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Navigating between meaningful ideas and meaningless practices:

Experts' views on youth public participation in Finland and Poland

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Abstract

This article examines the participation of young people in public life. Drawing on expert interviews and policy analysis, the study explores how institutional frameworks, political culture, and societal norms shape youth participation mechanisms and influence their ability to move beyond tokenism. In Finland, the Nordic welfare model, high institutional trust, and established youth policy frameworks create favorable conditions for engagement, yet reliance on formal representative structures often limits its responsiveness to spontaneous or grassroots initiatives. In Poland, the post-socialist legacy of low institutional trust, political polarization, and weaker traditions of structured civic dialogue contributes to the marginalization of youth voices. The findings highlight common barriers in both countries, including an overreliance on representative mechanisms, insufficient feedback loops, and the exclusion of marginalized youth. Theoretically, the study reaffirms the relevance of the 'invited' versus 'invented' spaces framework for cross-national analysis and underscores the need for intersectional approaches to youth participation. Practically, it offers recommendations for policymakers, educators, and participation facilitators, emphasizing the need to diversify participatory opportunities, broaden the scope of youth influence, and foster intergenerational dialogue.

Keywords: *youth participation, experts' views, local governance, recommendations, Poland, Finland*

1 Introduction

The contemporary generation of young people is confronted with a constellation of complex and interrelated challenges arising from global political instability, armed conflicts, and the enduring effects of neoliberal capitalism. These dynamics have contributed to heightened levels of precarity, forced migration, and identity disruptions, as youth navigate increasingly uncertain life trajectories. The neoliberal paradigm, characterized by the valorization of individualism, economic competition, and consumerist logic, has profoundly shaped the structural conditions under which youth transition to adulthood (Butler and Coward, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to mental health and socio-cultural development (Radzik-Maruszak and Szulc-WałECKa, 2025). Within the European context, young people face additional ongoing difficulties such as labor market insecurity, delayed economic independence, and diminished

prospects for self-sufficiency and psychosocial stability (Berry and McDaniel, 2022; Haikkola et al., 2022; Honkatukia and Rättälä, 2023; Jaatsi and Kymäläinen, 2023; Mrozowicki and Kajta, 2021). These conditions have prompted an intensified scholarly and policy-oriented focus on youth well-being and social inclusion, underscoring the necessity of integrating youth perspectives into broader socio-political frameworks and decision-making processes.

There is a growing consensus that young people must be heard and actively engaged in matters that directly impact their lives. However, the recognition of the right of non-adults to express their opinions on issues affecting their quality of life has been a protracted process. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), established in 1989, formally acknowledged the right of children to participate in societal affairs. The concept of youth participation encompasses a broad spectrum of interpretations, forms, and opportunities. Interestingly, while some countries adopt a formal approach by developing public policies and legal frameworks to facilitate youth participation, others favor informal solutions and democratic experiments (Juusola and Varsaluoma, 2023; Weiss, 2020).

Young people's experiences of public participation cannot be understood without taking into account the broader societal and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. This article examines experts' views collected during focus group interviews on youth participation in two different settings – Poland and Finland – with particular emphasis on the *instruments for* and *areas of* youth engagement in public life. The experts' opinions are crucial in this context because they provide informed, evidence-based insights that can critically assess and shape effective strategies for enhancing youth participation in public governance, ensuring that such initiatives are both meaningful and impactful. Additionally, they provide data to link macro- and micro-level analyses of youth engagement (Von Soest, 2023, p. 278).

Finland and Poland were selected for this study because they represent markedly different yet comparable contexts for analyzing youth local participation. Finland, as a Nordic welfare democracy, combines a long-standing culture of citizen engagement, high levels of institutional trust, and well-developed youth policy frameworks (OECD, 2021). Poland, by contrast, is a transition democracy still in the process of institutionalizing participatory mechanisms, with lower levels of institutional trust and more fragmented youth policy arrangements. Despite these structural differences, both countries maintain formalized mechanisms for youth engagement, such as youth councils, yet face similar challenges in ensuring that these mechanisms move beyond tokenism to have meaningful influence. This contrast-similarity dynamic makes Finland and Poland a valuable comparative pairing for examining how political culture, institutional design, and societal norms shape the level and nature of youth participation.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the concept of youth participation in public governance, presenting arguments both for and against the involvement of non-adults in (local) decision-making processes. We then provide an overview of the youth participation instruments available in Finland and Poland. Subsequently, we introduce our data, methods, and research findings. We conclude that, while youth participation is officially promoted in both countries, its practical implementation frequently adheres to conventional and conformist forms of engagement, resulting in ambiguous outcomes. In the context of these findings, we propose several practical recommendations for policymakers and facilitators of participatory processes.

2 Youth engagement in public matters: Overcoming the hurdles

While participation has been a focal point of research for several decades, the study of youth participation is a relatively nascent field. The issue of public engagement among youth remains neither universal nor a leading topic in public discourse (Bessant, 2004; Tsekoura, 2016b). Non-adults are often regarded as peripheral participants in participatory processes and are less frequently recognized as full-fledged actors in decision-making. Several critical issues arise within this context. First, it is frequently acknowledged that formalized decision-making processes, predominantly based on representative democracy, permit legitimate democratic participation only to individuals who meet certain criteria, such as age, experience, or specific types of knowledge. Consequently, the political agency of youth is often excluded, as their opinions are not deemed politically relevant according to adult-centric standards (Bosco, 2010; Häkli and Kallio, 2019; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). Second, as a corollary of the above, young people are often perceived as laypersons lacking the requisite social and political background to effectively articulate their views (McKay, 2014).

Some scholars argue that young people cannot fully exercise rights until they are capable of assuming responsibility (Matthews et al., 1999, p. 136). This perspective positions them as *objects* rather than *subjects* of policymaking, as evidenced by the fact that most public authorities and NGOs work *for* young people rather than *with* them (Lehtonen and Radzik-Maruszak, 2024). Consequently, inclusive governance is significantly constrained. Conversely, involving non-adults in governance necessitates the careful design of instruments and methods that enable their meaningful incorporation into decision-making. However, this poses substantial challenges for elected officials, bureaucrats, and adult citizens, often resulting in a participatory agenda that is built on pseudo forms of involvement, such as manipulation, decoration, or tokenism. In such cases, young people have little or no control over their participation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992).

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the approach to youth participation. The influence of international organizations, which have fostered a trend toward the involvement of young people by grounding their right to participate in public life within the framework of fundamental rights, has been particularly significant. The academic literature offers numerous arguments in favor of involving youth in decision-making processes. As Mannermaa (2007, p. 140) notes, 'A person has to train to be a player in democracy at an early age. Each generation has to study the principles of democracy and civilization right from the basics' (Gretschel et al., 2011, p. 15). It is unreasonable to expect young people to acquire civic knowledge and skills without practical experience (Hart, 1992). Therefore, fostering citizenship and creating meaningful forms of involvement are essential for the development of future civil society (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Mannermaa, 2007). Young people should have opportunities to express their views, effect change, and approach issues differently from adults (Matthews et al., 1999).

Early inclusion in decision-making processes can contribute to the empowerment, competence, and connection between non-adults and adults (Zeldin et al., 2007). Additionally, youth participation may increase their interest in and propensity for community service, political action, and other forms of public engagement (Bessant, 2004). Youth should be recognized as a valuable resource for policymakers and regarded as experts who offer unique perspectives and insights. Moreover, they possess knowledge and competencies that can be crucial for the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of local policies (Sińczuch, 2015). Furthermore, youth engagement can lead to more efficient and effective policies, enabling communities to implement lasting improvements that youth will support (Collins et al., 2016; Frank, 2006;

Mitra, 2005). Conversely, disregarding the potential of young people as stakeholders in the public sphere and questioning their role as ‘*experts*’ in public affairs can adversely affect the quality of public services and their alignment with young people’s expectations. Additionally, undermining their social rights may result in the long-term disengagement of this demographic from public affairs, leading to an irreversible loss of social capital that, if untapped, may accumulate in other areas of public life.

Similar to adult practices, youth participation can manifest in both formal and informal modes (Bherer et al., 2023). Formal participation is typically associated with institutional arrangements that are imposed top-down, formalized, and embedded within a specific political and legal framework. As Juusola and colleagues (2023) observe, most available forms of participation are tokenistic and, simultaneously, unattractive to young people. According to these authors, formal participation often serves as a ‘bypass’ to draw attention to particular groups – most frequently those who are marginalized, underrepresented, ignored, or diminished. The objective is to create institutional settings, referred to as ‘invited spaces’ within public arenas that address adolescent issues (Cornwall, 2004; Kersting, 2013). The rules governing these spaces, the degree of openness to young citizens, and, consequently, the potential for youth to influence the public sphere, are determined by the authorities. As a result, the functionality of these spaces and the role of young people within them are contingent upon the context and the perception of participation by public authorities (Cornwall, 2008; Tsekoura, 016a).

Therefore, despite the formal existence of participatory institutions for youth, their role in public life can be diminished or even reduced to a mere facade. Tsekoura asserts that institutions of participation dedicated to young people often replicate the issues found in adult participation. They largely ‘copy’ solutions characteristic of representative democracy, allowing only a select few young people who can navigate formal rules to participate in these formalized and institutionalized spaces (Tsekoura, 016a, p. 329). Cornwall (2008, p. 278) emphasizes that ‘being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice’. The mere existence of institutional arrangements is insufficient to guarantee meaningful participation in decision-making processes; political will on the part of decision-makers is also essential. Conversely, informal participation occurs outside the official channels sanctioned by the state, providing an alternative to institutionalized forms that are often perceived as unwelcome or unfamiliar by youth. In this way, ‘invented spaces’ emerge from bottom-up initiatives that are widely accepted and preferred by young people. These spaces can encompass a range of activities, including protests, various forms of resistance to established institutions, and the everyday routines typical of youth (Kersting, 2013, p. 271). However, Juusola and Varsaluoma (2023, p. 96-97), drawing on Finnish experiences, note that informal participation, while favored by youth, is often viewed unfavorably by decision-makers.

3 Youth participation in local governance: The experience of Finland and Poland

Finnish and Polish self-governments represent distinct governance models: Nordic, and Central and Eastern European, respectively (Loughlin et al., 2012). These models differ in terms of values, traditions, and experiences related to citizen involvement in public affairs (Bäck and Kestilä, 2009; Lasinska, 2013). These differences are also evident in the realm of young people’s participation.

Like other Nordic states, Finland has been at the forefront of incorporating youth perspectives into public administration, exemplified by the establishment of the Office of Ombuds-

man for Children (Law on the Ombudsman for Children 21.12.2004/122). Interest in youth participation has been prominent in Finland for the past 20 years, driven by two main justifications. First, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (*United Nations, 1989*) grants young people the right to be heard in decisions that affect them. Second, it is believed that participation experiences at a young age strengthen democratic values and equip young people with the skills needed to influence politics. Currently, Finland's structures for youth participation are outlined and governed by several laws. One of the most significant regulations is the Youth Act (1285/2016), which seeks to enhance young people's engagement in society based on guiding principles such as transnational interaction, cultural diversity, healthy lifestyles, sustainable development, and environmental respect. The Act mandates the preparation of a cross-sectoral program for youth work and youth policy, detailing four-year goals (Juusola and Varsaluoma, 2023). Other laws guarantee the voice and involvement of young people in welfare and other social activities, including the Basic Education Act (628/1998, 47a§), which affirms children's rights to express their views on education, and the Early Childhood Education Act (36/2016, 7b§), which emphasizes the importance of hearing children's opinions in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of early childhood education (Vlasov et al., 2019). Additionally, the Child Welfare Act (417/2007, 5§) prioritizes the child's own opinion (Pösö and Enroos, 2017). Young people also have the right to voice their opinions and participate based on the Land Use and Building Act 132/1999 and the Local Government Act 410/2015. Moreover, the Finnish Government is required to adopt a specific youth policy development program every four years (Council of Europe, 2011). The National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme 2020–2023 (VANUPO) outlines the diversification of instruments for youth participation and direct democracy for young people (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

In Poland, the concept of young people's participation emerged alongside the democratic transformation and the ratification of the UNCRC in 1989. Numerous initiatives, including the establishment of the Ombudsman for Children, have focused on the public rights of children and young people, although not specifically on their participation in public life (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2021). Unlike Finland, despite the growing emphasis on youth inclusion and actions taken, for example, by the EU, Poland has lacked strategic solutions and youth policies that would support public participation (Gašior-Niemiec and Kotarba, 2014). This omission was also evident in the National Action Plan for Children 2004–2012, 'Poland for Children', adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2004 (NPD, 2004). The document did not address the participation of young people in public life but rather focused on the protection of their rights, including the right to life and health, education, poverty prevention, and addressing familial and other life-related risks (Podlewska et al., 2019). Public participation issues were also only minimally addressed in the State Strategy for Youth for 2003–2012 and the Government's Youth Social Activity Program for 2015–2016, 'Active Youth' (Gašior-Niemiec and Kotarba, 2014; Kochman, 2022; Zielińska, 2009). Slight changes became visible in the second decade of the twenty-first century when Poland finally developed institutions dedicated exclusively to young people or co-created by them (Rodziewicz, 2016). These include the Council for Dialogue with the Young Generation, the Youth Climate Council, the Youth Justice Council, and the Government Plenipotentiary for Youth Policy (Kochman, 2022). In 2022, the Polish government adopted the first national program to promote youth community and public activity, as well as bottom-up youth initiatives – the Government Youth Fund Program for 2022–2033 (Rada Ministrów, 2022).

In practice, youth participation in both countries takes on various, yet at the same time, similar forms. Finnish and Polish local authorities are required to establish formal participa-

tory institutions that enable young people to engage in local matters. In both countries, youth councils (YCs) are the most common and strongly legislated instruments that allow youth to influence local decision-making. In Finland, YCs represent young people's views and ensure their opportunity to influence the planning, preparation, execution, and monitoring of activities related to the well-being, health, education, living environment, housing, or mobility of the municipality's residents (Section 26, Local Government Act 410/2015). In 2017, it was estimated that 80 percent of Finnish municipalities had such bodies (Valtiovarainministeriö, 2017). In Poland, youth councils have been operational since the early 1990s. However, in 2021, the regulations concerning these councils were amended, granting them slightly more powers. Currently, they consult, advise, and initiate actions at the local level. It is estimated that around 500 YCs operate across Poland (Wyrzykowska and Zapolski-Downar, 2021). Furthermore, in both Finland and Poland, many municipalities are experimenting with other democratic innovations dedicated to young people, including youth and school participatory budgeting (Lehtonen and Radzik-Maruszak, 2024).

4 Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative approach to analyze expert perceptions of youth participation in Poland and Finland. The research is based on two virtual focus group interviews with eleven experts from both countries, specializing in youth participation, governance, and public policy (*Appendix*). The study follows the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) approach, selecting Finland and Poland for their contrasting political cultures, historical legacies, and governance models (Anckar, 2008). While Finland, as a Nordic welfare democracy, has a well-established participatory culture, Poland, a post-socialist democracy, continues to face challenges in institutionalizing youth engagement.

For the purpose of this study, 'experts' are defined as key informants in the field – individuals responsible for investigating, developing, implementing, and evaluating policies, strategies, or solutions related to youth participation (Meuser and Nagel, 2009). Their extensive experience and specialized knowledge provide critical insights into youth engagement in decision-making processes. This research intentionally focuses on their perspectives to uncover the complexities and nuances of youth participation, offering a critical evaluation of existing approaches.

The expert focus group interviews were conducted as an initial phase of the project, serving as a preliminary exploration before engaging with other stakeholder groups involved in youth participation. By consulting external specialists (Kallio et al., 2016), the research team aimed to test and refine initial assumptions, ensuring a well-grounded analytical framework. Each focus group discussion was structured around two core themes: 1) forms of youth participation – assessing both formal mechanisms (e.g. youth councils, participatory budgeting) and informal engagement (e.g., protests, digital activism); and 2) youth autonomy and decision-making power – examining the extent to which young people influence governance structures.

Experts were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring representation from academia, policymaking, and civil society organizations.¹ Each session lasted 90 minutes, was transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis with MAXQDA software. The coding process involved an initial set of predefined categories derived from the literature (e.g., institutional vs. non-institutional participation, youth

¹ To enhance transparency, an anonymized list of experts, including their country of residence and research field, is provided in the Appendix.

autonomy, decision-making power) and was supplemented by inductively generated codes emerging from the data (e.g., perceptions of tokenism, political engagement, inclusion and exclusion of marginalized youth). To ensure comparability and reliability, coding was double-checked by independent researchers from both country teams. Given the scope of this article, only selected excerpts from the expert interviews are cited in the following sections to illustrate key findings².

5 Results and discussion

5.1 *Forms of youth public participation*

The creation of participatory instruments is determined by the nature of the political system, the level of institutional trust, the experience of societies in using democratic mechanisms, as well as other contextual factors (Hruška and Balík, 2025; Willems et al., 2020). At the same time, experiences across many countries indicate that youth public participation often mirrors the forms of engagement seen among adults, such as youth councils and participatory budgeting. The analysis of the interviews revealed differences in the experts' approaches to those issues, which translates into different understandings of participation and the use of participatory institutions.

Experts from both countries agreed on the need for combining formal and informal instruments of youth public participation. In Finland and Poland, youth councils are the primary, formal mechanism for involving young people in public affairs. At the same time, though the formalization and institutionalization of participatory instruments may be essential in democratizing societies, this approach raises questions and doubts. First, one of the Polish experts drew attention to the purpose of setting up institutions and their role in society. He asked:

What is the role of the participatory institution designed for young people? Is it meant to be part of the community or simply a clique that serves to get its foot in the door?

(E2/FGI/PL)

The Poles additionally underline different reasons for creating institutional arrangements.

On the one hand, youth public participation is driven by bottom-up, spontaneous initiatives supported by local community leaders, teachers, or local authorities (Vromen and Collin, 2010). On the other hand, top-down and instrumental activities (with political inspiration) can be observed. Additionally, contrary to Finland, the problem is a lack of a coherent youth policy in Poland, as one of the experts stated.

In the case of Poland, it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for institutionalizing participation mechanisms because there is a de facto lack of a youth policy that addresses participation issues.

(E2/FGI/PL)

Therefore, there are doubts related to the factual motivation for institutionalization. Second, as one Finnish expert pointed out, well-known, formal instruments such as YCs attract only some 'types' of young people. He addressed this problem in the following way:

I also saw that for many people, participants, youth participation actually only accumulates privileges because they are already very competent young people. They're very active citizens, they're engaged in NGOs, in school, student councils, and so forth... For them, access to

² Excerpts from interviews cited in this paper have been quoted verbatim, without corrections or editing.

another channel of participation just means that they're accumulating political capital, and social capital and further developing their competences.

(E2/FGI/FI)

In this context, formal public participation includes youth that is already active and excludes those individuals who are unable to smoothly navigate among established rules and those who are withdrawn, shy, or come from vulnerable groups and backgrounds (Bečević and Dahlstedt, 2022). Additionally, formal mechanisms can be dominated by a small group of the most active adolescents, who use them to pursue their own goals rather than those of the community. Importantly, experts cautioned against treating youth as a homogeneous category. Both in Finland and Poland, formal mechanisms of public participation tend to attract young people with higher levels of social and cultural capital – those from more affluent backgrounds, with supportive families, or with prior civic experience. Young people from working-class backgrounds, rural areas, or those identifying ethnic minority communities often face additional barriers to engagement, including limited access to information, financial constraints, and experiences of discrimination. Without targeted outreach and support, participatory processes risk reinforcing existing inequalities by privileging those already empowered to navigate formal structures. From this perspective, institutionalized forms of public participation may not perform the task for which they were created, e.g., by polarizing youth, excluding some individuals or groups. Moreover, the institutionalization of forms of public participation of young people is apparent. Although the number of participatory instruments is increasing, young people are not involved in decision-making. Youth public participation thus does not often expand beyond the voicing of opinions. Finally, experts from both countries are also concerned about the ineffectiveness of institutionalized participatory instruments. The instruments are often created for young people without genuine involvement, leading to their passivity and a lack of youth interest in public issues (Huttunen, 2021). One Finnish expert pointed out in this context:

In some cases, when such venues or activities fail to engage young people, they position themselves as spectators of society, assuming the role of outsiders.

(E2/FGI/FI)

The above statement pertains to instances in which individuals signal their disapproval of institutions that they perceive as misaligned with their interests or values. According to Finnish experts, this dynamic can be observed in the context of electoral cycles: relatively low voter turnout among young people may, on one level, constitute an act of dissent or resistance (Antila, 2019; Huttunen, 2021), while on another, it may represent a deliberate and strategic mode of engagement with public affairs, expressed through the conscious choice of non-participation (E3/GFI/FI). The search for other, non-formal, and institutionalized forms of participation may also indicate a lack of agency and the perception that institutional activities do not produce any results. Another reason is that young people rarely have a chance to control the outcomes of formal, institutional participation. At the same time, what was particularly stressed by Polish experts is that both institutional and non-institutional activity is a prerequisite for young people to be engaged in public life. According to one expert:

If there is no space for activity – institutional or non-institutional – it is hard to look for activism, or we will simply conclude that young people are not present, disengaged, and they just do not exist in the public space.

(E2/FGI/PL)

Finally, the distinction between ‘invited’ and ‘invented’ spaces provides a useful lens for comparing both countries. Invited spaces — formalized arenas such as consultations or youth councils — are structured and regulated by public authorities, often reflecting top-down agendas. Invented spaces, by contrast, emerge from youth-led initiatives outside institutional control, including protests, social media campaigns, and grassroots community projects. Finnish experts noted that municipal authorities occasionally attempt to integrate invented spaces into formal decision-making, for example, by inviting climate strike organizers to policy discussions. However, these invitations tend to be selective and often channel activism into pre-defined, less confrontational formats. In Poland, experts emphasized that invented spaces are more likely to be ignored or even stigmatized by authorities, particularly when they involve contentious political issues. This divergence highlights the differing political cultures and degrees of openness to bottom-up civic energy in the two countries.

5.2 *Areas and autonomy of youth participation*

The research indicates that not only are forms of participation important, but also the matters in which one can have a say. In theory, especially in Finland, the legal framework allows for involving young people in ‘serious’ public affairs. In reality, youth councils have the right to be *heard* in various areas of public affairs, rather than influence them (Council of Europe, 2011; Henriksson, 2020). The analysis of experts’ statements indicates, however, that in both Finland and Poland, young people are mainly involved in trivial matters. They do not participate in city planning or designing neighborhood areas, but rather in creating local playgrounds, planning menus in school cafeterias, or buying equipment for teaching rooms. One of the Finnish experts addresses this issue in the following way:

We should be able to look more critically at those sectors that young people are able to influence. Are they the immediate surroundings of young people? Such as schools? And how well they can influence other issues, for example, urban planning? These are critical issues. There are limits to what young people can do.

(E1/FGI/FI)

The mentioned Finnish expert added:

I’ve interviewed mayors [about youth participation], and they usually mention skate parks, which is an obvious example that young people have expertise in them. But critically speaking, we have talked about skate parks for 15 years. Maybe it is time to talk about other things as well, such as urban planning, social and health services, museums, and cultural services.

(E1/FGI/FI)

An expert from Poland made similar observations:

If you look at the UN documents on children’s participation, these say that the child has the right to have a voice. That doesn’t mean ‘childish’ things like playgrounds and so on. But in all matters like architecture and transportation as well. These are also issues that affect children. They influence them as citizens, so it’s quite obvious that children should be included. But here, there are cultural issues and ideas about the child’s place in society, limiting them to only what they need. So, we limit this participation only to playgrounds. And this is also important. But that’s not all.

(E3/FGI/PL)

The adult architects of public participatory processes conceive that young people can only be involved in less important matters (Achremowicz, 2020; Juusola and Varsaluoma,

2023; Kopińska, 2018) or even discourage them from engaging with public issues (Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al., 2010). The lack of support for youth participation is expressed, however, in the immediate environment of young people, such as by family members or teachers. One Finnish respondent addressed this issue in the following way:

School rules might say that young people can have an influence. But in practice, teachers might say that, well, you know it's really important that you participate, but look, we have the mathematics exam, and you need to study for math. So please don't do that [get involved in public matters] and [just] come to the mathematics lesson.

(E1/FGI/FI)

Against this background, experts from both countries emphasize that adults still dominate the process of youth public participation. In the Polish case, it was additionally stressed that this is culturally determined, as the division between the worlds of youth and adults has long been a feature of the country. Such an approach does not build young people's confidence or strengthen their sense of agency or ability to influence public affairs. The analysis of expert interviews also indicates the importance of ensuring the autonomy and transparency of institutions that allow youth to be involved in public affairs (Jarosz, 2016). One Polish panelist emphasized that young people cannot be invited or 'used' only when adults need them. In this form, the participatory process serves only adults and is instrumental and a sham. She addressed this issue in the following manner:

Sometimes, we think we cannot be participatory enough because we do not involve youth at all levels. That's OK. We don't have to involve them from A to Z. But we must be transparent about this. We cannot say: "We need your insights." And then we don't use their opinion. It is not fair. It's fair to say "we need your insights because we want to broaden our perspective and see things from more than one perspective".

(E3/FGI/PL)

As Finland has a longer experience of youth participation (Aalto, 1975), experts from that country highlighted different aspects of the relationship between youth and adults. The panel interview analysis indicates that the problem is the lack of cooperation with young people and the inadequate communication between local authorities and youth. Young people expect feedback on the activities they have participated in or initiated. They lose trust and interest in public matters if such information is not returned to them. As an illustration, one of the experts provided the case of the construction of a local sauna.

Children in early education wanted a sauna in the kindergarten. Moreover, it took ten years to organize the sauna. And then they were invited to the opening. It was ten years! So, when we talk about participation, we need to find a way to communicate with young people and think about the timeframe for activities. It is about interaction and how young people are informed about what happens when they say something and try to make an impact.

(E1/FGI/FI)

6 Conclusions, implications, and further research

In recent decades, youth participation has increasingly been presented as a 'good thing' – something to be promoted and considered beneficial for all members of society (Tisdall, 2008). This issue appears even more relevant today, as young people and adults face numerous social, economic, and political challenges. The results of our study indicate, however, that despite more 'friendly' rhetoric and a growing number of instruments designed to promote

youth involvement in public matters, engagement still encounters substantial barriers. These challenges are visible both in well-established democracies, such as Finland, and in countries with a turbulent past, such as Poland.

The first problem identified by experts concerns the prevailing approach to the organization of youth participation. Instruments dedicated to youth are largely based on representative mechanisms, with all their inherent weaknesses and drawbacks, including the tendency to involve those who are already active and engaged (Kiilakoski, 2014). In the view of experts, both countries lack spontaneous, one-off forms of engagement that differ from permanent, institutionalized solutions. At the same time, as Kersting (2013) observes, the pace and character of modern life often lead people to prefer short-term, spontaneous forms of activation rather than long-term solutions requiring sustained commitment. In both countries, a critical gap identified from a practical perspective is the insufficient attention given to the organization of the youth participation cycle and to the communication of its outcomes. Experts emphasized that young people often expect visible, immediate results from their involvement, reflecting their desire for tangible impact. Yet this expectation is frequently unmet within formalized participatory structures, such as youth councils, which typically operate with longer decision-making timelines. Without clear feedback mechanisms and transparent follow-up processes, youth engagement risks becoming superficial and tokenistic, ultimately undermining the motivation to participate in future initiatives.

According to experts in both Finland and Poland, young people tend to focus on areas traditionally associated with them, such as skate parks or school menus. The analysis, however, shows differences between the two countries. Finland, having implemented a youth policy many years ago, tends to involve young people in more substantial matters, although actions are still limited by institutional conformism and attachment to representative mechanisms. In Poland, shaped largely by its historical development, young people and their participation are not always taken seriously. Those under 18 are often perceived as being in a 'waiting room' on the way to adulthood. Moreover, a gap exists between civic and political activity: while the former is generally accepted and encouraged, the latter is often regarded by decision-makers as an area unworthy of investment.

From these findings, three main takeaways emerge. First, there is a persistent gap between the rhetoric of youth empowerment and the reality of participation, which remains constrained by structural and cultural barriers. Second, existing participatory structures often favor already active youth, leaving marginalized groups excluded and reinforcing inequalities (Augsberger et al., 2024; Cushing and van Vliet, 2017; Wyness, 2009). Third, thematic limitations restrict youth influence to narrow, age-specific topics, rather than enabling full participation in broader, more politically significant areas.

Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, our study reaffirms the relevance of the 'invited' versus 'invented' spaces framework for understanding youth participation in cross-national contexts, showing how political culture, governance traditions, and institutional trust shape opportunities for engagement and the reception of bottom-up activism. It also highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional lens, recognizing that youth are a heterogeneous group whose participation is influenced by socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, disability, and geographic location. From a practical perspective, our results indicate the need for a paradigm shift in youth participation, moving beyond tokenistic involvement toward more inclusive and impactful engagement. While formal structures such as youth councils remain valuable, they should be complemented by more flexible, project-based, and informal opportunities capable of engaging a wider range of young people. Youth should be invited to contribute not only to matters seen as 'youth issues' but also to significant policy

areas such as urban planning, education reform, climate action, and social services. Effective participation requires transparent communication and robust feedback loops, ensuring that young people's contributions are visibly acknowledged and acted upon. Without visible outcomes, there is a risk of disillusionment and disengagement. Capacity-building initiatives, including civic education and leadership training, are essential for equipping young people with the skills and confidence needed for meaningful engagement. Finally, a cultural shift in adult–youth relations is required, challenging adult-centric attitudes and fostering intergenerational dialogue based on mutual respect (Lehtonen and Radzik-Maruszak, 2024).

In conclusion, while Finland and Poland have taken important steps toward institutionalizing youth participation, significant work remains to ensure that young people are engaged not merely as symbolic actors but as equal partners in governance. Achieving this will require structural reforms, cultural change, and a sustained commitment to inclusivity, transparency, and mutual respect, enabling youth participation to become a transformative democratic practice that strengthens legitimacy and contributes to sustainable community development.

At the same time, certain limitations of our study must be acknowledged. The article presents only a portion of the collected research material and focuses primarily on expert perspectives. While the viewpoints of local authorities, officials, and young people themselves are indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of participation processes, they are not explored here and will be addressed in future publications. Future research should therefore include a wider range of stakeholders, expand the comparative framework to additional countries, and apply mixed-method approaches to capture both the depth and breadth of youth participation dynamics.

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Appendix:

Experts from Finland

(FI1) This expert is a researcher and practitioner affiliated with Tampere University. His work focuses on youth participation, democracy education, and the development of inclusive public policies for young people. He has extensive experience in both academic research and policy evaluation, with a particular interest in how institutional frameworks and educational practices can promote meaningful engagement and civic empowerment among youth.

(FI2) This expert is a researcher affiliated with the University of Jyväskylä, specializing in democratic education and youth participation. Her work focuses on the state and development of democracy education in schools, with particular attention to how educational practices can foster civic competencies and active citizenship among young people. She has contributed to both national and international projects examining participatory school cultures, student voice, and the role of education in sustaining democratic values.

(FI3) This expert is a researcher affiliated with Tampere University. She has research expertise in youth studies and social policy. Her work addresses issues of social inclusion, marginalization, and young people's encounters with institutions, often combining qualita-

tive research with participatory methods. She has led and participated in numerous interdisciplinary projects exploring the intersections of youth, gender, migration, and social justice.

(FI4) The expert is a university researcher at the University of Helsinki, specializing in disability studies, inclusive education, and youth transitions. Her research focuses on the lived experiences of young people in education and employment, particularly those facing structural barriers to participation. She has extensive experience in qualitative and participatory research methods and has contributed to national and international projects on equality, accessibility, and inclusive policy development.

(FI5) This expert is a researcher affiliated with Tampere University. His research focuses on political sociology, youth and citizen participation, and the dynamics of democratic agency. A key work examines outcomes of institutional youth participation, identifying pathways such as transformation, accumulation, and exit among young participants in municipal youth councils and participatory budgeting processes.

(FI6) The expert is a senior researcher based at Tampere University. Her academic expertise focuses on youth engagement, media literacy, and inclusion, with particular emphasis on participatory media methods that support marginalized or at-risk youth. Over recent years, she has led and contributed to action-oriented research exploring participatory photography, multiliteracies, and creative media production as tools to foster agency, social inclusion, and critical engagement among young people.

Experts from Poland

(PL1) The expert is a practitioner, researcher, and lecturer at the University of Łódź, specializing in social pedagogy, youth participation, and civic education. Her academic work focuses on the empowerment of young people, participatory methods in education, and the development of inclusive spaces for civic engagement. She has been involved in national and international projects promoting democratic competencies among youth and has published on issues related to educational innovation and participatory practices in local communities.

(PL2) The expert is a political scientist and senior researcher presently based in Germany, specializing in local governance, public participation, and democratic innovation. His work examines participatory budgeting, citizen engagement in municipal decision-making, and the design of deliberative processes. He has coordinated and contributed to numerous European research projects on participatory democracy and has published extensively on institutional frameworks and best practices for fostering inclusive, transparent governance at the local level.

(PL3) The expert is a professor of social pedagogy at the University of Silesia in Katowice, specializing in children's rights, child protection, and the social participation of young people. Her research focuses on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, mechanisms for safeguarding children's welfare, and the role of education in promoting civic engagement from an early age. She has served as an expert and consultant for governmental and non-governmental organizations, contributing to national and international initiatives on child protection and participatory rights.

(PL4) The expert is a cultural anthropologist and university lecturer at the Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, with expertise in youth studies, migration, and identity formation. Her research examines the everyday experiences of young people in diverse cultural contexts, including issues of mobility, belonging, and intercultural dialogue. She has been involved in

interdisciplinary projects combining anthropology, sociology, and education, and has published widely on topics related to youth, culture, and social change.

(PL5) The expert is an Associate Professor at the University of the National Educational Commission in Kraków, specializing in political science, civic education, and youth political participation. His research explores the political socialization of young people, democratic attitudes, and patterns of civic engagement, with a particular focus on comparative and longitudinal perspectives. He has participated in numerous national and international research projects on youth, democracy, and political culture, and his work has been published in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes.

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