

# Guidelines for successful e-participation by young people

in decision-making at local, regional, national and European levels



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## Imprint

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IJAB – International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany works on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, its own member organisations and other youth work associations and bodies. IJAB's mission is to strengthen and further develop international youth work and youth policy cooperation with European countries as well as worldwide. JUGEND für Europa, Germany's National Agency for the EU programme Erasmus+ YOUTH IN ACTION, has been affiliated with IJAB since 1988.

The photos contained in this publication were taken at a YouthBarcamp which took place in Vienna in October 2013 and provided a platform for young people to discuss the Guidelines.



## Introduction

### Relevance of youth e-participation

The increasing use of ICT in people's everyday lives has created new ways to communicate, new spaces to share cultural experiences, and new methods to make their voices heard. For a majority of young people, consuming digital media and engaging in social networks have become normal parts of their lives.

The ever-expanding range of technological possibilities gives young people new opportunities to engage online and to become involved in decision-making. To ensure the effectiveness of these tools, they need to be fine-tuned and adapted to the environments, resources and communication channels of young people. New and innovative approaches need to continue to be developed and tested in order to identify and share the best practices for e-participation of young people across Europe.

### Background to the Guidelines

In 2011 Germany's Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) adopted a new approach towards international cooperation, and created multilateral cooperation projects to function as cross-border think tanks to contribute input to current youth policy topics. To this end, the concept of peer learning – essentially, the act of learning from one another – offered an ideal framework as one of the EU Youth Strategy's strongest instruments for promoting youth policy cooperation in Europe.

youthpart, a multilateral cooperation project by IJAB, the International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany, was established to start an international dialogue on how more young people can be encouraged to participate in decision-making in today's digital society. youthpart and the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, together with its European partners, the Austrian Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth, the British Youth Council, the Spanish Institute for Youth (INJUVE) and the Finnish Development Centre for Youth Information and Counselling (Koordinaatti), and with the support of the European Commission's DG Education & Culture (Youth unit, D.1), produced this set of guidelines for successful e-participation by young people.

Designed as a multi-stakeholder process, the work began in December 2011 and ended in April 2014. During this time, the project partners attended four international workshops to develop and fine-tune the Guidelines and organised two events to gather feedback from European experts and young people. The complex process also included input from national advisory councils from each of the partner countries. These advisory councils reflected a range of stakeholders including young people, youth organisations, researchers, administrative bodies, software developers, practitioners and NGOs.

### Guidelines as a reference framework

These Guidelines provide those planning an e-participation process for young people with a set of factors they should take into consideration to make the process more effective. They are designed to support youth policy experts, decision-makers, young people, youth organisations and administrative staff. These guidelines are advisory and can be adapted to the needs of different e-participation initiatives and the differing circumstances of young people, and to meet future technical and societal changes.

# Guidelines for successful e-participation by young people

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## Definition of e-participation

Participation is sharing, becoming involved and taking action. This implies that citizens choose to actively participate in, and contribute to, public decision-making at different levels (i. e., local, regional, national and European). In the case of e-participation, this involvement and participation in decision-making takes place electronically through the use of online information and internet-based technology. In a political sense, the term expresses the fact that many aspects of the everyday lives of citizens are determined by political processes. Essentially, e-participation is interactive online policy-making in action.



### We distinguish between two dimensions of e-participation:

- > **Direct<sup>1</sup> participation online:** Here, political decisions are influenced directly and structural links to political decision-making processes are enabled.
- > **Indirect<sup>2</sup> forms of e-participation:** They reach out to internet users and encourage them to support certain issues and positions. In turn, they also contribute to the development of political opinion. One example is activities that are designed to encourage young people to participate in political matters via digital channels.

Both dimensions include activities created by young people and youth organisations, youth work, educational and citizenship projects, and activities initiated by administrative bodies and decision-makers.

These two dimensions of e-participation are inseparable and complementary, as evidence has shown. That said, these youthpart Guidelines are designed exclusively for direct e-participation and describe the preconditions for the success of such activities.

<sup>1</sup> transitive

<sup>2</sup> intransitive



## Overall principles of e-participation

Certain crucial aspects are common to all e-participation processes. These are:

- > **Alignment with young people's realities** | e-participation processes need to be aligned with young people's lives. This relates to matters such as content, information and time management, but also to design and technical implementation. The processes should be designed to interest, stimulate and motivate young people to ensure their continuing involvement.
- > **Resources** | e-participation processes require sufficient resources such as expertise, time, funding and technology, as well as staff to provide guidance and advisory services.
- > **Effectiveness & direct influence** | e-participation processes need to have an outcome. A structural link to decision-making processes is essential.
- > **Transparency** | the overall process needs to be transparent for everyone. This requirement extends to all information related to the process as well as to the software and tools used.
- > **End-to-end involvement of young people** | young people need to be involved in all stages of the process. This includes a feedback option in all phases of the process.

## Degrees of Participation model

The basic prerequisite for a direct participatory process is that it offers a structural link to public decision-making processes that is defined prior to the actual participation process. Those making the decisions should be involved in setting up the participation process.

The structure of the participation processes may vary depending on the intensity of the decision-makers' involvement (known as the Degrees of Participation model):

- > Consultation and information in the shape of consultative processes
- > Codetermination in the shape of decision-making with equal voting rights (i.e., all participants have equal input)
- > Self-determination in the shape of agenda-setting (meaning that young people are involved in deciding what issues make it onto the political agenda) and decision-making processes with exclusive decision-making powers (meaning that the decision is entirely up to the young people without the need to consult others).



## General structure of all e-participation processes

All types of e-participation process should have the following phase-related structure:

### Development phase

During this phase, the general parameters and common principles of the process are defined after careful consideration. These constitute the backbone of the process.

- > Participation processes should be linked to policy frameworks (e.g., directives, laws, strategies, conventions) of youth participation. This principle applies at all levels, whether local, regional, national or European.
- > Young people need to be involved in all stages of designing the process and should participate directly in all decisions in this phase.
- > There should be a consensus on how decisions are made and about the opportunities and limitations of the participation process. Raising false expectations would be detrimental to the process.
- > The entire organisational team should agree on the online platform and the social media channels to be used. When designing the structure, the option for a separate online youth section should be considered, where necessary for the exclusive use of young people, to allow informal communication.
- > The entire participation process should be integrated into an overall strategy for youth participation.
- > Cooperation and transparency should be built in to the process from the start.
- > Examples of existing participation processes and/or good practices should be collected, e.g. through the consultation of online platforms or databases. This input may be used as a resource when planning a participation process.
- > Innovations in IT and internet technology should be researched, reviewed and integrated provided they are relevant and accessible by the target group. Generally, the tools should support the process, not vice versa.
- > Easily accessible and appropriate technologies should be used (e.g., open source software). The software should be user-friendly, simple, accessible, inclusive, transparent and secure. It is essential that the technologies are tested by young people who will later use them, prior to going live.
- > The schedules of all stakeholders – e.g. young people, administrative bodies, decision-makers – should be taken into account and be reviewed throughout the process.
- > Compliance with legal requirements must be verified by experts in the run-up to all
- > e-participation processes (e.g. tendering, copyright, data protection).



### Implementation phase

During this phase, the general parameters should be put into practice, and the plans translated into concrete activities and actions.

- > The participation process should be embedded in a decision-making process.
- > To avoid raising false expectations, participants should be informed of the opportunities and limitations of the participation process as well as of how decisions will be made.
- > The online platform and the social media channels should be opened so the participants can voice their needs and concerns. The participation process should also be made accessible to young people who do not have regular access to the Internet.
- > A network should be set up involving relevant stakeholders, such as decision-makers, young people, youth organisations, youth workers, schools and, companies. Existing networks and structures should be used.
- > Trained staff should be available to provide support to participants.
- > It is imperative that all surveys and questionnaires are neutrally worded.
- > It should be ensured that the participation process is handled transparently, that the interests of all participating stakeholders are protected, and that previously agreed parameters and common principles are respected.
- > All relevant stakeholders should agree on a process to allow young people to raise complaints and grievances, and for these to be fairly reviewed and action taken as necessary.

### Access and information phase (part of Implementation)

During this phase, basic principles that have been previously agreed should be put into practice. The tools and information should be made available to the target audience to use.

- > The tools should offer a mix of online and offline interaction. The proportions will vary depending on the subject at hand.
- > Participants should be made aware of how to make contact if they have problems or questions, need guidance and advice, or would like to request mediation.
- > A feedback option for participants should be integrated into the tools.
- > The tools should use easy-to-understand language and present the contents clearly and vividly.
- > Stakeholders should define a set of online community standards and effective protocols for the monitoring and moderation of online activity. The people carrying out these tasks should be adequately trained.
- > (Online) educational activities should be integrated to promote participants' media skills (online literacy).
- > PR and marketing activities should be undertaken to encourage a wide range of potential users to take part in the process (e.g., via online, radio, TV and print).



- > All information provided must be accurate, up to date and verified, with a clear statement of when the information was written or updated. All content should be relevant to young people and respond to their needs. For further criteria concerning information provision, please consult the Principles for Online Youth Information by European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA).
- > Background information on the subject in question should be provided and made available using a language, format and style that is easily understood by the target audience.
- > Open Data enables access to valuable information that supports the formation of opinions. Therefore, all open data should be made accessible to young people, respecting personal data privacy laws, so they can carry out their own additional research.

### Input and dialogue phase

This phase is concerned with the actual running of the process and how the stakeholders are involved. It focuses on the topic at hand and the associated discussions, and reaches out to the target audiences.

- > An explanation of why this specific e-participation process exists should be provided including its scope and limitations.
- > The background should be explained, together with information on the initiators and implementing organisations as well as on the interests they represent.
- > The structure, main features, potential and the limitations of the software should be referenced.
- > The steps in the process and the timeline should be clearly explained.
- > Reference should be made to the intended effect of the process.
- > Effective safeguards against the unauthorised manipulation of the process and the software should be put in place.
- > All participants should be provided with an opportunity to give feedback on the process.
- > Full compliance with data privacy and personal privacy laws must be ensured.
- > The social and local importance of the e-participation process and the final decisions should be communicated appropriately to all relevant stakeholders and target groups.



### Output & outcome phase

This phase is concerned with the results of the process.

- > The entire participation process should be documented and archived and this information made publicly accessible.
- > The decision-makers (e.g., politicians) should be informed directly of the results.
- > It should be possible, after a certain time, to verify whether the outcomes of the participation process have been implemented.
- > Individual contributions should be displayed in an easily understandable manner in compliance with personal data privacy laws.
- > The participants should be able to trace back their personal contributions to the process.
- > The impact of the participants' contributions must be acknowledged and made visible during and after the process. This information should be actively communicated to the participants rather than waiting for them to ask for it.
- > The outcome of the process should be published in a youth friendly and attractive way (e.g., using videos, audio, etc.) and should be freely accessible.
- > The participants should be able to share their contributions – as well as the outcome of the process – with their friends, family and social networks.
- > The data collected during the participation process should be made available to download and for further analysis.
- > Where possible, the software and code should be made publicly available (e.g. open source).

### Evaluation phase

This phase involves an assessment of the e-participation process with the aim to improve the quality of future processes. It should highlight what went well, what did not go according to plan, and give suggestions for future improvements.

- > All relevant stakeholders, including young people in particular, should be able to give their feedback, views and opinions on the process, on the tools and software used, and on the outcomes and the implementation of the results.
- > Evaluation methods and styles should vary depending on the stakeholder.
- > The evaluation should contain concrete advice on improving future projects.
- > The results of the evaluation should be made publicly accessible.

