

Becoming an Inclusive and Participatory Rural Youth Organisation



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Rural
Youth
Forward

Introduction & Background

Rural youth organisations play a vital role in strengthening communities, fostering leadership, and enabling young people to shape the future of the places they call home. In many rural areas, they are not just spaces for activities and social connection, but platforms for civic engagement, community development, and democratic participation. They help young people feel empowered to stay, contribute, and lead.

However, rural youth are not a homogeneous group. **A young farmer, a commuting student, a young person with a disability, or a migrant youth may live in the same area yet experience it very differently.** Geography, economic conditions, cultural background, gender, ability, education, and access to services intersect to shape diverse realities.

To truly represent their communities, rural youth organisations must place inclusivity and participation at their core. Inclusivity means recognising this diversity and ensuring that all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, can access and benefit from organisational spaces. Participation goes beyond consultation; it involves sharing power and enabling young people to shape decisions and priorities.

Participation in rural areas can be challenging. Distance, limited transport, weak infrastructure, and digital gaps already create barriers. When combined with poverty, disability, or restrictive social norms, these obstacles deepen exclusion. **Meaningful engagement often requires creativity and flexibility.**

At the same time, **rural communities have strong networks, traditions, and local knowledge.** Youth organisations can build on these strengths by embedding inclusive and participatory practices into their structures and culture, ensuring young people feel heard, valued, and empowered.

This guidebook has been developed to **support rural youth organisations in reflecting on their current practices and strengthening their approach to inclusion and participation.** It does not offer a rigid model or one-size-fits-all solution. Rural contexts differ widely, and meaningful inclusion must always be locally grounded. Instead, this guide presents key concepts, foundational principles, practical steps, and examples that can be adapted to diverse realities. Becoming an inclusive and participatory rural youth organisation is an ongoing process of listening, learning, adapting, and sharing power.

This guidebook has been developed within the Rural Youth Forward project, that brings together rural youth organisations from across Europe **to strengthen partnerships, build resilient networks, and support the meaningful participation of rural youth in policy-making.** By connecting organisations of different sizes and contexts, the project aims to foster knowledge exchange, share good practices, and amplify innovative approaches to inclusive and participatory youth engagement in rural areas.

1. SALTO, Youth Participation Toolkit, May 2021, at 14

2. Carolina Trivelli and Jorge Morel, 'Rural youth inclusion, empowerment and participation', IFAD Papers of the 2019 Rural Development Report.

3. Ibid.

Inclusion and Participation in Rural Youth Work

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Why they matter

Rural youth organisations are rooted in rural communities and shaped by realities such as geographic distance, agricultural livelihoods, small populations, limited services, and strong community ties. They often speak on behalf of rural young people in public debates, policy discussions, and community decision-making. Their credibility therefore depends on whether they genuinely reflect the diversity of the communities they claim to represent. When only a narrow segment of rural youth is visible in leadership, activities, or consultations, representation becomes partial.

In this context, **inclusion must be understood as a continuous and evolving practice.** It is not about inviting diverse young people to attend activities while leaving structures unchanged. It is **a way of working that recognises diversity, respects differences, and adapts to varying needs.** Inclusion challenges prejudice, stereotypes, and assumptions, and affirms that all young people have the right to dignity, safety, and participation. Access alone is insufficient. A young person may be able to enter a space yet still feel unheard or unable to influence outcomes, which may ultimately lead to disengagement, either from the organization or from civic participation more broadly. Therefore, true inclusion requires removing structural and social barriers, adjusting organisational practices, and sometimes creating dedicated spaces where underrepresented groups can build confidence and strengthen their voice. If leadership roles, decision-making spaces, and development opportunities are primarily accessed by those who already possess confidence, networks, and resources, organisations risk reproducing the very barriers they aim to address.

Conversely, **inclusive participation refers to meaningful engagement in decision-making processes.** It goes beyond consultation or mere involvement and requires sharing power. In participatory approaches, young people are not passive recipients of programmes but active contributors who identify issues, propose solutions, and shape strategies. Facilitators guide rather than control, ensuring that diverse voices can influence priorities and see their contributions reflected in outcomes. When participation is authentic and not an abstract concept, it strengthens democratic culture and shifts power dynamics: young people move from being beneficiaries of activities to co-creators of initiatives. They develop confidence, leadership skills, the ability to advocate for their communities, fostering belonging and investment in the future of the community.

Inclusion and participation are therefore directly linked to rural sustainability. They contribute to stronger social cohesion, more responsive local governance, and more innovative community solutions. By ensuring that a broad range of young people can access, shape, and lead organisational work, rural youth organisations help build communities that are not only resilient, but democratic and forward-looking. In this sense, becoming more inclusive and participatory is a strategic commitment that determines whether rural youth organisations remain relevant, representative, and capable of shaping sustainable rural futures.

Barriers

Inclusion and participation do not fail because of lack of goodwill alone. They are often limited by structural and systemic barriers which include:

- 1 **Limited transport, inaccessible buildings, lack of public services.** In many cases, exclusion is not caused by individual limitations but by environments that are not designed to accommodate diverse needs.
- 2 **Digital barriers, limited internet access, poor connectivity, and uneven digital skills** can exclude young people from information, consultation processes, and online participation. While digital tools expand reach, they are not automatically inclusive.
- 3 **Social and cultural barriers** also shape participation. Traditional gender expectations, stigma, stereotypes, discrimination, and the perception that young people's voices are not taken seriously can all reduce engagement. In small rural communities, fear of being judged or socially exposed can further discourage involvement.
- 4 **Financial barriers.** Complex bureaucracy, low funding, and centralization block local initiatives. remain critical. Travel costs, interpretation services, accessible materials, and accommodation adjustments require more resources when working in rural areas. When funding is limited, inclusive measures are often the first to be compromised (5).

Understanding what group of young people face reduced opportunities within a specific rural context is the first step toward change. However, identifying barriers alone is not enough. While structural, digital, social, and financial obstacles can limit participation, internal culture determines whether inclusion is lived or remains symbolic.

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Foundations: Culture, Trust and Shared Ownership

An inclusive and participatory rural youth organisation is built first and foremost on culture. Structures, councils, and policies matter, but without trust, safety, and shared ownership, participation remains aspirational.

Organisational culture is reflected in everyday behaviour: how newcomers are welcomed, how disagreements are handled, how leaders respond to criticism, and whose voices are amplified. In rural contexts, culture carries particular weight. Small communities often have strong traditions, long-standing relationships, and informal hierarchies. These can create solidarity, but they can also unintentionally exclude those who are new, different, or less connected, reinforcing those hierarchies or resistance to new perspectives.

In these contexts, trust is central. Young people may hesitate to engage if previous experiences have shown that their input changes little. **Trust grows when organisations communicate transparently, act consistently, explain how decisions are made, follow through on commitments, and visibly integrate youth contributions into outcomes.**

Psychological safety is equally essential. In close-knit communities, expressing unconventional ideas or challenging established norms can feel risky, which is why an **inclusive culture must promote respectful communication and take a clear stance against discrimination.** Racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and other forms of prejudice must be addressed promptly and consistently. Zero tolerance does not mean that every incident results in immediate exclusion; it means that discriminatory behaviour is never ignored, minimised, or normalised. Instead, concerns are met with reporting mechanisms, early intervention, and meaningful support for those affected. Leaders and facilitators play a decisive role in modelling these standards and fostering an environment where ridicule, exclusion, and bias are challenged rather than tolerated.

Creating safe spaces and adopting respectful communication are central to a welcoming culture. A safe space does not eliminate disagreement but ensures that it happens respectfully and without harm. Through respectful communication, inclusion becomes visible: grounded in inclusive and appropriate language, active listening, constructive feedback, confidentiality and listening. Facilitators and leaders must be prepared to intervene when boundaries are crossed, offer support to those affected by harmful behaviour, and apply transparent moderation practices, particularly in digital spaces, where tone can be misinterpreted and boundaries can easily blur. Clear communication norms, both offline and online, help sustain respectful engagement and reinforce a culture of safety and accountability.

Mental health awareness is equally important. Rural young people may experience isolation, limited access to services, or economic pressures that affect wellbeing. Participation cannot flourish if young people feel emotionally overwhelmed. Organisations can foster supportive environments by normalising conversations about wellbeing, offering flexible engagement options, and recognising that stepping back temporarily is sometimes necessary. While youth organisations do not replace professional services, they can contribute significantly to a culture of mutual care.

These cultural foundations make inclusion operational and participation sustainable, leading to ownership and coherence. Once trust and safety are embedded, organisations can translate principles into concrete practices to widen participation and strengthen engagement.

From Principles to Practice

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Inclusion in Practice: Access, Representation and Belonging

With a strong cultural foundation in place, inclusion becomes tangible through actual organisational actions.

Communication is often the first order of business. Clear language, explicit statements welcoming diverse backgrounds and needs, and accessible contact points signal openness. Outreach strategies should not rely solely on digital platforms, as some rural youth experience digital exclusion; schools, local associations, and community increase reach.

Accessibility requires anticipating different needs rather than responding only when challenges arise. Application forms can include open questions about access requirements, signalling that diverse needs are normal and expected. These needs may involve step-free access, sign language interpretation, dietary considerations, quiet rooms, prayer spaces, transport support, or flexible schedules. Maintaining open communication before, during, and after activities ensures that needs can be adjusted as circumstances change.

Representation also matters. Diverse planning teams are more likely to recognise blind spots and design inclusive activities. When working with specific communities, involving members of those communities in planning and implementation increases relevance. Partnerships with local organisations, schools, associations, or cultural groups can strengthen outreach and credibility.

Some young people may require additional support to join and remain engaged. This may include mentoring, peer support systems, financial assistance, or gradual pathways into leadership roles. Flexible participation models such as hybrid meetings or modular involvement can accommodate varying responsibilities and capacities.

Digital inclusion deserves particular attention. Online spaces can expand access but also introduce new risks. Clear expectations regarding respectful communication, response times, privacy, and moderation help maintain safe and manageable digital environments. Organisations should remain aware that constant digital availability may create pressure rather than inclusion (6).

Ultimately, inclusion in practice ensures that access, representation, and belonging are addressed systematically, so participation is not limited to the most confident or well-connected.

Participation in Practice: Power, Structures and Youth Leadership

If inclusion ensures that young people can enter and remain in the organisation, participation determines whether they can shape it. Organisations should regularly assess where their practices fall along the spectrum of participation, from information to youth-led decision-making, and identify where greater responsibility can be shared.

Transparent governance is fundamental. Members should understand the organisation's aims, leadership pathways, and how decisions are made. When information is accessible and understandable, young people can engage more confidently and critically.

Clear channels for input like youth councils, working groups, advisory boards, open forums, or structured consultations strengthen shared ownership. The form is less important than the fact that contributions visibly influence decisions.

Leadership development supports sustainability. Young people who wish to take on greater responsibility benefit from mentoring, peer learning, and gradual increases in responsibility. In this regard, reflection processes like including evaluation meetings and feedback sessions can help emerging leaders assess their development and identify further growth areas.

Interactive sessions can enrich decision-making. Co-creation workshops, world cafés, simulations, participatory budgeting, hackathons, and collaborative strategy sessions recognise that young people already possess knowledge and lived experience. **These methods shift meetings from information delivery toward collective problem-solving.** In this, facilitators play a crucial role. They must balance structure with openness, ensure equitable speaking opportunities, and prevent dominant voices from overshadowing others.

Finally, participation extends beyond internal governance. Rural youth organisations can **support young people in engaging with local authorities**, national youth councils, and broader civic processes. **Advocacy and representation** amplify rural youth perspectives in wider policy discussions, reinforcing the link between local engagement and systemic change (7).

When power is exercised transparently and responsibly, young people become empowered contributors, not just attendants.



Examples from rural youth organisations across Europe

Across Europe, numerous examples demonstrate inclusive and participatory practice within rural youth organisations.

These examples demonstrate that inclusive and participatory practice can take many forms. What unites them is a commitment to shared decision-making, representation, accessibility, and sustained engagement.

- [LandboUngdom](#) conducted youth and member surveys to map rural youth quality of life, strengthening evidence-based advocacy.
- [Umbrella](#) uses gamification tools to make participation more accessible and engaging, while maintaining youth boards and general assemblies for decision-making.
- [Bund der Deutschen Landjugend](#) (BDL) organises annual parliamentary evenings in a World Café format, enabling dialogue with policymakers on equal terms.
- [Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster](#) launched the “Cuppa & a Catch Up” campaign to strengthen community wellbeing and encourage meaningful conversations.
- [Latvian 4H’s](#) annual reflection and planning meetings bring together board members, staff, and volunteers in shared evaluation processes, strengthening ownership and cooperation.
- [Estonian 4H](#) engages young people in co-creation workshops, hackathons, and advisory boards at both national and local levels, including discussions on rural mental health.
- [Landjugend Österreich’s](#) “Tat.Ort Jugend” initiative mobilises thousands of young people in community-based projects responding to local needs, while structured representation in national youth councils ensures rural youth voices influence policy.
- [The Youth Development Center of Armenia](#) engages rural youth directly in planning and decision-making roles, fostering ownership and relevance.

Conclusions

Becoming an inclusive and participatory rural youth organisation is an ongoing journey, not a one-time achievement. It requires confronting **structural barriers**, cultivating **trust and psychological safety**, and **ensuring that young people have real influence**. By embedding inclusive values into everyday practice and creating genuine opportunities for young people to shape decisions, organizations support youth leadership, build community cohesion, and contribute to sustainable rural futures. Inclusion and participation are strategic foundations that determine whether rural youth organisations remain relevant, representative, and capable of shaping resilient communities.

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