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# Youth participation in sport organisations: quo vadis?

NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT PARTICIPATION



## Introduction

Broadly speaking, youth participation and active citizenship are about having the right, the responsibility, the support, the space, the means, and the opportunity to effectively and systematically engage in actions and activities that contribute to influence decisions and build stronger democratic societies anchored in the respect for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Civic engagement hits higher values through sport participation, as sport activities are at the top of the frequency and popularity rankings of leisure activities, and sports clubs are one of the preferred organisations to which people voluntarily commit themselves over a longer period<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, sport organisations are considered to play an important role for the welfare of the population which is why public representation and diversity in sport governing bodies have become a topic for discussion.

Since 2001, the Eurobarometer surveys on the topic of “youth participation” systematically show that sport clubs are by far the preferred space for young people’s participation<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, when analysing the several Eurobarometer surveys on “sport and physical activity” conducted since 2010, all of them systematically show that young people are the most likely to exercise or play sport with some regularity, being the most active generation in this field<sup>3</sup>.

However, the governance structures of sport organisations haven’t changed much since their inception. For instance, in the UK the average age of sports board members is set at 54 years old, and just 2% of board members are aged between 18 and 29<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the Council of Europe recognises that “sports governance needs to become inclusive of different societal groups, in particular with regard to empowering young people and

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<sup>1</sup> [Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund \(2017\). Sportverbände und Vereine als Akteure der Zivilgesellschaft.](#)

<sup>2</sup> See Eurobarometer surveys on youth participation (2001; 2007; 2013; 2015; 2018; 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See Eurobarometer surveys on sport and physical activity (2010; 2014; 2018; 2022).

<sup>4</sup> [Bitel, N., & Grainger, K. \(2019\). Diversity in Sport Governance.](#)

women to be involved in decision-making processes and to take leadership positions in sports governing bodies”<sup>5</sup>.

This shows that although young people represent perhaps the biggest segment of the sport sector in terms of participation, therefore being key stakeholders for sport organisations, they often lack influence, representation, and participation opportunities in the decision-making structures of said sport organisations and clubs. Accordingly, age discrimination and inequalities within sport organisations need to be urgently addressed by taking the demographic reality into account and levelling the intergenerational playing field within sport organisations.

The present policy paper emerges from the identified need amongst ENGSO Youth’s member organisations to address and prioritise Youth development and involvement in sport. As such, it follows a period of consultations, including quantitative and qualitative research developed in cooperation with our member organisations and three researchers from the University of Munich, the German Sport University, and the University of Malmö, and builds on the Conclusions of ENGSO Youth’s European Youth and Sport Platform 2023<sup>6</sup>, to identify the current state of play regarding youth participation in sport and address possible ways forward towards meaningful and effective youth participation in sport governance<sup>7</sup>.

## **Youth participation in international policies**

For decades now, youth participation has been one of the biggest priorities both internationally, at the United Nations (UN) level, and for European youth policy. Youth participation has been widely acknowledged by a plethora of international policy documents as a necessary means to ensure the good governance of institutions<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> [Council of Europe Resolution 2199 \(2018\) - Towards a framework for modern sports governance.](#)

<sup>6</sup> The [European Youth and Sport Platform \(EYSP\)](#) was established in 2023 as ENGSO Youth’s flagship event following the European Year of Youth 2022, striving to build and consolidate a youth-friendly democratic space to ensure the youth and sport voices are continuous, permanently and effectively represented in the European Union.

<sup>7</sup> ENGSO Youth defines youth as persons between the ages of 13 and 35.

<sup>8</sup> [European Youth Forum. \(2020\). On Quality Youth Participation And Representation In Institutions.](#)

fostering intergenerational equality, promoting sustainable development, and thus leading to more cohesive societies<sup>9</sup>.

At the UN, the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) adopted by the General Assembly in 1995, besides its 30 mentions to the word “participation”, provides a full chapter on “full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making”<sup>10</sup>. The 1998 Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes follows up on this priority in a section dedicated exclusively to participation<sup>11</sup>. More recently, the 2019 Lisboa+21 Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes acknowledges the need to “ensure the right to meaningful participation of young men and women, youth-led and youth-focused organisations at all levels”<sup>12</sup>.

At the European level, the participation of young people is enshrined within the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - Article 165 (2) - and the promotion of inclusive participatory democracy is one of the guiding principles of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)<sup>13</sup>, a document created with, for and by young people in the course of the biggest youth participatory mechanism in the EU<sup>14</sup>.

If we look at the Council of Europe, its Youth Department has a long-standing tradition in the promotion of youth participation. The co-management system of the Council of Europe’s Youth Department is a perfect example of participatory democracy for young people. More recently, following the fourth summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe (16-17 May, 2023), the Reykjavík Declaration underlined the importance of including the youth perspective within the Organisation’s decisions “as youth participation in decision-making processes improves the effectiveness of public policies and strengthens democratic institutions through open dialogue”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Mannion, G. (2007). Going Spatial, Going Relational: Why “listening to children” and children’s participation needs reframing. *Discourse*, 28(3), 405-420.

<sup>10</sup> [United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth \(1995\)](#).

<sup>11</sup> [Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes \(1998\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> [Lisboa+21 Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes \(2019\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> [European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027](#).

<sup>14</sup> The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 was developed in the course of the 6th cycle of the Structured Dialogue, which is currently designated and known as the EU Youth Dialogue.

<sup>15</sup> [Council of Europe \(2022\). Reykjavik Declaration - United around our values](#).

With regards to international sport policy, UNESCO Charter (Article 3)<sup>16</sup> emphasises that all stakeholders, including youth, must participate in delineating strategic vision, policy options and priorities, whilst at the European level, the social and educational dimensions of sport are mentioned several times without meeting all the criteria for its proper functioning.

Despite some commendable initiatives, youth participation in decision-making in sport, although a part of the broader discussion on diversity and equality in sport governance, has not yet reached the priority in the agendas of sport stakeholders.

### **What do we mean by youth participation?**

Participation in the democratic life of any community encompasses more than just voting or standing for election. Youth participation includes both individual young persons and groups of young people freely expressing their views in a wide and diverse range of formats and geographical contexts, being active citizens within the democratic and civic life of our communities, and contributing to influence decisions, both directly and indirectly.

As the preamble of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life mentions, “participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities to contribute to building a better society”<sup>17</sup>.

As such, Youth participation within sport can incorporate both membership and volunteering in a sport club, or engagement in the decision-making processes of sport clubs and organisations. For the purposes of the current policy paper, we focus on youth participation in the sense of engagement in the decision-making process of sport clubs and organisations.

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<sup>16</sup> [UNESCO. \(2015\). International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport.](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Council of Europe. \(2015\). Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.](#)

In fact, youth can participate in sport organisations at various levels. For instance, young people can have the space to volunteer and practice sports, be supported in expressing their opinions at sport events and other occasions, be listened to and taken into account in board decisions, or be directly involved in decision-making<sup>18</sup>, such as being a youth representative within the board of a sport club or organisation, or even a full-fledged established youth committee. On the other hand, there are ways of participation that only seemingly provide an opportunity to participate such as youth engagement activities, actions or invitations that are granted only as a symbolic gesture to tick the diversity checklist.

Across the consultations undergone in the lead-up to the present policy paper became evident that many organisations equate youth involvement with athlete representation. There are several reasons why athlete representation cannot be fully compared to our understanding of youth participation. The concept of an athlete does not automatically translate into a young person because quite often there is no regulation regarding the age of these athletes, meaning that the athletes can also be older than 35 during their period as a representative. Additionally, athletes tend to represent the professional/elite sport, therefore, the right of co-determination and decision-making would be given only to the professional, elite athletes, thus denying access to young people engaged at the grassroots level. In this sense, athlete representation is no longer comparable to youth involvement, for which reason the two terms should not be automatically equated.

Youth participation it's not an end in itself but the main vehicle allowing young people to bring their ideas and views into decision-making processes and be able to influence them on equal terms for the benefit of the sport movement and society in general. It needs to be meaningful and effective, meaning that public policies and activities must be co-created and co-managed together with young people, which translates into including young people and youth organisations throughout the entire development process of the initiative or policy, from the preparatory phase, consultation and impact

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<sup>18</sup> Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107-117.

assessment, to implementation, management and evaluation, whilst providing the necessary support to build important knowledge and skills along the way.

### **Towards meaningful and effective youth participation in sport organisations**

Often organisations tend to shift their responsibility of providing a platform for youth engagement and participation at their highest level of governance to young people themselves, arguing the lack of initiative from the young generations. This usually covers the organisation's poor positioning regarding youth empowerment, involvement and participation and raises the question of how can young people know that the organisations are open to suggestions and listen to them if they are used to not being involved and usually don't have the structures in place for their participation? As such, the organisations must take the first step in taking over the responsibility of creating a platform and opportunities for youth.

Additionally, young people are often required to be experts in the field before they can participate in decision-making and their involvement is rather seen as an option to start a career instead of simply having a say in matters that affect them. Nevertheless, to have an opinion on issues that affect oneself and the same age group and to vote for these rights one does not have to be an expert or professional in any way. Therefore, decision-making should not be strictly connected to career development but rather be seen as an opportunity for young people to express opinions and have a real say on matters that affect them.

There are many reasons sport organisations should encourage and strengthen youth participation, some of which have been already advanced above in this document. These include more comprehensive benefits, such as social, institutional or organisational, as well as individual benefits. Youth participation has been suggested to be necessary for both, improving the existing structures and reimagining and proposing

new innovative ways of social life<sup>19</sup>. It also increases the quality of services to youth and the general population, whilst improving and revitalising the democratic governance of sport organisations as truly representative mechanisms.

Including youth will lead to better decisions at all levels. At the individual level, it “ensures children and young people's safety and protection from abuse, and it enhances children and young people's skills, self-esteem and self-efficacy”<sup>20</sup>, so that they can participate in society as equals, confident and informed individuals. At the community level, youth participation levels the playing field ensuring youth needs and causes are properly addressed, fostering intergenerational dialogue and equality, promoting sustainable development, and thus leading to more cohesive societies.

Young people, as essential stakeholders in sport clubs and organisations must be empowered with the internationally recognised right to participation, they must be given the space, the opportunity and the responsibility to meaningfully participate within the sport structures they so proactively engage with in order to ensure that democracy and citizenship reflect the variety of perspectives and the plurality found in society.

## **Recommendations**

Taking into consideration all of the above, we encourage all sport organisations and stakeholders to explore the manifold possibilities to achieve effective and meaningful youth participation in sport governance bodies. Youth participation needs a strategy that takes into account wider societal and organisational realities and encourage innovative solutions to youth participation mechanisms relevant and meaningful to youth. Therefore, ENGSO Youth recommends sport organisations, including local sport clubs, regional, national, european and international sporting bodies to:

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<sup>19</sup> Loncle, P., & Cuconato, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Youth participation in Europe: Beyond discourses, practices and realities*. Policy Press.

<sup>20</sup> Sinclair 2000; Mannion 2007; cited in Mannion, 2010, p. 330.



- Include young people in every step of the organisation's decisions, from delineating its mission, vision, and objectives, to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies, actions and activities. Co-creation and co-management with, for and by young people are essential as any decision within the organisation can affect the way youth interacts with sport structures and practice sport and physical activity.
- Address youth participation deficit in decision-making by establishing mechanisms for their formal engagement. This includes increasing youth representatives in board structures and creating youth bodies that allow for an effective and inclusive participation and governance.
- Foster mutual learning and sharing of good practices regarding youth participation. Sport clubs and organisations differ between countries and not everything that works in one country's organisation can be exactly adopted in the same way in another country's organisation. Whilst there are no "one size fits all" solutions, information sharing and mutual learning can help in adapting youth participation practices to different realities.
- Invest in education and awareness-raising for youth inclusion, enabling young people to participate on equal terms with adults. It is necessary to build the capacity of adults working with young people in sport, including board members, coaches, teachers and youth workers to empower and educate their pupils in and through sport to realise and take advantage of the benefits of their participation in sport organisations. Another important aspect is adjusting the language of the discussions to reflect the developmental age of all participants.
- Recognise and include youth work within the organisation's activities, thus empowering young people to contribute to decision-making processes through skills and knowledge building.
- Provide access to quality and user-friendly information regarding the organisation's activities and how young people can participate.
- Innovation in forms of governance is especially relevant for youth participation. The digital space can provide an important impetus in outreaching and engaging

young people in participation processes, however, they can only be used as complementary to offline activities, and never replace them.

- Ensure that the most vulnerable young people are directly involved in developing strategies and tools to facilitate their participation. Youth represents a very heterogeneous group with different social, economic, cultural, geographical, and educational backgrounds, challenges, interests and needs. Such heterogeneity should be taken into account in all phases of youth participation policies and activities. Special attention should be given to marginalised groups, minorities, underrepresented and disadvantaged young people.

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