

# Mitmischen & Aufmischen im Dorf! (Be involved!) - Akzente Salzburg, Austria

16/10/2024 - Actions in EGL



Salzburg region has a long reference of caring about youth participation and engaging people from an early age. We talked with Kathrin Weichselbaumer-Wimmer, Regional Office Manager from the municipal youth center Akzente Salzburg about what made this project a good practice, and how it connected youth and allowed them to participate in the local policies and projects.

## How and why has your organization started addressing youth participation in decision-making?

Akzente Salzburg - *Initiatives for young people*, was established in 1986. The goal was to be the number one contact point in the state of Salzburg regarding youth issues. We work on behalf of and with support from the state to address young people's concerns, needs, and problems. We initiate, inform, advise, and support young people in the state of Salzburg in different areas of life.

In all of our projects, young people always have a central role. We see ourselves as their voice that connects them to other decision-makers. The motto: "Those who are already actively involved in their social environment as young people will also be interested in it as adults" is at the core of our work. The regional offices of Akzente Salzburg organize discussion rounds between mayors, municipal representatives, and young people in all districts of Salzburg. These rounds promote direct dialogue between public institutions and young people. We believe that it's the young people themselves who

can best say what they want and need.



## **What are the challenges in rural youth work when it comes to youth participation?**

One of the key challenges in rural youth work regarding youth participation is youth engagement. While mayors and local leaders are generally open to doing something for young people and involving them in decision-making processes, they often don't know how to effectively engage them. This is where we at Akzente, come in – our role is to show them possible methods and avenues for youth involvement.

Another challenge is motivating young people to participate in the first place. Young people often have many other concerns, such as school, making it difficult for them to prioritize civic engagement. They will engage if a project is worthwhile. It must be fun or something they can do together with their friends and they must have the impression, that their engagement has an impact and changes something. Moreover, youth is a relatively short phase of life, so once you've found young people who are interested in getting involved, it doesn't become a self-sustaining process. You have to continuously recruit and motivate new participants, which can be frustrating for mayors, as they tend

to think in longer timeframes.

However, when you find young people who are ready and willing to participate, it creates a great opportunity to foster dialogue between political decision-makers and the lived experiences of the younger generation. This can lead to quality projects that benefit not only the young people but also the entire community, offering enormous potential for growth and development on both sides.



**What is the 'Be involved' project about? How is it structured, who can participate and what are the results?**

### **Organization and Process**

The project starts with preparatory workshops on “EU & Democracy”, “Active Participation” and “Project Management”. The next step is coaching on project development, organization, and project flow. After that, we organize municipal days where youth can visit the municipal office and talk directly with the Mayor. Further, we organize trips to the federal state parliament of Salzburg and Vienna to visit the democratic institutions of Austria. The annual project cycle ends with a closing event, where the projects carried out by the youngsters are presented and a jury awards the best projects. The winning team gets to travel to Brussels and learn more about EU political systems.

### **Participants**

60 young people from Pongau and Flachgau (region Salzburg) ages 16-18 participate in the project. We want to reach youth with different family, religious, geographical, and social backgrounds. The age group was deliberately chosen at the young voting age. We need to reach not only young people from the central region but also young people from the inner mountains (Pongau, Lungau, Pinzgau). Due to their limited mobility, these young people often have more difficulty accessing youth participation initiatives.

## Results

The project gives young people an insight into democratic processes and politics at various levels. They deal with democratic decision-making processes and learn where they can contribute and have a say. The project builds their participatory skills. The accompanying expertise in the workshops gives an overview of the political system in Europe. First, they get familiar with their municipality, then with the state politics, then with the federal level, and finally at the EU level. During the elaboration and conception of their projects in their home community, youngsters learn to work together and make joint decisions. Next to developing their social skills, the participants gain project management and organizational skills. Further, the region has been strengthened through the voluntary commitment of the young people and a great project is realized in different towns. The projects are made public.



## **How is this annual project contributing to the quality development of rural youth work in your city/province?**

Participants in community projects are called upon to act in solidarity. Other young people in the communities notice that the concerns of young people are also heard and implemented in their home community. They are encouraged to take on projects themselves. Youth goals are made more widely known at the local and regional levels. People realize that the youth goals are also relevant for communities. Participating decision-makers in regional and provincial politics (e.g. mayors, youth provincial councilors, members of the provincial parliament) experience that young people want to make their opinions known. They take their ideas with them into their everyday political lives.

Young people experience that administration and politics is a dialogue between all participants, joint action, and joint responsibility. The understanding of democracy and political interest are promoted. Young people get to know the different political levels and enter into dialogue with decision-makers (at municipal, state, and federal levels). Young people learn how to formulate their questions and address them to politicians. They also get to know different fields of work in politics and administration and they expand a variety of skills. Young people receive background knowledge on youth strategies (in Austria and the EU) and information on various funding opportunities (Erasmus+, etc.). They deal with the youth goals and actively participate in their home community, independently implement their project ideas, and can authentically present their ideas. The politicians and multipliers involved in the project gain a comprehensive insight into the views and wishes of young people.



## What other interesting activities are coming up for the local youth work for your organization?

We created a service platform for municipalities in print and digital versions. This document provides an insight into the support options available for municipalities from the Youth Department and Akzente Salzburg outlining the first steps to make your municipality even more youth-friendly. It can be used as a tool for conducting a current state of analysis called the *Town Portrait*. It is the first step in evaluating what projects, facilities, and services a municipality already offers for young people. It is also a collection tool for existing and past projects. This database makes it easier to orient new youth representatives in a municipality. Additionally, it provides an overview of all the services offered by Akzente Salzburg that are relevant for municipalities and other important stakeholders in the youth sector. The municipalities get access to a selection of methods for effectively engaging with young people. Municipalities can always contact us to discuss the various options.

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