

Policy Brief Youth Involvement in Europe

The United Nations 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals aims at taking intergenerational equity serious. With the Green Deal the European Union also recognizes the critical role of young people as actors of change in climate action, and there is a call for further involvement of the Youth in climate change policy at all levels. To provide Youth with a voice at the highest level, UN DESA established the UN Youth Delegate Programme. It allows selected youth representatives to be an official part of their delegation to high-level UN summits, for example the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Committee or the High Level Political Forum. It is up to national governments whether they want to install and fund such a programme for their national youth. Our desk research found 22 countries in Europe that had Youth Delegate Programmes.

The ESDN wanted to inquire about the Youth experiences with networking among each other and with being involved in national policymaking for sustainable development. Based on 12 interviews with 10 UN Youth Delegates, 1 member of a national NGO and 1 member of the Finnish 2030 Youth Group, desk research and demands they included in their [manifesto](#) written by them and other participants at the second ESDN Youth Workshop in November 2021, the ESDN Office developed a [Concept for an ESDN Youth Network](#). This policy brief is a summary of the main findings and recommendations.

The UN Youth Delegates we interviewed were between 18 and 26 years old, the majority were university students. Some of them also held down side jobs to fund their studies. Most of the Youth Delegates had been involved in Youth politics before, for example through the scouts, religious organisations or other NGOs. This is usually where they found out about the Youth Delegate programme and where they first came into contact with sustainable development.

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is a non-profit, pan-European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.

www.esdn.eu

Challenges

- Lack of structured opportunity to connect to each other and exchange experiences
- Lack of access to policy processes (dependent on invitations by ministries)
- Little or no knowledge about policy processes and where best to engage
- 'Tokenism'; the feeling of not being taken seriously
- Uncertainty about the actual impact of their activities
- Lack of expertise in SD Topics, leading to insecurity
- Lack of time or financial resources to participate in many processes

Recommendations

- 1) Give Youth a seat at the table
- 2) Support Youth participation through training and capacity building
- 3) Treat Youth as equal partners and avoid tokenism
- 4) Involve Youth on all topics relevant for their future, not just Youth and education
- 5) Support networking between Youth representatives

Policy Brief Youth Involvement in Europe

1) Give Youth a seat at the table

It is difficult for Youth representatives to know when new policy initiatives are starting that are of interest to them. One Youth Delegate reported that she tried to keep up with all policy initiatives in her country, but had to give up after a short time as it was not feasible next to her studies and her other activities as a Youth Delegate. However, in order to meaningfully participate, Youth representatives need a seat at the table. And in order to have a seat at the table, they need to know that there even is a table, i.e. a relevant policy initiative. It is therefore crucial that policymakers in different line ministries know of the existence of Youth representatives and of the importance of involving them. It is important that Youth be involved from the beginning of the process, when their suggestions and opinions can still be integrated into the process. Asking Youth's opinion when the policy has already been decided on appears more as a box-ticking exercise and is often perceived as tokenism. However, in order to be able to integrate Youth's voices into the policy process and the final policy, it is important that the right structures and mechanisms be in place from the ministry side.

2) Empower Youth through capacity building and training

Participating in policy processes and consultations can be intimidating, especially because the topics discussed in sustainable development tend to be very complex and there are many different interests that usually have to be considered. It can also be daunting to feel that most other people involved in the discussion are experts on the topic discussed and the Youth Delegate is the only one that is not. One Youth Delegate reported that she struggled to follow high-level meetings at the beginning of her mandate, as she was not aware of the meaning of many abbreviations, such as

UNFCCC or CBAM. Another Youth Delegate who grew up in a rural area felt that voices from rural young people were often overheard and that she had to build up a lot of confidence to be able to talk to policymakers and politicians. On the contrary, another Youth Delegate highlighted another member of her delegation called her before a specific meeting and made sure that she fully understood what would be discussed and what was at stake.

Thus, in order for to meaningfully participate, Youth Delegates need to be briefed on the topic as well as key concepts and terminology beforehand. This can be done by sending out briefs beforehand or training Youth on specific topics before involving them in the policy process.

This can also include measures to train Youth representatives on the general ways they can constructively participate in policy processes and get involved in politics. These measures should be targeted at and help empower a diverse group of young people to make their voices heard, with a specific focus on more marginalised Youth.

3) Treat Youth as equal partners and avoid tokenism

Many Youth Representatives reported that they felt that policymakers and politicians did not consider and treat them as equal partners. They did not feel their voices were taken seriously or less seriously than that of other stakeholders.

This is often combined with tokenism, where Youth are only involved in the process because it is 'the thing to do' and looks good in pictures. Yet, often policymakers are not actually interested in hearing young people's perspectives.

Policy Brief Youth Involvement in Europe

In order to continually involve Youth and to make sure their voices are actually heard, there need to be set mechanisms for participation and for integrating the perspectives into decision-making. In addition, there should be transparency about the process from the beginning. When invited to a consultation or to participate in policymaking, it needs to be clear from the start what is expected of the Youth and what they can expect to happen with their opinions. This can prevent disappointment when the opinions given are not integrated into the final policy or strategy.

Another aspect of treating youth as equal partners is to remunerate them for their work. As one Youth Delegate coined it: "Sometimes I am the only one in the room that is not getting paid to be there." Paying Youth representatives for their work does not only signal that their insights and suggestions are valued just like that of other stakeholders. It also makes Youth involvement more accessible to a greater part of the Youth population. Many young people may not be able to afford the travel to a consultation or conference or to miss out on work to participate. This will enable a more diverse set of youth with very different perspective to be part of the process.

4) Involve Youth on all topics relevant for their future, not just Youth and education

Almost all topics are of relevance for Youth. Even if the policies may not have a direct impact on their lives at that moment or for the next few years, they are the generation that will bear many of the consequences of decisions that policymakers make today. This is not only true for fighting the climate crisis, but also for policies in the area of the labour market, housing or pensions. Youth should be given the opportunity to participate in these decisions and voice their concerns about the impacts certain policies may have on their future quality of life.

5) Support networking between Youth representatives

One of the challenges in Youth engagement is that people and positions change quickly. For example, the mandates of UN Youth Delegates usually only last between one or two years. When people change, a lot of the content and process knowledge they have acquired throughout their mandates gets lost. Ideally, they are able to teach their successors, but it is impossible to pass on the tacit knowledge or the network of people that Youth Delegates build throughout their mandates. Especially in countries that only have one Youth Delegate, this can be challenging for new Youth Delegates. But also in other contexts, Youth representatives, for example in NGOs or National Youth Councils, move on when their term ends or they have finished their studies and are moving on to a full time job.

Policymakers can help to facilitate the preservation of knowledge by connecting Youth representatives to each other through events or building networks that enable Youth Delegates and Youth representatives in general to exchange their experiences, support each other when encountering problems and to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next.