EmPOWER YOUth: youth-led municipality – Associatia GEYC, Bucharest, Romania

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We talked to Alexandra Peca, head of Democracy & Human Rights from **Group of the European Youth for Change – GEYC**, an organization with a mission to empower young people to bring positive change in their community. GEYC has been initiating many projects that contribute to the quality development of local youth work. In this interview, we invite you to learn from Alexandra everything about EmPOWER YOUth – its activities, impact, and plans for the upcoming period.

What is your organization Asociatia GEYC focusing on?

Asociația GEYC focuses on empowering young people to become active, positive forces in their communities. Our work centers on four key areas:

- **Democracy & Human Rights**: We promote democratic values, civic engagement, and awareness of human rights, helping young people understand and advocate for these principles at local and European levels.
- **Entrepreneurship & Employment:** We support youth in gaining the skills needed for economic independence through training in entrepreneurship, job readiness, and employment skills, preparing them for meaningful, sustainable careers.
- **Digital Skills**: In today's digital world, we help young people build essential digital competencies, including media literacy, online safety, and digital creativity, ensuring they can

thrive in a connected society.

- **Sustainability**: Our programs emphasize sustainable development, encouraging young people to engage in environmentally friendly practices and to promote sustainability within their communities.

Through these fields, Asociația GEYC aims to inspire youth-led change by providing tools, resources, and a strong network to support young people's growth and leadership.

What are the challenges in youth work in Romania when it comes to youth participation in decision-making?

Based on our previous experience in working with youth, we noticed that there is a growing gap between the public authorities and the people, and especially youth do not have either the necessary confidence to get involved, the information needed for involvement, or the trust in the local authorities. Many young people feel disconnected from local and national authorities, stemming from a history of limited responsiveness or transparency in government actions. This lack of trust makes young people less likely to engage, as they often doubt that their voices will have an impact on policy decisions.

Opportunities for meaningful participation are often scarce, particularly in smaller communities. Programs that encourage youth involvement in decision-making are more common in urban centers, leaving young people in rural areas or smaller towns with fewer resources and platforms to participate actively.

Even when youth councils or advisory bodies exist, they may not have substantial influence on decision-making processes. Youth representatives often find themselves in symbolic roles without real decision-making power, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Many young people lack adequate information on how they can engage in civic activities or participate in governance. Schools and other institutions often do not prioritize civic education, resulting in a lack of understanding of democratic processes, which limits youth confidence and readiness to participate.

In many communities, youth perspectives are undervalued, and decision-making is dominated by older generations. There is often a cultural perception that young people lack the experience needed to contribute to serious issues, which can result in young voices being overlooked or dismissed.

There is often a communication gap between authorities and youth. Without accessible and effective channels for sharing information, young people may remain uninformed about existing opportunities or ongoing policy discussions, further isolating them from decision-making processes.

What is the EmPOWER YOUth project about? Can you share more details about its process, participants, its results?

The **emPOWER YOUth** project is an initiative designed to cultivate the potential of young people in Câmpina, Romania. Our goal was to empower youth to be active participants in shaping their community's future, especially by strengthening their engagement in the local government process. Developed as part of the „For European Câmpina" collaboration protocol with the local authority, emPOWER YOUth operated under THE: PLACE program, managed jointly by ALDA and MAD, with funding from Stiftung Mercator.

The project addressed the lack of youth participation in decision-making in Câmpina, which stems from limited trust in local authorities and a communication gap between youth and municipal leaders. By engaging young people directly, the project sought to bridge this divide, allowing youth perspectives to shape policies that affect their lives. Through workshops, focus groups, interviews, and other consultative methods, we've created a model that not only empowered young people but also fostered collaboration with local authorities.

Project phases:

The project followed a structured, multi-step process designed to build both knowledge and action:

1. **Youth Empowerment Phase:** We began with a workshop involving 20 young people, selected for their enthusiasm and potential as change-makers. The training covered critical topics, including democracy, participation, research, activism, and social media communication, providing a strong foundation for the subsequent phases.
2. **Community Needs Research Phase:** Over seven months, our youth participants actively engaged with the broader community. They conducted focus groups, interviews, and consultations across local high schools, gathering diverse perspectives on issues such as education, employment, environment, and social matters. This in-depth research allowed them to identify and articulate the key concerns and aspirations of Câmpina's youth.
3. **Municipality Meetings**: Regular meetings were held with local authorities, sharing insights from the research and learning about ongoing initiatives. This collaborative approach aimed to align youth-driven insights with municipal priorities, creating a cohesive strategy.
4. **Youth Strategy Development**: Using data from the community research, the youth, in partnership with experts, developed a comprehensive Youth Strategy. This document outlined mission statements, objectives, and policy recommendations. The strategy includes a methodology, a needs analysis, actionable steps, and financing options, addressing key areas identified by the youth.

5. **Municipal Adoption:** The Youth Strategy was formally presented to the municipal council for review. Currently, the strategy is being integrated into local government planning, ensuring youth perspectives shape decision-making.

Participants:

The project involved 20 dedicated young people from Câmpina, serving as both researchers and advocates. This group represented a cross-section of the community, bringing diverse perspectives. Their role was central; they gathered insights, analyzed data, and helped draft the Youth Strategy. We also collaborated closely with municipal representatives, fostering a transparent and inclusive approach to local governance.

Results and Impact:

Through emPOWER YOUth, young people in Câmpina have gained valuable skills, knowledge, and confidence in democratic participation. The Youth Strategy is now in the final stages of adoption by the municipality, marking a significant milestone in local governance and setting a precedent for future youth engagement. We aim for emPOWER YOUth to serve as a replicable model for other communities, showing that youth engagement can be a powerful tool for creating an inclusive, forward-thinking society.

The Youth Strategy (in Romanian) is available at this link.

How is this project contributing to the quality development of youth work in the communities? What is the role of municipalities in this project?

The emPOWER YOUth project contributed significantly to the quality development of youth work in Câmpina by creating a structured, replicable model for youth engagement, equipping young people with leadership skills, and fostering active participation.

- **Skill development and capacity building**: The project provided comprehensive training in areas like democracy, research, activism, and social media, directly enhancing the participants' competencies. This foundational knowledge not only empowered them for this project but also prepared them for meaningful engagement in future community initiatives, instilling skills valuable for lifelong civic involvement.
- **Participatory approach to youth work**: By centering young people in research, strategy development, and community discussions, emPOWER YOUth advanced a participatory model

that went beyond traditional, top-down youth work. This approach respected young people as equal stakeholders and partners in creating solutions, making the youth work more relevant, responsive, and closely aligned with actual needs.

- **Building trust and transparency with local authorities:** A significant barrier to youth involvement was the lack of trust in local government. This project helped bridge that gap by establishing direct, open lines of communication between young people and the municipality. The project's transparent, collaborative format enhanced the credibility of youth work, making it more likely that young voices would be considered in future policy discussions.
- **Replicable model for other communities**: emPOWER YOUth served as a pilot initiative to model youth engagement and participatory governance in other communities. By creating a structured, documented Youth Strategy that municipalities could adopt, the project offered a blueprint for engaging youth in local governance processes, fostering higher quality and more inclusive youth work.

Role of the municipality in the project:

The municipality played a crucial role in emPOWER YOUth, contributing at several levels:

- **Stakeholder and partner in youth engagement**: Their collaboration with the youth added authenticity and reinforced the project's goal of bridging the gap between youth aspirations and policy decisions. By being involved from the start, they demonstrated their commitment to youth inclusion and governance.
- **Supporting youth strategy development and adoption**: They provided insights into the current challenges and opportunities in Câmpina, ensuring that the Youth Strategy was both ambitious and realistic. Their support for adopting the final strategy meant that youth-centered policies had a strong chance of being implemented, allowing the project to have long-lasting effects.
- **Resource and policy integration**: By adopting the Youth Strategy and integrating it into municipal planning, the municipality guaranteed that youth engagement would remain a priority, establishing a more inclusive approach to governance. This adoption also included identifying potential funding sources for implementing the recommendations, making the strategy not only symbolic but actionable.
- **Mentorship and guidance for youth participants**: Municipal officials acted as mentors, engaging in regular dialogues with youth participants, providing feedback, and educating them on municipal processes. This mentorship enhanced the young people's understanding of governance and demonstrated the municipality's commitment to sustainable, quality youth work in the community.

Through these roles, municipalities helped transform emPOWER YOUth into a sustainable model that advanced the quality of youth work and set an example of youth-inclusive governance for other communities.

Can you share more about the youth festival in Campina – what does it mean for the community and this project? What's coming up in 2025 from this project?

The Câmpina YOUthArt Festival has already held two successful editions in 2023 and 2024, each organized with the support of European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteers alongside local youth from Câmpina. This collaboration brought fresh perspectives and international energy to the festival, enhancing the quality and variety of activities available. With ESC volunteers, the festival expanded its reach and impact, blending local culture with global ideas and creating a vibrant, inclusive space for young people to connect, learn, and express themselves.

The festival's significance for both the community and the emPOWER YOUth project is multifaceted:

- **Empowering local youth**: The festival embodies the youth strategy goal of offering a platform for young people to express themselves and gain experience in event planning and organization. With activities like art workshops, sports tournaments, and interactive challenges, young participants not only enjoy themselves but also gain practical skills in leadership, teamwork, and creative expression.
- **Fostering community cohesion**: By bringing together youth from Câmpina and international volunteers through the European Solidarity Corps, the festival promotes cultural exchange and

strengthens local pride. Events like art workshops, social gatherings, and community competitions give participants and residents a shared experience that reinforces their sense of belonging and connection to the city.

- **Driving economic and social engagement:** The festival draws local and nearby residents, encouraging foot traffic to local businesses and spotlighting local talent. Events such as the handmade crafts fair and local band performances provide visibility to regional artists and entrepreneurs, generating both economic opportunities and a sense of pride in local culture.
- **Supporting the youth strategy goals**: The festival fulfills a key aspect of the Youth Strategy—creating regular, youth-centered events that allow young people to play an active role in shaping their community. It serves as a tangible result of the collaborative youth-municipality efforts initiated by emPOWER YOUth, showing the community the value of youth-led initiatives.

Looking ahead to 2025

In 2025, the emPOWER YOUth project aims to build on the festival's early success by adding more layers of engagement and sustainable development:

- **Expanding international participation**: Building on the success of the volunteer program, more international partnerships and exchanges are planned, bringing in diverse ideas and

perspectives. This will likely expand the cultural offerings and increase volunteer support for organizing and managing festival activities.

- **Incorporating feedback from past festivals**: Youth organizers will review feedback from the 2023 and 2024 editions to refine activities, improve logistics, and introduce new, requested features. This iterative approach ensures the festival remains relevant and youth-led.
- **Solidifying festival as a community tradition:** By ensuring municipal buy-in and continued support from local businesses and organizations, the 2025 edition will aim to establish Câmpina YOUthArt Festival as an annual tradition that becomes a core part of the city's cultural identity.
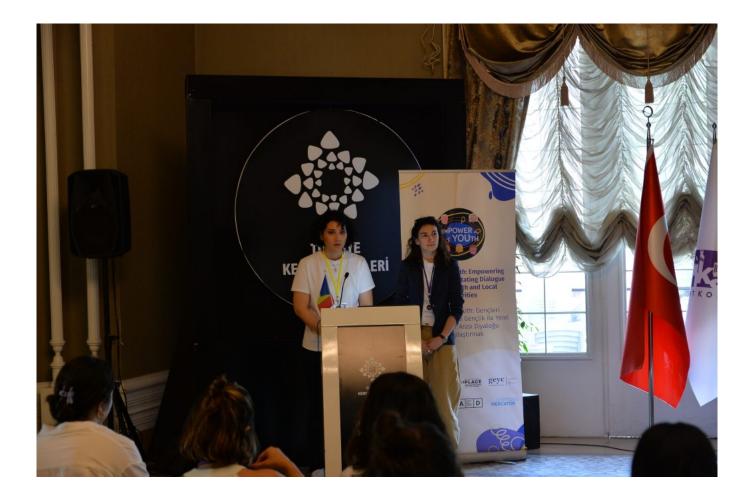
For more information and references, visit the official website of the festival: https://youth-art-festival.org/

How did the youth and local authorities respond to the participatory approach of the project?

The response from both youth participants and local authorities to the participatory approach of the emPOWER YOUth project was overwhelmingly positive, though it evolved as trust and understanding grew. Initially, some young participants were uncertain about whether their voices would truly be heard or if they would have a tangible impact on local decision-making. However, as they became more involved in activities like community needs assessments, focus groups, and periodic meetings with the municipality, their confidence grew. They saw that their insights were being taken seriously, especially when local authorities began integrating their findings and ideas into ongoing initiatives. This experience empowered the youth, making them feel valued as active contributors, not just observers, in the governance process.

Local authorities, on the other hand, were initially cautious but curious about how the process would unfold. As they engaged more with the youth through collaborative discussions, they were impressed by the depth of understanding and creativity that young people brought to the table. Authorities appreciated the structured, data-driven approach of the project, which provided clear insights into community needs and actionable recommendations. The periodic meetings helped build transparency and mutual respect, allowing both parties to understand each other's goals and constraints better.

By the end of the project's first year, the participatory approach had fostered a stronger relationship between youth and local authorities, shifting perspectives on both sides. Youth felt more connected to their community and local governance, while authorities recognized the value of incorporating youth perspectives into policy-making. This collaborative experience set a new precedent for future projects, showing that youth and local leaders could work effectively together to create positive, impactful change for the community.

What advice would you give to other communities or organizations interested in replicating this project?

Building trust between young participants and local authorities is essential. Make sure to establish open communication channels early on, and prioritize transparency at every stage. Regular updates, inclusive discussions, and follow-ups on action items demonstrate that youth voices are valued and that their contributions lead to real impact.

Empowering young people requires more than just a seat at the table—they need the skills to participate effectively. **Invest in initial training** for the youth in areas like civic engagement, research, and communication. This will not only prepare them for the project but will also boost their confidence and ability to make informed contributions.

I**nvolve local authorities as active stakeholders** rather than passive participants. Invite them to youth-led activities, and hold periodic meetings where youth can present their findings and ideas. This collaborative environment helps bridge any initial skepticism and allows authorities to see the value in a participatory, youth-centered approach.

Throughout the project, gather data from surveys, focus groups, and consultations to ensure that decisions are grounded in community needs. This **structured, evidence-based approach** helps make the case to local authorities, showing that the youth-led initiatives are well-informed and actionable.

For lasting impact, **work on a strategy** that goes beyond a single event or phase. Collaborate with authorities to adopt policies or programs that ensure youth engagement continues even after the initial project ends. This could include formalizing youth councils or integrating youth perspectives into ongoing municipal planning.

Each community is unique, and flexibility is key to adapting the model to fit local needs and dynamics. **Encourage youth and authorities to provide feedback** regularly and be willing to make adjustments along the way. This openness to learning and evolving will make the project more resilient and effective.

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