementioned categories. Naming the categories of aims, it is possible you now realize that a youth participation process you have been engaged in for a long time has some explicit, but also some implicit aims that are present but not really talked about or pursued per se. Typically, such implicit aims can occur in the developmental category, as youth participation can have a potential to provide young people with new experience, skills, knowledge, and to challenge or confirm their values

and attitudes, but any other categories can hold implicit goals as well. **The more explicitly aims of youth participation activities can be named, the better these aims can be linked with concrete processes and mechanisms to achieve them.**

## **Youth Participation Where?**

When thinking and talking of youth participation, knowing how it is defined and what aims it pursue is crucial. But it is just as crucial to know in what environment the youth participation is to take place. As we have already mentioned, the world is changing, and we need to keep up with the latest developments. One of the ways to do that is to acknowledge that we are not living in one universal democratic environment, but rather in several democratic environments which to some extent coexist, and to some extent intertwine or overlap with each other. **If youth participation is to stand a chance of fulfilling its aims, the characteristics of a democratic environment need to be taken into account and processes within the youth participation mechanism tailored to that environment.** There are five different democratic environments today:

- **direct,**
- **representative,**
- **participatory,**
- **deliberative,**
- **and counter-democracy.**

**Direct democracy**, in short, enables citizens to directly vote on various decisions. Typical tools of direct democracy are the following:

- referendums (i.e., direct and binding vote of citizens on a specific question; for more have a look at a [resource from New Zealand](#)),
- popular initiatives (i.e., the right of citizens to propose their own ideas to politicians; you can read more on popular, or citizens' initiatives in [Alarcón et al. 2018](#), and as Switzerland is a country known for various mechanisms of direct democracy, for more information have a look at the [Swiss webpage](#)),
- recalls (i.e., the right of citizens to remove a politician from the office; to read more, feel free to visit [the US National Conference of State Legislatures webpage](#)),
- and town meetings (or town hall meetings, i.e., assemblies of citizens of a given locality in which they vote on budgetary and other issues directly; for a real-life example of town meetings, have a look at the [webpage of Vermont, US](#)).

**Representative democracy** is the most well-known format in which citizens elect representatives who are then supposed to protect their interests in political decision-making. This process usually takes place on many different levels in democratic societies, from local through regional to national and international (e.g., in the EU elections). In this case, the right to vote and the right to stand for elections (or to be elected to an office) are two major mechanisms which influence to what extent young people can participate. The age limits to voting in elections and/or standing for elections change over time as debates progress. In the European context, the trend to lower the age limits is the most visible, first from early 20s to late teens (usually from the limit of 21 to the limit of 18), and furthermore also to mid-teens (usually from the limit of 18 to the limit of 16), as is the case in Austria or Malta ([Bárta 2020](#)).

**Participatory democracy** is a combination of the direct and representative democracy approaches, as the citizens are the ones setting the policy agenda and the politicians are expected to deliver concrete steps towards implementation of various measures within the set agenda. In concrete terms, the following mechanisms are used within the participatory democracy environment:

- participatory budgeting (i.e., citizens decide on budgetary aspects in a given locality or policy domain, and the budget is subsequently reviewed and put in practice by elected representatives; for more have a look at [YouthPB website](#)),
- citizen councils (i.e., advisory bodies consisting of citizens; for a real-life example have a look at the [webpage of the Ministry of Health in Ontario, Canada](#)),
- public consultations (i.e., open consultations in which citizens can express their opinions towards various concrete topics, as is the case in the [Public Consultation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU](#), or in case of the [Irish Government consultation opportunities](#)),
- neighbourhood councils (i.e., a very similar format to the citizen councils, but linked and focused on a local level, such as the [neighbourhood councils in the Berlin Neighbourhood Management programme in Germany](#)),
- participatory planning (i.e., a process allowing citizens to come up with a plan to manage certain activities in a given area, as can be seen in [the example of “fisheries management plans” collected by GAP2 Project](#), or when [creating urban development plans in the Czech Republic](#)),
- and e-democracy (i.e., the tools which allow citizens to engage in participatory democratic activities online, such as e-petitions, drafting strategic policies on the local level, or proposing participatory budgeting initiatives; all of these and many other examples can be found in a paper by [Korthagen et al. 2018](#), and also in a paper by [Bartlett and Grabbe 2015](#)).

**Deliberative democracy** represents a shift in which not only voting (i.e., counting preferences of citizens), but also reasoning behind the decisions are explored in a process which demands citizens to come together, give each other reasons for their opinions, and together reach a conclusion based on an open debate. The main methods used in the deliberative democracy environment are the following:

- deliberative polling (i.e., a method in which a group of citizens is brought together, surveyed with respect to a topic that is to be explored, then briefed with further information, given time to debate different opinions, and then surveyed again to see where the citizens stand after the discussions took place; a rigid methodology has been developed by [Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy](#)),
- citizens' juries (i.e., *“Much like a jury in a legal case, a Citizens Jury will receive background information about the issue, hear expert witnesses, and then make a considered ‘judgment’.”*, says [Anu Pekkonen online](#)),
- and citizens' assemblies (i.e., bodies consisting of citizens who debate various topics and come up with recommendations for the policymakers, as was the case in [Ireland when discussing gender equality](#), or in [case of Germany](#), and you can read more in the paper by [OECD 2020](#)).

**Counter-democracy environment** includes all methods which aim at balancing the system of representative democracy, and in practical terms, these are:

- industrial strikes,
- civil society protests,

- parliamentary opposition,
- call-ins (i.e., disputing decisions of executive bodies for further scrutiny before taking effect; for detailed information, see [Monmouthshire website](#)),
- petitions,
- media coverage of public policies,
- engagement of social movements and NGOs,
- various forms of citizen denunciation (i.e., complaints and corruption whistleblowing mechanisms),
- scrutiny co-optees or experts-by-experience (i.e., inviting citizens to become actively engaged in controlling public policy design and delivery, as an example [the Kirklees Council](#) and various other towns and cities around the United Kingdom work with voluntary co-optees, and [Care Quality Commission in England](#) and [Mielen NGO](#) focusing on mental health and substance abuse in Tampere, Finland introduce the experts-by-experience).

Before we move on, it is worth sharing a great initiative called [Participedia](#) with all of you, as you can easily look for examples of all methods mentioned above, and find detailed information on real-life processes or activities, and even search for those which took place in your country. Needless to say, it is very much also worth for you to share Participedia with young people interested in participation!

## **How to Tailor Meaningful Youth Participation Activities?**

As you probably expect by now, **it is through a combination of the aims and the democratic environments that meaningful youth participation mechanisms can be designed.** Meaningfulness is achieved by supporting the young people in (a) explicitly naming their goals and aims and choosing such processes and activities that allow them to achieve these aims in (b) a given democratic environment. The table below showcases youth participation activities which fit various combinations of aims and democratic environments, however, it is important to treat these as an mere examples, since there are many other processes and participatory mechanisms which may fit these combinations. **At the same time, as mentioned above, aims can be combined and democratic environments can overlap, and therefore it is crucial to always approach each situation individually, and support young people in identifying such mechanisms which suit their needs best.**

Democratic Environments						
		<i>Direct Democracy</i>	<i>Representative Democracy</i>	<i>Participatory Democracy</i>	<i>Deliberative Democracy</i>	<i>Counter Democracy</i>
<i>Aims</i>	<i>Rights-based</i>	Voting in referendums, recalls, and other direct democracy mechanisms	Voting in elections	Official/state bodies representing youth	State-run consultations	State-led structures for dialogue between social movement representatives and officials
	<i>Empowerment</i>	Initiating referendums, recalls, and other direct democracy mechanisms	Running for office	Decision-making bodies representing or directly involving youth	Youth-led consultations	Youth-led structures for dialogue between social movement representatives and officials
	<i>Efficiency</i>	Youth advisory bodies supporting referendums, recalls, and other direct democracy mechanisms	Youth advisory bodies supporting elected officials	Youth advisory bodies suggesting and monitoring (youth) policies	Youth advisory bodies supporting public discussions on (youth) policies	Youth-led independent advisory bodies suggesting and monitoring (youth) policies
	<i>Developmental</i>	Structures enabling youth referendums, recalls, and other direct democracy mechanisms with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth representative structures with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth advisory structures with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth consultation processes with a limited scope	Youth-led NGOs and youth-led projects

Note: You can find this table and a more detailed discussion on meaningful participation in the upcoming publication by Bárta, Boldt, and Lavizzari (to be published by the Council of Europe).

## What Are the Key Takeaways for Youth Workers?

All in all, we can now answer our initial questions. Everchanging world we live in is easier to tackle when we are aware of the components it is built of. In case of youth participation, keeping in mind the definition of youth participation (1), as well as its potential aims (2), and democratic environments it can take place in (3), can help young people to keep up with the changes around them.

Does everchanging world lead to everchanging participation? Well, to some extent, looking for new avenues has always been the case. Just as you look for the new methods to work with young people, young people can look for new ways to participate in public matters. And to support them on that journey, it is great to point them to the key aspects outlined above: the definition, the aims, and the



democratic environments. Are you excited to see what new mechanisms they will come up with?! I sure am.

But is the everchanging participation the only answer today? Not necessarily, sometimes dotting the i's and crossing the t's can be the way to go and finding a proven mechanism that fits your aims and works within your democratic environment can be the right way forward. And how can youth workers support young people when dealing with youth participation in our everchanging world? There are a few tips I can share:

1. **Be explicit when debating youth participation.** As much as you may be clear on what youth participation means, or what you mean by it, do not assume others are as clear or have exactly the same meaning in mind. Talking explicitly about what youth participation is can help young people develop, policymakers to stay on topic, and your fellow youth workers to know what exactly you talk about. Ask your discussion partners to be explicit as well and see where the debate leads you! Such debates help you to avoid the “everchanging youth participation” pitfall.
2. **Be the resource person to young people by outlining different democratic environments and participation aims.** Young people may have many brilliant ideas on what they wish to achieve in public matters and sharing information on various democracy environments (and typical mechanisms connected to these environments) and different aims (stressing that these are broad categories, and the concrete aims are only theirs to define!) can be immensely helpful to them when thinking of practical steps. Supporting them along the way, showing them mechanisms that already exist and can be used, as well as highlighting aims that may be hidden and implicit (development of their own competences, for instance), can be all they need to tailor their own meaningful youth participation experience and stay on point in our everchanging world.
3. **Be the devil’s advocate during the process in which young people establish their youth participation processes.** Ask them to prove to you that the processes or mechanisms they have in mind are truly participatory in nature (that they comply with the definition of participation!). Ask them to explicitly name their aims, write them down, link them to concrete processes. Ask them to explicitly talk about the democratic environments they consider to be crucial for their participatory endeavour, to conduct their own research into existent participatory mechanisms in these environments before they design their own (do not forget about [Participedia](#) and other valuable resources above!). Ask them to explain how the participatory mechanism they chose will help them achieve their aims, and how it aligns with other existent mechanisms in that democratic environment.

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