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Transformative Youth Leadership: towards
horizontal leadership models in youth work

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Towards horizontal leadership models in
youth work

Practices and
Perspectives in Europe



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TRANSFORMATIVE
YOUTH
LEADERSHIP



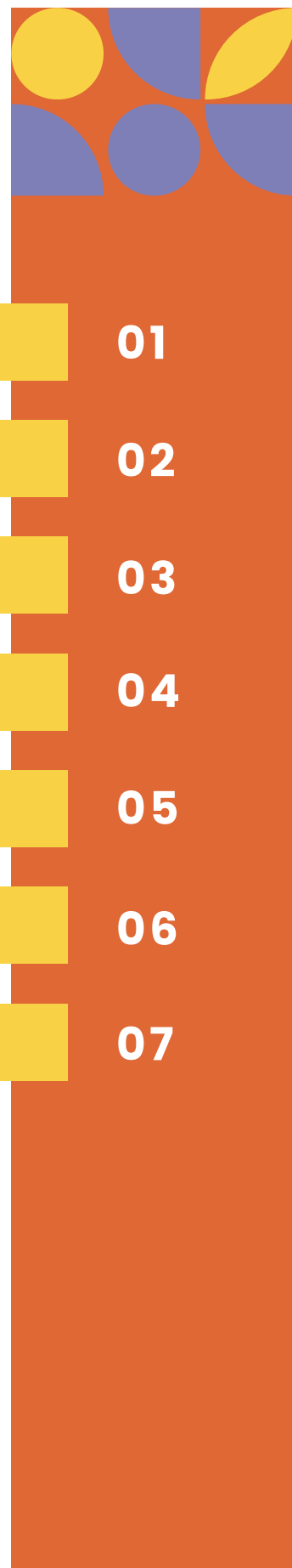
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1. Introduction

This document presents the findings of a transnational research effort conducted as the initial activity of an Erasmus+ project focused on fostering more inclusive, open and democratic leadership in the youth field, improving quality and innovation in work with young people. The project brings together a consortium of partners across Europe with a shared commitment to improving the quality, innovation and relevance of youth engagement practices. The aim is to develop and validate methodologies that encourage active participation and inclusion and share these practices through wide dissemination to strengthen youth work at the local, national and international level.

Context of the Project

The project addresses the growing need for participatory and empowering models of leadership within youth organisations. At a time when young people face complex social, economic and environmental challenges, it is increasingly vital to ensure that they are not only beneficiaries of programmes but also active contributors and decision-makers in shaping them.

The project aims to support organisations in rethinking their leadership models, ensuring that young people have meaningful opportunities to participate, lead and influence. This is in line with broader European goals for youth empowerment, democratic participation and social inclusion.



Importance of Inclusive, Open and Democratic Youth Leadership

In this research, we use the concept of inclusive, open and democratic youth leadership as a guiding principle to explore how youth participation is structured and supported within organisations.



Inclusive

means that leadership opportunities are open to all young people, regardless of their background, ability, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or geography. It requires intentional efforts to remove barriers and ensure representation of under-represented or marginalised groups.

Open

refers to leadership practices that are transparent, participatory and responsive. Open leadership values dialogue, feedback and co-creation. It encourages experimentation, shared learning and ongoing adaptation rather than rigid hierarchies.

Democratic

youth leadership implies shared power and accountability. Young people are not merely consulted, but have real influence over decisions, directions and outcomes. This includes involvement in governance structures, project design and strategic planning.

Together, these principles define an approach where leadership is not reserved for a few, but cultivated collectively and where young people are supported to grow, act and lead in ways that reflect their realities and aspirations.

Inclusive, Open and Democratic Youth Leadership is not only a value in itself, it is a powerful means of creating more responsive, innovative and accountable organisations. It contributes to personal growth, civic engagement and social cohesion. Despite widespread endorsement of participatory ideals, however, many organisations continue to face practical and structural barriers in implementing these principles consistently.

Understanding how youth leadership is currently practiced and where the gaps and opportunities lie, is a crucial first step in supporting organisations to move from intention to impact.

Objectives of the Research

The main objective of this research is to identify, document and critically assess current methodologies and organisational practices that support youth participation and leadership across different contexts.

Specifically, the research seeks to:

- Explore how young people are involved in decision-making processes within youth organisations
- Investigate the structures, tools and training that support youth leadership
- Identify challenges and barriers to inclusive and democratic youth participation
- Collect good practices and success stories that can inform future tools and methodologies
- Provide a solid evidence base to guide the next phases of the project





2.

Research Questions

The research was guided by a central question and a set of sub-questions designed to explore the topic in depth:

Main Research Question

How are youth organisations across Europe implementing inclusive, open and democratic youth leadership models and what are the outcomes and challenges of these practices?

Sub-Questions

The questionnaire was structured to explore the following thematic areas:

A

Organisational structure and youth integration

- What types of organisations are involved in the research and how are they structured?
- Are young people formally part of these organisations and in what roles?

B

Participation and decision-making

- In what ways are young people involved in organisational processes?
- Are they part of the ideation, planning and implementation of initiatives?

C

Leadership facilitation and support mechanisms

- What tools, structures, or approaches are used to enable youth leadership (e.g., committees, advisory boards, regular meetings)?
- Are specific training or capacity-building programmes offered to prepare young people for leadership roles? How effective are these programmes?

D

Frequency and consistency of youth engagement

- How regularly are young people engaged in decision-making processes?
- Are they involved on a permanent basis or only for specific projects?

**E**

Rationale and evolution

- Why do organisations involve young people in these ways?
- Has youth involvement been part of the organisation from the beginning, or was it introduced later?

F

Barriers and challenges

- What internal or external factors hinder inclusive and democratic youth leadership?

G

Impact of youth involvement

- How has youth participation influenced organisational outcomes or decision-making?
- Are there observable results or changes resulting from youth contributions?

H

Evaluation and learning

- Do organisations have mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of youth involvement?
- How is feedback from young people collected and used to improve practices?

I

Good practices and reflections

- What examples of successful youth leadership or participation can organisations share?
- Are there any additional insights or reflections that deepen our understanding of youth leadership?



3.

Methodology

The research presented in this report constitutes the first activity of Transformative Youth Leadership, a transnational Erasmus+ project (Cooperation Partnership in the field of Youth) aimed at promoting inclusive, open and democratic leadership in the youth field. The primary goal of this research was to gather insights into existing practices and methodologies in youth leadership across different organisational contexts and European countries. This understanding will support the development of targeted project activities and tools that respond to real needs in the field.

Collaborative Development of the Research Tool

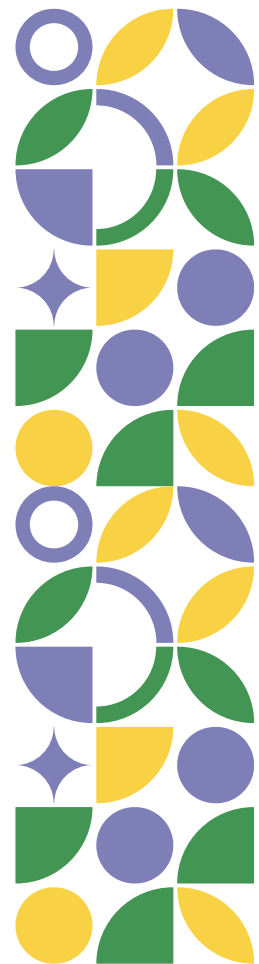
The research process began with the identification of a guiding research question:

"How are youth organisations implementing inclusive, open and democratic leadership models and what are the outcomes and challenges of these practices?"

To investigate this question, the project partners collaboratively developed a structured questionnaire. The survey was designed to collect both data across a common set of themes: youth involvement in organisational structures, participation in decision-making, capacity-building, challenges faced and examples of good practice.

Data Collection Process

The questionnaire was created and administered online, allowing for flexibility in data collection. Participating organisations provided responses in one of two ways:



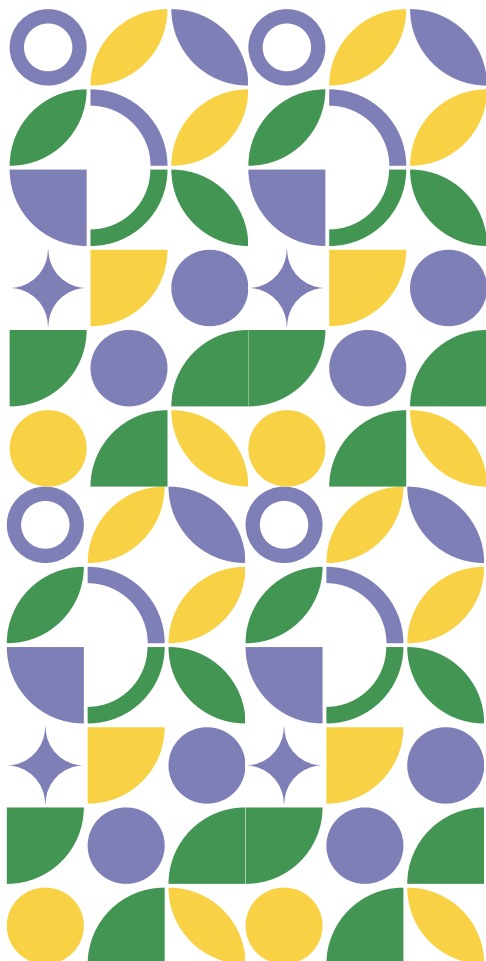
- **Self-administered:** Some organisations completed the online questionnaire independently.
- **Partner-administered:** In other cases, project partners conducted interviews with organisations and transcribed the responses into the questionnaire on their behalf.

This dual approach ensured accessibility and adaptability depending on the availability and preferences of each respondent.

Selection of Organisations

The selection of organisations was purposive and guided by the project's intention to gather a diverse and representative set of perspectives. Partners selected organisations based on the following criteria:

- **Geographic diversity:** Ensuring responses from a range of countries to reflect different cultural and political contexts, including organisations from countries external to the partnership.
- **Organisational diversity:** Including public bodies, NGOs, youth-led associations and hybrid structures.
- **Youth engagement:** Prioritising organisations with varying levels of youth involvement to explore different models and stages of development.



In total, the dataset includes responses from 30 organisations across 9 countries encompassing a wide range of organisational types, missions and structures.

Anonymity and Ethical Considerations

To ensure open and honest responses, all participating organisations were assured anonymity. As such, no names or identifiable details are included in the presentation of findings. Quotations and case examples are generalised or paraphrased to maintain confidentiality.



Limitations

While the research provides valuable insights into youth leadership practices, a few limitations must be acknowledged:

- As a pioneering study in this field, the research relies on qualitative methods to map out the key challenges and strategies encountered by youth workers and youth organizations across the EU. While the sample offers a representative image of the youth work sector, the findings here produced should be later validated and expanded on through quantitative research.
- The data is based on self-reported information and may reflect the internal perspectives, aspirations, or organisational narratives of respondents rather than external evaluations or outcomes.
- Language nuances and interpretation differences, particularly in partner-administered interviews, may have influenced how questions were understood and how responses were recorded.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer a rich foundation for understanding current practices and guiding the development of innovative methodologies in youth work.





4.

Profile of Respondent Organisations

The **30 organisations** that contributed to this research represent a wide and diverse spectrum of youth work actors across Europe. Their participation provides valuable insights into how different organisational models engage young people and foster democratic leadership practices.

Geographical Distribution

The participating organisations are based in **9 countries**:

Country	Number of Organisations
Bulgaria	6
Sweden	6
Italy	5
North Macedonia	4
Spain	3
Turkey	3
Greece	1
Lithuania	1
Romania	1

This geographical spread contributes to the richness of the dataset, capturing practices shaped by varied socio-political, economic and cultural contexts. Some participating organisations also come from countries that are not part of the formal project partnership, broadening the relevance and inclusivity of the research.

Types of Organisations

The sample reflects a diverse array of organisational structures, including:

- NGOs (the most common format)
- Youth organisations and associations (including youth-led and youth-focused groups)
- Public bodies (such as municipal departments)
- School boards or educational institutions
- Volunteer-based and grassroots initiatives

In several cases, organisations described their structures in detail, including layers such as advisory boards, general assemblies, youth worker teams and volunteer groups. This variety underscores the complex and adaptive ways in which youth work is carried out across Europe.

Organisational Missions and Focus

Although all organisations engage with young people in some capacity, their missions differ. They range from:

- Cultural exchange and mobility
- Social inclusion and democratic engagement
- Environmental awareness and sustainability
- Skills development and education
- Local policy influence

This variety ensures that the research findings are not limited to one type of mission but instead reflect a broader picture of the youth sector in Europe today.

Engagement with Young People

All respondent organisations confirmed that they work directly with young people, though the level and nature of youth engagement in internal structures varies. Some are youth-led, while others integrate young people into project implementation, advisory roles, or consultative processes. The degree of formal involvement also varies, from ad hoc consultations to fully embedded roles in governance and planning.



5. Findings

The analysis of the 30 organisational responses reveals a diverse and nuanced picture of youth leadership practices across Europe. While all participating organisations engage with young people, their methods, philosophies and structures vary significantly. The findings below are grouped by key thematic areas explored in the questionnaire.

5.1 Youth Inclusion in Organisational Structures

All 30 organisations confirmed that they work with young people. However, their level of involvement in internal structures and decision-making processes varies widely.

- Several organisations described **formal youth leadership structures**, such as youth boards, councils, or inclusion in the general assembly.
- Others involve young people **primarily in implementation roles** (e.g., helping deliver activities) rather than governance or strategic planning.
- In a minority of cases, youth involvement remains **limited or symbolic**, often due to structural, legal, or bureaucratic barriers, particularly in public institutions.



Despite these differences, there is broad consensus that youth participation contributes positively to organisational vitality, relevance and innovation. Some organisations are entirely youth-led, while others integrate youth perspectives through participatory mechanisms.

“Young people are involved in implementation and some stages of design, but the board still handles the strategic decisions.”
(anonymised response)

Others highlighted that while young people are not currently part of leadership, there is growing recognition of the need to change this, especially where structures are inherited from more traditional or adult-centric models.

5.2 Methodologies for Participation and Leadership

Most organisations actively facilitate youth participation using a variety of structured methods. These methodologies aim not only to include young people in organisational life but also to prepare them for future leadership roles.

Common Structures and Tools

Among the most frequently mentioned mechanisms were:

- **Regular meetings** as a core tool for maintaining youth engagement and feedback.
- **Leadership roles** and opportunities for active project ownership.
- **Advisory bodies** or informal consultative groups, often used to gather youth input without full governance authority.
- **Committees or working groups**, either temporary or standing, focused on specific thematic areas or projects.

Capacity-Building and Training

What Do We Mean by Capacity-Building and Training?

In general terms, capacity-building refers to the process of enhancing individuals' or organisations' abilities to perform effectively through the development of skills, knowledge, tools and structures. Training, more specifically, involves organised learning experiences, either formal or non-formal, aimed at developing specific competences.

In the Erasmus+ Youth Sector Context

Within the Erasmus+ Programme, Training and Capacity-Building carry distinct technical meanings as well as practical applications:

- Training is commonly associated with Key Action 1 (KA1) mobility projects, particularly those targeting youth workers. These include activities and mobilities for learning purposes, structured to enhance the professional competences of youth workers and to promote quality and innovation in youth work.
- Capacity-Building, in a more specific sense, refers to a separate Key Action: Capacity Building in the field of Youth, managed centrally by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). These projects support international cooperation with partner countries, aiming to strengthen the capacities of youth organisations through structured partnerships. They often include activities such as peer learning, organisational development, policy advocacy and cross-regional networking.

In the context of this research, both interpretations of capacity-building and training are relevant.

A strong emphasis emerged on **training and capacity-building**:

- 21 organisations described offering **training programs** specifically designed to build leadership, communication, project management and decision-making skills among young people.
- 13 mentioned structured **capacity-building pathways**, sometimes supported through non-formal education approaches or peer mentoring.

Some organisations reported tailoring training content based on youth feedback through focus groups, addressing working models and facilitation tools adapted to their organisational culture.

Effectiveness varied depending on available resources and the maturity of the programmes (those who have systematic frameworks and those who are either still developing them or implementing them inconsistently). Several organisations reported that such programs directly resulted in young people taking on more responsibility, leading initiatives, or contributing new ideas.

“Our leadership pathway helps young volunteers progress from support roles into full project coordinators over time.”
(anonymised response)

While most organisations demonstrated an intentional approach to participation, a few acknowledged that leadership training remains aspirational due to limited capacity or institutional constraints. In those cases, intentions were expressed to develop such structures in the future.



5.3 Frequency and Nature of Youth Engagement

The frequency and nature of youth involvement in organisational decision-making vary significantly among respondents. While all organisations engage with young people, the depth and regularity of that involvement depend on their mission, structure and resources.

Categories of Engagement Frequency

From the responses, four general patterns emerge:

- **Regular and systematic involvement**

A substantial number of organisations reported that youth are involved regularly: through bi-weekly meetings, leadership roles and integration into planning and strategy discussions. In some organisations, young people lead the initiatives, while others ensure youth voices are heard through established governance processes.

“Regularly. Everything is youth-led.”

“Pretty much in almost every activity we implement.”

- **Involvement tied to specific projects**

Many organisations stated that youth are involved only for specific projects, particularly those focused on youth-related topics or funded initiatives requiring participatory approaches.

“Only for specific projects during application or implementation phases.”

- **Occasional or informal participation**

In some cases, participation happens occasionally or ad hoc, often depending on the initiative or internal availability of youth leaders.

“Occasionally, mainly when preparing and implementing Erasmus+ projects.”

- **Limited or aspirational involvement**

A few responses revealed that youth engagement in decision-making remains limited, either due to lack of formal mechanisms or organisational constraints.

“Since there is no specific programme or framework, the involvement is irregular.”

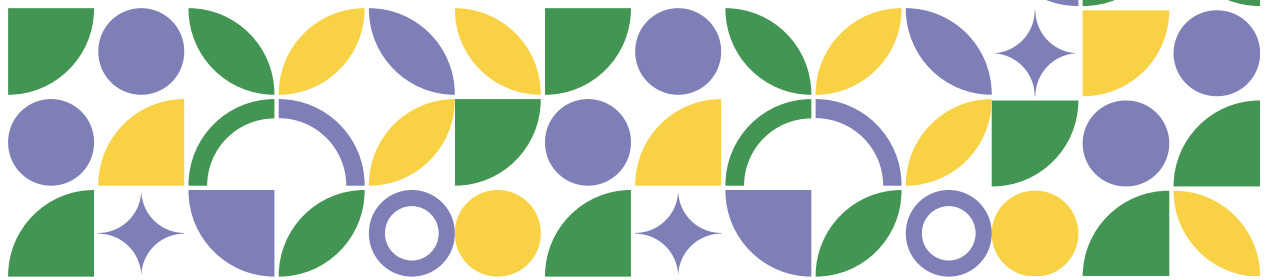
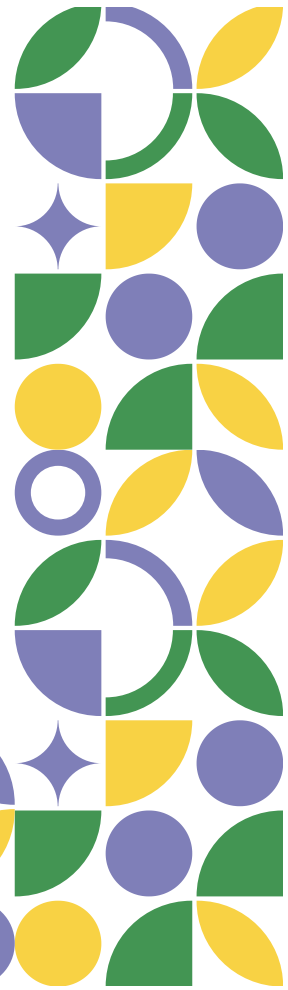


Factors Influencing Frequency

Factors influencing the frequency of engagement include:

- Organisational size and capacity
- Leadership philosophy (youth-led vs adult-led)
- Legal or bureaucratic restrictions (especially in public institutions)
- Presence of formal youth boards or advisory roles

The variety in responses highlights both the commitment and the challenges faced by organisations in maintaining consistent and meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes.



5.4 Rationale and Evolution of Youth Involvement

Organisations provided thoughtful reflections on why they involve young people and how these practices have developed over time. While motivations differ, most responses point to a shared recognition of the value that youth bring to shaping relevant, dynamic and democratic practices in youth work.

Why Involve Young People?

Across responses, several key rationales emerged:

- **Mission alignment:** Many organisations cited their core purpose as directly tied to working with or for youth. Therefore, involving young people is seen as essential to achieving their objectives.
- **Youth ownership and empowerment:** Respondents emphasised the importance of youth having a say in matters that affect them, both to empower their leadership and to ensure that initiatives are grounded in real needs and experiences.
- **Relevance and innovation:** Youth input was described as critical for keeping activities responsive, current and innovative, especially in rapidly evolving social or digital contexts.

"Youth work needs young people. That's why we want them directly involved in shaping the work, not just receiving it."

- **Legal or institutional limits:** Some public or more formal institutions expressed their constraints in involving young people beyond consultation, due to administrative or legal frameworks.

Evolution of Youth Involvement

Among the 30 respondent organisations:

- **19 organisations** stated that youth involvement has been a part of their structure **since the beginning**.
- **11 organisations** introduced youth involvement **over time**, often in response to:
 - Changes in leadership or internal priorities
 - Participation in international collaborations (e.g., Erasmus+)
 - External pressures or recognition of the added value youth participation brings

"From the start, youth leadership was a core element of our mission."

"We didn't start out this way, but our involvement in international projects showed us the value of meaningful youth participation."

Some organisations shared that although youth involvement is now a priority, earlier challenges such as adult-dominated governance, bureaucratic restrictions, or lack of capacity initially limited their participatory approaches.

5.5 Challenges to Inclusive, Open and Democratic Youth Leadership

While most organisations are committed to fostering inclusive and participatory youth leadership, they face a range of challenges that affect their ability to fully realise these goals. These obstacles vary by organisational type, national context and maturity of internal practices.

Key Challenges Identified

1

Limited Resources and Capacity

The most common challenge cited was the lack of time, staff, or financial resources. Smaller or volunteer-based organisations struggle to consistently support youth leadership due to operational limitations.

The challenge of limited resources and capacity, particularly among small or volunteer-based youth organisations, presents structural and operational barriers that directly hinder the sustainability and depth of youth leadership practices. While many organisations are ideologically committed to fostering youth participation, they often lack the institutional scaffolding to do so consistently and meaningfully.

One of the main mechanisms at play is the disproportionate reliance on unpaid or part-time staff. In such environments, the burden of routine operations—project management, fundraising, reporting and logistical coordination—often consumes the bulk of available time and energy. As a result, initiatives that require long-term mentoring, capacity-building, or participatory planning are either deprioritized or executed in fragmented ways. Even when motivation and ideas are abundant, the absence of stable funding and professional staff limits follow-through and continuity.

A second factor is the episodic nature of funding cycles, particularly in project-based environments like Erasmus+. While these programs can inject valuable resources, they also create periods of instability between projects. This affects not only staff retention and institutional memory, but also interrupts the development of coherent, long-term youth leadership pathways. The stop-start rhythm of externally funded activities contrasts with the continuous support and mentoring that effective leadership development typically requires.



Moreover, the administrative demands attached to funding opportunities—including proposal writing, budgeting, partner coordination and reporting—can overburden small teams and draw attention away from the relational and participatory aspects of youth work. This structural tension means that even organisations with strong values around youth participation may default to more top-down, efficiency-driven models under resource pressure.

The lack of resources also limits access to training and peer learning for both youth and staff. Without opportunities for reflection and skills development, organisations may struggle to evolve beyond tokenistic models of participation, defaulting to consultation rather than shared decision-making. This, in turn, can lead to frustration or disengagement among young people, particularly when they sense that their input is not linked to tangible outcomes.

Finally, there are emotional and relational consequences. When staff are overextended and young people are inadequately supported, tensions can emerge around roles, expectations and accountability. Mentoring youth to take on leadership roles requires time for relationship-building, feedback and shared responsibility—all of which are difficult to sustain without sufficient organisational capacity.

“Time and resources are two of the most difficult constraints to overcome.”

“We have the ideas and will, but not always the funding or time to implement structured participation processes.”

2

Engagement and Motivation of Young People

A recurrent challenge reported by organisations is the difficulty in engaging young people consistently and meaningfully in leadership roles. This is not necessarily due to apathy or disinterest, but rather a complex interplay of personal, social and structural factors that can limit youth confidence, availability and sustained participation.



Another barrier is inconsistent motivation, frequently tied to broader societal trends. Organisations described a sense of passivity or resignation among some youth, not necessarily a rejection of participation, but a belief that it "won't make a difference" or that their involvement is symbolic rather than impactful. This disillusionment may stem from previous superficial experiences or from a more general distrust in institutions and formal processes.

Availability is another practical factor. Time pressures, including school obligations, precarious work and family responsibilities, make it difficult for many young people to sustain long-term commitments. This is especially true for marginalised youth or those from rural areas, where accessibility, transport and digital infrastructure can create further barriers to regular engagement. For those who do participate, burnout or overcommitment is a risk, particularly when a small number of active youth are relied on repeatedly across projects.

There is also a generational dynamic to consider. Some organisations reported that adults in leadership positions may unintentionally set the bar too high or fail to adapt roles to younger capacities, expecting youth to "perform" leadership in adult-defined terms. Without space for experimentation, failure and authentic voice, young people may retreat from involvement, feeling like they're not "good enough" or that the process is not truly youth-led.

Additionally, the lack of peer role models or visible youth leadership success stories can hinder engagement. When young people don't see others like themselves in leadership roles, or when opportunities seem reserved for a select few, they may not envision a pathway for themselves. This is especially true in communities with limited civic culture or participation tradition.

These challenges point to a critical insight: motivation is not a fixed trait, but something that is cultivated through environment, trust, relevance and support. Addressing youth engagement challenges requires more than simply offering roles, it demands creating ecosystems that empower, validate and accompany young people through their leadership journey.

"There is a general lack of enthusiastic young people who are willing to take on leadership roles."

"It can be difficult for some youth to believe their voice truly matters."



A subtler but deeply influential challenge identified by several organisations is the persistence of adult-centric mindsets and organisational cultures that resist fully sharing power with young people. Even in settings where youth participation is formally encouraged, underlying power dynamics often limit the depth and authenticity of that engagement.

Adulthood, the assumption that adults are inherently more capable, knowledgeable, or responsible than young people, can manifest in several ways. It may appear in decision-making structures where adults retain final authority, regardless of youth input, or in consultative processes that present youth perspectives but rarely incorporate them into actual outcomes. In these cases, young people may be involved but not empowered, treated more as beneficiaries than co-creators or partners.

This mindset can be particularly entrenched in older, more hierarchical organisations, where leadership roles have traditionally been held by long-standing adult staff or boards. Even when youth engagement is introduced as a priority, shifting entrenched norms and habits can be slow. Some staff may genuinely value youth input but still struggle to relinquish control, fearing a loss of efficiency, professionalism, or institutional identity.

Additionally, adult gatekeeping often comes disguised as protection or quality control. Adults may limit youth involvement not out of malice, but from a belief that young people are not yet ready to make complex decisions or lead significant initiatives. While well-intentioned, this stance underestimates the capacity of young people to learn, grow and take responsibility when given the opportunity and support.

Another layer of the problem lies in communication and trust. Adults and young people may have different working styles, expectations, or vocabularies around leadership and responsibility. Without intentional intergenerational dialogue and mutual learning, misunderstandings and frustration can arise. When youth feel their ideas are dismissed they may disengage. When adults feel challenged or undermined, they may revert to more directive leadership styles.



Organisational culture also plays a decisive role. In settings where formal authority and hierarchy are strong, even progressive staff may find it difficult to introduce more horizontal or participatory approaches. Institutional rules, board structures, or funding frameworks may inadvertently reinforce adult control.

Finally, the lack of ongoing training and reflection for adult staff compounds the issue. While many organisations offer leadership development for young people, few invest in capacity-building for adults to critically reflect on their role as facilitators of youth leadership. Without this, adultism can persist as an invisible barrier to meaningful youth empowerment.

This challenge reminds us that democratic youth leadership is not only about elevating young people, it is also about transforming how adults lead, listen and let go. It calls for a cultural shift in which partnership is not just rhetorical, but practiced across every layer of an organisation's work.

"Some of our leadership still tends to see youth as beneficiaries rather than partners."

4

Structural and Bureaucratic Barriers

For many public institutions and established NGOs, promoting inclusive youth leadership is not simply a matter of intent, it is also a matter of navigating complex legal, bureaucratic, or structural constraints that limit their capacity to involve young people in formal governance and strategic decision-making.

One of the most commonly cited issues is the rigidity of institutional frameworks. Public bodies, such as municipalities, schools, or state-funded agencies, often operate within national regulations that determine how boards are composed, how decisions are ratified and who holds formal authority. These rules may restrict the inclusion of minors in decision-making roles or impose administrative procedures that make youth participation burdensome or symbolic.



Even in non-governmental organisations, long-standing governance models can pose challenges. Older or larger NGOs may have inherited top-down hierarchies, with fixed board structures, legal obligations, or standard operating procedures that leave little room for flexible, youth-driven decision-making. In these cases, even well-intentioned staff may find themselves bound by statutes, bylaws, or funding agreements that were not designed with youth leadership in mind.

Furthermore, the culture of bureaucracy often rewards compliance and risk-aversion over innovation and experimentation. In such settings, involving young people, particularly in ways that require shifting power or embracing non-traditional formats, may be seen as inefficient, inappropriate, or too informal. As some organisations pointed out, even when believing in youth leadership, they are limited by how much they can actually involve youngsters in governance due to legal obligations.

Another barrier lies in access and language. Formal participation structures (e.g., councils, boards, working groups) often require procedural knowledge, public speaking skills, or technical language that may alienate young people, especially those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. Without efforts to adapt these structures to be youth-friendly, participation risks being selective or exclusive.

Also significant is the issue of superficial or symbolic involvement under external pressure. In some cases, institutions adopt participatory labels to satisfy policy expectations but fail to provide real influence or follow-through. Here, bureaucracy becomes a shield against meaningful change, participation is documented, but not embedded.

Despite these limitations, several organisations expressed creative strategies to work within or around constraints. These include creating parallel youth advisory boards, piloting co-management schemes in project teams, or gradually amending internal policies to allow youth roles in governance. However, these innovations often depend on committed individuals and their sustainability remains uncertain without broader institutional support.

If youth leadership is to be more than a peripheral practice, governance systems, especially in public or formalised organisations, must evolve to accommodate participatory models that reflect the realities and needs of young people today.

“Bureaucracy is the first challenge, but also a general difficulty in translating ideas into inclusive models.”

While internal capacity and organisational structures are central to enabling youth leadership, several organisations highlighted the profound influence of external, contextual factors, particularly those working in rural, marginalised, or under-resourced communities.

A recurring issue was geographic isolation. Organisations based in rural areas often face challenges such as limited public transport, lack of digital infrastructure and a smaller pool of engaged young people. These structural realities make consistent participation difficult and reduce access to training, events, or peer networks that could otherwise support youth leadership development.

Depopulation and youth migration also emerged as barriers. In many rural or economically disadvantaged regions, younger populations tend to move toward urban centres in search of education or employment. As a result, local organisations struggle to maintain continuity, build youth leadership pipelines, or sustain youth-led initiatives. In some cases, youth participation is episodic and tied to specific school partnerships or short-term projects rather than being embedded in community life.

Moreover, local attitudes and cultural norms can hinder engagement. In more conservative or traditional settings, young people, especially girls or marginalised groups, may face social pressures that discourage assertiveness, leadership, or public engagement. Some organisations shared that community scepticism or resistance to youth-led change can dampen motivation or limit the space available for youth voices to flourish.

These contextual limitations are not always within the control of the organisations themselves, yet they profoundly affect what is possible. Where youth work is seen as an "add-on" or where civic participation is not part of local culture, it becomes harder to normalise youth leadership practices.

Despite these challenges, several organisations also shared creative strategies for adapting to context. These include embedding leadership into schools, organising mobile outreach events and developing partnerships with local authorities or cultural actors to slowly shift mindsets and increase legitimacy.



Promoting inclusive and democratic youth leadership requires not just internal transformation, but also attention to place, culture and local ecosystems. Tailored, community-sensitive approaches are essential to ensure that youth participation is not only encouraged, but possible.

“In the rural area, depopulation is one of the main obstacles; there just aren’t many youth to involve.”

6

Ensuring Representation and Diversity

Some responses reflected critically on a key concern in youth leadership practice: ensuring that participation is equitable, inclusive and representative of the broader diversity within youth populations. While many structures succeed in engaging motivated and capable young people, there is an ongoing risk that leadership opportunities become accessible only to a narrow, already-empowered group, typically those with higher education, stronger language skills, or more social confidence.

This dynamic can unintentionally reproduce social and cultural inequalities, even within organisations committed to inclusion. Young people from marginalised backgrounds, whether due to socio-economic status, rural location, disability, migration experience, or ethnic identity, often face higher barriers to access and lower levels of initial confidence.

Without proactive outreach and tailored support, these groups may remain underrepresented in leadership roles or internal decision-making bodies.

Some organisations acknowledged that visible youth engagement may conceal a lack of internal diversity. Even when youth are involved in boards or advisory groups, the participants may not reflect the full range of identities, experiences and perspectives within the community. This can limit the relevance and legitimacy of youth-led initiatives, as the decisions made may not account for the needs of the wider youth population.

Others highlighted the importance of intersectional awareness: understanding how different forms of disadvantage overlap and compound one another. For example, a young person with a migrant background and a disability may require more than just an open invitation, they may need translation, accessible formats and reassurance of safety and belonging.



A few organisations are experimenting with inclusive recruitment processes, informal engagement spaces and community partnerships to broaden participation. Others emphasised the need to challenge internal biases about who is "ready" or "suitable" for leadership. These efforts, however, require time, training and structural flexibility to succeed.

Meaningful youth leadership is not just about inviting young people to participate, it is about removing barriers, redistributing access and actively designing for diversity. Without this intentional approach, leadership structures risk becoming exclusive, even if unintentionally.

"Making a project that works for everyone and truly includes different perspectives is harder than it sounds."

5.6 Impact of Youth Involvement

The majority of respondents highlighted positive and tangible impacts of youth involvement on their organisational outcomes. In many cases, involving young people is not just symbolic: it has directly influenced strategies, project design, team dynamics and public visibility.

1

Innovation and Relevance

Youth involvement plays a crucial role in helping organisations remain adaptive, creative and socially attuned. Across the dataset, many organisations reported that the direct input of young people brings not only new ideas but also a renewed sense of urgency and relevance to their work. This is especially evident in areas like digital engagement, social media strategy and cultural trends, where young people's lived experience often exceeds that of older professionals.

Respondents noted that youth-led or co-created initiatives tend to reflect current societal concerns more accurately, such as climate anxiety, mental health awareness, social justice, or digital literacy. In some cases, the presence of young people in leadership positions allowed the organisation to pivot its programming or messaging in response to emerging issues, thereby improving its connection to its audience.

Moreover, youth participation helps to guard against institutional stagnation. Involving young people regularly in planning and review processes was described as a safeguard against rigid or outdated practices. Some organisations shared how their internal culture shifted to become more open, informal and experimentation-friendly as a result of youth leadership.



In this sense, youth participation is not only a value-driven practice but a strategic asset, enabling organisations to stay ahead of the curve, improve their outreach and align their work with the evolving realities of young people today.

"Youth involvement has brought fresh perspectives that help us understand current trends and connect better with our audience."

"It has helped us stay relevant and to keep the organisation from becoming too institutionalised or outdated."

2

Improved Project Design and Implementation

Youth participation was frequently linked to the development of initiatives that are more targeted, participatory and responsive to real needs. Organisations that involved young people in co-designing activities reported stronger engagement, more relevant content and higher-quality outcomes.

In many responses, organisations described how youth leadership or feedback helped reshape programmes to become more inclusive and aligned with the actual interests and concerns of young people.

This trend appeared across various organisational types, from NGOs to school-based groups and public structures. The principle remained the same: when young people help shape both the content and delivery of an initiative, its impact improves.

Crucially, the improvements weren't only practical or quantitative. Organisations also highlighted how youth involvement helped shift the tone and ethos of their programming, making it more open, inclusive and reflective of current realities.

These findings suggest that youth engagement is not only ethically desirable but strategically effective: it increases relevance, enhances participation and ensures that programmes are better tailored to the evolving landscape of youth needs.

"Their input helped us reshape an entire programme to be more participatory and inclusive."



3

Strengthened Organisational Identity and Culture

A number of organisations shared that active youth leadership has had a transformative effect on their internal culture. When young people are genuinely engaged in leadership processes, it tends to open up the organisation, fostering an atmosphere that is more transparent, participatory and adaptable.

Youth involvement was often linked to a greater openness in how decisions are made and discussed. Their presence brings new questions, perspectives and challenges to established ways of working, which pushes teams to reflect more deeply and communicate more clearly. This dynamic, in turn, leads to increased flexibility, particularly in how organisations plan and adapt their work to emerging needs or feedback.

Another frequent observation was the positive effect on internal cohesion. When young people are seen and treated as active contributors, not just beneficiaries, relationships within the team become more horizontal and collaborative. This supports a stronger sense of shared direction and mutual respect across different roles and generations.

In parallel, youth participation often helps cultivate a culture of accountability and responsiveness. Young people tend to expect and encourage openness about decisions and follow-up on feedback. Their engagement creates an internal pressure to align practice with stated values and to stay attuned to the realities that youth themselves are experiencing.

Overall, organisations described this shift not simply as a change in structure or participation level, but as a deeper evolution in how the organisation defines itself and lives out its mission.

“Youth leadership has strengthened the spirit and clarity of our mission; they remind us why we do what we do.”

4

Expanded Networks and Recognition

Several organisations indicated that involving young people in the creation and leadership of initiatives has not only improved internal processes, but also elevated the organisation's profile externally. When youth play a visible and active role in shaping projects, those initiatives often gain broader resonance, particularly within local communities, among peers and in institutional or policy-related spaces.



Respondents described how youth-led or co-created activities attracted new forms of attention and support. In some cases, this translated into stronger partnerships, with schools, municipalities, or other civil society actors, who viewed youth engagement as a sign of credibility and alignment with participatory values. In others, it led to increased visibility through public events, media coverage, or digital outreach, especially when young people were directly involved in communication and advocacy efforts.

Beyond visibility, several organisations noted that youth participation helped them build trust with new audiences. When initiatives reflect the language, concerns and energy of young people themselves, they tend to be seen as more authentic, not only by young participants, but by parents, educators, funders and community members.

In this way, youth leadership contributes not just to the quality of programming, but to the organisation's reputation and connectivity. By demonstrating that young people are not just included but empowered, these organisations position themselves as forward-thinking, community-rooted and responsive to the evolving landscape of youth engagement.

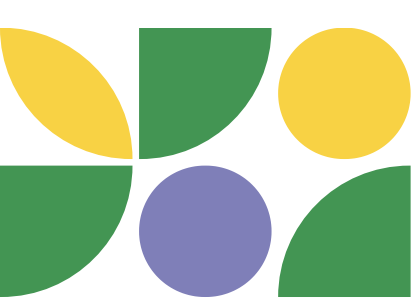
"We increased our network capacity and also promoted a better public image thanks to youth-led initiatives."

5

Internal Growth and Empowerment

Beyond organisational benefits, many respondents highlighted the personal transformation experienced by young people themselves through meaningful involvement. Youth leadership, when genuinely supported, becomes a powerful tool for individual development, helping young people grow in confidence, competence and commitment.

Organisations observed that participation in decision-making, planning, or facilitation roles allowed young people to develop key skills: communication, teamwork, responsibility and strategic thinking. These opportunities often marked a shift in how youth see themselves, not only as recipients or volunteers, but as capable actors with influence and purpose.



In several cases, this growth extended well beyond the immediate scope of the project. Young people who had taken part in leadership roles went on to initiate their own ideas, support peers, or take on mentorship and facilitation responsibilities. Some were even recognised as local role models, a reflection not only of their individual progress, but of the supportive environments that allowed them to step forward.

Responses also made clear that this empowerment was not automatic. It required intentional support: spaces to speak, chances to lead and a culture that encourages learning rather than punishes mistakes. Where these conditions were in place, organisations reported a deepened sense of belonging and investment among youth, as well as more sustainable engagement over time.

Ultimately, youth participation nurtures not only the collective strength of organisations, but also the personal trajectories of the young people involved, helping them grow into more confident, engaged and civically minded individuals.

"They are not just participants; they become community leaders and role models for others."

Youth engagement is widely considered a valuable approach that not only deepens and improves the quality and impact of work but also serves as a practical method for achieving better results and long-term viability.



5.7 Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

Most organisations indicated that they have some form of mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of youth involvement. These practices range from informal conversations to structured tools, reflecting different levels of formality, frequency and integration.

1

Feedback Loops and Consultations

Many organisations use feedback loops, often after activities or during project reviews. These may be conducted through:

- Group discussions or debriefs
- Regular consultation meetings
- Reflection sessions or evaluation forms

“We always gather feedback after every activity and it helps shape how we plan the next one.”

Several organisations also mentioned holding advisory or consultation meetings specifically focused on gathering youth perspectives.

The tools employed across organisations range widely in formality and structure. On one end of the spectrum, some organisations rely on informal methods such as spontaneous group discussions or quick verbal check-ins after activities. These are often flexible and relational but may not capture insights systematically. On the more structured end, others make use of digital evaluation forms, post-it exercises during local events, or scheduled feedback meetings, tools that enable the organisation to track changes over time and identify recurring needs or patterns.

What also emerged from the data is the frequency with which feedback is collected. While a few organisations described continuous feedback processes, integrated into regular meetings or internal reviews, most reported using feedback loops at specific moments: after events, at the end of projects, or during strategic planning phases. This occasional nature reflects both the value placed on reflection and the constraints under which many operate.

Finally, integration of youth feedback varies: in some cases, it informs activity design directly; in others, it plays a more symbolic role, collected but not clearly acted upon. This distinction is crucial, it highlights that effective consultation requires not only collecting input but also making visible how that input influences decision-making.



When young people see their feedback being acted upon, their trust and engagement tend to grow. When they don't, participation risks becoming performative.

This layered use of evaluation tools, ranging from the intuitive to the systematic, reflects a shared understanding of the importance of listening to youth, but also underscores the varying degrees of institutionalisation and follow-through among organisations.

2

Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys (both digital and in-person) were another commonly mentioned method. These tools are used to collect structured input on both programme content and leadership practices.

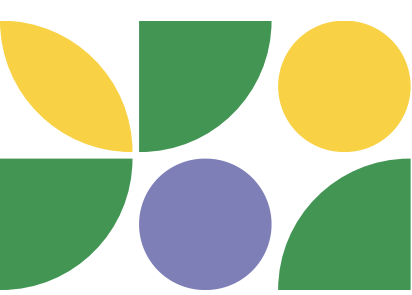
"We're thinking about implementing more regular surveys to formalise the process."

While some organisations use these tools consistently, others indicated they are aspirational or in development.

Surveys and questionnaires were recognised as useful tools for gathering structured and comparative feedback, especially when organisations seek to understand broader patterns across time or different groups. Among those using them regularly, surveys are often deployed post-activity to assess satisfaction, learning outcomes, or group dynamics. In some cases, they are also used to explore leadership needs, interests, or barriers to participation, offering data that informs programme design more strategically.

However, the responses also reveal that the use of surveys remains uneven. Some organisations spoke of them in aspirational terms, indicating a desire to move toward more consistent or automated use, but citing time or technical capacity as obstacles. Others are in early stages, experimenting with formats or trying to make the process more youth-friendly.

What's notable is that when surveys are implemented without complementary follow-up, such as discussions or feedback-sharing sessions, their impact can be limited.



A few respondents hinted at this tension: that collecting data doesn't always lead to reflection or change. Therefore, the value of surveys seems to depend not only on the tool itself but on the surrounding culture of responsiveness and transparency. Where that culture exists, surveys become more than administrative exercises, they act as bridges between youth input and organisational learning.

3

Agile and Iterative Approaches

A few responses referenced more systematic evaluation models, including feedback loops inspired by agile methodologies, or embedded reflection within project cycles.

"We use Agile-inspired feedback loops to regularly reassess how youth leadership is working and how it can be improved."

Although only a minority of organisations explicitly referred to agile methodologies, those that did provided compelling examples of how iterative feedback is being embedded into their organisational routines. These approaches typically involve short feedback cycles, regular checkpoints and space for rapid adjustments, often in the form of youth team retrospectives or adaptive planning sessions.

In contrast to more static or end-of-project evaluations, these iterative models allow organisations to make real-time changes to leadership processes, activity formats, or group dynamics. This increases responsiveness and can make youth involvement feel more immediate and authentic. When young people see their input leading to quick, visible changes, it reinforces their sense of agency and reinforces the organisation's commitment to co-creation.

Moreover, these models tend to decentralise decision-making. By encouraging teams, including young members, to reflect regularly and propose adjustments, power is shared more equally and learning becomes a continuous process rather than a one-off moment. However, adopting such practices also requires a level of internal coordination and openness to experimentation that not all organisations may yet be ready for.

Still, the presence of even a few examples suggests a valuable direction for the sector: moving beyond static assessments and toward more adaptive, youth-led reflection cycles that support continuous improvement.



In smaller or more grassroots settings, evaluation is often informal, conducted through day-to-day interactions, peer dialogue, or staff observations.

“Much of our evaluation happens through direct conversations; young people tell us what works and what doesn’t.”

Informal evaluation methods were commonly cited among smaller organisations, volunteer-led groups, or those operating in more relational and fluid environments. These mechanisms, including spontaneous conversations, peer-to-peer feedback and staff observations, allow for quick, intuitive assessments of what is working and where adjustments are needed. In these contexts, feedback is often integrated into the natural rhythm of activities, making it more accessible and less intimidating for young participants.

This approach offers clear advantages in terms of immediacy and trust. Young people may feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts in familiar, conversational formats rather than filling out formal surveys or attending structured evaluation sessions. For organisations rooted in community dynamics or operating with limited administrative capacity, these informal practices can be both pragmatic and authentic.

However, the same informality that fosters openness can also limit consistency. Without mechanisms for documenting or systematically analysing feedback, valuable insights may be lost and opportunities for organisational learning reduced. Several organisations expressed awareness of this trade-off, acknowledging the need to balance relational feedback with more structured follow-up, especially as they grow or engage with external partners.

Ultimately, informal mechanisms serve as a valuable entry point for fostering a feedback culture, particularly in settings where relationships and flexibility are core strengths. The challenge lies in ensuring that this informality does not result in fragmentation or missed opportunities for deeper reflection and accountability.



Importantly, several organisations reported that youth feedback is not only collected but incorporated into planning, strategy and project redesign.

“Youth suggestions have led us to change our approach to several projects; it’s a continuous dialogue.”

This aspect marks a critical distinction between feedback as a formality and feedback as a driver of change. Several organisations reported that youth input is not simply acknowledged, but meaningfully embedded into ongoing organisational practices, shaping project design, influencing strategic priorities and even informing governance models.

In these cases, feedback is treated not as a one-way process of consultation, but as part of an ongoing dialogue. Youth are not only asked for their views but are then updated on how their contributions influenced outcomes. This transparency reinforces trust and deepens engagement, making participation feel consequential rather than symbolic.

Examples included redesigning training formats based on youth learning preferences, adjusting communication strategies to better reflect youth culture and changing leadership structures to accommodate new forms of collaboration. Such shifts demonstrate that when organisations take feedback seriously and build mechanisms for integrating it, youth participation becomes not just visible, but transformative.

That said, this level of integration often requires deliberate effort. Organisations that succeed in embedding feedback tend to have clear follow-up procedures, staff roles dedicated to reflection and adaptation and a mindset that values responsiveness over rigid planning. In this way, feedback becomes a strategic tool for innovation and inclusion, rather than an administrative checkbox.

The findings show that while evaluation mechanisms vary in sophistication, there is a clear effort across organisations to listen to young people and improve participation processes accordingly. For many, these practices are still evolving: moving from ad hoc feedback to more structured, consistent and youth-driven models.



5.8 Success Stories and Good Practices

The organisations participating in this research shared a rich set of experiences and success stories that illustrate the transformative power of youth leadership when implemented with care, intention and creativity. Rather than isolated moments of achievement, these stories reveal a series of principles and practices that have the potential to be adapted and adopted across the youth sector.

This section identifies the key ingredients behind these successful practices, distilling them into transferrable models that can inform innovation in youth work.

1

Youth Leadership as a Built-In System, Not a One-Off Event

Across many responses, the most effective practices were those where youth leadership was not an occasional feature but a core organisational principle. In these contexts, young people were involved not just in delivering specific activities but in co-governing, co-planning and co-owning the mission. This was made possible through embedded roles, representative mechanisms, or structural mandates that ensure youth presence in decision-making at all levels.

Key Practice Principle:

Design youth participation as a standing organisational function, not just a project-based opportunity.

2

Ownership Through Real Responsibility

Successful examples showed that young people thrive when trusted with authentic responsibility, not just consultation or symbolic involvement. Whether coordinating events, managing budgets, or leading campaigns, youth involvement becomes meaningful when it's tied to tangible decision-making power.

These responsibilities were often paired with support structures, such as mentoring, debriefing sessions and capacity-building, allowing leadership to develop through practice.

Key Practice Principle:

Give young people real responsibility, paired with trust and tailored support.



3

Purpose-Driven Participation: Tying Leadership to Local or Global Challenges

Several impactful stories emerged when youth-led initiatives were explicitly connected to pressing social or environmental issues. In these cases, young people were not only participating but mobilising around causes they care about, from climate action to inclusion, education, or mental health.

The strongest practices allowed youth to set the agenda themselves and supported them in framing, designing and executing activities that respond to real needs.

Key Practice Principle:

Anchor youth leadership in action-oriented missions that resonate with their lived experiences and aspirations.

4

Adaptive Formats and Non-Formal Learning Environments

Innovation often came from organisations willing to break from conventional methods and adopt more flexible, youth-friendly approaches. These included the use of digital tools, peer-to-peer education, gamified learning, artistic expression and open-format workshops. Non-formal education was used not just as a content delivery tool, but as a method for co-creation and empowerment.

Key Practice Principle:

Use adaptive, creative methodologies that allow young people to learn and lead on their own terms.

5

Creating Continuity: From Project to Practice

A notable success factor was the institutionalisation of good practices beyond single projects. Some organisations described how youth boards, committees, or working groups initially formed for temporary initiatives eventually became permanent features of their governance or programming.

Sustaining youth leadership over time, even as individuals rotate out, ensures continuity, organisational memory and long-term impact.

Key Practice Principle:

Turn effective project-based practices into permanent structures that evolve with the organisation.



In several success stories, youth participation wasn't static, it evolved through continuous feedback and dialogue. Organisations used mechanisms like post-activity reflection, participatory evaluation and direct youth feedback to adapt and refine their practices over time. This created a culture where young people felt genuinely heard and where leadership processes remained flexible, responsive and improving.

Key Practice Principle:

Build iterative feedback mechanisms to evolve your youth leadership practices over time.

A Mindset Shift, Not Just a Toolkit

What emerged is a shared mindset: one that sees young people as capable, creative and essential partners in shaping the present and future of youth work.

Organisations that succeed in embedding youth leadership are those that shift their internal culture from delivering to co-creating, from managing to mentoring and from inviting participation to handing over real ownership.



Youth Leadership Toolbox

Principle	What It Looks Like in Practice	How to Apply It
1. Make Youth Leadership Structural, Not Occasional	Youth are part of decision-making bodies, planning teams and governance structures.	Embed youth roles in statutes, create youth boards or advisory groups and involve young people at every phase, not just during projects.
2. Give Real Responsibility with Support	Young people lead projects, manage tasks and represent the organisation publicly.	Assign leadership roles with real accountability and back them with training, mentorship and reflection spaces.
3. Connect Participation to Purpose	Youth initiatives respond to real needs (e.g., climate, mental health, inclusion).	Involve youth in identifying issues they care about and give them tools to design solutions. Keep participation mission-driven.
4. Use Creative and Youth-Friendly Methods	Gamification, art, digital campaigns, peer-led sessions.	Explore non-formal education, tech platforms and co-designed learning tools. Make formats fun, interactive and relevant.
5. Turn Good Practices into Lasting Structures	Temporary youth groups become permanent (e.g., councils, panels).	After a successful project, institutionalise the approach, don't let good ideas end with funding cycles.
6. Build Feedback into the Culture	Youth feedback shapes programming and decision-making.	Use reflective sessions, peer reviews, post-it feedback and surveys. Make space for young people to influence what comes next.



5.9 Additional Insights and Contributions

The final open-ended question invited organisations to share any further reflections, resources, or insights on youth leadership, inclusive and democratic practices. While many respondents left this space blank or used it to express appreciation for the research, others offered thoughtful additions that reinforced or expanded on earlier points.

Commitment to Youth Empowerment

Some organisations restated their deep commitment to youth-led approaches, emphasizing that empowering young people is both a goal and a method for achieving social change.

"We believe that empowering young people leads to stronger, more democratic communities."

"Our organisation is committed to fostering youth leadership at every level of our work."

Call for Broader Systemic Support

A few respondents underlined the need for greater structural support from institutions, funders and policy-makers to sustain inclusive youth leadership, particularly for grassroots or under-resourced organisations.

"Initiatives and projects focused on youth leadership are great, but they need long-term investment to make real change."

Appreciation and Solidarity

Several organisations expressed gratitude for being part of the research, highlighting the value of sharing practices across countries and learning from each other.

"Thank you for doing this work, it's important that we exchange ideas and keep pushing for real youth participation."

These final comments underscore both the aspiration and the challenge of inclusive youth leadership. They reflect a community of practitioners who are engaged, reflective and eager to improve, not only within their own organisations but across the broader field of youth work.



6.

Analysis & Discussion

The data collected from 30 diverse youth-oriented organisations across 9 countries presents a rich, multifaceted picture of youth leadership in practice. While the structures, capacities and contexts vary widely, several common themes, tensions and opportunities emerged.

6.1 Youth Leadership: Shared Values, Uneven Realities

Across all responses, there is a shared ideological commitment to youth inclusion, empowerment and leadership. Nearly every organisation sees youth participation as central to its mission.

However, the degree of actual implementation varies significantly. While some are fully youth-led or have embedded participatory structures, others are still developing pathways toward meaningful youth involvement.

This reveals a tension between aspiration and operationalisation: many organisations want to implement democratic youth leadership models, but face real-world limitations such as resource constraints, institutional rigidity, or low engagement.

6.2 Participation Is Context-Dependent

The frequency and quality of youth involvement correlate strongly with organisational type and national/local context. Youth-led associations and smaller NGOs tend to offer more regular and integrated participation. In contrast, public institutions and older structures are more likely to involve youth in consultative or project-specific roles.

Contextual factors such as bureaucracy, rural depopulation and socio-economic inequality were cited as structural barriers that prevent or shape youth engagement. This suggests that fostering inclusion requires both internal commitment and external support systems that recognise these constraints.



6.3 Effective Practices Require Support and Intentionality

Where youth leadership is successful, it is supported by:

- Formal structures (committees, advisory boards, general assemblies)
- Training and capacity-building
- Consistent feedback loops
- A clear commitment to long-term youth empowerment

These elements are not always present and where they are missing, youth participation tends to remain superficial or irregular. The data also shows that leadership development is most effective when it is intentional, resourced and evolving, not just symbolic.

6.4 Evaluation Practices Are Emerging but Inconsistent

Most organisations attempt to gather feedback from youth, but few use systematic, embedded evaluation frameworks. Informal methods dominate, with many relying on personal interaction, debriefs, or sporadic surveys. There is a growing awareness of the need for more structured approaches to assess the impact and quality of youth involvement.

This gap presents an opportunity: developing simple, scalable evaluation tools could help organisations reflect on and improve their practices and align their methods with their values.

6.5 Youth Involvement Is Transformative, when It's Real

The impact of youth leadership is clear in the most committed organisations. These effects include:

- More relevant and engaging programmes
- Strengthened internal cultures
- Expanded networks and visibility
- Growth in confidence, skills and civic engagement among young people

Crucially, these benefits are not automatic. They emerge only when young people are truly empowered, rather than simply invited to participate.



This analysis confirms the value and potential of youth leadership in organisational contexts but it also highlights the need for more intentional design, sustained investment and systemic support.

An additional layer of analysis reveals that youth engagement practices are shaped also by organisational structure. Youth-led associations and small NGOs most frequently reported regular and integrated youth involvement. These organisations tend to prioritise participatory governance and flexibility, often embedding young people in planning, decision-making and leadership roles from the outset. Public institutions and more formalised organisations, including those with hierarchical governance or rooted in administrative systems, were more likely to report project-based or occasional youth involvement. This often reflects structural or legal constraints rather than a lack of commitment.

Where engagement was described as occasional or limited to specific projects, it often correlated with a lack of permanent structures (e.g., youth councils, advisory boards). This supports the finding that systematic youth involvement requires intentional mechanisms.

Cross-referencing the evolution of youth involvement with engagement frequency reveals a clear pattern: among organisations where youth participation has been present since the beginning, the majority report regular youth engagement, in contrast, organisations that introduced youth involvement later rarely report regular engagement. From this it can be deduced that organisations that embed youth participation structurally from the outset are more likely to achieve consistent, ongoing engagement. In contrast, organisations that introduce it later may face cultural or operational barriers that require sustained effort and adaptation to overcome.





7. Conclusions

This research, conducted as the initial phase of a Cooperation Partnership in the field of Youth Erasmus+ project, Transformative Youth Leadership, set out to explore how youth organisations across Europe are implementing inclusive, open and democratic leadership models. The findings offer both a snapshot of current practices and a roadmap for where youth work can evolve.

Key Conclusions

1. **Youth leadership is widely valued but unevenly realised.** All organisations affirmed the importance of youth participation. However, actual practices range from fully youth-led structures to more limited, consultative roles, revealing a gap between principles and implementation.
2. **Structures matter.** Meaningful youth involvement is strongly supported by intentional organisational design: roles, committees, training and feedback loops. Where these are missing, youth input tends to be irregular or symbolic.
3. **Barriers are real and varied.** Organisations face internal and external constraints, including limited resources, adult-centric mindsets, legal rigidity and social disengagement. These must be acknowledged and addressed to create enabling environments for youth leadership.
4. **Youth involvement creates value.** When done meaningfully, youth leadership enhances relevance, visibility, innovation and organisational culture. It also builds confidence, skills and a sense of ownership among young people themselves.
5. **Evaluation and reflection need development.** While many organisations gather feedback from young people, few have robust mechanisms to evaluate the depth and quality of participation. There is a shared recognition that more structured reflection could improve practice.

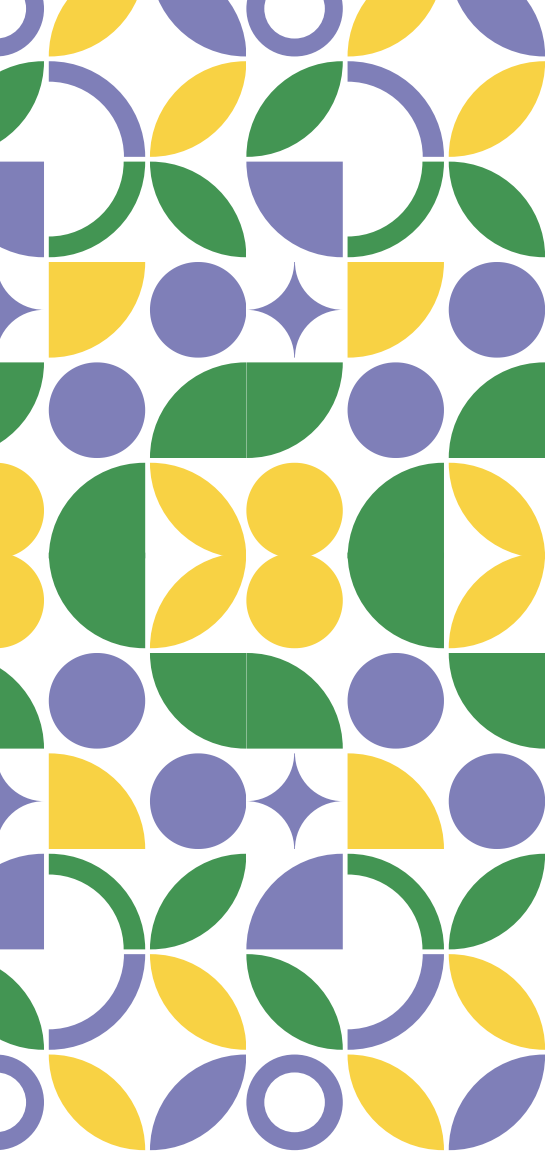
A Path Forward

This research confirms that horizontal youth leadership is not only desirable, it is essential to effective, democratic and forward-thinking youth work. However, it does not happen by default. It requires:

- Purposeful design
- Resource investment
- Cultural openness
- And long-term commitment

Transformative Youth Leadership project will build on these findings by co-developing methodologies, tools and practices that support youth-led approaches. The next phases will focus on validating, testing and disseminating these resources, ensuring that organisations across Europe can move from intention to implementation and from isolated efforts to shared, systemic change.





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Transformative Youth Leadership: towards horizontal leadership models in youth work

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Towards horizontal leadership models in youth work

Practices and Perspectives in Europe



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