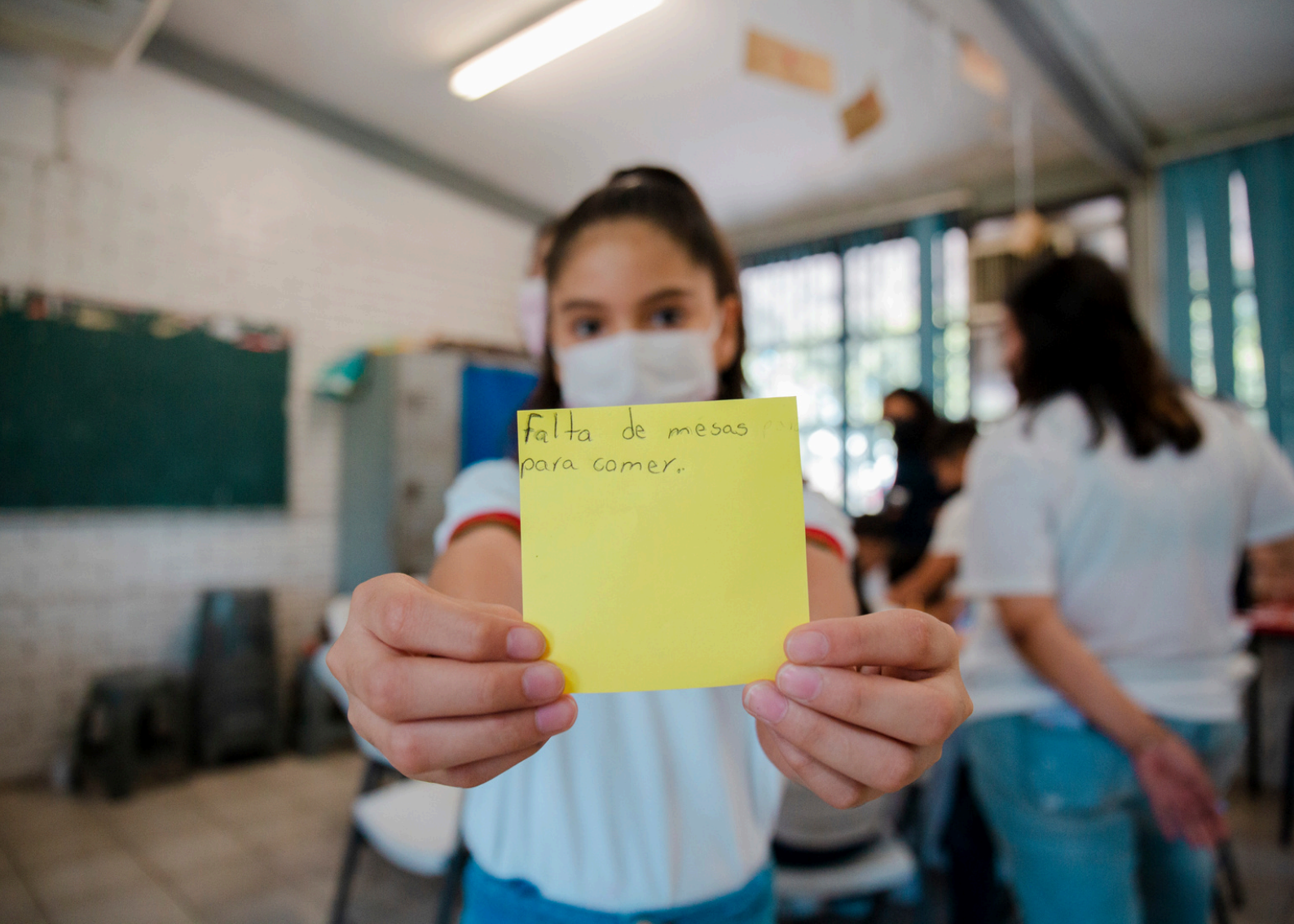


#03 IOPD
Peer Learning Note

Fostering Civic Engagement in Children & Youth: The Heartbeat of Vibrant Cities & Territories

Lessons from the 2024 IOPD Peer Learning Sessions



Acknowledgements

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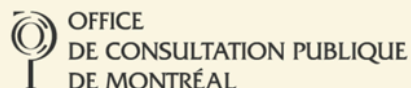
About the IOPD

The **International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD)** is an international network open to all cities, organisations and research centres interested in learning about, exchanging and applying experiences of participatory democracy at the local level. It was founded in 2001 within the framework of the European Commission's URB-AL program for decentralised cooperation and its official constitution was in November 2001 in Barcelona, during the 1st IOPD Conference. Since 2006 it has been part of the world organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

About UCLG

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is an umbrella international organisation for cities, LRGs, and municipal associations throughout the world that is concerned with representing and defending the interests of local governments on the world stage.

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» Introduction

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) with the support of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Learning team has organised in March and April 2024 the **IOPD Peer Learning Sessions, a series of online exchanges between local and regional governments** to share their municipal experiences and deepen the practices of citizen participation.

Two IOPD Peer Learning Sessions have been dedicated specifically to the participation practices of children and youth, two specific groups whose inclusion in democracy we consider essential. The participation of children and young people has a wide-ranging impact on the promotion of democratic values, civic education and the design and functioning of a city and a territory.

Methodology

The methodology consisted of the introduction of the city or local or regional territory, deepening in the context of the number of inhabitants, territorial organisation, and all the information to build the case and justify the relevance of the implementation of the practice of democratic participation. Then, the **participants presented the implementation of initiatives promoting child and youth participation in their context**, in most cases, it was a chronological development of the experience. Finally, they shared lessons learned and policy recommendations that resulted from the experience.

The sessions we analysed in this analytical note were held on:

- **20 May:** with the cities of Molina de Segura (Spain) and Mar del Plata (Argentina) in Spanish.
- **28 May:** with the participation of the State of Nuevo León (Mexico) and the city of Accra (Ghana), in English.



Fostering Civic Engagement in Children & Youth: The Heartbeat of Vibrant Cities & Territories

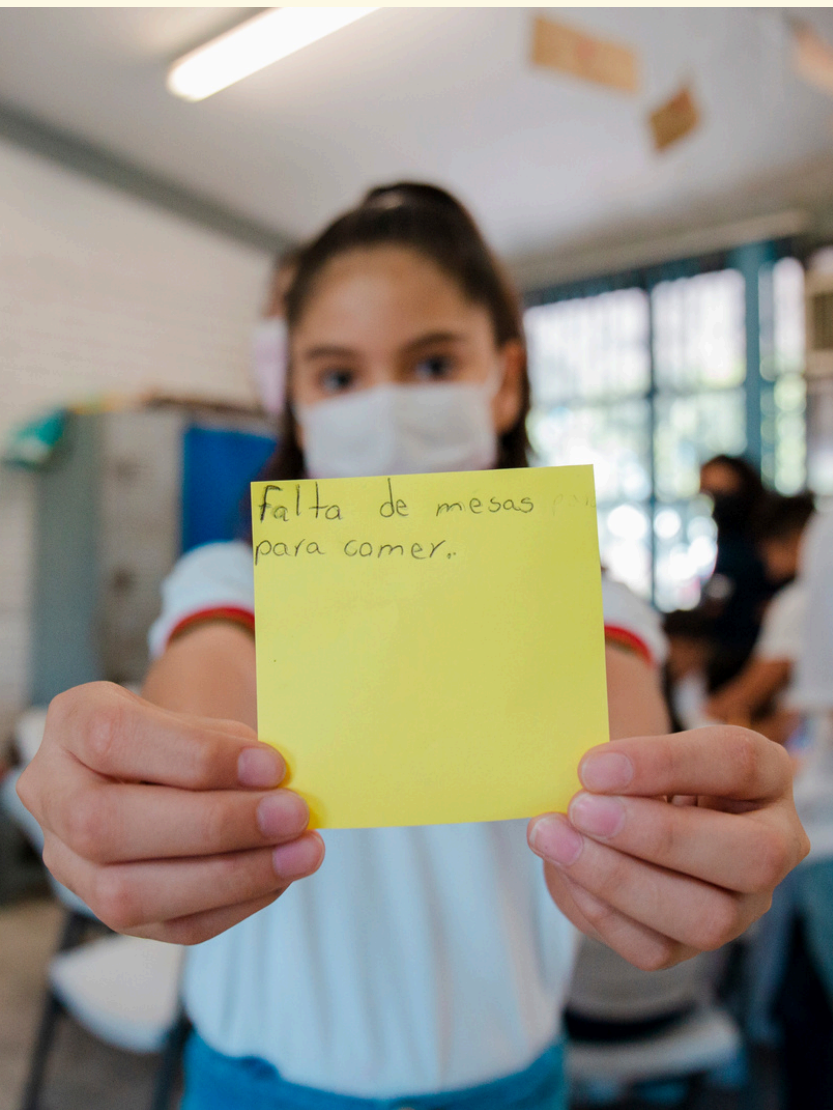
In the bustling tapestry of urban and local life, the voices of children and youth echo as essential threads, shaping the fabric of tomorrow's society. Their civic engagement and active participation in public life are the cornerstone of flourishing cities and territories. As we delve into the significance of their involvement, we unravel a narrative that underscores the pivotal role they play in shaping the trajectory of urban and local development while nurturing democratic values.

- **Nurturing democratic values:** At the core of civic engagement lies the cultivation of democratic values. **Children and youth, when actively involved in public life, not only absorb these values but also become the champions of democratic principles.** Through participation in community initiatives, local governance, and civic education programs, they imbibe, and then divulge, the essence of democracy – the importance of dialogue, respect for diversity, and the pursuit of the common good. By fostering these values from an early age, cities lay a solid foundation for a resilient, inclusive, and participatory democratic society.

- **Amplifying voices:** The inclusion of children and youth in public discourse amplifies the diversity of perspectives within urban and local settings. Their unique experiences, innovative ideas, and unbridled enthusiasm inject vitality into civic discussions, enriching the decision-making process. By providing platforms for their voices to be heard, cities and local territories harness the creative potential of the younger generation, **paving the way for more inclusive and forward-thinking policies.**

- **Building social cohesion:** Civic engagement serves as a potent catalyst for building social cohesion within cities and local territories. **By fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility, it bridges the divides that often fragment local communities.** Through collaborative projects, volunteerism, and grassroots initiatives, children and youth forge bonds that transcend socioeconomic, cultural, and generational barriers. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for a more cohesive and resilient urban fabric and local territories, where inclusion, solidarity and empathy reign supreme.





- **Fostering empowerment:** Empowering children and youth to actively participate in public life instils a sense of agency and ownership over their surroundings. By involving them in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives, **cities and local territories nurture a generation of empowered individuals who are not merely spectators but active agents of change.** This empowerment fosters a sense of responsibility towards the community, igniting a passion for civic duty that permeates every facet of urban and local life.
- **Cultivating future leaders:** Investing in the civic engagement of children and youth is a gain for the future leadership of cities and local territories. By providing them with opportunities to develop leadership skills, critical thinking abilities, and a deep understanding of civic responsibilities, cities and local territories nurture a community of capable leaders who are adept at navigating the complexities of governance and envisioning happier and joyful futures. These young leaders, **grounded in the values of inclusivity and social justice, are poised to steer cities and local territories towards brighter and more sustainable societies.**

- **Strengthening resilience:** In an increasingly uncertain world, the resilience of cities and local territories hinges upon the active engagement of their youngest inhabitants. Children and youth, **when empowered to participate in disaster preparedness, climate action, and community resilience initiatives, emerge as frontline champions of local action for change.** Their fresh perspectives, coupled with their innate adaptability, infuse cities and local territories with the resilience needed to weather the storms of the 21st century.

In the tapestry of urban and local life, the civic engagement of children and youth emerges as a vibrant thread that weaves together the fabric of inclusive, democratic, and resilient societies. Their vital voices, ideas, and actions reverberate as catalysts for positive transformation, propelling cities and local territories towards a future where the values of democracy, social cohesion, and empowerment reign supreme. As cities and local territories continue to evolve and confront the myriad challenges of the modern world, **let us recognise the indispensable role of our youngest population in shaping the urban and local landscapes and embrace their boundless potential as architects of change towards happier and joyful societies.**



Cases presented in the IOPD Peer Learning Sessions



Scan or click on this QR code to access the video recordings of the sessions in the IOPD YouTube Channel



Mar del Plata (Argentina)

Mar del Plata, Argentina's main seaside resort city, is located on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. There, a varied productive matrix can be observed, ranging from fishing and horticulture to the textile industry. **The city is a regional reference in terms of university education, with both public and private institutions.** It has a stable population of around 700,000 inhabitants and receives between seven and eight million tourists annually.



The culture of enjoyment of the common space and citizen encounters is palpable in Mar del Plata, backed by a solid social fabric, which includes institutions and organisations committed to the management of the city. Owing to its vibrant environment, Mar del Plata is also facing a high rate of motorisation, which contributes to negative externalities such as congestion, pollution and, mostly, road accidents.

To address this situation, in 2019 the municipality started a general reconversion process, towards a more just, human and sustainable city, in which urban mobility and public space play a special role. Through this reconversion process and its instruments, **the municipality of Mar del Plata is advancing a paradigm shift in mobility, from road safety towards a mobility culture in which everyone takes care of each other.**

Projects, legislative amendments and specific programmes are being implemented, such as the Comprehensive Road Safety Plan, presented in 2022, of which the Road Safety Advisory Commission, as an external body, is in charge of managing citizen participation. **Child and youth participation stands as a fundamental pillar in this plan.**

The Road Safety Advisory Commission brings together over 50 institutions, non-governmental organisations and a diversity of stakeholders, including municipal departments, representatives of the Honourable Deliberative Council, professional associations, universities, public bodies, associations of victims' families, disability organisations, among others. **This rich mix brings to the forefront "diversity as a value and an end in itself, as it enriches debate and collective construction,"** in the words of Gabriela Funes Balza, from Mar del Plata municipality.

Networking and games are two of the pillar strategies of the Commission to encourage citizen participation and co-creation. **Within the game strategy, in 2022 the Commission launched the initiative “You take care of me and I take care of you” (Me Cuidas y Te Cuido) , which aims to provide children with content on urban mobility, coexistence and respect through playful-recreational activities.** Through an array of activities, such as the recreation of a miniature city, children are introduced to the mobility culture, with concepts such as priority of passage, respect, maximum permitted speeds and distractions when cycling.

Lessons learnt:

- Betting on children is the goal of our societies for their benefit.
- Most of the time, learning takes place at the same time as practice, so it is necessary to be aware that unforeseen events and mistakes will appear, we only have to learn from them.
- Many actors are working towards better cities. Emphasis needs to be put on how to transcend sectoriality.



Scan or click on these QR codes to access the presentation of Mar del Plata



Scan or click on this QR code to access the website of the Road Safety Advisory Commission



Molina de Segura (Spain)

Molina de Segura, located in the province of Murcia, Spain, has a population of approximately 76,074 inhabitants, of which 4,654 are aged between 15 and 19. The municipal budget amounts to around 88,500,000 € and is **notable for its promotion of citizen participation, divided into five Citizen Participation Zones.**



Within the promotion of citizen participation and considering the high proportion of young people in the overall population, the Youth Participatory Budget stands out, with an allocation of 35,000 €. This project is aimed at students in the third and fourth years of compulsory secondary education, aged between 14 and 15. It **focuses on the environment, to raise awareness of climate change issues among the younger generation.**

The municipality carried out a community outreach strategy, going directly to the students in the classrooms, where they learnt about notions of participatory budgeting, such as budget structure and citizen participation. Workshops were also organised to elaborate proposals, with an outcome of 208 proposals developed.

To carry out this process, **47 information sessions were held in eight educational centres, during breaks or classes, involving a total of 1,124 students in classroom voting.** One of the main challenges faced was to increase the participation of pupils, as well as to involve them in the proposals so that they could carry them out themselves. In addition, the municipality also had to handle balancing the open lists of proposals with the playful component of the process.

The municipality considers youth as fundamental actors in civic participation, as they become promoters of this mechanism. José Manuel Mayor Balsas, from the municipality of Molina de Segura, recounts how **students leave school excited to tell their families about what they learned from participatory budgeting.** This is how youth are the link between various specific social groups, promoting social cohesion.

Lessons learnt:

- Young people are more involved when they participate from start to the end of the process.
- Young people show themselves as transmitters of the process to other social groups, like adults in their families.
- Participatory Budgeting is a key process to consider and include specific social groups to decision-making processes.



Nuevo León (México)

Located in the north of Mexico, close to the border with the United States of America, Nuevo León is a state hosting 5.7 million people. It's divided into 51 areas called municipalities and covers an area of about 64,156 square kilometres.



In 2021, the government created the Ministry of Citizen Participation in Nuevo León, to make sure that everyone in Nuevo León can take part in decisions by starting projects and creating spaces where people can join in. They aim to become a model for the whole country in getting people from every social background involved in government decisions, using an open style of government.

Within this inclusive approach to participation, **the government of Nuevo León is carrying out a community outreach strategy, going directly to schools and letting them have a say in participatory budgeting.** First, they pick groups randomly. Then they talk about ideas to make their schools better. After that, they vote on the best ideas and start working on them. So far, they've done 13 projects in 13 different parts of the state. This initiative promoting autonomy aims to develop a citizen participation culture within the young generation.

As part of the learnings of this process, Nuevo León's Ministry of Citizen Participation has acknowledged that **it takes time and effort to set up participatory spaces where everyone can join in and feel comfortable sharing their ideas.** They have also observed that children need

specific methods to be involved in decisions that affect them, and grown-ups need to help them with that. Overall, this regional government is guaranteeing the full respect of children's rights throughout the process.

As part of the outcomes of the process of child and youth participation, they have published a guide and a book. **The guide supports adults and young people to encourage children to take part in participatory processes. The book teaches children about their right to have a say in issues that matter to them.**

Lessons learnt:

- It is essential for young and adult people that guide and promote children's significant participation to be prepared and acquire experience.
- Building participatory spaces requires time and constancy to build confidence and a common understanding of the importance and impact of the participation.
- Participatory Budgeting requires strengthening institutional capacities and skill development.



Scan or click on these QR codes to access the presentation of Nuevo León



Scan or click on this QR code to access the website of Citizen Participation in Nuevo León State

Accra (Ghana)

Accra, the capital of Ghana, has a population of approximately 1,782,150 people as of 2021. It is also the largest city in Ghana with the second-highest population and the highest population density and 13 district governments covering its territory of 199.4 square kilometres. **Youth is one of the most important age groups to consider, as they make up 56% of the population in the city of Accra.**



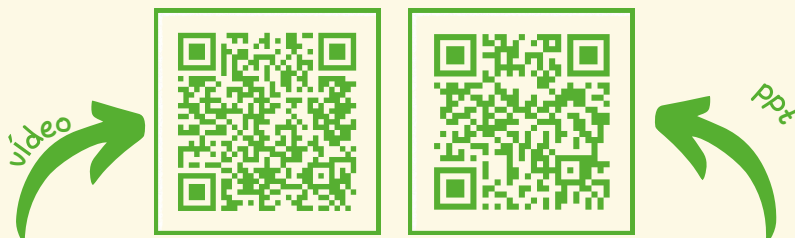
Due to its demographics, **Accra prioritises the inclusion of youth and children in various city development agendas, including identifying needs, planning, finding solutions, implementing programs, and decision-making in developmental and local governance.** The city's development revolves around the active involvement of youth in budgeted plans and strategic projects aimed at improving lives in the city.

Children are empowered through initiatives such as free basic education and access to information provided at community libraries, digital centres, and national development feedback channels, overseen by Social Welfare and Community Development Officers. Additionally, the National Center for Civic Education and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection's Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit play essential roles in **providing security and support to marginalised and vulnerable children, youth, and women at the district level, with designated desk officers.**

Accra has launched several initiatives to promote youth participation through the introduction of digital participation tools, such as **youth employment applications**, **educational initiatives**, **advocacy programs** like "Better Life for Girls," and **projects** like "Youth in Agriculture: Planting for Food and Jobs."

Lessons learnt:

- Empowering Institutions through effective decentralisation maximises efforts and outcomes.
- Economic hardships and inadequate access to infrastructure hamper the participation of children and youth.
- Traditions and culture are key elements that impact children and youth inclusion.



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Key lessons and recommendations

1. Education and awareness

Provide education on civics, democracy, and citizenship from an early age. Incorporate civics education into school curricula and extracurricular activities to cultivate an understanding of rights, responsibilities, and democratic processes.

2. Youth-friendly spaces

Create safe, inclusive and comfortable spaces where children and youth feel open to expressing their opinions, ideas, and concerns. These spaces could be physical (e.g., community centres, schools) or virtual (e.g., online forums, social media platforms).

3. Youth leadership opportunities

Empower young people to take on leadership roles in decision-making processes and community initiatives. Provide opportunities for youth to serve on youth councils, advisory boards, or participate in youth-led projects.

4. Accessible information

Ensure that information about civic participation opportunities, such as voting, volunteering, and advocacy, is easily accessible and understandable to children and youth. Use age-appropriate language and communication channels to reach young people effectively.

5. Supportive adults

Encourage the involvement of supportive adults, such as parents, teachers, and mentors, who can serve as role models and provide guidance and encouragement for youth participation in civic activities.



6. Interdisciplinary approaches

Integrate civic education with other disciplines, such as social studies, history, and language arts, to provide holistic learning experiences that connect civic concepts with real-world issues and contexts.

7. Youth-driven projects

Encourage youth to initiate and lead community projects that address local issues and contribute to positive social change. Provide resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities to support youth-driven initiatives.

8. Partnerships and collaboration

Forge partnerships with schools, youth organisations, government agencies, and community groups to leverage resources and expertise in promoting youth civic participation. Collaborative efforts can enhance outreach, programming, and sustainability.

9. Recognition and validation

Recognise and celebrate the contributions of young people to civic life through awards, certificates, and public acknowledgment. Validation of youth efforts reinforces their sense of agency and encourages continued engagement.

10. Feedback and evaluation

Solicit feedback from young participants to continuously improve civic participation programmes and ensure they remain relevant and impactful. Evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives in achieving their goals and make adjustments as needed.



Resources

- Action Guide 5: Young people's participation & civic engagement. <https://www.generationunlimited.org/documents/Action-Guide-5-Young-people-participation-and-civic-engagement>
- Unveiling the Future of Youth Civic Engagement. <https://www.ald-europe.eu/unveiling-the-future-of-youth-civic-engagement-meet-pre-selected-partners/>
- Youth Participation. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation>
- Anu Gretschel, Tiina-Maria Levamo, Tomi Kiilakoski, Sofia Laine, Niina Mäntylä, Geoffrey Pleyers, Harri Raisio. (2014). [Youth Participation Good Practices in Different Forms of Regional and Local Democracy](#).

Explore more

- Duarte, Adrià, Amanda Fléty and Jaume Puigpinós (UCLG IOPD and CSIPDHR). (2022). "Local institutions for civic participation, participatory budgeting and planning, inclusion of youth and migrants". GOLD VI Pathways to Equality Cases Repository: Democratizing. United Cities and Local Governments. <https://oidp.net/en/publication.php?id=1857>
- Lundy, L., Marshall, C., & Orr, K. (2016). Child Participatory Budgeting: A Review of Global Practice. <https://oidp.net/en/publication.php?id=1107>
- Final report from the World Forum for Democracy. (2015). From Participation to Influence: Can Youth Revitalise Democracy?. <https://rm.coe.int/16806b1656>

Papers & publications

- "Children and Young People's Participation Rights: Looking Backwards and Moving Forwards" by Laura Lundy (2021).
- "Youth Participation in Urban Governance: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles and Impacts of Youth Councils in Different Countries" by Jason Wood (2020).
- "Gender-Responsive Approaches to Children and Youth Participation in Peacebuilding: Lessons from Colombia" by Maria P. Luna and Clara R. Flores (2021).

- "Youth Participation in Local Governance: The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Inclusion and Representation" by Emily R. Keller and Sophia L. Smith (2019).
- "Children's Participation and Human Rights: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Directions" by Michael Freeman (2020).
- "Inclusive Participation: Engaging Marginalized Youth in Local Decision-Making Processes" by Sarah L. Johnson and David A. Taylor (2019).
- "The Impact of Participatory Budgeting on Youth Empowerment: Evidence from Brazil" by Ana Paula Costa and Marcelo Ribeiro (2021).
- "Children's Rights and Participation in the Digital Age: A Multidimensional Approach" by Sonia Livingstone and Amanda Third (2019).
- "Youth-Led Advocacy for Social Justice: Case Studies from South Africa" by Thandeka M. Ngcobo and Sipho Z. Dlamini (2020).
- "Empowering Young Girls through Participation: Lessons from Community Projects in India" by Priyanka R. Chaturvedi and Nandita S. Gupta (2022).



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