

# Youth Influence Concept



YOUTH CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION  
AND COMMUNICATION

## A handbook on youth perspective

The necessity of integrating the views of youth into decision-making processes has gained recognition in EU, national and regional organizations in the recent years. However, since youth often does not start out with the same conditions as others, extraordinary measures has to been taken into account if to create a good environment for youth influence.

This document has been developed by the Euroregion Baltic Youth Board within the Youth Cross-border Cooperation and Communication (Yc<sup>3</sup>) project, as a description of the distinctive factors that defines youth influence and participation as well as a collection of best practices and suggestion on how to create the best prerequisites for involving youth into the decision-making processes.

The document describes influence and participation as concepts, based on the discussions between ERB politicians, the Youth Board and Secretariats, as well as current research, to envision the complexity of introducing youth influence. These discussions are connected to how the ERB has worked with youth influence so far. This part finishes with some suggestions on how to develop the work with youth influence.

The Youth Influence Concept is intended to raise awareness about the problems around youth influence, but also to be used as a handbook on how to incorporate a youth perspective into the decision-making processes of other organizations.



## Taking care of tomorrow

Young people will take care of the future. Dialogue across borders, among youth and other, is crucial to develop a greater future of peace and understanding. Differences between countries and regions, between ages and cultures make it possible to learn and create better societies.

Today young people are a minority. Tomorrow the new generations will be part of the majority and their future success may depend on how well prepared they are to take over the responsibilities for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. When we talk about young people we mean persons between 15 and 25.

The EU has made the importance of youth influence very clear in its white paper on youth:

"Youth participation in democratic institutions and in a continued dialogue with policy makers is essential to the sound functioning of our democracies and the sustainability of policies which impact on our young peoples lives."

"Getting young people more involved in the life of the local, national and European communities, and fostering active citizenship is represent one of the major challenges, not only for the present but also for the future of our societies."

The importance of integrating youth into the decision-making processes has gained recognition during the resent years. The basic idea is of course good and an important contribution to the development of our democratic societies. However, levels of action rarely meet levels of ambition and well intended ideas easily turns to dust. Hence the process to integrate youth perspectives into decision-making processes should not be taken lightly. A number of different particular aspects concerning youth have to be taken into account if to create a positive environment for youth influence. ▶▶





*Youth is often understood as our future. Youth is the future of cities, countries and the world. Cooperation for a better future should start now. »*

- ▶▶ Another barrier to youth influence is that the possibility to influence is often created through a top-down process. In other words, power is in most cases delegated by the other generations to young through youth influence policies and practices created by the same group of people. Youth are not invited to create the setting of their influence which put them in a difficult position from the start. This again makes it very unrealistic to think that youth will be able to obtain the same possibilities to influence as others.

The very first step towards a successful integration of youth perspectives in decision-making processes is to acknowledge the differences in position and resources between youth and the elder generations as well as find instruments and routines to reduce these differences. Else, youth influence initiatives danger to become a play to the gallery and will simply come to nothing.

It is easy to end up in a trap thinking that only the opportunity given will lead to youth influence. This is nonetheless a incorrect assumption. Most of the problems of creating a good environment for youth influence stem from the simple fact that youth often do not possess the same opportunities and resources as the elder generations. Without the same experiences and knowledge it is much more difficult for young people to use the possibilities to influence and it is therefore unrealistic to believe that youth will be able to play according to the same rules as others. Young people need support and encouragement to be able to influence which is a key instrument in creating good growing grounds for youth influence.



*Young people should be involved in all decisions on all levels. We are going to live a longer time with the consequences of the decisions than the older generation. Taking part in democracy is not easy. We are not always invited to take part in the decision processes and even when we are invited it is sometimes difficult to understand how the process works. It takes a lot of thinking to find a way to cooperate with people who have been active in politics for many years.»*

– Paweł Sudara, Vice Chair-person ERB Youth Board, Pomorskie Region, Poland

# The feeling of making an impact

Influence goes hand by hand with participation. There can be no youth influence without youth participation. How youth participation is structured may have a huge impact on the final result.

Participation can be a feeling taking part of the decision-making process by being informed and have the opportunity to declare a standpoint whilst others are in the end taking the decisions. Participation can also be theoretical where the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process is given but there is no feeling of participation. The great challenge in the end is to combine the feeling of taking part with theoretical participation and enable real participation.

Research and youth initiatives show that to motivate as many young people as possible to take part in the process it is crucial that they really feel that they are able to make an impact. A very important factor to low participation figures among youth in the democratic process is a feeling of despair, exclusion, of not being heard.

What is the point of wasting energy on trying to make a difference if the decision makers are not listening anyway? Even if there is a possibility for youth to make a difference it's useless if the youth does not feel included and listened to.

However, the same research and youth initiatives show that youth is not easy to cheat and they will notice if the influence only is a delusion and will loose interest in participating in the process. Hence, to maintain youth influence in a decision-making process real participation, where the view of youth are are taken seriously and there are able to make a difference, is crucial. ▶▶



*How do you make young people feel part of something they can't decide themselves? »*



*Sometimes I feel that older people rather talk about youth influence than really consider young peoples opinions. A lot of people realize that democracy needs young people. But when it comes to practice it is more complicated.*

*Being an alibi for not doing any real changes is useless. If we talk and talk and nobody is listening it is a waste of energy. Making a real change needs a lot of communication between old and young people.»*

– Elise Wåhlin, Member ERB Youth Board, Blekinge Region, Sweden



## Youth Participation

- ▶▶ The sociologist Roger Hart has created an instrument dividing different levels of youth participation into a ladder, sometimes called the ladder of youth participation, to suggest a hierarchy of the different ways of involving youth into decision-making processes. The discussion about real participation can also be connected to this ladder.

The first three steps, that is explained as none participation, describes a state where youth are rather manipulated, used as a decoration or even tokenized. In these steps the views of young people are used to support the cause of adults with very little or no saying at all.

At the fourth and the fifth steps youth are either assigned and informed or consulted and informed. Hence, these steps describes two functions where youth are either assigned a role to comment or by their own comment on decisions by adults and are then informed about outcomes and results.

The three highest steps in the ladder of youth participation involve constructions where initiatives are either shared by young people and adults or entirely done by youth but with the expertise help from adults. Roger Hart has placed two steps where decisions are initiated by youth on top followed by a step where adults initiate the decisions that are taken by young people and adults together. It could be, and is, discussed whether a process where decision-making is shared between young people and adults or a process entirely determined by youth generates most influence for youth. In a democratic view, most beneficial organization of youth participation is a shared decision-making between young people and adults where both have the right to initiate.

This construction would also fit the discussion of real participation best since youth take direct part in the influencing process and also work side by side with adults for support and an experiential exchange.

### Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



*\*Note: Hart explains that the last three rungs are non-participation*

## Organizing real youth influence

The work to reach real youth influence needs a concept to be successful. Euroregion Baltic is constructing a concept for organizing youth influence. This concept is to be developed and applied in cooperation between youth and adults in the organization.

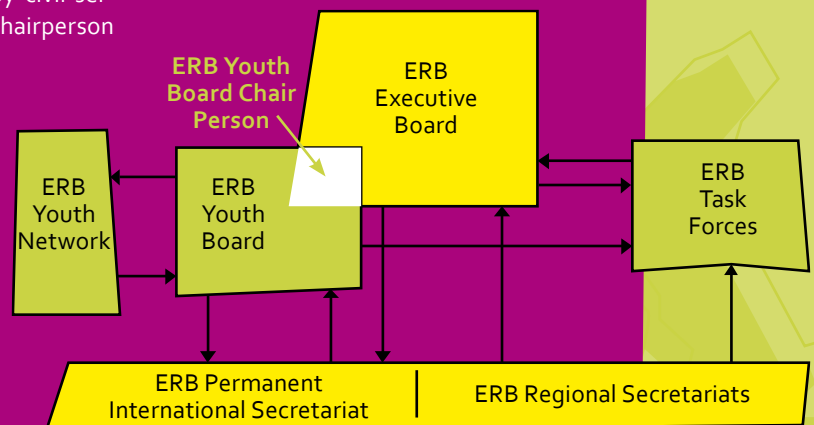
Youth issues in relation to cross-border cooperation have been of high priority for Euroregion Baltic. They first included as a horizontal goal in the Joint Development Programme, JDP, from 2005. It was also agreed to be a special priority in the Action Plan for 2006 and 2007 which indicated that a youth network should be established. The network would then promote and facilitate cooperation projects intended to actively involve youth in the Euroregion Baltic. This network would as well be involved in the decision making process.

In December 2007 the ERB Council approved of the changes proposed to the Statutes enabling the establishment of the Euroregion Baltic Youth Board. It consists of nine girls and boys between 16 and 25 years of age representing each member region. Some regions use the possibility to have a deputy. The chairperson of ERB Youth Board is a member of the ERB Executive Board and thereby become the voice of youth directly into the decision-making process of the organization. The representatives of ERB Youth Board met for the first time in February 2008 and started their work of giving their perspective on issues discussed in ERB.

Understanding all the structures of ERB and EU is not easy when you are new in this complicated world of politics. The ERB International Secretariat, staffed by civil-servants, supports the Youth Board chairperson with guidance and information to be spread in the Youth Board. The ERB Regional Secretariats, staffed by civil servants from the regional member organizations, are supporting and guiding the ERB Youth Boards members from their region to get a full understanding of structures and documents.

There is clearly an ambition to create real participation for youth in the organization by both including young people into the decision-making process through the chair-persons placement into the ERB Executive Board, but also by supporting the work of ERB Youth Board by the ERB secretariats.

In discussions between representatives from different instances within the ERB, the current status of the youth participation has been defined as that young people mainly is consulted and informed. However, since the ERB Youth Board chair person has a seat in the ERB Executive board the participation could be defined as even higher on the ladder. The representatives agrees that the participation could and should be taken further and that improvements can be made to further integrate youth influence into the work of the ERB.



## Factors for success – enabling real participation

The discussions in ERB Youth Board during the implementation of the Youth Cross-border Cooperation and Communication project have provided the following suggestion. Best practices from other initiatives and youth influence research have also inspired.

### Need for more support

Research and initiatives show that youth does not possess the same abilities as adults and do need support to be able to channel their influence. Members of the ERB Youth Board has during the discussions and in their answers to a survey created by the Youth Board expressed a lack of support of their work.

The solution to this could imply better communication between the ERB secretariats and the members of ERB Youth Board to better support their work and ensure a better environment for youth participation. Members of ERB Youth Board also implied that the responsibility to keep the contact between ERB secretariats and the members of ERB Youth Board is shared between the secretariats and the Youth Board, between young people and adults.

### Better contact with politicians

Better contact with politicians is also a matter of support. However, this could also work as a twofold dimension in the work for better youth influence. A trustful contact with the regional politicians is an assumption for a successful cooperation across the generation borders.

The experienced politicians could act as mentors for the younger generation and simultaneously get new perspectives on cross border cooperation. The members of ERB Youth Board have expressed that the contact with politicians is an important way to influence and have also wished for a better dialogue between ERB Youth Board members and politicians in their region. Better connection between the youth and politicians could create better understanding in the presence of decision and contribute to the democratic process.

### A feeling of inclusion is needed

Even if there is a possibility for youth to make an impact they need to get a feeling of making a difference. The feeling of participation is as important as influencing to youth to ensure real participation. The members of ERB Youth Board has during the discussions expressed that improvements could be made in this field. By inviting youth to meetings, discussions and encourage the ventilation of ideas give youth the feeling of inclusion and will have a positive effect on participation.



## ERB Youth Influence Concept

### ▶▶ **Response to ideas**

Youth need response to their ideas and get evidence for their ability to influence. To communicate the outcomes of the integration of youth perspectives into the decision-making process is an important challenge for both adults and the young people to improve the participation of youth.

The young generation is sometimes described as the restless generation and seek quick answers and results which can be problematic in political processes. However, to keep young interested in participation it is important to provide with some answers. Only to acknowledge input from youth is a step in the right direction and create a good environment for youth participation.

### **Encourage youth initiatives**

An important action to enable real participation and climbing up the youth participation ladder is to facilitate initiatives by youth in the process. By giving young people the opportunity to initiate issues to be handled by the organization by their own, produced a better feeling of inclusion into the process.

The ERB Youth Board has during the discussions ventilated the will of initiating own initiatives. This could be a good way of further integrate the participation of youth into the decision-making of ERB.

### **Informal setting**

The meeting rooms and hierarchal orders that may characterize some meetings between adults can be seen as very different and even intimidating for some. In the Yc<sup>3</sup> project, the ERB Youth Board has arranged thematic seminars to discuss and influence different topics of importance for youth. The seminars has worked as workshops where participants from the different regions have been able to meet and discussed the issues in a more informal setting.

This informal way of discussing enables the ventilation of ideas where all have the courage to provide with their ideas and views. This has in the end made as many as possible to contribute to the meetings and has had very good affect on the participation.



*When you come from school to a political organization like ERB some things are really hard to understand. There are a lot of new words to learn and structures to understand. In this work the staff on the ERB International Secretariat and our Regional Secretariat is extremely important to make us learn the best way to make ourselves heard. To be a real force for the future we need even more support from people with more experience than we have. We need more contact with both the staff and the politicians.»*

– Irmantas Sujeta, Chair-person ERB Youth Board, Klaipeda County, Lithuania

## Euroregion Baltic

The Euroregion Baltic, ERB, a cooperation between the regions in the South Baltic area, to strengthen and promote collaboration between local and regional authorities. The goal is to contribute to a sustainable development in the region. To reach this goal ERB takes an active part in shaping EU policies, in particular policies with an impact on the Baltic Sea region. Important is to contribute to the growth by developing cooperation with other actors creating platforms for networking and exchange of information and knowledge.

The organization ERB is lead by an executive board, a president and a youth board. The international permanent secretariat and the regional secretariats are taking care of the administration of ERB.

ERB was formed in 1998.

## ERB Youth Board

The ERB Youth Board has the goal to promote youth perspectives in the ERB priorities. In the long term the Youth Board is promoting opportunities for youth to be involved in the cooperation of ERB and act as one voice for the youth. Youth Board will also increase the interaction between regional authorities and young people.

The Youth Board has been organizing a number of activities for young people, making it possible to meet and exchange ideas over the borders. Each member organization of ERB has one member in the Youth Board and one deputy. Every year the Youth Board elects the chairperson who is their representative in the ERB Executive Board.

ERB Youth Board was established in 2007



## The Youth Cross-border Cooperation and Communication project

Youth Cross-border Cooperation and Communication, Yc<sup>3</sup>, is an international project aimed to give young people around the South Baltic Sea an opportunity to influence politicians on subjects that they are interested in. The project has been a platform for networking where young people can meet to exchange ideas and cooperate with other young people in the area.

The project is started by ERB Youth Board to find out what is important for youth to be discussed and the project has formed an arena for participation, influence, intercultural dialogue, and Cross border cooperation.

»» *Young people have fresh ideas and they think in innovative ways to solve problems.»*





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Lead partner



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