



Policy Paper

# Tackling Shrinking Civic Spaces and Ensuring Meaningful Rural Youth Participation



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# Introduction

In recent years, **civic space** has gained increasing attention within European policy debates. It refers to the physical, digital, social, and political environments that allow people and civil society to organise, exchange and express their views, and engage with public decision-making. Most importantly, it encompasses the **spaces that make meaningful participation possible**. When these spaces are open, accessible, and inclusive, whether online or offline, they support transparency, accountability, youth empowerment, and community cohesion.

However, across Europe civic space is under pressure. Financial constraints, restrictive measures, weakened infrastructures, and a growing mistrust toward civil society have contributed to **shrinking civic space**, narrowing the avenues through which people can participate and engage<sup>1</sup>. This trend represents a **significant threat** to those rights that underpin democratic life, such as **freedom of expression, association, and assembly**, weakening democratic resilience and undermining public trust in institutions. Rural areas, already characterised by distance, limited services, and fragile or unevenly developed local infrastructures, face more acute forms of civic contraction. The loss of a single youth centre, school hall or public meeting space can eliminate the only venue available for young people to gather and participate.

For rural youth, this results in a **double disadvantage**. Young people already have to contend with global forces that limit civic life, but they also have to overcome barriers specific to rural contexts: fewer participation platforms, limited decision-making opportunities, and scarce avenues to build the skills and confidence needed for active citizenship. Civic space is essential for rural young people: it is where they form communities, develop leadership, influence local development, and contribute to the future of their societies. When these spaces are absent or inaccessible, young people feel unheard, disconnected, and left behind.

Rural Youth Europe (RYE) believes that securing and expanding civic spaces that facilitate meaningful youth participation is central to rural development, social sustainability, and democratic renewal. Youth participation drives new ideas, safeguards civic and social decline, and helps building a more inclusive and resilient Europe.

This position paper outlines the **barriers rural young people face in accessing civic spaces** and provides recommendations to address them. It serves as a call to action for institutions at every level to ensure that rural youth have the physical, digital, and political spaces they need to shape Europe's future.

This document is organised into the following thematic areas:

- Enabling environment and sectoral policies
- Freedom of expression, association, and assembly
- Physical spaces, transport and connectivity
- Awareness, education, and democratic literacy
- Representation, power-sharing, and decision-making
- Social & cultural barriers
- Capacity building, skills, and leadership development
- Strengthening rural youth organisations and the rural youth sector
- Access to information and media literacy

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1. European Partnership for Democracy, 'Safeguarding Civic Space: Recommendations for an EU Civil Society Strategy', October 2025.



## Enabling environment and sectoral policies

Democratic participation strictly depends on **coherent policies** and an **enabling civic environment**, in which young people can organise, express themselves, and influence decisions without fear or structural obstruction. Policies in areas such as education, employment, transport, health, housing, and digitalisation often fail to account for rural realities, creating uneven access to services and civic opportunities. Without systematic rural proofing, these policies risk reinforcing territorial inequalities and limiting the ability of rural youth to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

A more inclusive and coherent approach is needed. National and regional governments must ensure that **sectoral policies reflect the needs of rural youth** and embed **rural proofing** into governance, legislation, and all major policy areas e.g. education, employment, transport, health, housing etc.

## Freedom of Expression, Association and Assembly

Freedom of expression, association, and assembly enable young people to come together, debate issues that matter to them, and collectively shape solutions for their communities. Young people in rural areas exercise these rights through informal groups, online networks, community initiatives, and youth organisations working to strengthen social and civic life in their villages and towns. However, many face obstacles that prevent them from fully exercising these freedoms. Sometimes, procedures for organising public meetings are unclear or excessively burdensome, requiring notifying authorities within strict timelines, fear of negative consequences that deter young people from expressing themselves or gathering collectively, especially if publicly associated with a cause<sup>2</sup>.

Strengthening civic space in rural communities therefore means:

- **To ensure that procedures for organising public meetings and assemblies are clear, proportionate, and accessible**, so rural youth and youth groups are not discouraged by excessive bureaucracy or unclear rules.
- **To protect rural young people and youth organisations' rights from retaliation, discrimination, political pressures or negative consequences** when exercising their rights to speak up, organise, and associate, and ensure that authorities do not arbitrarily interfere in their functioning.
- **To provide accessible legal and procedural guidance** to rural youth organisations on registration, assembly notifications, and compliance requirements, helping level the playing field for groups with limited access to legal support;
- Promoting cultural environments where young people feel free to express themselves without stigma or institutional pressure, **recognising activism as a legitimate and valuable form of participation** rather than a risk or a disruption.

When these conditions are in place, rural youth can engage fully and fearlessly in democratic life.

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2 European Youth Forum, 'Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe', 12 April 2022.



## Physical Spaces, Transport and Connectivity

Positive civic participation depends on **accessible spaces, both physical and digital, where young people can gather, collaborate, and shape the life of their communities.** Yet in many rural areas such spaces are scarce. Youth clubs or centres, community halls, and informal meeting places are often absent, underfunded, or poorly maintained, leaving young people without suitable environments for civic engagement. **The existing facilities often lack the staffing or resources needed to function as inclusive community hubs.**

**Transport barriers and digital divide** further undermine participation. Limited or irregular public transport makes it difficult for rural youth to attend events or training opportunities. Furthermore, despite long-standing commitments to digital inclusion, many rural regions still lack fast and reliable broadband access<sup>3</sup>. This prevents young people from participating in digital consultations, accessing information, or joining online civic initiatives central to democratic engagement.

To ensure that all rural young people can engage in civic life, we recommend to:

- **create and maintain multi-purpose youth spaces by investing in new facilities or repurposing underused public buildings** such as libraries, cultural venues, and town hall, so they function as accessible hubs for youth-led initiatives.
- **Improve rural mobility** to ensure young people can participate in civic life beyond their immediate surroundings. Educational institutions can help bridge distance barriers by opening their facilities outside school hours, providing additional spaces for young people to meet and organise.
- **Expanding broadband coverage and guaranteeing fast, reliable connectivity** to enable equal participation in digital civic activities.
- **prioritise targeted investment in rural infrastructure, mobility, and digital connectivity**, making use of EU funding instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and Cohesion Fund.
- **Creating safe and inclusive physical and digital spaces** where young people feel welcomed and empowered to participate.

## Awareness, Education and Democratic Literacy

Many rural young people lack practical knowledge of how democratic institutions function or how decisions are made. **Civic education in rural areas is often overlooked**, leaving young people unsure of how to influence policy or navigate democratic processes. This gap is reinforced by the scarcity of civic learning opportunities outside formal education and spaces where young people can meet decision-makers or practise democratic engagement. As a result, participation often feels distant or irrelevant.

Addressing these barriers requires **strengthening civic education** by:

- **Integrate practical civic learning into school curricula**, ensuring that young people gain concrete knowledge about governance, democratic processes and opportunities for civic participation.

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3 Perpiña Castillo C., Sulis P., Velasco Leon J.M. & Lavalley C. (2021). Broadband accessibility and quality connection in Europe by urban-rural typology including remoteness. Policy Brief. European Commission – Joint Research Centre, JRC124456.



- **Promote interactive learning experiences** through schools, youth organisations, and vocational programmes such as youth forums, simulations, and other participatory methods and **embed civic education directly into their activities.**
- **Link civic learning to real decision-making** by creating opportunities for rural youth to contribute to community discussions or participate in local planning processes.
- **Communicate participation opportunities in youth-friendly formats,** using accessible and engaging campaigns that clearly explain how young people can get involved.
- **Develop simple and accessible civic materials** e.g. guides, infographics, and short videos through governments, NGOs, and youth workers, **to break down civic processes** and make participation easier to understand.

## Representation, Power-Sharing and Decision-Making

Rural youth remain underrepresented in decision-making processes at local, regional, national, and European levels<sup>4</sup>. Even when they are invited into policy discussions, their involvement is often **limited to consultation** after key decisions have already been shaped. Their contributions rarely receive follow-up, and engagement tends to serve more, as symbolic visibility than genuine influence. For participation to be meaningful, rural youth must have the opportunity to **shape decisions and exercise real agency**, not merely observe or validate processes designed without them.

This challenge is rooted in cultures of governance that still hesitate to share authority with young people. Strengthening rural youth representation requires **governance** practices that **recognise youth perspectives as integral to democratic life**. In this regard, we suggest to:

- creating structures such as **rural youth councils or youth parliaments equipped with clear mandates**, meaningful influence, and adequate resources, enabling them to act effectively, engage with decision-making bodies despite geographical distances and provide feedback, while also strengthening existing structures.
- **Recognize and support financially and legally youth-led initiatives directly**, allowing young people to design and implement projects that respond to local priorities.
- Ensuring policymakers engage with rural youth organisations consistently, rather than through isolated consultations, and demonstrating transparently how youth input shape policy outcomes. **Inclusive consultation methods and ongoing dialogue** are essential to increase participation.

Local authorities, European institutions, and civil society actors have a role in reinforcing these shifts:

- Local governments can **involve young people directly in shaping local strategies and development plans.**
- European institutions can ensure that **rural youth perspectives** are systematically **reflected in democratic governance** and civic-space monitoring frameworks.

<sup>4</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth, 7 May 2025.

- CSOs can **strengthen the visibility and resilience of rural youth groups** through partnerships, advocacy support, and capacity-building.

Coordinated action across these levels is essential to ensure that rural youth participation becomes actually influential.

## Social and Cultural Barriers

Social and cultural attitudes often reinforce this sense of distance from democratic participation and processes: **young people's ideas may be underestimated or dismissed**, and older generations sometimes assume youth lack the experience or competence to contribute meaningfully. These dynamics not only **erode confidence** but also make it **harder for rural youth to see themselves as legitimate actors** in local governance and community life. Another factor shaping disengagement is the way rural youth groups are perceived. When young people gather informally, their activities are often associated only with leisure or “partying,” rather than recognised as moments of peer learning, organising, or community-building. This perception diminishes the value of youth spaces and reinforces **stereotypes** that young people are not serious contributors to civic life. At the same time, limited access to cultural opportunities further distances rural young people from civic engagement.

Overcoming these barriers requires:

- creating environments where **intergenerational relationships and dialogue** are built on respect rather than hierarchy.
- fostering spaces where young people and older residents work together, **strengthening trust and reducing the perception that youth contributions are less legitimate or less informed**.
- Ensuring that local actors, including municipal authorities and community leaders, **acknowledge youth perspectives and integrate them into local planning processes** and decisions.
- **Recognising youth gatherings as valuable spaces for collaboration, learning, and civic engagement**, rather than reducing them to entertainment or leisure would validate young people's initiatives and reinforces their role as contributors to community life.
- **improving access to cultural life** e.g. through reduced ticket prices for cultural events in cities and lower public transport costs. Enhanced cultural participation strengthens civic education, fosters critical awareness, and supports meaningful engagement in democratic processes.

When young people see that their insights matter and produce tangible outcomes, participation becomes relevant.



## Capacity Building, Skills and Leadership Development

Many rural young people face substantial **barriers in accessing capacity-building and leadership development opportunities**<sup>5</sup>. Training in advocacy, project management, digital skills or public speaking is rarely offered locally, and when programmes do exist, they are often underfunded or infrequent<sup>6</sup>.

This means that rural young people have less possibilities to build the skills needed to influence policymaking, lead community initiatives, or represent their interests in civic spaces compared to their urban peers. As a result, they are placed at a disadvantage, not only in terms of democratic participation but also in their educational, professional, and personal development pathways. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted measures, including:

- National and regional authorities should fund **accredited training programmes** in leadership, advocacy, digital literacy, and project management, ensuring hybrid learning options so rural young people can participate remotely when travel is not feasible.
- Local authorities and community centres should **make their facilities available for workshops and training sessions** to expand access to capacity-building opportunities.
- Schools, rural youth organisations, and vocational programmes should help young people **build the foundational skills needed for civic engagement** by integrating teamwork, problem-solving, and other participation skills into everyday activities, giving rural youth the confidence and abilities to advocate for their communities.

## Strengthening Rural Youth Organisations and the Rural Youth Sector

A strong civic environment depends on a **vibrant and resilient youth sector**, but many rural youth organisations operate under conditions of chronic financial fragility, structural barriers, and limited institutional recognition. These constraints make it difficult for them to sustain activities, retain volunteers, or plan long-term initiatives. The **lack of stable support structure** and this **financial instability** weaken their visibility, influence, and ability to contribute to community development. Furthermore, organisations often have to comply with overly bureaucratic measures to report on their operations, which slows down their work and makes it unnecessarily difficult<sup>7</sup>. Over time, this reality leads many rural young people to disengage because the opportunities available to them are inconsistent or inaccessible.

Strengthening rural youth organisations and improving the sustainability of their work involves the following steps:

- Local authorities should strengthen the rural youth sector by **investing in community organisations that create civic spaces and sustain youth-led initiatives** at the local level.

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5 Council of the European Union, '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', Brussels, 25 November 2024.

6 Adina Marina Șerban and Rūta Brazienė, 'Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled', 2021.

7 European Youth Forum, 'Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe', 12 April 2022.



- EU and national programmes should **prioritise capacity-building** for rural youth organisations and ensure that funding frameworks remain flexible enough to meet diverse organisational needs.
- Public authorities should **avoid excessive bureaucracy and reduce administrative burdens** so that rural youth organisations can operate more smoothly and access funding without unnecessary obstacles.
- **Introduce micro-grants** with a low administrative burden to support small-scale rural youth initiatives.
- Require public funding programmes to **demonstrate territorial balance in resource distribution**, ensuring rural areas receive fair access to support.

With long-term funding, meaningful co-design processes, and simplified access to resources, rural youth organisations can become stable, resilient pillars of civic life, empowering rural young people to engage, lead, and shape their communities.

## Access to Information and Media Literacy

Access to diverse and reliable information is a prerequisite for participating in democratic life. However, opportunities for **media-literacy education** are often **unusual**, making it harder for young people to assess the credibility of sources, navigate misinformation, and engage critically with online content. This weakens rural youths' ability to stay informed and engage.

To address these gaps:

- Public authorities should ensure that rural youth have **access to a wide range of information sources** across both digital and traditional platforms.
- Schools, NGOs, and youth workers should **support media literacy and critical thinking programmes** tailored to rural young people.
- Civil society organisations should **develop youth-led media initiatives** such as community newspapers to amplify rural voices, inform residents, and highlight local initiatives.
- Governments and local administrations must **ensure that public communication reaches rural communities** through accessible and youth-friendly channels.

## Moving Forward

Meaningful rural youth participation occurs where youth aspirations and enabling environments intersect. Rural young people want to contribute to their communities, influence decisions, and build democratic skills, but they need accessible spaces and supportive systems that make this possible.

Creating inclusive democracy requires protecting civic freedoms, investing in physical and digital infrastructure, strengthening the rural youth sector, and embedding genuine power-sharing across governance structures. Rural youth are essential to building a resilient, democratic, and inclusive Europe, and they must be recognised and supported as equal partners in shaping its future.



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This policy paper is intended to serve as a practical tool for Rural Youth Europe to support efforts in tackling shrinking civic spaces and ensuring meaningful rural youth participation across Europe.

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