

Needs and Opportunities Report - A Cross-National Perspective on Youth Participation and Community Engagement

Youth Empowerment through co-creative Activity Development

Introduction

This report presents the consolidated findings from a survey that was inspired by the NOISE analysis (Needs, Opportunities, Improvements, Strengths, Expectations) which was conducted by the YEA project partners: LAUREA (Finland), UCLL (Belgium), and CESIE (Italy). The analysis aimed to explore how professionals working with young people perceive and experience collaboration, youth participation, and community building in their respective contexts.

Data was collected through a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended survey questions between December 2023 and April 2024, with a total of 48 responses: 22 from Finland, 16 from Belgium, and 10 from Italy.

The findings offer a rich, cross-national perspective on inclusive youth work, highlighting both shared challenges and local nuances. This report synthesizes those insights into a unified narrative, providing a foundation for future co-creation and learning within the YEA project.

Youth Participation: Current Practices and Perceptions

Across all three countries, professionals reported a strong commitment to youth participation yet acknowledged a persistent gap between involvement and influence. While many organizations actively encourage young people to contribute ideas and feedback, fewer provide opportunities for them to participate in decision-making processes.

In Finland, youth are often invited to planning meetings and brainstorming sessions, and multidisciplinary teams meet regularly to identify best practices. However, quieter or marginalized voices are frequently overlooked, and participation tends to favor those who are already engaged or confident. In Belgium, similar patterns emerged: while youth are encouraged to participate in leisure planning, structural barriers—such as language, cultural differences, and limited access to public spaces—continue to restrict broader inclusion. In Italy, professionals noted that youth often perceive socio-emotional and intercultural programs as irrelevant, preferring job-readiness training. School-related stress and social vulnerabilities further limit their engagement.



Figure 1. How well are organizations supporting youth participation?

Survey data confirmed these observations. While 32 respondents rated their organization's youth participation efforts as "Good" or "Excellent" (figure 1), only 22 felt that youth had a strong role in decision-making. This discrepancy underscores the need to move beyond consultation toward genuine power-sharing and co-creation.

Collaboration and Community Engagement

Inter-organizational collaboration was generally viewed positively, with 29 out of 48 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their organizations collaborate well with others (figure 2). Specifically, 16 rated collaboration at level 4 ("Agree") and 13 at level 5 ("Strongly agree"). While a smaller number rated collaboration very poorly—10 at level 2 ("Disagree") and 9 at level 3 ("Neutral")—these responses suggest that although cooperation is present, there is still room for strengthening its consistency and effectiveness.

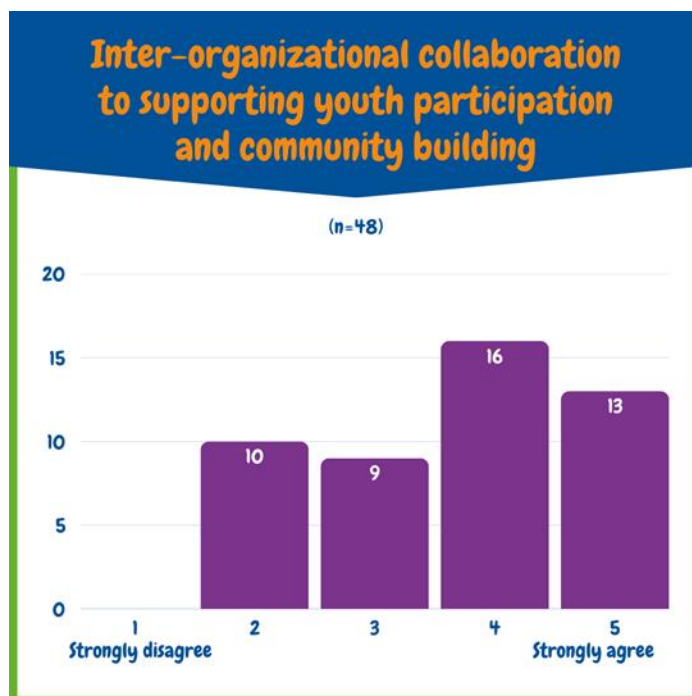


Figure 2. Inter-organizational collaboration to supporting youth participation and community building.

In Finland, collaboration spans youth services, schools, NGOs, and cultural institutions, though it often lacks structure and continuity. In Belgium, cooperation exists but is frequently ad hoc, and professionals called for more consistent, long-term partnerships. In Italy, weekly team meetings and shared strategies were cited as strengths, but respondents also emphasized the need for better mapping of youth services and more networking opportunities.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Respondents across all countries cited limited resources, fragmented communication, and difficulties in reaching disengaged youth as

major obstacles. Cultural tensions, language barriers, and a lack of centralized information platforms further complicate collaboration.

Barriers to Participation

Several recurring themes emerged regarding the barriers young people face in accessing and engaging with services. These include:

- ★ Social and cultural exclusion: Youth from migrant backgrounds or marginalized communities often face language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of culturally sensitive programming.
- ★ Structural limitations: Budget constraints, staff shortages, and limited outreach capacity hinder the ability to offer inclusive, consistent services.
- ★ Psychosocial factors: Mental health issues, school stress, and post-pandemic social anxiety reduce young people's willingness or ability to participate.
- ★ Lack of awareness: Many youth are unaware of available opportunities or unsure how to access them, particularly when services are not well-promoted or clearly communicated.

These barriers are compounded by a tendency for participation to benefit only the most vocal or confident individuals, leaving others behind.

Strengths and Emerging Practices

Despite the challenges, the report highlights numerous strengths and promising practices. Many organizations demonstrate a deep understanding of young people's realities and are committed to youth-centered approaches. Voluntary participation, low-threshold activities, and flexible structures help lower barriers and foster trust.

In Finland, professionals emphasized the value of grassroots-level engagement and peer-led initiatives. In Belgium, structured evaluation processes and strong supervision in asylum centers support meaningful youth involvement. In Italy, multidisciplinary teams and regular monitoring of youth engagement were seen as key assets.

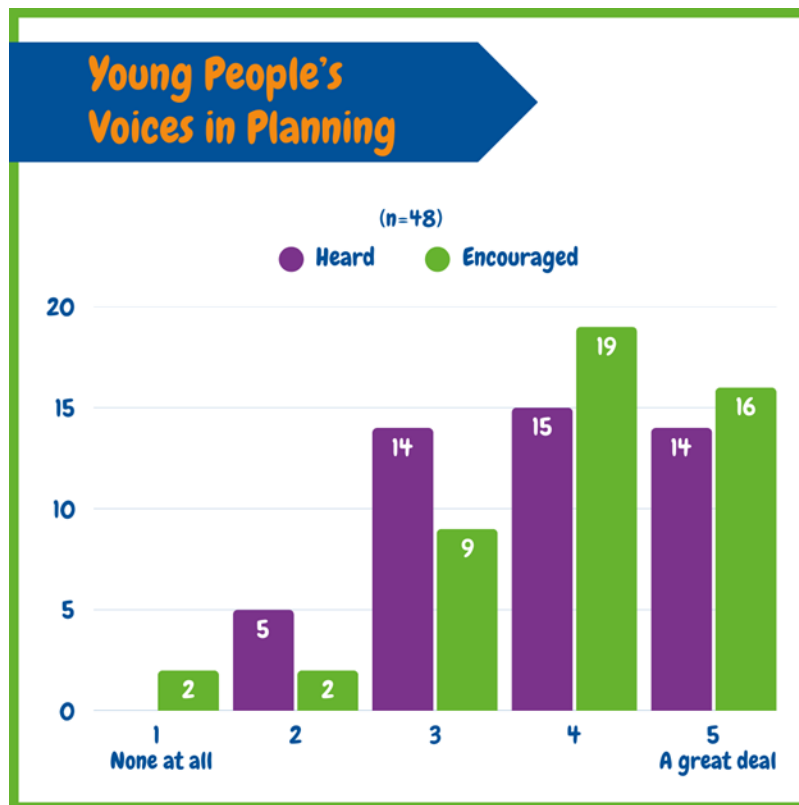


Figure 3. Young people's voices in planning.

The survey results further illustrate this commitment. When professionals were asked to what extent young people's voices are heard and encouraged in planning processes, most responses leaned toward the higher end of the scale (figure 3). Notably, professionals felt that youth are encouraged to participate even more often than they are actually heard—19 respondents rated encouragement at level 4 and 16 at level 5, while the corresponding numbers for youth being heard were slightly lower (15 and 14 respectively). This suggests that while environments are generally supportive, there remains a gap between encouragement and actual influence. Moderate ratings (level 3) were also common, indicating opportunities to strengthen mechanisms that translate encouragement into real involvement.

These findings align with the emergence of innovative practices across the regions. Reading circles, peer facilitation, and co-designed workshops are becoming more common, reflecting a growing culture of co-creation and shared responsibility. Such approaches not only enhance youth agency but also help organizations move toward more inclusive and responsive ways of working.

Expectations and Future Directions

Across all partner organizations, there is a clear expectation that youth should play a more active role in shaping the services and activities that affect them. While some organizations already involve young people in planning and facilitation, others are still developing strategies to increase participation. Creative engagement methods, such as gamification, incentives, and visual storytelling, are being explored to reach a broader and more diverse group of youth.

Professionals expressed a strong desire to build more inclusive, accessible, and youth-driven environments. This includes improving communication, strengthening inter-organizational networks, and ensuring that all young people—not just the most confident—have a voice in shaping their communities.

Conclusion

This NOISE inspired analysis conducted by the YEA project partners reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape of youth participation across Europe. While there are significant strengths—such as committed professionals, flexible approaches, and a growing emphasis on co-creation—there are also clear challenges that must be addressed. These include reaching disengaged youth, ensuring equitable participation, and moving from consultation to shared decision-making.

By building on existing strengths and addressing the identified gaps, the YEA project has the potential to foster more inclusive, participatory, and empowering environments for young people. The insights gathered here will inform the next phase of the project, where professionals and youth will come together to reflect, learn, and co-create across borders.