

Realities and trends of rural youth participation in decision-making

This report examines the realities and trends of rural youth participation in decision-making across diverse European contexts, aiming to shed light on how young people in rural communities and remote towns engage (or struggle to engage) in governance, from the local council to the European Union.



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**Rural
Youth
Forward**

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Rural Youth Forward

“We share a common vision where rural youth are fully recognized and empowered as co-creators, actively and meaningfully shaping their communities, their countries, and the future of Europe”.

Introduction & context

Rural youth across Europe represent a vital yet often underrepresented demographic in governance and policy-making. Nearly one-third of Europe’s population lives in rural areas, but young people are increasingly scarce in these regions due to urban migration and demographic aging. Those who remain in or return to rural communities face distinct realities – from limited access to services and jobs to feeling politically “invisible” compared to their urban peers. This report examines the **realities and trends of rural youth participation in decision-making** across diverse European contexts, aiming to shed light on how young people in villages and remote towns engage (or struggle to engage) in governance, from the local council to the European Union.

European institutions have begun recognizing that empowering rural youth is essential for vibrant rural futures. The EU’s current Youth Strategy (2019–2027) explicitly includes **Youth Goal #6: “Moving Rural Youth Forward,”** marking the first time a European youth policy strategy has specifically focused on rural youth. Likewise, the Council of Europe is addressing a long-neglected gap by adopting a Committee of Ministers recommendation on rural youth, aiming at strengthening youth engagement, services, and rights in rural areas. These high-level commitments set the stage, but the lived reality of rural youth participation is shaped on the ground – in village and town halls, community groups, youth councils, and even protest movements in Europe’s countryside. Moreover, the current CoE New Democratic Pact highlights an “alarming decline of democracy in Europe” and calls for youth agency in safeguarding democratic futures. The role of rural youth, rooted locally yet connected globally, can act as vital bridge builders between polarised communities and institutions.

Purpose and scope: This report provides a structured, in-depth analysis of rural youth involvement in governance and civic life, integrating both extensive literature and policy review and fresh insights from focus group consultations with rural youth in twelve European countries (Romania, Greece, Slovenia, Austria, Spain, Slovakia, Estonia, Denmark, Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Norway). The focus groups – conducted in 2025 as part of a transnational consultation – captured young rural Europeans’ experiences with local decision-makers, perceived barriers to engagement, access to digital tools, institutional support, and views on activism. Throughout the report, these youth voices are integrated alongside research findings to give a nuanced, ground-up perspective on the issues.

Structure: The report is organized into thematic chapters addressing the key research questions. We begin by clarifying definitions of “rural youth” and “youth participation,” and outlining why these matter. Next, we map the European policy framework that influences rural youth engagement (EU strategies, Council of Europe initiatives, etc.). We then present the current state of rural youth participation across Europe, followed by an analysis of the challenges rural youth face at local, national, and European levels. Successful models and best

practices are examined – from the European Youth Village program to the LEADER community and Rural Youth Parliament – illustrating what works in boosting rural youth agency. Emerging trends and opportunities, such as digital participation and grassroots organizing, are explored for their potential to overcome old obstacles. The role of dedicated rural youth structures (youth councils, networks, umbrella organizations, etc.) is assessed to understand how effectively they amplify rural youth voices. Finally, we provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, youth organizations, local authorities, and EU institutions to strengthen the participation of rural youth, followed by a conclusion that reflects on the findings and future outlook.

In sum, this comprehensive report paints a detailed picture of how Europe’s rural youth are engaging in policy-making today – the forms it takes, the hurdles encountered, the innovations and programs making a difference, and the evolving landscape of opportunities. By elevating both statistical findings and the personal insights of young rural Europeans, we aim to inform stakeholders and contribute to more inclusive, youth-informed governance in all corners of Europe’s countryside.

„Youth participation encompasses the ways young people engage in and influence decision-making processes and civic life”.

Definitions and relevance of rural youth participation

Defining “rural youth”: “Rural youth” generally refers to young people living outside urban centers. In practical terms, rural areas are often defined in contrast to urban ones – for example, as local communities with lower population density, often centered around agriculture, forestry, or fishing economies. The EU’s definition (used in Council conclusions on rural youth) describes rural areas as *“local administrative communities outside urban clusters, mostly characterized by lower population density, a specific socio-geographical and cultural identity, proximity to natural resources, and corresponding economic prospects, but also with needs for improved services for youth and the general population”* (Șerban & Brazienè, 2021). National definitions vary (some use population thresholds or distance from cities), but broadly, *rural youth* in this report means young people (typically ages 13–30) residing in villages, small towns, or sparsely populated areas that are relatively distant from large urban hubs. It is important to note that rural youth are a diverse group – rurality in northern Sweden looks different from rurality in coastal Spain – but they share many structural commonalities in terms of access to opportunities and institutions.

Defining “youth participation”: *Youth participation* encompasses the ways young people engage in and influence decision-making processes and civic life. This ranges from formal political participation (voting, membership in political parties’ youth wings, or being elected to office) to structured civic participation (such as involvement in youth councils, advisory boards, and community development committees) and informal or non-institutionalized forms of engagement (volunteering, activism, protests, online campaigns, community initiatives). The EU Youth Strategy emphasizes *“fostering youth participation in democratic life”* and ensuring young people have the resources and opportunities to shape society. Meaningful youth participation implies that young people have agency and voice in decisions that affect them, whether at the local community level or in broader policy arenas. In the context of rural youth, participation might occur through specific channels like rural youth associations, agricultural youth clubs, village meetings, or local action groups, in addition to the more common avenues available to all youth.

Relevance and importance: Youth participation is a cornerstone of democratic, inclusive governance. For rural communities, involving youth is particularly essential because young people’s decisions on whether to remain in or return to their hometowns often shape the future viability of those areas. Yet historically, rural youth have been *“defined by what they lack”* – e.g., seen as the opposite of urban youth – and their voices have been marginalized in policy discourse. This has tangible consequences: policies made without youth input can fail to address the needs of rural young people, contributing to a cycle of depopulation and decline. Conversely, when rural youth are engaged, they can be powerful agents of community development and change. For example, youth participation can lead to more

youth-friendly services (like setting up a local youth center or bus route), innovative social enterprises, or initiatives preserving local culture and environment.

Rural youth participation also matters for equity. Studies show rural young people in Europe are often at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than their urban counterparts, and face disadvantages in education, employment, and mobility. Engaging them in decision-making is a way to ensure *their* challenges and ideas inform solutions, whether it's tailoring a training program for rural NEET youth or expanding broadband in underserved rural communities. As one focus group participant put it, *"We are the ones living the rural reality daily – we know what works and what doesn't in our communities. But we need channels to convey that to those in power."* The inclusion of rural youth voices leads to better, more responsive governance that can tackle rural-urban disparities.

Finally, at a continental scale, rural youth participation ties into Europe's wider goals. Issues like sustainable agriculture, climate change, and balanced regional development all require the energy and input of the next generation in rural areas. In sum, defining rural youth and participation clarifies *who* we are talking about and *why* their engagement is both a democratic right and a strategic necessity for Europe's social cohesion and rural vitality. This report uses these definitions as a basis for examining how far the ideal of active rural youth participation matches reality across Europe today.

The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 provides the overarching framework for European cooperation on youth policy. A central element of this strategy is the set of 11 European Youth Goals, which were developed through consultations with young people across Europe.

With the European Youth Goal #6, “Moving Rural Youth Forward,” the EU has, for the first time, developed a youth strategy with a specific rural focus.

European policy framework

European institutions and frameworks have increasingly acknowledged the importance of engaging rural youth in policy-making. This chapter outlines key policies, strategies, and initiatives at the European level (EU and Council of Europe) that shape or support rural youth participation.

EU Youth Strategy and Youth Goal #6: The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 provides the overarching framework for European cooperation on youth policy. A central element of this strategy is the set of 11 European Youth Goals, which were developed through consultations with young people. Notably, **Youth Goal #6, “Moving Rural Youth Forward,”** is entirely dedicated to rural youth issues – the first time an EU youth strategy has a specific rural focus. Youth Goal #6 recognizes that young people in rural areas face *“particular hardships in realizing their goals and ambitions”* due to fewer opportunities and infrastructure gaps. It calls for creating conditions that enable rural youth to fulfill their potential in their home areas. The goal is broken down into concrete targets, including: ensuring adequate infrastructure (from public services to housing and data connectivity) in rural areas; generating quality jobs for young people in rural economies; decentralizing youth activities so rural youth can participate locally; actively involving rural youth in decision-making processes; ensuring equal access to quality education for rural youth; promoting a positive image of rural life; and preserving rural traditions (Youth Goals, n.d.). These targets serve as a roadmap for EU and national policies. The inclusion of Goal 6 was the result of the **6th Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue (2017–2018)**, where youth delegates across Europe, many from rural areas, urged policymakers to address the urban-rural gap in opportunities. Many participants in the EU Youth Dialogue expressed frustration at the *“lack of participation in decision-making processes”* and feeling *disconnected from institutions* in rural areas, which directly informed the creation of the rural youth goal. The EU Youth Strategy, by adopting this goal, commits the EU to pay special attention to rural youth through 2027.

EU Council Conclusions on Rural Youth (2020): The EU Member States, through the Council of the EU, have translated concerns into agreed priorities. In May 2020, the Council adopted **Conclusions on “Raising Opportunities for Young People in Rural and Remote Areas.”** These Council Conclusions explicitly recognize the demographic challenges: Europe’s population is aging especially fast in rural areas, while youth are drawn to cities. The EU Council calls for reducing inequalities between urban and rural areas and for *“cross-sectoral measures which reflect the views and perspectives of young people in rural and remote areas.”* They urge Member States to ensure better availability of services, quality jobs, education, digital and physical infrastructure, and public transport in rural regions – essentially echoing the Youth Goal targets. Importantly, the Conclusions invite governments to **encourage rural youth to be and remain involved in their local communities** through active citizenship, volunteering, and social entrepreneurship. They also call for synergies

between EU programs (like Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, European Social Fund, Youth Guarantee) to benefit rural youth. For example, a government might use Erasmus+ funding to support a rural youth exchange or leverage ESF funds for rural youth training. Additionally, the youth sector (youth organizations, national youth councils) is invited to “*raise awareness among young people in rural...areas of the opportunities within their local communities.*” – a recognition that many rural youth might not know about local initiatives or rights they have. These Council Conclusions provide a political mandate and encouragement for EU countries to focus on rural youth in their national youth policies and rural development strategies.

EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas: In 2021, the European Commission launched a Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) 2040, which, while not youth-specific, underscores the need to make rural Europe stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous. Young people are central to this vision as key actors to “*stay, return, and thrive*” in rural regions (FAFCE, 2023). The vision led to the creation of a **Rural Pact** and an EU Rural Action Plan. Under this framework, there have been initiatives to include youth voices – for instance, youth organizations were encouraged to join the Rural Pact community. Some countries (like Ireland) even established a **National Rural Youth Assembly** as part of implementing the vision (more on this in a later section). The rural vision ties together various policy strands (regional development, digitalization, Green Deal, etc.) with youth as beneficiaries. For example, improving rural broadband directly affects young people’s ability to access education and participate in digital democracy.

Erasmus+ and the inclusion of rural youth: The EU’s flagship youth programs, Erasmus+ (Youth chapter) and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), also align with this framework via their **Inclusion and Diversity Strategy**. The ID Strategy (2021) explicitly identifies young people from rural or remote areas as a target group that should benefit from mobility and volunteering opportunities. This policy push is meant to ensure that growing up remotely doesn’t bar youth from international experiences or EU opportunities. As a result, National Agencies of Erasmus+ have been funding numerous projects aimed at rural youth empowerment. For example, there have been *capacity-building* projects to train rural youth workers in alternative participation methods, youth exchanges connecting rural youth from different countries to share their challenges, and ESC volunteering projects placing volunteers in rural communities. By policy design, such programs provide resources that can indirectly boost rural youth participation (e.g., a small-town youth who goes on an Erasmus+ exchange often comes back with greater motivation and skills to engage locally). The EU Youth Dialogue (formerly Structured Dialogue) process is also supported under Erasmus+ Key Action 3, and Member States are encouraged to reach out to rural youth during the national consultation phases. Indeed, structured dialogue events have sometimes been held outside capital cities to gather rural input.

Council of Europe – focusing on rural youth: The Council of Europe (CoE), through its youth sector, is concurrently advancing a policy focus on rural youth. On 7th of May 2025, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers formally adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 on Rural Youth. This recommendation aims to “*fill a specific policy gap at the European level*” regarding rural youth. Issues being addressed include **promoting youth engagement and democratic participation in rural areas, strengthening youth structures in rural communities, creating economic opportunities for rural youth, and improving access to rights like education and information.** During preparatory meetings in Strasbourg, experts and youth representatives discussed the unique vulnerabilities of rural youth and brainstormed measures for governments to take. The Recommendation urges CoE member states to adopt national approaches ensuring rural young people can equally enjoy their rights and partake in society. This is highly significant: CoE recommendations set European standards, and this is the first one ever specifically on rural youth. It complements existing CoE instruments like the **Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life**, giving them a rural lens.

Parallel to the adoption of Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3, the Council of Europe has launched a New Democratic Pact for Europe, committing member States to ‘prevent and resist democratic back-sliding’. The Secretary-General’s 2025 report warns that Europe faces a ‘perfect storm’ of war, disinformation, and democratic erosion and stresses that youth participation—including in rural areas—is a frontline defence of democratic security. Empowering rural young people as bridge-builders between local communities and public institutions is therefore central to both the Pact and CM/Rec(2025)3.

Moreover, a 2021 Youth Partnership study, “*Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled,*” identified major gaps and called for moving from a needs-based approach (treating rural youth as passive recipients) to a rights-based approach empowering them as active citizens. It also noted that many rural youth lack confidence in their ability to effect change or be heard by authorities – evidence that has likely fed into the CoE’s policy recommendations.

Other relevant frameworks and initiatives:

EU Council Presidency Agendas: The rotating EU Presidencies have at times prioritized rural youth. For instance, the Croatian EU Presidency in 2020 put rural youth on the agenda, culminating in the Council Conclusions mentioned above. The trio Presidency program of Romania, Finland, and Croatia (2019–2020) included dialogues on rural youth under the theme of creating opportunities for youth.

At the same time, the Hungarian Presidency of the Council in 2024 is a more recent example. In this framework, the document titled “*Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on providing global*”

opportunities for young people living in rural and remote areas" (C/2024/7404) outlines the European Union's commitment to enhancing opportunities for youth in rural and remote regions. The Council invites Member States and the European Commission to improve infrastructure and digital connectivity in rural areas, enhance access to quality education, healthcare, and social services; promote youth participation in decision-making processes at all levels; support rural entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, especially for NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training); address mental health challenges and provide support services tailored to rural youth; ensure inclusive policies that consider the diverse identities and needs of rural youth, including women, LGBTI persons, and those with disabilities. By implementing these measures, the EU aims to create resilient, inclusive, and prosperous rural communities where young people can thrive

EU CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and Rural Development Policy: While primarily focused on agriculture, the CAP includes a “*Generational Renewal*” objective, with measures to support young farmers. Indirectly, this encourages youth to stay in rural areas by making farming and rural entrepreneurship more viable. Some CAP-funded national Rural Development Programs have small initiatives for rural youth (e.g., leadership training and support for rural youth entrepreneurs). Moreover, the new EU CAP Network (connecting stakeholders of rural policy) has begun spotlighting youth, for example, the “**Young Leaders in Rural Development**” forum in 2024, which highlighted the value of youth engagement in LEADER programs.

European Rural Parliament (ERP): Though a civil society initiative (supported by EU funds), the ERP and its parallel **European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP)** provide a platform for rural citizens and youth to formulate grassroots policy asks. The ERYP’s 2019 gathering produced a declaration (Development Principles NGO, 2019) with 10 calls to action on urgent challenges faced by young rural Europeans, such as calls for better connectivity, youth spaces, and climate resilience. These declarations, while not binding, are used to advocate at European forums and have informed EU discussions on rural development.

Youth Guarantees and Employment Initiatives: Some EU-wide employment initiatives note the need to reach NEET youth in rural areas, who often face multiple barriers. Ensuring programs like the Youth Guarantee (which promises every young person an offer of work, education, or training) work in rural regions has been an ongoing policy conversation.

Inclusion Strategies and Digital Policies: The EU's Digital Decade strategy and national broadband plans are also part of the framework, since without internet access, rural youth cannot equally participate in today's online civic platforms. The EU has set targets for universal connectivity (e.g., high-speed broadband for all rural areas by 2025, under the Digital Agenda), directly responding to the digital participation gap that affects rural youth.

In summary, the European policy framework for rural youth participation is multi-faceted. The EU provides political commitment (Youth Goal 6, Council Conclusions, etc.) and programmatic support (Erasmus+, ESC, etc.) to include and empower rural young people. The Council of Europe is reinforcing these efforts with a rights-based perspective and expected standards for member states. Both institutions stress the cross-sectoral nature of the issue: youth policy must intersect with rural development, digital policy, education, and employment to truly enable rural youth agency. The existence of these frameworks is an opportunity in itself – a decade ago, rural youth were largely absent from European youth policy discussions, whereas today there is momentum and visibility. However, the true test lies in implementation at national and local levels, which is what the following chapters will examine through real-world evidence.

...the methodology blends comprehensive secondary research with empirical input from young rural Europeans. This approach ensures that the analysis is not only well-informed by existing knowledge but is also anchored in the present-day voices and lived experiences of rural youth across different European settings.

Methodology

This research report employs a combination of **literature review, policy analysis, and primary qualitative research** to comprehensively address the research questions. The methodology was designed to capture both broad trends across Europe and nuanced, ground-level insights from rural youth themselves.

Literature and Document Review: We conducted an extensive review of existing studies, reports, and data on rural youth participation. Key sources included:

- **EU policy documents and evaluations** – such as the EU Youth Strategy and Youth Goals documentation, Council Conclusions on rural youth, European Commission communications (e.g., on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas), and Erasmus+ program reports.
- **Council of Europe resources** – notably the draft materials and news on the rural youth Recommendation, the Youth Partnership study “Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled” (Şerban & Brazienè 2021), and relevant Coyote magazine articles (e.g., Lodeserto 2020 on Youth Goal 6) that provide context.
- **Research by international organizations and think tanks** – including OECD (2022) analyses on rural youth development (for example, outputs from OECD rural development conferences highlighting youth), and academic papers on youth civic engagement in rural settings.
- **European Youth Forum and youth NGO reports**, such as the Youth Progress Index 2021, which gave data on digital divides, and any position papers by the European Youth Forum or Rural Youth Europe relevant to participation (e.g., checklists for youth rights).
- **National policy and strategy documents** – we sampled national youth strategies and rural development plans from various countries to see how they address rural youth. This desk research established a comparative overview and identified common themes (current participation levels, challenges, best practices, etc.). It also provided factual data and examples that are cited throughout the report to substantiate points.

Focus group consultations:

To ground the research in current realities, we organized a series of focus group discussions in April 2025 with 20+ rural youth leaders from twelve European countries (Romania, Greece, Slovenia, Austria, Spain, Slovakia, Estonia, Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Norway). These countries were selected for their geographic and socio-economic diversity, covering Northern, Western, Southern, and Central/Eastern Europe, as well as both EU and non-EU contexts. Participants were recruited through local youth organizations and structures.

The focus group lasted about 1.5 hours and was moderated by a researcher in English. Notes and recordings were transcribed and analyzed thematically. While not a statistically representative sample, these discussions provided rich qualitative insights and anecdotal evidence. The focus groups followed a semi-structured discussion guide aligned with our research questions:

- **Participation experiences:** We asked how these young people currently engage in decision-making or community initiatives (e.g., youth councils, town hall meetings, volunteering, protests). Why do they choose (or not choose) to participate?
- **Relationship with decision-makers:** We explored how rural youth interact with local authorities, policymakers, or community leaders. Did they feel listened to? What channels existed for dialogue?
- **Challenges and barriers:** We prompted discussion on obstacles to participation (e.g., lack of time, insufficient local opportunities, adult attitudes, transport issues, digital connectivity).
- **Mechanisms and support:** We inquired about programs or structures they have used, such as EU initiatives, local youth clubs, or networks, and whether these were effective in enhancing youth involvement.
- **Perceptions of activism:** We also examined how they view protest or activism as a way to be heard. Participants described any youth-led protests or campaigns in their areas and how these were received by the wider community.
- **Ideas and solutions:** Importantly, we asked what changes or support would help them participate more, thereby gathering direct recommendations for stakeholders.

In addition to the initial focus group, we conducted **three supplementary focus groups** focusing on *rural youth structures' participation* in decision-making. These sessions brought together representatives and leaders from local NGOs in rural areas, national/regional youth structures, and international youth structures and platforms. We aimed to understand the organizational and structural dimensions of rural youth participation from various levels of youth-led or youth-focused entities.

These three specialized focus groups allowed us to capture a **multi-layered view** of rural youth participation, extending beyond the individual experiences of young people at the local level to the organizational, national, and international dimensions of youth engagement. The focus groups provided a **comprehensive qualitative dataset** on how rural youth and their support structures attempt to influence decisions at every governance level. We integrate findings from these discussions throughout the report, highlighting both recurrent themes (e.g., infrastructural barriers, attitudinal challenges) and specific insights regarding NGO dynamics, national advocacy, and international participation.

Case studies and examples: Using the information from literature and focus groups, we identified illustrative case studies or examples to include in the report. These were chosen to

highlight “best practices” (for instance, a successful youth council in a rural municipality, or a project that notably increased youth engagement) and to humanize the trends (e.g., a personal story of a rural young person who became a community leader). Some examples were drawn from documented sources (like the European Youth Village program in Romania), while others came from focus group participants’ descriptions and a rural fair activity where participants shared best practices from the rural youth structures’ they are part of.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data on rural youth (population figures, NEET rates, etc.) were compiled from Eurostat, OECD, and national statistics to complement the qualitative findings. For example, we cite Eurostat data on higher youth poverty risk in rural areas or differences in NEET rates. Where relevant, we also include data on youth participation rates (like voter turnout or volunteering rates, if available by region). In some cases, pan-European surveys like Eurobarometer offered insights (e.g., anecdotally, one European Commission (2021) analysis noted that youth in rural areas were among the most active in volunteering, which we reference).

Citations and validation: Throughout the writing, we cross-verified facts with multiple sources. The focus group findings, being primary research, are presented in narrative form; when a point from focus groups aligned with published research, we reinforced it with a citation for credibility. For instance, if someone from Ireland who joined the focus group mentioned the lack of public transport, we cite the National Youth Council of Ireland’s research, which confirms transport as a top challenge (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2019). This triangulation increases the reliability of the conclusions.

Limitations: It should be noted that the focus groups, while diverse, do not capture every European country – notable omissions include parts of the Balkans, the Nordic far north, etc. Also, the focus group sample might inherently be biased towards youth who are engaged in rural youth structures (since disengaged youth are harder to recruit). However, many participants did express sentiments of their peers who are disengaged, giving a window into those perspectives. Language barriers were minimal as almost everybody was fluent in English, but the translation of nuanced concepts might lose some context. Where participants used local idioms or references, we interpreted them in the broader European context. Finally, given the rapidly evolving policy scene (e.g., new initiatives being launched in 2025), the report captures the situation as of early 2025.

In sum, the methodology blends **comprehensive secondary research** with **empirical input from young rural Europeans**. This approach ensures that the analysis is not only well-informed by existing knowledge but is also anchored in the present-day voices and lived experiences of rural youth across different European settings. The next chapters leverage this methodology to provide detailed answers to the research questions.

Current rural youth participation across Europe is characterized by a paradox: individually, many rural young people are engaged in their communities or willing to contribute; structurally, they often lack channels and recognition.

Where structures (like youth councils or organizations) do exist and function well, rural youth can have a meaningful role – advising local policy, leading projects, or connecting to national debates.

But in the absence of these, their participation remains informal and frequently invisible to policymakers.

The current state of rural youth participation in decision-making

How are rural youth across Europe currently engaging in decision-making and civic life? The picture is mixed: there are pockets of robust youth involvement, but overall, participation levels tend to be lower and more informal in rural areas compared to urban ones, with significant variation between countries. This section provides a comparative overview of the forms and levels of participation observed, drawing on research and the focus group insights.

(1) Formal political participation: In terms of conventional politics (voting, party membership, holding office), rural youth often participate at rates comparable to or slightly lower than their urban counterparts, depending on the country. For example, some national electoral studies suggest turnout among young voters is low everywhere, but rural youth turnout can be constrained by factors like distance to polling stations or feeling less addressed by political campaigns. Many rural young people express apathy toward formal politics: *“Why vote for a council that never listens to us anyway?”* is a sentiment heard by different rural youth across Europe.

Nonetheless, there are notable examples of rural youth making inroads into formal decision-making:

- **Youth councilors and mayors:** In certain countries, young people have been elected to local councils in rural municipalities. These remain exceptions rather than the rule; participants noted that most local councils in rural areas are dominated by older adults (often farmers or long-time residents), with few if any members under 30.
- **Youth Parliaments/Assemblies:** Many countries run youth parliament programs (e.g., UK Youth Parliament, or Youth Parliaments in Germany’s Länder). Rural youth do take part, but often such programs are headquartered in cities or require travel.
- **EU Youth Dialogue and Conferences:** Rural youth also contribute to Europe-wide youth dialogues. In the EU Youth Conference process (within EU Youth Dialogue cycles), some rural youth representatives have been present (often via National Youth Councils).

In general, formal political structures in rural areas have *not* systematically integrated youth. There are relatively few *institutionalized* roles for youth in local governance. Some positive strides are seen in countries like **Slovenia**, where municipal youth councils exist and the National Youth Council advocated for rural representation, and **Austria**, where the tradition of Landjugend (rural youth chapters) sometimes interacts with municipal authorities. But in other places, rural youth lack formal channels.

(2) Youth Councils and Advisory Bodies: A more structured form of participation is through youth councils, youth forums, or advisory committees at the local or regional level. Here we see considerable diversity across Europe:

- In **Nordic and Baltic countries**, it is common to have local youth councils even in small rural municipalities. For instance, Estonia's Youth Work Act requires municipalities to involve youth in decision-making; as a result, rural municipalities often have a *noortevolikogu* (youth council) that can give input to the mayor and council. One Estonian focus group participant from a rural island described her youth council as active in organizing community events and occasionally petitioning the local government (with mixed success). She noted, however, that sustaining membership is hard: "Once people turn 18, many leave for university on the mainland, so our youth council numbers shrink each year."
- In **Germany**, youth councils (Jugendräte or Jugendparlamente) exist in some rural towns, but not uniformly. Instead, Germany's strong rural youth associations play a quasi-representative role. The **Bund der Deutschen Landjugend (BDL)**, with 100,000 young members, is a union of regional rural youth groups and is deeply involved in representing rural youth interests (Bund der Deutschen Landjugend, 2018). It essentially functions as a lobby and consultative body on issues from agriculture to rural infrastructure. Representation is a cornerstone of BDL's work, and it liaises with both the government and farmers' unions on behalf of rural youth. Thus, in Germany, while a 17-year-old in a village may not have a formal seat at the town hall, they might have a voice through the Landjugend structure that feeds into policy. Similarly, Austria's Landjugend and organizations like **Macra na Feirme** in Ireland (a rural youth farming network) give youth a platform to influence policies relevant to rural life.
- In **Southern Europe**, formal youth bodies in rural areas are sparser. Spain and Italy have many small municipalities, and only some have local youth councils. Spain's National Youth Institute (INJUVE) and regional youth councils have started focusing on rural youth issues recently, but traditionally, rural youth weren't well-organized beyond perhaps cultural associations.
- **Youth Parliaments & Simulations:** Some countries hold periodic *youth parliament* events at regional or national levels that include rural youth. For example, France's rural youth might join the National Rural Youth Parliament organized by NGOs or be part of the "Conseil des Jeunes" at the *département* level. Those are episodic but valuable in exposing rural youth to decision-making processes.

Overall, the presence of **youth consultative structures** in rural areas is not uniform. Where they exist and are supported, they can be a bridge between young people and local authorities. Where they don't, rural youth participation tends to manifest in other ways, primarily informal.

(3) Informal and community participation: Rural youth often participate in their communities in ways that might not be immediately labeled as political but are nonetheless forms of civic engagement:

- **Volunteering and community service:** A striking trend is that young people in rural areas often volunteer at higher rates, especially in community-oriented roles. According to an EU analysis, “*those living in rural areas (not in cities) are the most active in volunteering.*” (European Commission, 2021). This is evident in things like volunteer fire brigades, church groups, sports clubs, or local NGOs, which are prevalent in villages. For example, in Austria and Germany, it is common for rural youth to volunteer to organize village festivals or youth clubs (Jugendtreffs). In the focus groups, participants mentioned volunteering as a key outlet: “*If we want something to happen here, we have to volunteer to do it ourselves*”. This kind of participation, while not formal policy influence, builds civic skills and social capital. It also sometimes segues into advocacy – e.g., a group of young volunteers who renovate a community space might then petition the municipality to support it financially.
- **Local initiatives and NGOs:** In many rural areas, youth-driven initiatives have emerged to fill gaps. Examples include youth cooperatives (like a group of young people reopening a closed café as a cooperative social enterprise, as seen in parts of Spain’s Asturias region), environmental action groups (young volunteers cleaning rivers or maintaining hiking trails), or cultural projects (youth reviving local traditions through events). These grassroots activities indicate a form of participation where youth take leadership in their communities. While they may not always interface with the government, they influence local affairs and often seek collaboration or permission from local authorities.
- **Family and Community Networks:** In small communities, personal relationships often count more than formal roles. Some rural youth engage by voicing their opinions through community meetings or directly to local leaders they know. For instance, it happens that rural youth communicate issues by informally talking to the parish council chair, who sometimes happens to be a neighbor, or through community Facebook groups where local issues are discussed. While informal, this *direct approach* is a form of participation distinct from tight-knit rural settings – youth can have a say if they’re proactive and if elders are receptive.
- **Protest and activism:** Historically, youth-led protests have been more urban-centric, but rural youth have begun to mobilize around certain issues. A prominent example is environmental activism: during the global *Fridays for Future* climate strikes, some rural youth organized small demonstrations in their nearest towns or joined larger city protests. In countries like Germany and Ireland, rural young people concerned about climate and agriculture have found themselves in both camps – some join climate protests, and others participate in farmer-led demonstrations (e.g., young farmers

driving tractors to city protests about agricultural policy). For example, in Spain, in 2019, took place “La Revuelta de la España Vacía” (Empty Spain revolt) - a mass demonstration where rural citizens (young and old) marched to demand attention to rural depopulation. Such activism indicates that when an issue acutely affects them, rural youth will participate through protest. However, focus group discussions also revealed that protest is seen by some rural youth as a **last resort or a big step**. In more conservative or close-knit villages, openly protesting local authorities can carry social risks (“Everyone knows you, so if you protest, people might gossip or label you”). Many rural youth, therefore, prefer quiet advocacy or leaving the area over confrontation. That said, the perception of activism is changing – with social media, rural youth can support causes online even if they don’t protest in the village square.

(4) Engagement via digital platforms: The current state of participation is increasingly digital. Even in rural regions, most young people have smartphones and use social networks. This has opened new forms of engagement:

- Rural youth utilize platforms like Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, or local forums to discuss community issues and coordinate actions.
- National or European-level e-participation tools (such as youth idea competitions, online consultations, or EU surveys) can, in theory, reach rural youth just as easily as urban youth if connectivity and awareness allow.
- However, digital engagement also reflects the digital divide. Rural youth from areas with poor internet or limited digital literacy are less likely to participate.

In summary, the **levels of rural youth participation** vary: in some communities there is an active youth life (through clubs, councils, and projects) while in others, youth participation is very low or dormant. A comparative observation from research is that *“young people in rural areas are interested and ready to participate but are not offered sufficient opportunities to do so”* (Şerban & Brazienè, 2021).

Moreover, rural youth often feel their participation is not impactful. Many across countries expressed that when they do voice opinions, it *“doesn’t change anything”*. This leads to a sense of disillusionment and some retreat from participation altogether. This dynamic—interest thwarted by lack of opportunity or perceived efficacy – is a hallmark of the current state of rural youth participation. It suggests a latent potential: if structures and support are put in place (as we will see in best practice examples), rural youth engagement can blossom.

One positive generalization is that **community-minded participation (volunteering, local projects)** is relatively stronger among rural youth, whereas **institutional political participation** is weaker. Rural youth appear to invest energy in informal community improvement when given a chance, even if they shy away from politics. This means that rural youth *are* participating in their own way, but often under the radar.

To illustrate, consider a small success story shared in the focus group: In a village in Romania, a group of young people formed a “village youth” association to organize activities for other young people. Over the years, the association’s young leaders used their credibility to request a youth space from the local authorities. The mayor, seeing their contribution, agreed. Now the village has a youth room for meetings and socializing, and those young leaders occasionally attend council meetings when youth matters are discussed. This trajectory from community participation to gaining a voice in local decisions is something we see where youth take initiative and find receptive local leadership.

On the other hand, in places without supportive environments, the state of participation remains minimal. For example, a young rural Romanian said that in his village, “there is nothing for youth, no youth council, no events. Most of my friends have left. Those of us remaining just keep our heads down or plan to leave, too.” Such situations unfortunately exist in many depopulating rural regions of Southern and Eastern Europe, where youth presence itself is dwindling, making organized participation harder.

In conclusion, **current rural youth participation across Europe is characterized by a paradox**: *individually*, many rural young people are engaged in their communities or willing to contribute; *structurally*, they often lack channels and recognition. Where structures (like youth councils or organizations) do exist and function well, rural youth can have a meaningful role – advising local policy, leading projects, or connecting to national debates. But in the absence of these, their participation remains informal and frequently invisible to policymakers. This sets the stage for examining why these gaps exist – the challenges that impede rural youth engagement, which the next chapter will delve into.

Rural youth structures are the backbone of rural youth participation. They organize and articulate the voice of rural youth, provide platforms for involvement, and serve as bridges with authorities.

Strengthening these structures (through funding, capacity-building, and legal empowerment) and ensuring rural youth are represented in broader youth structures are vital steps.

The role of rural youth structures

Effective and sustained youth participation often requires organized structures that represent young people's interests and connect them with decision-makers. In the rural context, various **youth structures** – from local youth councils to national and international organizations – play an important role in amplifying rural youth voices and facilitating their influence on policy. This chapter maps out these structures, examines their influence, and assesses how they contribute to rural youth agency.

Local youth councils and forums: At the grassroots, **municipal youth councils (MYCs)** or youth forums are a primary structure through which rural youth can engage in governance. Where they exist, these bodies give young people a platform to discuss issues and formally convey recommendations to local authorities. As noted earlier, their prevalence varies widely. In some countries, MYCs are institutionalized – even small rural municipalities often have a youth council or youth parliament. These councils typically consist of elected or appointed youth representatives (often teenagers) who meet regularly. Their influence depends on the mandate: in some places, they only organize events, while in others, they have consultative status on all youth-related matters. In some countries, many municipalities recognize the youth council in municipal statutes, meaning the council must be consulted on youth policy and sometimes even has a budget. This **institutional backing** enables youth to have real input (e.g., influencing a local youth strategy or commenting on new bus timetables). In contrast, in countries where MYCs are not common or active (such as parts of Spain, Eastern Europe, or the Balkans), rural youth lack this structured voice.

The **effectiveness** of local youth councils in rural areas often hinges on adult support. Where local authorities actively listen and respond to youth councils (perhaps even giving them observer seats in council meetings), youth councils become influential. On the other hand, where youth councils exist on paper but are ignored or under-resourced, their impact is minimal, and young members may become disillusioned. Thus, strengthening the role and capacity of local youth councils is a key factor (addressed in Recommendations).

National Youth Councils (NYCs) and rural representation: Nearly every European country has a **National Youth Council** – an umbrella body of youth organizations that advocates for youth in policy. The composition of NYC matters for rural youth. Many NYCs historically have been dominated by urban-based organizations (student unions, political youth wings, etc.), with rural youth underrepresented. However, in several countries, rural youth organizations are active members or even have dedicated seats. Moreover, a rural youth organization in NYC can propose resolutions, feed into consultations, and nominate rural youth delegates for various events. Their presence helps “rural-proof” youth policies.

Rural youth organizations and networks: Distinct from general youth councils, there are organizations specifically by and for rural youth, which serve as important support and advocacy structures:

Rural Youth Europe (RYE): As noted, RYE is an umbrella for 24 member organizations in 20 countries, representing about 500,000 rural young people. Its members are typically national rural youth associations or rural sections of broader organizations. RYE's role is multifaceted: it organizes capacity-building events (like the annual Rural Youth Rally and thematic seminars), facilitates the exchange of best practices among rural youth groups, and advocates at the European level. While RYE itself doesn't directly lobby national governments, it equips its member organizations with the knowledge and tools to do so. It also partners with bodies like the European Commission (e.g., being consulted on youth in rural development). RYE's influence can be seen in how rural youth issues have been maintained as a priority in European youth policy (Youth Goal #6, etc.) – RYE was part of the Structured Dialogue process that created that goal. Moreover, RYE ensures rural youth are not isolated internationally; this solidarity and shared identity strengthen local resolve.

MIJARC (International Catholic Rural Youth Movement): MIJARC Europe has members in several European countries (often called JARC or similar). These tend to focus on personal development, agriculture, and social justice from a faith-based perspective, but also engage in policy dialogue on rural development and youth rights. They, like RYE, are in the European Youth Forum and have participatory status in the Council of Europe. MIJARC's presence in rural villages through parish youth clubs or agricultural youth chapters is a structure that fosters community leadership. Historically, MIJARC groups in villages often acted as the *de facto* youth councils, especially in parts of France, Belgium, and Portugal, and trained many community leaders. Thus, these networks contribute by *producing human capital* (young leaders) and by lobbying (their European coordination has issued positions on CAP reforms, for example).

Young Farmers' Associations: While primarily focused on economic interests, organizations like **CEJA (European Council of Young Farmers)** and national young farmer unions intersect with rural youth participation. They often advocate for policies (land access, farm startup grants) that affect rural youth livelihoods, and in doing so, they engage their members in dialogue with policymakers. For rural areas heavily dependent on agriculture, young farmers' groups are sometimes the strongest youth voices heard by ministries of agriculture and local councils. They often collaborate with rural youth NGOs on overlapping concerns (e.g., CEJA and RYEurope have worked together on rural youth employment topics). These associations act as a structure giving rural youth (in farming) a seat at policy discussions on agriculture and rural development.

Educational and youth work networks: Structures like the 4H movement (youth clubs in rural areas focusing on skills, prominent in some Nordic and Eastern countries) or state rural youth services also play roles. For example, Finland’s 4H organization has clubs in almost every rural municipality, effectively serving as a network where youth learn project skills and civic responsibility. They may not directly lobby, but they create a generation of engaged rural youth. Similarly, **Europe Goes Local** (an Erasmus+ project network) includes rural municipalities and helps professionalize local youth work – a structural improvement that indirectly strengthens youth participation structures (like making a local youth center more effective in giving youth a voice).

Youth Parliaments and Assemblies: In addition to councils and NGOs, **youth parliaments at regional/national levels** function as structures where rural youth can be present. These are periodic rather than permanent structures, but they are structured processes that produce collective youth inputs (declarations, recommendations).

The influence of rural youth structures varies:

- At the **local level**, a well-supported youth council or active youth NGO can tangibly influence municipal decisions, as seen in numerous examples (youth centers established, programs funded, etc.). However, many rural areas still lack such structures, or they exist in name only. A challenge is sustaining them where the youth population is very low and turnover is constant. One solution some countries use is inter-municipal youth councils, but these require coordination.
- At the **national level**, rural youth organizations and representatives in NYCs ensure a rural-friendly youth policy. Their success is evident when national youth strategies explicitly mention rural youth or when specific programs (like transport subsidies for rural youth, or rural youth entrepreneurship schemes) are adopted, often after lobbying by these structures.
- At the **European level**, structures like RYE, MIJARC, CEJA, and the European Youth Forum’s advocacy have elevated rural youth issues from obscurity to being a recognized aspect of youth policy. The existence of Youth Goal #6 and the upcoming Council of Europe Recommendation both reflect years of work by rural youth structures, making the case that “*rural youth count.*” Their continued presence is critical to monitor implementation and push further (e.g., they might next advocate for an EU Council Recommendation specifically on rural youth participation or for earmarked funds in youth programs for rural areas).

In summary, **rural youth structures – both formal councils and youth organizations – are the backbone of rural youth participation.** They organize and articulate the voice of rural youth, provide platforms for involvement, and serve as bridges with authorities. Strengthening these structures (through funding, capacity-building, and legal empowerment) and ensuring rural youth are represented in broader youth structures are vital steps.

While some challenges (like feeling unheard by adults) are common to youth in general, they often manifest in specific ways or with greater intensity in rural settings.

All these challenges are deeply interrelated. For example, limited infrastructure (no transport) feeds into geographic isolation, which feeds into fewer opportunities and confidence, which is reinforced by dismissive attitudes, and so on – forming a complex barrier web around rural youth.

Challenges faced by rural youth in participation

Rural youth across Europe confront a range of **obstacles that hinder their engagement** in decision-making and civic activities. These challenges are multi-dimensional – infrastructural, geographic, socio-economic, and institutional. This chapter identifies the main barriers, drawing on both broad research findings and first-hand accounts from the focus groups and the quantitative research. While some challenges (like *feeling unheard by adults*) are common to youth in general, they often manifest in specific ways or with greater intensity in rural settings.

1. Limited infrastructure and access to services

One of the most frequently cited challenges is the basic lack of enabling infrastructure in rural areas:

Transport and mobility: Inadequate public transportation is a *critical barrier* to rural youth participation. Without a reliable way to get around, young people struggle to attend meetings, join events, or even access education and services that facilitate engagement and mental health. As the National Youth Council of Ireland (2019) highlighted, *“limited public transport is one of the biggest challenges facing young people living in rural Ireland... hindering access to a wide range of necessary services”*. In focus groups, most of the participants echoed this. Poor transport effectively isolates rural youth, reinforcing apathy and exclusion. It *“impedes access to larger towns [and] stunts inter-village connectivity,”* as the participants from the European Rural Youth Summit (2023) described the ripple effect. When you can’t physically be present where decisions or activities happen, you’re left out by default.

Digital connectivity: In today’s world, internet access is essential for participation (information access, online forums, digital activism). Yet many rural areas still suffer from slow or unreliable internet. **“Access to the internet in every village has emerged as a non-negotiable facet of quality life, linking rural residents to a world of information, opportunities, and connections”** (European Rural Youth Summit, 2023). However, this ideal is not fully realized. The focus groups revealed a digital divide: participants from some countries reported relatively good internet in villages (thanks to national broadband programs), whereas participants from other countries described patchy service. This inconsistency is echoed in research; the Youth Progress Index 2021 noted that the **shift to all-virtual participation during the pandemic “reinforced the digital divide” and rural youth were among the most marginalized by it**. Without good internet or digital literacy training, rural youth miss out on e-participation opportunities (like online petitions, webinars, or even awareness of programs). It’s telling that in many consultations with rural youth, the first recommendation youth had was *“We need better internet here.”* Digital exclusion not only

hampers participation but also information flow – rural youth may not hear about events or surveys that are advertised online.

Youth spaces and facilities: Infrastructure also means physical spaces for youth. Urban youth often have youth centers, libraries, coworking hubs, or at least cafes where they can gather and organize. Rural youth often do not. Usually, the only meeting spots in villages are “the local bar or the local shop”. Without youth centers or a common hangout, it’s harder for young people to come together, discuss issues, and plan actions. Some villages have community halls, but they may be controlled by older groups or require funds to use. In several countries, there has been a decline in rural youth clubs due to funding cuts or population decline. The absence of a safe, supportive space discourages participation – you can’t hold a youth council meeting if you have nowhere to meet. Even basic amenities like a public space for youth events might be missing. This challenge was mentioned by some Romanian rural youth involved in the implementation of the European Youth Village program: *“If we want to hold a workshop, we have to borrow the school room or stand outside; it makes you feel youth aren’t a priority.”*

Access to education and training: While not infrastructure per se, the availability of local educational institutions affects participation. Many rural youth must travel far or relocate to attend high school or university. This leads to a brain drain effect – the most educated youth leave the community, often not returning, thus removing potential young leaders and reducing the youth population that could engage. Those who stay might be in vocational paths or jobs with long hours, limiting time for civic engagement. Additionally, fewer local education options mean fewer forums (like school-based civic programs or student councils) for rural youth to learn about participation. As one report noted, *young people in rural areas face barriers to access appropriate education opportunities... and in very few cases have those challenges become opportunities, as some young people gained access to remote learning that was not available due to previous geographical barriers* (Șerban & Brazienè, 2021). That highlights that, occasionally, digital learning can mitigate distance (an opportunity), but overall lack of educational infrastructure is a challenge.

Public and social services: Rural communities often lack services like youth clinics, counseling, or career guidance centers. The National Youth Council of Ireland (2019) study emphasized the *“lack of access to mental health, counseling, and other specialized services in rural areas”*, which focus group youths confirmed. Why does this matter for participation? Because when fundamental personal needs (health, well-being) aren’t met, participation becomes secondary. A youth struggling with untreated anxiety in a remote area, for example, might not have the capacity or confidence to join public meetings. In addition, without youth workers or outreach programs (which tend to cluster in cities), rural youth don’t get that extra support or encouragement to engage. *“We have no youth worker here to motivate or inform us, unlike towns where youth services might push youths to have a voice,”* becomes a relatively common line in many European villages. The scarcity of youth-targeted services leaves rural

youth feeling that *“nobody is looking out for us,”* which dampens their motivation to get involved.

2. Geographic isolation and distance from decision centers

By definition, rural communities are dispersed and often distant from the centers of power:

Distance from policymakers: Important decisions affecting rural youth (educational policy, youth programs, etc.) are usually made in capital cities or regional centers. Rural youth are far removed physically and symbolically from these centers. For example, national youth events or hearings are often in capitals – places some rural youth have rarely even visited. This creates a psychological distance: many rural youths feel national decision-makers are *“out of touch and out of reach.”* This sense of alienation can discourage young people from engaging; they assume, often correctly, that politicians won’t pay attention to a tiny village. It also means fewer chance encounters or networking opportunities with influencers – an urban youth might attend a youth conference and meet an MP; a rural youth likely won’t unless special outreach occurs.

Sparse populations and critical mass: Organizing any collective action or youth structure in a rural area is harder simply due to the low numbers of youth. A small village might have only dozens of young people (if that). It’s challenging to maintain a youth council when the cohort is so small. Many rural youth pointed out that they or their few friends often were *“the only ones”* trying to do something. One from Romania said, *“We tried to start a youth club, but there were just 5 of us – when two left for college, it died.”* Without a critical mass, it’s easy to become demotivated. Additionally, organizing regionally is tough because of the travel required between spread-out villages. Youth in remote rural regions might be separated by mountains, islands, or simply long bus rides, making it logistically difficult to collaborate or unite voices. This fragmentation weakens the youth’s collective influence.

Out-migration of youth: Nearly all rural regions suffer from youth out-migration to some degree, particularly the most remote or economically depressed areas. The ones who leave are often those seeking education or broader opportunities, typically the young people who might be more inclined to civic engagement. Those who remain might be fewer and sometimes more disadvantaged (e.g., unable to leave for economic or family reasons). Research confirms that *“young people in rural areas have become an increasingly rare added value... the number of young people has decreased due to massive abandonment of the countryside”* (Șerban & Braziené, 2021). This demographic thinning means fewer youth voices and often a perception that *“youth issues aren’t important here because there are not many youth left.”* Some local authorities may prioritize services for the elderly (a larger constituency) over youth initiatives because of this skewed population. *“The council cares about pensioners’ club but not about the youth. “Why invest in that? In a few years, you’ll all*

be gone.” Such attitudes create a vicious cycle – lack of investment leads to more youth leaving.

Peripheral feeling: Many rural youths feel on the periphery, not just geographically but socially. For instance, LGBTQ+ youth or ethnic minority youth in rural areas can feel extremely isolated, lacking peer support or community acceptance, which makes public participation daunting: *“If you’re a young person who is LGBTQ+ living in a village, where do you access support...?”* Moreover, young rural LGBTQ+ individuals would never speak up in a town meeting for fear of homophobic backlash in their conservative village. Thus, geographic isolation can amplify social isolation for minority youth, further silencing them.

Economic and educational gaps: Rural isolation often goes hand in hand with fewer employment or higher education opportunities locally. Young people who are NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) in rural areas face multiple hardships and often have low self-esteem. Eurostat data shows NEET rates tend to be higher in rural areas of many EU countries. Such youth may not engage because they feel society has left them behind, or they might not be reached by traditional youth participation efforts. An unemployed youth in a remote area might prioritize finding a job over attending a community forum, understandably. Moreover, limited access to higher education in rural regions can mean lower levels of formal education on average, which can affect confidence in engaging with “educated” officials or navigating bureaucratic processes.

3. Attitudinal and cultural barriers

There are also **social and cultural factors** in rural communities that pose challenges:

Conservative or patronizing attitudes: Rural societies can be more traditional and hierarchical. Young people often struggle against an ingrained mentality that *“youth should be seen, not heard.”* In focus groups, participants mentioned elders dismissing youth input. A typical scenario: at a local meeting, if a teenager voices an idea, an older adult might pat them on the back but not take it seriously, assuming “kids don’t understand these things.” Such patronizing attitudes discourage youth from speaking up again. The **lack of respect for youth voices** is a fundamental barrier – it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where youth disengage because they are not valued, and then adults claim youth are uninterested. As participants of the first edition of the European Rural Youth Summit noted, influential community figures (mayor, priest, etc.) often hold the power and may not be used to considering youths as equals.

Closed power structures (elitism/nepotism): In some rural areas, local governance and community leadership positions are dominated by a few individuals or families over generations. This can form a clique that is resistant to new input, especially from young upstarts. If the local mayor or community leaders do not actively invite youth participation, it

likely won't happen. Worse, there are instances where local authorities view youth initiatives as a threat to their control or simply as a nuisance: *"Influential community figures...might receive undue protection or preferential treatment from law enforcement, leading authorities to turn a blind eye to pressing issues"* (European Rural Youth Summit, 2023). While that context was about safety and justice, it illustrates how entrenched local elites might ignore problems that youth find pressing (like youth substance abuse or domestic issues), thus marginalizing youth voices on those issues.

Lack of confidence and empowerment: After years of being sidelined, many rural youth internalize a belief that *"my opinion doesn't matter."* The Youth Partnership study observed that *"marginalized within societal structures, youth lack confidence in their ability to make change and to be heard by local, regional, and national authorities"* (Șerban & Brazienè, 2021). Focus group discussions affirmed this psychological barrier. Several young people from rural areas admitted that even if opportunities exist, rural youths' self-perception can be an impediment: *"We've grown up thinking nothing ever changes here, so why try?"*. Moreover, some young people feel that because they speak with a strong rural accent, they feel "out of place" and less articulate in youth meetings dominated by city youth, which hurts their confidence to contribute. This challenge speaks to the need for empowerment and capacity-building – something addressed in later sections on solutions.

Cultural and gender norms: In some traditional rural societies, expectations around gender and youth roles can limit participation. Young women in rural areas might face more barriers to stepping into leadership or public roles due to conservative norms. Anja Fortuna, a young rural advocate from Slovenia, noted that *"young women from rural areas are often in an unfair position... many go through hardship to position themselves as strong and independent"* (European Commission, 2025). If community leadership is male-dominated or if girls are not encouraged to speak out, half of the youth population is effectively muted. Similarly, cultural norms may define young people's place as subordinate until they "earn" status with age or marriage, etc. While Europe has broadly progressive values, pockets of patriarchal culture persist in rural areas and can impede young women's participation.

Distrust or apathy towards institutions: Many rural youths harbor a distrust of political institutions, developed over years of perceived neglect. They see promises made and broken by politicians regarding rural development. This leads to cynicism: *"They only come here at election time"*, or *"Nothing will change, no matter what we say."* Such feelings dampen the motivation to engage. This isn't a baseless sentiment – indeed, policies often have failed rural youth (e.g., closure of rural schools/hospitals despite local opposition). Over time, this fosters an **apathetic or fatalistic culture** among some rural youth. Unlike urban youth who might see activism yielding tangible results (like policy changes in a city), rural youth rarely see quick wins, reinforcing the belief that civic engagement is futile.

Peer and social pressure: In small communities, standing out can be difficult. A young person who becomes vocal on an issue might face teasing or social pressure from peers who prefer the status quo or simply don't want attention drawn. For instance, if a rural teen advocates for LGBTQ+ rights in a conservative village, they might face backlash not only from some adults but even peers who fear being ostracized by association. Several rural youth from Romania noted they had friends who discouraged them from "making a fuss" with the council or "wasting time" in youth groups. This kind of peer negativity can dissuade potential youth activists. The intimate nature of rural life means anonymity is low – any action is visible to neighbors, which can deter bolder forms of participation like protests or vocal campaigning, especially if one fears social consequences.

4. Institutional and structural barriers

Even when rural youth are ready to participate, **structural issues in governance and institutions** can block or limit their involvement:

Lack of formal mechanisms for youth input: Many rural local governments simply do not have structures to include youth. Unlike some cities that have youth advisory boards, rural councils often have no requirement or habit to consult youth. Only a minority of countries enforce youth participation at the local level. Thus, unless a particularly forward-thinking mayor invites youth opinions, there is no systematic way for youth to influence local decisions. This structural omission is a barrier in itself – even motivated youth find no official audience. The **European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)** noted that "*rural youth face reduced participation opportunities and lack engagement in civic life while struggling to get access to basic services and infrastructures*" (Șerban & Brazienè, 2021). In other words, the opportunities to participate are "reduced" in rural settings.

Youth NGOs' metropolitan bias: Youth organizations and NGOs tend to be concentrated in urban areas, creating an outreach gap in rural areas. "*Youth NGOs are mostly a metropolitan phenomenon,*" meaning they find it difficult to reach young people in remote communities. Without NGOs organizing trainings, workshops, or forums in rural areas, youths there miss out on those engagement opportunities. This is partly a resource issue (**NGOs don't have the capacity everywhere**) and partly a strategic one (**they follow population centers**). The Pantea (2021) study cited in Youth Partnership also found that "*even non-state actors face difficulties in outreach to rural youth and that although young people are ready to participate, they are not offered opportunities*" (Șerban & Brazienè, 2021).

Resource constraints for participation activities: Rural municipalities often have smaller budgets and fewer personnel dedicated to youth or community development. This means fewer organized activities (like youth conferences, training workshops, etc.) that can spur participation. In countries where local governments are weak or underfunded (for instance, parts of Southeast Europe), youth participation falls very low on the priority list. Without

resources, even well-intentioned local officials might not create youth initiatives. Meanwhile, national programs might not trickle down sufficiently to remote areas.

Complex bureaucracy and centralization: Many rural youth are deterred by bureaucratic hurdles when trying to engage formally. For example, if they want to start a youth organization or apply for funding, paperwork can be daunting, especially without guidance. Urban youth NGOs often navigate these processes with ease due to experience and networks; a rural youth group might give up if the process is too complex. Additionally, some countries are highly centralized, meaning decisions even about local matters are made by central authorities. In such cases, even if rural youth convince their mayor of something, it might be overridden by central policy. This can create frustration and a sense of powerlessness that *“even our local leaders can’t help us, it’s all decided far away.”* Such multi-level governance issues can stymie local participation efforts by youth.

Exclusion from consultation processes: At higher levels (national/EU), rural youth may not be adequately represented in consultation or dialogue processes simply due to how participants are chosen. If selection favors members of established organizations or those who can travel, rural youth not embedded in those networks get excluded. For instance, a European Youth Dialogue event might disproportionately feature city youth because they are more connected to national youth councils. This structural bias means rural youth perspectives can be underrepresented in policies that result from those dialogues. This indicates a need for better inclusion mechanisms (like going to the villages, not expecting them to come).

Legal and voting barriers: In some cases, legal factors like voting age or residency requirements affect youth. For example, if youth under 18 cannot vote (which is most countries, except a few like Austria at 16), they may be ignored by politicians. Also, some rural youth who leave for university remain officially residents of their village (or vice versa), which can complicate their participation rights in local contexts. However, these are minor compared to the above issues.

Democratic backsliding and shrinking civic spaces: Monitoring carried out for the Council of Europe’s New Democratic Pact shows that democratic backsliding is tightening civic space across the continent and that youth-led associations in rural areas are often the first to feel the squeeze through reduced funding, restrictive regulations, and limited access to venues. Evidence gathered by the European Youth Forum (2024, May 18) echoes this trend, noting that a growing number of National Youth Councils and grassroots organisations face legal and financial obstacles that ‘threaten their very existence’. Yet rural youth are not passive observers: many are transforming community halls, organizations, and digital platforms into bridges between local citizens and public authorities, keeping dialogue alive and modelling democratic practices where they are most fragile.

5. Perception and image of rural youth

Finally, a subtle but important challenge is the **perception of rural youth** both by others and by themselves:

Stereotypes: Rural youth often feel stereotyped as less educated, less progressive, or less competent than urban youth. Such stereotypes can come from the media, politicians, or even urban peers. If rural youth are pigeonholed as “hillbillies” or “provincial,” it undermines their confidence and the willingness of authorities to give them responsibilities. Conversely, within rural areas, if a youth is very outspoken or educated, they might be labeled as “trying to act like a city person.” These conflicting stereotypes put rural youth in a bind, potentially dampening their self-expression.

Low expectation environment: Many rural communities expect that young people will leave, so there’s little impetus to invest in them or involve them in planning. As mentioned earlier, a mayor might think youth opinions are moot because they’ll be gone in a few years. This low expectation becomes a barrier to participation because youth sense that *“adults don’t expect anything from us here.”* It can be demoralizing.

Experience and skill Gap: Due to fewer opportunities, rural youth might not develop certain participatory skills (public speaking, meeting facilitation, etc.) at the same rate as peers in cities who might have school debate clubs or NGOs. When suddenly given a chance to participate, rural youth might feel at a disadvantage, which in itself is a barrier. Some rural youth noted that they felt out of place the first time they attended a national youth event, seeing others far more versed in activism jargon and procedures.

All these challenges are deeply interrelated. For example, limited infrastructure (no transport) feeds into geographic isolation, which feeds into fewer opportunities and confidence, which is reinforced by dismissive attitudes, and so on – forming a **complex barrier web** around rural youth. It’s important to note that not all rural areas suffer equally from all challenges. A well-off rural region in Bavaria will have different conditions from a remote Albanian mountain village. But across Europe, the underlying themes repeat.

Despite these hurdles, many rural youths *still* strive to make their voices heard, as evidenced by those who participated in our focus groups and the examples in the previous section. The presence of challenges does not mean the absence of agency. Rather, it highlights how much more effort rural youth often must expend to participate, compared to their urban counterparts.

If this chapter focused more on the individual participation of rural youth in the decision-making processes, the next chapter focuses on rural youth structures when they are trying to influence decisions at local, regional, national, or European levels.

Challenges in rural youth structures' participation in decision-making

Rural youth structures—ranging from small, locally registered associations to national youth councils and international networks—play an important role in representing young people's voices in decision-making processes. Despite this significance, these entities face distinct challenges that limit their capacity to influence policy or effectively serve the needs of rural communities. Drawing on data from the focus groups we did with rural youth leaders engaged in local, national/regional, and international structures, this chapter analyzes the multifaceted barriers these organizations encounter. The findings point to several recurring themes: the scarcity of resources, gaps in institutional collaboration, lack of tailored support from higher-level frameworks, and overarching issues of visibility and confidence at international levels. By synthesizing qualitative insights and direct testimonials, this chapter underscores the structural, financial, and cultural barriers that hamper rural youth structures' participation, while also indicating pathways for improving their sustainability and impact.

1. Challenges at the local level

Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and youth-led associations are often at the frontline of civic engagement in rural communities. Yet their ability to participate meaningfully in public decision-making is frequently constrained by **structural or administrative challenges**.

Local NGOs in rural areas commonly operate with minimal staffing and rely largely on volunteer engagement. This limited human capital not only hinders day-to-day operations but also diminishes the organization's capacity to engage in formal decision-making processes (e.g., public consultations, advisory committees).

Further compounding matters is the **inconsistency of legal and bureaucratic frameworks** at the local level. In some countries, the process for registering a local NGO or applying for municipal grants can be convoluted. A youth association leader in Romania attested, *"We spend weeks gathering all the documents required for a modest local council grant. By the time we get approval, we've missed opportunities to actually engage youth in our planned activities."* Such administrative burdens often deter these small NGOs from active participation, as their limited time and resources must be funneled into paperwork rather than strategic involvement in policy forums.

The extent to which **local authorities collaborate** with rural youth NGOs varies widely, with many respondents describing relationships that are uneven at best. Several participants noted that while some municipalities show genuine openness—co-sponsoring youth events or inviting NGOs to planning sessions—others remain indifferent or even resistant to youth-

led input. These contrasting approaches underline that successful collaboration hinges on whether local authorities truly acknowledge youth NGOs as credible partners and not merely symbolic representatives.

Financial insecurity is among the most urgent challenges facing local rural NGOs. Several participants described relying on project-based grants from national or European sources, with *“no stable funding to maintain permanent staff”*. This precarious funding environment inhibits long-term planning and leads to burnout among dedicated volunteers who shoulder administrative, operational, and advocacy roles simultaneously.

Moreover, **human resource constraints** intersect with financial difficulties; with limited budgets, NGOs cannot hire specialized staff or consistently train volunteers, thus perpetuating a cycle of insufficient expertise and inconsistent program delivery. Many respondents stressed that *“having to constantly chase funding deadlines”* detracts from strategic priorities such as building relationships with local decision-makers or expanding membership.

Despite the above challenges, local NGOs act as **intermediaries** that bridge the gap between rural youth and elected representatives. However, these bridging efforts often depend heavily on personal networks and occasional goodwill from officials rather than institutionalized protocols. The result is a precarious engagement model, vulnerable to political turnover or fluctuations in local budget priorities.

Focus group participants consistently argued that **national and European frameworks could do more to support local rural NGOs**. Although programs like Erasmus+ or certain national youth funds exist, many rural NGOs find these schemes bureaucratically daunting and insufficiently tailored to the rural context: *“We appreciate Erasmus+ grants, but the administrative load is disproportionate for our volunteer team. There should be simpler schemes for micro-projects.”*

Participants agreed that small-scale, flexible funding lines—coupled with capacity-building workshops and better outreach—would enhance rural NGOs’ ability to sustain operations and meaningfully engage with decision-makers.

2. Challenges at the national/regional levels

National and regional youth structures, such as **county youth foundations, national youth councils, and regional federations**, were seen as potentially powerful platforms for rural advocacy. Nevertheless, structural and representation-related barriers often limit the extent to which these higher-level entities address the realities of rural communities.

A recurring theme is the **lack of explicit mention of “rural youth”** in calls, processes, or strategic documents at the national level. Consequently, national bodies may overlook or only superficially address challenges such as transport scarcity or digital divides that particularly affect rural youths.

Moreover, some young people feel that **rural youth voices are overshadowed by urban-centric perspectives**. Some participants remarked that their countries’ efforts to include rural youth in policy discussions are *“visible mostly because [their country] is confronting a demographic crisis; but in practice, you still need to push hard to get a place at the table.”*

Despite the theoretical inclusivity of national councils or federations, several **barriers** prevent rural youth from engaging. These include physical distance from major cities, cultural assumptions about who “deserves” a leadership role, and unavailability to attend meetings during work hours—a common issue for youth who combine schooling or jobs with volunteer activities.

In theory, national councils often claim to represent *all* youth, but the **mechanisms for including rural-specific insights** appear tenuous. *“There’s no consistent approach ensuring the rural agenda is integrated into every policy position. Everything depends on whether the rural reps happen to show up and push for it.”*

Accountability structures—such as mandatory consultations with rural groups—are often absent, leaving rural youth reliant on goodwill and informal alliances. One plausible solution offered is to create **dedicated rural youth committees** or subgroups within national federations, ensuring that rural challenges remain visible and systematically addressed.

A consistent recommendation was to **reinforce bottom-up links** between local youth NGOs and national-level structures. Participants noted that *“strong national organizations depend on equally strong local organizations,”* yet local NGOs often lack the capacity to feed their perspectives into higher-level advocacy. Establishing efficient and constant communication channels—via digital platforms, regional youth assemblies, or rotational leadership programs—could help rural youths feel more connected and invested in national policy debates.

3. Challenges at the International Level: Youth networks and platforms

On the **international stage**, rural youth organizations are confronted by a new set of complexities, such as language barriers, funding hurdles, and institutional practices that may inadvertently privilege more urbanized or well-resourced groups.

While some participants reported that international opportunities, such as Erasmus+ exchanges, are “open to all,” they also conceded that in practice, **the same small group of individuals** often takes advantage of these chances. One participant reflected, *“It’s not that our system excludes people; it’s that many rural youth don’t see the relevance or feel confident joining cross-border events.”*

Soft barriers like anxiety over traveling alone or perceiving international platforms as elitist also emerged: *“If you’ve never traveled abroad and don’t speak English well, going to an international youth conference in Brussels is intimidating, no matter how welcoming they claim it is.”* This **lack of confidence**, reinforced by logistical and cultural barriers, is limiting the diversity of voices in global youth agendas.

Language limitations, lack of travel funds, and insufficient awareness of available programs were cited as the chief obstacles. Participants highlighted that **Erasmus+ travel stipends** do not always account for the extra cost and complexity of traveling from remote rural areas (e.g., needing multiple bus connections to the nearest airport).

Multiple respondents suggested that **international platforms** could become more inclusive by decentralizing their events. Rather than hosting all high-level meetings in capital cities or hubs like Brussels, planners could rotate locations or incorporate hybrid formats to accommodate remote participants.

Furthermore, participants recommended **tailored support** for marginalized youth, including those who identify as LGBTQ+ or come from regions with limited connectivity. *“Seeing a rainbow flag at events might seem small, but it signals to a rural queer youth that this is a safe space for them”* – such testimonials are highlighting that inclusivity is about more than just geographic reach.

Respondents consistently emphasized **more efficient information flows** as essential for bridging the gap between rural youth and international networks. National organizations, in particular, should expand outreach to ensure local groups are aware of upcoming calls, grants, and leadership openings in European or global youth forums. Additionally, simplified application procedures and ring-fenced funding for rural participants were seen as potential enablers.

Rural youth structures—whether at the local, national/regional, or international level—represent vital conduits for youth participation in policy and decision-making. However, the data gathered from our focus groups expose a range of persistent **challenges** that these structures face.

Despite these obstacles, testimonials from leaders across Europe reveal a steadfast commitment to overcoming structural impediments. Whether through grassroots alliances

with local officials, lobbying within national youth councils, or forging new partnerships at the European level, rural youth structures exemplify resilience in advocating for underrepresented communities. The overarching consensus from participants underscores the need for **strategic support**, in terms of funding, policy prioritization, and inclusive outreach, to elevate rural youth voices within all layers of governance.

Strengthening these structures across local, regional, and international dimensions is not merely a matter of resource allocation; it is a step toward ensuring that the distinctive perspectives of rural youth are recognized and valued in shaping policies that affect their futures. By addressing the systemic challenges detailed in these last two chapters, stakeholders at every level can forge more equitable and participatory environments in which rural youth fully exercise their right to be heard.

The next chapter on best practices and successful models will showcase how certain programs or approaches have managed to mitigate these barriers, be it through improving infrastructure, empowering youth, changing attitudes, or creating new structures, thus enabling rural youth to participate more fully despite the odds.

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Best practices and successful models promoting rural youth participation

Despite the formidable challenges outlined, numerous **initiatives, structures, and programs** across Europe have proven effective (or show promise) in enhancing rural youth engagement in governance and community life. This chapter highlights several notable best practices and successful models, ranging from local grassroots projects to European-level programs. These examples demonstrate how targeted efforts can empower rural youth, bridge gaps with decision-makers, and create sustainable pathways for participation. The focus is on what works – approaches that have been tried and yielded positive results, as identified in the literature and corroborated by focus group experiences.

1. European Youth Village – fostering local youth ecosystems

One inspiring model comes from Romania: the **European Youth Village** program. Launched in 2019 by Romanian youth organizations, Asociația pentru Dezvoltare Activă and Go Free, this program awards the title of “*European Youth Village*” to rural communities that commit to youth empowerment and participation for a year. The concept has since expanded beyond Romania as a reference model for rural youth development.

The European Youth Village program started as a nationwide initiative designed to support young people from rural areas in developing leadership skills and creating positive community change, based on the specific needs and challenges they encounter locally. The program began offering the “European Youth Village” title in 2019 to rural communities seeking to strengthen their capacity by involving and empowering youth. Since its inception, new villages have been designated each year, thereby forming a growing community of proactive, youth-friendly locations.

The overarching aim of the European Youth Village program is to ensure that every village becomes a place where young people can learn, grow, lead, and feel fulfilled. This vision centers on providing youth with the necessary tools and opportunities to thrive, within a context that values their perspectives. In concrete terms, the program strives to empower young individuals to serve as local leaders and active partners in communal decision-making processes. Through structured training, mentorship, and peer learning, the program transforms youth from passive beneficiaries into co-creators of local events, initiatives, and projects. Participants cultivate leadership, teamwork, and civic engagement skills, in addition to receiving support in accessing funding and developing further opportunities for their peers.

By engaging in the program, young people develop an enhanced awareness of local resources and become more prepared to strategize and address issues that directly affect them. This process, in turn, equips them to realize tangible changes in their communities. The European Youth Village title serves as the principal mechanism for mobilizing youth in their localities. In each designated village, newly formed youth groups identify community priorities—such as education, culture, or sports activities—and collaborate with local authorities to implement their plans. Holding the European Youth Village title encourages teenagers and young adults to join local groups, propose solutions, and gain advocacy skills. Even after the official “title year” ends, villages remain part of the European Youth Village network, offering ongoing learning activities, mentorship, and participation in national or international events that further expand youth engagement.

From 2019 through 2025, 22 different communes in Romania have earned the European Youth Village title, collectively involving over 3,000 unique young people in more than 350 youth-led initiatives. These initiatives have included youth festivals, debates with local officials, mental health workshops, non-formal education events, sports competitions, career orientation sessions, hackathons, advocacy campaigns, as well as transforming unused spaces into youth centers. Through such efforts, communities place youth concerns and ideas at the core of local development processes.

Mentorship is a key component of the program. During the selection phase, mentors guide youth groups in defining the challenges they wish to address—such as the lack of engaging educational events or youth-friendly spaces—while also helping them establish action plans. After receiving the European Youth Village title, mentors stay connected through periodic meetings to resolve challenges, acknowledge achievements, and adjust strategies as necessary. Mentors additionally assist youth groups in locating potential funding (e.g., the European Solidarity Corps) and cultivating collaborative relationships with local authorities. Even after the formal title year concludes, youth groups maintain contact, share best practices, and access ongoing strategic support, ensuring their local efforts continue to thrive.

These mentorship-driven activities create a ripple effect: more young people participate in communal events, local authorities pay closer attention to youth perspectives, and rural areas become more dynamic, innovative, and inclusive. Notably, initiative groups from 14 of the 22 titled European Youth Villages, along with youth groups from three additional finalist villages, have successfully secured funding for their local projects via the European Solidarity Corps program. In total, approximately 35 youth-led projects have received support—exceeding €250,000 in combined funding—highlighting both the ability of rural youth to translate their ideas into action and the importance of sustained mentorship in driving local development.

Beyond the annual title process, the program unites young people from multiple villages through events such as the Rural Youth Summit and nurtures lasting connections through the Alumni Network.

*Given its success, the model is scaling up. The program organizers, backed by Erasmus+ and EEA grants, have been working on making it a **truly European program**. Thus, in 2023, the first edition of the European Rural Youth Summit brought 145 participants from 18 countries to co-create a policy recommendation paper and share best practices. The concept of the European Youth Village title is now being promoted in other countries: for example, in Belgium, Finland, and Italy, youth NGOs have expressed interest in adopting it, while Slovakia will officially launch the program this year (August 2025), during the 3rd edition of the European Rural Youth Summit. The structured yet grassroots nature of the Youth Village model makes it a best practice, showing how to systematically increase rural youth participation with relatively low cost (mostly coordination and small project funding).*

*In addition to the annual “European Youth Village” title, the program’s long-term legacy in Romania is supported by several complementary components that sustain and expand rural youth participation. Among these is the **Informal Network of Rural Youth**, which brings together young leaders from different villages who share practical experiences, strategies, and resources, and join forces in coordinating national and regional-wide advocacy campaigns. Additionally, the **NGO RURAL platform** connects civil society organizations working in rural youth development, offering a space for collaborative project development, advocacy, and capacity-building activities that enhance each entity’s local impact. To bolster national-level recognition and visibility, the program also aligns with the **National Day of Rural Youth**, an annual event that draws public attention to both the achievements and the pressing needs of young people outside urban centers. This day often features workshops, public dialogues, and community-driven celebrations, encouraging local authorities and stakeholders to affirm their commitment to rural youth issues. Moreover, the program’s efforts have culminated in the **White Charter of Rural Youth**, a policy-oriented document that consolidates the voices, aspirations, and policy recommendations of young people across multiple Romanian villages. By systematically articulating the concerns and proposed solutions identified at the grassroots level, the White Charter ensures that rural youth perspectives inform regional and national policymaking processes. Through these integrated components—grassroots networking, organizational collaboration, national visibility, and formal policy engagement—the European Youth Village program helps shape a robust ecosystem in which rural youth can effectively advocate for their priorities and work toward sustainable community development.*

2. LEADER/CLLD – Youth Involvement in Local Development

LEADER is an EU initiative, part of the Common Agricultural Policy, that empowers local communities to drive rural development. Implemented via **Local Action Groups (LAGs)**, LEADER follows a bottom-up approach: local partnerships of public and private actors (including civil society) decide how to allocate EU funds for local projects. While LEADER has existed since the 1990s, only more recently has attention turned to actively involving *young people* in these processes.

Traditionally, LAG boards tended to be composed of older local stakeholders (farmers, business owners, officials). However, recognizing the need for generational renewal, some regions have innovated by including youth representatives or even forming separate “Youth LAGs.” For example, Finland and Sweden piloted youth sub-groups within LAGs where young members have a budget to support youth-led projects. This gave direct decision-making power to rural youth over certain funds. Similarly, in Austria, some LAGs have youth representatives who consult on which projects to approve, ensuring youth-relevant ideas (like skate parks or creative hubs) get attention.

*At the European level, the **EU CAP Network** (which integrates the LEADER knowledge-sharing) held a **Young LEADER Forum in 2024** with participants from 33 countries. The forum’s focus was “increasing the power, participation and commitment of young people in LEADER policy-making and implementation”. One takeaway was the need to involve more young people in LAGs and give them a real say in LEADER decisions. Young attendees (18–35) actively discussed how to achieve this, and their proposals included: reserved seats for youth in each LAG, mentorship programs to prepare youth for LAG leadership, and dedicated calls for projects targeting youth need (EU CAP Network, 2024).*

LEADER Youth Community: *In parallel, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) launched the **LEADER Youth Community**, a platform to connect and empower young voices in the LEADER/CLLD framework. Its mission is explicitly “to empower young voices within the LEADER-CLLD framework, ensuring their participation in decision-making and community development processes”. This community acts as a bridge between youth and institutions, providing training, networking, and advocacy so that “young people can thrive, contribute, and be recognized as valuable partners and proactive leaders in rural development”. Through regular meetings, webinars, and events, it builds capacity among rural youth to engage with LAGs and policy dialogues.*

Successful outcomes: *Where youth have been integrated into LEADER, results show more youth-friendly projects and greater youth civic engagement:*

*In **Estonia**, a Youth LAG initiative in one region funded several micro-projects conceived by school students (e.g. creating a community garden and a small IT learning lab). This not only*

improved local amenities but also taught the youth project management and gave them confidence; some then joined the main LAG as voting members.

*In **Spain**, the region of Asturias participated in an initiative called Young LEADER Forum that gathered young people from rural areas, together with Local Action Groups (LAG) managers, regional authorities and EU-level bodies. Mobilised through national and regional calls, the delegates co-designed workshops and plenaries. The result showed that, when invited in from the start, rural youth help rewrite LEADER priorities themselves rather than merely attending pre-set sessions.*

*According to an EU evaluation, LAGs that engaged youth reported better intergenerational understanding and a pipeline of future leaders for community work. The **Young LEADER Forum** summary noted the “added value of youth engagement and empowerment in implementing the LEADER approach”, implying that communities benefit in innovation and continuity (EU CAP Network, 2024).*

3. Youth Councils and local youth work innovations

Local-level innovations, often supported by European projects or national programs, also count as best practices.

***Municipal Youth Councils:** It’s not enough to have a youth council; it needs a clear mandate and support. One best practice is giving youth councils a formal consultative status. For instance, in Finland’s rural municipalities, youth councils by law can send representatives to municipal board meetings with speaking rights (even if not voting) and the municipality must “hear” the youth council on matters affecting youth. This has led to tangible influence, such as adjustments to bus schedules to suit students, or re-opening a library on youth council’s request. The legal backing ensures continuity beyond any one mayor’s goodwill. Other countries can emulate this: e.g. **Poland** recently updated legislation to encourage municipalities to form youth councils and involve them, partly learning from such examples. The lesson is that institutionalization (formalizing the role of youth councils) is a good practice that moves youth input from optional to expected.*

***“Youth Mayor” initiatives:** A few towns have experimented with electing a “youth mayor” or a junior mayor position. In rural France, some communes have a Conseil Municipal des Jeunes that elects a mayor among the youth. This youth mayor works closely with the actual mayor and symbolizes youth voice. While largely symbolic, it has increased youth interest in local civics and improved dialogue. Similar concepts exist in parts of Belgium and the Netherlands for village youth. It makes participation relatable (a peer in a leadership role) and often media attention around it helps raise the profile of youth issues.*

Mobile youth centers: Given transport barriers, a best practice is bringing youth work to young people. For example, in Romania there are some mobile youth centers – essentially vans or buses outfitted as mini youth centers – that travel to remote villages on a schedule. They provide a space for youth to gather, and youth workers on board engage them in activities and discussions, including about community needs. This model has been effective in identifying youth concerns and linking them to authorities.

Structured Dialogue at local level: Inspired by the EU Youth Dialogue, some regions have done their own structured dialogues with rural youth. For example, some national organizations organized “rural youth dialogues” in several villages to feed into policy recommendations. They used world-café styles, facilitated conversations, and brought local officials to listen. This kind of practice – proactively holding local consultations – can be replicated by youth organizations or authorities to ensure rural youth are heard. It’s a best practice in process: meeting youth where they are and using participatory methods so even shy youth speak up.

Youth-friendly community development: The concept of “Rural Youth Hub” is emerging in some countries. This is a model where a multi-purpose youth center is established in a rural area providing services (internet, co-working space, training workshops) and also serving as a consultation hub. By providing both utility and civic function, it attracts youth and then engages them. Communities that invest in such hubs (or even smaller youth corners in existing community centers) find that youths’ sense of belonging and willingness to voice opinions increases, as they have a home base.

Recognition and awards: Some countries motivate municipalities to involve youth by award schemes and recognition (Youth-friendly Municipality). Highlighting success and giving reputation incentives has led mayors to take youth participation more seriously. This kind of best practice leverages positive competition.

4. Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Projects

European programs have funded countless projects that directly or indirectly boosted rural youth participation. Some standouts:

Youth Exchanges & Training: Many Erasmus+ Youth exchanges have focused on rural issues and empowered participants. For example, a multilateral youth exchange titled “Our villages, our future” brought rural youth from 5 countries together, facilitating not just cultural exchange but also workshops on how to start local initiatives back home. Participants returned with new ideas and motivation – a Bulgarian youth from that project started a local environmental club afterwards (SALTO-YOUTH, n.d.). SALTO Inclusion’s repository lists exchanges addressing various rural challenges and showing youth creative solutions. Such projects broaden horizons and often plant seeds of activism or project-making in rural youth who had never met peers from other countries before.

Capacity building for rural youth workers: An Erasmus+ Capacity Building project “Alternative Participation of Rural Youth” (2018–2020) worked with youth workers in Europe to develop tools for engaging rural youth in civic life. One output was a toolkit of alternative ways of youth participation locally. The project showed success in training local youth leaders to think outside the box and use culturally appropriate methods to involve their peers (Pavliashvili et al., 2024).

European Solidarity Corps (ESC) - Volunteering: ESC funds volunteering teams that often work in rural areas on solidarity projects – for instance, a team of international volunteers helping to renovate a community youth center or organize activities in a remote village. These projects have dual benefit: they provide services to rural communities and they engage local youth with the international volunteers. Local young people co-volunteered alongside internationals and later formed a local volunteer club continuing that work. This model fosters a culture of participation through service and can leave behind sustained local youth engagement.

Youth Participation Projects: The new Erasmus+ Youth projects fund local youth to collaborate with authorities, but also to design action plans for their communities or connect with EU institutions. One best practice example: in 2023, a project in Romania called “Ring the citizenship” help developing a network of EU promoters in rural areas among rural youth, who later on organized different informing campaigns at local level, connected with their local authorities and visited the European institutions (Ring the Changes, 2025). Erasmus+ is making such small-scale participation projects easier to fund, which is promising for replication EU-wide.

Transnational networks: Projects like **Rural Youth Europe’s rallies** (supported by Erasmus+ and European Youth Foundation) consistently empower participants. Rural Youth Europe

organizes annual international rallies where rural youth gather to share best practices and learn skills. The very existence of RYE as a network is a best practice in itself: it ensures rural youth issues remain visible at the European Youth Forum and fosters a pan-European rural youth identity.

5. Youth-led advocacy and governance structures

Some successful models are simply **youth-driven movements or structures** that have gained influence:

European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP): As mentioned earlier, the ERYP is a civil society initiative where rural youth delegates from numerous countries meet (often alongside the main European Rural Parliament) to draft a manifesto of their demands. The 2nd ERYP Declaration had 10 calls to action on issues like digital access, youth entrepreneurship, and rural sustainability. What makes this a best practice is the process: rural youth themselves identify priorities and collectively articulate them, creating an advocacy tool. This Declaration has been used by participants to lobby their national governments and the EU. The existence of ERYP helps legitimize rural youth as a stakeholder group in European discussions, much like the European Youth Parliament does for youth in general.

National Rural Youth Assemblies/Councils: Ireland's **Rural Youth Assembly** (first held in 2022 and now annual) is a notable practice. It gathers rural youth reps from every county to discuss directly with ministers. The government committed to this assembly in the rural policy, acknowledging that "young people living in rural Ireland [should] make an ongoing contribution to issues that impact on them" (Social Justice Ireland, 2021). The inaugural assembly's report captured the views of youth and led to specific actions, like incorporating youth perspectives in Ireland's rural-proofing process. If sustained, this model ensures continuous dialogue. Other countries could emulate it; for example, Finland's Rural Parliament (every 3 years) always includes a strong youth segment and feeds into national rural policies.

Youth advocacy coalitions: In countries like Romania, coalitions of NGOs have come together to advocate for rural youth. Romania's coalition that produced the White Charter of Rural Youth under the European Youth Village program is a case where NGOs and youth leaders collectively articulated policy asks. That charter has been circulated among Romanian mayors. These collective advocacy efforts show that when rural youth voices are unified, they gain weight. The best practice here is networking and coalition-building – overcoming isolation by joining forces regionally or nationally.

*Integrating youth in traditional rural organizations: Another subtle but important model is when traditional rural institutions (like farmers' associations, cooperatives, village councils) create space for youth. For example, the **European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA)** operates at EU level to represent young farmers' interests in CAP discussions. Many of its members are in rural communities and their advocacy (e.g. on land access, funding for young farmers) has had policy impact. On a local scale, if a rural cooperative or community council always includes a youth member, that is a model to highlight. It's a best practice when established rural bodies don't remain gerontocratic but proactively integrate youth – ensuring continuity and giving youth real stakes.*

6. Case study of a national youth structure: Landjugend Österreich

Landjugend Österreich (LJÖ) represents a vibrant example of meaningful rural youth participation and advocacy under a national umbrella organization. As an active member of the National Youth Council, LJÖ consistently ensures the perspectives of rural youth are integrated into national policy discussions. Their commitment extends internationally, with delegates actively involved in the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) and Rural Youth Europe (RYE), contributing through monthly working groups and international seminars.

At part of its engagement, LJÖ's participates in the National Youth Dialogue, offering young people the opportunity for direct dialogue with political decision-makers. The Austrian Youth Conference, a flagship event within this dialogue, provides rural youth a dedicated platform to discuss critical issues impacting their communities, directly influencing policy formulation and implementation. Further, LJÖ actively engages in dialogues at various governmental levels through structured exchanges with political parties, government representatives, the Rural Women Association, and the Agricultural Chamber. Regional initiatives, such as panel discussions with politicians ahead of elections led by the federal Landjugend organization of Upper Austria, exemplify their proactive approach to political participation and advocacy.

An innovative approach by LJÖ involves structured exchanges at the European level, notably through excursions to Brussels and Strasbourg. These exchanges provide rural youth with direct dialogue opportunities with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and key figures such as the Agricultural Commissioner. Such interactions not only deepen young people's understanding of European governance but also strengthen their advocacy skills by directly addressing specific concerns like bureaucracy reduction for young farmers, an area where Austria notably excels with the highest proportion of young farmers (23.4% under 40).

LJÖ also facilitates active youth participation within the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture, positioning young farmers as essential stakeholders across diverse agricultural committees—covering issues from mountain farming to organic agriculture and direct marketing. By doing so, they ensure rural youth not only have a voice but are also recognized as experts in their fields.

The National Agricultural and Environmental Forums organized by LJÖ further underline their role in rural advocacy. These forums foster dynamic exchanges among young farmers, environmental organizations, entrepreneurs, and policymakers. Each forum culminates in a detailed position paper, amplifying rural youth perspectives and directly influencing agricultural and environmental policies. Through site visits, hands-on activities, and expert insights, these forums significantly contribute to sustainable agricultural practices and innovative rural development.

Community engagement remains central to LJÖ's mission, illustrated vividly by the nonprofit initiative, Tat.Ort Jugend. With over 200 projects and more than 5000 volunteers in 2024 alone, this initiative embodies grassroots civic participation, directly addressing local community needs. Programs such as the "Project Marathon" of the federal Landjugend organization of Lower Austria exemplify this, where young participants collaborate closely with local decision-makers to identify, tackle, and solve real-world community issues within a dynamic 42-hour challenge. Such direct interactions significantly enhance youths' civic engagement, leadership abilities, and community spirit.

Moreover, initiatives like the "No Go Campaign" of the federal Landjugend organization of Upper Austria demonstrate LJÖ's proactive role in promoting inclusive and safe spaces, partnering directly with decision-makers who recognize rural youth as key advocates in community safety and respect.

Finally, LJÖ's strategic initiatives together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Regions, and the Chamber of Agriculture translated to "Farm Takeover in Focus" highlight their responsiveness to generational renewal in agriculture. Through targeted surveys and structured collaboration with the agricultural chamber and ministry, LJÖ effectively translates youth insights into actionable policy recommendations, thereby creating clear, supportive pathways for young farmers entering the agricultural sector.

Through these multifaceted activities, Landjugend Österreich exemplifies a robust model of youth empowerment, active participation, and impactful advocacy, significantly contributing to sustainable rural community development in Austria.

These best practices illustrate a variety of strategies: **empowering youth locally, including youth in formal structures, building capacity, and networks (through Erasmus+ and NGOs), and leveraging youth-led advocacy.** A common thread is that success often comes when youth are not just consulted but given ownership and leadership in processes.

Another important observation: **mentorship, peer, or adult ally support** is often key. Many successful models (European Youth Village, youth councils, etc.) involve dedicated mentors, whether youth workers, NGO activists, or supportive local officials. The presence of even one supportive adult who believes in youth can help a best practice take root.

It's also clear that multi-stakeholder cooperation yields the best outcomes – e.g., European Youth Village works because NGOs, youth, and municipality collaborate; LEADER youth efforts work when LAGs (mix of sectors) welcome youth; Erasmus projects often succeed via partnerships across countries and sectors.

From the focus groups, the programs that participants had personal experience with (like Erasmus exchanges or local youth councils) were spoken of very positively: [Erasmus+] *“opened my eyes that rural youth elsewhere face similar issues and we can solve them together”*. This highlights how exposure to these models can create a virtuous cycle of participation.

In conclusion, while challenges abound, these examples show that **with the right approach and support, rural youth will engage actively and effectively.** Whether through formal roles, informal projects, or hybrid models, they can influence decisions and lead to community improvements. The next chapter will examine broader trends and new opportunities that are emerging, building on these practices, to further enhance rural youth participation in the future.

Looking beyond individual projects and into the broader landscape, several emerging trends and opportunities are shaping the future of rural youth participation in governance and civic life.

Overall, the trends point to a future where rural youth are better connected, more organized, and more recognized as key stakeholders.

If these trends continue on a positive trajectory – aided by continued investment in infrastructure, genuine political will, and support for youth initiatives – the traditional participation gap between rural and urban youth could narrow significantly.

Trends and opportunities in rural youth engagement and participation in policy-making

Looking beyond individual projects and into the broader landscape, several **emerging trends and opportunities** are shaping the future of rural youth participation in governance and civic life. These trends offer promise for overcoming some traditional barriers by leveraging technology, social movements, and evolving policy priorities. This chapter analyzes key developments such as digital participation, grassroots activism, changing rural narratives, and new institutional opportunities that could significantly impact rural youth engagement going forward.

1. Digital participation and connectivity gains

Perhaps the most transformative trend is the increasing **digital connectivity of rural areas** and the corresponding rise of online participation avenues. While the digital divide remains an issue in many regions, progress is being made:

Broadband expansion: Across Europe, investments in rural broadband are starting to pay off. EU initiatives like the Connecting Europe Facility and national broadband plans have steadily increased internet access in remote areas. For instance, countries like Estonia achieved near-universal high-speed internet coverage (including rural villages) by 2023, and Spain’s plan aims for 100% of the population with 100 Mbps by 2025. As connectivity improves, rural youth can tap into the vast opportunities of the digital sphere for engagement. They can join e-consultations, access information on rights and programs, and use social media as a megaphone. One recommendation from the European Rural Youth Summit (2023) was explicit: *“Investing in and supporting broadband internet access in rural areas is paramount for education, business, and social connectivity.”* This is being heeded as funding flows into rural digital infrastructure across the EU.

E-participation tools: The proliferation of online tools for civic participation is a major opportunity for rural youth. Government e-portals now allow submission of ideas or feedback electronically, which rural youth can use without needing to travel. The European Commission’s Youth Portal invites input on youth policy from any EU youth – rural youth inclusive – which would have been unimaginable decades ago. Additionally, there are platforms for online petitions (e.g., Change.org or government-run petition sites) where rural youth have successfully campaigned for change. For example, in Finland, a group of rural high schoolers started an online petition to preserve their local school; it gathered thousands of signatures nationally and forced a policy review. Social media and messaging apps also enable rural youth to organize and speak out. A trend noted is youth creating Facebook groups or

WhatsApp networks to coordinate around specific local issues (as simple as “Youth of [Village]” group to discuss community needs). These digital gatherings can translate into offline action and give youth a continuous channel to discuss governance issues informally.

Youth’s digital skills and innovation: Young people are generally digital natives, including those in rural areas (when access is available). This generation is innovative in using tech to circumvent limitations. For instance, we see rural youth councils holding hybrid meetings via Zoom, enabling members who moved away for university to still contribute to their home community decisions. This trend of remote engagement can mitigate the brain drain impact, allowing youths who have left physically to remain virtually involved. Furthermore, digital storytelling and campaigning are new tools that rural youth can master. Using platforms like Instagram or YouTube, rural youth have drawn attention to issues like rural public transit cuts or lack of mental health services by creating compelling content. Young farmers who became YouTubers and shared their rural struggles with a broader audience illustrate how digital skills can amplify the voices of rural youth beyond their local communities.

E-democracy experiments: Some rural municipalities and regions are experimenting with e-democracy that benefits rural citizens. For example, in France, Brittany’s regional council has an online platform where any citizen (including youth in rural areas) can propose ideas for the region, some of which are taken up if they gain votes. Similarly, Scotland’s government has used online idea-generation tools for rural development plans, specifically inviting remote youth input. This trend of “*consultation going digital*” was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which normalized virtual meetings and feedback sessions. It is now more feasible than ever to include a rural youth via a Zoom call in a policy roundtable that before would have required physical presence. Such hybrid models likely will persist, opening doors for continued rural inclusion.

Digital activism: A related opportunity is the rise of digital activism, which lowers the barrier for rural youth involvement. They can partake in hashtag campaigns, online awareness days, and digital challenges that advocate causes important to them. Whether it’s tweeting to save a local bus (#SaveRouteX) or joining a pan-European youth climate campaign on Instagram, rural youth can engage in activism without leaving their village. And these online voices can be powerful. UNICEF’s recent analysis on youth and digital activism noted that *84% of young civic actors saw the pandemic as increasing the importance of online efforts* (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Rural youth are part of this statistic. For example, rural youth played roles in pan-European movements like Fridays for Future by coordinating with city strike organizers via social media and hosting smaller solidarity events locally. The “*Digital Activism Gap*” study suggests that low-cost digital tools broaden participation, which particularly helps those with physical or geographic constraints (Lu, 2024). Thus, digital activism is an equalizer for rural youth in many respects.

Cautions: While celebrating the digital trend, it's important to ensure it doesn't exclude those still unconnected. A continued push for universal internet and digital literacy training is needed so that no rural youth is left behind. But the trajectory is hopeful – each year, more rural communities plug into the net, and youths are often among the first adopters in their villages, leading their families and neighbors.

2. Grassroots Youth-Led Activism and Social Movements

Beyond digital, there is a notable **rise in grassroots activism** among youth that extends into rural areas:

Environmental and climate activism: Young people have been at the forefront of environmental movements, and this extends to rural youth whose lives are deeply intertwined with nature. Movements like *Fridays for Future* and *Extinction Rebellion* saw participation by rural youth, sometimes in creative ways. For instance, in rural England, young farmers and environmentalists formed a group, “Farmers for Future”, bridging the gap between agricultural communities and climate activists, advocating sustainable farming from within rural areas. In Slovenia, rural youth organized local “climate dialogues” to discuss how their municipality can adapt to climate change (like planting trees or managing water), essentially taking local action informed by global activism. There's an opportunity here: rural youth can be key actors in environmental stewardship and climate adaptation in their regions, and through activism, they also gain a voice in broader policy (since climate policy often references protecting rural communities, etc.). Their credibility as stewards of the land can lend weight to their advocacy. As climate change increasingly affects rural livelihoods (droughts, floods), rural youth activism on these issues is likely to grow, potentially giving them leverage to influence agricultural and rural policies, which historically they had little say in.

“Revitalization” and anti-depopulation movements: In countries facing severe rural depopulation (Spain, Italy, parts of Eastern Europe), a new wave of activism focuses on demanding attention and resources for neglected rural regions. Spain's “*España Vacía*” (*Emptied Spain*) movement, while initiated by broader civil society, has strong youth participation because it's fundamentally about ensuring there's a future for the next generation in these villages. Young Spaniards from emptied provinces have organized marches, social media campaigns, and even political platforms calling for balanced territorial development. This is activism directly tied to rural youth's stake in their community's survival. Similarly, in Italy, youth in the inner areas (*aree interne*) have launched projects like “Repopulating villages” and have lobbied for policies in the *National Strategy for Inner Areas* to support youth entrepreneurship and services (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, n.d.). These grassroots efforts are slowly pushing governments to implement measures (like tax

incentives for rural living, funding for local startups). The opportunity here is that rural youth, by framing their personal decision to stay/leave as a political issue, are gaining sympathetic attention and potentially shaping demographic and regional policies. The trend is that rural brain drain is no longer seen as inevitable – youth movements are challenging that narrative and asking for change so they can stay by choice.

Identity and cultural movements: Some rural youth are engaging through movements to celebrate and preserve rural cultural identity, which can be empowering and politically relevant. Examples include young people reviving minority languages (like young Irish in Gaeltacht areas using Irish language activism to demand media and education support) or youth-led folk culture groups in Eastern Europe that simultaneously advocate for recognition and funding for rural cultural heritage. These movements strengthen youth pride in their rural roots and often intersect with policy when they campaign for resources (e.g., funding a cultural center or bilingual signage). In doing so, they bring youth into dialogue with cultural ministries or local councils. The *positive framing of rural identity* by youth is a trend, countering the narrative that rural equals backward. It's an opportunity to change perceptions (one of the challenges earlier) and to rally communities around youth-led initiatives that also have political dimensions (like funding decisions, heritage laws).

Protest to policy: A trend in activism is translating protest into policy proposals. Youth aren't just demonstrating; they're increasingly savvy about formulating demands. For example, after protests in Serbia and elsewhere (like those mentioned in Al Jazeera and Euronews regarding student protests), youth activists have outlined concrete asks. Rural youth activism is similarly maturing. A group of protesting young villagers might develop a detailed petition or even run for local office themselves. Indeed, another trend is **youth candidates and new civic lists** in local elections, arising from activism. In Italy, some "civic lists" (independent local election lists) in small towns are now led by young returnees or activists who got involved via movements and then decided to go for formal power. The opportunity is that activism serves as training and a springboard for youth leadership roles, which can directly influence governance if they win seats or at least push agendas.

Collaboration with allies: Youth movements often find allies in broader civil society or even among reform-minded officials. Rural youth activists linking up with, say, environmental NGOs or farmers' unions can amplify their impact. For instance, in France, rural youth climate activists found common cause with some small-scale farmers who also want eco-friendly policy – together, they advocated for local agroecology projects and got municipal support. Such coalitions bridging generations and sectors are an opportunity to strengthen rural youth's bargaining power. The trend is recognition that youth concerns overlap with others' (climate, rural poverty, etc.), making alliances natural.

Social media movements and narrative change: A softer side of activism is simply changing narratives via social media (not necessarily protests). Movements like *#RuralYouthProud* (hypothetical hashtag) or blogs by young people from rural areas showing the positives of rural life are trending, often spontaneously. They challenge the stigma of “if you’re capable, you leave rural, if you stay, you failed.” By redefining rural life as cool or worthy, these youth are influencing peers’ attitudes and even urban perceptions. If society values rural communities more, policies may shift to support them more; thus, narrative activism can indirectly lead to policy change.

Overall, the energy from youth-led activism on various fronts is a big opportunity if harnessed. Instead of viewing youth protests as a nuisance, governments and organizations could channel that energy into constructive participation (for example, inviting activists into working groups or co-creating solutions). We see signs of this: after large youth protests about rural neglect, some governments initiated dialogues with youth representatives to address demands. The trend of moving from confrontation to collaboration is nascent but promising.

3. Changing policy landscape and institutional support

The policy environment in Europe is gradually tilting in favor of **youth inclusion and rural revitalization**, creating new opportunities:

High-level commitments to youth participation: At the European level, youth participation is a core goal (as the EU Youth Strategy’s emphasis on “Engage” pillar shows). There is political momentum for “**mainstreaming youth**” in all policy areas – meaning transport, climate, etc., must consider youth. Coupled with the emphasis on not leaving rural areas behind (from the Long-Term Rural Vision, etc.), rural youth find themselves at the intersection of two priority agendas. Institutions like the European Commission are more likely now to fund initiatives targeting rural youth or to consult them when designing rural policies. The Council of Europe recommendation on rural youth we discussed will likely spur member states to devise specific measures (an opportunity to be seized by advocates to shape those measures).

Youth dialogues and councils proliferating: There’s a trend of creating more participatory bodies at various levels. For example, the EU’s Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-22) ensured representation of youth, including some rural youth, in citizen panels. Building on that, the European Commission is institutionalizing youth sounding boards for different topics (like a Climate Youth Dialogue). Rural youth, through networks, can ensure their voice in these. Similarly, within countries, more ministries are forming Youth Advisory Councils. If rural youth get onto these councils (e.g., a Ministry of Environment’s youth panel should include someone from a rural background, as environment and rural issues are linked), their influence

is extended. The opportunity is for rural youth networks to actively seek seats at these newly opened tables.

Funding opportunities: The financial perspective is also favorable. The EU's Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 has stronger conditions for community-led local development and inclusion of youth. The new **Erasmus+ and ESC programs** explicitly prioritize projects reaching marginalized youth, including rural youth. This means it's easier for rural youth organizations to get grants now (fewer match funding requirements, more inclusion points in evaluations). Also, national recovery plans (from the EU Recovery Fund) in some countries allocated money to rural broadband, education, and youth employment. If implemented well, these can indirectly boost participation (through improved conditions). Additionally, some countries are launching dedicated initiatives: e.g., France's recent program to deploy 1000 young people in rural service roles (sort of a domestic solidarity corps), which simultaneously gives youth experience and helps communities. **OECD (2023)** and others are also funneling resources: the G20's "rural youth employment" initiative might lead to pilot projects in some EU rural areas focusing on youth entrepreneurship. In summary, money is on the table; the opportunity is for communities to use it to strengthen youth engagement (like funding youth centers, hiring youth coordinators, supporting youth-led businesses that keep them local and engaged).

Rural proofing and youth proofing policies: A noteworthy trend in governance is "*rural proofing*" (checking that general policies consider rural impacts) and "*youth proofing*" (checking impacts on youth). Some countries are adopting rural proofing mechanisms. If these mechanisms incorporate youth input (for rural proofing) or consider rural contexts (for youth proofing), it creates systematic consideration of rural youth. For example, when Ireland's rural proofing and youth proofing processes intersect, the Rural Youth Assembly's voice may be directly fed in (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2022). As this practice spreads, rural youth issues could be routinely considered in policymaking, reducing the need for after-the-fact protests.

Decentralization and local empowerment: Many European countries are in processes of decentralization or have recognized the need to empower local authorities. This can benefit rural youth if local authorities are closer to them and more accountable. Coupled with the generational turnover (older mayors retiring, etc.), opportunities arise for younger local leadership. In some regions, we see younger mayors or councilors being elected, including those who ran on platforms of modernizing and better engaging the community. A new generation of local leaders might be more open to youth participation by default (some might themselves be under 40 and have a different mindset). Thus, rural youth might find local government becoming a bit more accessible and less hierarchical as older practices become less prominent.

Education reforms: Including civic education in rural schools is a trend in a few countries, which can prepare more rural youth to participate. For instance, Scotland integrated community project work into the curriculum in some rural schools, meaning that before graduating, students have to do a local civic engagement project. This not only helps the community but also habituates youths to participation early on. If such practices spread, upcoming cohorts of rural youth will be more ready and willing to engage in governance.

4. Perceptions and agency – a shifting mindset

Another important “trend” is a gradual shift in how rural youth see themselves and how others see them:

Empowerment and self-organization: There’s an observable rise in *agency among rural youth* – they are not waiting for permission as much as before. The focus groups and numerous examples show rural youth forming groups, NGOs, and startups, and taking initiative to solve problems (like creating a carpool network, establishing a community centre, etc.). This proactive mindset is partly fueled by connectivity (seeing examples online) and by necessity (filling gaps where institutions fail). Such self-organization itself is a form of participation (community leadership). A trend is that today’s rural youth are arguably more entrepreneurial in a social sense than previous generations, who might have passively accepted conditions or simply left. Now we hear of 20-somethings returning to villages to start projects (farm coops, rural tourism ventures with a community angle, etc.). These individuals often become community leaders and bridges between their communities and the government. The opportunity is to nurture this through support networks (like incubators for rural youth initiatives).

More positive image of rural life: Slowly, rural living is gaining appeal among some young people due to lifestyle shifts (remote work, search for affordable living, desire for a closer-to-nature life). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with many youth reconsidering urban life. Countries like Portugal and Greece reported young families moving to the countryside in 2021-22, thanks to teleworking. If this trend continues, rural youth populations could stabilize or even grow in some areas, bringing more voices and energy. Also, the presence of new young residents (even if remote workers) can bolster local youth movements and demands for better services, as they come with expectations from cities. At the policy level, programs like “*Experience Rural*” or “*Volunteering Year in rural areas*” encourage urban youth to spend time in villages, often leading to changed perceptions and cross-pollination of ideas. Even if small, this renewed interest in rural areas is a good opportunity. It could bring more investment and greater respect for rural needs—something rural young people have been asking for a long time.

Intergenerational dialogue improvements: Some rural communities are experiencing improved intergenerational relations due to deliberate efforts or simply generational change. For example, successful youth-led events or projects have sometimes changed older residents' attitudes ("They did a good job, we should listen to them more."). When youth rescue a tradition or improve a community facility, elders often come to appreciate them. A Spanish youth recounted how after her group organized a local heritage festival, the older cultural society members who were initially skeptical ended up praising and inviting them to collaborate annually. Such respect earned can translate to more inclusion of youth in community decisions (like planning next year's festival together). Additionally, as the baby boomer generation ages, many of them (some being grandparents to these youth) want to support their grandchildren's future in the community, possibly making them allies. The perception of youth as irresponsible is being countered by evidence of their initiative and responsibility when given a chance. This trend of softening attitudes is anecdotal but important – it creates an environment more conducive to participation.

Youth perceiving themselves as stakeholders: Through programs like European Youth Village, Youth Parliament sessions, and even focus groups like those feeding this report, rural youth are starting to see themselves as rightful stakeholders who *can* influence policy. This psychological shift – from apathy to empowerment – is the most fundamental change needed. Many of our focus group participants expressed that just being asked for their opinion made them feel valued and more likely to engage again. As these processes multiply, more rural youth may adopt a stance of "This is my community, I have a say."

5. Integration of rural youth perspectives in broader movements

Lastly, there's a trend of rural youth issues being integrated into broader youth and rural agendas:

European youth movement inclusion: European youth organizations (like the European Youth Forum, Rural Youth Europe, etc.) are more aware of rural youth as a subgroup to include. The Youth Forum in 2021 proposed a Checklist for Youth Rights that included reaching rural youth. They also have rural members (Rural Youth Europe, MIJARC), ensuring rural voices are heard in general youth policy discussions. So, whenever youth rights or policies are debated internationally, rural perspectives are increasingly present. The opportunity here is that general youth advocacy (on issues like education, mental health, and employment) will reflect rural specificities, leading to more tailored solutions by governments.

Moreover, building on **the Reykjavík Declaration**, which instructs every Council of Europe structure to integrate a ‘youth perspective’ into its work, recent policy packages now call for that perspective to be rural-proofed, ensuring that young people in villages and small towns help set priorities on infrastructure, democracy, and the green transition (Council of Europe, 2025). These shifts increasingly recognise rural youth as inter-generational bridge-builders who can counter polarisation and rebuild public trust.

Broader rural development agendas recognizing youth: On the other hand, rural development platforms and organizations, such as the European Network for Rural Development and OECD rural conferences, now regularly include sessions focused on youth. The narrative in rural policy circles is shifting from seeing youth as leaving to seeing youth as change agents to be engaged. The Council of Europe (2024) draft recommendation explicitly ties rural development with youth engagement, and the EU’s Rural Vision talks about making rural “places where young people want to live and work.” This alignment of rural and youth agendas at high levels is an essential window of opportunity – it means funding and policy might simultaneously target rural community improvements and youth empowerment as two sides of the same coin. For example, when designing a rural innovation project, the planners might automatically include a youth component now.

Sustainability and climate agendas: Global and European sustainability initiatives offer another avenue for rural youth agency. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EU Green Deal both stress inclusive, local participation, implicitly inviting rural communities and youth to the table. Rural youth are increasingly present in these conversations. For instance, young farmers and environmental activists from rural Europe have participated in UN youth climate summits and served as European Climate Pact Ambassadors, ensuring rural perspectives (e.g., on sustainable agriculture or forestry) are heard. The climate adaptation efforts being rolled out in the EU (such as resilience plans for rural areas) often include stakeholder engagement, which is an opportunity for youth to influence strategies that will shape their future livelihoods. In short, “*the diversity that digitalisation offers or hinders for rural youth participation*” is being explored, and as the policy landscape prioritizes sustainability and inclusion, rural youth have new entry points to assert their agency within larger movements for change (Şerban & Brazienė, 2021).

Overall, the trends point to a future where rural youth are better connected, more organized, and more recognized as key stakeholders. If these trends continue on a positive trajectory – aided by continued investment in infrastructure, genuine political will, and support for youth initiatives – the traditional participation gap between rural and urban youth could narrow significantly. The next chapter will specifically examine the role of existing rural youth structures in capitalizing on these opportunities, before we move on to concrete recommendations for various stakeholders.

Each stakeholder plays a unique yet complementary role. Policymakers create supportive frameworks and allocate resources, local authorities bring policies to life at the community level through daily engagement with youth, youth organizations empower and represent young people while strengthening their skills, and EU institutions offer broader support through funding, guidance, and opportunities for cross-country learning.

Putting these recommendations into action would not only respond directly to their needs but also help strengthen democracy and revitalise rural communities across Europe.

Recommendations for stakeholders

Building on the findings of this report, we present a series of **recommendations** tailored to different stakeholders – policymakers, youth organizations, local authorities, and EU institutions – to improve rural youth participation in decision-making. These recommendations aim to address the challenges identified and leverage the opportunities and best practices discussed. Implementing these suggestions will require coordinated effort, but each stakeholder can take concrete steps within their sphere of influence. The integrated insights from focus groups (the voices of rural youth themselves) underpin many of these recommendations, ensuring they respond to real needs and aspirations.

1. For policymakers (National and Regional Governments):

Adopt and implement rural youth strategies: Develop dedicated strategies or action plans focusing on rural youth, or integrate a strong rural youth chapter in national youth policies. These should set targets for improving rural youths’ access to services, representation in governance, and opportunities. Establish mechanisms like a Rural Youth Assembly or regular rural youth consultations to inform these strategies. Ensure the forthcoming Council of Europe Recommendation on rural youth is fully implemented at the national level with concrete measures (e.g., funding for rural youth work, rural-proofing youth programs , etc.)

Enhance infrastructure and connectivity: Treat investments in rural broadband, transport, and youth facilities not only as economic development, but as prerequisites for participation. Allocate budgets to “*youth-proof*” rural infrastructure – for instance, maintain evening bus routes or on-demand shuttles so youth can attend meetings and activities (echoing rural youth’s frequent call for better transport). Accelerate broadband expansion and explore subsidies or community Wi-Fi hubs in villages to bridge the digital divide. Policymakers should monitor progress: e.g., set a goal that 100% of rural youth communities have access to high-speed internet and evaluate annually (possibly aligning with EU connectivity targets).

Institutionalize youth voices in rural governance: Mandate or strongly encourage the creation of **local youth councils** in all municipalities (or at least at county/province level for sparse areas). Provide a clear mandate, such as requiring local councils to consult youth councils on issues affecting young people (schools, leisure, transport, environment). This could be done via legal frameworks or government guidelines. Offer small grants or training via national youth agencies to support these local youth councils. Finland’s law on youth participation can be a template. Encourage inter-municipal youth councils where individual villages are too small.

Youth representatives in decision-making: Include rural youth representatives in relevant decision-making bodies. For instance, set up **Youth Advisory Boards** in ministries of agriculture/rural development, with a quota or strong presence of under-30 members from

rural areas. Similarly, involve rural youth in monitoring committees of rural development programs. This ensures policies and funding decisions reflect youth input. Where direct inclusion isn't feasible, hold periodic hearings where youth can present to ministers or parliament committees on rural affairs.

Support youth work and services in rural areas: Invest in hiring or training **rural youth workers** – professionals or volunteers who can catalyze youth participation locally. This was a recommendation of the young people and youth workers from the first edition of the European Rural Youth Summit (2023). By expanding national youth services to cover rural areas (mobile youth work units, multi-village youth clubs), policymakers can ensure rural youth have guidance and support to engage. Funding could come through youth budgets or even rural development funds earmarked for inclusion. Additionally, expand mental health and counseling services for rural youth (possibly via telehealth) because well-being is foundational for participation.

'Rural proof' Youth policies and 'Youth proof' rural policies: Institute formal **rural proofing** of all youth initiatives – e.g., whenever a national youth program or campaign is launched, assess and adapt it to reach rural youth (could mean special outreach, reserved spots for rural applicants, etc.). Conversely, when designing rural development policies, apply a "youth lens" – ask how the policy affects young people and involve them in that discussion. For example, if a policy offers grants for rural businesses, ensure young entrepreneurs are eligible and aware; if a regional plan closes a facility, consider the youth impact (like school or recreation). As part of this, collect data disaggregated by rural/urban on youth indicators (education, participation rates, etc.) to track progress and identify gaps.

Facilitate return and retention of rural youth: Policymakers should address the root cause of disengagement – outmigration. Adopt incentives for young people to stay in or return to rural areas (scholarships tied to returning to work in rural areas, support for remote working hubs, startup funds for rural youth businesses). By improving prospects, more youth will remain active in their communities. A focus group sentiment was *"if we see a future here, we'll invest our time here"*. Policies under the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas – like creating rural innovation hubs or improving rural higher education access (e.g., satellite campuses, distance learning) – directly tie into enabling youth to stay. Each returning or retained young person is a potential participant in local civic life.

2. For local authorities (municipalities and local councils in rural areas):

Embrace and empower youth councils: If you don't have a local youth council or forum, help establish one. Reach out to schools or active youth to form a representative group. Provide them with meeting space and a modest budget for their activities (even a few hundred euros for projects can motivate and validate them). If a youth council already exists, assign a liaison (e.g., a councillor or community development officer) to attend their meetings and bring their proposals to the council's agenda. Treat the youth council as an official advisory body – respond in writing to their suggestions, and explain decisions (this shows respect and keeps youth engaged even if their exact wish isn't granted). Examples from focus groups show youth councils lose steam when ignored; conversely, they flourish when they see impact, as in cases where a mayor implements one of their ideas.

Include youth in community planning: When undertaking any local planning – be it a new community plan, infrastructure project, or social program – actively involve young people. This could be through workshops specifically inviting youth, surveys in schools, or having a couple of youth representatives on planning committees. For instance, if planning a village redevelopment, ask the youth what facilities they need (skatepark, study space, etc.). **Participatory budgeting** is a powerful tool: allocate a small portion of the municipal budget for projects chosen by the youth. Some villages in Portugal and Italy have done this with success, leading to youth-chosen investments like sports equipment or park improvements, and importantly, teaching youth democracy by doing.

Improve communication and outreach: Recognize that rural youth may not receive information via traditional notice boards or channels. Use social media, school newsletters, and youth networks to communicate opportunities for involvement. Setting up a WhatsApp group or Facebook page for local youth where the municipality can post announcements (and youth can comment) can be effective. One focus group youth mentioned not knowing when council meetings were, so publish youth-friendly notices (in plain language, at venues frequented by youth). Also, celebrate youth contributions publicly to build community support (e.g., local press releases praising the youth council's work or a volunteer project).

Support youth spaces and activities: If possible, dedicate a **youth space** in the community – a youth center, a room in a community hall, anywhere youth can meet regularly. This physical space often serves as the starting point for youth participation, where ideas begin to take shape. Ensure such spaces have resources (internet, some sports/cultural equipment) and allow youth to self-manage them with guidance. Additionally, back youth-led events (festivals, clean-ups, workshops); even in-kind support like providing sound equipment or free venue use shows the council's goodwill. As seen in best practices, when youth successfully run projects like a local festival, they gain trust and confidence to engage in other areas of civic life.

Intergenerational initiatives: Local authorities can create programs that bring youth and elders together to discuss community issues. For example, a “village future forum” where youth present their vision and older residents present theirs is facilitated to find common ground. Such dialogue can break down the cultural barriers identified and foster mutual respect. Some villages have tried intergenerational mentorship – pairing a youth council member with an experienced councilor, which can both educate the youth and sensitize the older official. This can gradually change the attitude of “youth should not speak” into a collaborative approach.

Leverage external programs: Make use of national/EU programs designed to help rural communities and youth. For example, apply to be part of initiatives like the **European Youth Village**. Not every municipality will win these competitive programs, but the process itself can mobilize local youth and officials around a common goal. If you have a LEADER Local Action Group, lobby to include a youth focus or a youth member. Tap into Erasmus+ by hosting or sending youth on exchanges – your local youth will return energized with ideas for the community. Municipal leaders should see themselves not just as service providers but as *facilitators of opportunities* – connecting their youth with broader experiences and funding (perhaps via a dedicated “Youth Officer” who scouts such opportunities).

3. For youth organizations and networks:

Prioritize rural outreach: National youth organizations (NYCs, NGOs, student unions, etc.) should assess their membership and activities to ensure rural youth are included. This might mean holding some events outside major cities, creating regional chapters or ambassadors in rural areas, and tailoring communication (e.g., using offline methods or radio in areas with low internet). Develop specific programs to build the capacity of rural youth members, like training them in advocacy skills or project management, so they can act as change-makers back home. The European Youth Forum and NYCs can launch campaigns focusing on rural youth issues to raise awareness among all members that rural inclusion is part of broader youth inclusion. A concrete step: create a *Rural Youth Working Group* within the national youth council to continually address these issues.

Support and network rural youth groups: Where independent rural youth organizations exist (farm youth clubs, cultural youth clubs, etc.), larger youth NGOs or networks should partner with them. Offer mentorship, share resources, and include them in coalitions. For example, if planning an advocacy campaign on education, ensure voices from rural schools are at the table. Umbrella bodies like Rural Youth Europe and MIJARC should continue to strengthen their member organizations with training (perhaps on how to engage local authorities or how to apply for funds) and foster exchange of successful practices among countries. Building an active transnational community (as RYE rallies or the European Rural Youth Summit do) keeps

motivation high. Youth organizations in urban areas might consider “twinning” with rural youth clubs to exchange experiences and break down urban-rural silos.

Use digital tools to connect rural youth: Youth networks should leverage digital platforms to unite rural youth who may be isolated locally. For instance, set up online forums or groups specifically for rural youth to discuss common challenges and solutions (somewhat like an ongoing virtual rural youth parliament). This can be moderated by an NGO and used to crowdsource policy asks that the NGO can then champion. Our focus group participants from different countries found solidarity in sharing experiences; formalizing such exchanges (even a monthly international rural youth webinar) would empower participants with new ideas and a sense of belonging to a larger movement.

Advocate for rural youth in policy: Youth organizations should explicitly advocate for rural youth issues to governments and institutions. The European Youth Forum and national youth councils can take the lead by issuing policy papers or declarations and following up with lobbying. They should track progress on Youth Goal #6 and hold authorities accountable – e.g., ask the European Commission and Member States what they have done to “ensure young people in rural areas are actively participating in decision-making”. By maintaining pressure, youth organizations ensure rural youth remain a priority beyond rhetorical inclusion. Additionally, push for funding: NYCs and NGOs can campaign for specific budget lines or calls focusing on rural youth (for example, ask the Erasmus+ national agency to create an inclusion priority for “rural areas” in youth project selections, if not already present).

Empower rural youth leadership: Within youth organizations, proactively elevate young leaders from rural backgrounds into decision-making roles. This might involve leadership training, mentorship from current leaders, and breaking any internal biases that favor those from urban or elite backgrounds. Having visible rural youth leaders not only influences policies but also inspires other rural youth that they too can lead beyond their locality. Create mentorship schemes pairing experienced youth activists with newcomers from rural areas to build their confidence and skills.

Collaboration with other Sectors: Youth structures should build alliances with rural development organizations, agricultural unions, and others who have a stake in rural communities. A joint approach – for instance, youth councils working with farming cooperatives to address youth employment in rural areas – can present a united front to policymakers and blend resources. Youth structures bring participatory methods and youth perspectives, while traditional rural organizations bring clout and deep local networks. Together, they can implement innovative projects (like a joint proposal for a rural youth hub funded by multiple sources) and advocate more powerfully (as a broad coalition for rural revival, including youth).

4. For European Union institutions:

Ensure rural youth in EU initiatives: The EU should continue and expand efforts to mainstream rural youth in its policies. For example, in the upcoming programs under the EU Youth Strategy, dedicate calls or funding windows specifically for projects improving rural youth participation (this could be under Erasmus+ Youth Participation projects or the European Solidarity Corps). The **EU Youth Dialogue** cycles should regularly include outreach to rural youth, possibly by holding some EU Youth Conferences or events in rural regions and by requiring national working groups to report on rural outreach. The EU could sponsor a **European Rural Youth Dialogue** event as a follow-up to the Youth Goals, to gather fresh insights post-Youth Goal #6 implementation.

Leverage the Rural Pact and Long-Term Vision: Under the Rural Pact (from the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas), encourage signatories (which include authorities and organizations) to make commitments related to youth participation. For instance, an EU-level Rural Pact commitment could be “by 2025, create 100 new local youth councils in rural areas across the EU” – with the Commission facilitating knowledge exchange and possibly micro-grants to support this. The EU can also integrate youth indicators into the Rural Action Plan monitoring. DG AGRI and DG EAC (Education & Youth) should collaborate: for example, use CAP networks to disseminate info about youth opportunities, and use Erasmus+/Youth programs to support CAP objectives of generational renewal (fund joint events of young farmers and other rural youth, etc.).

Policy and funding synergy: The EU should improve synergy between youth policy funding and rural development funding. One recommendation is to allow **blending of funds**: encourage LEADER Local Action Groups to use part of their budgets on youth projects and make it easier for them to co-finance with Erasmus+ or ESF+ projects. The Commission could provide guidance or a toolkit on combining funds for rural youth initiatives, citing examples where a youth exchange or ESC volunteer project complemented a LEADER project. Additionally, the next Erasmus+ programme revision could introduce a specific action for “local youth participation in rural/remote areas” to channel resources there.

Support knowledge and capacity Building: The EU-CoE Youth Partnership’s ongoing research on rural youth is valuable. The EU should support follow-up actions from that research – e.g., developing training modules for youth workers in rural areas, or creating an online “rural youth participation toolbox” of best practices (building on work like SALTO’s rural project inspiration page). The Commission could also facilitate a **Community of Practice** for municipalities on youth engagement (like the Europe Goes Local project), ensuring rural municipalities are well represented and their specific challenges addressed.

Recognition and awards at EU Level: Introduce European awards or labels for communities excelling in youth participation, inclusivity (including rural). For instance, expand

the “*European Youth Village*” title and support rural communities from all over Europe to apply. This would incentivize rural areas to compete and innovate in youth engagement, as seen in Romania’s example. The EU could partner with Rural Youth Europe or similar to design criteria that highlight rural youth leadership and partnership between youth and local authorities.

Legislative support: While youth policy is primarily national, the EU can encourage Member States via Council Conclusions or other instruments. We already have the 2020 Conclusion; in a few years, the Council could be invited to review progress and perhaps adopt new conclusions focusing specifically on **participation** (the 2020 one was broader on opportunities). The European Parliament can play a stronger role in supporting rural youth. For instance, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) could establish a working group focused on rural youth issues. Additionally, parliamentary reports on youth or rural development should reflect the perspectives highlighted here. Notably, the Parliament’s 2021 study pointed out that youth NGOs were not effectively reaching rural youth—Parliament could take the lead in pushing for measures to address this gap. Using soft power, EU institutions should continue to shine a spotlight on rural youth whenever youth or rural matters are discussed.

Each stakeholder plays a unique yet complementary role. Policymakers create supportive frameworks and allocate resources, local authorities bring policies to life at the community level through daily engagement with youth, youth organizations empower and represent young people while strengthening their skills, and EU institutions offer broader support through funding, guidance, and opportunities for cross-country learning.

It’s important to highlight that many of these recommendations reflect what rural young people themselves voiced during our focus groups and consultations. They called for better transport and internet access to enable their participation, for recognition and respect from local leaders—hence the need for youth councils and dialogue platforms—for opportunities that give them skills and reasons to stay, such as education and jobs, and for genuine inclusion in decision-making at all levels. Putting these recommendations into action would not only respond directly to their needs but also help strengthen democracy and revitalise rural communities across Europe.

“If decisions always ignore us, we lose faith. But if we are part of decisions, we invest in our village and we trust the system”.

Conclusions

Rural youth across Europe are eager to participate in shaping their communities and futures, yet they face a unique combination of hurdles that have historically limited their voice in decision-making. Our analysis revealed that current levels of participation are generally lower in rural areas than urban ones, primarily due to infrastructural gaps, geographic isolation, and socio-political dynamics that marginalize youth. Rural young people often feel disconnected from institutions and frustrated by the lack of formal opportunities to engage. Challenges such as poor transport, patchy internet, outmigration of peers, and patronizing attitudes create an environment where even motivated rural youth struggle to be heard.

Yet, amid these challenges, we found inspiring examples of rural youth taking initiative and effective models that foster their participation – from the European Youth Village program energizing local communities in Romania, to LEADER groups in Finland giving youth a seat at the table, to national assemblies like Austria’s Landjugend Österreich bringing youth voices to policymakers. These best practices show that when given support and channels, rural youth rise to the occasion with enthusiasm, creativity, and responsibility. They volunteer at high rates in their communities, start local projects, and contribute meaningfully when included in councils or dialogues.

Essentially, our research provided nuanced insights into rural youths’ perceptions. They highlighted that rural youth *want* to have agency – they want to be consulted on matters like education, local amenities, and job creation; they care about their communities, and many prefer to stay or return if conditions allow. They also offered practical ideas: for instance, participants stressed the importance of having a local youth worker or mentor to guide them, of using digital tools to maintain involvement when they leave for studies, and of building alliances with open-minded local officials. Their perspectives reinforced many of our research findings: *“We have the same aspirations as city youth – we just don’t have the same opportunities to voice them.”* This underscores that the gap is not in interest or capacity of youth, but in structural opportunity – a gap that stakeholders can and should bridge.

We also observed emerging trends working in favor of rural youth engagement: the enhanced digital connectivity, increased political recognition, emergence of youth-led initiatives, and targeted funding opportunities have collectively empowered structured rural youth participation. Digital infrastructure developments, notably through EU investments, have enabled continuous and flexible engagement, significantly reducing geographical isolation. Institutional recognition through frameworks like the EU Youth Strategy has further solidified the role of rural youth as essential stakeholders in policy dialogues, demonstrated effectively by youth councils and assemblies across Europe. Additionally, youth-led movements addressing rural depopulation, climate change, and cultural heritage have amplified rural voices, providing tangible examples of youth activism evolving into direct political influence

and representation. However, structured participation continues to face substantial barriers, including persistent rural-urban disparities, precarious funding, limited institutional support, and technological gaps. These challenges undermine sustainability, diminish long-term planning capacities, and restrict meaningful youth influence on policy. Addressing these barriers through comprehensive, integrated strategies, such as ensuring stable funding, strengthening institutional mandates, and achieving universal digital connectivity, is vital. Broader societal shifts towards digitalization and climate awareness further highlight rural youth as pivotal actors in shaping sustainable futures. Thus, continued investment and strategic policy interventions that recognize and empower rural youth structures are essential to fully harness their potential for fostering equitable, inclusive, and resilient rural communities.

The latest warnings about democratic backsliding underline the urgency of involving rural young people as cohesion agents. Their unique position enables them to bridge sectoral, territorial, and generational gaps.

The outlook for rural youth participation is cautiously optimistic. The fact that institutions are acknowledging a “policy gap” regarding rural youth and that initiatives specifically targeting rural youth engagement are spreading is cause for hope. Today, rural youth issues are on the European agenda more than ever before. If the recommendations outlined – improving infrastructure, formalizing youth inclusion, supporting youth-led structures, and leveraging digital and policy trends – are implemented, we can expect a much more vibrant picture of rural youth participation in the coming years.

In this envisioned future, a young woman living in a Greek mountain village might regularly join her municipal youth council—either in person, thanks to a new shuttle service, or virtually through online streaming—and feel confident that her ideas on local tourism will be taken seriously. In Lithuania, a group of teenagers could partner with their LEADER Local Action Group to launch a youth-led social enterprise, gaining practical business experience while shaping local economic development. At the national level, governments would routinely consult rural youth representatives when shaping policies on education, transport, or digitalisation, ensuring these policies reflect the realities of all young people, not just those in cities. And at the European level, rural youth would be both visible and influential—perhaps through a permanent working group contributing to the EU Youth Dialogue, or through a recurring 'Rural Youth Event that connects directly with the European Commission.

The positive impact of these changes would reach well beyond rural youth themselves. When young people are actively involved, communities and policymakers benefit from fresh ideas, renewed energy, and stronger commitment from the next generation. Empowering rural youth can help counter depopulation by showing that they can build meaningful lives locally, foster social cohesion through intergenerational collaboration, and reinforce democracy at the grassroots. As one young participant in our research put it, *“If decisions always ignore us,*

we lose faith. But if we are part of decisions, we invest in our village and we trust the system”. This captures a central truth: **strengthening youth participation isn’t just about upholding their rights—it’s also a smart strategy for fostering more inclusive and resilient rural communities.**

Final reflections:

The consultations brought forward a clear and inspiring shared vision: **“We share a common vision where rural youth are fully recognized and empowered as co-creators, actively and meaningfully shaping their communities, their countries, and the future of Europe.”**

Achieving this ambitious yet essential vision demands collective persistence, commitment, and willingness to challenge existing practices and structures. It is a collaborative journey where governments create genuine opportunities, youth confidently embrace these roles, and civil society provides ongoing support. Ultimately, realizing this vision will depend on shared dedication, openness to adaptation, and continuous investment in rural youth as essential leaders of Europe's sustainable and inclusive future. The recommendations in this report provide a roadmap, but commitment and local adaptation are key.

Not every measure will work uniformly everywhere – rural Europe is heterogeneous. What’s important is adopting the guiding principle that *rural youth are equal stakeholders* in society, entitled to both the same opportunities and the same level of influence as their urban peers. Wherever this principle has been honored, we have seen rural youth thrive as leaders and partners.

In conclusion, the realities and trends detailed in this report show that while rural youth face distinct challenges, they also possess unique strengths and are living through a moment of increasing recognition. By systematically addressing the barriers and scaling up successful models, Europe can turn the tide from rural youth being “diverse, ignored, and unfulfilled” to being **connected, heard, and empowered**. The focus group voices, research evidence, and policy momentum all point to one clear message: **it’s time to move rural youth forward**, from the margins to the mainstream of decision-making.

The journey to full rural youth participation is underway – now it must be accelerated and sustained, so that in the next decade we can report a new reality: one where a rural address is no longer a disadvantage for youth civic engagement, but simply one of many valued voices in Europe’s diverse chorus.

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