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# Heroes Among Us

Policy Recommendations for Youth Engagement

This policy brief incorporates the perspectives and policy proposals developed by the participants who participated in the “*Heroes Among Us*” event held in the Metaverse during the 30<sup>th</sup> of June and 1st of July 2025 as part of the Metaversing project ERASMUS-YOUTH-2025-CSCOG-SGA-101227904.

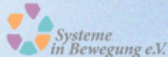
## Context and objective

Within the framework of the Metaversing project (ERASMUS-YOUTH-2025-CSCOG-SGA-101227904), two facilitated debate sessions were held on the topic of supporting and fostering youth engagement under the title *Heroes Among Us*.

These sessions drew on the DANA catastrophe that took place in Valencia (Spain) on the 29th of October as an example of how young people were able to get involved and were essential in a time of need and to reflect on how this engagement could be extrapolated to daily life. These sessions counted on the participation of the network’s members.

This discussion was structured in two sessions on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June and 1st of July through a series of questions. The first session focused on how everyday heroism can be recognised and supported through long-term change. The second session concentrated on empowering young individuals by focusing on their actions.

The aim was to consider and identify obstacles and discuss potential recommendations to encourage youth participation in public and civic spaces in line with EU youth policies and the principles of participatory democracy.



## European Policies for Youth Empowerment

The empowerment of youth is a strategic priority of the European Union as a central one for the establishment of inclusive, democratic, and sustainable societies. The EU has established an integrated policy approach, financing schemes, and participation mechanisms aimed at enhancing the autonomy, competencies, and active citizenship and participation of young people in public life.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) is the policy document, and its priority areas include youth engagement in democratic institutions, social inclusion, and skill development. It is executed through institutional mechanisms such as the EU Youth Dialogue, which ensures that young people have direct input into national and EU policy-making processes.

Supporting the Strategy, programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps offer valuable chances for non-formal learning, volunteering, cross-border mobility, and youth initiatives, as well as improving employability, social innovation, and intercultural competence.

In addressing socio-economic challenges, interventions like the Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Support, financed through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), aim to ensure the school-to-work transition and the battle against unemployment among youth and ensure equal access to quality employment, education, or training.

Other instruments like DiscoverEU and the European Youth Portal consolidate youth mobility, access to information, and European identity. The EU also employs a series of Youth Indicators to monitor the situation of young people systematically and supply evidence-based policy making.

These policies and programs provide young people with the competences, opportunities, and spaces to make positive contributions to society, while supporting social cohesion, civic participation, and youth-led innovation across the Union.

## **Key Findings**

- Young people feel disregarded in decision-making processes due to being perceived like inexperienced and immature.
- Successful youth initiatives are influenced by visibility, solidarity, and meaningful inclusion.
- Systemic priorities (politics, economics, tradition) overshadow youth concerns.
- Sustained youth engagement requires structured follow-up and institutional support to create long-term change.

## **Barriers to Youth Engagement**

Participants identified the perceptions of inexperience and immaturity as the main reasons young people today feel unheard; they highlighted how these perceptions lead to feeling unable to contribute meaningfully to civic life. Some participants highlighted how young people are marginalised in political, business, and community settings, explaining how outdated societal attitudes and resistance to accepting youth's innovative ideas further this exclusion. Participants also highlighted the impact of inherited problems and intergenerational resistance, which can lead to disillusionment and a loss of motivation among young people seeking engagement.

Other obstacles, such as lack of youth representation in politics, disconnection from civic processes, and insufficient or symbolic participation designed without genuine decision-making power, were also identified. Another concern raised was the lack of safety in volatile environments such as public protests or demonstrations.

In addition to these external barriers, internal obstacles also emerged prominently in the discussions. Participants spoke about lacking self-confidence and not knowing the pathways to civic engagement, compounded by the absence of accessible, youth-specific platforms where their voices would lead to tangible outcomes. Some described feeling isolated when joining small initiatives, where limited participation made collective action difficult. Participants also cited practical limitations, specifically the conflict between engagement opportunities and personal responsibilities like study, work, and family. Significant disparities in access to resources and platforms compound these challenges, particularly affecting marginalised and rural youth.

## Examples of Youth Impact

Despite the discussed barriers, participants identified instances where youth engagement yielded tangible outcomes.

- Fridays for the Future and March for Our Lives were cited as successful examples of youth mobilisation built on sustained public visibility, strong advocacy, and a global organisation.
- Local initiatives such as a Bulgarian student mapping road accidents to improve public safety and young people coming together to provide relief during natural disasters demonstrate how young people can respond decisively to community needs.
- Individual examples of youth engagement, such as Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education and Tilly Smith's tsunami warning efforts, were highlighted as examples of youth courage and social responsibility, as well as how an individual action can have an impact on a wider community.

Participants identified shared purpose, media visibility, community support, and opportunities for sustained engagement as the key enablers to youth impact.

## Systemic Issues and Missed Opportunities

By implementing these policy recommendations and taking actionable steps, stakeholders can create an environment where young, everyday heroes are recognised, supported, and empowered to make a positive impact in their communities. Investing in youth engagement is not only a moral imperative but also represents a strategic investment in the future. By celebrating 'Heroes Among Us,' we can build stronger, more resilient, and more vibrant communities for all.

## Sustaining Youth Engagement

Using the catastrophe of the DANA floods in Valencia, participants reflected on how spontaneous moments of unity can be leveraged to create a lasting change in the community. Suggestions included:

- Guaranteeing that these moments are visible in public media discourse.
- One suggestion was to transform emergency responses into structured, ongoing community initiatives that are led by young people.
- Promoting and fostering solidarity actions as examples to inspire future initiatives.

## **Policy Recommendations to Support Youth Engagement**

### **Education and Skill Development**

- Revise school curricula to integrate civic education, participatory skills, and youth leadership training.
- Provide practical training in event organisation, advocacy, rights awareness, and public speaking.
- Emphasise that engagement itself is a means of building essential civic competencies.

### **Civic infrastructure and platforms**

- Establish local and national youth councils with decision-making powers.
- Provide accessible spaces, resources, and digital platforms for youth-led initiatives.
- Support peer mentorship networks, linking experienced civic leaders with new youth activists.

### **Legal Protections and Funding**

- Guarantee legal protections for peaceful protest and civic expression by young people.
- Simplify access to public funding, grants, and civic resources for youth-led projects.
- Remove administrative barriers and streamline application procedures for youth initiatives and organisations.

### **Recognition and Mentorship**

- Launch structured mentorship programs for emerging youth leaders.
- Develop public recognition and awards schemes to highlight outstanding civic engagement by young people.
- Promote individual and collective achievements in public discourse and institutional reporting.

### **Integrating youth voices into policy Elaboration**

- Establish formal, regular, and meaningful youth consultation mechanisms at the local, regional, and national levels.
- Ensure youth consultation is genuine, clear, regular, and embedded in policy-making processes.



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