



# A Shared European Method Catalogue for Ambitious Youth Participation

Developed through the Erasmus+ project Society Shapers –  
Transforming European Participation (STEP)

**SOCIETY  
SHAPERS**

POWERED BY CENTRAL DENMARK REGION

# Introduction

## Purpose and background

This method catalogue serves as a shared European foundation for knowledge and reflection for public organisations that want to work ambitiously, long-term, and responsibly with youth participation. It is the result of the Erasmus+ project Society Shapers – Transforming European Participation (STEP), developed through a multi-year collaboration between three European regions: Central Denmark Region (Denmark), Gelderland (the Netherlands), and Euskadi (Spain).

Across the project, young people, politicians, decision-makers, and professionals have worked together across national and administrative contexts with a common goal: to develop more meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable forms of democratic participation.

# Introduction

## Knowledge base and approach

The catalogue draws on multiple sources of knowledge. It builds on systematic evaluation experience from the Danish democracy project Samfundsformerne, qualitative notes and reflections from workshops and collaboration processes with young people in the three regions, and the shared development work carried out within STEP.

Overall, the catalogue is practice-oriented while remaining analytically grounded. It is deliberately reflective and text-rich. Experience from STEP and Samfundsformerne shows that youth participation cannot be reduced to short method descriptions or simple “best practice” models. The work involves doubt, dilemmas, relationships, and power dynamics that require space and language. The catalogue is therefore not a traditional handbook, but a working document intended to be read, re-read, and used differently depending on context, ambition, and organisational maturity.

# Participating regions

## **Euskadi (Spain)**

The Basque region of Euskadi is represented through the public organisation Ihobe, which works with environmental, climate, and sustainability policy. The region has a strong tradition of involving citizens and young people in addressing complex societal challenges, particularly within the green transition and environmental policy. In STEP, Euskadi contributes experience from the YouthCORE initiative and practical knowledge on how young people can be involved in technically and politically complex decision-making processes in ways that feel meaningful and real to young participants.

## **Gelderland (the Netherlands)**

Gelderland has extensive experience in international cooperation and youth participation, including through Erasmus+ projects and youth conferences under the ENCORE network. Over several years, the region has worked systematically to create frameworks for dialogue between young people and decision-makers at regional and European level. In STEP, Gelderland contributes particularly with knowledge on interregional cooperation, facilitation of international workshops, and the development of structures that can support youth participation over time.

## **Central Denmark Region (Denmark)**

Central Denmark Region is the applicant and project lead in STEP and brings substantial experience with youth participation through the democracy project Samfundsformerne. Over several years, the region has developed new forms of collaboration between young people, politicians, and professional staff, where young people are not only consulted but take part as active co-creators of solutions to regional challenges, including health, mobility, climate, and regional development. Evaluations from Samfundsformerne have strongly influenced this catalogue and its reflective approach to youth participation.

# About Society Shapers: Transforming European Participation (STEP)

STEP is an Erasmus+ project under Youth Participation Activities. Its purpose is to strengthen young people's democratic confidence and participation in political decision-making processes. The project is built on a shared insight across the participating regions: many young people experience barriers when engaging with democratic institutions and have limited knowledge of how they can gain real influence over decisions that shape their everyday lives.

Co-creation has been a guiding principle. Young people have not only taken part in activities; they have played an active role in planning, facilitation, and method development. Through international workshops, virtual collaboration, and shared reflection, STEP has developed experiences and methodological approaches that are now gathered and edited in this catalogue. The ambition has not been to create one common model, but to make different approaches, choices, and trade-offs visible-and the practical consequences these have had.

# Why youth participation and cross-regional cooperation matter

Youth participation is not only a question of democratic legitimacy; it also concerns the quality of public decision-making. Young people bring perspectives, experiences, and questions that can challenge established assumptions and contribute to more long-term and sustainable solutions. Experience from STEP and Samfundsformerne shows that participation is perceived as meaningful only when it is real, clearly framed, and linked to concrete decision-making processes.

Cross-regional cooperation strengthens this work. An international perspective makes it clear that challenges related to young people's democratic participation are not isolated national issues but shared European concerns. Cooperation enables mutual learning, inspiration, and adaptation of methods across political systems and administrative cultures.

The catalogue also underlines the importance of collaboration across roles and generations. Meaningful youth participation emerges in the encounter between young people, politicians, decision-makers, and professionals, where all parties are recognised as legitimate carriers of knowledge. This requires time, relationship-building, and organisational willingness to share both power and responsibility



# 1. Collaboration Methods

## Youth participation as a democratic responsibility

### Introduction to the work station

The Collaboration Methods work station began with a basic question: How can public authorities and young people collaborate in practice in ways that are meaningful, legitimate, and sustainable? Discussions were based on a shared understanding that youth participation is not an optional add-on to existing decision-making processes, but a democratic responsibility.

Across evaluations and workshops, young people describe political and administrative systems as complex, inaccessible, and distant from their everyday lives. This distance rarely leads to indifference; more often it creates a sense that participation requires special skills, prior knowledge, or access to closed rooms. Many young people therefore underestimate their own importance and their ability to contribute meaningfully.

The Samfundsformerne evaluation shows that this self-perception can change markedly when young people are invited into transparent, respectful, and clearly framed collaborations. When purpose, roles, and available actions are clear, young people's democratic confidence and sense of responsibility are strengthened. Collaboration is therefore a matter of methods, structures, and relationships, and public organisations have a specific responsibility to reduce the distance between systems and everyday life.

# 1. Collaboration Methods

## Youth participation as a democratic responsibility

### Collaboration formats in practice

The work station applied a broad understanding of collaboration formats. A key point was that youth participation rarely works through one fixed method, but requires a palette of formats that can be adapted to purpose, target groups, and organisational context.

The work station focused particularly on:

- Meetings and dialogue forums where young people engage directly with politicians, leaders, or professionals on concrete issues or decisions.
- Workshops and co-creation processes where young people and public actors develop ideas, solutions, or recommendations together.
- Councils, panels, and advisory boards that provide a more permanent and recognisable youth role in the organisation's work.
- Project-based collaboration where young people join project teams and contribute continuously throughout the process.

A recurring theme was the balance between structure and openness. Too little structure can create uncertainty; overly rigid frameworks can reproduce power relations and make participation symbolic.



# 1. Collaboration Methods

## Youth participation as a democratic responsibility

### Examples and ideas from the workshop

The work station generated concrete ideas for collaboration in practice:

- Involving children and young people in schools, where political dialogue is part of teaching so democracy becomes something practised early.
- Outreach and dialogue-based formats where young people and residents meet face to face to contribute ideas for developing their local area.
- Internships and placements in local, regional, and European institutions, giving young people practical insight into political and administrative processes.
- Thoughtful incentive models that recognise voluntary engagement (e.g., access to transport or cultural activities) without replacing meaningful influence.
- Partnerships between civil society and public authorities, including sports and leisure organisations where many young people are already active.
- Youth panels that assess ideas and provide feedback, with mechanisms that make feedback binding (e.g., participatory budgets).
- Using role models and influencers to demonstrate how youth engagement can make a difference and why participation matters.

These examples highlight that effective methods often build on young people's existing communities and everyday arenas.

# 1. Collaboration Methods

## Youth participation as a democratic responsibility

### Recommendations for public organisations:

1. Make influence visible and concrete. Young people should see a clear connection between their contributions and the decisions made.
2. Actively translate complexity. Explain processes, roles, and decision routes in language that is accessible to young people.
3. Create stable structures without locking participation in place. Permanent formats can strengthen continuity, but should be adjusted to remain relevant and inclusive.
4. Combine formal and informal spaces. Trust is built not only in meeting rooms, but also in community-oriented settings.
5. Recognise young people as knowledge holders - not as representatives of all young people. They contribute from their own experiences.
6. Ensure follow-up and feedback. Lack of feedback is one of the biggest barriers to sustained engagement.
7. Use incentives thoughtfully. Recognition can support participation, but should not replace meaningful influence.

# 1. Collaboration Methods

## Youth participation as a democratic responsibility

### Summary conclusion

Meaningful youth participation does not arise from one-off activities, but from deliberate organisational choices. Collaboration requires time, clarity, and willingness to share knowledge and influence. When collaboration is transparent, respectful, and connected to real influence, it strengthens young people's democratic confidence, trust in institutions, and the quality of decisions.

# 2. Recruitment of Young People

## Recruitment as a relationship-building process

### Introduction to the work station

This work station addressed a central and often underestimated aspect of youth participation: How do we find, invite, and motivate young people to take part? Recruitment is not merely a preliminary technical exercise; it is an integrated part of the democratic process.

Many young people do not actively opt out—they simply never discover that opportunities exist, or they cannot see why participation would be relevant to them. Recruitment therefore concerns visibility, but equally meaning, recognisability, and trust.

Experience shows that young people often evaluate opportunities through three questions: What is it about? What do I get out of it? And who is inviting me? Recruitment is also a formative first contact: it shapes not only who participates, but the culture of the collaboration that follows. Recruitment works best when it happens through relationships rather than channels, because personal invitations and peer-to-peer recruitment create legitimacy and reciprocity that traditional postings rarely achieve.

# 2. Recruitment of Young People

## Recruitment as a relationship-building process

### How young people hear about opportunities

- Social media is essential, but requires a clear strategy. Visibility alone is not enough; content must be targeted, visual, and authentic.
- Schools, educational institutions, and youth organisations are key trusted intermediaries. Invitations through familiar settings feel more legitimate.
- Youth-to-youth communication has special impact. When young people share their own experiences, credibility and interest increase.
- Transparency and clear separation of facts and opinions strengthen trust—especially in a context shaped by misinformation.

The work station also highlighted the value of defined recruitment periods. Time-limited invitations create clarity and make it easier for young people to decide.

### Why young people choose to participate

Motivation varies widely.

Many are driven not by political interest alone, but by community, learning, and opportunities to develop skills:

- Real influence, including voting on ideas or priorities in youth councils or panels.
- Responsibility and trust, where young people are given real roles in processes, assessments, or decisions.
- Skills development, including experience with facilitation, collaboration, and political processes, as well as networks and CV value.
- Social communities and shared experiences, such as events, study trips, or joint activities.
- Recognition and support for engagement, which can include visibility or institutional backing.

Decision-makers and existing councils also function as role models. Visible political engagement increases both motivation and legitimacy.

# 2. Recruitment of Young People

## Recruitment as a relationship-building process

### Examples and concrete approaches

- Social media campaigns where young people themselves act as senders on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.
- Invitations via schools and youth organisations, presenting participation as an opportunity with clear frameworks.
- Establishing local or regional youth councils with clear mandates and visible links to political decision forums.
- Recruitment through activist networks and interest communities where young people are already engaged.
- Clear and honest communication about benefits: what you learn, who you meet, and what difference your contribution can make.

A recurring recommendation was to be targeted: not all young people should be recruited for everything. Recruitment around concrete themes often creates stronger engagement than broad and vague invitations.

# 2. Recruitment of Young People

Recruitment as a relationship-building process

## Recommendations for recruiting young people

8. Think of recruitment as relationship- not marketing. Trust and recognisability matter more than reach.
9. Use young people as senders. Youth-to-youth communication is often more credible than formal institutional invitations.
10. Be clear about framework, time commitment, and benefits. Unclear expectations are a major barrier.
11. Work with existing communities. Schools, associations, and youth organisations are key entry points.
12. Connect participation to real influence. Motivation increases when contributions have visible consequences.
13. Combine substance and community. Social elements are prerequisites for retention, not optional extras.
14. Accept diversity in engagement. Flexibility increases inclusion.

# 2. Recruitment of Young People

## Recruitment as a relationship-building process

### Summary conclusion

Recruitment cannot be separated from the quality of participation that is offered. Young people are motivated by credible invitations, clear purposes, and real opportunities for influence. Public organisations therefore have a responsibility to make recruitment a deliberate part of democratic practice. When young people are met at eye level, invited into clear frameworks, and experience that their engagement is taken seriously, participation, trust, and the democratic community are strengthened.

# 3. Avoiding Pseudo-Participation / Creating Value

Collaboration, co-creation, and power

## Introduction to the work station

This work station addressed a central risk in youth participation: How do we ensure that participation is real and value-creating, rather than symbolic? Young people quickly notice when participation has no real consequences. When participation becomes hearings without impact, non-binding dialogue meetings, or processes where decisions are already made, it can create frustration and weaken trust in democratic institutions.

Collaboration between young people and public organisations is shaped by asymmetric power relations. Young people rarely hold formal decision-making authority, while organisations hold structural power and the right to define agendas. STEP shows that power imbalances cannot be removed, but they can be handled more openly and reflectively.

Co-creation involves involving young people early and allowing them to influence both problem definitions and the solution space. This requires organisations to accept uncertainty and unpredictability. Experience suggests that serious co-creation can lead to more robust and legitimate solutions.

# 3. Avoiding Pseudo-Participation / Creating Value

Collaboration, co-creation, and power

## Real influence as a guiding principle

Real influence does not necessarily mean decision power in every matter. However, young people must be able to see a clear and credible link between their contributions and the decisions made. Pseudo-participation often arises when roles and mandates are unclear, expectations about influence are not aligned, and feedback is missing or the consequences of input are not visible. Public organisations must therefore be clear about both possibilities and limitations, and commit to acting on youth input where possible.



# 3. Avoiding Pseudo-Participation / Creating Value

Collaboration, co-creation, and power

## Feedback, transparency, and recognition

- Systematic feedback on how youth proposals have been assessed.
- Clear communication on which ideas were taken forward, changed, or rejected-and why.
- Active recognition of young people's contributions, individually and collectively.

Recognition is not only praise; it is an organisational practice that gives young people's work real value and visibility in decision-making processes.

## Structures that support real participation

- Youth councils with regular meetings and clear purpose (e.g., sustainability and future-proofing).
- Formal commitments for political committees to consider youth council recommendations and provide feedback.
- Dedicated budgets for youth councils so ideas can be implemented.
- Formal influence where relevant, including voting or defined roles in decision processes.
- Youth structures within political parties with clear frameworks and organisational impact.
- Targets or quotas to ensure youth representation in councils and committees.
- Preparatory programmes for younger adolescents (e.g., mock councils or training programmes).
- Participation models that differentiate by age and experience.
- Standing agenda items to ensure political consideration of youth proposals.
- Involvement throughout policy cycles -from ideation to implementation and evaluation.

These examples illustrate that real youth participation requires institutional frameworks as well as political willingness.

# 3. Avoiding Pseudo-Participation / Creating Value

Collaboration, co-creation, and power

## Recommendations to avoid pseudo-participation

15. Define clear mandates from the start. Young people must know what they can influence and what they cannot.

16. Make follow-up mandatory. All input should be met with clear feedback and reasons.

17. Embed youth participation in decision structures. Participation should be organisationally anchored- not only project-based.

18. Give young people access to resources. Budgets and support are essential to turn ideas into action.

19. Ensure political ownership. Visible engagement from politicians increases legitimacy and impact.

20. Treat participation as a process-not a one-off moment. Involve young people throughout decision pathways.

21. Take young people seriously-even when you disagree. Disagreement often signals real participation.

# 3. Avoiding Pseudo-Participation / Creating Value

Collaboration, co-creation, and power

## Summary conclusion

Youth participation creates value only when connected to real influence, clear structures, and transparent decision-making. Symbolic participation is not only ineffective; it can be directly harmful to trust in democracy. Public organisations and political institutions therefore have a special responsibility to ensure youth participation becomes an integrated and binding part of democratic practice. When young people experience that their contributions make a difference, engagement, democratic confidence, and the quality of decisions are strengthened.

# 4. Inspiration & Scaling

Community, relationships, and psychological safety

## Introduction to the work station

This work station focused on how successful experiences, methods, and collaboration forms can spread, inspire others, and continue beyond a single project or organisation. Many youth participation initiatives remain isolated, time-limited, or dependent on specific individuals, limiting their broader democratic impact.

Inspiration and scaling are more than dissemination. They involve translating experience into new contexts and sharing both successes and failures openly. Young people consistently highlight community as essential for engagement. Longer programmes can build trust and courage to participate. At the same time, community requires active facilitation; without clear frameworks, insecurity and exclusion may arise. STEP indicates that relational work is not wasted time-it is a prerequisite for depth and quality

# 4. Inspiration & Scaling

Community, relationships, and psychological safety

## Motivating institutions and organisations

- Clear cases and short narratives showing concrete value-democratic and organisational.
- Transparency about processes: how collaboration was designed, choices made, and challenges encountered.
- Visible results that can be used or felt, such as changed decisions, new initiatives, or concrete outputs developed with young people.
- Organisational anchoring, where a unit or team has responsibility for gathering knowledge and supporting sharing and development.

Institutions are often motivated by recognising themselves in others' experience. Inspiration should therefore be practical and avoid idealised descriptions.

## Inspiring more young people

- Youth ambassadors and role models who share their experiences and serve as bridges to new groups.
- Visibility in young people's everyday spaces, including social media, schools, student councils, and youth organisations.
- Visual storytelling formats such as short films, documentaries, or digital stories.
- Clear paths into participation—showing what the next step is and how to get involved.

Inspiration is strongest when it is authentic, youth-to-youth, and linked to real influence.



# 4. Inspiration & Scaling

## Community, relationships, and psychological safety

### Examples and practical tools

- Knowledge bases that gather methods, results, presentations, and process descriptions in a structured way.
- Toolkits and short cases that enable other organisations to test and adapt methods quickly.
- Films and documentary formats that create recognition and motivation.
- Experience-sharing forums where actors share what worked and what did not.
- Networks across generations and roles, bringing together youth ambassadors and experienced politicians.
- Interactive formats such as social media hackathons or joint development days.
- Participatory budgets where young people have funds and responsibility to implement priorities.
- Links to education settings where young people practise democracy through low-threshold participation.

# 4. Inspiration & Scaling

Community, relationships, and psychological safety

## Recommendations for inspiration and scaling

22. Make experience easy to share and reuse through accessible structures.

23. Share both successes and challenges. Honesty increases learning and credibility

24. Invest in young people as ambassadors for youth participation.

25. Create organisational ownership with clear responsibility and resources

26. Use visual and narrative formats—stories engage.

27. Support networks across institutions, regions, and generations.

28. Connect inspiration to action so good examples lead to new initiatives.

# 4. Inspiration & Scaling

Community, relationships, and psychological safety

## Summary conclusion

Youth participation gains real democratic impact when experience is shared, translated, and further developed.

Inspiration is not about copying methods, but about creating understanding, courage, and willingness to act in both institutions and young people. Public organisations have a responsibility to ensure that knowledge does not remain tacit or person-dependent, but becomes anchored and activated in new contexts.

# 5. What to Remember (Principles & Tips)

Implementation, learning, and organisational anchoring

## Introduction to the work station

This work station gathered the most important experiences and learnings from the project. The focus was on the principles and everyday practices that determine whether collaboration with young people becomes trusting, meaningful, and sustainable. Experience shows that quality often depends more on design, facilitation, and follow-up than on formal structures. Implementing youth participation is a long-term organisational change process. Projects without clear anchoring quickly lose momentum. Successful implementation requires clear responsibility, resources, and continuous leadership attention.

# 5. What to Remember (Principles & Tips)

Implementation, learning, and organisational anchoring

## Core principles in working with young people

- Voice and democratic confidence: encourage young people to express views, perspectives, and doubts; their voice must be experienced as legitimate and wanted.
- The right to fail: allow mistakes as part of learning; fear of failure hinders participation and development.
- Early involvement: involve young people while direction and content can still be influenced.
- Genuine interest and recognition: sincere attention strengthens engagement and confidence.
- Diversity and relevance: include young people with different backgrounds and ensure topics feel relevant and close to everyday life.

## Structure, feedback, and facilitation

- Clear structure in tasks and questions. Too broad tasks can feel overwhelming; clarity creates safety and focus.
- Constructive feedback focused on ideas—not people—strengthening learning and courage.
- Room for all voices through facilitation that ensures participation beyond the most outspoken.
- Transparency in timelines and decision processes, including clarity about influence on both sides.
- Varied formats and tools that support engagement beyond long, one-way presentations.

# 5. What to Remember (Principles & Tips)

## Implementation, learning, and organisational anchoring

### Do's

- Be honest about influence and expectations.
- Involve young people early and continuously.
- Always provide feedback, also when ideas cannot be implemented.
- Create room for curiosity, creativity, and new perspectives.
- Participate actively in the processes together with young people.

### Don'ts

- Do not steer or manipulate young people's views.
- Do not discriminate on the basis of age.
- Do not judge young people's ideas or forms of expression.
- Do not assume in advance what young people can or cannot contribute.
- Do not over-bureaucratise processes or make participation unnecessarily complex.
- Do not make participation dull; keep formats accessible and engaging.
- Do not create guilt or shame if engagement varies.

# 5. What to Remember (Principles & Tips)

Implementation, learning, and organisational anchoring

## Summary conclusion

Meaningful youth participation is largely a question of attitude, practice, and relationships. Methods and structures can support participation, but everyday choices in interactions with young people determine whether collaboration becomes trusting and value-creating. When openness, clarity, and respect guide the work- and when doubt, mistakes, and differences are treated as resources-conditions for democratic engagement are strongest. These principles are guiding points that can be adjusted as experience and context evolve.

# Concluding synthesis:

## Youth participation as democratic practice and shared responsibility

This method catalogue is grounded in the understanding that the societal challenges we face today— climate, housing, the economy, mobility and public transport, food systems, the green transition, health, and mental well-being—are complex, long-term, and cross-border. They cannot be solved through technical solutions alone or within established institutional frameworks. They require new perspectives, new forms of collaboration, and a willingness to share both responsibility and influence.

Young people are not only future citizens. They are citizens here and now with experiences, knowledge, and perspectives that are essential for developing sustainable solutions. When young people are involved early, seriously, and with real influence, they contribute not only ideas, but also critical questions, new priorities, and an ability to see connections that might otherwise be overlooked.

The catalogue does not offer one single correct model. Instead, it gathers methods, principles, and experiences that can inspire, be translated, and further developed in other contexts. Youth participation is not a linear process; it is a practice that develops in the meeting between people, institutions, and concrete issues.

# Concluding synthesis:

## Youth participation as democratic practice and shared responsibility

For public institutions, the responsibility is clear: youth participation cannot be reduced to hearings, projects, or one-off events. It must be anchored organisationally, prioritised politically, and supported methodically. This includes systematic work with recruitment, collaboration formats, real influence, feedback, and knowledge sharing- and honesty about both possibilities and limitations.

For young people, participation does not require special prerequisites or expert knowledge. Democratic engagement grows through practice, community, and the experience of making a difference. When young people are invited into processes where their contributions are taken seriously, democratic confidence and agency increase.

The catalogue's most important message is that youth participation is not a tool to be used when convenient. It is democratic practice and a shared responsibility: creating open, transparent, and inclusive processes where young people and public institutions develop ideas and solutions together for the challenges that shape our shared future.

This catalogue is not an ending, but an invitation:

An invitation to experiment, adapt, share experience, and build further.

An invitation to let young people help shape the decisions that already shape their lives today-and our shared society.