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**Desk Research 'Future
Challenges, Skills Needs and
Effective Youth Engagement
Methodologies for Community Led
Local Development Practitioners'.**

DESK RESEARCH



YOUTH LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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Community-led local development and 'Future Challenges, Skills Needs and Effective Youth Engagement Methodologies for Community Led Local Development Practitioners'

Project Name: "Addressing youth skills and community youth inclusion processes to facilitate the next generation of young community leaders"

Project Acronym: *Youth Led Local Development (YLLD)*

1. Brief introduction to the Youth Led Local Development Project

Project 'Youth Led Local Development'

Youth Led Local Development (YLLD) is an Erasmus+ project¹ that aims to increase youth inclusion in Community-Led Local Development across the EU. The Lead partner is Ballyhoura Development (Ireland), with partnership from Italy – ASCAE, Romania - Asociatia Grupul de Actiune Locala Napoca Porolissum, and Portugal - Right Challenge Associação.

The project will enhance awareness, interest, knowledge and participation of young people living in rural and remote areas and who face socio-economic difficulties, in civic participation and community led local development activities, contributing to community inclusion, social innovation, sustainable growth and quality economic opportunities. The project will do this by engaging existing community development organisations to understand the challenges of volunteer recruitment and succession planning, as well as perceptions/challenges of integrating young people into the community led structures. One of the cores aims of the project is to develop, through codesign with groups, a toolkit to facilitate best practice in the integration of young people to community led local development structures.

Aim of research

This research was undertaken to identify the current and future skills needs of young people for their engagement and inclusion in Community Led Local Development activities in all partner countries.

The goal is to focus on several crucial aspects of the Community Led Local Development and youth engagement domains. The methodology used was based on an online questionnaire that was circulated to professionals, youth workers, volunteer citizens, members of local government and young people in order to develop a greater understanding of requirements and perceptions of challenges and solutions to youth inclusion. It also assessed how young people's ambitions and the needs of local community groups can effectively be merged to sustain strong community led organisations. The research will be used to design and develop tools to better facilitate the integration and inclusion of young people.

Target groups

The target groups include several stakeholders such as young people (18- 30 years) or youth workers working in youth development, current members of voluntary community groups, community leaders, local action groups and young agencies.

¹ Grant number 2021 IE01-KA220-YOU-0000287.

2. CLLD-YOUTH INCLUSION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT POLICY

2.1 CLLD: DEFINITION

Community-led local development is an approach to the territorial development where local actors work in partnership to develop and implement actions and strategies responding to their own local objectives and needs, taking into consideration the potential and the strength of the territory, building knowledge and skills, supporting new ideas and encouraging cooperation helping to create viable and resilient communities. The expression "Community-led local development" (CLLD) has been introduced by the European Commission stems from a desire to change the traditional "top-down" approach: it aims to improve the quality of life and to address the lagging in the development of local communities in rural areas.

Community-led local development (CLLD) is situated within European regulations and funding models to pursue integrated local development goals on a sub-regional scale with the priority contribution of local forces. It involves local actors who come together in a mixed partnership (public-private); it provides an operational role (managerial and administrative) entrusted to the Local Action Group, which draws up a Local Action Plan which translates the objectives into concrete actions, by providing a technical structure capable of carrying out these tasks.

Considering the role of local communities to reinforce and contribute to the territorial cohesion, the EU, with strong support from the European Parliament has decided to facilitate and strengthen the use of CLLD for all types of territories (rural, urban, coastal) and various types of community needs (notably social, cultural, environmental and urban) (European Parliamentary Research Service).

Background - Project Origin CLLD

The **community-led local development (CLLD)** funding approach, initially limited to the rural areas under the name **LEADER** (Links between actions for the development of the rural economy), is a EU initiative to support development projects in rural, coastal and urban areas of EU member countries at the local scale by involving relevant local actors, including local organizations and associations, as well as individual citizens.

LEADER is a Community Initiative developed in the early 1990s through EU policy aimed at solving problems in certain areas of the European Union. In 1991 - 1993, the focus was on 217 areas of disadvantaged rural region. Then, in 1994 - 1999 (LEADER II) rural areas are still at the heart of the project, but the number of LAGs (Local Action Groups) has increased to around 900. In 2000 - 2006 (LEADER+), the method included all types of rural areas. In the period 2007 - 2013 LEADER became an integral part of the rural development policy of all EU Member States, covering the 2416 rural territories. In 2007, in addition to rural areas, fisheries policy has been included in the project with the creation of FLAGs (Local Fisheries Action Groups). In the last years, the scope of the LEADER approach has been further extended to include rural, urban and fisheries areas under the name of "**Community-Led Local Development**" (CLLD): it is an instrument regulated by Articles 32 - 35 of EU Regulation 1303/2013, Articles 42 - 44 of EU Regulation 1305/2013 of 17/12/2013, and the Rural Development Programs 2014 – 2020, financed by the **European Structural and Investments Funds**.

Challenges of CLLD

The challenges that CLLD will face are closely related to the contribution that this tool can concretely provide to the improvement of development policies. The challenges are aiming to:

- improve the design and implementation of policies in favor of specific areas, through a greater territorial focus on those areas to increase their effectiveness;
- foster greater quality of local planning;
- promote coordination between policies in a flexible and concrete manner, with a logic inspired by the simplification of both governance tools and procedures for access to EU funding.

2.2 Youth inclusion and community development policy in Italy

In Italy, youth policies are developed at various levels. There are many national laws in favour of young people in different fields, such as education, employment, health, culture, etc. The organizational system is a multilevel governance, with it being a democratic form of government in which decisions arise from the collaboration of many actors that influence each other.

At national level, in 1996 the responsibility for youth policy matters was assumed by an appropriate entity at the Office of the President of the Council of Ministers: the Department of Social Affairs. It was then transferred to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. Subsequently, in 2006, responsibility for matters of youth and sport were assigned to an ad hoc entity: the Department for Youth Policy and Sporting Activities (Dipartimento per le politiche giovanili e le attività sportive). In 2008, the new government made the express decision to create a new department which no longer dealt with youth and sports, but which was aimed exclusively at implementing measures and interventions for youth. To this end, the Department of Youth (Dipartimento della Gioventù) was established by a Decree by the President of the Council of Ministers on 8th May 2008. The Department of Youth directly manages the part of the funds allocated to national interventions through calls for projects open to youth organizations and civil society and is in charge of signing agreements with the National Youth Council, the National Youth Agency and other entities that carry out activities in favor of youth. At the national level there isn't any general law on youth, while there are many specific laws affecting young people in different fields, such as education, employment, apprenticeships and internships.

Youth is constitutionally protected, article 31 of the Italian Constitution – “The Republic [...] protects maternity, childhood and youth [...]” and therefore, over the years, a State's commitment to safeguard young people has always characterized the political and legislative decisions that have accompanied the interventions by government authorities.

With the constitutional law n. 3/2001 Regions have acquired legislative and executive powers in all matters not expressly reserved to the State legislation, including youth policy. At Region level, different laws have been approved over the years, referring to implementation of the rights of citizenship, the promotion of personality development, the social participation, youth associations and prevention of youth problems.

Since 2006, youth policies have been financed mainly by the **National Fund for Youth Policies**, established by Article 19(2) of Decree-Law 223/2006 converted, with amendments, into Law 248/2006, with the aim of promoting young people's right to cultural and vocational training and integration into social life, including through the realisation of young people's right to housing, as well as facilitating access to credit for the purchase and use of goods and service **The Universal Civil Service Fund finances Civil Service actions** on the basis of an annual programme approved by the State-Regions Conference, and operates under a special accounting system as provided for by the regulations in force.

The major programmes of national relevance, financed from the **National Fund for Youth Policy** are focused on different field of action: social inclusion; participation of young people in the social and political life of the area; support for autonomy and promotion of young people's participation in cultural and sporting activities; non-formal education; prevention and measures against new addictions.

Specifically, in 2021 the main programs have been:

- **"Enzymes" ("Fermenti")** call for projects: it financed youth entrepreneurship projects of a social and cohesive, proposed by young people between 18 and 35 years of age,

- and aimed at improving the living conditions of young people and their community;
- **"Support for young talents" ("Sostegno ai giovani talenti")** call for projects: funds initiatives in support of talents and creativity of young people between 18 and 35 years old
- **"Young talents orientation and placement" ("Orientamento e placement giovani talenti")** call for projects: aims to promote job placement for young people between 15 and 28 years, to support the self-entrepreneurship of young talents, and the link between education and the labour market
- **GIOVANI2030 web platform:** offers news, insights on volunteering, training, education, culture, entertainment, sport, describing the opportunities to be had to grow in a participatory way
- **National Youth Card (CGN):** from mid-March 2021, the CGN allows for concessions to access goods, services and opportunities on the national and European territory.

2.3 Youth inclusion and community development policy in Ireland

Various Irish policy documents reference youth inclusion in Community-Led Local Development. These include a *National Youth Strategy* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015); *National Volunteering Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2021); *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024* (Government of Ireland, 2019); and *Youth Empowerment in Ireland* (2014), to name a few. When it comes to youth inclusion, the common thread tying these together is that all are highly supportive of its promotion (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2014; Government of Ireland, 2014). All commit to the implementation of policies and structures that support its development.

The following is a list of some of the core principles around which Irish policy regarding youth inclusion is built:

Supporting Active Citizenship: The *National Youth Strategy* acknowledges that through fostering youth voluntarism, “young people are included in society, are environmentally aware, their equality and rights are upheld, their diversity celebrated, and they are empowered to be active global citizens” (2015: pg. 3). The strong involvement of non-state actors and civil society groups in the provision of services has been characteristic of Irish society throughout the state’s history (Devereux, 1993; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2011). Supporting active forms of citizenship and volunteering in policy is thus a means of maintaining this partnership approach, as well as unlocking the benefits of an empathetic and skilled citizenry.

Inclusion as a guarantor of fairness and respect for human rights: There is a strong sense in Irish policy that youth inclusion is a vehicle for delivering a fairer and more democratic society. *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities* contends that promoting this fairness is essential “so that communities thrive, throughout both urban and rural Ireland... improving the quality of life and opportunities for all sections of the population, especially our younger and older people in the most disadvantaged communities” (2019: pg. 8).

It is worth noting that the same document also states that “it is a duty of Local Authorities to work towards facilitating and promoting involvement in local government, including involving young people in democracy and local government” (2019: pg. 17). This project is designed to

assist with this mission: It will deliver a framework for designing and delivering training programmes for instructors and community participants to help foster youth inclusion.

Building skills for the future: For the *National Volunteering Strategy*, “the benefits of volunteering go far beyond the actions involved and their impact on the beneficiaries. The full range of skills developed through volunteering and community action are important for a wide range of young people” (2021: pg. 23). Fostering youth inclusion is thus seen as a way of future-proofing the national workforce and developing skills that young people will carry through various roles in their lives (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2014).

For these reasons, the *National Volunteering Strategy* will explore making volunteering part of the national educational curriculum. Again, this demonstrates the value and timeliness of this Youth-Led Local Development project, which will deliver learning materials and structures that can readily be used in these pilot programmes.

2.4 Youth inclusion and community development policy in Portugal

In Portugal, youth rights are protected under the article 70º of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and there are records on policies aimed for youth since the Portuguese Revolution, in 1974 (Observatório Permanente da Juventude). In 2018, the first National Plan for Youth was launched under the Resolution of the Ministers Council n. 114-A/2018 of the 4th of September 2018 to develop improved public policies for the Portuguese Youth. This plan has been in place until the end of 2021 and aimed to develop transversal policies for youth. It focused on the group between 15 and 29 years of age, which represents around 16% of the total of the Portuguese population, and so the Constitutional Government aimed to foster inter-ministries articulation to develop policies for education, employment, entrepreneurship, housing, health, higher education, quality of life, sports, culture, defence, justice, environment, agriculture, transports, social security sustainability, fighting poverty, equality, inclusion and migrations. The Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude (Portuguese Institute for Youth and Sport) has the responsibility of coordinating this National Plan for Youth, which during the previous government, involved 17 government areas and 31 institutions focused on the implementation of 247 measures. This plan was created to guide the implementation of the objectives of sustainable development in the national context, regarding youth, as well as the commitments held at the Declaration Lisboa+21 on youth policies and programs, which resulted from the Global Conference of Ministers responsible for youth, and the Youth Forum, which was held in Lisbon in June 2019.

The Portuguese Institute for Youth and Sport provides support in various areas (sports, citizenship and participation, culture and creativity, formal and non-formal education, health, employment, entrepreneurship, housing), namely in the creation of Youth Associations and Community Projects, in supporting and disseminating volunteering activities, and citizenship projects for youth. In 2022, this institution has undertaken a broad needs’ assessment and is now preparing the second National Plan for Youth. Moreover, they articulate with other National, European and International institutions that support youth in these areas. Some of the National institutions relevant in this area are: Conselho Nacional de Juventude (National Council for Youth), created in 1985, which is a platform that aims to represent youth organisations of various areas (cultural, environmental, scouts, associated with parties, students, unions, or religions), fostering the development of youth associations; and the

Fundação da Juventude (Youth Foundation), which implements and supports initiatives aimed at promoting the integration of youth in their communities and in the labour market.

Regarding youth inclusion in community development, participatory citizenship and fostering youth volunteering, the National Plan for Youth included measures to support youth associations, foster volunteer work and promote political literacy, namely: support activities for youth engagement in associations, including training and the definition of the Statute for Associative Managers; training for leadership skills; support for local and regional projects aiming to encourage political and social participation of young vulnerable groups; campaigns, training and activities focused on Human Rights, equality and inclusion, the EU (e.g. Youth Parliament); National and International Volunteer Programs focused on Human Rights, inclusion, environmental issues, among others; Assemblies within the “Programa Escolhas”; Development of the Municipal Councils of Youth by local authorities; the Plano Nacional de Incentivo ao Associativismo Estudantil (National Plan of Incentives to Youth Associations); among others.

2.5 Youth inclusion and community development policy in Romania

Public policies for youth inclusion and community development in Romania

Youth law. Romania has a Youth Law in force that was initially adopted in 2006 (Law no. 350 of 21/07/2006 Youth Law) and is the main legal document that underlies the framework of youth policies in Romania. It addresses all types of young people, but pays special attention to vulnerable groups, which is why it provides a number of rights.

¹The youth law legally defines a number of terms such as: young person (person between 14 and 35 years old) or organization of and for youth (at least 50% of the members are young or aim to support and promote the rights of young people). It also establishes the framework of responsibilities of central and local authorities in the field of youth as well as the framework of financing and support of youth activities, defines the rights of young people (part of the decision-making process affecting them, support and counseling, education and training, access to information, family planning), beneficiaries and volunteers in mobility programs or intercultural dialogue) and establishes the facilities that young people enjoy in areas such as education, culture, health, volunteering, entrepreneurship, employability or housing.

² **National Youth Strategy.** The National Strategy in the field of youth policy 2015-2020 (referred to as the Strategy) was adopted by Government Decision in January 2015 and has as its stated objective the support of young people to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life, ensuring equal opportunities in terms of education, employability and decent living conditions for all young people, including vulnerable groups. It was developed to be interrelated with national strategies for social inclusion, education, employability and health.

¹ Parlamentul României, *LEGE nr. 350 din 21.07.2006*, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/73834>.

² *Politici publice în domeniul tineretului*, <https://www.nonformalsepoate.ro/index.php/propunere-politica-publica/toolkit-elaborare-politica-publica/85-toolkit-elaborare-politica-publica/87-3-politici-publice-in-domeniul-tineretului>.

Unfortunately, however, these strategies are approached in fragments, without an integrated policy to provide for their holistic implementation.

³The strategy is built on four thematic pillars: culture and non-formal education, health, sports and leisure, participation and volunteering, employability and entrepreneurship.

Our president has announced at the beginning of 2022 that the Romanian Government is preparing a new National Strategy for Youth 2022-2027, focused on the emancipation of young people, education, increasing employment among young people and their active participation in economic, social, cultural life and politics.

Youth inclusion in community life in Romania

Law no. 78/2014 regarding regulation of volunteering was part of alignment with European Legislation, Directive 89/48 EEC on diplomas recognition defining professional experience as related to the legal and current practice of the chosen profession. It's aim was to increase the benefits that young people obtain by conducting or being involved in such activities. According to the law, since 2014 volunteering is considered professional/specialized experience depending on the type of the activity only if it is carried out in the field of graduated studies.⁴

Although the law is encouraging young people to involve more in their community, only 12,4% of the young have been involved in volunteering during 2018-2019 (12 months), compared to the average of 31% of young people in the European Union, according to a study conducted in 2019 in Romania. However, those aged between 14-18 years old tend to involve considerably more in volunteering (15,7%) than those aged 27-29 years old (9,4%). At the same time, it was observed that girls tend to be more involved in volunteering actions than boys.

From those young involved in volunteering, about half of them are highschool/university students. In a significantly lower percent, only 9,6% are involved in associations or clubs, 11% are signed up in non-governmental organizations or other types of youth organizations. It seems that the young people are least involved in trade unions: 1,3% and political parties: 3,5%.

Speaking as a whole, only 7,6% of young people in Romania participate in volunteering activities and 12,1% participate in activities organized by different youth centers. This tends to further strenghtens the tendency of the young to get involved in structured recreational activities. Since such activities have the greatest impact on their further development, there is a clear need for a national strategy in order to encourage their involvement in the structured activities.

The same study has shown that 28,2% of young people do not trust the volunteering process, while 8,7% of the young completely trust in volunteering. In addition, respondents were asked if they were involved in different types of participatory activities such as signing a list of political demands, participating in demonstrations, volunteering activities, working for a political organization, fighting for environmental issues or participating in online political activities. Both participation and interest levels are low, with participation in protests being the

³ *Strategia Națională în domeniul politicii de tineret 2015-2020*,
<http://mts.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Strategia-tineret-final.pdf>.

⁴ Diana Crangasu, *Legea noua a voluntariatului. Beneficii si limite*, 01.08.2014,
<http://hrmanageronline.ro/legea-noua-a-voluntariatului-beneficii-si-limite/>.

most popular form of young inclusion in community life. Less than a quarter (22%) were involved in participatory acts and only 20% of those involved did not express their intention to participate in the future in such activities.⁵

3. Perceptions and Realities of Integration and Inclusion of Young People in CLLD activities

European young people have rarely been more engaged with issues that matter to them. Be it local or regional socio-economic issues, or the youth-led global climate strikes, there is clearly a knowledge and appetite among European young people for involvement in CLLD activities of one form or another. Voluntary community groups, youth organisations, and local government institutions also generally express a willingness to work with young people and to value their input into local development matters and projects.

Why, then, is youth inclusion or youth-led development not more of an automatic process? Young people often perceive that community organisations and other institutions don't value their input, while community institutions can tend to claim that young people are not interested in their work, or are more "in need of assistance rather than being community assets" (Jones & Perkins, 2006, p. 91). The reality is more complex – young people and older community leaders can work very well together, but methods and approaches to integrating young people into leadership roles takes thought and careful management to achieve maximum success.

Many studies concerning youth inclusion in CLLD have referenced the perception among older members of community groups and organisations that young people mainly need assistance or are not capable or interested in taking on leadership roles (Jones & Perkins, 2006).

This stereotyping on the part of adults can "constrain the potential of young people at the community level by hindering their ability to relate to adults, even causing youth to doubt their own competence" (Jones & Perkins, 2006, p. 91). Failing to break this stereotype and approach thus reinforces the need for older people to assume authoritative roles and limits the possibility of youth leadership.

In fact, when young people and older people are put to work together in youth-led projects, older people are often surprised by the competence and interest shown by their young partners;

"Lucille, an adult, said that letting the youth plan was difficult for her at first: "I know they're very capable, but I also want the program to be 'successful.'" In the end, she reported having increased confidence in the abilities of the youth to accomplish anything they are given" (Hennessey et al., 2013, p. 82).

Having said that, it has also been noted that simply putting young and older people to work together on a project or in groups does not lead to effective, sustained youth inclusion (Pickering, et al., 2021). When adults attempt to foster youth leadership by simply "getting out of the way," older group members can risk not "providing the leadership and support needed for young people to be successful. For youth to be effective agents of change, adults need to provide instrumental support and guidance." (Collura, et al., 2019, p. 475). Relationships between Youth Inclusion and perceptions of self and place have also been widely recognised.

There can be a perception among rural youth from various regions that to stay in their local area would be detrimental to their future (Rauhaus & Guajardo, 2021, p. 78). However, youth inclusion has been widely recognised to increase positive self-perceptions as well as increasing the value young people place on their home communities (Andresen, et al., 2013). Youth inclusion has not only been used as a tool of improving rural young peoples' perceptions, but also as a powerful way of integrating and instilling a sense of community in newcomers (Allen-Handy, et al., 2020).

4. Existing and future skills need for young people and community volunteers to facilitate young people to progress

Youth participation is a broad concept that supports a wide variety of practices. Youth organizations, local authorities and youth workers approach this issue from different angles and interest when it comes to involving young people. In addition, most of the free time of the young is spent in local community. In order for the young to feel like they belong to the community they need a common activity to facilitate common problems solving. For an efficient youth involvement process and progress, the young people need to acquire and develop certain skills.

Hard skills are the skills that are learned, the technical skills and the required knowledge that you need to do an activity. Usually, the young learn at school, from books, at trainings or even at work. Hard skills differ depending on the field of activity. Soft skills are considered character traits or interpersonal skills that help young adapt, interact and work with others. These cannot be learned but can surely be developed throughout time. In comparison with hard skills, soft skills are increasingly sought after in volunteering activities, internships and even jobs.²

There are two types of soft skills: intrapersonal skills – stress management, emotional control, optimism and perseverance; interpersonal skills – both written and verbal communication skills, conflict management, teamwork skills.

The most important and sought-after soft skill is the young ability to communicate, whether written or verbal communication. A centered problem of the youth is public speaking, which is required in order to successfully progress in a specific community related problem. Although it may seem like this skill is mastered by everyone, many people cannot speak in public, do not know how to explain or do not make themselves understood on a certain topic. Youth should focus more on shaping these communication skills by practicing public speaking, participating in social networks, sharing self-created content with others. Focusing on developing these skills is highly important in the context of young people wanting to make themselves heard and taken seriously in different matters.³

Similar to adaptability, the problem-solving skill involves finding solutions and also knowing how to implement them in order to solve a problem. In order to master the problem-solving skill, young people should focus on developing their analytical skills and to learn how to be organized. This encourages young people to take responsibility and make informed decisions. Thus, young people test and have a better understanding on the consequences of making decisions. If the youth is involved in the decision-making process, they are more likely to

² *Hard skills vs soft skills: diferența dintre acestea, care sunt cele mai căutate și cum le echilibrăm?*, 21.08.2020, <https://humangest.ro/stiri/hard-skills-vs-soft-skills-diferenta-dintre-acestea-care-sunt-cele-mai-cautate-si-cum-le-echilibram/>.

³ *Top 8 soft skills pe care și le doresc angajatorii*, 29.05.2019, <https://www.undelucram.ro/cumlucram/top-8-soft-skills-pe-care-si-le-doresc-angajatorii-1642>.

have their views considered and their needs met.

⁴ Creativity is a necessary soft skill in any field. Creative young people come up with the most interesting ideas which are innovative and they think of the most unexpected ways to solve a problem or to develop a project, a policy etc. Equally, creativity and problem-solving require the capacity to consider possible future consequences of certain actions and evaluate the risks. Central to this skill is the concept of self-control, responsibility, problem solving and adaptability.⁵ The youth should as much as possible focus on increasing these skills in order to successfully progress in both community life and personal life.

Although improving their soft-skills should be a priority for the youth, we live in the digital era and there is one hard-skill that is overall required: digital skills. The mass shift to online operations due to COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the need for digital competences. By developing these skills, young people have a better chance to contribute to their communities and future-proof their careers.⁶ The need for digital skills will only increase, thus it is recommended that the youth should pursue further training such as self-learning, take classes and programs.

By getting involved in various projects and activities, young people can gain knowledge, develop skills and can both express and pursue their aspiration for the future. This can only happen through learning activities, such as learn-by-doing when performing specific tasks. Opportunity to use these new skills in new contexts helps young people to act more and more effectively.

5. Effective youth engagement methodologies and in person/online/blended learning preferences and methodologies

Based on the analysis of two case studies of a UK and a Czech Youth Political Organisations, Mackóva and Mejias (2020) reflect on the use of online and offline media strategies and activities. They acknowledge that, as others have demonstrated, “online media play a crucial role not only as sources of information and means of communication, but also as important tools for political participation, activism and mobilisation or organisation of citizens – which applies especially for young people” (p. 160), as savvy users of the internet and social media. Indeed, it is widely recognised that media have the power to shape opinion and social discourse – not only traditional media (which detain a recognised power), but also new media and social media, through alternative paths, by blurring the lines of content producers and the public through complex algorithmic strategies that are open to powerful and/or wealthy institutions. Thus, new media and social media seem to have created new forms of participation and engagement, though traditional media remain relevant and powerful.

However, the abovementioned authors found that these youth political organisations, as research has shown, favoured both forms of engagement – online and offline. They used online platforms and social media (websites, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, according to the country) to raise awareness and educate the public through digital content to counteract

⁴ Tinerii și participarea în comunitate, <https://www.nonformalsepoate.ro/index.php/propunere-politica-publica/toolkit-elaborare-politica-publica/85-toolkit-elaborare-politica-publica/86-2-tinerii-si-participarea-in-comunitate>.

⁵ OECD, *The future of education and skills. Education 2030*, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/379035842/The-future-of-education-and-skills>.

⁶ What are digital skills?, 09.03.2021, <https://digitalskills.unlv.edu/digital-marketing/what-are-digital-skills/>.

disinformation (through videos and memes, using creative, humorous or satirical strategies along with informational valid and authentic contents, but also public documents); to define their group's identity; to disseminate activities and foster engagement and mobilisation of followers. So, the use of new media facilitated the process of reaching and engaging participants for those face-to-face activities, simplifying their organisation's communication. Moreover, they organised face-to-face activities in public spaces, such as educational seminars, public discussions/debates, training events, campaign canvassing, demonstrations, and valued the importance of direct interaction as a strategy to foster a more effective communication and engage new supporters and so, as a tool for mobilisation.

Thus, these groups used online or offline activities according to their goals, adapting to the needs of their target groups and to their aims. Online and social media allow to reach large groups, especially for activities for and led by youth; they created departments of communication focused on strategising and developing effective engagement methods. Traditional media were also used since they allowed their initiatives to reach a wider mainstream audience, supporting offline mobilisation and campaigns, contributing to their public image and visibility, as well as the possibility to have an impact on the public agenda. Therefore, Mackóva and Mejias (2020) conclude that online and offline activities are both relevant (though not simply the key for success) for promoting the engagement of youth in communitarian, social and political activities, illustrating this process through Bakardjieva's analysis of the contemporary mediapolis as a triple helix "comprising online media, traditional media and the physical spaces of the city" (2012, p. 77).

However, Mackóva and Mejias (2020) also refer to a tendency from traditional media, which retain the power to legitimate or dismiss the activities of youth organisations, namely in the UK, by representing them as "potentially violent and also de-contextualise and de-legitimise their successful active citizenship efforts if such efforts are found to be non-normative or in direct challenge to the political establishment consensus" (p. 176-177), defining what types of civic action are considered worthy of promoting. Nonetheless, they also demonstrate that these public discourses of traditional media, can change, which happened with one of the youth groups in this case study – Momentum, from the UK.

Moreover, it is crucial to consider the quality of participation experiences since it directly influences youth engagement. Indeed, Ferreira and colleagues (2012) developed two studies that demonstrated that the developmental quality of participation experiences is connected to more complex modes of thinking about politics, and that it predicts change patterns in political attitudes. So, participation experiences with low developmental quality might have a negative impact on adolescents' political development, as some studies had previously suggested (e.g., Mahoney, 2000; Menezes, 2003), such as fostering the acquisition of inappropriate social norms or reinforcing intolerance and bias towards minorities. Thus, the authors seek to identify what are the criteria of experiences with high developmental quality since they will foster youth engagement and promote psychological, ethical-moral, and socio-political development of participants. Indeed, literature in the area has demonstrated that youth civic engagement and political participation are associated with personal and social well-being, have an impact on identity development, and moral and political consciousness and, so, are predictors of future political involvement (Ferreira et al., 2012).

Despite research that demonstrates an increase in political disaffection, alienation or hostility regarding politics (Putnam, 2000), Ferreira and colleagues (2012) alert us to the fact that youth participation may not be necessarily lowering but that it is clearly changing by using “self-expressive and anti-hierarchical (...) forms of political participation and civic engagement” (p. 600). Recent research has demonstrated that young people are more likely to participate in civic groups, volunteering associations, youth groups of political parties (as the ones mentioned by Mackóva and Mejias, 2020), NGOs, among other kinds of institutions (Cruz et al., 2020).

Therefore, Ferreira and colleagues (2012) emphasise that the focus must be on promoting experiences of high developmental quality, which entail: role-taking processes as opportunities for self-development by taking the role of the other and his/her difference (Mead, 1934); exposure to feelings and attitudes of others through peer interaction to facilitate the process of social perspective (Piaget, 1977), generating cognitive conflict and stimulating development, as Kohlberg (1976) also proposed, by presenting problems that defy individual’s reasoning and expose them to others’ perspectives through social interaction and reciprocal communication, leading to moral and ethical development; considering the five components of cognitive-developmental change proposed by Sprinthall (1994) – continuous involvement in *significant* role-taking experiences, which must be balanced with opportunities for guided reflection on those experiences with others in a context that simultaneously supports and challenges their world views to foster development. So, action and reflection are crucial for the integration of new experiences and development of world views, which lead to psychological and ethical-moral development. These perspectives have been validated by more recent research (e.g., Chupp & Joseph, 2010 on service learning) demonstrating that, on the one side, action must be real and meaningful for the individual through high quality social interaction; on the other side, critical reflection is crucial for positive participation experiences, combining “action, reflection, collaboration and community” (Schoenfeld, 2004, p. 238 cit in Ferreira et al., 2012) – thus, combining challenge and support, in pluralist and diverse contexts to contribute to the interaction with the other, who is both equal and different (Arendt, 2005).

Therefore, to promote youth engagement it is crucial to promote their involvement in the process, which can be achieved through participatory methodologies. Prati and colleagues (2020) offer an evaluation of an intervention based on Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which aims to promote positive development and civic engagement, demonstrating the benefits of this methodology in terms of social well-being and active citizenship of its participants. They define YPAR as a “form of community-based participatory research in which young people are trained to identify and analyze (through research) issues relevant to their lives, report to relevant stakeholders, and advocate for solutions or influence policies and decisions” (Prati et al., 2020, p. 1). It is based on the active engagement of young people in research on significant issues of concern for them, critical reflection and discussion to identify strategies for change and to develop alliances with relevant stakeholders to enact those changes. Thus, the youth involved is the owner of the project, which promotes their agency and psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995) through the involvement with their community. Prati and colleagues (2020) summarise research that has demonstrated that these strategies benefit participants psychological and social well-being (the later involving belonging to a community, trust in people, and a positive view of society), as well as agency, psychological, vocational/professional, social and ethical-moral development, critical consciousness, empathy, among other benefits. In their study, the authors found that, compared with the control group, participants in their intervention reported higher levels of social well-being, institutional trust and participation, and lower levels of political alienation, contributing

to active citizenship. Thus, they conclude on the vital relevance of involving students in research on social issues that are important and significant to them (action that provides meaning and promotes empowerment), fostering critical analysis (through reflection on reliable sources and learning how to identify them) and develop possible measures to tackle these issues.

These are all important issues to consider when intervening with youth since, despite reports of disaffection, youth seem to claim for their rights and for being listened to (Ribeiro et al., 2015). Indeed, an important issue that Mackóva and Mejias (2020) identified in one of the youth groups they studied was horizontalism in the relationships within the organisation, in which all participants could propose and implement their ideas, no matter their role in the organisation. And this feature seemed not only to be valued but to have been one of the triggers for the growth of the organisation.

To conclude, the “CATCH-EYoU Toolkit – practices of active participation” developed within the Horizon 2020 project “CATCH-EYoU – Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solution” offers tools to help young people prepare for participation in different contexts, foster their participation and engagement, as well as some insights into how to foster engagement. It briefly describes strategies used by some of the institutions they focused on, such as: negotiating differences between participants through a focus on communication, exchange of experiences and feedback; organising small activities throughout the year based on co-creation and participatory strategies in which all participate and then prepare a wider event; the need of support and guidance from older and/or more experienced people; among many others.

Regarding online/offline strategies of engagement with youth, this toolkit presents the strategies used by some youth institutions, such as using Facebook, Twitter or Instagram (according to the country) to advertise activities or events, provide testimonies, events, news, videos, etc, while reflecting on the possible challenges or pitfalls this entails (lack of worthy content); using radio broadcasts. Moreover, they report the efficacy of the organisation Momentum in the UK in moving from an online to an offline organisation through social media virality - one of the organisations explored by Mackóva and Mejias (2020).

In the project’s Blue Paper n. 8, based on research developed throughout the project, Banaji (2018) sums up some recommendations regarding significant tools of active citizenship, which allow us to reflect on effective youth engagement methodologies and in person/online/blended learning preferences. These include: having accessible space for public and private meetings; having voluntary or paid workers to generate ideas and activities (alerting to the fact that low income youth may not be able to volunteer due to income needs, and so emphasising the importance of promoting representation equality through paid work); using all available media in a creative way, including established media (posters, phones, newspapers, newsletters, leaflets, email), cross-over media (mentioning digital radio, digitised databases and webforms, forums, videos), and new media (asocial media, apps, vlogging and content sharing platforms); and promoting intergenerational relationships. Thus, they recommend web-based media to be well curated to become “friendly, accessible, interesting, up-to-date, and well moderated (Which takes considerable time and work)” (p. 10), proposing to articulate these strategies with “offline events, spaces and older media formats like films, radio and graffiti” (Banaji, 2018, p.10).

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