# Participatory policy making

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# Introduction

In recent years there have been a decided shift towards more participative policy making processes; national governments and local authorities have been searching for new ways to involve citizens and other stakeholders in the development and implementation of policies. This is part of a wider paradigm shift, whereby experts and policy makers are no longer seen as the sole agents in the development of policies, but rather as just one of the many actors who contribute. Policy making in this new paradigm is dynamic and open-ended; it involves interactions between multiple actors and the pooling of resources (both public and private; material and intellectual).

However, implementing participatory processes is not an easy task – through this policy brief we aim to provide policy makers with some inspiring examples of participatory policy making based on the outcomes of the UPLIFT project. At the end of the report we will sum up some of the key takeaways.

## The UPLIFT project

The UPLIFT project aims to understand the patterns and trends of inequality across Europe, focusing on young people (aged 15-29) in urban areas. Through a range of methods, the project seeks to understand how individuals experience and adapt to inequality, and – together with communities in four locations – aims to co-design a policy tool to involve young people in the creation, implementation and monitoring of policies seeking to reduce inequalities. The UPLIFT team is made up of 15 international partners including academic partners, independent research organisations, social workers, local municipalities and others.

The project uses existing data sets to understand the different factors contributing to socio-economic inequality particularly in the domains of housing, education and employment in 16 different urban areas across Europe. These have been selected as research sites for their range in economic potential and redistributive environments. At eight of these sites the partners conduct further research, investigating individual experiences of inequality thorough interviews and workshops with both young people and adults. In a final four cities, Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Tallinn and Sfântu Gheorghe, the project explores policy co-creation. Together with the UPLIFT researchers, young people in each of these four areas design potential policy solutions to address their experiences of inequality. Through the reflexive policy making agenda, UPLIFT aims to develop a new, sustainable, participatory policy co-creation process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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# Why participatory policy making?

The past decade has been a period of polarisation and fragmentation in Europe with the financial crisis and rapid technological change widening socio-economic inequalities. Intergenerational inheritance of (dis)advantage has become increasingly predictive of an individual's opportunity, and young people in particular have become the demographic age group most at risk of experiencing poverty in Europe.

## At-risk-of-poverty rate (%) in the EU countries
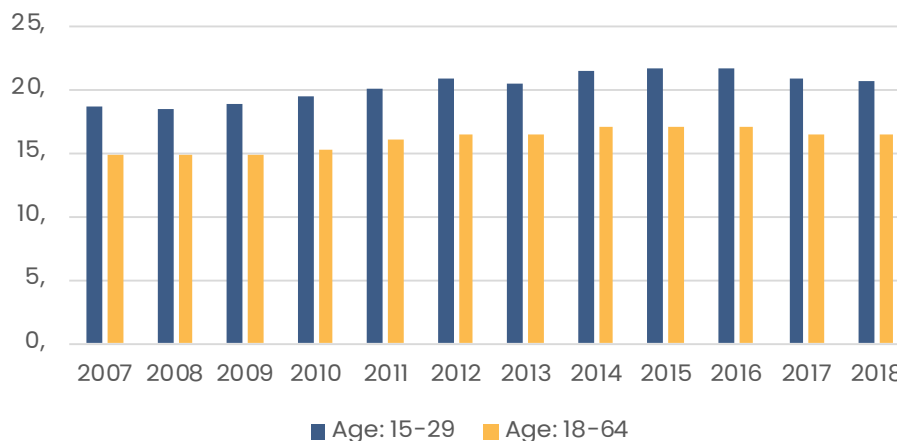


Source: SILC, ILC_LI02, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LI02__custom_2310331/default/table?lang=en

Youth unemployment has been a persistent challenge in many places despite the economic recovery of the last several years. However, even where unemployment poses less of a problem, young people are more likely than any other age group to be precariously employed – meaning that they often have to accept part-time work without permanent contracts and struggle to find stable, long term employment that is suitable to their qualifications.

## Youth unemployment rate in the EU countries by educational level
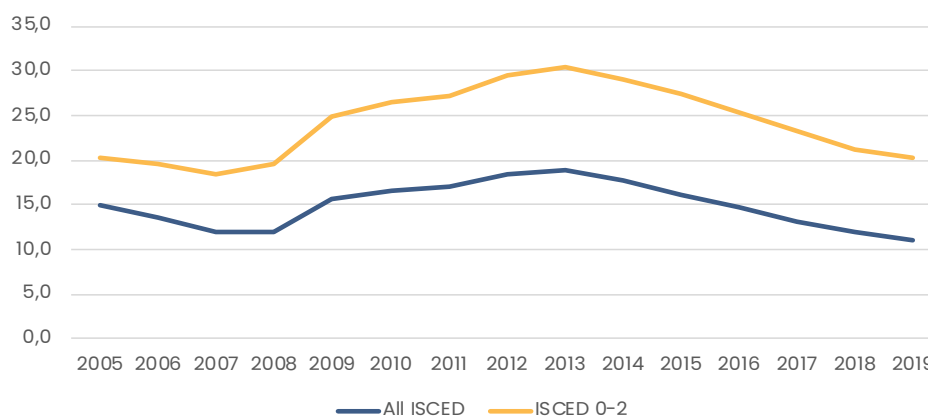


Source: LFS

For a lot of young people, difficulties in labour market integration translate to problems in accessing suitable housing. Particularly in urban areas, young people are faced with unaffordable housing costs, and thus are often forced to rely on their parents for financial support and remain longer in the family home. The vulnerability of young people on the labour and housing markets was highlighted by the COVID pandemic.

Especially since the financial crisis, there has been a trend of increasing cuts to public spending, which often led to increasingly restricted access to existing social services and benefits, amid pressures to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policies and save money.
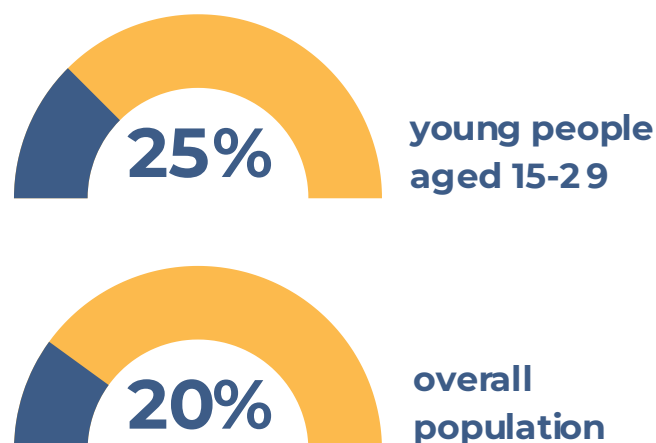
## Share of young people living with their parents in the EU countries
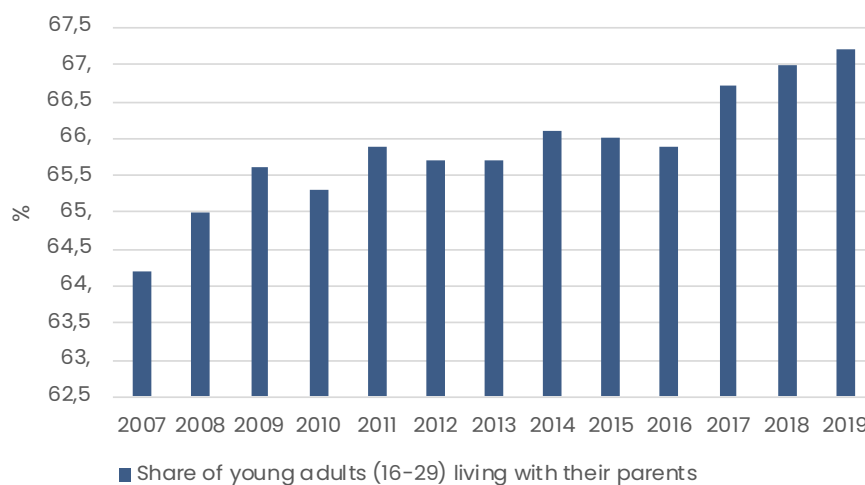


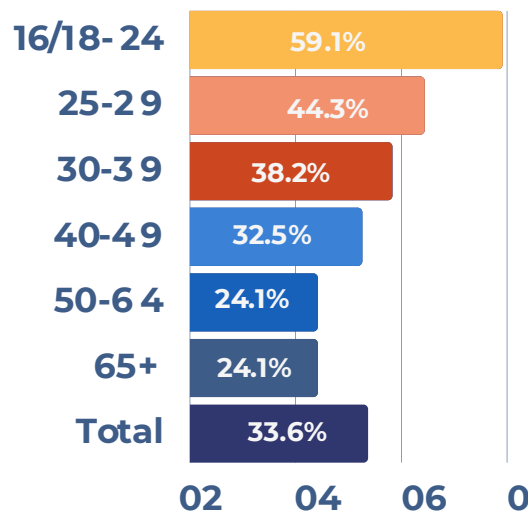Source: SILC, ILC_LVPS08; Eurostat, YTH_DEMO_030

At the same time, political disengagement has been growing, especially among the young, as evidenced by the rates of voter turnout and in polling.

## Not at all interested in politics, 2018, OECD



**25%** young people aged 15-29

**20%** overall population

Source: https://www.oecd.org/gov/empowering-youth-across-the-oecd.pdf p 16

## Did not vote in the last national elections, 2015, EU28

| Age group | % |
|---|---|
| 16/18-24 | 59.1% |
| 25-29 | 44.3% |
| 30-39 | 38.2% |
| 40-49 | 32.5% |
| 50-64 | 24.1% |
| 65+ | 24.1% |
| Total | 33.6% |

02    04    06    0

*Source: https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/YFJ_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope_B1_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf p26*

Europewide, there have been growing calls for new types of policy- and decision-making processes which enable more direct citizen participation, both as a way to counter political disaffection and to increase the effectiveness of policies. Increased participation can enhance the policy making process by integrating the knowledge, lived experiences and ideas of different stakeholders and by fostering a sense of ownership and commitment towards solutions.

Participatory processes imply a paradigm shift, whereby coming up with and implementing solutions to complex problems is no longer the sole responsibility of experts or policy-makers, but rather becomes a more dynamic and open-ended process involving interactions between multiple actors and the pooling of resources (both public and private; material and intellectual).

### European cooperation in youth policy

During the German EU presidency in 2020, the EU Youth Strategy was introduced with the long-term aim to synchronize youth policy principles across the European Union. The aim of the framework is to encourage national authorities to follow a common approach to policy making for young people. The strategy focuses on three core areas of action: fostering youth participation in democratic life (engage), supporting social and civic engagement (connect) and ensuring that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society (empower). A key overarching theme of the strategy is the development of cross-sectoral youth policies and the involvement of young people in the policy making process.

# What does participation mean in practice? The challenges of participation

Recognising the virtues of participatory policy making does not solve the question as to how to implement it in practice.

- There are different points in the policy making and delivery process at which participatory elements can be introduced; from the identification of priorities and problems to be addressed and the drafting of solutions to specifying, evaluating and implementing interventions.

- There are also variations in the extent and nature of participation, along with the particular type of input gained from the process. This can range from information sharing and consultation with regards to a previously elaborated plan, to deeper forms of cooperation such as collaboration, joint decision-making or the wholesale delegation of powers. These different levels of participation are not necessarily better or worse; they can be appropriate and useful in different situations. However, it is important to be clear at the get go what are the aims and expected outputs of the process, where exactly do decision-making powers rest and what are the questions under consideration. This needs to be transparently communicated throughout the process.

- Meaningful involvement implies a shift in power relations and a reconfiguration of the relationships between citizens and other stakeholders and decision-makers, which is why fitting participatory processes into the existing institutional structures can be challenging. Rigid, hierarchical and bureaucratic institutions can struggle to accommodate new inputs and the relinquishing of control participatory processes require.

- By nature, participatory processes involve uncertainty and, by bringing differences in interests and opinions to light, carry the potential for conflict. Unchecked, such conflicts can actually encourage disengagement and increase distrust among different groups or towards decision-makers. Participatory processes do not always lead to consensus. Fostering openness and trust among the various stakeholders often require mediation and longer periods of time.

- Meaningful involvement often requires specific skills on the part of participants – such as the ability to express opinions and make arguments. Different stakeholders might vary in their ability and willingness to engage. More vulnerable people tend to have difficulties in engaging and taking part in participatory processes but reaching these social groups can be especially challenging. This problem can be addressed through careful facilitation and good processes on the part of the initiator, in order to truly involve a multiplicity of voices and opinions – even those of the most vulnerable.

Creating meaningful participatory processes is not an easy task. In the next section, we turn to our UPLIFT innovative examples, which attempt to overcome the challenges listed above.

# Innovative examples for participatory policy making



## CORBY, UK

### Big Local project

Big Local is a highly innovative UK funding programme launched in the post-crisis era, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. It is a unique place-based funding mechanism, in that it awards funding to localities on the basis that it can be spent over 10-15 years according to the communities' own plans and priorities and with almost no strings attached.

Developed specifically to be radically different from other funding programmes which have failed deliver meaningful change to many left behind areas in the country, Big Local ensures local control over funds through direct funding agreements with community members themselves. At the centre of the programme are the so-called Big Local partnerships. A group of at least 8 people (the majority of whom live in the Big Local area), the partnership is responsible for creating a shared vision and developing a credible Local Plan, as well as overseeing its delivery. Throughout the lifecourse of the programme, training, networking and light-touch on the ground support is available – however, the program does not expect partnerships to become formal organizations processing large numbers of invoices or capable of delivering services. In most places, the administering and accounting for the distribution of funding or the delivery of activities and services is typically done by another organization chosen by the Big Local partnership (so-called locally trusted organizations).

It is important to note that Big Local funding provides additional resources and cannot replace statutory government funding. This implies that Big Local is more geared towards the development of new types of services and activities, rather than the improvement of existing ones already provided by the local authority.

The Kingswood and Hazel Leys (KHL) ward of Corby became a Big Local area in 2012 – as one of 150 local areas to receive funding. Northamptonshire Community Foundation manages and distributes funding on behalf of the KHL Partnership. A key initiative in the KHL Big Local has been the Community Chest Fund, which offers grants of up to 5000 GBP for projects to improve the wellbeing of local residents. The Chest Fund is a rolling programme aimed at ensuring that the Big Local funding is spent in a way that reflects the ideas and priorities of the local community. Alongside several other activities, the community in KHL have decided to dedicate its Big Local funds towards various initiatives aimed at its young population.

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# SFÂNTU GHEORGHE, ROMANIA

## UPLIFT co-creation process

Sfântu Gheorghe is one of the four cities where the UPLIFT project explores policy co-creation in a period spanning two years. The aim is to develop new policies to improve the local education system in a dynamic process of co-creation involving multiple institutional actors and young people aged between 15 and 24 years. Through the co-creation process the partners hope to create new types of solutions as well as a sense of ownership, which shall provide a sound basis for successful implementation.

As the local facilitators of the process, Suppedito and GAL SEPSI has recognized that opening a space and creating a framework for reciprocity between young people and the institutional actors requires time and careful facilitation. As such, a 2.5 year time slot in the 3.5 year project period includes a longer preparatory phase, even before the two distinct groups are brought together.

On the one hand, the young people involved in the project learned how to better express their opinions and formulate their needs through the development of personal skills. This was especially significant as the project specifically aims to include vulnerable or disadvantaged youngsters. On the other hand, the creation of trust and encouraging openness was even more of a challenge among the institutional groups – made up of representatives from such diverse organizations such as the local municipality, schools, regional employment and welfare offices, together with NGOs. Participating in the co-creation process required overcoming long standing institutional mechanisms and the skepticism regarding the possibilities for institutional change. Through multiple moderated discussions, both stakeholder groups (youngsters and the institutional actors) developed a shared problem map and identified the most important shared values.

The next phase of the project is the development of the reflexive policy agenda: elaborating a common and realistic policy solution document. At the point of the writing of this document, GAL SEPSI has just initiated this stage of the process. In this phase, the youngsters and the institutional group begin working together, sharing the problem maps they have elaborated on in the previous phase and begin to formulate solutions. In the third and fourth phase, the partners promote and then pilot the policy they have developed.

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# Key takeaways

The two examples in this policy brief function in different spatial scales (national vs town level) and the direct outputs are also different. Big Local as a funding mechanism focuses on specific investments and the development of new independent services and activities, while the co-creation process underway in Sfântu Gheorghe seeks to alter local policies together with the local authority. Yet these projects and many others not cited here share a number of features which suggest important takeaways with regards to participatory policy making.

Longer time spans. Much more than just a single consultation, both examples take place over several years and involve multiple distinct phases. Such an approach is more compatible with the more open-ended nature of participatory processes. It is also based on the recognition that meaningful participation often requires time to develop.

Trusting in the experiences and views of those affected by the problem. Participatory policies are often developed specifically to replace or challenge failed top-down policies. The inclusion of participants with lived experiences of the problem may enable the recognition of previously overlooked connections and needs.

Support mechanisms and increasing capabilities. Both of the projects above dedicate a significant amount of time and resources to training and support. The challenge is to strike the right balance in transferring key decision-making powers while not expecting participants to become experts or take over government roles. These initiatives specifically aim to create new new constellations of expert and local knowledge – so both community members and policy-makers might need some guidance and benefit from new skills.

Community building as a key outcome of the process. Forging new or stronger connections among those involved is seen as a key knock on effect of the project. The recognition of shared values, interests and common stake in a project is hoped to create effects beyond the issue in question and create more resilient and proactive communities.

# Participatory policy making

## Imprint

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