



Guidebook

Building resilient structures for rural youth



Introduction

Young people in rural areas are often faced with unique and persistent challenges: limited educational and employment opportunities, social isolation, lack of infrastructure, and reduced access to decision-making spaces. Yet, they also hold potential to drive local development, strengthen community life, and build innovative responses to these challenges. Rural youth organizations are vital spaces where this potential is nurtured, organized, and transformed into action.

This guidebook was created as a key outcome of The European Rural Youth Participation Summer Forum, so called European Rally 2025 and of Autumn Seminar 2025: Seminar on building resilient structures for rural youth, to serve as both a practical tool and an advocacy resource. It provides a methodology for establishing rural youth organizations and supports our broader mission to empower young people in rural communities.

By sharing this guide, we aim to encourage and empower different stakeholders to invest in supporting young people to establish organizations where there are none. These organizations not only play a key role in addressing the immediate needs of rural youth, but also in fostering community engagement, youth empowerment, and sustainable local development.

The guidebook was developed collaboratively, with input from young people coming from different rural areas of Europe and is structured into five core chapters, covering from understanding rural youth organizations to long-term sustainability. More specifically, the guide includes:

- The role and impact of Rural Youth Organisations
- How to build the initial framework
- Statutory, legal and financial aspects
- Partnerships, community and programs
- Evaluation, growth and longevity



Chapter 1

The role and impact of Rural Youth Organisations

Why are Rural Youth Organizations so important?

Rural youth commonly face a lack of support from the governments and limited opportunities for higher education and employment. Poor internet connectivity and transportation barriers often lead to social isolation and reduced access to health and mental health services. Many young people feel that their problems are not considered urgent by society and that they are not very self-assured. In addition, digital reliance has increased the lack of face-to-face interaction, and language barriers can complicate adaptation for newcomers. Housing challenges and lower wages also contribute to these difficulties.

Rural youth organisations help reduce loneliness and build a sense of belonging.

In this context, rural youth organizations play an important role in addressing these challenges. By offering local spaces for young people to gather, learn, and take action, these organizations help reduce loneliness and build a sense of belonging. They provide new competences, confidence, and opportunities to connect with others through diverse workshops, cultural events, international exchanges, and volunteering projects. For example, through the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union or the European Youth Foundation of Council of Europe, young people can take part in intercultural exchanges, travel, learn languages, and gain experience that helps them in their future careers.

Rural youth organizations contribute to fostering community engagement and youth empowerment by giving young people a voice in the community, building their skills and confidence, and creating opportunities for social connection and leadership. These organizations also ensure young people are heard in local decision-making by encouraging participation in youth councils or municipal events. They also promote civic engagement through local projects and help bridge gaps in services, and help break negative stereotypes about rural life by highlighting local talents and successes through activities like festivals, clean-up actions, or social campaigns. By providing a platform for participation, development, and collaboration, rural youth organizations empower young people to be active members of their communities.



Not only, while their work often starts at the local level, the impact of rural youth organizations can grow far beyond. Local initiatives can inspire regional, national, or even European-level actions and networks, strengthening youth participation across borders. By connecting local efforts to broader movements and opportunities, these organizations contribute to shaping a more inclusive forward-looking rural Europe.

In essence, these organizations give rural youth the tools and support they need to grow, feel proud of where they come from, and contribute to the future of their communities and beyond. This not only benefits the youth themselves but also helps create stronger, more connected, and more vibrant rural communities.



Chapter 2

Building the Framework

This section will guide aspiring rural youth leaders through the initial steps of establishing their rural youth organization. This includes identifying a common vision and the specific needs to address within their community, and then moving on to the establishment of a core group, with clear roles and responsibilities, including considerations for a potential structure and procedures that govern an organization e.g. volunteers, staff, board elections, memberships etc.

What are the first steps? To establish a rural youth organization, you'll need a solid foundation: get your team aligned, define your purpose, and create a structure that can grow with you. Your team will also help ensure that your organization is both meaningful to its members and impactful in your community.

- 1. Identifying Community Needs:** Since a rural youth organisation addresses critical needs and existing gaps in the community, such as a lack of representation, credibility, or interest among young people, these needs must be identified beforehand. How? Through advocacy, outreach programs (like visiting schools and local events), surveys, asking and researching the local community.
- 2. Setting clear goals and objectives:** This is a crucial step that comes after identifying community needs, and before getting into detailed procedures. It helps the new organisation define what it wants to achieve and guides all future activities.
- 3. Develop a shared vision and mission:** Define why you are doing this; a vision statement is a short, inspiring summary of what the organization hopes to achieve in the future. It paints a picture of the ideal rural community that your organization is working towards. The mission statement is more action-oriented. It explains what your organization does, for whom, and why.

Forming a core group

The size of the organization will determine the roles within the team. Key roles and responsibilities to define and distribute include:

- **Chairperson/Leader:** Runs meetings, represents the group publicly, builds networks, and helps guide strategy.
- **Treasurer:** In charge of managing finances, budgeting, and funding.
- **Communications person or Public Relations Officer:** Handles outreach, marketing, and social media.
- **Project Manager:** Prepares applications, manages documents, and monitors progress.

Governance and procedures

A strong foundation requires clear rules and transparency. Key elements include:

- Democratic and transparent decision-making processes and a board or steering committee.
- A defined structure, code of conduct (e.g., to promote inclusivity, to forbid bullying and discrimination), and compliance with local laws.
- Clear communication channels and accountability measures.

Define member criteria/status

Start by outlining the requirements for membership:

- Age or geographical requirements.
- Voting vs. non-voting membership criteria.
- Processes for joining and leaving the organisation..

Board Structure

As the organization grows, create a formal board to ensure accountability. Decide on:

- **Board Elections:** A board of directors is responsible for the overall direction of the organization. You should decide the process for electing board members e.g. who can run, how nominations work, and how voting happens.
- **Roles within the Board:** In addition to Chairperson and Treasurer, you may outline the responsibilities of other potential board positions (e.g., legal and ethical duties, strategic planning, internal/external affairs).

Secretary Staff (Stretch goal)

In the early stages, your organization may not have staff. As you grow, consider establishing a dedicated secretary role to support administrative health. This position can eventually handle tasks like keeping records, managing correspondence, and preparing agendas.



Chapter 3

Statutory, legal and financial aspects

This section will guide through the essential legal and financial considerations for establishing and sustaining an organization. It will cover the drafting of the organization's statute, detailing its essential elements such as **legal and governance structure, purpose, goals and activities**. Furthermore, it will outline the steps for legal registration with local and national authorities, drawing on requirements found in a specific country. The section will also address the aspects of **fundings and financial management** necessary for a new organization.

Once you have agreed on the initial framework, you can think about the statutory, legal and financial aspects required to establish a youth organization. First of all, you should research the national legal requirements to register the organization and define the appropriate legal form. After that, you can start drafting the statute of your organization.

Legal Registration: you will need to formally register your organization with the relevant authorities. This is a crucial step that gives your organization legal standing, legitimacy, and often opens doors to funding and partnerships. Before you start the paperwork, you'll need to make some key decisions:

- **Define your Legal Form:** Decide on the most suitable legal structure for your organization, such as a charity, NGO, association, or a non-profit. The legal form you choose will determine your organization's legal rights, responsibilities, and tax status.
- **Choose a Legal Name and Logo:** Select a name and a logo for your organization. Make sure to check that the name is available and not already in use.
- **Draft Your Legal Documents:** Have all your legal documents prepared, especially your statute, as this is a core requirement for registration.

The process of legal registration generally follows these steps:

- **Founding Meeting:** A formal meeting of your founding members is often required to officially adopt the statutes and elect the initial board members. This meeting solidifies your organization's purpose and structure.
- **Registration Application:** Submit all the required documents and application forms to the relevant national or local authorities.
- **Post-Registration Compliance:** Be aware that registration is just the first step. Depending on your country, there may be ongoing requirements such as obtaining necessary licenses, dealing with taxes, and securing insurance



Drafting Your Organization's Statute: A statute is a legal document that defines how your organization works and serves as its internal rulebook. Key elements to include in the statute are:

- **Name and Seat**
- **Purpose/Mission** (what/who/why/how)
- **Code of Conduct and values:** it outlines the values that your organization stands for, such as respect, empathy, diversity, inclusion, and free speech. By clearly stating these values, you can create a safe, welcoming, and productive environment for all members.
- **Board composition and powers**
- **Membership**
- **Structure & Governance:** structure and procedures that will guide your organization's work. This includes outlining the different bodies that exist, such as a General Assembly and a Board. It should also specify who is responsible for which decisions and the length of each mandate. The statute should clearly define how decisions are made, including how often the organization will meet and the voting process.
- **Emergency Procedures:** It is important to plan for unexpected situations to ensure the continuity of your organization. Your statute should address key emergency procedures, such as what happens if a board member is unable to fulfill their role. This ensures that your organization can continue to operate smoothly even in the face of unforeseen challenges. It can also include how the statute itself can be changed if necessary.
- **Financial matters:** The statute should define the fiscal year, outline how funds are collected and spent, and specify who can approve expenditures. It should also require regular financial reporting to the board or membership, and indicate if audits or independent reviews are needed.
- **GDRP and data protection compliance.**

Funding and Financial Management: Getting your organization off the ground requires a financial plan. You'll need to figure out how to fund your activities and manage the money responsibly to ensure your organization's long-term health. It's about securing the resources you need and using them wisely. But remember, a lot can be done with voluntary work and commitment from the team.

- **Create a Realistic Budget:** Develop a budget that accounts for both running costs and project-specific costs. Be sure to include a buffer for unexpected expenses.
- **Designate a Treasures:** Have a specific person in charge of all finances to ensure that information doesn't get lost and that there is accountability for all spending.
- **Establish Key Practices:** Immediately set up a separate bank account for your organization. This is crucial for keeping personal and organizational finances distinct. Implement a system for tracking all income and expenses, no matter how small. This will make it easier to manage your budget and prepare for any required financial reporting.
- **Explore Diverse Income Streams:** Don't rely on a single funding source. Consider other options like small membership fees, local business sponsorships, fundraising events, or in-kind donations of goods and services.



Chapter 4

Partnerships, Community and Programs

This section is designed to guide rural youth organizations in **building external relationships** and developing impactful programs. It will cover strategies for identifying diverse partners, approaches for initial contact and fostering beneficial collaborations. Furthermore, it will detail how to engage the **wider community** through communication and inclusive involvement, including brainstorming diverse ideas, developing relevant programs, and planning their implementation.

4.1 Building Partnerships

Building a network of allies and partners is essential for expanding your reach and achieving your goals. Collaboration and working in synergies allows to share resources, combine efforts, and increase your impact.

- **Who to partner with:** Look for potential partners in your local area and beyond. Consider anyone who aligns with your mission and values, from **schools, local businesses, and community leaders to farmers, elder groups, and other youth initiatives or youth centers**. Attend relevant fairs and shows to mingle and scope out the needs and concerns of the people around you. Don't forget to check community boards and stay in touch with local authorities, churches and municipal offices.
- **How to Approach Partners:**
 - **Do your research:** Before making contact, understand their mission, what they've done in the past, and how they might benefit from a partnership with your organization.
 - **Structure your message:** Whether it's an email or a community notice, be clear and concise. Be explicit about what they can gain by supporting you. Appeal to their interests by showing them how a partnership can enhance their reputation, provide them with new opportunities, or help them connect with the youth in their community.
 - **Start with your existing contacts:** Use your networking connections to get an introduction. A warm referral can make all the difference.





4.2 Engaging the Community

Your organization is part of a larger community, and its success depends on active engagement with everyone, not just members.

- **Communication:** Use every channel at your disposal, from social media to local radio and newspapers, to tell the community about your mission and activities.
- **Community events:** Involve the community through activities that benefit everyone. Examples include shared gardens, open days, or charity events. You can invite guest speakers from the community, host forums on pressing local topics, and work on community projects like cleaning up a local park or trail.
- **Involving non-members:** Invite people to your events and ask them to volunteer. You can for example ask them to serve as judges if you organise competitions, help with fundraising, or for example provide a “from-farm-to-plate” educational opportunity.

4.3 Developing Programs

Programs are the core of what you do. They must be engaging and directly address the needs and interests of rural youth.

- **Encouraging active citizenship: Youth organizations can be powerful platforms for strengthening civic engagement. You can do this by:**
 - Establishing a local Youth Council or Advisory Group to work directly with local authorities.
 - Hosting simulations like Youth Parliaments, Youth Dialogues or Public Cafés.
 - Organizing public forums or consultations led by youth.
 - Launching awareness campaigns around democratic participation.
- **Diverse program ideas:** Make sure your programs are varied to attract a wide range of interests. Brainstorm ideas that go beyond traditional meetings. Consider skill-building workshops (e.g., digital literacy, entrepreneurship), cultural celebrations, environmental projects, or sports leagues. Check around your area what would attract young people to join your activities and what are their needs.



Chapter 5

Evaluation, Growth and Sustainability

After the establishment of a rural youth organisation, it will be crucial to monitor the progress, adapt to evolving needs, and ensure the long-term viability and growth. This section will cover the implementation of **evaluation and feedback mechanisms** to measure impact and foster continuous improvement. Additionally, it will guide organizations in **strategic planning for sustainability and growth**, addressing key aspects like member retention, attraction, volunteers and leadership development. Finally, this section will conclude with a series of actionable steps for establishing a rural youth organization, including a checklist, key milestones, and advice for overcoming common challenges.

5.1 Implement Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

To ensure your organization is effective, it's crucial to regularly evaluate your programs and gather feedback.

Measuring Impact: Start by defining what success looks like and break down big objectives into trackable outcomes. You can track progress by monitoring membership numbers; an increase in membership is a strong indicator of positive progress. Evaluation can also be done collaboratively with board members, partners, committees, and members to ensure goals are being met. However, also qualitative impact should be taken into consideration, such as the level of participants' engagement and activeness.

Gathering Feedback: Surveys are a simple and effective tool to gather feedback on satisfaction, well-being, workload, and members' needs. Surveys should be short, accessible, and can be shared via social media or at events. It's often helpful to provide an incentive for completion.

Using Feedback for Continuous Improvement: Use regular reporting and end-of-year reflections to track progress toward long- and short-term goals. Make sure to share meeting minutes with committees to ensure all actions are being met and are contributing to the overall goal. Moderation or collaboration with other organizations can help you share best practices and find support for any challenges.



5.2 Plan for Sustainability and Growth

To stay relevant and vibrant, and to continually grow, an organization needs to connect with its members, evolve with the times, and create an environment that inspires participation and loyalty.

Relevance:

- Stay connected to everyday life by linking activities to real-world issues.
- Be ever-changing and open-minded. Learn from new members and other successful organisations.
- Follow current trends in news, social issues, and pop culture. Listen and respond to members' needs. Understand what current and future members want.
- Provide accessible and comfortable facilities for meetings and events, ensuring inclusivity and well-being.

Vibrance:

- Offer creative, engaging, and varied opportunities.
- Keep the calendar full of small, easy activities to keep members involved, or plan fewer but larger events that create a strong sense of excitement and impact.
- Be fun and friendly, and don't get too formal too soon.
- Regularly introduce new ideas and formats to keep things exciting, think outside the box.

Retaining members:

- Recognise passion and talent, and don't be afraid to mentor and encourage them.
- Create opportunities for development by offering training, trips, and chances to move up within the organization. Small rewards can mean a lot.
- Host public events to maintain a good reputation and morale.
- Encourage regular feedback and act on what members say.
- Celebrate and reward commitment with experiences and recognition.

Attracting new members:

- Encourage current members to bring friends or promote events to their networks.
- Organize events for the public, such as open days or competitions, to showcase what the organization offers.
- Use incentives like prizes, competitions or "bring-a-friend" benefits to boost engagement.
- Promote a positive attitude and be visible and approachable in schools and public spaces.
- Use social media to promote past activities and their results and impact.



Action Steps for Establishing a Rural Youth Organization

The journey to establishing a rural youth organization begins with a clear vision and a series of concrete steps. This roadmap will guide you from the initial idea to a sustainable, impactful organization.

Roadmap

1 Define Your Reason, Purpose and Vision:

- Start by identifying why you want to set up a rural youth organisation, what you want to achieve and who the organisation is for.
- Conduct a thorough needs assessment by speaking with local youth, parents, schools, and community leaders to understand what is missing and what support is needed. This ensures your organization is formed on relevant information.

2 Form Your Core Team:

- Gather a strong team of passionate individuals, including young people and a mentor with some knowledge of administration.
- Establish an organizational structure that is appropriate for your country, such as a Charity, Youth Group, or NGO.

3 Formalize Your Structure:

- Research national legal requirements and guidelines to understand the necessary steps for registration.
- Establish clear roles within a committee (e.g., Chair, Secretary, Treasurer) and write down what are the responsibilities in these roles.
- Develop and draft a statute that includes governance procedures, your organization's main purpose and structure.
- Consider policies for decision-making, safeguarding, and inclusion from the very beginning.

4 Create Your Identity:

- Develop a brand identity that reflects your community. Choose a name that resonates locally and a common vision and mission.
- Establish an online presence through a basic website or social media.

5 Plan Your Activities:

- Once your structure and identity are in place, develop a strategic plan with a focus on a varied program of activities and events. These should be aligned with your goals and consider the needs of the youth and the local area.
- Examples include fundraising, hands-on activities, or informational events.

6 Secure Funding:

- Designate a member of the founding team to take charge of finances.
- Explore diverse funding options, such as applying for local grants, seeking sponsorship from nearby businesses, or introducing a small membership fee. You can also look into international funding opportunities, for example through programmes like Erasmus+ or the European Youth Foundation. Keep in mind that obtaining funding can be challenging, especially in the early stages, but it can significantly influence your organization's activity level and growth.

7 Launch and Recruit:

- Use social media, school networks, youth centers, agricultural shows, flyers, and word-of-mouth to recruit members.
- Launch with a fun, welcoming event to give a good first impression and start off on a good tone.

8 Ensure Sustainability and Growth:

- Regularly gather feedback from members to monitor engagement and make improvements.
- Setting clear long-term goals and a shared vision for the organization's future. Developing action plans or strategic plans helps guide your activities and measure progress toward those goals.
- Encourage leadership from within by allowing older members to mentor or lead events.
- Build relationships with national networks and local partners to help with growth and legitimacy.
- Involve young people in all decision-making so they feel like co-creators.
- Prioritize safeguarding from the beginning with appropriate checks and policies, and celebrate successes openly to build morale and credibility.

Tips

- **Do:** Involve young people early, build slowly and consistently, prioritize safety and inclusion, and lean on community support.
- **Don't:** Try to run everything alone, overpromise what the group can deliver, become overly formal too soon, or overlook the diversity of rural youth needs and backgrounds.

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