

Effective youth participation is more

Young people shape our society on a daily basis. They want to assume responsibility and carry this responsibility in youth associations, families, schools and training, for example. They have diverse interests and strong positions on social issues. As experts for their world, they contribute decisive perspectives. They don't want to wait until they might be asked. Young people are affected by decisions in politics and administration, in educational institutions and companies - now and later as adults. They have a right to participation because of that.

From the municipality to the EU, there are various legal bases, occasions and forms of youth participation. But even though youth participation is more and more part of political practice today, we find that the demands and expectations associated with it are rarely reflected in the processes and structure of participation. Youth participation is not meaningful and effective just because it exists.

Co-determination is a basis for youth associations and youth councils. That is why we at the German Federal Youth Council have concrete expectations of youth participation. We demand cooperation with effect! For youth participation to be more than mere decoration, it must be continuous, appropriate and effective. Only effective youth participation takes young people and their interests seriously.

Effective youth participation is when young people are always enabled to have a direct influence on everyday life and politics.

- Participation rights and investment-friendly processes must be anchored in the long term.
- We need stable structures and long-term formats. They offer the opportunity for young people to set their themes and get involved when it suits them.
- Stakeholders must be recognised as such and involved in their representation function, especially when the processes and issues are abstract.

Effective youth participation is when it is implemented with appropriate formats and framework conditions.

- The formulated quality criteria¹ and framework conditions for youth participation must be taken into account.
- Participation is voluntary and should provide opportunities for all, regardless of their socio-cultural background, to participate. The preconditions for this must also be created at political level.
- Children and young people express their opinions and needs through channels of their choice and in their own time. These must also be taken into account.

Effective youth participation is when the commitment of young people and their positions are taken seriously and serve as a basis for what is to come.

- We need a common understanding of participation and binding procedures.
- The actors in politics, administration, educational institutions and companies must take the positions of young people seriously. They have to give up design and decision-making power and implement results.
- We need a culture of participation and spaces for the self-determined shaping of the world in which we live.

¹ go.dbjr.de/jbquali

Effective youth participation is our self-image

In youth associations, young people come together voluntarily and self-determined. They organise their work collectively and self-organised, deal with different topics and express their concerns and interests. Here, young people get involved in shaping society directly and assuming responsibility. Children and young people form their democratically constituted structures in youth associations - they elect their representatives themselves. Youth associations therefore represent the interests of and for children, young people and young adults.

Youth associations, with their diverse approaches and established structures, offer reliable places and points of contact for participation. They are aimed at all children, adolescents and young adults, not just their members. Youth organisations must be respected as experts on the lives of young people and the concepts of effective youth participation. Effective youth participation needs such reliable structures.

As actors in civil society, we as youth associations take on responsibility in and for society on the basis of this self-image. Within youth and socio-political debates, we youth associations are legitimate representatives of the interests of young people. We criticise many participation projects in the political arena for disregarding this democratic principle of representation. Actors* from various administrative, political and social contexts repeatedly call for the participation of so-called unorganised young people in particular. This is a devaluation of our representative, legitimate representation of interests.

On the basis of our practice, our experience and our knowledge of direct participation, we formulate our claim to effective youth participation. It must not be thought of in isolation, but must be implemented with the aim of shaping society in the sense of and with young people.

Effective youth participation is responsibility

Effective youth participation is,

- if young people are always enabled to have a direct influence on everyday life and politics.
- if it is implemented with suitable formats and framework conditions.
- if the commitment of young people and their positions are taken seriously and serve as a basis for what is to come.

Youth participation therefore needs political will and attitude. It also needs an awareness of the responsibilities, requirements and expectations involved. We find that participation events in politics and administration are often not about giving young people creative power. Rather, the needs of adult actors and their processes are at the forefront. The motives decide whether youth participation is conscious and as effective as possible or whether it is a sham participation. The commitment to youth participation must not be confined to youth policy principles and legal regulations; it must be put into practice.

There are important cornerstones for effective youth participation:

FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE OUT: Young people don't just want to participate when they are asked. You don't just want to get involved on fixed topics in given time windows. Youth participation should therefore not only be implemented selectively and on a project basis. Sustainable structures and long-term formats offer the opportunity for young people to set their themes and get involved when it suits them. Youth participation must not stop when opinions have been collected or decisions made. Rather, young people should also be involved in further developments. In this way they can follow what happens, explain their positions, if necessary, or work to ensure that action is taken in their own interests and set their own themes. After all, a culture is needed in which young people are allowed to get involved and have a say.

DIVERSITY: Young people are just as diverse as participation events. There is therefore not one format that appeals to all young people and is the right method for all cases. It is important to make use of the diversity of formats,

to allow access to as many different target groups as possible and to create spaces that offer opportunities for participation.

EFFECT: Youth participation is not an end in itself, but a way to let young interests and needs influence politics. It is therefore important to take young people seriously. Participation can be of varying intensity. Sometimes the opinion of children and young people is simply asked, sometimes they can decide something together with adults and in the best case young people can shape things themselves in a concrete framework. Which goal, which limits and which context the respective participation has must always be clear for everyone. However, the concrete impact of participation is crucial for effective youth participation. Only if young people's opinions and ideas have a real impact on decisions can they be an added value for a youth-friendly policy. Only then can participation motivate, create positive experiences and promote political learning and participation.

STRONG STRUCTURES: Sustainable participation requires binding agreements and concrete contact persons* who assume their responsibility. These contacts*in politics, administration, educational institutions and companies must be aware of their role in the participation project and be supported by qualification. In order to enable the establishment and further development of youth participation in the long term, existing structures and networks of youth work and youth participation must be used and strengthened.

STRONG CRITERIA: The occasions and motivations for the respective youth participation activities are very different, as are the framework conditions and results. There's not one yardstick. What is crucial, however, is a common understanding of what youth participation means. All actors should be aware of the understanding and goal with which they implement youth participation. Based on our experience with participation in youth associations, we have formulated requirements and criteria and introduced them into the specialist discourse. In 2009, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth published the "Quality standards for the participation of children and adolescents" formulated out of this discourse. They were supplemented in 2014 by the Guidelines for Successful eParticipation. Both are generally recognised and form the basis for the theory and practice of youth participation in Germany. They formulate clear standards and requirements that all actors have a duty to comply with.

Effective youth participation strengthens our society

Youth participation is important for various reasons. It is socially necessary. Participation creates understanding and trust. It promotes the ability to change perspective, critical reflection and frustration tolerance. Participation is a constitutive component of democratic culture. It is important for the development of young people. That is why children and young people must be involved and their positions taken seriously. At all political levels and in all policy areas where decisions are taken. This includes, for example, social policy, finance, media and digital policy, transport, health, peace and security as well as classic youth issues such as environmental, educational or engagement policy.

Politics and society are directly positively influenced. The contributions of young people open up new perspectives and solutions and thus improve political processes and decisions. The joint negotiation process creates greater acceptance.

Youth participation must be designed with the clear objective of giving young people concrete influence on policy. Participation with the sole aim of building democracy puts the interests of young people at the back and runs the risk of being ineffective and dishonest. Serious and effective youth participation always has the positive effect of political education. Democracy can be experienced immediately. Participation is strengthened both practically and socially.

Successful youth participation provides young people with access to political participation and an understanding of it. It avoids feelings of powerlessness and dependence, encourages people to take responsibility for society and strengthens social skills.

Effective youth participation takes young people seriously

Youth participation inspires and qualifies in all areas of life and at all political levels. In addition to the everyday context of participation in their living environment or concretely in school, young people want to participate in decisions at other levels and on a variety of topics. In addition to explicitly political processes, civil society or economic processes are also meant.

Effective youth participation needs:

EYE LEVEL: It is important for effective youth participation that all stakeholders are aware of their role. Youth participation needs not only active young people, but also committed and open people in politics, administration, educational institutions and companies. These must not only create participatory structures. They must also trust young people to deal with complex political issues. They must also be prepared to question and discuss their own knowledge or their own priorities and approaches to solutions. Because just because the budget does not provide for it, a proposal from young people should not simply be dropped. It is precisely these situations that reduce the effectiveness of youth participation and limit the opportunities for innovative solutions.

EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION: Youth participation should not only be part of high-profile projects. The places and contexts in which youth participation takes place are diverse. They also affect personal life such as family, leisure, school, education or work. All these places determine the everyday life and options of young people. It is therefore crucial for them to be directly involved in their design. There are clearly defined opportunities for participation and rights of co-determination in schools and training. However, these are far from being in line with their potential and are often not as effective as young people would imagine and need them to be. In addition, the respective balance of power is a difficult starting position for effective participation and must always be viewed critically.

DESIGN OF POLICY: Abstract political processes are sometimes as difficult to influence by other civil society actors as by young people. The design options and concrete impacts are often very limited. Young people understand that. But it's no reason to rest on it. It is important to argue that young positions should be included so early that they can exert a relevant influence. Young people want to and must be involved in decisions in their local community, as well as in the state, federal government and EU. Of course the possibilities and formats have to be adapted to the level and the topic. Particularly decisive are the respective starting conditions such as legal regulations and their design. While it is still quite easy to effectively involve young people in processes in the district, the more abstract the levels, themes and objectives are, the more difficult it becomes. It is therefore important to strengthen and establish sustainable structures in order to keep the opportunities for participation transparent and to keep access as low as possible. On the other hand, in more abstract processes it often makes sense to address young people in contexts that help them to position themselves or in which they have already dealt with similar topics. While this can also be youth clubs and schools in municipal processes, youth associations and youth council as well as other self-organised interest groups are particularly suitable at higher levels.

INTEREST REPRESENTATIONS: Young people should be involved in everything that concerns them. At the same time, they cannot always and everywhere participate directly. You don't have time, and sometimes you're not interested. Sometimes the thematic background knowledge is missing. And finally, political negotiation processes are often longer than a person's youth phase. Just like adults, young people also look for structures that stand up for them. Representing the interests of young people (such as youth associations, youth council, pupil* and trainee representatives, associations and initiatives) are important structures for youth participation. They speak in the interest and on behalf of young people and can establish eye level where children and young people would otherwise be excluded. All actors in youth work have a responsibility to pass on the results of youth participation processes effectively, as young people have entrusted them with these positions.

Effective youth participation is consistent

Sustainable structures and resources are essential for effective youth participation in order to meet the formulated quality standards for and expectations of youth participation.

METHODS: Diverse occasions, places, actors and themes need equally diverse methods. There are many empirical values, but no patent remedies. When selecting the appropriate formats, the objectives and framework conditions must be taken into account. In order to ensure direct influence, formats must be strongly oriented to the processes. Processes should be adapted and the focus should be on the appropriate timescales and methods for the children and young people. In order to open up participation to young people with different backgrounds and interests, the formats must allow participants to engage to different degrees and in different ways.

CONDITIONS: Quality criteria and framework conditions describe the needs for serious youth participation. Whether sustainable structures or short-term activities, youth participation is not easy to have. As a rule, investment activities accompany existing processes, but should and can also initiate new ones. In addition to political will, adapted processes and money are needed for materials, personnel and training. Comprehensive information on processes, topics and actors is important. Results must be as concrete as possible.

MAKE EFFECTS VISIBLE: Youth participation can only become effective in the context in which something happens at all. While adults are accustomed to political processes not always having short-term visible results, young people are often disappointed when the promised effect does not materialise. In such cases, it must become visible how things may continue and to what extent the commitment of young people has influenced discourses or achieved effects in other areas. Processes must be seriously designed to be open to results in order to be effective. In the run-up to youth participation, every process should be examined in this light.

DIGITAL TOOLS: Digitalization expands methods of participation. Digital tools and digitised processes increase the chance that more young people can contribute their knowledge and thereby shape the political process. All young people should have equal opportunities to use these digital tools. It must be taken into account that the individual prerequisites and the internal behaviour of the user* are very different.

RESPONSIBILITY: Adult actors* must live up to their responsibilities. Instead of merely applauding the young positions, they must give up power and implement the positions they have worked out. Whether it is about the participation of children and young people in school, in local politics or in the EU Youth Strategy. As far as possible, discussions should be held at eye level to ensure that young priorities and ideas are not simply dismissed as unworkable, but that the current plans are compared in an open-ended manner. If there is no willingness to share the shaping power, there is no prerequisite for an effective participation process.

Effective youth participation needs a culture of participation

Youth participation is important. But even when the perfect method has been found, the desired target group has been reached, the standards in processes have been observed and many framework conditions have been met, one problem remains: there is a lack of a social participation culture.

Access to participation is part and parcel of a genuine culture of participation. Participation must not be limited to projects, but must be fundamental and self-evident. It must not be a question of justifying and organising youth participation. Instead, justification must be given if no participation is implemented.

A culture of participation includes:

CONTINUITY: Strengthening sustainable structures takes children and young people seriously. Specific participation is always initiated in the interest of other actors. Permanent structures enable effective youth participation as it should be. This is the only way to involve as many young people as possible from different contexts. Only in this way can even small questions be discussed with the involvement of those affected. Only in this way can more

be achieved with less effort. The appropriate structures for effective youth participation are diverse and sometimes work independently of each other, sometimes together. In addition to youth associations/wrestling groups and initiatives, these also include committees such as student* representatives, youth advisory councils and co-management systems^[2]. These locations offer the opportunity to accompany long-term processes and to open up permanent opportunities for participation. Youth participation needs people to accompany it. They keep an eye on the big picture and secure the important cornerstones. Long-term contact persons* who (can) do relationship work and are not only selectively approachable make the difference. Professional, political monitoring and representation of interests make it possible to increase the effectiveness of youth participation for the benefit of young people.

RESPONSIBILITIES: In addition to permanent structures for young people, effective youth participation also requires continuous work on the part of the administration. It's very different. In addition to the classic format of youth welfare committees, some municipalities have clearly structured participation procedures within the framework of urban planning. Often, general responsibilities in the municipality also lie with so-called child and youth offices or youth welfare officers* and increasingly with service points for youth participation at state level. In all municipalities and countries there should be clear responsibilities for the general and effective participation of children and young people. The necessary task descriptions and binding framework conditions must be formulated together with actors in youth work.

LISTEN: Participation of young people is our goal as the German Federal Youth Council. Youth participation should not be designed in the sense of political processes and actors. There must be an increased focus on allowing young people to choose their topics and to take their forms of expression seriously, rather than on specifying when, how and for what purpose opinions are asked. Youth participation is important and necessary for the benefit of all for a youth-friendly and sustainable society. Many young people are not reached by traditional participation formats because they do not want to participate on acclamation. They prefer to express themselves when they want to and use their favourite channels to do so. Listening to young people where they express themselves is therefore an important participation format. Because young people do not only have an opinion when they are asked.

CONNECTIVENESS: Politics must not only consider young people with care and take them along, but also think along as decisive actors. From the outset, processes must also be geared to the participation of children and young people. But thinking ahead and strong structures are not enough. It needs clearly formulated rights and consistent adherence to them. Binding participation rights for young people should be introduced in regulations and laws at all levels. At school and in the workplace as well as in the municipality or the EU. In particular, however, it must be made obligatory to specify how and when the respective participation is to be implemented. This is the only way to encourage actors in practice to keep youth participation in mind at all times. Only in this way is it possible to successfully demand participation. This is the only way to ensure that processes are fundamentally designed in a participatory manner. The applicable quality criteria must be taken into account and their implementation made possible with resources and commitment.

FEHLERTOLERANZ: Youth participation must be effective especially from the point of view of young people. Detours must be possible. It must be respected that investment activities fail. Political processes do not always come to a result. However, this does not in itself call into question youth participation.

KEEP THINKING: We need a professional and social discourse on the possibilities and expectations of youth participation. Not only multipliers* should discuss how youth participation can become effective. Actors from politics, administration and civil society should also deal with and specify what the quality criteria mean for them and

² Co-management in the field of youth policy is about binding cooperation between youth and policy/administration. For example, committees are set up in which young people, as representatives of youth structures and experts in their environment, advise and decide on an equal footing with responsible representatives from politics or administration.

advocate a culture of participation. Young people are strengthened professionally and personally through youth participation. But also practitioners of youth participation need support in order to adapt their practice to the different expectations and respective framework conditions. Above all, it should become a matter of course that those involved in administrative and political activities should undergo further training in order to reflect on their own processes and decisions and to live up to their responsibility in investment activities.

PARTICIPATION: Youth participation should always include as an offer all interested young people - regardless of origin, residence permit, social status or educational level. It is desirable to reach children and young people in particular who have not previously had any experience of participation. But this must above all be facilitated by the choice of themes and places in which to participate. The deliberately low-threshold design of formats and communication can contribute to this. However, there must be no pressure to participate and no impression that the young people involved are insufficient. Ultimately, all formats of effective youth participation reach their limits where the realities of young people's lives are affected by political action. Access to education and digital media, financial security, personal assistance, residence rights, equal rights - all these are crucial factors and need to be strengthened to enable participation in society.

FREE SPACES: A culture of participation means that political participation of all people is desired and actively supported. Youth participation needs clearly defined spaces and structures that enable and secure direct participation in political processes. In addition to these regulated formats, however, freedom must also be created in which young people can shape their lives independently and on the basis of their own interests. The experiences in the youth associations show how well young people can take on responsibility and get involved in their society. These possibilities should also be granted to them in other places of their life realities.

Decided unanimously by the DBJR General Assembly on 26/27 October 2018 in Dresden.