



POLICY JAM BERLIN

From Youth Voice to Youth Influence

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What needs to change so that young people do not only have a voice, but real influence?

This was the central question of the **Policy Jam Berlin**, bringing together close to 30 youth workers, activists, educators and musicians from across Europe with guests working in political education, youth participation, children's rights, policy and music.

The discussion took place at a significant moment for youth participation and democracy in Europe. In Berlin, 16- and 17-year-olds are able to vote in the parliamentary election for the first time. At the same time, participants reflected on declining trust in democratic institutions, the rise of far-right and populist movements in different European countries, and the growing challenge of reaching young people who feel disconnected from politics.

Experiences from Germany, Spain, Italy, Croatia, the Netherlands and other European countries were brought into the conversation. The **European Youth Goals** provided a common reference point; but also prompted an important question: how do we make sure that principles that look good on paper connect with the realities young people experience in their everyday lives?

What we heard

There was broad agreement that **being heard is not the same as having influence**.

Youth councils, consultations, elections, youth organisations, dialogue processes and other participation mechanisms can create important opportunities. But participation becomes meaningful only when young people can see that their involvement has consequences: when their ideas reach decision-makers, when they know what happens with their input, and when they can recognise something they helped to change.

This also requires adults and institutions to be prepared to **share power**. Inviting young people into a room without giving them any possibility to influence what happens afterwards risks turning participation into tokenism.

Participants identified many barriers: lack of access, communication, motivation, transparency and resources; language and educational barriers; hierarchy and



powerlessness; lack of appropriate spaces; and the unreliability of politicians and decision-makers.

Above all, we talked about **youth reality**.

Not every young person has the same possibility to participate. Young people experiencing poverty or exclusion, young migrants, young people with disabilities and others facing barriers are often missing from participation processes. Too often, the young people represented are those who already have the confidence, education, networks, time and resources to participate.

And for somebody dealing with much more immediate problems in their life, joining a consultation or political meeting may simply not be a priority; particularly if previous experience has taught them that their opinion will change very little.

From this discussion, **five recommendations emerged**.

1. MAKE PARTICIPATION LEAD TO SOMETHING

Young people should be able to see **what happens after they speak**.

Participation needs clear routes from consultation to decision-making. Institutions and policymakers should explain what was heard, what will be acted upon, what cannot be implemented and why.

Young people should not repeatedly be asked for their views without seeing tangible results.

Participation without feedback creates frustration. Participation with visible impact creates trust.

This also means being prepared to share decision-making power. Meaningful participation cannot happen if adults invite young people to participate while retaining control over every important decision.

2. START FROM YOUNG PEOPLE'S REALITIES; ESPECIALLY THOSE WE ARE NOT HEARING

Participation cannot be meaningful if it repeatedly reaches only the young people who already know how to participate.



Institutions, policymakers and youth organisations need to make a much greater effort to reach young people who are currently underrepresented; including marginalised young people, migrants, young people with disabilities, those experiencing economic disadvantage and young people outside established organisations and networks.

That means **going where young people are**, rather than always expecting young people to enter institutional spaces.

It also means listening before designing solutions. Why is someone disengaged? Why does someone not trust democratic institutions? Why does participation feel irrelevant to their life?

The message from the Policy Jam was simple:

Understand before judging.

3. BUILD LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS, NOT ONE-OFF PARTICIPATION

Meaningful participation needs **time, continuity and trust**.

Too many participation opportunities are organised around individual projects, events, elections or consultations. Young people are asked what they think, the activity ends, and the relationship disappears.

Participants called instead for long-term approaches that create **ownership, agency, collaboration and accountability**.

Youth participation should therefore become a normal part of how institutions work rather than an occasional exercise. This requires sustained structures, adequate funding and resources, accessible local spaces, and stronger connections between young people, youth organisations, policymakers and public institutions.

Participation should not be something that happens to young people. Young people should be able to **shape the process itself**.

4. COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY; AND GO LOCAL

One uncomfortable question in the discussion was why populist and far-right movements are succeeding in reaching some young people, working-class communities and people in rural areas.



Participants observed that democratic and progressive actors can sometimes communicate in ways that are too abstract, intellectual or distant from everyday concerns. Meanwhile, populist movements can be highly effective at using platforms such as TikTok and offering simple, emotionally powerful answers to complex problems.

The response cannot be to copy those answers.

But democratic institutions, civil society and youth organisations **can learn from the ability to communicate clearly, listen locally and connect political questions with people's everyday experiences.**

We need solutions **“beyond TikTok”**: not algorithm-driven easy answers, but communication that is understandable, accessible and relevant while still respecting the complexity of the issues.

This is particularly important where trust in politicians, institutions and democracy is already weak. Rather than dismissing people because of how they vote, we need to understand the concerns, experiences and frustrations behind those choices; and rebuild democratic participation from the local level upwards.

5. USE MUSIC AND CULTURE AS SPACES FOR PARTICIPATION

Music does something that conventional political formats often struggle to do.

Participants described music as **emotional, universal, accessible, low-barrier, non-verbal, provocative, embodied and fun**. It can create connection and community. It can give people a way to express identity and dignity, speak their truth, ask difficult questions and communicate across language barriers.

Importantly, music can involve people who would never voluntarily enter a political meeting.

Arts and music should therefore not be treated simply as entertainment alongside youth participation. They can be **tools for participation themselves**: creating awareness, opening dialogue and helping turn ideas and emotions into action.

Creative spaces can also be less hierarchical and less competitive than conventional political spaces. They allow different forms of knowledge and expression to count.



Not every young person wants to write a policy paper. They still have something political to say.

From voice to influence

The Policy Jam did not produce one single model for meaningful youth participation; nor was that the intention.

Different countries, communities and young people need different approaches. But one message ran through the discussion:

Giving young people a voice is only the beginning.

Meaningful participation requires access, inclusion, transparency, resources, long-term relationships and genuine opportunities to influence decisions. It requires institutions to listen differently and sometimes to give up power. And it requires us to recognise forms of participation that happen beyond traditional political spaces.

The challenge is therefore not simply to create more opportunities for young people to speak.

It is to make their participation matter.



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Policy Jam Berlin was organised by INA / Songs for Rights as part of the Erasmus+ supported programme “Promoting European Youth Goals through Music”. The discussion took place during the Songs for Action Training in Berlin, where youth workers, activists, educators and musicians from across Europe explored how music can be used to promote human rights, EU values and the European Youth Goals.