

ENSURING MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Tackling instrumentalisation and
overcoming obstacles

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Inspiring **Knowledge** Driving **Action** Uniting **Cultures**

Introduction



This introduction will both explore the importance of the issue in the specific context of the French network and thus the Anna Lindh Foundation, while also highlighting its global relevance in today's Euro-mediterranean context.

The issue of the instrumentalisation of youth participation and overall obstacles to ensure meaningful participation was treated first in the context of the French network of the Anna Lindh Foundation. Two years ago, in 2023, while reconfirming the main topics and sub-topics of interest of the French network, “Youth” and youth work, education and participation were by a large margin the main topics of work of about 100 members. Following the interest set by the various members of the network and gathering a panel of expertise on that subject, the co-heads of the network hosted an online webinar with youth associations discussing and debating the main issues of youth participation, especially within the context of civil society organisations and of local political participation. This webinar also took the form of a focus group in many ways given the methodology followed. We followed up by a questionnaire to the members on how youth participation was tackled within the French context. The main question we asked our members was whether national public policies seem to reflect the local context in which they operate. 70% of respondents answered “no” to the question, with responses such as: ‘They are light years away, the resources allocated are not commensurate with the challenges’ or ‘National public policies are illustrative of the brakes that the authorities in the South want to apply’. Most expressed a gap between national policies and local needs, highlighting a lack of dialogue and consideration of local realities.

This issue resonates far beyond the French context. In the broader Euro-Mediterranean region, over 60% of the population is under 30¹, yet young people continue to face significant barriers to genuine engagement decision-making both in civic and political contexts. Whether through restricted access to decision-making spaces, sometimes the lack of intergenerational trust, or the co-optation of youth agendas for political gain, the challenges are widespread and unfortunately systemic. Moreover, in recent years, crises such as COVID-19², geopolitical conflicts in the region, and democratic backsliding ³ have exacerbated youth marginalisation, making this topic more urgent than ever.

A multilateral approach



Following the bottom-up approach of the state of play in France, we entered thanks to the Anna Lindh network of networks in contact with relevant stakeholders and experts of youth participation in various topics, with whom we built the workshop proposed at the Anna Lindh Forum. The approach and contextual problems uncovered were the results of several weeks of meetings with them, during which we put under the light the specific needs and context of each country and identified the analytical questions to be posed during the workshop but also during the research phase, before and after.

¹ <https://ufmsecretariat.org/publication-speech/our-youth-future>

The idea was to create an interesting sample of countries in which different inputs could be drawn and from which our youth experts, being each from one of these countries, could come with their specific context, problems and opportunities. Indeed, that is how we came up with the five youth organizations of five relevant countries, with a North-South balance, a panel of expertise from youth council functioning , to political leadership passing by environmental activism and CSO 4 -Municipality key relationships.

Indeed, according to **the Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI) 2025** led by the European Partnership for Democracy and the Youth Democracy Cohort, each of our present countries has the following score on overall youth participation in which the socio-economic dimension, the civic-space dimension, the political affairs dimension and an election dimension were taken into account:

Egypt: 44/100 (very low)

Türkiye: 55/100 (low)

France: 75/100 (high)

Spain: 76/100 (high-very high)

Austria: 77/100 (high-very high) 5

Showing thus a diverse array of political systems and youth participation.

In the following paragraphs, we will then present the conclusions drawn by analysing thoroughly the institutional relevant frameworks of youth participation policies in Europe, its neighboring countries and other global south actors while highlighting the bottom-up finding done through focus groups both in France and transnationally with our collaborators.

Challenges of current policies regarding youth participation and recommendations

The challenges to meaningful youth engagement in the Euro-Mediterranean region reflect deeper systemic issues. Youth participation can be tokenistic, disconnected from actual decision-making, and hindered by structural, educational, and institutional barriers. Current policies tend to overlook informal youth groups, fail to provide sustained mechanisms for youth leadership development, and do not adequately match the needs of young people with existing opportunities.

One major policy gap lies in the limited operational power of youth councils⁶. While they exist in many countries, they are often symbolic rather than functional. To be impactful, youth councils must be equipped with real budgets, autonomy, and the ability to co-create and assess public policy. Their work should be grounded in the real needs of local youth, not just institutional agendas. National and local authorities must also support a shift from one-off training to long-term coaching and continuous engagement strategies.

² <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-summaries/youth-involvement-social-and-civil-dialogue-mediterranean-region>

Another concern is **the lack of early education on civic participation and citizenship**⁷, leading to disengagement. Education systems should be linked to youth NGOs through practical, experience-based learning, introducing participation from a young age. Pilot projects, weekly visits to local institutions, and voluntary opportunities tailored to young people's interests can build stronger civic habits.

In terms of governance, youth engagement policies must adopt bottom-up and horizontal approaches. This includes creating validation frameworks that track progress, needs, and impact at both the individual and organizational levels, as well as social impact reporting that reflects youth and community feedback⁸.

Crucially, mobility programs should be democratized, addressing current inequalities and visa obstacles that make such opportunities accessible only to a privileged few. True mobility should serve shared goals and produce concrete outputs, not just participation for visibility's sake.

Finally, trust-building is central. Young people must be seen not only as future leaders but as present-day partners in governance. Institutional frameworks must be revised so that youth themselves evaluate youth-friendliness of mechanisms and policies, not only external actors. Empowerment means handing over responsibility, resources, and recognition, from the project design stage to evaluation. It also means protecting youth structures from political threats, especially from actors seeking to dismantle democratic youth spaces.

³ <https://www.ifes.org/publications/understanding-young-peoples-political-and-civic-engagement-counter-democratic>

⁴ Civil-Society organisation

⁵ <https://gypi.epd.eu/country-reports>

⁶ https://www.youthpolicy.org/uploads/documents/2006_National_Youth_Councils_Report_Eng.pdf

⁷ https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-06/a_638465072881174770.pdf

⁸ https://edyn.eu/storage/2023/03/YDC_Handbook.pdf

Institutional openings to a more meaningful participation; a hope for synergies

In recent years, institutional frameworks and policy developments have significantly evolved to foster more meaningful youth engagement, both within the European Union and in its neighboring Mediterranean countries. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, built around the pillars of Engage, Connect, Empower, sets out a comprehensive vision to involve young people not only as beneficiaries but as active shapers of society. It emphasizes the need for youth participation in democratic life, cross-sectoral cooperation, and a focus on social inclusion.

Concretely, EU programs such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps have expanded access to civic engagement, training, and mobility opportunities. The European Youth Dialogue, including the Youth Check mechanism⁹, allows young people to influence the shaping of policies that affect them. These developments mark a transition from tokenistic to more genuine and structured forms of participation.

At the external level, the EU Youth Action Plan in EU External Action (2022–2027) 10 extends this ambition to the Global South, including the Mediterranean region. It promotes youth-led initiatives through dedicated funding such as the Youth and Women in Democracy Initiative (€40 million) and the Youth Empowerment Fund (€10 million). These frameworks aim to reinforce youth leadership, peer learning, and youth-led policy assessment.

The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) has also adopted a Youth Strategy 2030¹¹, recognizing that nearly half the population in southern Mediterranean countries is under 30. The strategy focuses on creating opportunities in education, employment, climate action, and civic engagement, all through a lens of inclusion and trust-building.

Encouragingly, opportunities are also emerging from bottom-up approaches. Local youth councils, informal youth groups, and volunteer networks across Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey are developing new models of engagement based on trust-building, practical civic education, and community-based participation. Youth movements focusing on environmental justice, cultural rights, and local governance have shown that impactful engagement can emerge even in constrained contexts, especially when youth are given real responsibility, autonomy, and access to resources.

Opportunities also emerge from innovative practices: increased use of digital tools (e.g., platforms for participatory governance), community-based models of co-planning with youth councils, and horizontal dialogues that prioritize reciprocal learning. The importance of early civic education, volunteerism based on young people's actual interests, and accountability mechanisms (e.g., social impact assessments) are increasingly acknowledged.

⁹ https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/youth-check_en

¹⁰ https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/youth/youth-action-plan_en

¹¹ <https://ufmsecretariat.org/youth-strategy/>

Conclusion



This work has highlighted the urgency and complexity of ensuring meaningful youth participation across the Euro-Mediterranean region. What started as a national reflection on the disconnect between local youth realities and public policies soon revealed broader, systemic challenges echoed across the region.

Through focus groups, surveys, and transnational collaboration, it became evident that youth participation often remains symbolic, with young people offered little real influence over decision-making. Despite the existence of youth councils and institutional frameworks, the lack of operational power, structural support, and genuine co-creation mechanisms limits their impact. Informal youth groups and innovative initiatives are frequently excluded from traditional frameworks, even though they often provide the most responsive and relevant forms of engagement. This exclusion perpetuates a mismatch between the needs of young people and the opportunities available to them. The research approach, shaped by a diverse and balanced representation of five countries, allowed for an intersectional and comparative understanding of youth participation. The findings point to a clear demand among young people to be recognised as partners in governance today, not just as future leaders. It is equally evident that meaningful participation requires more than the presence of institutional frameworks; it calls for structural change, cultural shifts, and trust based collaboration between youth and public authorities.

Recommendation summary to policy-makers and political stakeholders:



In the political empowerment and enablement framework:

- Equip youth councils with real operational power, including autonomy, budgets, and policy co-creation roles.
- Base youth councils work on local youth needs, not solely on institutional or politician's priorities.
- Move from short-term training of youth actors and young leaders to long-term coaching and continuous engagement strategies.
- Consistently establish validation frameworks to track progress, needs, and impact on individual and organizational levels.
- Protect youth structures from political interference, particularly attempts to dismantle democratic youth spaces. Promote an EU directive that defends and promotes youth councils,
- but also guarantees their legal security against regional and/or national governments that threaten them.

In the educational framework:

- Introduce civic education and citizenship learning at an early age.
- Link formal education systems with youth NGOs through practical, experience-based learning.
- Introduce primary and secondary students to non formal education systems and experiences, in collaboration with NGOs and associations.

Give common youth mobility opportunities:

- Democratise youth mobility programs by addressing inequalities and visa-related obstacles.
- Ensure youth mobility leads to shared goals and tangible outputs, not just symbolic presence.



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