

CHAPTER 5

Youth involvement in macro-regional policies

“Politically, youth engagement is important because young people deserve the right to represent their interests. The civic engagement of young people is also crucial to prepare them to be active citizens in a democracy.” This is how Stefano from an Italian NGO argues for the involvement of younger generations in European issues.

Young people have different, modern and fresh perspectives, in line with the modern political society in which they are growing up. Their exclusion from the regional and macro-regional policies would mean less representation of different ideas in the political system.

As Christiana, a civil society representative from Austria puts it, “young people are often seen as children without power and experience, the engagement of youth is not supported enough in our country”. Even if scientific studies explain how to overcome this situation, as long as politicians do not encourage young citizens to get involved and show them respect, their involvement will remain weak.

Institutions and organisations in all European countries should focus more on connecting with young people, listening to them, interacting with them. Stefan from Germany recalls that “there is a generational conflict as young people feel that the thinking of their parents’ generation is not suitable to bring us into a better future”. So young people need guidance and support, but adults must also be ready to provide leadership and authority while listening to the hopes and ambitions of young people.

“Participation of young people between 15-25 years in the proceedings of the Conference on the future of Europe should be equal to their ratio in the European population (12,7%). It means participation of at least 55 young people out of the 433 members of the Conference plenary” – argues Virgilio from Italy.

There is a double challenge according to a Polish NGO. We should promote themes that are interesting for young people (culture, tourism, innovative technologies, education, employment), but – in the end – they may consider these strategies as documents with little connection to the problems of young people.

NGOs certainly agree that societies must develop policies that better respond to the needs of younger generations, since they represent our future. Young people’s active contributions to the political debates, to the decision-making processes, and to discussions about socio-economic issues can bring democratic values to life.

As a new development, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen proposed in September 2021 to make 2022 the European Year of Youth. She argued that Europe needs the vision, engagement and participation of all young people to build a better future, and Europe needs to give young people opportunities for the future, the future that is greener, more digital and more inclusive. The question is who and how will translate these nice words into practice? Practices what would really make a difference in the life of young people living under difficult conditions far from Strasbourg where the proposal was made at the European Parliament. Practices that should have long-term effects well beyond 2022.

Aleksandar from Macedonia takes into consideration the time factor as well. “It will take much more time to develop and implement macro-regional policies, thus involving the youth may be essential to project their views on the future (10 years and more), how they see it, and to consolidate policies accordingly,” he says.

What methods could be used to involve the younger generations? A Belgian colleague, Marie gives an exhaustive list: “hackathon, videos, social networks, summer camps, digital competitions, conferences, leaflets of good practices, webinars, trainings”.

However, certain problems might hinder youth involvement. Matej, a young Croatian notes that young people are nowadays quite unambitious, fewer and fewer of them are interested in education. “More and more young people have a problem with communication and social skills, they do not know how to have a quality conversation or how to talk to people.”

Aneta from a Slovak NGO thinks there are several factors contributing to the lack of interest of young people in public life and politics. “I would stress at least two of them: 1. general lack of perception of ‘positive engagement’; 2. lack of capacity (limited information, inadequate time management, over-investment in virtual social life).”

All these challenges make it even more important to help the young generations. As Iuliana from Romania recommends: “We should create contexts for the involvement of young people, let them freely express their opinions and put on the table the ideas to be included in the elaboration of policies.”

Specific suggestions

- Creating regional tourist-welcoming centres for cyclists, along the Danube, as well as the common participation in thematic discussions could improve youth involvement and build coalitions among youth actors. (Valentin, Romania)
- An important way to involve youth is through their education and it could be done from primary schools to universities. For primary schools by twinning schools in the region, they could work on macro-regional topics. The same could be done at the secondary level, involved schools could make exchanges and do the final presentations together. For university students there could be common bachelor and master thesis projects. (Kurt, Denmark)
- Don't explain Europe abstractly but show the benefits of the EU's macro-regional policy by means of specific projects. (Sabine, Germany)
- Members of the European Parliament should engage in dialogue with young people on macro-regional and other relevant issues. (Juraj, Slovakia)
- Set up our own monitoring system to observe the implementation of the 2022 European Year of Youth objectives in the macro-regions. (Christa, Austria)

Additional quotes

“It all starts with removing the stigma towards the younger generation. We need to give them space and listen to them for real.” (Erasmus, Italy)

“Youth involvement contributes to innovations and better mobility, as well as to making positive change happen.” (Stanka, Serbia)

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