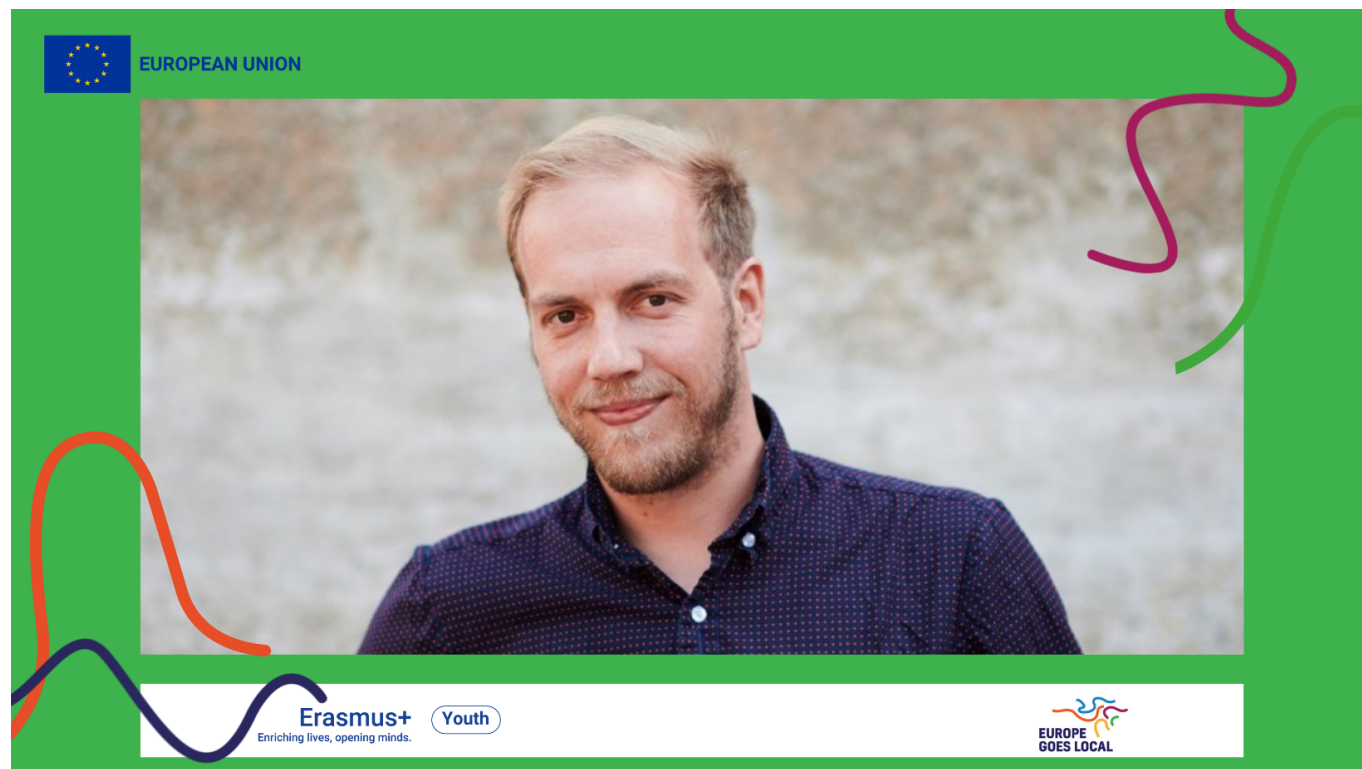


Does youth participation create better citizens? Conversation with Dr. Georg Boldt

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Creating conditions and setting standards on local, municipal level for young people to become impactful change-makers and consequently effective leaders is one of Europe Goes Local's primary goals. Recognizing youth participation as an essential element of citizenship in a democratic society, Europe Goes Local strives to implement initiatives and activities that foster meaningful youth participation in local government. The latter guarantees that youth perspectives and voices are heard and able to drive the local decision-making process.

One of EGL's recently organised activities was a Study Visit in Finland with a focus on the Finnish youth sector and youth participation work on municipal and local levels. Participants visited local youth organisations and municipalities to learn more about local youth work and exchanged stories and good practices of youth engagement in their own communities and countries.

Participants got to listen to speakers of various expertise in youth participation. Dr. Georg Boldt, working in the field of sociology, presented his doctoral dissertation titled *Citizens in Training. How institutional youth participation produces bystanders and active citizens in Finland*.

Encompassing the period of 2015-2018, the dissertation is based on more than 200 hours of participant observation of municipal processes for youth participation, conducted in both youth councils and in participatory budgeting events in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. Based on the practices of parliamentary decision-making, youth councils are the most typical forms of institutional

youth participation. On the other hand, the process of participatory budgeting offered by the city of Helsinki provides young people with the opportunity to influence local budgetary allocations of the city's Youth Department.

In his dissertation, Dr. Boldt identified four individual level outcomes of youth participation, which depended on the style of interaction in the participation process and whether participants felt they were able to exert any influence over decision-making:

1. A group of participants had a deep and fundamental experience of empowerment and transformation;
2. A group of socially privileged participants strengthened their position by accumulating influence;
3. Some participants left the process of participation to find different outlets for their civic engagement;
4. For a group of participants, the position of being a bystander was further reinforced;

We sat down with Georg Boldt to learn more about his dissertation and findings and their impact on understanding the complexities of youth participation better.

What is the relationship between (current) structures and young people participating in these structures?

GB: Many of the institutional youth participation structures that exist today are built on the model of representative democracy. Consequently, participation is open only to a group of elected representatives. Forms of democracy that favour popular inclusion would reach many more and offer a platform for political socialization for a generation that are less likely to engage with the traditional stakeholders in civil society and politics.

Are we approaching the concept and practice of youth participation correctly and justly? Does its use as an umbrella term overlook important aspects and nuances?

GB: A lot of times it seems that institutions are mixing up youth participation and participatory democracy. From a theoretical point of view participatory democracy signifies something quite different from most youth participation initiatives.

Are institutional approaches and practices adequate and reflective of the social, racial, economic and environmental landscape?

GB: Different youth participation projects cater for different kinds of young people. Youth councils, a form of youth participation in which young people meet and make decisions following parliamentary procedures have been criticized for mainly attracting groups of young people that already have a high capacity for public functioning. Meanwhile, young people from outside the world of formal politics don't find the parliamentary method of political debate and decision-making in representative structures to be attractive.

I believe it is possible to engage all kinds of people in institutional initiatives for participation in decision-making but in order to achieve pluralism in participation there is a need for diversity in the ways people are offered to engage.

There is a clear intention of institutions and existing frameworks to include young people in decision making processes. What outcomes did you identify that bring a deeper understanding of the complexity of youth participation?

GB: Offering all young people, the same opportunity for participation seriously misrecognizes the needs, skills and capacities of young people. An initiative that resonates with somebody might be completely dissonant for someone else. One reason for this is that people have different skills to start with. Some people need to develop efficacy and learn to justify their positions in a publicly acceptable way, whereas others are ready to debate the finer details of a law proposal for hours. There is also a need to consider the multitude of ways of imagining a different world. For some it is important to discuss issues like power, privilege and diversity, while others prefer to focus on ways to amend smaller everyday problems. Likewise, some people want to organize things rather than debate concepts and approaches.

After carefully observing youth councils in Finland, what conclusions can you make about the efficacy and the limitations of youth councils?

GB: Youth councils are organized in different ways and drawing any generally applicable conclusions is difficult. But I like to reiterate the need for more youth participation initiatives founded on ideas of popular inclusion in order to avoid youth councils becoming a breeding ground just for elite groups and prospective politicians.

How about participatory budgeting?

GB: In theory participatory budgeting is a brilliant way to engage people in participatory democracy. Also, compared to many youth councils, participatory budgets have real economic power. Again, it is important to consider the needs of the target group and to avoid the creation of black boxes where decisions on youth proposals are taken without transparency.

Q: What needs to change in order to make youth councils and participatory budgeting inclusive, representational and reflective of the diverse needs of young people?

GB: There needs to be more opportunities for young people to influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. The most common demand I heard during three years of fieldwork was a place for young people to spend time in, without a requirement to consume anything, in which they can feel safe and not be under the constant supervision of adults telling them what to do. Despite all kinds of youth participation initiatives, these spaces seem to be impossibly difficult to establish. I guess that as soon as institutional youth participation processes turn out to actually be able to influence the everyday lives of young people in a meaningful way, the interest for them will increase. In terms of making them inclusive and representative, I think the best solution is popular inclusion, i.e. that anybody can join whenever they wish. Moreover, there should be facilitation available to guarantee civility in debates, that everybody can get their voice heard, and much more attention should be given on how decisions are reached. Deliberation without forced closure forces participants to listen and consider each issue from multiple perspectives, developing empathy for others and skills in finding compromises.

Is the current approach to active youth democratic participation adequate to fulfilling its own mission and claim?

GB: I think there are big differences from city to city and country to country. In general, I think our

democratic institutions should become more inclusive of social diversity, that decisions should be taken closer to those affected by them, and that these processes should engage more people than they do now.

More information

[Find the dissertation here](#)

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