EU HAVE A DREAM

SUMMARY OF KEY CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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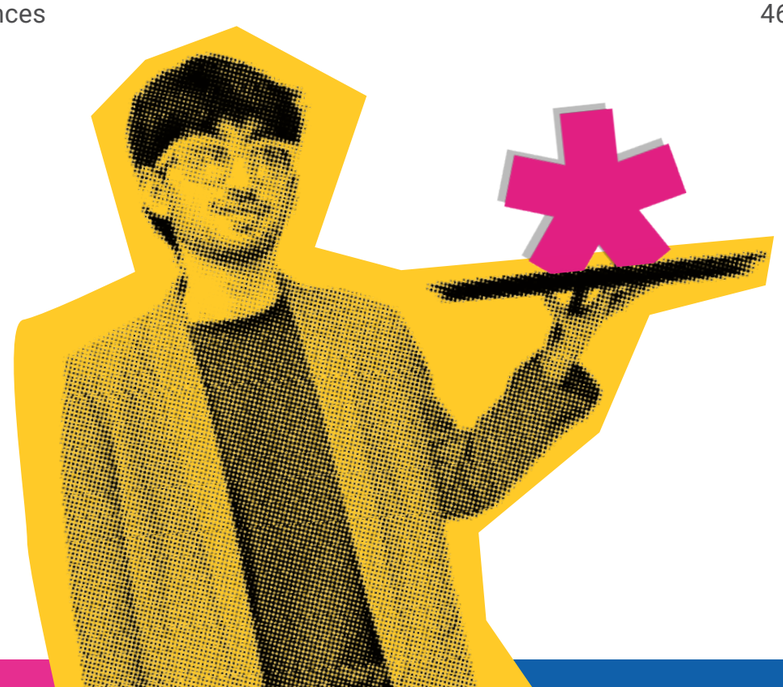


Executive summary

Young people across Europe are not disengaged from democracy: they are engaging in ways that institutions often fail to recognise. The EU Have a Dream project has uncovered a fundamental disconnection between how young people's cultural expressions are perceived by institutions and the actual nature of their practices.

This document intends to make a contribution to addressing that gap by shifting the focus from suspicion to recognition, from moralisation to dialogue, and from paternalism to shared responsibility.

Cultural participation is not peripheral to democracy. It is a core space where civic skills, political expression and social relationships are developed.

Strengthening participatory, relational and youth-led cultural practices requires structural change in how participation is recognised, supported and valued.

This document aims to provide a set of principles and policy recommendations for cultural practitioners, organisations, institutions and policymakers working at local, national and European level. Its purpose is to support the development of more inclusive, responsive and democratic approaches to youth cultural participation and civic engagement.

The first chapter examines the stigmatisation of youth culture, revealing how informal, digitally-mediated forms of political participation are systematically misrecognised as mere aesthetic expressions. Drawing on Eurobarometer data, the chapter shows that young people remain highly engaged, but in ways

that institutions fail to acknowledge. Moral panics often frame youth culture as threatening, leading to demands for conformity, while ethnic and cultural diversity is reductively presented as an "integration issue."

The first chapter proposes overcoming these emotional foundations of exclusion through situated practices and collective imagination, arguing that cultural participation can reconfigure democratic relationships.

The second chapter establishes the vital link between cultural participation and civic engagement. It argues that supporting youth cultural expressions strengthens the conditions for democratic life, by providing spaces for civic learning, political articulation, and social interaction. A framework for situated, inclusive practices is developed, addressing tensions between institutional timeframes and the gradual processes required for authentic engagement. The chapter calls for expanding definitions of 'culture' and of 'participation', ensuring youth voices are heard within institutional structures.

The third chapter introduces the material conditions necessary for meaningful participation, highlighting the issue of the uneven geographical distribution of cultural infrastructure. It details the specific needs identified by young people, from rehearsal spaces to mentorship schemes, and develops the concept of "enabling ecosystems" where spaces, resources, and relationships interact. Rebalancing cultural provision requires reducing territorial inequalities, investing in accessible infrastructure, and building interconnected systems linking culture, community development, and civic life.

Through an exploration of the interconnections between cultural participation and civic engagement, the fourth chapter calls for a broader understanding of democracy as everyday practice.

It develops the concept of “social empathy” as a foundation for engagement, demonstrating how cultural co-creation provides essential spaces to develop relational skills central to democratic life. The chapter addresses structural inequalities limiting access, arguing that for many young people, the issue is not lack of interest but lack of recognition and opportunity.

The final chapter focuses on transforming how participation is understood, valued, and communicated. It emphasises the critical role of professional facilitation, advocating for qualitative impact measurement that captures incremental, relational transformations. The chapter critiques dominant narratives that reduce participation to numbers, calling for collective action to change public discourse and build cross-sector alliances.

The document (which is based on this summary of key challenges and recommendations) positions cultural participation as a democratic imperative, arguing that investing in young people’s cultural expressions is essential for democratic renewal. It calls for a fundamental shift in perspective: from suspicion to recognition, from paternalism to trust, and from symbolic participation to meaningful co-creation. Only by addressing these interconnected dimensions can young people’s contributions be fully recognised and supported. This requires not only isolated projects or temporary initiatives, but also the structural transformation of institutions, policies, participation frameworks and cultural practices.

The Summary of Key Challenges and Recommendations is addressed to a wide range of stakeholders working at the intersection of youth, culture, participation and democracy. Its primary audiences include youth workers and youth services, cultural organisations and practitioners, artists working with and for young people, policymakers, educators, local authorities, networks active in the fields of culture and civic participation, as well as European and international organisations engaged in youth and

cultural policies.
Particular attention is given to the youth work sector, which remains highly fragmented and often under-recognised despite its crucial role in fostering participation, trust-building and civic engagement among young people. The document therefore seeks to speak directly to youth workers, youth clubs, youth centres and their professional associations at local, national and European level. This includes organisations and networks such as the European Confederation of Youth Clubs, the Alliance of Youth Workers Associations (AYWA), national youth work associations, organisations implementing European youth programmes, and broader advocacy platforms dedicated to youth participation and democratic engagement.

The document is also intended for cultural and artistic networks working with younger generations, including organisations active in theatre, music, urban cultures and participatory arts practices, as well as European cultural cooperation networks and platforms engaged in cultural democracy, inclusion and civic participation.

We hope the Summary of Key Challenges and Recommendations can serve multiple purposes. First, it is conceived as an advocacy tool capable of challenging stigmatising narratives surrounding young people and their cultural expressions. Second, it aims to be a practical and reflective framework supporting institutions, organisations and practitioners in designing more inclusive, participatory and trust-based practices. Third, it is a contribution to broader European conversations on democracy, youth participation and cultural rights, encouraging stronger connections between cultural participation, civic engagement and social justice.

More broadly, this summary aims to stimulate dialogue, inspire policy development, strengthen cross-sector collaborations and contribute to the recognition of young people not simply as beneficiaries or audiences, but as active cultural and democratic agents capable of shaping the present and imagining alternative futures.

Overarching issue: Overcoming stigmatisation - reframing the relationship between youth culture and political participation

Across Europe, young people's cultural and civic participation is systematically misrecognised. Public and political discourse continues to frame youth as disengaged or apathetic, overlooking the forms of participation that take place outside institutional settings.

European research consistently highlights a shift in youth participation patterns: from institutional and representative forms - such as voting and party membership - towards more informal, issue-based and digitally mediated practices (Sloam, 2016; Kitanova, 2020; Grasso & Smith, 2021).
At the same time, levels of trust in European institutions among young people remain relatively high, often exceeding those of older generations, yet this trust does not translate into increased electoral participation.

Recent Eurobarometer data confirm this paradox: while only a minority of young Europeans participate in elections, a significant proportion engage in civic actions such as petitions, demonstrations and volunteering (European Commission, 2022).

This does not signal disengagement, but rather a **transformation in how participation is practiced and recognised**.

1.1 From aesthetics to politics

Youth cultural practices are often interpreted as purely aesthetic, expressive or recreational, and therefore excluded from the domain of political participation. Music genres such as rap and trap, urban dance, gaming communities or transfeminist activism are not only cultural expressions, but function as spaces of narration, resistance and political positioning: they enable young people to articulate identities, express critique and engage with collective issues.Yet these practices are often dismissed, trivialised or interpreted as problematic.

"When we do rap, they only hear the bad words. They don't hear what we are actually saying"

"Adults talk about us, but not with us. They decide what culture is, and we are outside of that definition"

This lack of recognition is also experienced at a more everyday level:

"They don't take what we do seriously. It's just something we do in our free time for them"

This misrecognition is reinforced by recurring forms of moral panic (Cohen, 1972), through which youth culture is framed as disruptive, deviant or threatening. Media and institutional narratives frequently portray it as incompatible with dominant social norms, producing a paternalistic expectation of conformity.

Historically, similar reactions have targeted practices such as acid house music, video games or hip-hop culture. Today, these dynamics persist and are intensified in relation to genres like rap and trap, as well as to emerging forms of political expression such as transfeminist and environmental activism, often framed as

disruptive or radical within public discourse.
These dynamics are further reinforced by broader structural transformations. Younger generations are significantly more ethnically and culturally diverse than older ones, yet this diversity is often reframed as a problem of integration or social disorder.

"They say we are not integrated, but they never ask what we want to bring"

In this context, cultural expressions associated with racialised or migrant youth are more easily constructed as problematic, contributing to processes of marginalisation and symbolic exclusion.

At the same time, the decline of collective political movements in the past decade and the marginalisation of mediating figures - such as educators, cultural workers or community leaders - have reduced the spaces in which youth culture can be translated, interpreted and legitimised.

As a result, the gap between generations widens, and youth cultural practices are more easily reduced to stereotypes.
In the interviews, this was often linked to a broader sense of exclusion from decision-making:

"We are asked to participate, but not to decide"

As a result, youth cultural practices are not only aestheticised, but also depoliticised and problematised - interpreted through the lens of risk, control and moral judgement rather than recognised as legitimate forms of participation.

1.2 The role of emotions: disgust and moral judgements

Processes of stigmatisation are not only institutional or discursive; they are also deeply emotional.

As Martha Nussbaum (2004) argues, emotions such as disgust are not merely instinctive reactions to what is perceived as dirty or unpleasant. They are shaped by beliefs about contamination, purity and threat, and operate as mechanisms through which difference is moralised and transformed into deviance. In this sense, disgust does not simply reflect social boundaries: it actively produces and reinforces them, legitimising exclusion. As further highlighted by Giuliana Ciancio (2024), emotions are not only individual reactions but part of broader "emotional clusters" that shape how social realities are interpreted and how political decisions are made.

These affective configurations influence what is perceived as legitimate, acceptable or threatening within the public sphere, and shape political and media agendas. Emotions, therefore, are not external to politics, but deeply embedded within it: they shape institutional responses, public discourse and policy orientations, often in implicit ways.

Understanding the role of these emotional dynamics is therefore essential to unpack the processes through which certain groups (including young people and particularly those associated with non-normative cultural practices) are positioned as problematic, and to challenge the mechanisms that sustain their exclusion.

This dynamic resonates strongly with the experiences described by young people in the research.
Across contexts, participants reported that their presence, bodies and practices are often associated with disorder, dirt or danger -

especially in public space:

“If we stay in the square, they think we are doing something wrong - even if we are just talking”

These narratives do not simply describe behaviour; they produce a moral classification.

Youth - particularly when racialised, visibly different, or associated with non-normative cultural practices - are constructed as out of place, as bodies that contaminate the social order.

“Before you even speak, they already have an idea of who you are”

“You feel like you are always under observation”

In this sense, disgust operates as a mechanism that:

- transforms difference into deviance
- legitimises control and exclusion
- reinforces symbolic boundaries between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of presence.

These processes are especially visible in reactions to:

- youth gatherings in public spaces
- nightlife and festivals
- cultural expressions perceived as excessive, loud or non-conforming

Importantly, as Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2004) argues, disgust is not a reliable moral guide. When translated into legal, political or policy frameworks, it risks legitimising discrimination and undermining principles of equality.

In the context of youth, this means that emotional reactions - for example, fear, irritation and disgust - can shape:

- urban regulations
- cultural policies
- media narratives

often without being recognised as such.

The result is a subtle but pervasive form of exclusion, in which young people are not explicitly banned, but are continuously framed as problematic.

Importantly, these dynamics are not unidirectional. While disgust and moral judgements are often projected by adult society onto young people, the research suggests a more complex and reciprocal process.

Experiences of misrecognition, exclusion and stigmatisation can lead young people to develop their own forms of emotional distancing, mistrust and rejection, directed not only towards adults, but also towards institutions and the political sphere more broadly.

As a result, **participation and non-participation are not simply behavioural choices**. They are shaped by **reciprocal projections**, in which both young people and adults interpret each other through simplified, often negative emotional frames.

In this sense, disengagement from institutional politics can also be understood as an affective response: not indifference, but a form of withdrawal grounded in mistrust, lack of recognition and perceived irrelevance.

This dynamic was reflected in statements by interviewees like the following:

“Politics feels very far away, like it belongs to another world”.

1.3 Critical implications

In line with Nussbaum's perspective, the challenge is not simply to "include" young people, but to **transform the emotional foundations of public discourse and participation**.
This requires shifting:

- from disgust to recognition
- from fear to dialogue
- from control to mutual trust

and developing forms of engagement grounded in **empathy, imagination and shared responsibility**.
However, such a shift cannot be achieved through discourse alone. It requires **situated practices and embodied encounters** that challenge existing perceptions and emotional distances.

The EU Have a Dream project has addressed this challenge by creating structured yet open spaces of interaction between young people and political representatives. These were not limited to moments of information or formal consultation, but included opportunities for **direct exchange, dialogue and mutual exposure**.

In several cases, the possibility for young people to meet policymakers in person - and for policymakers to present themselves beyond institutional roles - played a crucial role in transforming perceptions on both sides.

As one participant observed:
"When you actually meet them, you realise they are not so far away"

These encounters helped to:

- humanise political actors
- reduce symbolic distance
- create conditions for listening and recognition

Importantly, the emphasis was not only on participation as expression, but on physical and relational **proximity as a precondition for meaningful engagement.** As Arjun Appadurai has argued, imagination is not merely an individual faculty, but a **collective and social practice**, through which people interpret their realities and envision possible futures (Appadurai, 1996).

Cultural participation thus becomes a key infrastructure for democracy: not only as a channel for expression, but as a space for **reconfiguring relationships, emotions and mutual perceptions**, and for exercising a renewed collective capacity to imagine and negotiate shared futures. The combination of misrecognition, moralisation and emotional framing produces a **structural and relational disconnection** between young people and institutional forms of participation.

This disconnection is not simply a matter of access, but of **recognition, legitimacy and meaning**. It affects how participation is defined, who is seen as a legitimate participant, and which forms of engagement are valued.

This disconnection:

- obscures existing forms of engagement, particularly those that are informal, cultural or digitally mediated
- delegitimises youth cultural expression by reducing it to aesthetic, recreational or problematic behaviour
- reinforces social and generational inequalities, especially affecting marginalised and racialised youth
- undermines trust in democratic processes, institutions and public actors.

At the same time, participatory frameworks often remain **procedural rather than transformative**. Young people are invited to take part, but within predefined structures that limit their capacity to influence outcomes.

Participation, in this context, risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive:
"They invite us to participate, but everything is already decided"

"They want our presence, not our voice"

This produces a cycle of disengagement, in which institutional participation loses credibility, while alternative forms of engagement remain unrecognised.

1.4 Shifting the mindset

- Youth cultural practices should be recognised as **sites of political meaning, knowledge production and participation**, not only as aesthetic or recreational expressions.
- Institutional frameworks should move beyond **moralising, paternalistic and stigmatising narratives**, acknowledging the diversity and legitimacy of youth perspectives.
- Emotions such as fear and disgust should not shape cultural policy or public discourse; instead, engagement should be grounded in **empathy, reflexivity and critical awareness of emotional biases**.
- Young people should be recognised as **legitimate cultural and political actors,** particularly in contexts of increasing social, ethnic and cultural diversity.
- Participation should be understood as a **relational and processual practice**, not a one-off event or procedural requirement.
- Recognition, listening and mutual accountability are **preconditions for meaningful engagement**, not outcomes.

1.5 Recommendations

- Recognise and support youth cultural practices (e.g. music, gaming, urban culture, informal creative practices) as **legitimate forms of civic and political engagement**, including within funding and policy frameworks.
- Develop **guidelines for media, institutions and public actors** to avoid stigmatisation, moral panics and reductive representations of youth culture.
- Invest in **spaces and personnel for intergenerational mediation** (e.g. cultural facilitators, educators, community practitioners) capable of translating, connecting and contextualising different perspectives.
- Create and sustain **accessible cultural infrastructures** (physical and digital), especially in underserved areas, enabling young people to produce, experiment and collaborate.
- Address structural inequalities affecting participation, particularly for **marginalised, racialised and migrant youth**, by removing barriers to access, recognition and resources.
- Design participatory processes that move beyond symbolic inclusion by ensuring:
    * **early involvement** in decision-making
    * **shared agenda-setting**
    * **transparency of outcomes**
    * **real influence and co-creation**.
- Support **long-term, process-oriented engagement**, recognising that trust, participation and civic agency develop over time.
- Foster opportunities for **direct encounters between young people and policymakers**, enabling dialogue, mutual understanding and the humanisation of political processes.

Challenge One: Stimulating cultural participation and civic engagement

Cultural participation and civic engagement are deeply interconnected.

The research shows that many forms of youth cultural expression - often considered informal or purely recreational - function in practice as spaces of civic learning, political articulation and social interaction.

Supporting cultural participation therefore means strengthening the conditions for democratic engagement, particularly among young people who are distant from institutional politics but active in other domains of social life.

2.1 Developing Situated Practices

Cultural and civic participation does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by specific social, spatial and cultural conditions that influence how young people engage, express themselves and relate to institutions. For this reason, fostering meaningful participation requires the development of **situated practices** - approaches that are context-sensitive, inclusive and responsive to the lived realities of young people.

Across the research, a consistent pattern emerges: young people do not reject participation as such, but they disengage from formats

that feel imposed, abstract or disconnected from their everyday experiences.

As one participant explained:
"In class you are forced to listen… here it was easier because we were all involved"

This highlights a key implication for cultural policy and practice: participation cannot be reduced to access or invitation. It must be **designed in relation to how young people actually experience and inhabit social spaces.**

2.1.1 Recognising the specificities of local contexts

Cultural and civic participation is deeply embedded in place. Neighbourhoods and cities differ in terms of available infrastructures, socio-economic conditions and cultural resources. Standardised approaches risk overlooking these differences and, in doing so, reproducing exclusion.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of material and spatial conditions for participation.

"You put everyone in the condition to participate… you give concrete tools and actively encourage them to take part"

This points to the need for policies that:

- invest in accessible and distributed cultural infrastructures
- recognise informal and community-based spaces
- adapt interventions to local needs and constraints.

2.1.2.Recognising diverse cultural identities

Young people's cultural identities are plural, hybrid and often shaped by transnational experiences, migration backgrounds and multiple affiliations. However, institutional frameworks frequently rely on narrow and static definitions of culture and politics, which fail to recognise this diversity.

"What adults do is often different from what we as young people know"

This gap is not only generational, but epistemic. It concerns different ways of knowing, interpreting and valuing cultural practices.

"To engage with young people, you need to know how they think"

Recognising diversity therefore implies:

- expanding institutional definitions of 'culture'
- valuing different forms of expression and knowledge
- addressing inequalities in cultural recognition and representation

2.1.3 Embracing different rhythms and modalities of engagement

Participation is not linear, immediate or uniform. It often develops gradually, through processes of trust-building, experimentation and collective interaction.

This emerges clearly from the interviews:
"At the beginning we didn't want to do the performance, but then we all did it"

These accounts highlight that engagement is often **processual**

rather than instantaneous, and that initial reluctance should not be interpreted as lack of interest.
Moreover, modalities of engagement matter.

As one participant put it:
"It was easier to participate because it was interactive"

This suggests that participatory formats should:

- allow time for gradual involvement
- prioritise interaction and co-presence
- accommodate different levels and forms of engagement.

2.1.4 Nourishing cultural vitality through diversity of practices

Cultural vitality emerges from the coexistence of diverse practices, languages and forms of expression. Many of the activities that resonate most with young people - such as music production, gaming, urban dance or informal gatherings - often fall outside traditional cultural policy frameworks.

Yet these practices play a central role in identity formation, social connection and participation.

"This project helps us understand and participate more"

Supporting cultural participation therefore requires:

- recognising these practices as legitimate cultural expressions
- investing in spaces and resources that sustain them
- moving beyond rigid distinctions between "high" and "low" culture.

2.1.5.Recommendations

Developing situated practices means shifting from abstract and standardised models of participation towards approaches that are **contextual, relational and adaptive**. It requires:

- grounding interventions in local realities
- recognising diverse identities and knowledge systems
- accommodating different rhythms of engagement
- valuing the plurality of cultural practices.

Only by aligning cultural policy and practice with the lived experiences of young people can participation become meaningful, inclusive and transformative.

2.2 Trusting the process

Meaningful cultural participation and civic engagement do not emerge instantly. They develop over time, through **processes of trust-building, experimentation and relational continuity**. However, institutional frameworks often operate under time-bound logics - short project cycles, predefined outputs, measurable indicators - that are poorly aligned with the temporalities of young people's engagement.

The research highlights a fundamental tension: while participation is often expected to produce immediate results, **engagement is inherently gradual, non-linear and relational**.

2.2.1 Taking time seriously

Young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of time, not as a constraint, but as a necessary condition for participation.

"Even those who were more distant at the beginning slowly entered into the process"

This illustrates that:

- initial resistance is part of the process
- trust cannot be imposed
- participation evolves through experience.

Taking time seriously therefore means:

- allowing for gradual engagement
- recognising hesitation as legitimate
- designing processes that can evolve.

2.2.2 Co-creating the process

Participation is not only about being present, but about having a role in shaping how participation itself unfolds.

In contrast to predefined formats, participants valued experiences where they could actively contribute to the process:

"You put everyone in the condition to participate… you give concrete tools and actively encourage them to take part"

This suggests that:

- processes should be co-designed with participants
- flexibility should be built into project structures
- facilitation plays a key role in enabling engagement.

Co-creation is not an additional feature, but a **precondition for meaningful participation**.

2.2.3 Flexibility and plurality of engagement

Engagement does not follow a single model. Different participants engage in different ways, at different times, and with different intensities.

This highlights the importance of:
- interactive and dialogical formats
- non-hierarchical spaces
- multiple entry points into participation.

Rigid structures risk excluding those who do not immediately conform to expected behaviours or timelines.

2.2.4 The value of ongoing learning

One of the most significant outcomes of participatory processes is not only what is produced, but what is learned individually and collectively along the way.

"This project helps us understand and participate more"

Participation, in this sense, is a **learning process**:
- about oneself
- about others
- about society and politics.

It contributes to the development of:
- confidence
- relational skills
- civic awareness.

2.2.5 From distance to proximity: rebuilding trust

A key finding of the project concerns the transformation of relationships between young people and institutional actors, particularly policymakers.

Many participants initially described politics as distant, abstract or inaccessible. However, direct encounters and dialogical formats contributed to reshaping these perceptions.

As highlighted in the research, creating opportunities for **face-to-face interaction, dialogue and exchange** allows participants to:
- recognise the human dimension of political roles
- question stereotypes and mutual mistrust
- develop a sense of proximity and shared responsibility.

Trust, in this context, does not emerge from representation alone, but from **encounter, recognition and interaction**.

2.2.6 Recommendations

Trusting the process means recognising that participation and civic engagement are not linear outputs, but **relational and temporal processes**.

They require:
- aligning institutional timelines with the rhythms of engagement
- enabling co-creation and flexibility
- valuing learning as an outcome
- investing in relational proximity between young people and institutions.

Only by trusting these processes can participation move from symbolic inclusion to **meaningful and sustained engagement**.

2.3 Recognising differences in ages, styles and forms of participation

Meaningful cultural participation and civic engagement require recognising that young people engage with culture and public life through diverse forms, languages and practices.

The research highlights a structural misalignment between institutional frameworks and young people's lived experiences, which affects not only cultural participation but also the conditions for democratic engagement.

2.3.1 Disconnection from traditional cultural forms and institutional participation

Many young participants expressed a sense of distance from established cultural forms and civic engagement, which are often perceived as:

- oriented towards the past
- self-referential
- disconnected from their everyday experiences and worldviews.

As a result, these formats are not necessarily rejected, but are often experienced as **irrelevant**.

This disconnection extends beyond culture to institutional forms of participation more broadly.

Practices and narratives recognised by institutions do not correspond to the ways in which young people experience expression, belonging and engagement.

Yet these practices function as spaces of:

- expression and identity construction
- social interaction and collective belonging
- informal political discussion and positioning.

Failing to recognise these practices not only produces cultural exclusion, but also limits access to forms of **civic and political engagement** that are already taking place outside institutional frameworks.

2.3.2 Active participation, voice and co-creation as foundations of civic engagement

Across the research, a clear preference emerges for **active over passive forms of participation**.

Young people do not simply want to access culture and politic, they want to:

- contribute
- co-create
- shape processes and outcomes.

This shift from reception to participation is crucial not only for cultural engagement, but for democratic life more broadly.
Active and co-created cultural spaces become arenas in which young people can:

- experiment with expression
- negotiate differences
- develop confidence and agency
- engage with collective issues.

At the core of this lies a fundamental demand for recognition.
The implicit question that emerges is simple but profound:
"Would you like to listen to me?"
Allowing young people to express themselves fully - to say what

they want to say, in their own terms and without interruption - is not only a matter of cultural inclusion, but a condition for democratic participation.

2.3.3 Cultural participation as an arena for democratic practice

The research suggests that co-created cultural participation can function as a space where forms of **applied democracy** are experienced and enacted.

These spaces often operate within a dimension of **fictionality and imagination**, where participants can explore roles, positions and perspectives in ways that are not always possible in formal political settings.

At the same time, this fictional dimension does not detach participation from reality. On the contrary, it allows young people to engage with real issues - conflict, inequality, representation - within a context that reflects the **plural, fragmented and dynamic nature of contemporary societies**.

In this sense, cultural participation becomes:
- a space for experimenting with democratic interaction
- a site for developing social empathy and relational skills
- a bridge between personal experience and public engagement.

Co-creative cultural practices contribute to this capacity by enabling young people to:
- project themselves into collective scenarios
- articulate perspectives
- rehearse forms of participation that can extend beyond the cultural sphere.

2.3.4 Recommendations

Recognising differences means acknowledging that cultural participation and civic engagement are deeply interconnected and take multiple forms.

It requires:
- expanding definitions of culture and participation
- recognising informal and hybrid practices as legitimate
- supporting active, co-creative and dialogical forms of engagement
- ensuring that young people's voices are fully heard and recognised

Only by embracing this plurality can cultural participation become a meaningful pathway for democratic engagement and the development of more inclusive societies.

Challenge Two: Rebalancing cultural provision and infrastructure

Ensuring meaningful cultural participation and civic engagement requires not only recognising young people's practices and perspectives, but also providing the material conditions that make participation possible.

Across the research, a consistent message emerges: participation is not only a matter of motivation or interest, but of access, availability and infrastructure.

Where spaces, resources and opportunities are lacking, participation becomes difficult, if not impossible. Participation cannot exist without infrastructure.

3.1 Access and territorial inequalities

Cultural participation is unevenly distributed across territories. In many contexts, especially in peripheral or marginalised areas, young people face a lack of:

- accessible cultural spaces
- structured activities
- institutional support

This creates a structural inequality in opportunities for both cultural participation and civic engagement.

Rebalancing provision therefore requires:

- investing in under-served areas
- decentralising cultural infrastructures
- ensuring that opportunities are not concentrated only in central or privileged contexts.

3.2 Spaces, resources and enabling conditions

Young people consistently emphasised the importance of **having access to concrete tools and spaces**.

These include:

- rehearsal and recording spaces
- cultural and community hubs
- access to instruments and equipment
- mentorship and guidance (e.g. tutors, facilitators).

These infrastructures are not neutral: they shape who can participate, how, and with what degree of continuity.

Importantly, these spaces function not only as sites of cultural production, but also as social and civic environments, where relationships are built and forms of engagement take shape.

As participation becomes more accessible and supported, young people are more likely to:

- develop skills and confidence
- engage with others
- sustain their involvement over time.

3.3 From provision to participation: enabling ecosystems

Providing infrastructure is not sufficient in itself. What is required is the development of **enabling ecosystems**, where spaces, resources and people interact.

This includes:

- connecting cultural infrastructures with schools, communities and local organisations
- supporting facilitators who can mediate between institutions and young people
- ensuring continuity beyond short-term projects.

In this perspective, infrastructure is not only physical, but also:

- relational
- organisational
- educational.

These ecosystems allow participation to move from isolated experiences to **sustained forms of cultural and civic engagement**.

3.4 Recommendations

Rebalancing cultural provision and infrastructure means addressing the material and structural conditions that shape participation.

It requires:

- reducing territorial inequalities
- investing in accessible spaces and resources
- supporting long-term and relational infrastructures
- building ecosystems that connect culture, community and civic life.

Only by ensuring these conditions can cultural participation become a **real and equitable opportunity**, and a foundation for democratic engagement.

Challenge Three: Building democratic and civic engagement

Cultural participation and civic engagement are deeply interconnected.
The research shows that, for many young people, engagement with public life does not primarily take place through formal political channels, but through everyday practices, cultural activities and relational experiences.

This calls for a broader understanding of democracy, one that goes beyond institutional participation and recognises the role of **dialogue, interaction and lived experience**.

4.1 Beyond voting: everyday practices of democracy

Democracy cannot be reduced to electoral participation. While voting remains a fundamental right, it represents only one dimension of civic engagement.

Across the research, young people described engagement as something that takes place in everyday contexts:
- through dialogue and the exchange of perspectives
- through participation in collective activities
- through critical engagement with information and the media.

In this sense, **democracy is experienced as a practice**.

Strengthening civic engagement therefore requires:
- fostering spaces for dialogue and disagreement
- supporting critical media literacy and the ability to counter misinformation
- recognising everyday interactions as sites of democratic learning.

Rebuilding trust in democratic processes depends on reconnecting institutions with these lived dimensions of participation.

4.2 Social empathy and shared responsibility

Civic engagement is not only about expressing one's own voice. It also requires the ability to listen, negotiate differences and engage in collective problem-solving. Shortly, it requires social empathy.

Social empathy skills are central to democratic life. They enable cooperation, reduce conflict and contribute to the development of a sense of shared responsibility.

Cultural participation - particularly in co-creative and dialogical settings - provides a space where these capacities can be developed and practiced.

In this perspective, civic engagement is not only a matter of knowledge or awareness, but of relational competence.

4.3 Re-humanising politics: encounters with institutions

One of the most significant findings of the project concerns the impact of **direct encounters between young people and political actors**.

Many participants initially described politics as distant, abstract or inaccessible. However, when given the opportunity to interact directly with politicians and policymakers, these perceptions began to shift.

These encounters made it possible to:

- recognise the human dimension of institutional and political roles
- reduce feelings of distance and mistrust
- foster more nuanced understandings of political processes.

In this sense, civic and political education should not be limited to formal instruction, but should include **opportunities for direct interaction, dialogue and exchange**.

Bringing young people and institutions into proximity is a key step towards rebuilding trust and enabling meaningful participation.

4.4 Addressing alienation and marginalisation

At the same time, the research highlights that not all young people have equal access to participation.
Experiences of alienation, exclusion and marginalisation - often linked to socio-economic conditions, migration backgrounds or place-based inequalities - can significantly limit engagement.

For some young people, the issue is not lack of interest, but lack of recognition, access and opportunity.

Addressing these conditions is therefore a precondition for civic engagement.

This requires:
* targeted support for marginalised groups
* inclusive and accessible participation formats
* long-term investment in trust-building processes.

Without addressing structural inequalities, efforts to promote participation risk reinforcing existing exclusions.

4.5 Recommendations

Building democratic and civic engagement means expanding our understanding of how participation takes place and who is recognised as a legitimate actor.

It requires:

- recognising everyday practices as forms of democratic engagement
- fostering social empathy and relational skills
- creating opportunities for direct dialogue between young people and institutions
- addressing structural conditions of exclusion and marginalisation.

Only through this broader and more inclusive approach can democratic participation become meaningful, accessible and sustainable for younger generations.

Challenge Four: Changing the conversation

Transforming cultural participation and civic engagement requires not only new practices, but also a shift in how these practices are **understood, valued and communicated**.

The research highlights the need to move beyond dominant narratives that reduce participation to numbers, visibility or short-term outcomes, and to develop new frameworks that recognise the **qualitative, relational and transformative dimensions** of engagement.

5.1 Quality matters: the role of professional skills and methodologies

Meaningful participation does not happen spontaneously. It requires **competence, preparation and methodological awareness**. The research shows that the quality of facilitation, artistic processes and engagement methodologies plays a decisive role in shaping outcomes.

This includes:

- the ability to create inclusive and safe environments
- the use of appropriate artistic and participatory methods (e.g. theatre-based approaches, dialogical formats)
- the capacity to adapt methods to different groups and contexts.

Not all approaches work in all contexts. For this reason, it is essential to:

- invest in professional training

- support experimentation and methodological diversity
- recognise facilitation and mediation as key professional roles.

Quality, in this sense, is not an aesthetic luxury, but a **condition for meaningful participation and civic impact**.

5.2 From numbers to value: redefining impact

Participation is often measured through quantitative indicators: number of participants, number of events, number of outputs. While these metrics are important, they do not capture the most significant outcomes of participatory processes.

The research highlights the importance of shifting towards a more qualitative understanding of impact, including:
* changes in confidence and self-expression
* development of relational and civic skills
* transformations at group and community level
* increased trust and willingness to engage

What counts is not only how many young people are involved, but what changes for them and around them.

5.3 Recognising small changes and everyday impact

Transformative processes are often incremental rather than immediate.

Small changes in attitudes, behaviours and relationships can have significant long-term effects:

- increased openness to dialogue

- greater sense of responsibility
- everyday practices that contribute to broader social goals (e.g. environmental sustainability, inclusion).

Recognising and valuing these micro-transformations is essential to understanding the real impact of participation. It also challenges dominant expectations of rapid and visible results, and supports a more realistic and sustainable approach to change.

5.4 Communication, dissemination and narrative change

How participation is communicated matters.

Media and public discourse often reproduce simplified or stigmatising narratives about young people, reinforcing the very dynamics of misrecognition highlighted in this document.

There is therefore a need to:

- develop more accurate and nuanced narratives
- communicate processes, not only outcomes
- highlight young people's voices and perspectives.

Dissemination should not be treated as a final step, but as an integral part of the process, contributing to visibility, recognition and public understanding.

5.5 Networking, advocacy and strategies of influence

Finally, changing the conversation requires collective action.

Individual projects, however successful, have limited impact if they remain isolated.

It is therefore essential to:

- strengthen networks between organisations, institutions and practitioners
- share practices, methods and learning
- build alliances across sectors (culture, education, social policy, youth work).

Advocacy plays a key role in this process. This includes:

- engaging with policymakers at different levels
- contributing to policy design and implementation
- promoting structural changes in funding, evaluation and governance

The goal is not only to improve individual practices, but to influence the broader systems in which they operate.

5.6 Recommendations

Changing the conversation means transforming how participation is:

- practised
- evaluated
- communicated
- and supported.

It requires:

- investing in quality and professional skills
- shifting from quantitative to qualitative understandings of impact
- recognising incremental and everyday transformations
- developing new narratives and communication strategies
- strengthening networks and advocacy efforts.

Only by addressing these dimensions can cultural participation and civic engagement be fully recognised as **key drivers of democratic life**.

Conclusions

This document has shown that cultural participation and civic engagement are not separate domains, but are deeply interconnected processes that shape how young people relate to society, to institutions and to one another.

Developed as the outcome of a research process carried out within the EU Have a Dream project, it builds on insights emerging from diverse national contexts and participatory experiences.

Across different countries and contexts, the research reveals a common thread: young people are not disengaged. They are often **misrecognised, unheard or insufficiently supported**. Their forms of participation frequently take place outside institutional frameworks, yet they carry significant cultural, social and political meaning.

Addressing this gap requires more than expanding access or increasing opportunities. It requires a **shift in perspective**, from:

- suspicion to recognition
- moralisation to dialogue
- control to trust
- standardisation to contextualisation
- symbolic participation to meaningful co-creation.

Cultural participation, when properly supported, can function as a **space for democratic practice**, a place where young people can experiment with voice, negotiate differences, build relationships and develop the skills necessary for civic life.

In these spaces, participation is not abstract. It is lived, relational and situated. It is where trust can be rebuilt, where institutions can

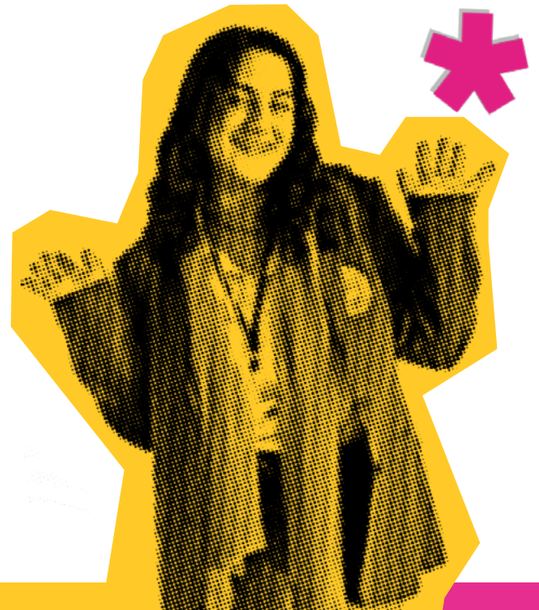
become accessible, and where new forms of collective imagination can emerge.

As suggested by Arjun Appadurai, the capacity to imagine shared futures is a crucial cultural and political resource. Supporting young people's participation means strengthening this capacity, enabling them not only to express themselves, but to envision and shape the societies they are part of.

In a context marked by polarisation, misinformation and social fragmentation, investing in youth cultural participation is not a marginal policy choice. It is a **democratic imperative**.

This document does not offer a fixed model, but a set of principles and directions grounded in research and practice.
Its implementation depends on the commitment of cultural institutions, policymakers, educators and civil society actors.

The challenge ahead is not only to include young people in existing institutions and processes. It is to **transform those institutions and processes** so that participation becomes real, meaningful and shared.



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