



Statement on Youth Participation and Governance

Young people are the future. Young people have unique perspectives. And young people are immensely resourceful. To build stable and peaceful societies and develop policies that respond to the specific needs of younger generations and future generations, the voice of youth must be included in politics. Young people's active contributions can bring democratic values to life. Young people's voices are key in making political decisions as they voice the opinion of a group partly below the voting age and with fewer elected officials to directly represent them. With our unique perspectives on the world, we are key in the shaping of a better future.

It is undeniable that young people are the future of our communities, regions, countries and the world itself. Their boundless creativity, resourcefulness, and enthusiasm make young people an essential component of society. It is imperative to recognise the potential the young generation has, and ensure their active participation in shaping healthy, blossoming societies we strive for. In an era characterised by complex challenges and rapid changes, the voices and the perspectives of the young people are not only valuable, but indispensable.

Still, at the moment, European youth are facing multiple barriers to being active members of society. On the practical side, there is a lack of youth civic spaces, arenas—in-person or digital—that allow young people to communicate, participate and organise. This is in line with what is identified in the [AER's "Bureau Position on Youth"](#) For tailor-made youth policies addressing the challenges of the next generation" that one of the main challenges and concerns affecting young people in Europe is "addressing the lack of community spaces for youth." But, even when these spaces do exist, there is very limited information about them, and youth lack the necessary knowledge about where and how to get involved. Moreover, social barriers such as prejudices, a lack of trust and free speech, and a lack of recognition from elected officials foment feelings of infidelity among youth politicians. In addition to dampening motivation, such barriers severely impede the accessibility of existing youth civic spaces.

We call for governing bodies to provide support with the practical aspects of involvement in politics. We need assistance in creating, supporting and promoting open, safe and inclusive youth civic spaces in our local communities. We advocate for actions aligning with the recommendations stated in the aforementioned position paper. The spaces must be visible, accessible and approachable; recognising the diversity of young people. Youth civic spaces must also cherish the values of respect, integrity, responsibility and freedom of speech. Structures such as youth councils at regional and local level must be in place to promote meaningful, systematic and continuous influence in decision-making processes. Moreover, arenas like youth centres are important civic spaces for young people to develop, share and bolster their engagement.

Another practical barrier faced by young people is the economic strain of engaging in events outside the local community. Geographical distances are a barrier to young people in rural areas. This specific issue was raised at the 2022 Summer Academy plenary by delegates, and again during the 2023 YRN capacity-building weekend in Koppang. Moreover, many face difficulties in finding reliable, economic



and efficient transport and accommodation, creating an economic and mobility disparity affecting who is allowed to participate.

We strongly encourage the member regions of the AER to provide financial support to their YRN youth delegates to allow and encourage them to attend events and avail of training opportunities. It is one of the AER's priorities to allow youth access to opportunities "to grow professionally, socially and culturally [as it] is vital for regional development". Financial support towards youth delegates will close the disparities between urban and rural youth when it comes to the accessibility of youth civic spaces. It will also ensure diversity in the representation of youth; allowing young people with different backgrounds to raise their voice. Moreover, the opportunities for knowledge and capacity-building, as well as the development of actions and initiatives through attending events and training seminars are immense. **Providing young people with these learning opportunities will be a resource for their communities, regions, and beyond.** The youth of today are valuable collaborators for the governing bodies today, but they are also the decision-makers of the future.

As is also expressed in the [AER Bureau Position on Youth](#), "For tailor-made youth policies addressing the challenges of the next generation", providing financial support to young people and building the competences should not be seen narrowly as a cost, but an important investment that will shape sustainable societies now and into the future.

Bureaucracy, complex processes and language represent big impediments for young people to get involved in politics and meaningfully influence stakeholders and decision-makers. Moreover, **we experience a large gap between youth and politicians**, both generationally and communication-wise. Youth often feel like their opinions might be heard, but that they are not actually listened to. Their opinions are often not considered, and youth involvement frequently leads to youth washing. Such barriers impede the important dialogue between youth and adult politicians.

As a means of facilitating better collaboration between youth and adult decision-makers, we encourage the creation of events directed specifically towards intergenerational dialogue, but also a greater emphasis on the continuous dialogue in everyday decision-making. By reaching out to youth regarding topics that affect them and their future, their opinions are validated, their engagement nourished, and you are utilising one of the most important resources available to achieve targeted and sustainable solutions. Responsibility rests on youth to approach adults on their terms and vice versa; especially where there are complex bureaucratic processes that could be simplified and understood better through communication. We commend the Assembly of European Regions' facilitation and emphasis on intergenerational dialogue through its flagship Summer Academy programme, the [MEET Intergenerational Debates](#) or the inclusion of YRN members in the Working Group on Mental Health, and encourage bringing this mentality into all other work streams. Youth build their competence when working with adults and adults gain new perspectives and ways of thinking by interacting with youth.

Youth participation is not a benefit for young people only, but it is an asset that strengthens and enriches the entire society. If you allow us, we can be the "Engines of the communities", driving positive change.



Especially in decisions that directly affect youth, we encourage you to act by the phrase “Nothing about us without us”!

The AER Youth Regional Network