

When participation becomes a shared process

How can we build participatory pathways that meet the needs of local communities? We discuss this with Jász Mentorok Kft., a Hungarian organization dedicated to promoting active citizenship and non-formal education, which, through its Participation Lab project, is experimenting with new forms of dialogue between local communities, institutions, and younger generations.

Participation does not arise from standardized models, but from listening to people and the specific needs of each community.

It is from this conviction that the Participation Lab takes shape, a project developed by the Hungarian organization Jász Mentorok Kft. to encourage the involvement of younger generations in local decision-making processes, particularly in areas where opportunities for participation are less widespread.

Through dialogue between communities, institutions, and young people, the project experiments with co-design processes capable of transforming needs and ideas into shared actions.

In this interview, the organization discusses the origins of the initiative, the challenges encountered, and the elements that make participation a concrete tool for local development.

What are the origins and mission of your project?

The Participation Lab is not born from theory, but from a very simple and honest observation made by young people themselves.

In our city, Jászberény, there is a functioning youth ecosystem: student councils, community initiatives, and real opportunities to engage with local decision-makers. However, many of the young people involved in these processes do not actually live in the city. They come from smaller towns in the surrounding region, where similar opportunities simply do not exist.

This creates a contradiction: young people experience what meaningful participation looks like in one place, but have no way to translate it back into their own communities.

The mission of the Participation Lab is to bridge this gap. Not by exporting a ready-made model, but by creating a process through which young people and local stakeholders co-design participation in their own context.

What challenges are you facing, and what tools are helping you make a difference?

One of the main challenges we face is the assumption that youth participation can be “implemented” through predefined structures. In reality, every community is different – in size, culture, institutional capacity, and in the openness of local decision-makers. Another challenge is trust. Young people often feel that their opinions do not matter, while institutions are not always used to working with young people as equal partners.

What helps us most is shifting our role. Instead of acting as experts bringing solutions, we become facilitators of a shared learning process.

We use non-formal learning methods, peer facilitation, and continuous dialogue between young people and decision-makers. Creating safe spaces for honest conversation proves to be more powerful than any predefined tool.

Participation Lab addresses a very real issue: the gap between urban centres, where there are more opportunities for participation, and small rural towns, where dedicated facilities are often lacking. What were the first steps taken to highlight this gap and turn it into a shared process with local authorities?

The first step is simply listening.

The idea of the project emerges directly from young people who articulate this gap based on their own lived experiences. Instead of defining the problem ourselves, we treat their perspective as the starting point.

From there, we initiate a process where these young people return to their own towns – not as “experts”, but as facilitators of local conversations.

At the same time, we involve local authorities from the beginning. Not at the end of the process, but as partners in understanding the situation. This helps transform the issue from a “youth problem” into a shared local development question.

In your approach, you do not propose a predefined model to local authorities, but rather a participatory planning process. Which elements need to be adapted to the local context on a case-by-case basis, and which, on the other hand, do you consider essential in any youth participation process?

We strongly believe that participation cannot be standardized.

There are elements that always need to be adapted to the local context: the form of engagement, the structure of meetings, the communication channels, and even the level of institutional involvement.

However, there are also essential principles that remain constant.

These include:– genuine involvement of young people in defining problems and solutions– structured dialogue with decision-makers– facilitation instead of top-down coordination– and continuous feedback between participants and institutions.

The form may differ from place to place, but these principles are what make participation meaningful.

Young people and local authorities work together to develop proposals and recommendations. In your experience, what changes when young people are not merely consulted, but contribute directly to defining the solutions?

The difference is profound.

When young people are only consulted, they tend to respond within the limits they assume exist. But when they are involved in defining solutions, their thinking becomes more creative, more responsible, and more connected to reality.

At the same time, decision-makers also change their perspective. Instead of seeing young people as a target group, they start to see them as partners with valuable insights.

This creates a shift from “asking for opinions” to “building together”.

And perhaps most importantly, young people begin to see themselves differently – not as passive members of a community, but as active contributors to it.

A piece of advice or inspiration for young people living in territories undergoing transformation.

If you want to create change in your community, don't start alone.

In our experience, the most important starting point is not an idea, but a space. For many young people, this space already exists – in student councils or in youth organisations that bring different schools and communities together. These are not just formal structures; they are safe environments where you can learn how to speak up, how to listen, and how to take responsibility.

What makes a real difference is when these spaces are connected. When student councils are not isolated within schools, but linked through a wider youth organisation, something changes: experiences are shared, confidence grows, and young people begin to see themselves as part of a larger community.

This is where participation becomes real. Not in one-off events, but in ongoing processes where young people plan together, test ideas, and reflect on what works and what doesn't.

So our advice is simple: find or create a community where you are not alone in thinking about change. Build on what already exists – even if it feels small. Over time, these spaces become the foundation where you not only talk about your community, but actively shape it.