

Further developing ESDN's mission: High-quality youth participation as key factor for sustainability



Youth Camp 2021 (BMU Medialab)

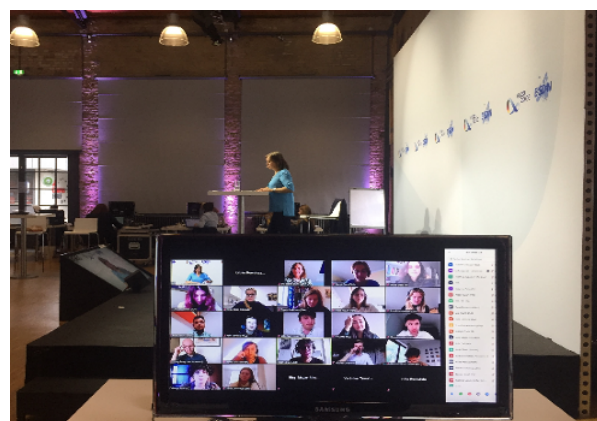
France's "Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat", the Irish Citizen's Assembly on Abortion, the Citizen's Assembly for Climate Change in Spain and the "Conference on the Future of Europe" – deliberative citizen assemblies have become more prominent in recent years. While citizen assemblies seem to be "en vogue" now, citizen participation is a constant player in EU politics.

The German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) is very active in this field, with its own unit on citizen participation and sustainable development. The engagement of the BMU and many other political bodies stems from the recognition that well-designed public participation processes not only broaden the decision-making basis and enrich political programmes and strategies, but can also increase understanding of political processes, strengthen interest and commitment to environmental policy among the population and thus contribute to a vibrant democracy.

As one of the main premises for sustainable development revolves around intergenerational equity and sees sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, young people are a key stakeholder group.

¹ GUTE BÜRGERBETEILIGUNG. Leitlinien für Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter des Bundesministeriums für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit, available only in

It is therefore fitting that in the framework of discussions within the ESDN about its mid- and long-term strategy and vision, young voices, thoughts, and ideas be heard - and included. The ESDN sees this as a two-way street: The aim is not only to include young people into the European sustainable development debate, but also to offer a deep(er) insight into current sustainability politics as well as direct links to policymakers.



Youth Camp 2020 (Euref Campus Berlin)

To start the process, the German Ministry for the Environment organised a series of youth events in the framework of the ESDN. In October 2020, about 20 young people from 10 European countries took part in a European Youth Camp entitled "Green Young Deal". The young people developed a "Youth manifesto", which they presented at the ESDN annual conference in October 2020. The demands and ideas of the young people provided a "red thread" for the conference and were well-received by the German Chancellor, EU institutions and many other actors. In November 2021, following the huge success of the 2020 edition, the Camp was organised again with young people from nearly 20 countries.

What we have learned: The formula "quality is key" is also true for participation. Respect, transparency and flexibility are crucial elements. The guidelines of the BMU on public participation¹

German: https://www.bmu.de/fileadmin/Daten_BMU/Download_PD

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have proven an important guideline and toolbox. They include key factors for successful participation processes, inter alia:

- **Definition of mandate**
The more clearly the mandate to the citizens (and thus the scope for action) is defined, the better the consultation can be. In classic participation theory, there are three levels of participation building on each other: 1. Information, 2. Consultation, 3. Co-decision. Most participation on government level is on level 2, meaning that citizens are invited to give their opinions and contribute with their ideas and knowledge. The decision and responsibility, however, remain with the representative political bodies (the process thus is not legally binding).
- **Timing**
The participation process shall also be timed in such a way that there is as much scope as possible, and the results can be used quickly afterwards.
- **Selection**
Every selection procedure has its advantages and disadvantages. Whereas self-selection (an open procedure where citizens register for participation) helps to reach specific target groups, a random selection (where citizens are approached via randomly generated phone numbers or registers of the residents' registration

offices) gives more chance of a broad spectrum of opinions, experiences and knowledge among the participating citizens while it limits influence by interest groups.

- **Formats**
Addressing the target group in a motivating way is key, especially when it comes to young people. When it comes to formats, it is not only about deciding between in-situ versus online-conferences (for the EU Youth Camp, we chose a virtual setting on a Saturday), but also choosing from the broad range of methods: world cafés, panels, dialogues, etc.
- **Using the results**
Perhaps most important is processing the results of the participation. After the citizens' recommendation are handed over to the addressees, ideally, a feedback process shall provide information about whether and how the results will be used. Both use and non-use are possible, but information as to the "why" should be given.

On the basis of these key points and experiences, and together with participants and members, the ESDN will now start discussions as to whether including a permanent Youth Network in the ESDN and how to better support young people's engagement.

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