

# Youth Democracy Lab: Co-creating Civic Participation in Maia

## Name of the organisation

Município da Maia

## Website of the organisation

<https://www.cm-maia.pt/>

## Location of the organisation

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## Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work

- Participation of young people in implementing youth activities (planning, preparing, carrying out, etc.)
- Participation of young people in decision making
- Non-formal education/-learning
- Policymaking processes, methods and tools

## Good practice category

A practice of processes and methods

## Good practice aim & purpose

The Youth Democracy Lab: Co-creating Civic Participation in Maia was developed to strengthen young people's civic and political engagement by providing real-life experiences in democratic environments and participatory processes. The practice resulted from the Municipality of Maia's commitment as a member of the Portuguese Territorial Network of Educating Cities and the International Association of Educating Cities. Under the 2024 theme — The Educating City as a Laboratory for Learning, Citizenship and Social Transformation — the project sought to transform the city into a living learning space where young people could explore democratic participation, co-create proposals, and experience active citizenship.

The initiative aimed to address key challenges observed in Portugal, including the low participation of young people in traditional civic processes and the growing need to acknowledge their emerging and innovative forms of engagement, especially through digital means and new civic practices. By taking young people into real decision-making spaces — from the national Parliament to the local Municipality — and combining non-formal education with participatory methodologies, the project aimed to promote empowerment, critical thinking, co-responsibility, and political literacy. Ultimately, the objective was to create meaningful spaces for listening, dialogue, and action, enabling young people to take an active role in shaping their community.

## **Good practice description**

The Youth Democracy Lab: Co-creating Civic Participation in Maia was an innovative participatory process designed to reinforce youth engagement in democratic life by transforming the city into a dynamic educational ecosystem. Grounded in Maia's commitment as an Educating City, the practice was structured around several interconnected sessions that combined experiential learning, non-formal education, and direct engagement with political decision-makers.

The project began with a remarkable field experience: instead of a traditional parliamentary visit, the group met with a Member of Parliament and a parliamentary staff member outside the Portuguese Parliament. At the same time, the young participants observed a large firefighters' demonstration from a safe distance, which led to a meaningful discussion about democratic rights, freedom of expression, and civic engagement. This spontaneous moment created a powerful learning opportunity about democratic life and forms of participation.

The first formal session introduced the concept of an Educating City and included dynamic activities on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The young people analysed different SDGs and, through debate and consensus, selected SDG 4 (Quality Education) as the most relevant for guiding the project. After the session, an online questionnaire was provided to deepen reflection and collect insights for the next steps.

Based on the questionnaire results, the second session explored SDG 4 in depth by analysing local examples such as sensory integration rooms and mental health initiatives. The participants identified local challenges and collaboratively developed concrete proposals. To ensure more active engagement, the group was divided into two subgroups. At this stage, the commitment was made that the proposals would later be formally presented to the Municipality's political decision-makers.

A following session focused on preparing and refining these proposals. The process culminated in a round-table meeting at the Municipality of Maia, where the young participants were welcomed by elected officials. The environment was intentionally designed to be inclusive and supportive, allowing the young people to present their ideas confidently. The group itself democratically elected the representatives who would speak in the final presentation.

Across the five in-person sessions — involving 32 young people aged 15 to 22 from various local parishes — the practice relied on non-formal education methods, democratic voting, guided discussion, and participatory decision-making. Two major proposals emerged: a "Green Area" proposal, which became integrated into several ongoing municipal actions; and a "Blue Area" proposal, which was later formally approved for implementation.

The Youth Democracy Lab demonstrated that municipalities can effectively function as laboratories of democracy, offering young people meaningful opportunities to understand political processes, co-create solutions, and influence local decision-making.

### **Good practice result & concrete effects**

The implementation of the Youth Democracy Lab generated significant and lasting impacts on both the young participants and the Municipality's approach to youth participation. The young people deepened their political literacy, gaining a clearer understanding of how responsibilities are distributed across different levels of governance. They also demonstrated increased analytical capacity, collaboration skills, and confidence, which became evident in the well-structured proposals they developed and presented to political decision-makers.

The process strengthened the young participants' sense of belonging, responsibility, and empowerment, as they played an active role in every stage of the project — including the democratic election of their representatives for the formal presentation. The sessions also helped consolidate democratic practices such as voting, deliberation, and active listening.

Among the proposals developed, two stood out. One was integrated into existing municipal actions, while the other became the foundation of an Erasmus+ KA1 project application submitted by the Municipality of Maia. This application was approved with 80 points, enabling the continuation and expansion of the work initiated in the Youth Democracy Lab.

The practice showed that when young people are given space, voice, and opportunity, they become genuine agents of social transformation capable of influencing policies and strengthening democratic processes.

### **Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work**

Organisation and practice