



# EU HAVE A DREAM RUNNING FOR DEBATE

## Guidelines for a theatre-debate



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## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of all project partners: Fondazione Fitzcarraldo (Italy), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), Consol Theater (Germany), The Lisbon Council (Belgium), OTI Group (Cyprus) and Visionary ETS (Italy). We are also grateful to all colleagues who supported this work throughout its development, contributing with their time, expertise and commitment.

A special thanks goes to all the young participants, artists and practitioners involved in the project. Their voices and lived experiences have been central to this research, grounding it in real contexts and making it possible to move beyond abstract reflection.

## Read all the project's documents

This document should be read in conjunction with the Charter for Youth Cultural participation, an agile and brief document designed to stimulate discussion and serve as an advocacy tool, and the EU Have a Dream: Summary of key challenges and recommendations, which explores these issues in greater depth these and identifies the Charter's main target audiences.

Scan or click the QR code below to read the documents.



## 1 The Candidate: a collective character

**PURPOSE:** To create a fictional young political candidate who represents the group's diversity, voices and experiences. As a collective character, she can be embodied by any young person.

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A shared candidate identity

## 2 Building the Team and Setting the Agenda

**PURPOSE:** To form the group and identify the political, social or civic issues that matter most to the young participants.

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A shared agenda for the candidate's campaign and a first map of people, organisations and stakeholders to involve

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**PURPOSE:** To move beyond the internal group discussion and engage with the local community

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A collection of perspectives, interviews, information, stories, data and questions that deepen the chosen theme

## 4 The Communication Campaign

**PURPOSE:** To design the public communication of the candidate and the theatre-debate, using the language and imagery of an electoral campaign

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A communication campaign

## 5 The Theatre-Debate

**PURPOSE:** To create a public participatory event where the audience is invited to act as delegates and contribute to defining the candidate's programme.

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A theatre-debate format with proposals, participatory activities and audience interaction

## 6 The Delegates' Toolkit

**PURPOSE:** To design artistic installations, participatory devices and materials that help the audience express opinions, share experiences and contribute to the debate.

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A set of participatory tools for collecting contributions.

## 7 Counting the Votes

**PURPOSE:** To collect, analyse and value the contributions that emerged during the theatre-debate and the overall process.

**OUTPUT TO BE ACHIEVED:** A final collection of results: feedback, priorities, proposals, questions, dreams and recommendations





## Introduction



# "Politics is how we live together, it's not just about parties or elections." <sup>1</sup>

These guidelines present the theatre-debate methodology: an innovative participatory theatre-debate format that facilitates discussion on local and global issues through artistic and theatrical mediation. The format was developed within the European project EU HAVE A DREAM, funded by the European Union's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The project made a strong commitment to promoting the integration and participation of young people in political and democratic life, with a specific focus on those who are traditionally distant from active participation. Through dialogue among citizens, artists and policy-makers, the project addressed some of Europe's most urgent challenges, such as climate change, social inequalities and

civic disengagement. Participatory workshops and debates were held in five countries - Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Germany and Belgium - with a final international meeting in Brussels, offering younger generations tools to imagine and co-create a more inclusive and sustainable society.

The guidance set out in these guidelines grows out of the experiments and practices developed during the EU HAVE A DREAM project. It is the result of a shared process of co-creation and methodological construction, tested through field experimentation across the project activities. The guidelines therefore bring together the lessons learned through the involvement and valuable contribution of young people, artists, educators and project partners.

Here you will find the guidance needed to design and deliver a theatrical and participatory event co-created with a group of young people: an artistic format that is, by nature, adaptable and replicable in very different contexts, but that must be grounded in shared principles and assumptions in order to preserve the participatory effectiveness and capacity for social transformation that were tested during the project.

<sup>1</sup>- All quotations are taken from interviews with young participants in the project from the four countries involved.

## Introduction



## Objectives

The theatre-debate aims to:

- develop an open and inclusive functional model of cooperation among young people, artists and communities, in order to promote innovative approaches that actively contribute to democratic values
- encourage young people to communicate and collaborate with one another, addressing issues relevant to contemporary society together
- strengthen the development of artistic creation in order to foster social and cultural innovation at local and European level
- ensure and promote inclusion, diversity and gender equality by strengthening active participation, cooperation and innovation.

## Target groups

These guidelines are addressed to all those interested in promoting active citizenship and democratic dialogue. The main target groups include educators, youth workers, artists, facilitators, cultural organisations and active citizens.

## Why theatre-debate?

When you decide to embark on a theatre-debate journey, it means that you have chosen to put yourself on the line and to believe that change is possible. Here are some of the reasons why this experience can engage young people, give them a voice and transform participation into concrete action.

The theatre-debate:

- Entrusts young people with decision-making power, in terms of both form and content, asking them not only to participate, but to devise, build and promote a public event
- Turns politics into an experience to be lived and reinterpreted, studying its mechanisms and then staging them in a creative, personal and engaging way
- Responds to the growing need for opportunities to meet and exchange views in person, creating spaces in which to discuss, listen to one another and build relationships
- Engages diverse audiences, thanks to the theatrical dimension that makes political and social issues accessible even to those who do not usually take part in debates or civic initiatives

## Introduction



- Offers concrete and alternative ways to express ideas and points of view, experimenting with dialogue, exchange and disagreement
- Invites adults to listen, offering facilitators, experts, institutional representatives and audiences the opportunity to engage with languages, topics and methods that start from young people's experience

## Let the adventure begin!

**"Creating something together is a form of civic engagement."**





The Candidate: a collective character



### Agenda

At the heart of the theatre-debate is the character of a young candidate in the next elections (local, national or European), whose aim is to bring the voice of younger generations into her programme.

The candidate is a collective character, able to represent the diversity and plurality of the experiences and points of view that characterise the world of young people. Through a few simple identifying signs (for example a jacket and glasses of the same colour), each participant can play her and give her a voice.

She is a fictional political character, who does not bring specific content defined in advance, but rather a new, dialogue-based approach to the community. Her task is not to propose solutions, but to ask questions, listen to the people she meets and build her agenda starting from the issues that emerge from exchange with citizens and young people. She is therefore both real and imaginary: a character who represents a collective demand - calling for attention to younger generations while also promoting their participation.

### What is at stake?

- Explore the relationship between individual identity and collective representation
- Reflect on the image young people have of politics and institutional representatives
- Experiment with roles and forms of participation that are often perceived as distant or inaccessible
- Engage with different ways of expressing ideas, gaining support and exercising responsibility
- Question stereotypes and expectations linked to power, leadership and gender
- Create a space in which the plurality of young people's experiences can be represented

**"This showed me my voice actually matters"**

## Key questions

What skills and values could I bring to the character of the candidate?

How is authentic representation built?

What characteristics should a political candidate who represents me have?



## Lessons from the field

- The candidate can be played by several participants, even at the same time
- The candidate has simple, easily replicable distinguishing signs
- The character of the candidate is not built by defining her political opinions, but from the personal characteristics that young people want to attribute to her and from the questions she asks in order to engage the community on the content the group considers a priority.
- Stepping into the candidate's shoes helps create a more equal relationship in meetings between young people and politicians or public decision-makers
- The collective character values both individual skills and the resources that emerge from the group
- Choosing a candidate with a female name can become a tool for reflecting on gender representation and challenging established stereotypes.

**"We learned that politicians are also just humans... they are not as high as we think."**

## In EU Have a Dream

The candidate's name is Vera Demaah (an anagram of Have a Dream), but one partner chose a name that could also be adapted to the masculine gender (Charis).



## 2. BUILDING THE TEAM AND SETTING THE AGENDA

Working with young people and stakeholders

Building the team and setting the agenda



### Agenda

In this phase, a group of young people explores the theme of political and democratic participation and discusses the most urgent and significant issues according to their lived experiences. Starting from this exchange, one or more priority themes are defined around which to build the candidate's programme and the future theatre-debate. The group also begins to identify people, organisations and local realities with whom they would like to explore and deepen these issues in the following stages of the process.

Research on the theme develops through multiple perspectives: personal, social, political, artistic and theoretical.

### What is at stake?

- Form the group: create common ground (getting to know one another, building trust, creating a safe space)
- Explore participants' personal relationship with politics and institutions
- Explore different forms of political and democratic participation
- Define one or more priority themes for the candidate's campaign
- Explore the group's opinions and ideas on the chosen themes (needs, proposals, critical issues)
- Identify the organisations and people to engage with in order to deepen the identified themes



**"It made us think about what role we want to have as citizens."**



## Key questions

How can citizens act (individual responsibility), and how can politics act (collective responsibility), on the issues we care about?

How much do I know about local, national and European institutions?

What do institutions and governing bodies (local, national and European) do about the issues I care about?

Where and when do my actions have a political dimension?

What priority themes would I like to hear about, and what do I think should be placed at the centre of the discussion?

Who do we want to engage with on these themes?



## Lessons from the field

- No frontal lessons, but participatory methodologies and activities: workshops must be accessible and engaging, so that participants can actively contribute to the process, formulate proposals and discover their rights, duties and possibilities for action as citizens.
- A bottom-up approach, starting from participants' experiences, needs and perspectives, fosters a more authentic dialogue
- The group has real decision-making power in choosing the themes to explore and the people to involve in the process.
- The involvement of experts, associations and organisations directly affected by the chosen themes makes it possible to broaden knowledge, strengthen the connection with the local area and develop a more critical approach to information.
- Direct exchange with adult and institutional realities that are often perceived as distant or inaccessible helps reduce distance and open up spaces for participation that usually remain unexplored.
- Designing an event for others is an opportunity that combines enthusiasm and responsibility: it gives value to the group's work and strengthens participants' sense of agency.

**"During the meetings I spoke a lot... I usually don't have things to say, but here I did."**

### In EU Have a Dream

Each theatre-debate was preceded by a workshop with a group of young people identified in different ways: an open call, a secondary-school class, annual theatre-training groups for young NEETs, and pre-existing informal groups.



### 3. CAMPAIGNING ON THE GROUND

Listening before speaking

#### Campaigning on the ground



#### Agenda

After the internal group exchange, it is time to meet the local community. Young people explore the chosen theme in greater depth by engaging with politicians, institutional representatives, experts, organisations and citizens directly involved. Through interviews, meetings, participation in events, questionnaires and other activities, they collect points of view, experiences and information useful for deepening the theme. These encounters are also opportunities to present the candidate and make her known locally. This work makes it possible to identify the most relevant issues to bring into the theatre-debate and to check whether the group's concerns are also shared by other young people and by the wider community.

#### What is at stake?

- Transform a theme perceived as personal into a public issue
- Involve politicians, institutions and local stakeholders in the issues that are priorities for young people
- Improve understanding of decision-making processes and institutional responsibilities.
- Identify the themes and questions to bring into the theatre-debate.
- Compare different experiences, data and points of view on the same theme.
- Reduce the perceived distance between young people, politics and institutions.

**"We connected with teachers, students, and local officials, which opened my eyes to different perspectives."**

## Key questions

Who has useful skills, experiences or knowledge on this issue?

Who deals with this theme at local, national or European level?

Does this theme concern only our group, or does it also matter to other young people?

Who is directly involved, and what experience can they share?

Which policies, laws or regulations influence this issue?

How can I get in touch with institutional representatives and policy-makers?



## Lessons from the field

- The group identifies the people and organisations it wishes to meet. The role of facilitators is to support the process, not to decide who is most relevant or authoritative.
- The performative dimension of the campaign and the character of the candidate encourage more informal and horizontal ways of meeting between young people and public decision-makers.
- Direct encounters with institutional representatives reduce the perception of distance and make politics more concrete and accessible.
- Politicians and experts are also invited to experiment with new languages and modes of communication: learning is mutual.
- Seek out different interlocutors: political representatives, officials, experts, associations, influencers, and people directly affected by the theme.

**"Interacting with others who see things differently helps me understand issues more deeply"**

### In EU Have a Dream

on the theme of mental health, significant meetings were held with professionals in the field (a neuropsychiatrist, an educator), but also with young people who had experienced the issue first-hand and generously shared their experiences.



## 4. THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

Co-creating shared imaginaries

### The Communication Campaign



#### Agenda

This phase is dedicated to building the candidate's communication campaign. Young people design and produce content, actions and materials to make the candidate known, invite citizens to public meetings and promote the theatre-debate. Communication draws inspiration from the imaginary of a real electoral campaign, using its most engaging and recognisable aspects to build curiosity and participation. Communication thus becomes a tool for telling the story of the project, involving new people and experimenting with creative forms of participation.

#### What is at stake?

- Reflect on how communication influences political and civic participation
- Experiment with creative languages and tools to involve other people
- Question how to build messages that are clear, accessible and engaging
- Value participants' creative, communication and organisational skills
- Transform communication from simple promotion into an opportunity for participation

**"We talked about topics, showed our points, and revised them to make them understandable for the audience."**



## Key questions

What message do we want to convey?

Which communication channels and tools are most effective for reaching the people we care about?

Who do we want to speak to?



## Lessons from the field

- It is useful to maintain a certain aura of mystery around the figure of the candidate: it is better to present her as a real character, avoiding revealing her identity as a collective and fictional character
- The tone of communication can be ironic, creative and irreverent in relation to the traditional languages of politics
- All forms of communication can become part of the campaign: social media, videos, flyers, posters, stickers, performances, flash mobs or public events
- Communication actions (handing out flyers, inviting people to an event, taking part in a flash mob) represent a concrete opportunity for civic activation and first-person participation
- The campaign can become an opportunity to value associations, groups and local organisations that offer opportunities for further exploration, participation and activation around the identified themes
- Communication is not only a tool for promoting the event, but an integral part of the participation and learning process.

"We didn't just work for us, we showed it to others."

## In EU Have a Dream

During the visit to the European Parliament in Brussels, all participants stepped into the candidate's shoes and presented the themes of their programme to everyone they met, inviting them to the debate the following evening.



## 5. THE THEATRE-DEBATE

Come and have your say - it will be a show!

### The Theatre-Debate



#### Agenda

The theatre-debate is a participatory debate format with an educational dimension, inspired by an electoral convention in which the candidate wants to define her political programme starting from the themes identified by the group of young people. During the theatre-debate, everyone in the audience is addressed as delegates whose task is to contribute to defining the programme itself.

For each proposal presented by the candidate, delegates are invited to take part in the discussion through a series of installations, activities and participatory devices that allow them to express ideas, exchange views with others and define priorities.

#### What is at stake?

- Create a public space where citizens and young people can discuss issues relevant to the community.
- Encourage the participation of people with different experiences, skills and levels of involvement.
- Transform ideas, needs and concerns into shared proposals.
- Strengthen young people's confidence in their ability to influence reality and contribute to democratic processes.
- Promote active citizenship based on listening, exchange and shared responsibility.

**"It wasn't about who was right or wrong - it was about finding a way to move forward together"**

## Key questions

How can we foster an exchange of ideas that values both the expression of personal opinions and the listening to different points of view?

How can we transform needs and desires into shared commitments?

Which proposals can concretely improve community life?

Which changes depend on me, and which require collective action?

Which proposals should become priorities in the candidate's programme?



## Lessons from the field

- The framework of an electoral campaign in theatrical form makes the debate more accessible, engaging and enjoyable, even for those who do not usually take part in political initiatives.
  - Narrative elements such as polls, plot twists, announcements or "scoops" help keep audience attention and participation high.
  - Proposals can be presented by the candidate or by the people and organisations involved in the research phase, either in person or through video contributions. This helps value the process carried out and make the plurality of voices involved visible.
  - The format must allow every person to contribute according to their own ways and level of exposure, without forcing anyone to speak publicly.
  - Artistic and participatory methodologies foster the involvement of diverse audiences and create more inclusive conditions for exchange.
  - The value of the debate does not lie in reaching consensus, but in the possibility of listening to different perspectives and building a broader understanding of the issues at stake.
- It is useful to include a moment of audience "warm-up" in the first part of the event, gradually preparing participants for active participation through simple and accessible actions (raising a hand, talking to a neighbour, etc.).

### In EU Have a Dream

When discussing democratic participation, a number of statements are projected on a screen and the audience is asked to respond by raising a green card if they agree and a red card if they disagree. Some actors in the audience ask a few people to explain the reasons for their choices.



## 6. THE DELEGATES' TOOLKIT

From audience to participants

### The Delegate's Toolkit



#### Agenda

To encourage active participation during the theatre-debate, artistic installations, participatory devices and dedicated materials for delegates can be used. These tools help the audience express opinions, share experiences, exchange views with others and contribute to building proposals. Installations can be used during the welcome phase or during the event, while the "delegate's kit" is provided to each audience member and can contain materials and tools for participation (cards, voting cards, questions, prompts for reflection, etc.).

#### What is at stake?

- Engage the audience as protagonists of the process, not merely as spectators
- Translate complex themes into accessible images, metaphors and experiences
- Promote dialogue and the exchange of ideas among people with different points of view
- Strengthen the sense of belonging and relationships within the community
- Create opportunities for active participation and personal expression
- Foster relationships and collaborations among young people, citizens and local organisations

**"Now I feel more confident to share my ideas in front of strangers and actually believe they matter"**

## Key questions

Which modes of participation also allow people who are shy or less experienced to take part?

How can ideas, experiences and insights be collected among participants?

How can I transform a theoretical concept into something more understandable and accessible?

Which stimuli or suggestions make the theme clearer or easier to understand?

What metaphors can I use?



## Lessons from the field

- It is important to alternate different modes of participation (written and oral, individual and collective, based on opinions or on personal experiences) in order to engage different audiences.
- Installations and participatory devices work best when they start from everyday objects, situations or experiences and use metaphors to address complex themes.
- The proposed tools must facilitate the expression of ideas, offering accessible forms of participation even to those who do not feel comfortable speaking in public.
- It is useful to encourage discussion in pairs or small groups before the plenary discussion.
- Activities should start from personal experiences and then move progressively towards collective and political reflection.
- Participatory devices are not only meant to collect opinions; they also strengthen the sense of belonging to a community and awareness of one's role within it.

"It was easier to express ourselves because everyone was involved."

## In EU Have a Dream

Before taking their seats in the audience, participants find three mailboxes where they are invited to post postcards completing the phrases: "Dear adults / dear politicians / dear young people, you need to understand that...". The postcard texts are then read during the theatre-debate, at a moment dedicated to intergenerational dialogue.



#### Counting the Votes



#### Agenda

In the final phase of the process, it is possible to collect feedback both on the experience lived by participants and on the content that emerged during the debate. This can be done through questionnaires, surveys, ballot boxes or other evaluation tools.

The materials produced during the show and through the installations can be collected, analysed and returned to the community, to the young participants and to institutions in different forms: exhibitions, posters, symbolic political programmes, videos, publications, communication campaigns or public events.

#### What is at stake?

- Collect and value the voices that emerged during the process and in the theatre-debate
- Identify shared needs, priorities and proposals
- Document the process and its results
- Return to the community what was expressed and built collectively
- Foster dialogue among citizens, young people and institutions even beyond the debate

**"The project allows me to understand that informed opinions, dialogue, and collective action have tangible impacts"**

## Key questions

Who can take up the baton after the project?

What are the community's priorities?

What dreams emerged?

Which proposals deserve to be carried forward?

What remains after the debate?

What questions remain open?



## Lessons from the field

- If you wish to collect an evaluation of the event, for example through an online questionnaire, it is important to do so before the show concludes, while participants are still involved in the process.
- The artistic installations and the delegates' kit make it possible to collect ideas, priorities and contributions in a simple and accessible way.
- Although they have no statistical value, the materials produced during the debate are a valuable source of information on the needs and perceptions of the community.
- Documentation is not only a memory of the project, it can become a tool for dialogue with institutions, organisations and citizens.
- Publicly returning what emerged strengthens the sense of being listened to, recognised and involved.

**"I feel more aware of my role in society and more confident that I can influence outcomes."**

### In EU Have a Dream

The data gathered through the project were collected in "A CHARTER FOR YOUTH CULTURAL PARTICIPATION", which also translates into a set of "Practical Recommendations for Institutions and Policymakers".



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