

Webinar 1: Involvement in decision-making of young people in and after alternative care¹

Overview and key insights

Young people from alternative care (state, voluntary, or private placements outside the family) enter youth spaces like Erasmus+ or European Solidarity Corps with experiences shaped by profound disruption. Instability, rigid institutional routines, and ruptured family bonds leave lasting imprints on how they view authority and trust adults.

Care-experienced youth navigate a "double vulnerability," intersecting with multiple socioeconomic disadvantages. While participation is an important protective factor that builds agency, traditional institutional frameworks often actively work against it. Systemic responses tend to individualise structural problems as personal deficits, medicalise social grievances as pathologies, and institutionalise dependency. Understanding these dynamics is essential not to label young people, but to dismantle structural barriers and treat young people as agents of change rather than subjects of intervention.

Main barriers to inclusive youth participation

- **Cynical Knowledge:** Learned skepticism and deep doubt toward institutions due to past neglect and broken institutional promises.
- **Institutional Alienation:** Participatory spaces favor dominant, privileged norms, leaving care youth lacking the cultural and linguistic capital to navigate them.
- **The Medicalization Trap:** The use of therapeutic or diagnostic language (e.g., trauma, ADHD) to frame and dismiss legitimate grievances.
- **Tokenism & Exploitation:** Nominal inclusion that risks severe participant burnout by demanding emotional labor - like sharing personal stories - without offering real influence.
- **Structural & Personal Constraints:** Rigid residential or halfway house regulations that limit scheduling, paired with a natural hesitation to trust adults and uncertainty about how much voice they are "allowed" to have.

Potentials and effective methods

¹ Insights from speakers Webinar 1 (Involvement in decision-making in and after alternative care):

- "Youth Workers and Young People from Alternative Care: Creating Meaningful Participation" by Artūrs Pokšāns - University of Latvia
- "Practical Tips for Youth Workers Working with Care Leavers" by Marie Kaiser - Careleaver Weltweit
- "Together" Methodology by Margherita Brasca and Marcela Baxanean - SOS Villaggi dei Bambini

- **Relational Trust & Consistency:** Building a foundation through reliable routines, open power-sharing, and private, individual check-ins.
- **Flexibility & Accessible Layouts:** Adapting activities directly to youth schedules using late arrivals, remote options, and flexible participation roles.
- **Multiple Pathways for Voice:** Offering non-verbal, creative, written, and artistic ways of expression instead of relying solely on group speaking.
- **Systemic Reframing & Boundaries:** Helping youth see obstacles as systemic inequality rather than personal failures, while strictly protecting them from story exploitation.
- **Inclusive Design:** Designing structures specifically to counter alienation by embedding youth interest, non-hierarchical setups, and adequate resources.

Practical tips for youth workers working with care leavers

- **Build Trust & Stay Flexible:** Establish genuine relationships and adapt plans to individual needs and unstable life situations.
- **Provide Holistic Support:** Assist with financial, practical, and emotional challenges when planning international stays (like paperwork and prep).
- **Encourage Active Participation:** Include care leavers and alumni directly in decision-making and maintain open, ongoing communication.
- **Create Peer Community:** Organize seminars and connections with other care leavers to foster belonging and shared experience.
- **Respect Individual Choices:** Support care leavers without judgment if they step back or leave early, while continuing to offer community resources.

Conclusion

Inclusive youth participation requires adapting institutional structures, maintaining strict boundaries between democratic dialogue and therapy, and committing to systemic rather than individual fixes. When youth workers replace rigid bureaucratic rules with trust, flexibility, and real responsibility, participation stops being another system to navigate. True participation means listening to young people's absence and skepticism - it is not an act of good-will, but the realization of fundamental rights.

The "Together" Methodology: Strengthening Youth Voice

Developed by SOS Villaggi dei Bambini, this EU-funded framework transforms theoretical child rights (UNCRC Article 12) into concrete public decision-making practices, specifically for care-experienced and marginalized youth.

Theoretical Core

- **Hart's Ladder of Participation:** Used to actively identify and eliminate tokenism, decoration, or manipulation.
- **The Lundy Model:** Structures engagement by securing four distinct pillars: **Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.**

Two-Tiered Engagement Model

1. **Peer Trainers (Aged 18–24):** Young adults, including care leavers, who receive specialized training to directly manage workshops. Their shared lived experiences break down adult hierarchies and build deep, immediate trust.
2. **Workshop Participants (Aged 11–17):** Youth who engage in a **6-session territorial curriculum** to learn about their rights and map out how to influence local public policy.

Key Delivery Mechanics

- **Near-Peer Leadership:** Swapping traditional adult-led models for peer-led education to ensure safe, authentic, and accessible dialogue.
- **Partnership for Change:** Workshops culminate in a direct, final dialogue where empowered youth pitch concrete recommendations directly to institutional stakeholders.

The Takeaway: Moving youth from passive "beneficiaries" to active citizens, ensuring public policies are co-designed rather than just consulted.

Webinar 2: Democratic participation of young people in rural areas¹

Overview and key insights

Rural young people are willing to participate in democratic and community life, but often face structural barriers that limit their access to meaningful participation. Rural youth are not a homogeneous group and their realities are shaped by geographic isolation, limited services, fewer participation opportunities, and weaker connections to decision-making structures.

Participation in rural areas differs from urban contexts because it is strongly linked to community relationships, informal engagement, and local realities. Young people are often already active in their communities through volunteering, cultural activities, or local initiatives, but these forms of participation are not always recognised by institutions.

The examples from Dumbrava (Romania) and Varėna Region (Lithuania) show that inclusive participation grows gradually through trust-building, informal interaction, creative methods, and direct dialogue with local authorities. Participation becomes meaningful when young people move from being consulted to co-creating activities, shaping decisions, and taking ownership of initiatives.

Youth participation is essential for democratic legitimacy and social cohesion. When rural youth feel excluded from decision-making, trust in institutions decreases. However, when participation is accessible, relevant, and linked to real community issues, young people can become active contributors to local development and democratic processes.

Main barriers to inclusive rural youth participation

- **Geographic Isolation and Limited Transport:** Physical distance, inadequate public transport, and dispersed settlements make it difficult for young people to attend activities, meetings, and decision-making processes.

¹ Insights from speakers Webinar 2 (Democratic participation of young people in rural areas):

- “*Participation starts where young people are: A rural perspective*” by Spyros Papadatos - Rural Youth Europe
- “*From Participation to Shared Ownership - What We Learned from the Youth of Dumbrava*” by Sebastian Ologu - Romanian National Agency
- “*The vision of youth: strengthening democratic youth participation in Varėna Region, Lithuania*” by Aiste Slajute - Varėna Culture Centre (Lithuania)

- **Lack of Youth Spaces and Services:** Many rural communities have few dedicated youth centres, organisations, or structured opportunities for civic engagement and participation.
- **Limited Access to Information and Digital Tools:** Young people may not receive timely information about participation opportunities or may face digital infrastructure and connectivity challenges.
- **Inaccessible Participation Processes:** Formal language, complex procedures, and institutional approaches can discourage or exclude young people from engaging.
- **Tokenistic Participation:** Young people may be consulted without being given genuine influence over decisions or meaningful opportunities to shape outcomes.
- **Low Trust in Institutions:** Limited interaction with decision-makers and previous negative experiences can reduce confidence in public institutions and democratic processes.
- **Reaching Only Already Active Youth:** Participation initiatives often engage the same motivated individuals while overlooking less visible or disengaged young people.
- **Economic and Time Constraints:** Work, family responsibilities, and long travel distances can limit young people's availability to participate consistently.

Potentials and effective methods

- **Building Trust Through Informal Activities:** Creating safe, welcoming environments and informal interactions encourages young people to participate without fear of judgment.
- **Bringing Activities to Local Communities:** Organising events directly in villages and rural areas reduces travel barriers and makes participation more accessible.
- **Creative and Non-formal Methods:** Using approaches such as world cafés, storytelling, visual mapping, and forum theatre helps make participation engaging, interactive, and inclusive.
- **Peer-to-peer Outreach and Youth-led Initiatives:** Empowering young people to involve their peers strengthens ownership, increases participation, and builds local leadership.
- **Connecting Participation to Local Issues:** Focusing on challenges that directly affect young people's daily lives makes democratic participation more relevant and meaningful.
- **Co-creation and Shared Ownership:** Involving young people as equal partners throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation strengthens commitment and long-term engagement.

- **Direct Dialogue with Decision-makers:** Creating opportunities for open conversations between young people and local authorities helps build trust and ensures youth perspectives are heard.
- **Visible Results and Real Influence:** Demonstrating how young people's contributions lead to concrete changes reinforces motivation and confidence in democratic participation.
- **Adapting Participation to Rural Realities:** Flexible formats, accessible communication, and locally tailored approaches help ensure participation is inclusive and responsive to diverse needs.

Conclusion

Inclusive rural youth participation requires more than inviting young people into existing systems. It requires adapting structures, methods, and decision-making processes to rural realities. The articles show that when young people are given trust, support, and real responsibility, they do not only participate in democracy - they actively help shape their communities and their future.

Webinar 3: Effects of poverty and other socio-economic barriers on democratic participation¹

Overview and key insights

Young people facing poverty and socio-economic disadvantages are regularly absent from decision-making spaces, or present without real influence. This is not due to apathy, but because existing participation models are inherently non-neutral. They are built on assumptions of time, stability, and institutional familiarity that do not align with marginalized realities.

When young people do not participate, we should not question their motivation, but rather question our systems. Traditional city hall meetings fail because systems are hard to access, turning the "hard to reach" into the "easy to exclude." True engagement requires a conceptual change and an intersectional perspective: moving away from a one-size-fits-all model demanding that individuals adapt, and instead making sure that systems adapt to the intersectional realities of poverty, discrimination, and limited networks that many young people face at the same time.

Main barriers to inclusive youth participation

- **Structural Misalignment:** True engagement requires a fundamental conceptual shift. We must move away from a one-size-fits-all model that forces individuals to adapt, and instead design systems around the daily realities of marginalized youth.

¹Insights from speakers Webinar 3 (Effects of poverty and other socio-economic barriers on democratic participation):

- *"Participation or Belonging?" Rethinking youth participation from the margins* by Fernando Vasco Chironda - European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)
- *From "Hard to Reach" to "Easy to Exclude" Rethinking youth participation through an intersectional lens* - Aïssatou Cissé (Local policymaker in Borgerhout)

- **The Hidden Cost:** The heavy toll of time, transport, connectivity, and emotional exposure weighed against the risk of being judged, misunderstood, or ignored.
- **Participation is not neutral:** Unspoken rules about how to speak, how to behave, and what counts as a "valid" contribution that reward those with institutional familiarity.
- **Participation can reproduce inequality:** Formats where personal stories and lived experiences are collected repeatedly without shifting actual decision-making power.
- **When inequalities multiply:** Layered, intersecting barriers that reinforce each other, threatening to normalize exclusion through four major risks:
 - *A democratic risk:* Deepening distrust ("Nothing will change anyway") as youth remain outside decision-making spaces.
 - *A social risk:* Entrenching the intergenerational transmission of poverty.
 - *A governance risk:* Pushing the responsibility for managing inequality downward to local actors without adequate resources.
 - *A normative risk:* Eroding the universality of rights, turning equality from a principle into a variable.

Potentials and effective methods

- **Familiar Starting Points:** Start participation directly where young people already gather (youth centers, cultural spaces, or streets) instead of expecting them to come to formal institutions.
- **Gradual Trust-Building:** Build confidence through smaller, safe, non-judgmental interactions over the long term. This requires consistency and honesty rather than only reaching out when input is needed.
- **Diverse Expression Pathways:** Offer multiple ways to engage (writing, small discussions, creative methods) instead of relying on a single, formal form of expression.
- **Lower practical barriers:** Make small but critical adjustments to the baseline set-up of activities, such as changing the timing, using accessible language, and offering food and compensation.
- **Working with peers and role models:** Collaborate with neighborhood youth ambassadors - people young people already trust and relate to - to bridge the gap between formal institutions and communities.
- **Engaging the Core Frustration:** Engage with the underlying frustration (insecurity, invisibility, lack of voice) rather than dismissing or policing how young people express it.
- **Solidarity:** Recognize lived experience to correct power imbalances, establish an equal footing in dialogue, and build true solidarity across differences.

- **Closing the feedback loop:** Communicate clearly exactly what changed because of young people's input (e.g., integrating ideas into local initiatives) so youth see real, visible outcomes.
- **Beyond inclusion: a question of power:** Move the framework deliberately away from superficial consultation toward co-creation, shared decision-making, and genuine youth ownership.

Conclusion

Participation is often presented as a tool - a way to improve policies, strengthen engagement, or enhance inclusion. But it is also something else. It is a test of whether democratic spaces are capable of expanding, not only in who they invite, but in how they function and of whether participation is willing to move beyond appearance, and into influence. For young people facing poverty or social exclusion, the challenge is not simply to be included. It is to belong. And belonging, in the end, is not created by invitation alone. It is created by recognition, by trust, and by the structural authority to shape what happens next.

Webinar 4: Democratic participation of young people with intellectual disabilities¹

Overview and key insights

Young people with intellectual disabilities have a universal right to actively shape decisions that affect their lives. In European youth practice, however, this right often remains symbolic. Meaningful participation is frequently reduced to mere physical presence, whereas it actually relies on three inseparable conditions: voice (using individual communication methods), being heard (extended timeframes and active validation), and influence (the actual power to change outcomes).

Because young people are the experts of their own lives, their involvement produces more targeted, legitimate, and sustainable results. When systems exclude them, decisions are built on flawed assumptions. Participation is fundamentally a question of power. True inclusion is not an afterthought layered onto existing systems; it is the very foundation of democratic legitimacy. It requires a radical conceptual shift away from asking "how do we include these youth?" and toward asking "why do our systems exclude them, and what must change?".

Main barriers to inclusive youth participation

- **Communication and Access to Information:** Long, complex documents and rapid meeting discussions that assume high literacy and lack visual support.
- **Structural Design of Participation Processes:** Systems built around a narrow participant model who reads fluently, processes info quickly, and speaks confidently in formal contexts.
- **Low Expectations and Assumptions of Incapacity:** Conscious or unconscious beliefs that youth with intellectual disabilities cannot contribute to complex topics, treating them as subjects of care rather than agents of change.
- **Tokenism:** Inviting a small number of self-advocates simply to create the appearance of inclusion while formats remain inaccessible and decisions have already been made.

¹ Insights from speakers Webinar 4 (Democratic participation of young people with intellectual disabilities):

- *"Nothing Without Us: Barriers, Inequality and Making the Participation of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities Real"* by Sandra Marques - Inclusion Europe
- *"Making Democratic Participation Accessible"* by Elisabeth Gudenus - EU For Trisomy 21

- **Intersecting Inequalities:** Compounding barriers when intellectual disability reinforces and interacts with poverty, gender, migration background, or rural isolation.

Potentials and effective methods

- **Change the System, Not the Person:** Shifting the core objective to adapting environments and structures so participation becomes possible, rather than trying to correct the individual.
- **Easy-to-Read Communication:** Utilizing short sentences, active voice, and supporting images as a standard accessibility benchmark for all key documents and agendas.
- **Process Adaptations:** Implementing structural adjustments like small group formats, adequate time to process and respond, visual tools, and multiple contribution formats.
- **Initial and Sustained Engagement:** Involving young people from the very beginning when questions, objectives, and project designs are still being defined.
- **Co-production and Shared Power:** Moving completely away from consultation toward models where youth hold real decision-making power through advisory groups with genuine authority.

Practice Story: Insights from *EU for Trisomy 21*

Through the *European Self-Advocates* and *Together for Inclusion* projects, this organisation has worked together with self-advocates, families, and organisations across Europe to develop practical ways to support meaningful participation.

- **Participation Needs Preparation:** Real engagement starts long before the meeting. It requires dedicated up-front time to help youth understand complex topics, form distinct opinions, and build confidence.
- **From Participation to Leadership:** Self-advocates must serve directly as co-creators, speakers, and decision-makers, ensuring that support people assist without replacing youth leadership.
- **Accessibility Beyond Easy Language:** True access is a continuous process—requiring visual structures, repetition, role-play, concrete examples, and patient processing windows.
- **Grassroots Ownership & Human Dignity:** Long-term motivation relies on projects built *with* participants. True democratic participation means having the power to create real change for oneself and one's peers.

Conclusion

Realizing the principle of "Nothing Without Us" cannot be achieved through tokenistic diversity box-ticking. It demands that organizations and youth workers actively dismantle structural barriers, embed proactive preparation, and share power. When young people with intellectual disabilities are cut off from shaping their own realities, youth policy reproduces inequality and weakens democracy. Meaningful participation begins only when institutions are ready to question their own privileges, step back to allow self-advocates to lead, and redesign their structures from the ground up.