

## **Educating for participation to build more inclusive communities**

**What tools help younger generations make an impact on public life? In this interview, the Armenian organization INEDNET explains how non-formal education, media literacy, and dialogue with institutions can strengthen youth leadership.**

Understanding how public decisions are made, interpreting data, reporting on current events, engaging with institutions, and turning ideas into concrete proposals: participation also stems from these skills.

This is the vision of [INEDNET](#) (**Information and Education Development Network**), an Armenia-based organization that brings together youth workers, non-formal educators, and communication professionals working to strengthen the role of the younger generation in society.

INEDNET promotes programs that help young people develop critical thinking, awareness, and the ability to positively impact their communities through projects focused on civic participation, media literacy, well-being, and environmental sustainability.

One example is [Youth UPI](#), an initiative that engaged young people in analyzing local public budgets and engaging in dialogue with local governments, demonstrating how knowledge of decision-making processes can become a concrete tool for active citizenship. For INEDNET, in fact, transparency alone is not enough: for public data to be truly accessible, people must have the necessary skills to understand, interpret, and use it.

In this interview, we explore their approach to youth empowerment, the role of communication as a driver of active citizenship, and the challenges involved in building communities that are more inclusive, resilient, and open to the contributions of younger generations.

**What are the origins and mission of your project?**

*The idea behind Youth UP! came from a simple observation: many young people speak about problems in their communities, but very few know how local decisions are actually made or how public money is allocated, is budget youth oriented. In Armenia, discussions around local budgets are often seen as technical topics reserved for officials or experts. We wanted to change that perception and show young people that community budgets directly affect their daily lives — from youth spaces and cultural activities to education, sports, and infrastructure. Through Youth UP, implemented by INEDNET, our mission was to foster meaningful youth participation in local community budgeting and decision-making processes. We aimed to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to understand public finance, analyse local budgets, communicate their findings, and engage in constructive dialogue with local authorities. Ultimately, the project sought to make local governance more participatory and youth-friendly while empowering young people to become active contributors to their communities.*

**What challenges have you faced, and what tools have helped you make a difference?**

*One of the biggest challenges was overcoming the belief that young people cannot influence public decision-making. Many participants initially felt that local authorities would not take their opinions seriously, especially young girls and women, while some municipalities were not accustomed to involving young people in discussions about budgets and planning. Even a simple letter to the municipality asking about basic information, which all citizens have the right to do, became an unpleasant experience for our youngsters. However, we used our support mechanisms, to keep our youth mentally stable and resilient and to go for what they believe is the right thing to do.*

*Another challenge was the complexity of budget documents. Public finance can be difficult to understand even for adults, so making these topics accessible and engaging for young people required creative approaches.*

*What helped us make an impact was combining non-formal education methods with practical action. Instead of only providing theoretical*

*knowledge, we encouraged participants to work with real community budgets, conduct research, write analytical articles, interview stakeholders, and present recommendations directly to decision-makers. Mentorship, peer learning, storytelling, daily mentorship and media production were also essential tools. Through the Youth UP! Cast podcast series and public communication activities; young people were able to amplify their voices and make their participation visible to wider audiences.*

**Your work combines non-formal education, media and youth participation. How can communication and media skills become tools for active citizenship among young people?**

*Today, being an active citizen is not only about voting or attending meetings. It is also about being able to understand information, critically evaluate it, communicate ideas effectively, and influence public conversations.*

*Media and communication skills allow young people to transform concerns into action. When a young person learns how to tell a story, write an article, produce a podcast, be a speaker, create a video, or fact-check information, they gain the ability to participate in public discourse. These skills help them advocate for community needs, raise awareness about local issues, and hold institutions accountable.*

*In our work, we see media not only as a communication tool but also as a participation tool, "medium" between active citizenship and youth. Through content creation, young people become researchers, storytellers, and changemakers. They move from being passive consumers of information to active contributors to democratic processes and to educating others.*

*Through the Youth UP project, you have also worked on analysing local budgets and on young people's participation in community decision-making processes. What insights have emerged from the interaction between young people, public data and local authorities? One important insight is that transparency alone is not enough. Public data may be available, but if people do not understand how to access or interpret it, meaningful participation remains limited.*

*When young people started analysing local budgets, many discovered for the first time how community resources are distributed and how decisions affect their everyday lives. This process helped them develop a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility toward their communities.*

*At the same time, local authorities often expressed surprise at the quality of the proposals and questions coming from young participants. In many cases, dialogue improved once both sides had the opportunity to interact directly. We learned that young people are not lacking ideas; they often lack access and opportunities. When those opportunities are created, they can contribute valuable perspectives and innovative solutions that institutions may otherwise overlook.*

**INEDNET works across several areas — participation, media literacy, the environment, and physical and mental health. How do you manage to bring these themes together within a shared vision of youth empowerment?**

*Although these topics may appear different, they are all connected by one central idea: empowering young people to have agency over their lives and communities.*

*We believe that youth empowerment is holistic. A young person cannot fully participate in society if they lack access to reliable information, if their mental health is neglected, if environmental challenges threaten their future, or if they feel excluded from decision-making processes. This is why our work combines civic engagement, media literacy, climate awareness, and wellbeing. We aim to develop not only informed citizens but also resilient, critical-thinking, and socially responsible individuals. Whether we are discussing community budgets, misinformation, climate justice, or mental health, our goal remains the same: helping young people build the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to create positive change. On this end you can also learn more about our successful project on establishing [MIL Clubs](#) in all over Armenia, and our new project on participatory Budgeting called [BUDGETIFY](#).*

**Finally, a piece of advice or inspiration for young people living in territories undergoing transformation.**

*Our advice would be not to underestimate the value of your voice, even when change feels slow or uncertain.*

*Young people living in territories undergoing social, political, economic, or environmental transformation often witness challenges firsthand.*

*Because of this, they also possess unique insights into what their communities need. Sometimes it is easy to believe that meaningful change can only come from large institutions or powerful actors.*

*However, many important transformations begin with small local actions, conversations, and initiatives led by committed individuals.*

*Stay curious, keep learning, ask questions, and do not be afraid to engage with decision-makers. Participation or democracy is not something that is given to you; it is something that grows stronger the more you practice or practice it. Even when results are not immediate, your involvement helps build more democratic, resilient, and inclusive communities for the future.*