

EUROPEAN CHARTER ON THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL LIFE

3.0

Prepared by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
in partnership with the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ)

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Introduction

1. The European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life 3.0, developed by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in collaboration with the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) of the Council of Europe and young people through a variety of youth organisations at different levels, aims to promote and strengthen the active and meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes at the local and regional levels.
2. Young people and their participation in decision-making at local and regional level are at the centre of the Charter. Young people are equal actors in society and their participation in democratic processes is essential to the sustainability and development of democratic systems. From local neighbourhoods to regional landscapes, youth regularly bring fresh perspectives, shed light on complex situations, and demonstrate determination to address pressing challenges. Young people are crucial agents of change building inclusive, sustainable, and resilient communities. As the generation that will inherit the consequences of today's decisions, youth should have the right, to have their voices heard and respected in all areas of policymaking. Including a youth perspective across institutions and levels of governance and guaranteeing youth participation at all levels of decision-making strengthens democratic institutions and improves the effectiveness and sustainability of public policies.

Chapter I Youth participation and its principles

3. Youth participation is about young people having the right, the space and structures, the tools and the opportunities as well as full support to participate in and influence the decision-making at local and regional level.
4. In a rapidly evolving world, the ways young people choose to participate and are supported to do so are as diverse as they are. The Charter recognises that in order to ensure youth participation stable structures are required, alongside with new, creative forms of engagement that empower young people to shape the communities.
5. Youth participation is based on democratic values, being an inclusive, representative and accessible process. The principle of equality and the prohibition of discrimination, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, has to be fully applied in respect to youth participation. All young people, regardless of their background, should have equal access to participation structures and processes. This requires constant attention being paid to identifying and removing barriers to participation and the adoption of tailored opportunities to participate in local and regional affairs, especially for young people from vulnerable backgrounds.

6. Youth participation requires a clear and open communication, where young people have access to accurate and relevant information, counselling and support. Transparency of the decision-making process entails that information about the decisions to be made, the process and the ways young people can take part, as well as the resulting decisions are made available in a youth friendly manner and through channels that used by young people. There should also be mechanisms to hold decision-makers accountable, ensuring that the youth's contributions and interests are respected, and acted upon, or, if that is not the case, young people should be entitled to be explained why their ideas were not considered.
7. Democratic competences, awareness of human rights and critical thinking are necessary skills in a democratic society which contributes to the empowerment of young people. All those involved in youth participation, from local authorities to young people, need these competences.
8. Youth participation requires environments that are both physically and psychologically safe and where all participants are treated with respect. Young people should feel secure and comfortable to express their opinions and engage without fear of discrimination, intimidation, or backlash. Respect in dialogue fosters trust and cooperation between youth and decision-makers, creating an environment where diverse opinions can be shared freely, and discussion can take place. This is essential for trust in democracy. In this regard, not only young people learn how to engage in political processes, but institutions, their representatives and staff must also undergo a learning process and develop the competences required.
9. The formats of youth participation should be firmly anchored in decision-making procedures, yet flexible and adaptable to constantly changing political or socio-economic circumstances. They should allow for innovation and creativity, offering a variety of ways for young people to engage. This principle recognises that young people's interests and the societal context are constantly evolving, and participation processes should evolve alongside them. Furthermore, it allows young people to engage in ways that suit their schedules, interests, and levels of commitment.
10. The structures, processes and platforms for participation should be designed in ways that are accessible and appealing to young people. Youth participation structures, platforms and processes must adapt to the needs and interests of young people, by using language, technology, and formats that they are familiar with, while securing the respect of their human rights. To truly capture young people's attention and commitment, participation should be productive, engaging and enjoyable, creating the conditions for a meaningful and empowering for young people.
11. Youth participation requires dedicated and sufficient financial and qualified human resources. Professionals working with young people and the decision-makers at local and regional level need to have their capacities built and trained to support youth participation. Sustainability means that youth participation efforts are ongoing and not one-off events, with permanent structures, ensuring that youth engagement continues to thrive.
12. Meaningful participation processes require accountability and transparency allowing young people to see the impact of their involvement. This involves young people having a say from setting the agenda, taking part in deliberations leading to decision-making, but as well as in the implementation and evaluation.

Chapter II Young people have rights

13. Youth participation is rooted in the international human rights framework that emphasises the importance of involving all individuals, including young people, in the decisions and processes that affect their lives.
14. Local and regional authorities are one of the main foundations of any democratic system. As outlined by the European Charter of Local Self-Governance and its Protocol, the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs is one of the democratic principles shared among all member States and this right can be most directly exercised at local level.
15. By engaging in decision-making at the local and regional level, young people exercise their human rights, including the right to participate in the public affairs and cultural life, either directly or through representatives they choose.
16. Local and regional authorities play an essential role in the respect of human rights of young people. Youth participation processes can contribute to the full realisation of young people's human rights. Equally, the respect, protection and fulfilment of young people's human rights is important in creating the necessary conditions for their participation in the life of the community.
17. The respect of freedom of expression of young people is fundamental for the exercise of the right to participate, to ensure that young people can express their opinions without fear of intimidation, repression and back clash. Equally, their right to privacy requires additional protection in respect to participation processes, especially in what concerns the digital realm. At the same time, young people need access to unbiased and reliable information to make informed decisions.
18. The freedom of assembly and association, including the protection of youth civil society is a requirement for meaningful youth participation at any level. Young people exercise these rights in various ways, including through engagement in youth organisations, local and regional youth councils, movements, taking part in demonstrations and advocacy groups. Young people need to be protected when appearing or acting as human rights defenders, in both online and offline environments.
19. Young people need to be given access to social rights and services, including housing, education and training, health services, leisure, culture without discrimination on any grounds. In order to achieve this, special attention has to be paid to more disadvantaged segments of youth, especially those who are affected by multiple and sometimes intersecting discrimination. It is necessary to ensure that every young individual is well and healthy, both physically and psychologically, and thus in a position and empowered to participate while their diverse needs are recognised and considered.
20. Youth participation is not just an individual right but a collective right as well. Youth are often part of communities and movements that work together to achieve common goals, whether through advocacy or protests, digital activism, or community mobilisation. This collective dimension ensures that young people can make an impact not only as individuals but as part of a broader community.

Chapter III Young people have structures and spaces for youth participation

21. Structures are fundamental preconditions for youth participation at local and regional levels because they provide the framework for cooperation and consultation with young people and youth civil society. Youth participation might take on different forms, including permanent structures for youth participation (e.g., local and regional youth councils or parliaments) or ad-hoc consultations on specific topics.
22. The Charter advocates for creating safe spaces and enabling environments where young people are not just invited to participate in the sense of being heard, but where they can define how they want to engage and have a true impact on decisions affecting the community they live in.
23. Local and regional authorities should secure information is available to young people about the various forms of participation.
24. Local and regional youth councils, youth parliaments, and youth forums (hereafter, youth councils) should serve as permanent structures that enable young people to engage in decision-making processes actively and meaningfully on a regular basis. They should act as a framework and entry point for young people to express their views on local authority initiatives, with the power to make proposals to local and regional authorities and have real impact. Additionally, they can facilitate consultations with youth on relevant issues, serve as fora for the development, monitoring, and evaluation of youth projects, and encourage youth participation in other local consultative bodies.
25. Youth councils secure that their composition is fair and representative of the diversity of local youth. The members of the youth councils are elected or designated by young people and/or youth civil society through a fair and transparent procedure. The youth councils adopt and implement non-discriminatory policies and practices that ensure all young people, regardless of their background, can take participate.
26. Youth councils require have a clear framework for their functioning, including a clear and public set of objectives, roles and responsibilities in respect to young people and to local and regional authorities, rules and procedures, discussed and approved by the member.
27. Youth councils have access and contribute to the decision-making process of the local or regional authority, and ideally have the right to also place topics for discussion and decision on the agenda of the decision-makers.
28. Local and regional authorities have to secure that youth councils have an adequate budgetary allocation, financial, material (e.g., meeting space, equipment, technology, materials) and human resources that support their activity. This should not impede youth councils to seek additional funding and resources necessary for them to conduct their activity.
29. The activity of youth councils is also transparent, well communicated and made visible to young people and youth civil society in the community they represent.
30. *A paragraph on principles for ad-hoc participation (e.g. consultation on the Charter).*
31. Youth spaces, such as youth centres, play a crucial role in fostering youth participation at local and regional levels. These spaces are designed to be safe, inclusive and open, encouraging young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in the life of the community. This process fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, encouraging young people to take initiative, raise awareness and involve in the local and regional life.

32. The Charter recognises diverse forms of participation by every young person and acknowledges that youth civic space needs to be protected as the contribution to a thriving democratic society. Being a member of a civil society organisation is one of the traditional forms of youth participation. Ideally, young people should be in leadership positions in youth organisations. While young people's organisations or associations can be registered by local or national authorities and can act as legal entities, some young people enjoy sharing their ideas and interacting with other young people without becoming an official member of associations or part of any structures. They might instead choose informal groups that are not registered, that have very flexible rules and meet their needs more efficiently.
33. Schools and universities, youth centre, sports and cultural organisation are one of the key places where young people learn new things about the world, form their opinions and get ready for next phase in their lives. It is also the place where young people can learn about active citizenship and occupy their first roles as representatives or advocates for collective interests. Most young people spend a big part of their lives at school or university and so these are places where youth participation should be not only promoted or strengthened, but also practised on a regular, institutionalised basis.
34. Young people can actively participate in political parties at the local and regional levels by joining youth wings, engaging in grassroots mobilisation, and running for local elected mandates (councillor, mayor etc.) or party positions. They can leverage social media to raise awareness, mobilize support, and connect with their communities.
35. Young people, as fully fledged citizens, can engage in local and regional affairs through mainstreamed democratic structures. They have the right to run for office, vote in elections and referendums, and participate in public debates. While dedicated youth participation spaces are valuable, these should complement - not replace - their involvement in broader democratic processes.

Chapter IV Youth perspectives in policy-making

36. Co-management is the highest form of youth participation. This entails that on matters concerning youth policy and young people directly, decisions at local and regional level are taken together with the representatives of young people (e.g., local and regional youth councils).
37. The risk of not considering youth perspectives in public affairs is that issues particularly important to young people may be overlooked or excluded from the political agenda. This can lead to debates and decisions on matters that affect younger generations being disconnected from their realities and losing relevance as well as to policies failing to address the future consequences that young people will ultimately have to live with.
38. Decisions taken in certain policy areas particularly affect the lives of young people. This includes but not limited to the issues of economic uncertainties, employability, living and working conditions of young people, diversity and inclusivity, digital technology, social media and artificial intelligence, rural and remote communities, environment and climate change, and public health, particularly access to mental health services.

39. Some of these policy areas are not only of utmost concern to young people or would benefit of young people's knowledge and innovative ideas but are also pre-conditions of accessing to further human and democratic rights; for example, young people living in less favourable socio-economic conditions sometimes find it more difficult to access information on youth participation opportunities or spaces for participation, and need extra support.

Chapter V Young people have the tools, the opportunities and full support for participation

40. The tools, opportunities and support aim to enable youth participation in local and regional affairs by empowering young people and by encouraging local and regional authorities to foster youth participation in decision making.
41. Human rights and citizenship education are essential for the development of a culture of democracy and human rights at all levels. Local and regional authorities should secure that young people, elected officials and public servants have access to human rights and citizenship education in both formal and non-formal settings. Full recognition and support should be given to youth civil society as provider of human rights and citizenship education opportunities.
42. Youth work remains an important support system for young people as they develop critical thinking and understand their environment. Delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation.
43. The Charter acknowledges the pivotal role that youth work plays in encouraging youth participation at the local and regional levels. It promotes active engagement and inclusion by creating welcoming environments where young people from diverse backgrounds feel seen/understood and motivated to participate voluntarily. Through non-formal learning opportunities, youth work provides tailored programmes that meet young people's specific interests, helping them develop skills and knowledge for active community involvement. Youth work facilitates dialogue with the community, enhancing civic awareness and fostering relationships with local and regional decision-makers.
44. The tools include raising awareness in the digital space (on social media platforms, forums, websites, etc.), providing education through digital literacy, critical thinking, and both formal and non-formal training, as well as exchanging best practices and offering e-learning opportunities. These tools also focus on ensuring there are trained and competent staff, such as youth workers and local and regional youth officers, who can effectively support young people's participation. Capacity-building of local and regional decision-makers can also enhance their engagement with youth. Finally, these tools aim to encourage a shift from one-off volunteering to long-term involvement and commitment in local and regional affairs.
45. The private sector can offer apprenticeships, internships, and training programmes that empower youth with the skills and experiences they need to engage in their communities and participate in the local economy. Companies in the technology and innovation sectors can offer tools and platforms that facilitate youth participation, such as online platforms for civic engagement, apps that connect young people with local governments, and digital spaces for public discussion.

Chapter VII Dissemination, evaluation and review of the Charter

46. The dissemination of the charter is a shared responsibility among all actors involved. While the Council of Europe continues its efforts, local and regional, as well as national authorities play a crucial role in bringing the Charter to life at the community level.
47. Equally important, young people must be considered key partners in this process as their involvement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of dissemination strategies ensures that these efforts are relevant, effective, and resonate with the youth. Engaging young people as partners not only empowers them but also enriches the overall impact of the Charter by fostering collaboration and dialogue between different age groups, leading to more comprehensive and fair decisions.
48. Local and regional authorities and young people can assess the implementation of the Charter in their community using tools developed for this purpose. Such an assessment process needs to be followed-up with appropriate measures to strengthen the implementation of the Charter.
49. Although the Charter was drafted in a way to remain relevant and adaptable in a constantly evolving world, it anticipates the need for regular review by the Congress in collaboration with young people. Five years after its adoption, this process should be based on the evaluation of the state of implementation, particularly assessing the measures taken by authorities at national, regional and local levels, the progress achieved and the remaining shortcomings.