



Rural Advocacy:

***building skills and empowering
change-makers across rural Europe***



***Rural Youth Europe Study Session
March 2025***

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Introduction

This toolkit has been developed as a key outcome of our 2025 Study Session, which took place in Budapest from the 16th to the 22nd of March, aimed at equipping rural youth with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to engage in advocacy at local, national and European levels. This toolkit serves as a guide to help young people in rural areas to navigate the complex world of policy-making, to make sure that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed when making decisions.

As a brief overview of the Study Session, it brought together 35 young people coming from different rural areas of Europe to learn about advocacy and build their capacities concerning this topic. The session aimed to address the lack of representation of rural youth in decision-making by providing them with the necessary skills to engage in advocacy effectively. The toolkit was created by rural young people for rural young people, with a participatory approach during the Study Session

The toolkit is structured to provide concrete information about advocacy, offering practical guidance on how young people from rural areas can advocate for their needs and rights. More specifically, the toolkit includes:

- An overview of advocacy and its importance for rural youth
- Tools and skills required to engage in advocacy
- Practical steps on engaging in advocacy, e.g. how to engage with decision makers
- Rural youth priorities for advocacy
- Good practices and examples

We hope that this toolkit serves as a valuable resource in your advocacy efforts and empowers you to take action in your communities and beyond!



What is advocacy & why is it so important?

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is the process of influencing decision-makers, policies, and societal norms to bring about positive change. Youth advocacy, specifically, focuses on empowering young people to have a voice on issues that affect them, ensuring their perspectives are heard in decision-making at local, national, and international levels.

Moreover, youth advocacy is about empowering young people to speak up for themselves and others to create positive change in their communities and beyond. It involves raising awareness of issues that impact youth and working to ensure their rights, needs, and opinions are respected and considered in decision-making processes.

Advocacy can take many forms. At times, young people advocate for themselves by expressing their views, standing up for their rights, or

ensuring their voices are heard in situations that directly affect their lives. In other cases, young people support their peers, speaking on behalf of those who may not feel confident or able to do so. Young people can also come together to lead campaigns or movements aimed at bringing about social, environmental, or political change. For example, many youth groups advocate for better education, mental health support, environmental protection, or human rights. Through these efforts, young people demonstrate leadership, raise public awareness, and influence policies that shape the future. This may include advocating for better laws, funding for youth programs, or policies that protect the rights of children and young people.

At its core, youth advocacy is about giving young people a voice and ensuring they have the power to participate in shaping the world around them.

Why is advocacy so important?

- Increased visibility and better brand recognition
- Recognition for expertise and values
- More rural youth members
- Stronger partnerships, sponsorships, and funding
- More and better opportunities for rural young people



What are skills?

Skills are the abilities that enable a person to perform tasks effectively. They can be learned, developed, and improved over time through education, practice, and experience. **These are some skills needed for successful advocacy:**

- Time management
- Social skills
- Negotiation
- Public speaking
- Argumentation
- Knowledge and experience
- Effective communication
- Leadership
- Decision-making
- Analytical skills
- Empathy
- Critical thinking
- Visualisation and illustration
- STEM

Competencies are a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a person to perform effectively in a specific role or situation. Competencies are broader and involve applying skills in real-life situations.

What are tools in the context of advocacy?

In advocacy, tools refer to the methods, resources, and strategies used to influence decision-makers, engage communities, and drive change. They enable advocates to communicate messages clearly, mobilize supporters, and effectively push for policy reform. **Some common advocacy tools include:**

- Social media and media posts
- Press releases and articles
- Radio broadcasts
- Public speaking
- Events
- Conferences
- Campaigns
- Podcasts
- Partnerships, alliances, sponsorship
- Fundraising
- Networking

Tips for successful advocacy

- Be consistent
- Stay friendly
- Stay respectful
- Develop a strategic plan
- Have a Plan B
- Know your strengths Find information on social media (e.g. about decision-makers)
- Look for opportunities
- Connect with other organisations
- Understand and explore your target audience
- Define your boundaries
- Craft clear messages
- Create catchy slogans
- Use statistics effectively
- Reach out to decision-makers
- Document promises made by decision-makers
- Include young people in your plan
- Identify advisers of decision-makers
- Document your actions (photos, videos, posts on social media, portfolio)
- Engage in informal communication with decision-makers (e.g., coffee breaks)



How to engage with decision makers



Networking

- Build connections with decision-makers and the people who work with or around them. Even if someone isn't the right person for your current issue, they may know others who are - connections you wouldn't otherwise have access to.
- Find individuals, organizations, and companies that share your interests and concerns. They can support your cause and help present a united front.
- Get to know people on a personal level. Engage with them during breaks or informal meetings - many key conversations (and even decisions) happen during coffee or lunch breaks.



Build relationships

- Advocacy is a two-way street. Don't just ask for favors or funding. Offer something in return. For example, you can share youth perspectives or provide support for their initiatives.



Do your research

- Identify who is working behind the scenes (e.g., advisors, assistants).
- Find out who is actively working on the topic you care about.
- Learn what other topics they're handling—your issue is likely one of many.
- Understand their background. For example, are they or their families farmers? Do they have connections to companies that may oppose your cause?



See the bigger picture

- Connect your issue with others on their agenda.
- Show that you're not acting alone—it's your entire community asking for change. There is power in numbers.
- Think long-term: What are the positive impacts if change happens? What are the consequences if it doesn't?
- Identify all the people affected by the issue and show how widespread the concern is.



Be concise

- Know your maximum and minimum asks in advance.
- Be clear and concise with your needs. Prepare a clear plan for how you will present your topic and yourself.
- Back up your arguments with evidence—statistics, examples, and personal stories.
- Have a plan B. For example, you might consider launching a social media campaign if decision-makers aren't willing to engage. But use this tactic strategically—overusing it could damage your reputation and make future collaboration more difficult.



Reaching out

- Use multiple channels, be persistent and just keep knocking on doors.
- Sometimes it's more effective to reach out to their assistant or advisor rather than contacting the decision-maker directly. They often have more expertise and know the best timing for your approach.



A continuous process

- One meeting or one social media post is rarely enough to make lasting change.
- Follow up regularly and remind them of the urgency and importance of your issue.
- Be flexible and adapt your approach based on the person you're speaking with.
- Know your audience and choose your strategy accordingly (e.g., social media, open meetings, direct messages).



Social Media

- Start by making a detailed plan of what to say and what to achieve ideally.
- Be as clear and concise as possible in relation to what you need and what you ask.
- Communicate with them by also offering or asking them what we can do for them.
- Giving examples and evidence linked to the demands is always helpful.
- The ministers and the politicians are important partners, but sometimes their advisors and members of their cabinets can be also even greater allies.
- Be aware and conscious of their professional and personal background, as well as the other projects they are working on - they are also humans and they have their own interests and passions you can find connections with.



Advocacy priorities of rural young people



Promoting access to public services and basic rights

We believe in equality and stand for the idea that everyone should have access to basic rights and public services. For us, basic rights include equal access to education, healthcare, transportation, and information, as well as the right to vote and express oneself freely.



Develop and reinforce a culture of democratic participation

Young people have unique ideas and specific needs that must be considered in the democratic process. In rural areas, they face particular challenges shaped by their local realities. That's why decision-making must take a local approach, one that includes rural youth by actively listening to them and encouraging their participation.

Empowering young people goes hand in hand with fostering a culture of democratic participation, which we aim to strengthen in our rural communities. By doing so, we can ensure that the voices, concerns, and aspirations of rural youth are truly heard. We believe in active citizenship, rooted in the decentralization of power, to enable more inclusive and representative democracy.



Community

Culture is a powerful force that connects people and generations. Promoting cultural heritage means passing on values, family histories, skills, and life experiences through intergenerational exchange. It's shared, living knowledge, something that brings people together around a table.

Life in rural communities is often marked by limited access to services and opportunities, including barriers to collective advocacy due to the physical distance between villages. That's why we must support young people in rural areas by providing platforms for connection and coordination. At the same time, we aim to engage with and strengthen existing networks to amplify the voice of rural youth.

We also need to address isolation and encourage active participation in social development, bridging gaps while preserving the traditions that shape rural identity.





Protection of culture

The realm of rurality is central to life in rural areas. It is the basis for traditions, folklore, sustenance, work, and recreation. That is why we advocate for the sovereignty and protection of rural communities.

We believe that promoting traditional knowledge should go hand in hand with integrating current scientific research on territorial protection. This empowers people to make informed decisions about their land and environment. Furthermore, we see the protection of sovereignty and territory as essential for fostering social cohesion and building resilient, thriving communities.



Future proofing

Farmers play a central role in our society by providing food. It's essential that we support them in having a positive impact on the land while working toward an accessible and inclusive rural life for all. In addition to this, the biodiversity crisis represents one of the most significant planetary boundaries affected by human activities. Protecting biodiversity requires both special protection and restoration efforts, as well as addressing the root causes of the crisis. It is crucial to allocate economic and human resources to the organizations responsible for ecosystem care.

As youth, it's important for us to consider our future. One of our top priorities is to ensure that the decisions and legislation made today do not negatively impact our tomorrow. We want to be part of the decision-making process and the discussions that will shape the world we inherit. Advocacy and open dialogue are key to ensuring that the voices of rural youth are heard and taken into account. Our priority is to collaborate with decision-makers to ensure rural youth have a say in shaping their future.



Transport matters

Transport is a critical issue for rural youth, influencing their access to education, jobs, healthcare, and social opportunities. Advocacy in this area is essential to ensure young people in rural areas are not left behind. Poor transport infrastructure limits rural youth from reaching schools, colleges, and employment, widening the gap between rural and urban opportunities. Without reliable transport, young people struggle to attend youth programs, community meetings, and political events, reducing their ability to advocate for their needs. Advocating for better transport helps ensure that rural youth have access to environmentally sustainable and affordable mobility options.

Many rural students must travel long distances to attend school or university. Without reliable transport, education becomes harder to access, limiting future opportunities. Jobs, internships, and training programs are often located far from rural areas. Limited transportation options force many young people to migrate or remain unemployed. Rural youth need reliable transport to access essential services such as healthcare, mental health support, and recreational facilities that enhance their quality of life. The lack of transportation also increases isolation, making it more difficult for rural youth to participate in sports, cultural events, or simply socialize with friends.

Advocating for improved rural transportation is crucial to bridging the gap between urban and rural youth. Better roads, affordable public transport, and innovative solutions such as community transport programs can empower rural youth, providing them with the same opportunities to thrive as their urban counterparts.



Infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, power supplies) necessary for the functioning of society or enterprise.

To provide a variety of opportunities, we need to ensure that communities, particularly those in less developed areas, have access to the same resources and connections as those in more urban environments. Without these essential facilities, people in rural and disadvantaged areas will miss out on opportunities to grow and thrive alongside the rest of society.

Infrastructure should encompass many of the priorities discussed throughout this document and is not limited to the points raised in this section.

Basic infrastructure must include access to Wi-Fi, transportation links, electricity, roads, freshwater, and much more.



Education

Rural youth should prioritise education as an advocacy issue for several important reasons:

1. Education as an advocacy priority for young people will ensure that they continue to have access to quality education in their local areas. Educational opportunities in rural regions have been on the decline for many years, forcing rural youth to travel to urban areas to receive their education.
2. By investing in education, rural areas can build a more skilled workforce, attract businesses, and foster local innovation. This contributes to the overall economic development of rural communities. Access to quality education also opens doors to further and higher education opportunities.
3. Rural areas often face disparities in educational resources and infrastructure compared to urban regions. Advocating for education ensures that rural youth receive the same quality of education as their urban counterparts, promoting greater equity.
4. Education empowers rural youth to become advocates for their own communities, driving change and representing their needs and interests. It enables them to take on leadership roles and contribute to the development of their areas.
5. Educated rural youth are more likely to engage in sustainable practices, advocate for environmental preservation, and support social causes. Education is key to addressing pressing issues like climate change, healthcare, and rural infrastructure.
6. By prioritising education, rural youth can become powerful agents of change within their communities and beyond.





Mental Health

One in five young people in Europe will experience a mental health disorder each year. This staggering statistic highlights the urgent need to address this growing concern. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are not just personal challenges, but also affect families, schools and entire communities. Since 2020, there has been a 40% increase in mental health issues among young people. Yet, despite the alarming rise in need, mental health services remain underfunded and often inaccessible, particularly in rural areas.

This is where we need a change. It's essential that we invest in mental health services for young people- not only in terms of increased funding, but also by making services more accessible for young people. This includes providing early intervention programs in schools and offering easily accessible counseling and support services. Together, we can begin to make a real difference.



It is also crucial that we address the stigma surrounding mental health. A survey by the European Youth Forum found that 40% of young people still feel embarrassed to seek help for mental health issues. Changing this perception is key to ensuring that young people feel comfortable seeking support when they need it the most.

If we want to secure a healthy and prosperous future for Europe, we need to prioritise mental health for the younger generation. It's time to provide them with the resources, support, and care they deserve. The future of Europe depends on it.



Health Care

Young people need access to healthcare close to home. This access is crucial for maintaining well-being and preventing health issues from worsening. In case of an emergency, there's no time to drive for hours to reach a hospital. People living in rural areas are often farther away from hospitals and, as a result, receive poorer healthcare.

Health care advocacy can focus on educating young people about healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and the importance of vaccinations. This knowledge empowers youth to make informed choices about their health.

Investing in youth healthcare not only fosters healthier adulthood but also eases the burden on healthcare systems and improves long-term quality of life.

Overall, healthcare is a fundamental aspect of youth advocacy, as it directly impacts the well-being and future of young people. By advocating for better healthcare, youth can create a healthier and more supportive environment for themselves and their peers.

Personal stories & good practices for advocacy

Telling personal stories effectively for advocacy requires a combination of emotional connection, structured storytelling, and strategic messaging.

Tips for telling powerful personal stories

- **Authenticity Over Perfection** - Genuine, imperfect, and heartfelt stories resonate more than polished, scripted ones.
- **Know Your Audience** - Adapt the message to different stakeholders (policymakers, donors, communities).
- **Balance Emotion & Logic** - Emotion draws people in, but logic and facts sustain engagement.
- **Call to Action (CTA)** - Clearly define what you want the audience to do (donate, sign a petition, join an initiative).
- **Repetition & Consistency** - Share stories across different formats and platforms to reinforce the message.
- **Empower, Don't Victimize** - Frame the story in a way that promotes dignity and resilience, not just hardship.



Tadej, Slovenia

Goal: Improve mental health awareness and support for farmers and rural populations. Reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues in rural areas. Develop strategies and guidelines for long-term psychological and social support for the agricultural community.



Background: Farmers and rural communities often face significant mental health challenges due to economic pressures, isolation, and the demanding nature of agricultural work. Despite these difficulties, mental health remains a stigmatized and under-addressed issue in rural Slovenia. The MOCno PODEŽELJA project was initiated to bring attention to this issue and foster a more supportive environment.

Challenge: Lack of awareness and understanding of mental health issues among farmers and rural populations. Strong social stigma prevents individuals from seeking help. Insufficient mental health services tailored to the needs of rural communities.

Outcome: Conducted workshops across Slovenia to educate and empower rural populations. Engaged various stakeholders in discussions about mental health challenges in agriculture. Developed recommendations and action plans for improving mental health support in rural areas. Raised awareness and started a broader conversation about mental health in rural Slovenia, paving the way for systemic improvements.





Kacper, Poland

Goal: To promote local food producers and educate them about the usage of it.

Background: I organised the regional stage of the Young Agricultural Producers' Olympiad. To make it happen, my team and I had to arrange a venue at an agricultural university, secure sponsors, and organize catering. It was a major undertaking because we had to handle everything separately.

The questions were prepared in cooperation with agricultural institutions, and the Olympiad was held under the patronage of the Minister of Agriculture himself.

Challenge: The amount of work and organising.

Outcome: Positive feedback, new knowledge, great prize and networking.



Rob, Armenia

Goal: To make a place where young people can work and enjoy "office life"

Background: My team and I came up with the idea of creating a space where young people could work in a comfortable and inspiring environment while also having opportunities to earn money. This space will support their professional growth, creativity, and collaboration, giving them the tools they need to succeed.

Challenge: It was really hard for us to start the "business" because we didn't have all the necessary printing machines, and we didn't have a place to start the work.

Outcome: We asked our municipality to help us and they happily helped us. They gave us enough money to make a place for us, to get all the necessary printing machines. So now we are doing printing services, we print pics on glasses, on plates, on clothes and so on.



Naro, Armenia

Goal: Strengthening the role of marginalised youth in democratic processes

Background: The project aims to strengthen the role of marginalized youth (aged 14-17 and 18-21) in democratic processes by systemizing cooperation between youth and local government authorities. Newly established mechanisms for knowledge sharing on social and public policy issues will equip youth with relevant knowledge and skills in human rights, effective interaction with local government, youth participation, and inclusion, as well as community development plans and advocacy.

Challenge: Bureaucratic Barriers, Lack of Youth Representation in Decision-Making, Resistance from Local Authorities

Outcome: The participants have created a student council in their school and have started doing different projects.

Conclusion

This toolkit has hopefully provided you with the essential knowledge, skills and resources to engage in advocacy effectively, whether at local, national or European level. By applying these strategies, tips and information, sharing your experiences, and working with other young people, you can amplify your voice and drive meaningful change for rural youth!

Advocating for rural areas is not only about addressing immediate challenges, but about shaping a common future together, where rural voices are recognized and taken into account in decision-making processes at different scales. Your efforts contribute to this, creating a movement that aims to have more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable rural communities.

We encourage you to use this toolkit as a first step in your advocacy journey. Use the information provided, adapt it to your local context and take action!



Listen to our rural advocacy podcast!

Listen to our Study Session podcast episode, hosted and produced by the participants of the 2025 RYE Study Session, where they talk through each of the chapters of the toolkit.

Listen by searching for 'Rural Voices' on Spotify or Apple Podcasts, or scan the QR code!



