

Hosted by



European Committee  
of the Regions

## Final Conference

### “Structured Dialogue: the use of digital tools to foster youth engagement in policy-making”

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## REPORT

On 24 April, the six partners making the consortium of the project YouthMetre held the Final Conference of the project. The conference took place at the Committee of the Regions (Brussels), and gathered together more than 60 representatives of European institutions, local and regional authorities, civil society associations, experts and ordinary citizens to exchange knowledge, experiences and good practices on how to use digital tools to foster youth engagement in policy-making.

The event was composed of two panels: the first one was dedicated to The Perspectives of the Institutional Stakeholders and was moderated by **Mr. Karl Donert**, Coordinator of the project YouthMetre & President of EUROGEO; the second one was dedicated to The Perspectives of the Practitioners and was moderated by **Dr. Rafael De Miguel González**, Partner of the project YouthMetre & Professor of Geography and Social Sciences Education at the University of Zaragoza. Each panel was followed by a round of Questions and Answers.

### Welcome speeches

**Mr. Karl Donert, Project coordinator YouthMetre & President of EUROGEO**, reminded the audience that structured dialogue is a process that means a long-term commitment towards changing relationships between decision-makers and young people. However, young people are placed in a subservient position if they are tokenised and not treated as equal dialogue partners. Mr Donert highlighted the sheer number of initiatives implemented at the local level in youth policy but the lack of lessons-learned, which could be rectified through a research programme evaluating these projects and opening dialogue between local authorities. He stressed that the YouthMetre project is based on data, which is a useful tool to empower young people, but only if its sustainability and quality are maintained.

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**Ms. Yoomi Renström, Member of the SEDEC Commission, Committee of the Regions**, welcomed the participants and highlighted that the decreasing involvement of young people in politics is a democratic problem for the future. However, she pointed out that young people now get engaged on other subjects (such as environmental issues, human rights, animal rights or equality) and organise themselves in different ways. Ms Renström remarked that mastering technology does not mean knowing how to use it in a right way, which is where the role of education, to technology and to the treatment of information, is crucial. She concluded her intervention with the need to keep in mind the plurality of young people's voices.

**Ms. Antonella Valmorbida, Secretary General, ALDA**, welcomed the audience and stressed the role of ALDA in bringing the local authorities' component to the YouthMetre project with its expertise in citizens' participation at the local level. She highlighted that youth participation and citizen's participation are ways to deepen democracy at the local level, as a participative community is a successful community in many ways. Ms. Valmorbida stated that to foster participation, there is a need not only for active citizens but also for competent local authorities, which know how to engage with young people. She affirmed that YouthMetre represents a very important tool for empowering young citizens, to support local authorities to engage in dialogue at the local level and to stimulate cooperation between public institutions through sharing experiences.

Ms. Valmorbida also mentioned other ALDA initiatives in the field of youth policy such as: a Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue implemented since 2015; CRISCO, a 2-year project to engage with small initiatives to include disadvantaged youth and migrants to build together policies at the local level. She insisted on the importance of capitalising on the results of the YouthMetre project, through engaging with local authorities to receive feedback on the tool and continuing to encourage local authorities to use it. To this effect, Ms. Valmorbida called on the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission for support.

### **Panel 1: The Perspectives of the Institutional Stakeholders**

**Mr. Csaba Borboly, Member of the SEDEC Committee, Committee of the Regions** stressed the need to focus on less developed regions in the EU and on at risk young people, such as NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). He stated that all member states should guarantee a basic package for young people in order to ensure equal opportunities for all (access to high speed Internet, basic digital skills, learning a 2<sup>nd</sup> foreign language, career guidance and continuous mentoring, involvement in volunteering, and accessible funding to carry out studies that offer real prospects of employment). Mr. Borboly pointed out that if their participation rates in elections are low, young people are highly involved in youth organisations, on social media and through volunteering; which raises the question of lowering the voting age. He also called for strengthening the role of young people in the decision-making process at local and regional levels through structured dialogue.

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**Mr. Emilian Pavel, Member of the European Parliament, Vice-chair of the Youth Intergroup**, highlighted the importance of data in supporting the decision-making process. He insisted on the need to reach out to young people to show them the results of their involvement in structured dialogue at all levels in order to foster continued interest in policy-making. Mr. Pavel also mentioned that increased funding for EU programmes targeting young people is crucial as it would allow for reaching out to the young people that are unaware of the potential benefits of said programmes. He concluded by asserting that disrupting technology and globalisation also mean disrupting policy-making, which is only possible if young people get involved and do not let the decision-making process only to long-standing politicians.

**Mr. Alessandro Senesi, Deputy Head of Unit B3 – Youth, Volunteer Solidarity and Traineeships Office, DG EAC**, reminded that structured dialogue processes exist in the framework of both the EU Youth Strategy and the ERASMUS+ Programme. He however admitted that structured dialogue should open up to youth organisations and ensure that all means of participation are digitalised. Mr. Senesi announced that a new narrative for Europe is being designed, which will include a toolkit to support the participation of young people and will be based on inputs from young people gathered a national and European level. He pointed out that the cycles of the EU Youth Strategy and the new ERASMUS+ Programme will be aligned from 2020, which will allow for further policy coherence and synergies. Mr. Senesi also revealed that the European Commission was working on a new tool to engage with youth, in close cooperation with local authorities, and that this new tool will be available on the European Youth Portal.

**Mr. Davide Capecchi, Research and Youth Policy Officer, Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the in the field of youth** stressed that youth participation is embedded in the idea of citizenship and citizenship education. According to him, this link makes the need for reflecting on how to stimulate young people active participation in decision-making processes all the more urgent. Mr. Capecchi linked the issue of participation to digital accessibility as one has to make sure that data is inclusive and sustainable before using it to support its decisions. He also highlighted the importance of translating youth participation into policy changes. Mr. Capecchi affirmed that a participatory approach to youth research is needed: bringing together researchers and decision-makers will produce a more nuanced knowledge-based approach which will bring real policy change that follows young people's recommendations, thus preventing tokenism.

**Ms. Stéphanie Nowakowski, Project Officer, Bureau International Jeunesse**, referred to the importance of recognising non-traditional participation means. She also insisted on the need of bridging the institutional gap by enabling local and regional authorities to engage with young people and by training youth organisations to dialogue with institutions. Ms. Nowakowski gave the example of study visits and training courses based on research that her organisation organises for municipalities' workers, as engaging with young people properly requires specific competences. She mentioned that the Committee of the Regions could get involved in fostering cooperation with the youth field and helping train local authorities.

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**Mr. Wout Van Caimere, Coordinator, Youth Intergroup of the European Parliament,** concluded the panel by praising the opportunities offered to both policy-makers and youth activists by the YouthMetre tool. He emphasised the importance of bringing the results of programmes and projects to people through the use of data, which generates the need for quality data. Mr. Van Caimere also highlighted the importance of training both young people and policy-makers before they can have a fruitful dialogue with each other.

The Panel discussion was followed by a **‘Question and Answer’ Session** where the participants at the event challenged the perspectives of the panellists with targeted interrogations.

**Ms. Mihaela Onofras, Project Manager, ALDA,** expressed her concerns about the future of funding for projects such as YouthMetre and regretted that the European Commission did not foster synergies between the several forward-looking projects financed under the same budgetary line as the YouthMetre project.

Mr. Alessandro Senesi was not able to comment on future sources of funding as the draft for the next Multiannual Financing Framework is about to be released. He stated that the European Commission is not able to facilitate contacts between individual projects but that it is working on building communities of stakeholders on specific subjects.

**Mr. Mathieu Savary, DG EAC, European Commission,** inquired about the means put in place to prevent youth organisations from being hijacked by “youth policy geeks”.

Mr. Wout Van Caimere answered that youth organisations should indeed look at themselves critically to check if they are being representative enough. Ms. Stéphanie Nowakowski added that youth organisations are not the only platforms for young people to get engaged and that it is for institutions to provide young people with the space to experiment and try. Mr. Karl Donert commented that the model of a community of practice could be a good idea to foster collaboration between youth organisations.

**Mr. Ergys Brocaj, MyUtopia,** asserted that youth organisations do not need local governments anymore to implement their actions but that local authorities on the other side still do need young people; what should local authorities then do to engage with young people?

Mr. Alessandro Senesi answered that youth departments are often the most active department of any given local authority. He then stated that the European Commission will organise in 2019 an EU dialogue on youth with a dual focus on local debates which results will then be passed on at the EU level. Mr. Senesi finally commented that the situations in local authorities vary greatly and that what works in one case cannot always be replicated in another.

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## **Panel 2: The Perspectives of the Practitioners**

**Mr. Alessio Lupi, Secretary General, ARS for Progress of People**, presented the achievements of the project YouthMetre. He reminded that the main goal was to de-structure the structured dialogue by involving concretely young people who are not formal members of youth organisations and training them in order for them to provide meaningful proposals that can be realistically put in place. Mr. Lupi introduced the 3 components of the YouthMetre strategy: information (through collecting data on youth policy and making it easily available to young people), inspiration (by presenting young people with examples of successful projects funded by the ERASMUS+ programme) and interaction (by providing young people with an online tool that would allow them to make proposals, rate each other's proposals and communicate with policy-makers).

**Mr. Valentin Dupouey, Secretary General of the Young European Federalists** reflected on the challenges that online youth participation poses. He listed the following challenges: motivating young people to participate online; ensuring that young people have access to the different spaces necessary to participate in policy dialogue; improving citizenship and digital education; bridging the digital divide. Mr. Dupouey also pondered on the shift from ideology-based mobilisation to theme- or case-based mobilisation and on the difficulty to connect the different links of the democratic chain, from local to national and European level participation.

**Ms. Delphine Rochus, Belgium Young Ambassador, Conseil de la Jeunesse**, introduced the work of the Structured Dialogue process in the framework of the ERASMUS+ Programme. She explained that the first EU Youth Conference took place in 2017 in Estonia and was followed by a year of national consultations on youth in relation to Europe, unemployment and discrimination. Ms. Rochus then referred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> EU Youth Conference which took place in 2018 in Bulgaria during which the data of the national consultations was gathered at European level to produce 11 European youth goals. She stated that the time until the 3<sup>rd</sup> EU Youth Conference, to take place in September 2018 in Austria, will be dedicated to meeting with decision-makers to find solutions on how to implement these goals, but also on influencing the next EU Youth Strategy.

**Ms. Elisa Lironi, Digital Democracy Manager, European Citizen Action Service**, showcased the methodology of the DEEP-linking Youth project. She explained that the project was based on the concept of social listening: getting to know young people's opinions online, outside of traditional formal participation channels. Ms. Lironi developed that after performing social listening about "youth mobility", young people were empowered to voice their concerns on EU policies through boot camps offline. She then went on to show how the project focused also on supporting decision-makers: first by helping them to make their online communication more attractive to young people, second by creating a digital dashboard where decision-makers can see what young people are talking about online by issue and third by providing them with recommendations on social intelligence, e-participation and learning mobility. Ms. Lironi emphasized that online participation should only be used in a complementary manner to other forms of participation, and that digital education is crucial to allow young people to participate online properly.

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**Mr. Evaldas Rupkus, Project Manager, International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany**, stated that e-participation allows for interactive online decision-making directly, by influencing political decision-making, and indirectly, by supporting certain issues or positions through social media. He pointed out that e-participation is particularly useful for young people as it is independent of time and place and it makes the collection and the processing of inputs easier for initiators of projects. Mr. Rupkus introduced the EUth project which created the OPIN online e-participation toolbox where initiators of e-participation processes can find guidelines, and a decision support tool where they can receive a template for an e-participation process tailored to their needs. He asserted that one of the reasons of the political apathy of young people is that they are not able to prove the results and impacts of the inputs of their participants. Mr. Rupkus also mentioned the website [jugend.beteiligen.jetzt](http://jugend.beteiligen.jetzt) where tools and tips on e-participation are available in German and the eXploring Youth eParticipation training seminar to take place on 18-20 June 2018 in Tallinn.

**Mr. Matías Nso, CEO & co-founder of Kuorum.org**, introduced the services his company provides local authorities that want to launch their own online citizen participation platform. He insisted that the most important element of an online citizen participation platform is the participation census of people interested in participating. Mr Nso then went on to explain how to make sure that citizens engage with the participation process created: master marketing techniques, set up the right incentives, manage expectations correctly and use the best technology.

**Mr. Daniel Van Lerberghe, Dissemination & Communication Partner, Cafébabel International**, presented the #ask project, financed by the ERASMUS+ Programme. He explained that the main goal of the project was to act as a 'broker' between policy-makers and young people on existing social media platforms: to reconnect young people with decision-makers who are both already on Twitter, instead of creating a new participation platform. Mr. Van Lerberghe introduced the #ask Data Broker Framework during which Twitter handles belonging to young people and youth organisations, and policy-makers and political parties respectively were identified. He then introduced the #ask Dashboard where people can analyse Twitter conversations on ten topic categories relevant to young people and address the other party directly, using the handles that will grab their attention. He pointed out that each social media platform has a specific audience that it is addressing.

**Ms. Céline Guedes De Carvalho, Policy Officer, Foundation for European Progressive Studies**, introduced to the audience the Millennial dialogue that was launched in 2014 to find out what the millennial generation actually wants and expects from politics. She stated that the research conducted in more than 23 countries in the EU and beyond showed that many values resonate with the millennial generation in general (such as healthcare, equality, and education) but there is a problem of lack of trust of young people in policy makers, coupled with an inability of some policy-makers to relate to young people's concerns. Ms. Guedes de Carvalho affirmed that to make millennials more involved in politics there is a need for new tools (such as e-voting) and a different narrative (based on transparency, honesty and unifying messages). She concluded by saying that millennials are not laid back observers, but that they want to be involved and be heard.

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The Panel discussion was followed by a **‘Question and Answer’ Session** where the participants at the event wondered about the future of youth participation in general and in relation to technology in particular.

**Mr. Andrei Constantin, LOW Europe**, asked the panellists if they thought they were working to create change in the near future or to create change for the next generation; he also wondered if they made a differentiation between young people voting for extremist political parties and young people voting for mainstream ones when engaging youth to participate.

All the panellists answered that they are working to create change in the present, as young people are tired of traditional ways of participation and because policy-makers usually do not have a long-term vision, only a short-term practical goal.

**Mr. Matías Nso**, answered that e-participation processes are open to everyone that is open to debate, thus no distinction is made between young people according to their political orientation.

**Mr. Kamanzi Ntashamaje, Topl**, remarked that the panel of NGO representatives knows that young people have to work together to achieve their goals, however they do not seem to know how to work together themselves.

**Ms. Mihaela Onofras, ALDA**, wondered how to incorporate the work of the tools presented within each other’s actions in order to create a single tool.

**Mr. Karl Donert, Coordinator of the project YouthMetre**, concluded the event by calling for the participants to share with him any ideas or suggestions they may have regarding the e-participation of youth, hoping to make the best of such a gathering of stakeholders to build towards the future of online participation of young people.

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