

From ideas to decisions: how to build participation that makes a difference

An interview with DYPALL Network, the European platform that fosters youth participation in local decision-making, exploring the tools, experiences and good practices that help turn ideas into meaningful action.

How can participatory processes be designed so that young people can genuinely influence the decisions that shape their communities?

This question lies at the heart of [DYPALL Network](#), a European platform dedicated to strengthening dialogue between young people, institutions and local authorities through cooperation projects, training programmes and tools for democratic participation.

Among its latest initiatives is [Climbing the Ladder: fostering a culture of Youth Engagement](#), a European project that explored different models of youth participation across Europe and led to the development of the [ENGAGE YOUTH platform](#). The platform is designed to support public authorities, organisations and communities in creating more structured and effective participatory processes.

In this interview, DYPALL Network shares the challenges encountered, the solutions developed and the experiences gathered throughout the project, offering practical insights for anyone who wants to play an active role in shaping the future of their community.

Let's start with the origins and mission of your project.

After implementing numerous activities and trainings, offering consultancy to public bodies, and engaging with thousands of young people, we realised something crucial: to truly support the next generation, we need a much more comprehensive approach. We want to empower young people to become true facilitators of democratic

processes, who revitalise the space for political dialogue and lay the foundation for new policies that actually align with the vision of the youth. To achieve this, we knew we had to start by exploring what resources and opportunities already exist, how they can be improved, and how we can develop new mechanisms for youth engagement through participatory processes.

This is exactly why the "Climbing the Ladder: fostering a culture of Youth Engagement" (CL-YE) project was created. The project addresses the urgent need for effective, meaningful structures and spaces where young people can actively participate in policy-making and decision-making at local, regional, national, and European levels. Our main aim was to explore, map, and understand the wide variety of existing mechanisms of youth engagement. From there, we developed targeted activities and resources like our Engage Youth platform to foster the qualitative development of such mechanisms.

What challenges have you faced, and what tools have helped you make an impact?

We have noticed that meaningful youth engagement remains inconsistent across different sectors and regions. While various participation mechanisms and models have emerged over the years, ranging from advisory roles to co-management in decision-making, many stakeholders face the same challenge: the desire to involve young people is there, but the practical "how-to" is often missing.

Whether it is a lack of formal structures or simply uncertainty about where to begin, the gap between institutional goals and actual youth participation remains a significant barrier. For policymakers, organisations, and institutions, simply wanting to include a youth perspective isn't enough. To do it effectively, they need to truly understand these different mechanisms, their strengths, their weaknesses, and how to implement them in the real world, in their own context.

That is exactly why we developed the ENGAGE YOUTH platform. The platform is helping practitioners, youth workers and local authorities, and young people identify and choose the most impactful youth engagement mechanism for their specific context. Instead of leaving stakeholders to

figure it out on their own, it empowers them with a clear, structured process to make meaningful youth engagement a reality. For example, many municipalities and organisations initially express interest in creating youth participation bodies without fully understanding the differences between mechanisms such as youth councils, youth parliaments or advisory boards. By clarifying the characteristics, governance implications and resource requirements of each mechanism, the platform enables institutions to make more informed and realistic choices.

With tools like the Engage Youth platform, how can young people move from ideas to action and turn their proposals into real change?

The ENGAGE YOUTH platform isn't actually designed with young people as its primary target audience, especially for the needs assessment tool as the main feature. Instead, it was built specifically for public bodies, governmental authorities and private institutions that have the desire to involve young people but currently lack a structured youth engagement model.

However, this is exactly what makes it such a powerful tool for young changemakers. Instead of just showing up to municipal meetings with abstract ideas or a list of demands, young people can introduce this platform directly to their local authorities as a practical solution. By using the features of the platform, youth groups can generate a ready-to-implement action plan tailored to their specific local context and hand it straight to decision-makers. This completely shifts the power dynamic and young people stop being just petitioners and instead become strategic partners offering a solution.

Furthermore, beyond the core needs assessment tool and customisable action plan template, the platform serves as a comprehensive resource hub designed to inspire and educate. Users, among which youth people too, can dive into the publications developed throughout the project, allowing them to explore the different participation mechanisms and read about real-world good practices. The platform also features video content where users can explore the practical, day-to-day impact of each mechanism through the first-hand experiences and insights of our youth

experts. Armed with both a concrete action plan and a rich library of evidence, young people have everything they need to show local authorities exactly how democratic and meaningful youth engagement mechanisms function in practice.

Many young people feel like their voice doesn't really matter: based on your experience and the results of the Climbing the Ladder project, what is the first concrete step a young person can take to start influencing decisions in their city?

It is completely valid that so many young people feel this way. Too often, youth participation can feel like a box-ticking exercise. For example, municipalities might have a youth council on paper, but in reality, young people are rarely given the actual resources, trust, or decision-making power to make a difference. When youth are invited to speak but never actually heard, it is an example of a tokenistic gesture, not meaningful engagement.

Based on everything we have learned through the Climbing the Ladder project, the secret to breaking through this frustration is shifting the approach from asking for permission to be heard to offering a structural solution.

Youth engagement can take many forms, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Therefore, the first step a young person can take is to look at their local municipality and identify what structures already exist or what is missing. This is where young people can strategically use the ENGAGE YOUTH platform, to explore the 8 key mechanisms: youth councils, youth parliaments, youth advisory boards or panels, youth co-management bodies, youth delegates and ambassadors, youth grantings, youth ad-hoc meetings and consultative mechanisms. By understanding these mechanisms and the different models of each, young people can identify exactly which mechanism and model best fits their local context and goals.

The platform encourages a highly strategic approach to youth participation. It features a needs-assessment process that forces institutions to reflect on hard questions: What level of decision-making power are they genuinely willing to share? What institutional support is available? What is the long-term sustainability of these structures? By

introducing local decision-makers to this needs-assessment tool, young people can make their municipalities rethink existing practices. It allows youth to walk into city hall not just with complaints, but with a tool that helps local authorities redesign participation structures in a way that aligns with their policy goals and administrative capacity.

You have collected many inspiring examples of youth participation across Europe: is there a story or case that particularly stood out to you and could inspire young people to get involved?

Our platform and project resources are full of incredible good practices of meaningful youth engagement from across Europe. However, the most inspiring moments aren't just the written case studies, but the human connections made when people realise that the challenges they face locally are often universal and they are no longer working in isolation.

One particularly meaningful moment took place during the final conference of the project. A young participant from Italy shared a milestone that perfectly captures this. He said: "We created a network of young elected officials under 35 years old - something which we could not do without the inspiration from this project."

Another inspiring example to highlight is the pool of youth facilitators for democracy whom we trained throughout the project. Often, international trainings end, everyone goes home, and the momentum fades. But these young leaders completely did something different. They met for a second time to officially develop their own strategic plan, and they haven't stopped since. They have continued to stay active, meeting regularly online to map out and plan their next concrete actions and act as powerful multipliers in their own communities.

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

If your city or region is undergoing a major transition it can feel like the future is being decided for you, rather than with you. However, transformation always breaks old habits, and those moments are your greatest opportunity for change. Do not just show up to demand change

or wait for a broken system to give you permission to speak. That path often leads to tokenism and frustration. Instead, use tools like the ENGAGE YOUTH platform to study European good practices, understand the different existing mechanisms of participation, and map out what is possible for your context. Walk into your local municipality with a ready-to-implement action plan. Show the decision-makers exactly how a youth council, a co-management body, or a participatory budgeting scheme can align with their goals.

For any young person feeling doubtful about whether their involvement matters, the examples we have seen and shared throughout our work are the ultimate proof of what is possible. Young people are becoming part of a continuous movement of young changemakers and multipliers who are actively redefining how Europe is governed.