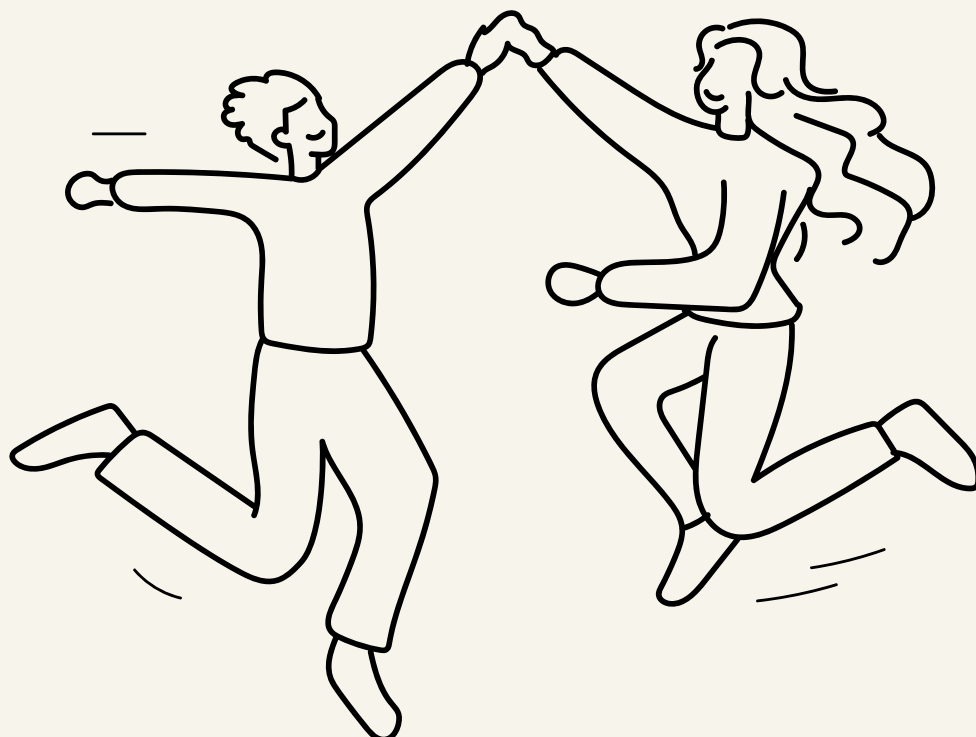




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Youth Participation in Sport Governance

Strengthening Youth Voice and Influence in
Decision-Making





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Executive Summary

Youth participation is increasingly recognised as an important element of inclusive and democratic sport governance. Young people are already actively involved in sport across Europe, as participants, volunteers, coaches and activity leaders. However, their involvement does not always extend to the structures and processes where decisions about sport are made.

Building on ENGSO Youth 2023 policy paper *Youth Participation in Sport Organisations: Quo Vadis?*, the EUYOUSPORT project seeks to further examine the current state of youth participation in sport governance and identify how existing approaches can be strengthened. The paper combines evidence from the EUYOUSPORT survey and Youth Participation Mapping with insights from project workshops and the European Youth and Sport Platform 2025, while considering the broader European policy context for youth and sport.

The evidence points to a persistent gap between being involved in sport and having influence over decisions. While young people are widely represented among sport participants and volunteers, their presence tends to decrease as participation moves towards formal governance and decision-making positions. Youth engagement also remains unevenly embedded within sport organisations, with formal mechanisms and strategies existing alongside more informal, ad hoc or project-based forms of participation.

At the same time, the EUYOUSPORT Youth Participation Mapping illustrates that a range of participation mechanisms already exist across Europe. These include youth committees, youth representatives, consultative bodies, youth-led structures and mechanisms for shared decision-making. They demonstrate that there is no single model of youth participation, but rather a range of approaches that can be adapted to different organisational and governance contexts.

The findings suggest that meaningful youth participation should go beyond simply providing young people with opportunities to be present or consulted. It should enable



them to contribute to discussions, influence decisions and, where appropriate, share decision-making responsibilities. This requires both meaningful opportunities for young people and organisations that are willing and equipped to facilitate their participation.

The paper therefore identifies key priorities for strengthening youth participation in sport governance, including: embedding youth participation within organisational governance structures; creating clear and sustainable pathways towards decision-making; strengthening the capacity of both young people and organisations; ensuring participation is inclusive and representative; and improving monitoring and accountability.

European policy and funding frameworks can provide important support for this transition. Although the EU Youth Strategy, Erasmus+, the EU Youth Dialogue and the EU Work Plan for Sport already offer opportunities and a policy framework to promote youth participation, empowerment and capacity-building, there's space for further development. The forthcoming European strategy on sport also provides an opportunity to further recognise and strengthen young people's role in sport governance. At the same time, the Council of Europe and EPAS can continue to contribute through their work on youth participation, democracy and good governance in sport, complementing EU-level action.

Ultimately, the paper argues that the challenge is not simply to increase the presence of young people in sport organisations, but to strengthen their meaningful influence within sport governance. Building on existing European policy commitments, existing participation models and the growing body of evidence started by the EUYOUSPORT project, the paper proposes a set of policy priorities and recommendations to support sport organisations and policymakers in creating more meaningful, sustainable and inclusive pathways for youth participation in decision-making.

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Introduction

Youth participation and active citizenship are fundamental to democratic societies. Meaningful participation requires more than being present or having the opportunity to express an opinion: young people need the space, support, information and opportunities to contribute to decisions that affect them and to take an active role in shaping their communities. This principle is increasingly recognised across European youth policy, where participation and the meaningful involvement of young people in democratic life have become central priorities.¹

Sport provides a particularly relevant environment for such participation. Sport organisations are among the spaces in which young people are most actively involved in organised activities. The 2024 Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy² found that 64% of young people aged 15–30 had participated in the activities of at least one organisation during the previous 12 months, while 49% reported having taken action to change society. Sport clubs were the most common type of organisation among the organised activities examined, with 33% of young people reporting participation in a sports club. This places sport organisations in a distinctive position: they are not only providers of sporting opportunities, but also important spaces for social interaction, volunteering, skills development, civic engagement and the development of young people's sense of belonging.

Yet the extent to which young people participate in sport does not necessarily translate into participation in how sport is governed. Young people are key stakeholders in the sport sector, but their presence and influence within decision-making structures remain comparatively limited. This gap between participation in sport and participation in sport governance was highlighted by ENGSO Youth's 2023 policy paper, *Youth Participation in Sport Organisations: Quo Vadis?*³, which called for greater opportunities for young people to participate meaningfully and effectively in the governance of the organisations and structures in which they are already actively involved.

¹ European Commission, EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027

² European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 545: Youth and Democracy*, May 2024.

³ ENGSO Youth, *Youth Participation in Sport Organisations: Quo Vadis?*, 2023.

The need to strengthen young people's perspectives in decision-making is also reflected in the broader European policy context. The Reykjavík Declaration, adopted at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 2023⁴, called for a youth perspective to be integrated across the Organisation's work and for young people to be further involved in decision-making. This provides a relevant European framework for considering how a stronger youth perspective can also be embedded in sport governance.

Against this background, the EUYOUSPORT project⁵ contributes new evidence and perspectives to the ongoing discussion on youth participation in sport governance. The project brings together quantitative and qualitative evidence to develop a broader understanding of how young people currently participate in sport governance, which mechanisms are available to support their involvement, what barriers remain, and what conditions are necessary for participation to become meaningful and sustainable. This includes the EUYOUSPORT survey and its analysis of the current state of play, the EUYOUSPORT Youth Participation Mapping⁶, the conclusions and experiences emerging from the project's workshops⁷, and the perspectives developed through the [European Youth and Sport Platform 2025](#). The project therefore builds on previous work while extending the evidence base towards a broader European understanding of youth participation in sport governance. The Youth Participation Mapping, in particular, provides an opportunity to look beyond the existence of participation mechanisms and consider the different levels of influence and decision-making they provide.

The purpose of this policy paper is not to propose a single model of youth participation. Rather, it seeks to identify the conditions under which young people's participation can become meaningful, inclusive and influential, and to translate the evidence gathered through EUYOUSPORT into priorities for action. A stronger youth perspective in sport governance can contribute not only to more representative and democratic

⁴ Council of Europe (2023), *Reykjavík Declaration – United around our values*, 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, Reykjavík, 16–17 May 2023

⁵ ENGSO Youth, EUYOUSPORT project description, <https://engsoyouth.eu/euyousport>

⁶ Includes a mapping of youth participation mechanisms in sport further described below.

⁷ The EUYOUSPORT project implemented a total of 8 workshops on youth participation: 3 at national level (40 participants) and 5 at local level (195 participants).



decision-making, but also to sport organisations that are more responsive to the needs and experiences of diverse groups of young people. In this sense, strengthening youth participation can support a sport sector that is more inclusive, safe, adaptable and open to new perspectives and forms of innovation.

The paper first presents the current state of youth participation in sport governance, drawing on the findings from the EUYOUSPORT survey and qualitative evidence from project workshops. It then considers what meaningful youth participation can look like in practice, using the EUYOUSPORT Youth Participation Mapping as a framework for examining different forms and levels of participation. The paper subsequently identifies the main challenges and policy priorities emerging from the evidence and from the wider European youth and sport policy context. Finally, it puts forward recommendations for sport clubs, sport federations and organisations, and European institutions, with the aim of strengthening the integration of a youth perspective into sport governance and decision-making across Europe.

Youth Participation in Sport Governance: State of Play

Participation in democratic life extends beyond voting or standing for election. It encompasses young people's right, means, space, opportunity and, where necessary, support to express their views, take part in decisions and contribute to shaping their communities⁸. In the context of sport, youth participation can therefore take many forms, from volunteering and contributing to activities to being consulted, represented in governance structures or directly involved in decision-making.

For the purposes of this policy paper, youth participation in sport governance refers specifically to the meaningful involvement of young people in the processes through which sport organisations develop policies and strategies, establish priorities and make decisions. This includes different forms and levels of participation, ranging from consultation and representation to shared decision-making.

Importantly, youth participation should not be equated with the mere presence of young people within an organisation. Nor should consultation or representation automatically be understood as meaningful participation. The relevant question is whether young people have a genuine opportunity to contribute to, influence or share responsibility for decisions. This distinction is particularly relevant in sport governance, where young people may be represented as athletes, volunteers or beneficiaries without necessarily having a voice in the decisions that shape the organisation.

Youth participation is therefore not an end in itself, but a means of ensuring that young people's perspectives and experiences can contribute to decision-making. Meaningful participation requires appropriate structures, information, support and opportunities for young people to engage throughout relevant stages of decision-making.

The EUYOUSPORT survey developed within the activities of the EUYOUSPORT project provides a snapshot of how youth participation is currently embedded within sport organisations across Europe, drawing on the perspectives of a diverse range of sport

⁸ Council of Europe (2015), *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, art. 2.



stakeholders, including sport clubs, national and international federations, National Olympic Committees and civil society organisations. It shows that young people are already a central constituency of the sport sector: 92% of organisations engage young adults aged 18–30, while youth participation is particularly strong through sporting activities (91%), volunteering (59%) and coaching or activity leadership (55%). Yet this presence does not translate proportionately into governance: only 27% involve young people as board members.

This gap is also reflected in the way participation is organised. Only 29% have a formal strategy for involving young people in the planning and design of activities, while consultation remains predominantly informal. Moreover, 44% report having no specific youth participation mechanism. Taken together, these findings suggest that youth participation is well established at the level of sport delivery, but remains less consistently embedded in the structures through which organisations define priorities and take decisions.

The qualitative evidence from the EUYOUSPORT workshops points in the same direction. Young participants highlighted the importance of direct dialogue with decision-makers, continuity and ownership, as well as the support needed to sustain youth-led structures and networks. These insights underline that meaningful participation depends not only on access to decision-making spaces, but also on the conditions that enable young people to use them effectively.

The current state of play therefore reveals a structural gap between youth participation in sport and youth participation in its governance. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond ad-hoc consultation or representation towards participation mechanisms that are structured, supported and sustainable enough to allow young people to contribute to and influence decision-making.

Towards Meaningful Youth Participation in Sport Governance

The EUYOUSPORT Youth Participation Mapping illustrates the different mechanisms through which young people can participate in decision-making across sport and related governance structures in Europe. It brings together examples identified through project partners' expertise and desk research, focusing on different forms and levels of participation rather than providing a country-by-country comparison⁹.

Building on Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation, the mapping illustrates a continuum ranging from young people being informed or consulted to shared decision-making and youth-led processes. It includes examples such as youth committees, youth representatives, consultative bodies and youth-led structures across different levels of participation.

The mapping does not imply that the highest level of participation is necessarily the most appropriate in every context. Rather, it highlights the importance of ensuring that the level of influence is genuine, transparent and appropriate to the purpose and context of the participation process. It therefore provides a framework for moving beyond the question of whether young people are involved, towards considering how they are involved and what influence they can exercise.

The survey also provides insight into how sport organisations envisage strengthening youth participation. A recurring priority is to create genuine opportunities for young people to contribute to decision-making, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, while encouraging youth-led initiatives that allow young people to take ownership and contribute to organisational development.

Capacity-building and support were also identified as important enablers, particularly through training that can equip young people to take on more active roles. At

⁹ EUYOUSPORT, *Youth Participation Mapping*, developed within the EUYouSport project and hosted by ENGSO Youth, 2026. <https://engsoyouth.eu/youth-participation/>



organisational level, the responses point to the need for clearer strategies, objectives and monitoring mechanisms to make youth participation more structured and sustainable. Continued cooperation between organisations was further identified as a way to expand opportunities and strengthen approaches to youth engagement.

Taken together, these findings point towards a shift from participation as an opportunity to participation as a meaningful role. Meaningful youth participation requires not only spaces for young people to be involved, but also the responsibilities, capacities, structures and support necessary for them to contribute effectively to decision-making.

Key Challenges and Priorities

Meaningful youth participation does not depend solely on young people's willingness to engage. It depends on whether sport organisations and governance systems provide the conditions in which young people can effectively participate and influence decisions. The EUYOUSPORT findings point to a participation gap that is therefore less about young people's presence in sport organisations than about the conditions under which their participation translates into meaningful influence.

Four interconnected challenges emerge:

- **Organisational and resource constraints**

The main barriers identified point first to the capacity of organisations to sustain youth participation. Lack of time (23%) and financial resources (21%) were the most frequently reported barriers, followed by lack of interest from young people (17%) and lack of human resources (16%). These figures suggest that youth participation cannot be considered independently from the organisational and resource environment in which it takes place.

- **Inclusiveness and meaningful influence**

The challenge is not only whether young people are involved, but what role they are given and what influence they can exercise. While 91% of the organisations surveyed involve young people as participants or beneficiaries, only 27% report their involvement as board members. Similarly, only 29% reported having a formal strategy for involving young people in the planning and design of activities. This gap highlights the distance that can remain between being part of the sport ecosystem and having a recognised role in shaping it. Awareness of available opportunities was also identified as a barrier by 15% of the survey

responses, further pointing to the importance of accessible and visible participation pathways.

- **Capacity and intergenerational cooperation**

The findings point to a need to consider participation as a shared capacity-building process. Among the forms of support identified, youth training (17%), institutional partnerships (16%), workshops for organisational leaders (16%) and mentorship (15%) were all highlighted as relevant. This suggests that meaningful participation depends not only on the capacities of young people, but also on the ability of organisations and decision-makers to engage with them effectively.

- **Continuity and institutionalisation**

Youth participation also faces a challenge of continuity. 59% of organisations reported relying on informal consultation, while only 23% had a formal consultation strategy. Moreover, 44% reported having no youth participation mechanism in place. At the same time, when asked how participation could be strengthened, organisations highlighted the importance of clear strategies, defined objectives, monitoring mechanisms and continued cooperation. The challenge is therefore to move beyond isolated or informal opportunities towards participation that can be sustained and formally recognised within organisational governance.

These challenges sit within a wider European policy context that increasingly recognises participation, inclusion and active citizenship as essential dimensions of democratic governance. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 identifies meaningful civic, social, cultural and political participation as a core objective and supports youth representation and involvement in policy development¹⁰. The EU Work Plan for Sport 2024–2027 similarly places integrity and values, the socio-economic and sustainable

¹⁰ Council of the European Union, *Resolution on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027*, 2018.

dimensions of sport, and participation in sport and health-enhancing physical activity among its three priorities, with particular emphasis on accessibility, social cohesion and active citizenship¹¹.

Although both youth and sport policy frameworks generally recognise the importance of youth participation, the youth sector often fails to recognise sport and physical activity as crucial spaces for young people's participation, whilst the sport sector often falls short in providing the space for meaningful youth participation in its governance and decision-making processes.

Allied to the underfunding of key EU programmes like Erasmus+¹², the lack of available data and support structures for young people's participation in sport governance, we fall short in materialising the need for more and better evidence-based youth sport policies across all levels, from institutions to organisations.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, *Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the European Union Work Plan for Sport (1 July 2024–31 December 2027)*, C/2024/3527, 2024.

¹² *The Draghi report: In-depth analysis and recommendations (Part B)*, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059, p.268

Recommendations

Meaningful youth participation in sport governance requires a shift from seeing young people primarily as participants and beneficiaries towards recognising them as contributors, decision-makers and leaders. This requires action at different levels of the sport system, supported by adequate resources, structures and policy frameworks.

1. Foster an inclusive and safe environment for youth participation

Sport organisations should ensure that participation opportunities are accessible, transparent and safe, and reflect the diversity of young people involved in sport. Particular attention should be given to disadvantaged, marginalised, minorities and otherwise underrepresented young people, whose perspectives should be actively considered in policy making.

Sport clubs

- Provide clear and accessible information on how young people can participate and influence decisions.
- Create safe and welcoming environments for diverse groups of young people.
- Proactively reach young people who are underrepresented in existing structures.

Sport federations

- Support clubs in developing inclusive youth participation practices and safeguarding standards.
- Promote diversity within youth representation and leadership structures.
- Share guidance and good practices on reaching underrepresented young people.

European and national institutions

- Increase budget for sport and physical activity programmes. Particularly at European level, Erasmus+ budget should be increased and budget earmarking for Youth and Sport sectors secured at 15% and 5% respectively.

- Ensure that relevant sport and youth policies address the diversity of young people and barriers to participation.
- Support and fund initiatives that strengthen safe, inclusive and accessible youth participation in sport.

2. Modernise governance structures to enable meaningful youth participation

Youth participation should be integrated into organisational decision-making rather than relying primarily on informal consultation or individual initiatives. Young people should have clearly defined roles, responsibilities and opportunities to contribute throughout the policy and decision-making cycle. Sport organisations should adapt their governance structures and participation processes to reflect the realities of younger generations. This includes exploring innovative, flexible and digital approaches that can lower barriers to participation while preserving meaningful interaction and decision-making.

Sport clubs

- Establish formal youth representation, youth committees or other appropriate participation mechanisms.
- Involve young people in the development, implementation and evaluation of relevant decisions and activities.
- Adapt participation formats to young people's educational, professional and personal commitments.

Sport federations

- Create and incentivise clear pathways from grassroots youth participation towards regional, national and international governance.
- Strengthen and formalise youth representation within boards, committees and other decision-making bodies.
- Develop flexible and, where appropriate, digital and hybrid participation formats.

European and national institutions

- Encourage youth representation and meaningful participation within sport governance and policy structures.
- Integrate youth participation criteria into relevant funding and programme frameworks.

3. Strengthen youth leadership through mentoring, capacity building and cooperation

Young people should be supported to move from participation towards leadership and decision-making responsibilities. Capacity building should therefore be combined with opportunities to take responsibility, access mentoring and exchange with experienced leaders and peers.

Sport clubs

- Give young people opportunities to lead projects and progressively assume decision-making responsibilities.
- Establish mentoring or peer-support arrangements between young and experienced members.

Sport federations

- Develop youth leadership, mentoring and capacity-building programmes.
- Facilitate intergenerational and peer learning between youth representatives and experienced decision-makers.
- Recognise youth work as a pathway for developing skills and preparing young people for governance roles.

European and national institutions

- Support youth leadership and mentoring through Erasmus+ and other targeted funding instruments.

- Encourage cross-sector and transnational partnerships connecting youth, sport, education and civil society organisations.
- Facilitate the exchange of effective participation and leadership practices across Europe.

4. Ensure long-term engagement, monitoring and institutional commitment

Youth participation should be treated as a sustained organisational commitment rather than a one-off initiative. Clear objectives, adequate resources and monitoring mechanisms are needed to ensure continuity and assess whether participation translates into genuine influence.

Sport clubs

- Set clear objectives for youth participation and regularly assess progress.
- Allocate appropriate time, resources and responsibilities to sustain youth participation.
- Ensure continuity when young representatives or leaders leave their positions.

Sport federations

- Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the quality and impact of youth participation.
- Embed youth participation within long-term governance strategies and organisational development.
- Use evidence and feedback from young people to adapt participation mechanisms over time.

European and national institutions

- Include sport and physical activity in youth strategies. Particularly at European level, the EU Youth Strategy Post-2027 should clearly mention the importance of sport and physical activity. Likewise, the upcoming European Commission's Strategic Vision for Sport in Europe should recognise and underline the importance of meaningful youth participation for sport governance, whilst any upcoming EU Work Plans on Sport should further build on this priority.
- Provide sustained funding and institutional support for youth participation mechanisms beyond individual projects or funding cycles.
- Encourage sport organisations receiving public or European funding to set clear objectives, monitoring indicators and accountability mechanisms for youth participation in governance.
- Support the integration of youth participation into long-term sport governance strategies, including through dedicated youth representation and leadership mechanisms.



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