

# Rural youth participation in policy- making across Europe



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Rural  
Youth  
Forward

# What you'll find inside:

- Clear definitions of key concepts like "rural youth" and "youth participation", and why they matter to you.
- An overview of the European policies designed to support rural youth and how they impact you locally.
- Insights into how young people across Europe are currently getting involved in decision-making and the main obstacles they face.
- Inspiring examples of what's working—from the European Youth Village program to the LEADER community and Rural Youth Parliament.
- New trends and opportunities, like digital activism and grassroots movements that can help you overcome traditional barriers.
- An analysis of dedicated youth organizations and structures—are they amplifying rural voices?
- Actionable recommendations for decision-makers, youth organizations, local governments, and European institutions to truly support your participation.

## Why this publication?

*We wanted to better understand how rural youth across Europe engage in their communities, the barriers they face, and how they overcome them. To do this, we didn't just rely on existing research—we spoke directly with young people from different European countries. Through these conversations, young people shared their personal experiences, challenges, and hopes, painting a clearer picture of rural youth participation today.*

Did you know that almost one-third of Europe's population lives in rural areas? Yet, despite this, rural youth often remain invisible when decisions about their communities and futures are being made. Young people across Europe's countryside are increasingly moving to cities, leaving those who stay behind to face unique challenges, like limited access to jobs, fewer opportunities, and feeling unheard by decision-makers compared to their urban peers.

This publication dives deep into what it's really like for young people in rural areas to participate in decision-making, whether it's in their village council meetings or even influencing European policy. Recently, European institutions have finally started recognizing that the voice of rural youth matters greatly. For example, the EU's Youth Strategy now explicitly prioritizes rural youth, marking a significant step forward. Similarly, the Council of Europe recently adopted recommendations specifically to empower young people in rural communities. Still, what counts is how these ideas come to life locally—in your town halls, community groups, youth councils, or even through protests and activism.

Young people in villages and small towns can play a huge role in building bridges between divided communities and larger institutions, especially at a time when democracy faces tough challenges across Europe. Your voice, rooted in your local realities yet globally connected, can truly shape the future.

This publication brings together the voices, challenges, solutions, and hopes of rural youth like you. By highlighting real experiences alongside practical solutions, we hope to encourage more meaningful, inclusive, and youth-led governance in every corner of rural Europe.

# Who are rural youth?

Rural youth are young people living outside big cities — in villages, small towns, or remote areas. These regions often rely on farming, forestry, or fishing and face challenges like limited access to services. Definitions vary across countries, but rural areas generally have fewer people and are farther from urban centers.

# What is youth participation?

Youth participation means young people actively shaping their communities and futures. It includes:

- **Formal:** voting, joining political parties, running for office
- **Structured:** youth councils, advisory boards
- **Informal:** volunteering, activism, online campaigns

# Why does it matter?

Youth participation is essential for vibrant democracies — especially in rural areas. When young people are involved, they help create solutions that work: new bus routes, youth spaces, or local initiatives. Ignoring their voices worsens issues like depopulation and inequality. Rural youth often face more risks — poverty, exclusion, fewer opportunities — yet their input is often missing from policymaking.

*The bigger picture*

Rural youth are key to tackling Europe's major challenges — climate action, sustainable farming, and regional growth. Empowering them isn't just fair — it's crucial for Europe's future.

# What's Europe Doing for Rural Youth?

Key policies and  
programs that support  
rural youth participation

## EU Youth Strategy

2019–2027

Includes Youth Goal #6: Moving Rural Youth Forward, aiming to improve rural infrastructure, job access, education, and youth involvement in decision-making.

## Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

2040

Encourages youth to “stay, return, and thrive” in rural regions, with tools like the Rural Pact and national youth assemblies.

## EU Council Conclusions

2020

EU governments committed to reducing rural-urban inequalities, improving services, and supporting rural youth in areas like citizenship, entrepreneurship, and volunteering.

## Council of Europe

2025

Adopted its first-ever rural youth policy, recognizing their role in defending democracy and encouraging national action.

Ensure rural youth can join international exchanges, volunteering, and training—building confidence and skills to engage locally.

## Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps

## Other Initiatives:

- **EU presidencies** have highlighted rural youth issues like mental health and education.
- **Common Agricultural Policy** supports young rural entrepreneurs.
- **European Rural Youth Parliament** gives rural youth a voice.
- **Youth Guarantees** help rural youth access jobs and training.
- **Digital Decade** aims for full rural internet coverage by 2025.

**Policies now exist  
— but local action  
is what truly  
makes a  
difference.**

# Rural Youth Participation Today

## What's Really Happening?

Rural youth across Europe are getting involved in different ways—some formally, many informally. But participation levels vary widely depending on local support and opportunities.

1

### Formal political participation

Voting and political involvement tend to be lower in rural areas. Many rural youth feel ignored by politicians, which discourages them from engaging.

2

### Youth councils and advisory bodies

Where youth councils exist, they help connect young people to local governments. Without them, participation often shifts to informal efforts.

3

### Informal & community involvement

Rural youth are often most active through volunteering, organizing local events, or starting community initiatives—even if they're not officially recognized.

4

### Digital participation

Social media and online tools help rural youth stay engaged and make their voices heard—even from remote areas.

*Many rural youth care deeply about their communities but feel their efforts go unnoticed. In places with support—like youth spaces or receptive leaders—participation grows. Without it, interest fades.*

**Rural youth are active, but often invisible to decision-makers. With better support and structures, their potential to shape local communities is huge.**

# Youth Structures

## How can rural young people amplify their voices?

To truly influence decision-making, young people need organized ways to express their views. In rural areas, structures like youth councils, networks, and organizations help amplify youth voices, ensuring young people are not only heard but genuinely involved. Let's explore how these structures work, their impact, and why they matter.

### Local youth councils and forums – a voice in the village

At the local level, Municipal Youth Councils (MYCs) or youth forums are often the first way rural youth can formally engage in decision-making. These councils give young people a chance to discuss local issues and officially share ideas or recommendations with local authorities.

- In some countries (especially Nordic and Baltic states), even small rural communities regularly have **youth councils**. These councils can be quite influential if they're supported by local governments, sometimes even having budgets and guaranteed consultations on youth matters (like public transport or youth spaces).
- However, in other countries—especially in parts of Spain, Eastern Europe, or the Balkans—these structures either don't exist or have limited influence, leaving rural youth without a structured voice.

**The key** to successful local youth councils is support from adults and local authorities. When young people feel listened to (like having a seat at the town council meetings), their participation becomes meaningful. Without this support, youth councils often fade away, discouraging young people from getting involved.

### National youth councils (NYCs) – Representing rural voices nationally

Nearly every European country has a National Youth Council—a platform where youth organizations come together to advocate on youth issues at the national level. But historically, these councils often represented urban youth more than rural youth.

- Thankfully, this is changing. Some national youth councils now include rural youth organizations or have dedicated seats for rural voices, helping ensure national policies genuinely reflect rural young people's needs and realities.
- When rural youth are actively represented, policies become more responsive, like special transportation schemes, rural entrepreneurship programs, or tailored education opportunities.

### Youth Parliaments and Assemblies – Periodic Platforms for Engagement

Beyond local councils and **NGOs**, youth parliaments or assemblies provide opportunities for rural youth to contribute ideas collectively. Though these events aren't permanent, they create important platforms for young people's voices to be documented and shared with decision-makers.



## Rural youth organizations and networks – strength in numbers

Specific youth organizations representing rural interests are crucial because they understand and advocate directly for rural youth's unique needs:

- **Rural Youth Europe (RYE)** is an umbrella organization connecting rural youth groups from 20 countries, representing around 500,000 young people. RYE provides training, hosts events, exchanges best practices, and ensures rural issues remain a priority in European youth policy. Their involvement was key in getting the EU to adopt Youth Goal #6 ("Moving Rural Youth Forward").
- **MIJARC Europe** (International Catholic Rural Youth Movement) focuses on personal development, social justice, and agriculture from a faith-based perspective. Active at the grassroots level (especially in France, Belgium, and Portugal), MIJARC often acts as a local youth council and helps train community leaders. They also influence policy debates, like reforms to EU agriculture policies.
- **Young Farmers' Associations like CEJA** (European Council of Young Farmers) advocate strongly for rural youth in agriculture, addressing issues like land access and farm support. While primarily economic, they play a significant political role by engaging policymakers on rural development issues. They often collaborate with youth organizations like RYE, giving young farmers a louder collective voice.

## Educational and youth work networks – building skills and leadership

Other networks, like the **4H movement**, are active, especially in Nordic and Eastern European countries. 4H clubs focus on building practical skills, leadership, and civic engagement, indirectly boosting rural youth participation by empowering young people locally.

Another example is the **Europe Goes Local network**, which professionalizes youth work in rural municipalities, making local youth structures more effective.

## The Impact of Rural Youth Structures:

### Locally

Effective youth councils or active youth organizations can lead to real change—like new youth centers, local programs, or better public services.

### Nationally

Rural youth representatives in national youth councils ensure national youth policies include rural perspectives, influencing everything from transportation to entrepreneurship support.

### At the European level

Rural youth organizations have successfully made rural youth issues visible and influential. The existence of EU Youth Goal #6 and recent Council of Europe recommendations on rural youth are clear outcomes of this advocacy.

*Rural youth structures are the backbone of meaningful youth participation. They organize youth voices, create opportunities for involvement, and serve as crucial bridges between young people and decision-makers. However, they face challenges like limited funding, unstable membership due to young people moving away, and uneven support from local authorities. To strengthen rural youth participation, these structures need consistent financial support, training, and legal backing. Ultimately, having strong, representative youth structures means rural young people can actively shape their communities, advocate for their needs, and ensure their voices count at every decision-making level.*

# Why Is It Hard for Rural Youth to Participate?

Rural youth across Europe face many barriers to being heard and involved. These challenges are interconnected and affect access, inclusion, and confidence.

1

## Access & Infrastructure

- Poor transport and internet isolate youth.
- Few youth spaces and limited education or services make engagement difficult.
- Lack of local opportunities causes many to leave.

2

## Geographic Isolation

- Decisions are made far away, making youth feel invisible.
- Small populations and out-migration weaken youth groups.
- Minorities or marginalized youth often feel unsafe or excluded.

3

## Social & Cultural Barriers

- Adults may dismiss youth voices as “too young.”
- Power often stays in the hands of a few.
- Gender norms, peer pressure, and broken trust discourage participation.

4

## Structural Barriers

- Few rural areas have youth councils or support systems.
- NGOs focus on cities, leaving rural youth out.
- Complex bureaucracy, low funding, and centralization block local initiatives.

5

## Perceptions & Stereotypes

- Rural youth are often underestimated or ignored.
- Low expectations from communities hurt motivation.
- Fewer chances to build leadership skills puts them at a disadvantage.

## What's Holding Youth Structures Back?

### Locally

- Lack of funding, staff, and spaces
- Burdensome bureaucracy
  - Support depends on personal connections

### Nationally

- Urban focus dominates
  - Rural voices often excluded
  - Travel and access barriers persist

### Internationally

- Costs, language, and confidence block access
- Events feel elite and disconnected
- Marginalized rural youth feel left out

Rural youth leaders keep pushing, but real change needs better funding, inclusion, and support at all levels.

# What's Next for Rural Youth Participation?

- Better internet access and online platforms enable rural youth to engage from home.
- Social media, e-participation, and digital activism boost visibility and influence.
- More training and infrastructure are still needed.

## Digital Tools

## Grassroots Activism

- Rural youth lead climate, cultural, and anti-depopulation movements.
- Protests are turning into policy proposals and leadership roles.
- Youth are building alliances with NGOs and local leaders.

## Changing Mindsets

- Rural youth are more proactive and seen as community leaders.
- Remote work and post-COVID trends make rural life more attractive.
- Intergenerational respect and local engagement are increasing.

## Broader Inclusion

- Rural youth are now part of European youth platforms and policy forums.
- They shape agendas on sustainability, education, and rural development.

- EU and national policies increasingly prioritize rural youth.
- Youth councils, dialogues, and targeted funding are growing.
- “Youth-proofing” and decentralization support local leadership.

## Stronger Institutional Support

Looking ahead:

With growing tools, recognition, and confidence, rural youth are becoming key players in shaping their futures and communities. In the next chapter, we'll explore how existing rural youth structures are already using these opportunities, showcasing real examples of success in rural youth engagement.

# Recommendations for action

## How can we improve rural youth participation?

We've heard the voices of rural youth clearly: they want to be heard, respected, and included in decisions that shape their futures. Based on the insights shared by young people from across Europe, here are concrete recommendations for different stakeholders—policymakers, local authorities, youth organizations, and EU institutions—to boost rural youth participation in decision-making.



# Recommendations for policymakers (national and regional governments)

## Create rural youth strategies:

- Develop specific strategies or include a rural chapter in national youth policies.
- Set clear targets for better youth services, representation, and opportunities.
- Set up Rural Youth Assemblies or regular youth consultations to ensure continuous youth involvement.
- Fully implement the Council of Europe Recommendation on rural youth.

## Invest in infrastructure and connectivity:

- Ensure reliable broadband internet in every rural community.
- Improve public transport options specifically for young people, such as evening buses or community shuttles, so youth can actively participate in meetings and activities.

## Institutionalize youth voices:

- Establish mandatory local youth councils with a clear advisory role.
- Include rural youth representatives in decision-making bodies (e.g., ministries of agriculture, rural development committees).

## Support rural youth services:

- Invest in rural youth workers and mobile youth services to support participation.
  - Expand mental health and counseling services, possibly through telehealth.
- “Rural-proof” youth policies and “youth-proof” rural policies:
- Ensure all youth initiatives explicitly reach rural youth (special outreach, reserved spots, etc.).
  - Consider youth impacts when designing rural development policies.

## Encourage youth to stay or return:

- Offer scholarships, startup grants, or remote working hubs for rural youth to stay or return.
- Improve rural education opportunities (satellite campuses, distance learning) to reduce outmigration.

# Recommendations for local authorities (municipalities and local councils)

## Establish and empower local youth councils:

- Set up youth councils, provide them meeting spaces, and assign them a local council liaison.
- Treat youth council input seriously—respond and explain your decisions to keep youth engaged.

## Involve youth in community planning:

- Regularly include young people in planning processes (community plans, infrastructure projects).
- Introduce participatory budgeting, letting youth choose how a portion of local funds is spent.

## Improve communication and outreach:

- Use youth-friendly channels like social media, WhatsApp groups, or school newsletters.
- Celebrate youth successes publicly to build community pride.

## Support dedicated youth spaces and activities:

- Provide and equip local youth centers or rooms.
- Back youth-led events, even through simple support like providing venues or equipment.

## Promote intergenerational dialogue:

- Facilitate conversations or mentorship programs between youth and elders, breaking down cultural barriers and fostering mutual respect.

## Use external funding opportunities:

- Apply for initiatives like European Youth Village or Erasmus+ exchanges to energize local youth engagement.

# Recommendations for youth organizations and networks

## **Prioritize rural inclusion:**

- Regularly hold events in rural areas or establish rural ambassadors.
- Offer targeted advocacy training for rural youth.

## **Network and support rural youth groups:**

- Partner with rural youth clubs, offering mentorship and resources.
- Create platforms (online forums, webinars) where rural youth across countries can exchange ideas.

## **Advocate explicitly for rural youth:**

- Push governments and EU institutions to prioritize rural youth participation.
- Track progress on Youth Goal #6 (Rural Youth Forward) and hold decision-makers accountable.

## **Empower rural youth leaders:**

- Proactively train and elevate rural youth into leadership roles.
- Establish mentorship schemes pairing experienced activists with rural newcomers.

## **Collaborate with other sectors:**

- Build alliances with rural development organizations, farming unions, and others to amplify rural youth voices.

# Recommendations for European Union institutions

## **Mainstream rural youth in EU initiatives:**

- Create dedicated funding calls within programs like Erasmus+ or European Solidarity Corps specifically for rural youth participation projects.
- Hold EU Youth Dialogue events in rural regions to ensure rural perspectives are directly captured.

## **Leverage the Rural Pact and Long-Term Vision:**

- Include clear rural youth commitments in EU Rural Pact actions (e.g., establish 100 new local youth councils).
- Monitor rural youth indicators in the Rural Action Plan.

## **Foster policy and funding synergies:**

- Encourage blending rural development and youth policy funds to support rural youth initiatives.
- Provide practical guidance on how to combine different EU funding sources effectively.

## **Support knowledge and capacity building:**

- Develop training modules and an online “Rural Youth Toolbox” of best practices.
- Establish an EU-level Community of Practice for rural youth engagement.

## **Recognition and awards:**

- Expand the “European Youth Village” initiative across Europe, incentivizing rural communities to excel in youth participation.

## **Legislative and parliamentary support:**

- Periodically review and renew Council Conclusions specifically addressing rural youth participation.
- Encourage the European Parliament to create a working group focused on rural youth issues.

# Conclusions

Rural youth across Europe are motivated to **shape their communities**, yet practical barriers — poor transport, patchy internet, geographic isolation, and institutional neglect — still curb their influence. Their lower participation rates reflect these obstacles, not a lack of interest.

Where support exists, young villagers thrive. Initiatives such as the European Youth Village (Romania), LEADER groups (Finland), and Austria's Landjugend show that, with resources and a seat at the table, **rural youth volunteer, launch creative projects, and offer valuable policy insights**. They consistently ask to be heard on education, jobs, and infrastructure, stressing:

***We have the same dreams as urban youth, just fewer chances to voice them.***

Positive trends are emerging. Better connectivity, EU frameworks like the Youth Strategy and Rural Pact, and grassroots climate - and depopulation -focused movements are widening opportunities for rural engagement. Still, chronic rural-urban gaps, unstable funding, and weak local institutions **must be tackled to make participation sustainable**.

The stakes are high: **empowered rural youth can bridge divides, revitalise democracy, and strengthen social cohesion**. Achieving this requires concerted action — investing in infrastructure, formalising youth councils, backing youth-led projects, and harnessing digital tools.

The vision rural young people share is clear: **to be recognised as equal co-creators of Europe's future**. By scaling proven practices and removing persistent barriers, **Europe can move rural youth from the margins to the mainstream of decision-making** — ensuring vibrant, resilient rural communities where young voices are truly heard.

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