

What does the term “youth participation” mean to young people and why is it so important?

Introduction

From the outset of the presentation I think it is important to address one of the biggest misconceptions relating to young people and youth participation – and that misconception is that they are any different to the rest of society when it comes to participation in democratic and civil society.

Young people are rightly segregated as a hard to reach group but this is no different from the difficulties which are faced when engaging the rest of the population in these types of activities. Across Europe the amount of people voting in elections varies, but on average at Parliamentary elections it is around 67% and in European elections this is significantly lower at around 45%. As we can see in the most basic of civic engagements over 30% of people choose not to be involved in voting at a national level and 55% choose not to engage at European level.

The reason I have chosen to highlight this, is that young people, like their elders, sometimes don't care about participation and often choose not to engage with it at all. So for many of them youth participation is something which actually isn't important and invariably choose actively to avoid engaging with.

Whilst I say this – it does not mean that we shouldn't try to engage with young people but that the methods used to engage with them and the issues on which they should be engaged with have to reflect their interests and their needs.

What does youth participation mean to young people?

When exploring this question I found it incredibly difficult to give a single answer which would encapsulate all the different opinions on youth participation. One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is because of the variety of ways in which young people participate in life.

In the context of engaging young people in “active citizenship” and their engagement through representative institutions – youth participation can be equally hard to qualify.

For those that engage fully; youth participation in this context can be a great start to a life where they are engaged with politics and governance structures. It can also be an opportunity to enhance their extracurricular activities and to give vital experience when applying for jobs/education placements. This is not to say that young people only participate in order to receive some form of personal benefit but for the many young people who do engage with youth participation in the traditional models there is usually a motivation behind it which has some form of personal gain.

From my experience of working with both young and old people regarding participation in democratic and active citizenship, it is usually predicated on this idea that there will be some form of personal or social gain. Those participating in a selfless capacity or because they see it as their civic duty are often hard to find.

I want to state that this is not a criticism of young people for asking “why should they engage” but that at local and regional level we need to get better at answering the question of “what’s in it for me?”. Fundamentally we face the same problems engaging the rest of society in democratic and civic activities as we do with young people – we struggle to answer the question of “what is in it for them....why should they bother to engage?”.

After serving for four years on the board of a national youth council, as well working on a European level advocating for the rights of young people and as a staff member of a youth NGO it pains me to say the following but I truly believe that actually *youth participation is not important TO young people BUT it is important FOR young people.*

Why is it not important TO young people?

In order to explain why I believe youth participation is not important TO young people I want to look at the types of young people who traditionally become engaged in youth participation. From my experience and testing it out with colleagues this week more often than not the types of young people who are engaged come from one of two particular groups.

Those who are well educated – who see it as important and/or of benefit for them to participate in active citizenship. Where – as I stated earlier – are able to see a benefit for them by improving their grades, job prospects or who have a genuine passion for it.

And the second group is those who have had to overcome a difficulty or personal issue for which engaging in youth participation has become an avenue in which to resolve this or find solidarity. Examples of this would be those who struggle with LGBTQ issues or those who suffer from bullying.

Whilst there are obviously exceptions to this and I am sure some of you will know examples; I would say that these were the main two groups of those who become involved.

However the reason why I believe youth participation is NOT important to young people is because these two groups do not represent anywhere near the majority of young people who could participate if engaged effectively.

There are two other groups of young people where youth participation needs to focus its efforts in order to engage everyone fully.

The first group, which is smaller but arguably more important, are those young people who are furthest away from engagement, those who have more pressing things to worry about; such as homeless young people, those who are in care, have left care or are care givers, those who have been excluded from mainstream education and those who do not have access to their social and civic rights. This group of young people will have a different perspective on civil society and their views and engagement should be sought out to improve the variety of opinions which local and regional authorities have access to.

The second larger group, and what makes up the vast majority of young people are those who I think are the most difficult to engage – and I have termed this group as “those who just don’t care”.

This is your typical young person, for whom the idea of youth participation doesn't resonate with them in the slightest. They either don't see the benefit or they don't care enough about it, to take time away from them living their lives. It is this group of young people for whom society including local and regional authorities have to convince that youth participation is important.

This is not to suggest that young people are completely disengaged from democratic and civic behaviour but that the methods in which they do so are those which are suitable to them. The demonstrations and protests over the last few years have shown that when engaged on an issue they are passionate about, young people become the most powerful and passionate advocates, able to speak across generations to gather support for their cause.

So if it isn't important to young people, why is it important FOR young people?

Youth participation is exceptionally important for young people because it gives them one of their first opportunities to shape the world around them. Participation of young people in decision-making on a local and regional level is crucial in terms of young people's feelings of ownership and responsibility in community life being developed, gaining democratic citizenship skills, and more importantly to be empowered to take active charge of their lives and communities. Looking at different European realities we can see that the level of participation of young people in decision-making processes, even as basic as voting, is a real challenge.

Achieving youth participation at a local and regional level is one of the essential hurdles to tackle in order to bring a wholesale change to how young people participate in democracy. Involving young people in the political process helps strengthen their bond to their local community - it should be seen as an investment that will assist in them remaining involved in the political process as they reach adulthood.

The development of services and the local community is important to how young people are able to interact with their world. Not only for their own peer group but for those which come after them.

We should be moving to a place where youth participation is not something which local and regional authorities strive to achieve but is integral to how they develop and deliver their services. The British Youth Council carried out a snapshot of participation mechanisms in local authorities in England and found that "although the preferred model varies there is growing recognition and evidence that youth participation and representation not only benefits young people during their transition to adulthood, particularly nurturing youth leadership and teamwork skills, but it can also result in better quality decision making for those who facilitate it."

As we know, becoming engaged in youth participation is a win-win scenario for young people and local and regional authorities. It helps build employability and educational skills as well as improves services and societies.

How is youth participation in practice changing and how can we reach the two groups previously mentioned?

The argument is commonly put that young people do not engage in society and democracy and whilst to an extent this is true, there are many examples of how young people do engage passionately but this participation is not sustained. The development of social media and the connectivity which is established through the internet has enabled young people to engage far more on single issue based activism than at any other time in history. Young people have the ability to dip in and out of youth participation when it suits them and on issues which stir their passions. In The Netherlands, for example, one of the changes taking place is a move away from traditional activism/demonstrations to young people organising participation themselves and taking activism, in whichever format, into their own hands. In the United Kingdom, the development of online platforms have allowed political and campaign engagement to take place which mobilises hundreds of thousands of people on singular issues. If the current issue is of importance to a young person they can participate, if not, they can choose not to engage.

Youth participation structures need to adapt and develop to encompass this changing engagement method and be able to harness and sustain the involvement of young people once they have become engaged. The window of opportunity to engage with a specific young person may be only very short but this should be recognised as an area which can be developed. Future research which looked to identify best practice and models of successful engagement with young people who only passively engage in youth participation is something which would be welcomed.

A report in 2010, commissioned by the Local Government Group and the National Youth Agency (NYA) in the UK, showed the contribution that youth engagement makes to strengthening democracy and delivering many outcomes that communities and councils seek. It focuses on three aspects of youth engagement.

The first was **Public participation**: typically through involvement in youth forums or councils, participation in surveys and consultations or through activities linked to quality assurance and improvement of services such as inspection, mystery shopping and involvement in recruitment.

The second was **Social participation**: defined as group activities that young people are involved in. These include many examples of social action projects, where young people are motivated to improve their local area; volunteering, as both a one-off and an on-going activity; activities such as group fund-raising and support for charities or good causes; and participating in more generic social group and positive activities.

The final one is **Individual participation**: as a way of exploring the motivation and benefits for young people and the impact this has on strengthening democracy. These three aspects will attract different types of young people from the groups which were mentioned previously however moving forward in order to gain further engagement from the difficult to reach groups we need to have more emphasis and development on *individual participation* where the choices and actions an individual takes as statements of the kind of society they want to live in are harnessed.

So what does it mean to participate fully in policy and decision making?

In order to ensure all young people are heard the structures available to them need to increase and be in a format which is accessible to their changing needs. This will have to account for the aforementioned change in the way young people participate but also strengthen the existing models which are currently effective. The emphasis on young people being 'heard' is important because for all the youth participation structures

across Europe - if their views are not taken into account and acted upon their engagement is meaningless and will not be sustained.

However it is not just about being 'heard', but more importantly about 'feeling heard'. Sometimes local and regional authorities do listen to young people but forget to give feedback to young people and let them know what is being done with their input. If a young person raises an issue and they can see it has been acted upon, they will become more likely to contribute again in the future.

Local and regional authorities should support and strengthen the tools being made available to encourage youth participation but should also focus on how the information and views of young people are received.

Young people need to be able to see that their contributions are having an impact. I have made repeated calls today but just like other generations time is a precious commodity for a young person; if they think their time is being wasted then they will refuse to commit any further. It is also important for young people to be an integral part of the process rather than an afterthought.

Conclusion

So as I draw my speech to an end I wanted to go back to the issue raised at the beginning. Young people are often criticised for their lack of engagement but I believe we have failed for a long time to truly seek out their participation in democratic and civic activities.

It is easier to grab the "low hanging fruit" – those who know and understand the benefits of engaging in youth participation models, those who are well educated and politically active – but local and regional authorities should be much bolder in what they are aiming to achieve.

They should be striving to engage those young people for who traditional models of youth participation are not in their interest but who do engage in more passive methods, such as pressure groups and one off campaigns; those who dip in and out of online engagement on singular issues.

When young people are engaged in the shaping and delivery of services, we know that these services both improve in standards but also the take up of these services is improved. So there are clear benefits for the engagement of youth participation within local and regional authority structures.

However we need to try and find new ways of answering the "what's in it for me?" question so that young people feel confident that giving up their time which is balanced between parents, schools, exams, volunteering, relationships and friends is worth it for them.

I thought I would end on a question for the audience which unfortunately I was not able to develop an answer for in the given time but one which I think is pertinent to how youth participation is delivered and how we can find an answer to the above question.

Is youth participation about development of the young person or is it about the development of services and local governance? Are the two mutually exclusive and if not which one of those two is the more important to achieve?