

## The structures of youth participation in Catalonia since the democratic transition<sup>1</sup>

**Pere Soler Masó\***

Universitat de Girona

**Anna Maria Novella Cámara**

Universitat de Barcelona

**Anna Planas Lladó**

Universitat de Girona

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### **Abstract**

*Youth participation is and has been a concept with many considerations, meanings and forms of application, both nationally and internationally. In order to ascertain the evolution of the main structures of youth participation, this article starts with the frames that have motivated this participation in Europe, and then it analyses the evolution of some of the participative youth structures in Catalonia in recent decades: local and municipal youth councils. The article also examines some of the longstanding challenges of youth participation, which aim to overcome the structuring of traditional channels of participation and generate other ways of taking part in everyday community life.*

**Key words:** young people participation, youth participation, democracy, youth policies, Catalonia

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\* Contact address: Pere Soler Masó. Office 312, [Departament de Pedagogia](#), Universitat de Girona. Plaça SantDomènec, 9. 17071 Girona, EU. E-mail: [pere.soler@udg.edu](mailto:pere.soler@udg.edu).

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a number of publications which question the classical and traditional structures of youth participation. They claim that in a cultural context characterised by increasing individualism, it should come as no surprise that people do not want to be represented, and therefore the bridges of dialogue between citizens and public institutions enter into crisis (Luque & Giner, 2012). If, furthermore, we bear in mind the precarious situation, the lack of definition and the instability of the job and life pathways of many youths, it is easy to find an explanation for the lack of steadfast commitment and stable formal ties. Despite this, youths have been the ones to lead some of the most important participative movements in recent years (the 15-M movement, the movement to defend quality education, the anti-globalisation movement and others).

This article aims to analyse youth participation through an examination of Europe's political guidelines and recommendations and an analysis of some of the historical structures of youth participation in Catalonia in recent decades. We shall also survey some of the old challenges of participation and formulate proposals for a new history of youth participation, which aim to overcome the structuring of traditional channels of participation and generate other ways of taking part in everyday community life.

## 2. The historical structures of youth participation

By approving regulatory frameworks and promoting certain programmes, public institutions encourage the implementation of certain kinds of projects and actions that directly affect youth. The structures of youth participation, especially the more formal and institutional ones, are no exception. We could say that this creates a domino effect: European policy is crucial to understanding the implementation of certain projects, policies and structures of youth participation in the state, and the states are crucial in their national, regional and local influence.

In this section, we shall first contextualise the major European directives and then focus on the levels and structures of participation in Catalonia (Spain has transferred the competences on youth matters to Catalonia).

### 2.1. *The impetus of Europe*

This point on the historical structures of youth participation aims to briefly describe the key junctures and programmes that have been promoted by the main European institutions: the European Union and the Council of Europe. Both of them, with their recommendations, for example, have fostered and justified the development of local youth councils and the creation of youth forums, among other initiatives. We also examine some challenges and ambivalences around youth participation which can be gleaned not only from the regulatory frameworks and practices to date but also from the demands of the new generations of youth.

### 2.1.1. Reference frameworks and programmes

The European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CE) have played a key role in youth, youth policies and work with youth. In 1988, the EU initiated the Youth for Europe exchange and mobility programme (1988-1991). This desire to work on behalf of youth, their mobility within Europe and their participation in community life was also legitimised through different European Union treaties (Maastricht and Lisbon, for example). The Youth for Europe programme was followed by the Youth for Europe II and III programmes (1992-1995 and 1996-1999), Youth (2000-2006) and Youth in Action (2007-2013) (Devlin, 2010: 67).

In turn, the CE was one of the first international institutions to focus on the needs, rights and circumstances of young people and to recommend that youth participate in society (Devlin, 2010: 75). It has two permanent structures to implement the youth policies of the Council of Europe: the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, created in 1972, and its counterpart in Budapest, created in 1995. They are centres where youth can gather and get training, with an annual schedule of events, many of them conducted in partnership with youth NGOs.

The first formal agreement between the EU and the CE in youth matters came in 1998 (despite previous informal contacts), and it revolved around the European Youth Worker and Youth Leader Training. It was complemented in 2003 with two more agreements, one on “Euro-Mediterranean youth cooperation” and another on “research on youth”.

One important touchstone for European youth policies is *The White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth* published in 2001 (Commission of the European Communities, 2001) by the European Commission after a work and consultation process that got underway in 1999. The *White Paper* encourages governments to coordinate on four themes: participation, information, volunteer service and a better understanding of youth. Regarding participation, the paper argues that youths’ desire to participate “must be given room for expression at various levels, from local to international; it must take several forms -- active and representative -- and it must not exclude any type of commitment, be it one-off or ongoing, spontaneous or organised. Moreover, this involvement cannot be limited to a single consultation and certainly not to opinion polls. It has to include young people in the decision-making process” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 13).

On issues of youth participation, the CE’s Second Conference on Youth Policies was also important; at it, the issue of youth participation was prioritised and the groundwork was laid for the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (approved in 1992), which was amended ten years later and approved by the Congress of the Council of Europe in 2003. This second charter, which was translated into Catalan by the National Youth Council of Catalonia, should be regarded as a reference document for the political participation of youth in local life and was adopted by many European municipalities. The Charter holds that as citizens of towns and regions, youth should have access to all forms of participation in society.

The *White Paper* and the European Charter on participation were followed in 2005 by the European Youth Pact, which is organised around three strands: a) work and social integration; b) education, training and mobility; and

c) balancing work and family life. In this context, in 2005 the Council of Youth Ministers also adopted a resolution that encouraged the Member States to “develop a structured dialogue with youth and their organisations on a national, regional and local scale on the political actions that affect them, with the involvement of researchers in the field of youth” (Council of the European Union, 2005). Starting in 2005, as well, the EU and the CE strengthened their cooperation and established an agreement to provide a framework for the joint development of a coherent strategy on training young workers, youth policy and research on youth.

In 2009, the European Commission proposed a new strategy as part of its youth policies called “Investing and Empowering”. This strategy proposed: a) creating more opportunities for youth in education and jobs; b) improving access to the full participation of all youth in society; and c) fostering mutual solidarity between society and youth. The strategy also stressed the importance of youth work, the need for transversal work and the contribution of evidence that help us to properly assess these policies.

Also in 2009, the EU approved the “Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)”, whose goal was to improve cooperation among EU countries in order to offer youth better opportunities. The resolution encourages all EU member states to establish a structured dialogue with youth and youth organisations in order to jointly reflect on European cooperation in the field of youth matters. Regarding participation, the resolution says: “Young people’s participation in representative democracy and civil society at all levels and in society at large should be supported”. The initiatives that can be implemented include: a) “develop mechanisms for dialogue with youth and youth participation on national youth policies”; b) “encourage use of ... guidelines on youth participation, information and consultation”; c) “support politically and financially youth organisations, as well as local and national youth councils”; d) “promote the participation of more and a greater diversity of young people in representative democracy, in youth organisations and other civil-society organisations”; and e) “make effective use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen participation of young people”.

In the same vein, in July 2010 the EU and the CE signed a new partnership agreement which adopted binding goals in three priority areas: a) the social inclusion of young people; b) democracy and human rights, democratic citizenship and youth participation; and c) intercultural dialogue and diversity.

### *2.1.2. Current challenges and ambivalences*

Even though in recent decades there has been a number of programmes and actions to develop youth policies on a European scale, their translation into noticeable improvements for youth depends largely on the actions of the different member states, which have the authority over their own youth policies. The European bodies can facilitate, provide support and encourage, but without the commitment of the national governments (and the regional governments in some cases), their pronouncements can remain mere wishful thinking (Devlin, 2010:79). We can find one example of this in Spain itself. While the

aforementioned Council resolution recommended providing political and financial support to youth organisations as well as to local and national youth councils, in January 2014 the Council of Ministers of the government of Spain approved a draft law on rationalising the public sector which provided for the elimination of the Youth Council of Spain (Consejo de la Juventud de España, CJE), whose functions would theoretically be integrated into those of the Youth Institute (Instituto de la Juventud). This measure has been harshly criticised by youth organisations, which are witnessing as young people may be left without a voice that has defended their interests and rights before the public administration (Planas-Lladó, Soler- Masó & Feixa-Pàmpols, 2014: 560).

Both state- and nation-wide, youth policies still remain weak, fragmented and lacking a strategy. According to Loncle et al. (Loncle, Leahy, Muniglia & Walther, 2012: 21), this is what lies behind the recent emphasis on youth participation. These authors' hypothesis is that there is a huge gulf separating the multiplicity of political discourses on youth on the one hand, and the weakness of youth policies on the other. We could say that the stress on youth participation actually reflects the weakness of youth policies and the lack of a steadfast political will and strategy in relation to youth. Therefore, participation takes the place of political objectives and strategies.

However, if we analyse youth participation from a European perspective, we encounter several ambivalences (Muniglia, Cuconato, Loncle & Walther, 2012). The first refers to the very concept of participation: on the one hand, the acceptance that youths create new forms of participation and social interaction, which means accepting uncertainty and shifts towards new and unknown social mores (*White Paper from 2001*), and on the other, participation basically envisioned as the kind that happens within the existing social and institutional structures (as contained in the European Youth Pact). In this sense, the regulatory texts and frameworks are still ambiguous, and this translates into practical actions only by the institutional participative structures, which are often manipulated and used to legitimise the policies being promoted by the administration itself, which have a dubious focus on new forms of youth participation. The second ambivalence refers to the challenge of youth participation in all the areas and all the spheres that affect them (health, housing, culture, work, etc.). The political legitimacy of the administrations means, among other issues, helping youth express their citizenship and therefore their participation in everything that affects them. Thirdly, we can find the issues of the level of participation and a distinction between "real" and "superficial" participation. Many official documents and declarations say that participation should go beyond consultations and should instead get youth involved at high levels, such as decision-making. However, these higher levels of participation tend to be channelled through formal youth organisations, most of them comprised of youth with high levels of education, which excludes the non-organised majority of young people. Finally, the variety of areas, forms and meanings of participation allows for a broad range of interpretation, which means that it cannot simply be reduced to consultation or political decision-making. Participation should be considered in youths' everyday lives, and therefore it should be a fundamental part of social-educational practices and youth projects.

## 2.2. The levels and structures of youth participation in Catalonia

One of the first actions during the period of democratic transition in Catalonia was precisely the organisation of channels of youth participation. Thus, in 1977, at the First Youth Congress of Catalonia, the idea of creating an organisation that could serve as an umbrella for Catalan youth organisation was suggested based on a proposal from the Taula de Joves or Youth Committee (Coordinadora d'Entitats i Moviments de Joves). This youth mobilisation and its subsequent organisation were possible thanks to the important youth movement that existed in Catalonia at that time based on the tradition of free-time education and led by the actions of the scouting movement and “*esplai*” (recreational) movements and groups (Adroher, Jiménez & Vallory, 2005; Balcells & Samper, 1993; CNJC, 1984; Samper, 1993; Serrano, 1999; Vila, Puig & Ainaud, 2005).

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1979, by decree issued by the Generalitat de Catalunya, the National Youth Council of Catalonia (Consell Nacional de la Joventut de Catalunya, CNJC) was created with the goals of coordinating youth organisations and movements and serving as a bridge between youth associations and the administration on youth policy matters. This signalled institutional recognition that youth exercise citizenship, and it was a sovereign articulation of the Catalan youth movement, with Spanish cooperation and the presence of Catalonia in the European Community (Domènech, 2008).

Since the recovery of democracy in the last quarter of the 20th century, different forms and structures have been offered to materialise youth participation in public policy. In fact, democracy without participation is impossible, but there are many ways to understand these two terms, such that models with very different degrees and structures of participation can be advocated depending on whether we are discussing situations of social stability or civic virtue and the social nature of human beings (Soler, 2013: 252). Sellarès (2003) proposes a classification of the structures of youth participation which we still believe is quite valid. She proposes two forms of structures depended on whether they are participative structures created, run and managed by youth themselves or whether they are promoted and managed by the public administration. Table 1 shows a summary of this analysis and the main limitations and opportunities of each model.

**Table 1. Main local structures of youth participation in Catalonia**

	Participation structures managed by youth			Participation structures managed by the public administration	
	Local Youth Council	Youth Committee (mixed platform)	Youth Assembly	Municipal Youth Council	Youth Forum
Participants	Organisations and associations that are either formally established or not	Organisations and association that are either formally established or not and individual youths	Individual youths	Organisations, associations, youth and staff invited by the Town Hall	Open to all youth in the city individually

	Participation structures managed by youth			Participation structures managed by the public administration	
	Local Youth Council	Youth Committee (mixed platform)	Youth Assembly	Municipal Youth Council	Youth Forum
Limitations	Does not allow for youth who are not members to participate	Fragile structure because of the lack of homogeneity and the difficulty of articulating individual participation or organisation	Very difficult in large cities; difficulty accepting responsibilities and representation	Consultative body controlled by the Town Hall to which some youth are invited to participate	Very difficult in large cities and difficult to ensure continuity
Opportunities	Capacity of influence and ease of functioning because of the homogeneity of the participants	Participative richness, dynamism, flexibility and adaptability	Direct participation, horizontal and available to all youth	Body approved and recognised within the administrative structure	Plurality of participants and access to the public administration

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Sellarès (2003)

Based on a full conception of the words youth participation and democracy, it is clear that the most participative structures are those managed directly by youth. Structures managed by the public administration should only be viewed only as being in the early stages of promoting and encouraging participation. Despite this evidence, the administration's interest in "formalising" and standardising the forms and models of youth participation has given rise to different controversies and difficulties when delimiting, recognising and establishing dialogue with some of the less conventional structures of youth participation.

Regarding the participants in these structures, there has also been an open debate for years which revolves around whether the members had to join individually or whether organisations and associations could also join. Likewise, within this context another source of controversy has been whether organisations and associations should be formally established or whether more informal structures can be recognised. The tendency has precisely been to consider all kinds of organisations and associations, regardless of whether or not they are formally established. This option clearly appeals to the wisdom of including and opening participation up to many unconventional organisations and associations, even though this means a focus on representative participation at the expense of direct participation by youth. For this reason, some options defend more open models which make direct individual participation possible.

Among the five structures of youth participation presented in Table 1, Local Youth Councils (LYCs) are worth highlighting because of the impact they have had through the goal of implementing them in all the towns in Catalonia, and because of their explicit and ongoing defence of this model advocated by the CNJC in its different resolutions, the latest of which dates from the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 and is entitled "Per un associacionisme fort, participatiu i transformador"

(In favour, of strong, participative and transformative associations). The 3rd Catalan Youth Charter (2004) explicitly states that participating means having access to and being an active part of the decision-making mechanisms. For this reason, LYCs were proposed as the structures of participation and organisation of the participative youth movement. In fact, article 59 of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, approved by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe in 2003 (drafted in 1992), specifically recommends “effective participation of young people in local and regional affairs should be based on their awareness of the social and cultural changes taking place within their community, and requires a permanent representative structure such as a youth council, a youth parliament or a youth forum.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, both the administration and the organised youth organisations and movement keep insisting that local youth councils (LYCs) should be spaces where democratic values are transmitted and a locally-committed citizenry should be built as the “main interlocutors with the local administration on youth policies” (Luque & Giner, 2012: 57).

How have these structures of youth participation been implemented in the different towns around Catalonia? Over time, have they remained in the towns where they were created? Where have they cropped up the most: in large cities or small towns? These are just some of the questions we wish to answer below with the goal of furthering our analysis of youth participation and the changes that are taking place in it.

### *2.3. The evolution of local youth councils and municipal youth councils in Catalonia*

Participation by youth and youth organisations in Catalonia has been a constant feature in the programmatic documents of both youth organisations and the public administrations themselves. However, just as in all of Europe, what has been included under the concept of “youth participation” is not always the same, and it has ranged from merely attending certain events to direct involvement in decision-making in affairs that are inherent to youth policy. In all cases, despite recognising the important associational movement in Catalonia, youth participation is still regarded as insufficient (CNJC, 2004; CNJC, 2013).

In Catalonia, none of the structures of youth participation mentioned above has been implemented extensively and permanently. Despite this, the models that have taken root the most over the years, and the ones with a more or less continuous history, are the local youth councils (LYCs) and municipal youth councils (MYCs), with a clear predominance of the former.<sup>3</sup> MYCs have

<sup>2</sup> Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life approved by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (10<sup>th</sup> meeting, 21 May 2003, Annexe to Recommendation 128).

<sup>3</sup> Experiences similar to youth councils can be found in other countries as well. This is the case of the experience of “youth commissioners” in San Francisco, whose influence is recognised in the city’s public policies. The youth commissioners review the policies proposed by the city’s civil servants, establish priorities in meetings with the City Hall and defend their interests through face-to-face meetings with the public servants. With actions like these, they learn to organise themselves for political action in a scene dominated by adults (Checkoway, Allison & Montoya, 2005). Timmerman’s analysis of municipal youth policy (2009) is also worth reading.



often been viewed as early structures which should lead to a subsequent participative structure led by the youth themselves. In any event, they are participative youth structures where the youths' role is lower than in the LYCs, and, as Claret notes (2014:90), MYCs can be regarded as “empty carcasses, vacuous spaces aimed at artificially satisfying young people's demands for involvement in local policy under the fallacious appearance of a participation that is truly non-existent or extraordinary low intensity”.

Tables 2 and 3 and Graph 4 show the regional implementation of these participative structures locally from the democratic transition until today ((1978-2014). The figures were provided directly by the CNJC.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We would like to thank the CNJC for its willingness to compile and provide information on this issue. The figures presented are the outcome of a tentative unpublished study coordinated by M. Peral from the CNJC and they span the period 1978-2003, to which subsequent data provided by the CNJC have been added.



Year	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
Badalona			Recovery					Recovery	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
Barcelona	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
Cornellà																			
El Prat																Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal
L' Hospitalet	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
Mataró					Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal
Rubí				Recovery															
Sabadell										Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
Cerdanyola del Valès												Local	Local						
Sta. Coloma															Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal
Terrassa				Local											Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal
Viladecans								Recovery			Local	Local							
Vilanova i la Geltru								Recovery			Local	Local							
Alella	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Local	Local	Local												
Berga																			
Blanes					Municipal														
Castelldefels					Recovery														
El Vendrell																			
Granollers			Municipal	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Local	Local											
Franqueses del Vallès										Local	Local	Local	Local						
Manlleu					Municipal														
Igualada						Municipal													
Manresa					Municipal														
Mollet					Municipal														
Montcada																			
Montgat																			
Ripollet																			
Sant Adrià Besos					Recovery														
Sant Cugat						Local	Local	Local											Recovery
St. Feliu Llobregat					Municipal														
Sant Just																			
Sta. Marg. Montbuí																			
Súria																			
Vic							Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Crisis		Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal
Vilafranca					Recovery									Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Local	Local
Molins de Rei					Recovery				Local	Local	Local	Crisis							
Sant Boi					Recovery								Local	Local	Crisis				
Mancomunitat de la Plana					Recovery					Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery	Recovery					
Matadepera									Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Crisis	

	Municipal Council		Local Council		Recovery of a youth council or attempt to create a youth council		Crisis
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Source: Prepared by the authors with data from the CNJC.

**Table 3. Implementation of local youth councils and municipal youth councils in Catalonia (1978-2014) - Provinces of Tarragona, Lleida and Girona.**

Province of Tarragona																		
Year	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
Alcanar																		
Amposta																		
Baix Camp																		
Montblanc																		
Reus																		
Tortosa																		
Tarragona																		

Year	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
Alcanar																			
Amposta																			
Baix Camp																			
Montblanc																			
Reus																			
Tortosa																			
Tarragona																			

Province of Lleida																		
Year	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
Cervera																		
Lleida																		

Year	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
Cervera																			
Lleida																			

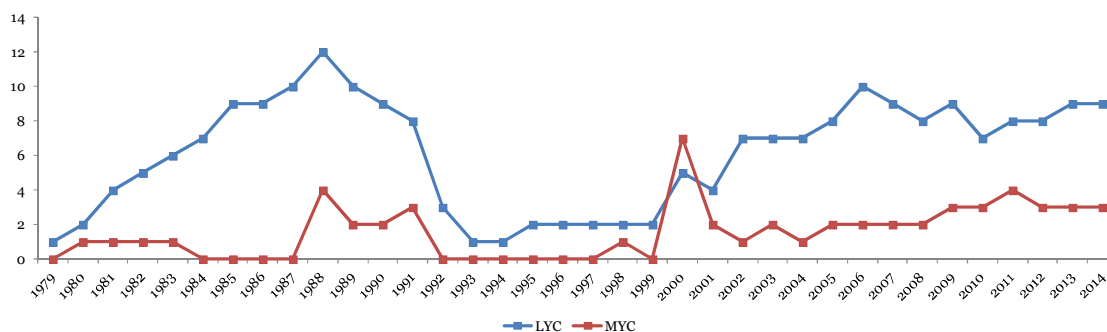
Province of Girona																		
Year	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
Girona																		
Figueres																		
Sant Feliu de Guíxols																		
Blanes																		

Year	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
Girona																			
Figueres																			
Sant Feliu de Guíxols																			
Blanes																			

	Municipal Council		Local Council		Recovery of a youth council or attempt to create a youth council		Crisis
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Source: Prepared by the authors with data from the CNJC.

**Graph 1. Evolution of local youth councils and municipal youth councils in Catalonia, 1979-2014.**



Source: Prepared by the authors with data from the CNJC

Based on an analysis of these data, we can see that the only LYC that has existed nonstop from the democratic transition until today is the Youth Council of Barcelona, even though it did experience a period of crisis between 1992 and 1993 (Consell de la Joventut de Barcelona, 2006). Therefore, it is clear that although it is the largest and longest-standing structure in which youth can participate in public policies, its model is not very widespread and it has encountered some difficulties.

The mean number of years that youth councils have operated during this period is 20 years. The maximum implementation took place in 1988, with 16 youth councils operating (12 LYCs and 4 MYCs), and in 1989, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2014 when a total of 12 youth councils were active. Therefore, it is clear that the period of the widest implementation of youth councils came after 2009. However, we cannot say that these structures have been welcomed by or successful in the majority of towns. Of the 947 towns in Catalonia, 51 have had some experience with youth councils (LYCs or MYCs) or have witnessed attempts to create them. This figure accounts for 5.4% of all towns. Yet it is clear that this figure is not very representative of the real impact of youth councils because precisely the most successful experiences have happened in the cities where the most youth live.

We can see youth councils have been implemented the most frequently in larger cities and that the majority continue to exist. This can partly be explained by the fact that these structures are not always needed in small towns. In any event, LYCs have been established and maintained more often in large cities, despite the difficulty potentially posed by the number of youth and youth organisations they have.

There is a parallel between the youth policy implemented by the public administration and the evolution of LYCs. In an ideal world, these structures for youth participation and organisation should remain outside the public administration and be impervious to the ups and downs of municipal governments. An analysis of the data gathered enables us to see that in the 1980s, with the implementation of the Catalan youth policy and the organisation of democratic town halls, there was a clear push for these participative structures, with a constant upswing until 1988, when there were 12 LYCs and 4 MYCs. We should recall that 1985 was International Youth Year,

and that there was a clear political will to make youth policies visible. However, 1989 signalled a crisis in many of these structures and in the attempt to create new ones, which was largely unsuccessful. The early 1990s were years of economic recession and restrictions on many social policies. Precisely after the 1992 Olympics, this stagnation and the withdrawal of many services and resources earmarked for youth came into clear focus. In this sense, after 1991 there was a decline in these youth participation structures until they reached their nadir in 2000. From that year until 2006, there was a slight upswing until a steady number was reached of between 10 and 12 youth councils all over Catalonia. The implementation of the first National Youth Plan of Catalonia 2000-2010 (PNJCat) signalled a revitalisation of these councils. In 2000, too, there were as many as nine attempts to create or revive youth councils.

LYCs have been implemented in 35 towns, and the average lifespan of these structures ranges between 6 and 7 years. This lifespan is short if we bear in mind the 36 years of history we are analysing. What might be the causes hindering their implementation and continuity? One of these causes is precisely the interventionism of the public authorities and the danger of their using these structures for their own purposes. Administrations have often wanted to oversee the association movement and neutralise its critical capacity. As Luque and Giner say, youths' participation and autonomous and independent organisation, "instead of being regarded as social enrichment and democratic learning, has been viewed as a threat to the power of the public institutions" (Luque & Giner, 2012: 18). In some cases, the shift from a MYC to a LYC was not very warmly welcomed and has prompted tensions and difficulties between youth councils and the city administration.

It is important to consider the model of local youth policies in each town. Choosing these participative structures entails, as Claret (2014) says, viewing local youth policy beyond the leisure-cultural vision that only encompasses actions in the fields of leisure, free time, culture and sport. Ballester expresses a similar viewpoint (Ballester, 2013) by calling for a shift from a policy of presence (more symbolic than transformative) to a policy of influence, such that youths' actions would actually have repercussions on everything that affects their lives and the life of their community.

This potential cause of the difficulty of implementing and continuing these participative structures is compounded by the lack of representativeness and the difficulty transmitting information. We should bear in mind that these structures have not resolved the intermediate strata between the grassroots organisations and the regional, provincial or national coordination structures. In this sense, Francés mentions that when young people question the logic of representation, in reality they are critiquing a model of participation based on associations (Francés, 2008). Other no less important causes are the low level of economic autonomy and the difficulty financing these structures, the corporatism of the organisations in which they take part, the bureaucratisation imposed on them and the difficulty of finding and maintaining generational succession.

### **3. Longstanding challenges for a new history of youth participation**

After analysing the historical evolution of the participative structures and identifying the difficulties consolidating them, we shall now examine three longstanding challenges of youth participation, namely: recognising youth as active participants with a great deal of potential, focusing on projective and metacognitive participation, and articulating the political socialisation of youth. The goal of this section is to break down these challenges in order to pinpoint the factors that might shed light on possible advances in the structures of youth participation

#### *3.1. Recognising youth as active participants with a great deal of potential*

According to Fierro (2000: 138), we define youths as individuals who are biologically adult but are not sociologically recognised as such. Historically, youth has been regarded as a period of instability, uncertainty and provisionality, but also as a time of enormous potential and new competencies. Today this potential is fed by both formal education and informal learning, the domain of the technologies and permanent interconnection, which makes youths highly informed and permanently connected to the public opinion circuit. Therefore, many youths are highly prepared to participate in their surroundings.

In recent years, a culture of immediacy and hyperactivity has taken root in our society, fostered largely by the behavioural changes triggered by the new technologies. This has led to the emergence of more flexible forms of participation among youth and among the not so young, which are organised by semi-presence which makes people more connected and able to meet their needs more quickly. The new technologies have also opened the borders to individual and collective participation; examples include interconnection, the dissemination of information and the generation of opinion through the social networks.

Participation as a process has a vast educational potential that cannot be ignored. Many of the core competencies in education today are exercised and tested continuously through participative practices. These competencies including forming and constructing opinion; projecting ideas in socially-committed initiatives and actions; managing, organising and creating action networks; generating knowledge and ideology; planning participation; defending just and socially-conscious causes; and governing oneself by democratic principles and values.

However, in order to deal with the challenge of recognising youths as active participants with a great deal of potential, it is necessary to identify some of the considerations that will allow us to move towards a new history of youth participation. They include:

- Building our image of youth based on their potential, not with the ballast of their historical stigmatisation.
- Recognising youths' active, socially-committed citizenship, integrating it into the community's day-to-day life and overcoming fears of giving those who are led power and of empowering them.

- Promoting youth policies that multiply and expand youths' participative opportunities and experiences. All youths have a potential that allows them to be increasingly competent. However, not all youths develop this potential equally. It is important to promote participative spaces and experiences because through these practices we can offset, develop and expand many of the essential formative competencies.
- Conferring value and validity on technological participation. The technologies that youths have mastered are vast participative platforms that can be used for everything from generating opinion to promoting mobilisations. Not only do they allow youths to activate participative processes more quickly, but opinion-generation also has a multiplying effect in terms of its impact.

### *3.2 Moving towards projective and metacognitive participation*

The concept of participation has multiple dimensions: as a principle, as an engine of personal and social development, as a democratic value, as a way of doing things, as an educational content, as a right and responsibility, and as personal and social wellbeing. All of these dimensions are active in the different participative structures. Participation means being part and thus taking part. There are many ways of taking part. Trilla and Novella (2001) suggest four forms of participation, namely: simple, consultative, projective and meta-participative. What has predominated in youth participation structures is simple and consultative participation: these structures are spaces of symbolic participation and, in the best of cases, platforms for gathering youths' opinions on public policies. However, what we should strive for in youth participation, and where the challenge lies, is spearheading projective participation, in which the participants are no longer the mere consumers of a proposal, nor do they participate simply by sharing their opinions. In this kind of participation, youths have to be the active agents in planning and developing initiatives, and therefore their involvement in the design – defining the what, the why, the who, the when and the how – and the practical materialisation of the action is necessary, as they are responsible and committed to the corresponding environment.

Expanding the opportunities for projective participation among youth can be the first level of this challenge. The second level may take shape by practising and internalising meta-participation. In this case, the goal of participation is participation itself in two complementary and interrelated ways. The first refers to the possibilities of discussing their participation, of analysing and reflecting on what their participative processes are like with the goal of improving and systematising them. And the second refers to certain collectives' capacity for protest so that their voices can be heard, taken into consideration and, of course, influence public policies. This would be tantamount to making youth capable of demanding and protesting that they should be an active part of the policies that affect them both directly and indirectly, so that they actually come to conceptualise their participation as a principle, a value, a right and a responsibility.

Youth participation should be characterised by being projective and becoming an element of protest. This will be possible if this participation is fed by moments of reflection and deliberation about what participating by



participating means. Further exploring the “why” and “for whom” of participation fosters its protesting, mobilising nature, and among youth it generates thinking and ideology of what youth participation is and what it should be. To achieve this, young people must be free and self-sufficient when projecting their goals, dreams and utopias. Inasmuch as this process is articulated through responsible, socially-committed action, it influences the community and their identity.

To move towards a new history of youth participation, the challenge of focusing on projective and metacognitive participation as the utmost expression encourages is to bear the following elements in mind:

- Overcoming the fear of youth participation. The public administration and some political leaders still perceive youth participation and youth participative structures as a threat to our supposed social and democratic stability. This mistrust or outsized perception of threat deflects from the potential advances of participative initiatives and can even thwart their emergence.
- Expanding the possibilities of leading participative processes, from their emergence by identifying and defining the need that mobilises and gathers youth, to the execution of an action plan which prompts progress towards utopia by achieving small dreams.
- Meta-participation is the utmost expression of youth participation. Opening up spaces to think about participation, to review it, to define it and to plan it allows youth to construct their participative identity and gives them the tools with which to claim it.

### *3.3 Articulating the political socialisation of youth*

Certain bodies are clearly concerned with youths’ political disillusionment, and they have reason to be. But based on Soler’s analysis of the 2011 Survey on Participation and Policy (Soler, 2013:252), perhaps we should note that “political disaffection is not a phenomenon specific to youth, because the political sphere interests or disinterests youth just as it does the rest of the population. However, there is an exception in party identification: young people show a clearly lower sense of affiliation with political parties.” We should not forget that political disaffection concerns us with regard to the exercise of representative democracy, in which we vote every four years to choose “someone” whom we delegate to decide for “us”. All the alarms go off with regard to the relatively low percentage of youth who exercise this democratic right, especially when surveys reveal the mistrust in the political class, political parties and politics itself. However, if we channel the same concern to political socialisation or assisting the processes of constructing political identity, we might actually make a difference.

Political socialisation still remains to be done. Based on the definition proposed by Anduiza and Bosch (2004), we view political socialisation as the process of developing the competencies that allow people to act as citizens by influencing the political process and its results. For a long time, studies and surveys have labelled youths as “irresponsible”, “indifferent” and “passive”. Behind the inconsistency of many of these claims hides the backdrop of our

inability as a community to assist in the training of citizens. If we base citizen training on representative logic – which requires nothing more than waiting until they are legally of age – we are mortgaging a model of country and governance on the exercise of the right to vote every four years, through the election of representatives whom we delegate the job of engaging in politics for us. The challenge is to promote political socialisation by helping to train participative citizenship in an active, intentional way. One of the clearest ways of dealing with this challenge is by including participation in the day-to-day lives of citizens from a very young age, and in this sense both the family and the school are extremely meaningful contexts, but so are free-time activities through work on socially-conscious projects, and the city itself through initiatives such as children’s councils. The essential values and procedures of participative democracy are built into these natural spaces of socialisation through active and activist experience.

Soler (2013) identifies three features that characterise the participation and political attitudes of today’s youth. First, he recognises the expansion of the political sphere, noting that youth participation goes beyond the structures established by the local or national institutions. Secondly, he identifies a normalisation of extra-institutional political action through the emergence of political participation initiatives outside the institutional participative structures which are instead associated with alternative means of participation. And thirdly, he points to a desire to control or to directly commit to whatever the young person is participating in, since youth seek action and a direct impact with their participation and refuse to admit intermediaries.

An analysis of this goal, namely to articulate youths’ political socialisation as a way of diminishing their “disaffection”, allows us to highlight a few guidelines and tools to project a new history of youth participation. They include:

- Accepting that there is no one way to engage in politics. Youth recognise and exercise multiple forms of political participation. Institutions and administrations should open up the horizons that participative democracy makes possible instead of limiting it to just representative democracy, and they should factor in the potentials of each of them.
- Promoting self-managed participative opportunities without either conditions or conditioning factors that are defined and brought to fruition by the youths and with youths.
- Promoting political participation from very young ages. The embryo of youth participation is gestated in participation experiences in childhood within the family, at school, in free-time activities or in the city. Youths learn to participate by participating in all these scenarios.
- Being an active agent in public policy is a process of identity-building that takes an entire lifetime. Still, there is some overlap when stating that political participation among youth is one of the defining features of constructing identity and the way this identity is expressed. Political participation is part of our being or non-being.

These are just some of the challenges that will allow us to project a new history of youth participation. We all have to take responsibility for these

challenges, but the people in charge of youth policies and youths particularly do. The former should do so *with* youth, not simply thinking about them or for them. And the latter, the youth, should be the primary stakeholders in charge of this participation, despite the limitations and obstacles that governments and adults may pose at times. Participation should become part of our reality as a value, a right and a responsibility.

#### 4. Final reflections

Youth participation requires free action by youths and, when needed, the assistance of the public administrations, which must recognise and integrate this democratic activism. In order to project a new history of youth participation, we must start from this premise and expand the concept of youth political participation by integrating other forms of participation that can transform day-to-day lives and foster the construction of a collective project. It must be possible for youths themselves to include the emerging participative forms and structures into their participation, which is shaped by their principles and needs and has an internal organisation that is defined and sustained by the youths themselves. These structures, built bottom-up by youth, should be able to coexist alongside the – equally necessary – youth structures coming from representative democracy and defined by the public administrations.

The local youth participative structures that have been promoted the most throughout the past 35 years, the LYCs and MYCs, show weak, fraught implementation. It is important to find solutions to the causes that hinder their functioning or to seek new participative structures that guarantee youth action and organisation and that ensure that youths play a key role in youth policies.

Francés (2008:46) suggests bearing three key dimensions in mind when evaluating any participative figure. They are inclusiveness, which allows any youth to participate; intensity, or a desire to allow any youth to implement all the actions that comprise the process; and an influence on public policies, recognising the connection between the decisions reached or results achieved and institutional action. Therefore, the goal is to seek participative structures that are as inclusive, intense and influential as possible.<sup>5</sup>

We agree with Claret (2014:69) when he states that the unsurmountable hindrances to participation are poverty, weakness of the democratic edifice and the lack of democratic culture in the institutions and population. Indeed, we must understand that youth participation is not an effect of public youth policies: it is a necessary condition for the very existence of these policies.

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Francés (2008) proposes considering the criteria that generate a participative space that is open to the new logics of participation called for by youth. He suggests 18 criteria, which he classifies into 7 areas of the participative space: communicative interaction, information, participative openness, deliberation, decision-making, appropriation and institutional commitment.

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