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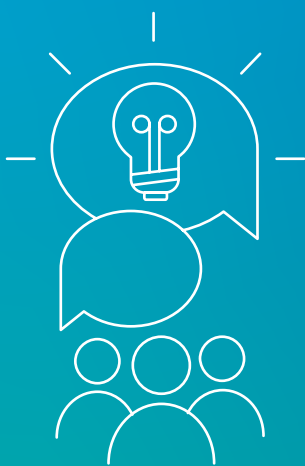
Integrating youth into the just transition process

A case study highlighting good practices

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*Regional and
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Integrating youth into the just transition processes – A case study highlighting good practices



Key messages

- Youth participation is fundamental to ensure and inform a just transition in JTF regions and needs to be supported at all stages of intervention from design to implementation.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The format of engagement needs to be creatively designed depending on the aim, timeframe, target group, and landscape of actors in the planned process. Examples range from Climate Youth assemblies to national surveys, and from podcasts to informative workshops and hackathons.
- Bottom-up initiatives should be heard and supported. Youth is an active agent of change that takes initiative and offers input on local development. Governments should design equal participation together with youth considering their already on-going activities on the ground.
- Youth participation should be structured and properly planned to have a greater impact. This implies considering what needs to be done to prepare the participation and following up after it.

1. The importance of youth engagement in JTF regions

This case study highlights the importance and best practices of youth participation in Europe's transition to a sustainable, climate-neutral economy by showcasing examples from the Just Transition Fund regions.¹ Engaging young people enhances local democracy and social acceptance, providing space for new perspectives. Therefore, it is pivotal for the key group who will be implementing the transition strategies in the mid- and long-term to integrate the perspectives of the youth. The European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) aims to encourage more ambitious, meaningful and numerous participation opportunities for youth in the regions targeted by the Just Transition Fund, as well as to ensure that the effects of such processes will lead to better-quality strategies and interventions addressing the challenges of the transition.² As part of these efforts, a 'Toolkit for Youth Participation in the Just Transition Fund' was launched in 2021.³

Nonetheless, there is still a long way towards meaningfully engaging youth in the just transition process according to Climate Generation Europe and Bankwatch.⁴

This is particularly important for EU JTF regions, which are implementing transition strategies for a sustainable future whilst already facing high rates of depopulation, brain drain and ageing populations.⁵ Youth in these regions are the part of the population, which will live in the economic, social and environmental ecosystem that results from today's just transition process.

Boosted by the nomination of 2022 as European year of youth, many European national and local governments moved steps ahead in the direction of youth engagement. Formal processes such as the drafting, implementation and monitoring of **the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTJs)** can provide a framework and a timeline for this endeavour, tapping on the partnership principle that requires the involvement of representativeness of all societal segments along the process.

1.1 Youth engagement: From sharing information to building active partnerships

Participatory processes are key to youth engagement. Their set up requires time and resources to define the suitable formats, establish contacts with youth, follow-through, and conduct effective follow-up. The benefits of youth engagement outnumber the costs and a meaningful engagement of youth can:

- ✓ Bring new ideas on how to sustainably develop and regenerate target areas locally,
- ✓ Provide a more complete picture of the needs of the local community,
- ✓ Spot relevant investment and development needs in sectors indirectly linked to the transition from coal+ and carbon-intensive economy such as transport, education, and culture,
- ✓ Suggest and support in implementing improvements for the quality of life in the region.

Below we highlight practical examples from JTF regions showcasing classical and innovative approaches to youth engagement across the spectrum of participation and the different stages of the transition planning and implementation.

1.2 Informing youth

Justice starts with access to information. In JTF regions the climate transition is a complex societal transition, and its intertwined economic, ecological and societal aspects must be a subject of open discussion within the society. In a recent exchange between youth representatives organized under the exchangeEU, a programme offered by the European Commission to facilitate peer exchanges across European Coal+ regions to enhance Just Transition strategies, **knowledge** was identified as the key enabler for them and their peers to provide comments and advance with solid proposals.⁶ Given their proximity and access to young populations, local NGOs, universities and schools as well as municipal staff, local businesses, and trade unions can be great allies to organize, enable and engage youth in the discussion. The most effective outreach method is to use communication channels that youth already use, and to involve existing either formal or informal youth-oriented groups.

It is important to highlight that “knowledge as an enabler” does not mean that youth must be trained or educated before the engagement activities. In fact, their own perspectives on the local needs and vision of the future already qualifies them as valuable stakeholders. This was highlighted by youth representatives who participated in another exchangeEU session.⁷ In the participants’ experience, youth ended up teaching experts, as they know best in which future region they would like to live in and, according to a local NGO, the key factor for successful youth engagement is the willingness to listen respectfully and with an open mind, while avoiding a patronizing tone and presenting one’s own perspectives and solutions.

Sharing information is an extremely valuable **preliminary step to any type of engagement**, regardless of which stage of the Just Transition process stakeholders are. Below are some examples from JTF regions on how to effectively share information with stakeholders:

Classical formats:

- The Silesian region (Poland) created a **dedicated website** called Silesian transformation (transformacja.slaskie.pl) where everyone can easily access all relevant documents in the local language, including the TJTP, the approach adopted and the progress towards implementation.⁸
- Through the LIFE programme, Hungary set up the web platform North Hungary in transition⁹ with the objective of making the plan and implementation of the JT publicly available. The resources include also an **Ecological footprint calculator for high school students**.¹⁰



Innovative formats:

- In 2020 the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) created a **video** about Just Transition. Inspired by hip-hop music, it highlights concerns and hopes of young people for their future.¹¹
- The EU-funded initiative EU Teens4Green launched a **podcast** series in 2022 which aims to give voice to young people in JTF regions.¹²
- The Leeds University Business School through a research project on Just Transition will publish a **podcast** with 12 episodes on the topic, focusing each of them on a different country, including Germany, UK, Spain and Poland.¹³

1.3 Consulting youth

The traditional ecosystems of regions in transition have been redesigned in the TJTPs to serve current and future needs of local communities. New forms of living and new economic environments are needed, next to alternative transportation systems and adapted infrastructure to keep these regions competitive. The inclusion of youth’s perspective in such ambitious plans increases the capacity to think out of the box whilst at the same time understanding of what new generations consider important to invest in. This in turn helps to anticipate potential social and economic malfunctioning such as depopulation or high levels of youth unemployment. Finally, to build trust in the process it is very important to **summarize and circulate key results of these exchanges following the discussions**, ideally with an indication of how results will feed into the next stage of transition. Follow up processes to inform which points from the consultation have been included or excluded and why are also important.

Classical formats:

- Both in Slovakia and in Spain a nation-wide **online survey** has been designed to better understand the position of youth with regard to the future of the JTF regions. In Slovakia, the data gathered by the national survey was integrated into another online survey, designed and launched by two university students for their peers to understand how they see the future of their region, the Upper Nitra.¹⁴ In both cases, the surveys have been followed by online workshops.¹⁵
- Since 2017, in Eastern Wielkopolska (Poland) future development is a public topic of discussion that has been explored in open **informative meetings and public debates** jointly organized by local, regional and national governments and civil society, including youth representatives.¹⁶

Innovative formats:

- Two **Hackathons** on the Future of Urban and Rural Areas were organized in Bulgaria by WWF Bulgaria as part of the “Panda Labs Junior for a Just Transition” funded by EUKI. The events targeted students from secondary schools and universities and engaged them in the challenge of building a proposal for local start-ups in 1 day. Ahead of the hackathons, the students had the opportunity to learn more about just transition via webinars, to meet local entrepreneurs from the green sector and to raise their concerns and suggestions to their mayors directly in a **round table discussion**.¹⁷
- A similar approach was taken at EU level by the **Youth Climate Pact challenge**¹⁸ launched in 2021 by the Climate Pact initiative to gather ideas from youth for engagement projects in the field of climate action. The open call received over 650 applications from individual persons, NGOs, youth organizations, schools among others and 47 final projects selected for the challenge. The learnings of this experience have been included in the document “Guidance on How to Organise a Youth Pact Challenge”.¹⁹

1.4 Including youth in the decision-making process

Ideas and visions for the future need to be grounded in concrete plans that outline the steps to be followed and the resources that are needed to do so. Besides being consulted on their visions, youth should be **actively involved throughout the whole decision-making processes**. Unfortunately, experiences show that the participation of youth tends to lack long-term sustainability. This hints that there is still a diffuse general perception of youth’s role as passive stakeholder to be consulted at ad hoc basis rather than structurally engaging them as stakeholder group which is part of the transition process. Webinars, meetings, and discussions on the proposed content of policies and their implementation struggle to keep youth engaged in a bidirectional dialogue.

For the authorities it may seem overwhelming to take all the ideas collected during consulting activities and assess whether and how those can work in practice, but it should be considered that youth can take this responsibility on themselves if properly supported. This can be quite easy when engaging institutionalized youth groups such as local and national youth councils but can also be organized with selected individuals.

Classical formats:

- In Ireland, representative of youth local councils as well as youth and climate organizations meet in March at the **National Youth Assembly on Climate 2023**.²⁰ Participants between 12 and 24 years old discussed their visions to reach carbon neutrality and deliberate and vote on recommended actions for the Government. A final set of 8 recommendations covering sustainable transport, circular economy, communication, education and engagement were presented to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications for inclusion in the Government’s Climate Action Plan 2024. The Assembly also asked the National Government to stop investing in fossil fuel and rather boost the deployment of RE to achieve 100% clean energy production by 2035. Moreover, alongside a public consultation on the EU Just Transition Fund,²¹ the government of Ireland organized consultations in the form of workshops where the National Youth Council of Ireland was invited to present its own position.
- In the Netherlands, a permanent **Youth Advisory Council** is part of the Province of Groningen and is consulted on policy matters in the province. As such, during the development of the Territorial Just Transition Plans in 2021, youth representatives from the Council were invited to a general public consultation event with several local stakeholders and were asked to provide written feedback on the planned TJTP.²²

Innovative formats:

- The three regions of North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Brandenburg jointly organized **Planathon: Youth shape structural change**²³ which gathered over 40 young people between 16 and 27 years old to contribute with their opinions and recommendations to the region’s transformation processes. The final report was presented to local politicians by youth representatives.
- A different approach that can be taken is peer parliaments, informal meetings that gather 10-15 citizens to discuss a specific topic commissioned by a public authority that also commits to act based on the peer parliaments outcomes. The meetings are self-organized and moderated by one of the peers (the host) that coordinates the dialogue and the feedback to the authority who launched. The format has been tested at EU level by the European Climate Pact, which then created the guide “**The Peer Parliaments go local: How to adapt the format to cities**” to transfer the mechanism to the local level.²⁴

1.5 Moving on to implementation with youth

A report of GCE and Bankwatch²⁵ shows that out of 15 just transition countries analysed, 11 included specific youth participation in drafting their TJTPs but only 3 (Estonia, Greece, Slovakia) presented a clear intention and way forward on **engaging young representatives** in the monitoring mechanisms of TJTP implementation **beyond inputs in the drafting phase**. The advancement toward meaningful youth engagement should not only be assessed with quantitative values such as number of dialogues organized, or number of young people engaged, but should also look at the quality and depth of their participation. Governments at all levels, should strive to secure youth representation throughout the Just Transition processes to avoid tokenism.

Classical format:

- In Western Macedonia (Greece) the local association Active Youth in Florina that previously mobilized youth from the major cities of the region, was formally invited to join the monitoring committee of the national just transition plan. **Youth representatives have been granted the same voting right as the other members of the committee**

Innovative format:

- In the Climate Assembly in Nottingham a youth dedicated process was set up to respond to a report on youth climate anxiety.²⁶ A first panel of youth helped in designing the assembly, the themes to discuss, the experts to invite and the overall programme. Over a weekend in July 2022, selected **youth created a manifesto** that was promoted across local institutions and the city council committed to work with the youth committee moving forward. More on Climate Assemblies can be found in the report drafted by KNOCA.²⁷ Unlike the National Youth Assembly on Climate in Ireland, here the formal body of representation of youth was not established and the initiative was to respond to the need expressed by the youth in Nottingham.



2. Lessons learned

Building on the learnings from above examples, we list the key aspects that should be considered when initiating a youth participation process:



1. **Tap into the potential of local active youth groups** and favour their growth. Initiatives that naturally sprout from the ground are normally very effective in initiating activities and taking the ownership for the participation process.



2. **Do not limit outreach to the already active youth.** It is important to make sure invites and communications are inclusive. To facilitate getting in touch with the most vulnerable youth you can consider to, e.g., organize events in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, schools with high presence of minorities, or network with associations that have the same target audience.



3. **Find your messenger:** Youth have their own communication channels and know best how to use them. It may be more effective to let them take the lead and promote initiatives themselves.



4. **It is never too early to be included** and even though here we focused on youth, some interesting experiences have been tested with engaging children, e.g., In urban design.



5. **It is not all about work!** Job opportunities are important for self-development and financial independence, but it is not the only element that individuals, especially youth, consider when determining where to live. The quality of natural and built environment, facilities available and socio-cultural offerings are key to limit brain drain and make JTF regions are appealing to young professionals.



6. **Clear objectives** and their **connection with the overall process** of finding a just transition path are fundamental to make the most out of any youth participation process. Pop-up activities may have the opposite effect due to lack of proper engagement plan.



7. **Transparency** throughout the process is fundamental to set expectations as well as keep everyone's motivation high. Clear communication before, during and after the engagement activity is important to avoid the participation of youth to be a "tick the box" exercise.

4. Useful resources

In the last years, many resources have been created to support the role of youth involvement in the policy-making processes. Below some useful references to tools and best practices.

- **European Climate Pact**: Launched by the European Commission, the Pact is part of the European Green Deal and encourages everyone to act and contribute to building a more sustainable Europe. The initiative focuses on creating a pact between public sector and civil society in advancing toward climate objectives. Youth were actively engaged in proposing, testing and fine-tuning methods. Learnings and useful materials are available in the [Youth section](#) or the [Resources section](#).
- **EU4TeensGreen**: An EU funded project that offers an opportunity for teens to take ownership and become actors of change while proposing actions for a green recovery of their region. The project allocates grants of max 10,000€ to allow youth-led actions to grow locally in Coal+ areas.
- **Toolkit for youth participation in the JTF**: Published by the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, the toolkit aims to encouraging youth participation in the Just Transition Fund regions and therefore ensure the positive results of actions implemented. The report includes a great list of examples from all the EU JTF regions, some of which are included in this document.
- **Webinar** “Powering the just transition through youth engagement”: Organized by the EU project CINTRAN on 8th February 2023, where also the results of the quoted report “The state of youth engagement in the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanism of the EU” is presented and discussed.
- **Checklist** for local and regional governments “Unlocking the power of youth”: The document has been designed in early 2023 by ICLEI with the contribution of UNICEF, YOUNGO and Student Energy. It proposes three sets of indicators for public bodies to assess to what extent youth is included in the local climate action.
- **Case study** “A Youth Climate Assembly in Ida-Viru”: The exemplary case of youth participation from the Ida-Viru County, in Estonia is explained in this case study produced by the Initiative for coal regions in transition led by the European Commission.

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This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the [JTP website](#).

Endnotes

- 1 Regions most affected by the transition that depend on fossil fuels or carbon-intensive industries.
- 2 European Commission (2021). [European Youth Portal – A Toolkit for Youth Participation in the Just Transition Fund](#).
- 3 European Commission (2021). [A toolkit for youth participation in the just transition fund](#).
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- 5 European Commission (2023). [Questions and Answers on Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions and the Demography Report](#).
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- 7 European Commission (2023). [Exchange between the Rheinish Region \(DE\) and Eastern Wielkopolska \(PL\)](#).
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- 11 National Youth Council of Ireland (2020). [A Just Transition 2020](#).
- 12 European Commission (2023). [EU Teens4Green podcast](#).
- 13 Leeds University Business School (2022). [Just Transition: action, concepts, debates and strategies – an international comparison across 11 countries](#).
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- 15 Climate Generation Europe and Bankwatch Network (2022). [The state of youth engagement in the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanism of the EU](#).
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- 18 European Commission (2021). [The Youth Climate Pact Challenge](#).
- 19 European Commission (2022). [Guidance on How to Organise a Youth Pact Challenge](#).
- 20 The National Youth Assembly of Ireland (2023). [The National Youth Assembly on Climate 2023](#).
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- 25 University of Nottingham (2022). [Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly 2022](#).
- 26 Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (2023). [Climate assemblies: emerging trends, challenges and opportunities: A report of the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies](#).
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