



Active involvement of youth from alternative care in democratic processes in the community

Recommendations on good practices and transferable working
methods to promote active involvement of youth from
alternative care in democratic processes

Best practices guideline to inform the transferability of the identified good practices to other contexts. Target groups will include young people, youth workers, trainers, researchers, civil society organisations, social welfare, childcare and youth institutions.



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For more information about the project, visit our web page <http://youthmoving.eu> or our Facebook page "Youth Moving".

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1. Introduction

Within the scope of the “Youth Moving” project, funded by Erasmus+ Program of the European Commission, coordinated by SIRIUS (HR) in partnership with APDES (PT), Forum za kvalitetno udomiteljstvo djece (HR), DGASPC HR (RO), Co&So (IT) and FAMO (CS), this document has been developed with the aim of presenting a series of recommendations on good practices and transferable working methods to promote active involvement of youth from alternative care in democratic processes, and therefore, contribute to a more effective promotion and protection of these children.

When we talk about guaranteeing the right to grow up in a healthy environment that fully develops young people’s potential, it is essential to promote their participation in democratic life, to support their social and civic involvement and to ensure that they have the resources needed to participate in society. This is an imperative question for children and young people in care, to whom the State takes responsibility for the holistic promotion of their development. For these children/youngsters, there is a relationship between youth’s personal biography and the impact of the social and economic context in which they live, suggesting that policies and interventions can increase (but also limit) opportunities for young people coming out of alternative care to maximise their potential and ensure that they themselves are involved in shaping the services they need and receive. In order to do so, this document aims to raise awareness among citizens, but especially among public policy makers about the additional support that youth from alternative care needs to express their opinion and to be given an opportunity to meet their needs in all spheres of democratic life in the community.

The present document is based on desk research conducted by 6 organisations from the 5 countries above mentioned, in order to investigate good EU practice examples regarding care leavers’ participation in democratic life. The research was based on a jointly developed template to ensure the data collection done by each partner is focused on the same topics and questions. This data collection was based on aspects such as the situation of care leavers in democracy life, existing youth groups in alternative care, good practices review and the identification of relevant stakeholders to community-based movements empowerment. Since all members of this YM Consortium have different contexts and life histories, this document humbly highlights the importance of respecting the principle of plurality, inclusion and diversity.

The document starts with an introduction presenting its goals and target group. Afterwards, the issue of children and young people in alternative care is contextualised, with a brief presentation regarding the current state of the active involvement of youth from alternative care in democratic processes. Lastly, some recommendations and key lessons are presented.

2. Framework

The Youth Moving research in five EU countries showed that living in residential care is still a reality for a large number of children, despite the UN Resolution A/74/395¹ on the Rights of The Child that urges ending the institutional care of children globally whenever possible. Of particular concern is the Portuguese case, since the majority of children/youngsters in the foster care system are still placed in residential care (86%, in 2021 according to welfare system data). Where that's not possible, the Resolution says that governments should commit to provide high-quality, family and community-based alternative care for children. In this sense, in Croatia, Czech Republic, Italy and Romania, the majority of children/youngsters are being placed in family type services/responses. Nevertheless, residential care is still a reality in those countries. Concerning the average time spent in the foster care system, in Croatia, Italy and Portugal, young people spend 2-4 years in the system. In Czech Republic and Romania, most of the children enter the foster care system at a very young age and stay until they turn 18, which represents more than 10 years in the system.

Data from desk research drafted in the Youth Moving project shows that leaving the care system when turning 18 is the most common scenario to these European youngsters. Nevertheless, in most countries, they are allowed to stay and benefit from the care system until 25/26 years of age if they pursue educational goals.

Most of them are happy to become independent but they are frightened to face real life with responsibility. Data shows that European care systems require these youngsters' emancipation, something that doesn't occur in the common population since usually, young people have the support of their family in the transition to adulthood until they are 26-30 years old. In this sense, leaving care is one of the most challenging phases to youngsters. This target group faces limited access to housing (due to high prices for renting an apartment or even a room) and employment opportunities, more challenges in continuing studies (namely, higher education), insufficient and inadequate financial resources, solitude and feelings of abandonment as well as lack of family and social support.

"Nobody becomes an adult at the age of 18, don't ask it from us"
- Care Leavers Network project, Italy.

"They never called me again... What I feel now is that I was nothing more than a piece of their work, there was no kind of friendship or affection of us having lived there"
- OUTogether project, 2020

¹ Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly

Youth Moving desk research also shows that despite the existence of legislation there are still limited responses/services to support care leavers. Nevertheless, it is essential to underline that most of the existing services to support care leavers aren't funded by state governments but promoted by foster parents (in the cases of youngsters placed in family-based responses), NGOs or other civil society organisations or by public-private collaborations as in the Romanian example. Regardless, Italy presents a promising example, with the Italian government being more directly involved in projects and structures aiming to support care leavers. Therefore, there is a need for adequate responses to the needs of young people in alternative care, lack of knowledge and technical quality of professionals, and absence of a structured intervention model in the preparation for autonomy. Also, autonomy apartments in Portugal are a social response, developed in equipment or apartments inserted in the local community, aimed at supporting the transition to adulthood of young people with specific personal skills, through the promotion of services that link and leverage existing resources in territorial areas. In Romania, there are also protected houses for young adults, where they can stay for a determined time if they get hired and go to work regularly.

Furthermore, desk research conducted shows gaps between law and reality concerning young people in care participation in decision-making processes regarding alternative care systems specially in Croatia, Czech Republic, Portugal and Romania. There is also a lack of studies focusing on care leavers' participation in democratic life.

"young people who are more distant from involvement, those who have more pressing things to worry about such as (...) the institutionalized, those who have left institutions (...) those who have been excluded from traditional education and those who have not had access to their social and civic rights"
(Pinheiro, 2017, p. 22).

"this group of young people will have a different perspective on civil society, so they should probe their perspectives and mobilize will, in an act to promote the variety of opinions"
(Pinheiro, 2017, p.23).

3. Recommendations to promote active involvement of youth from alternative care in democratic processes

While CDC principles see young people as citizens of rights and state in article 12.^o that young people have the right to express their opinion freely on matters related to them, and their opinion should be taken into account the Youth Moving view in five EU countries showed that opinion taken by young people from alternative care is still insufficiently taken into account when making decisions that affect them. This suggests that their participation in some forms of decision-making regarding alternative care systems and in associations such as school councils and youth councils is still very modest and without an influence.

The foster care system **in Croatia** fundamentally relies on the importance of Rights of children and doing everything “in the best interest of a child” but lacks in promoting active participation and motivating children and young people in care to be more active in society. According to Croatian social welfare law, every child also has the right to be informed about its situation (reasons for separation from biological parents, what are the biological parents doing wrong, details about the foster family they are moving into, different possibilities of keeping in touch with the biological parents etc.). Also, every child should have a case worker who will be responsible to provide the child with relevant information and professional support and it is mandatory for social welfare professionals to keep in touch on a regular basis. Still, the reality shows that this is compromised by the lack of professional staff in welfare centres which undermines communication, greater sense of involvement, and therefore, the opportunity for foster children to actively participate in their case. Moreover, Croatian care leavers participate little in the democratic life. Desk research conducted showed that there are no organisations or activist groups/movements of young people who live/lived in alternative care. According to Croatian experts with field experience, this lack of activity happens because when care leavers achieve independence, they don't want to differentiate too much from the general population but focus on school/job. Still, they can be involved in different NGOs that promote foster care or different youth NGOs. This happens particularly in cases where care leavers stayed living (or stayed in close contact) with their foster parents, and foster parents are involved in a foster care NGO. This is a major opportunity for youngsters to participate more actively by sharing personal experience to those who are younger, promote foster care and all of its benefits and also focus on the promotion of the importance of education and learning different skills needed in the workforce.

In Czech Republic significant change has taken place in recent years, giving greater importance to the views expressed by children themselves. According to Czech law (The SPOD Act - § 8 para. 2) a child who is able to formulate its own opinions has the right for the purposes of SPO to express these opinions freely when discussing all matters affecting it, even without the presence of parents or other persons responsible for raising a child. The child's statement shall be given due consideration appropriate to his or her age and intellectual maturity. In its activities, the SPO body

takes into account the wishes and feelings of the child, taking into account his or her age and development, so as not to endanger or disrupt his or her emotional and mental development. Children should be informed of what is happening; why is it happening; what they can expect in the near and distant future; where appropriate, they should be informed as to their decision. This follows from the decision of the Constitutional Court that the courts must involve the child in the proceedings, the older the child, the more the judge must communicate with him. The Constitutional Court also set an indicative limit at which courts must communicate with the child directly, i.e., without the parents, from the age of 16. Nevertheless, it is often difficult for children who are growing up in alternative care to access support structures when they do not necessarily have access to information and resources to allow inclusion of people with whom they can comfortably discuss their personal issues (within their foster family or institutional care facility). Regarding participation in democratic life, Czech organizations, like “Lumos”, and groups like “Vteřina poté” play an important role in communicating and educating the public, groups and policy makers on the negative impact of institutionalisation on children and youth, and pushing for the child’s right to family care, and how to effectively implement this. Also, the National Parliament of Children and Youth is a nationwide project that enables young people to participate in public affairs.

According to the report “Bambini e ragazzi in accoglienza **in Italia**” elaborated by the Istituto degli Innocenti in 2019, foster care children were involved in the definition of their “Framework Project” in 19% of cases. In Italy there are also specific moments (at least every six months) when the “Framework Project” is presented and verified through meetings with the child and his/her family, as well as additional accompaniment measures to support them. Besides the “Framework Project”, the Italian system contemplates other two documents declined to the specific situation of the child: the “Foster Care Project” (*Progetto di affidamento*), when it comes to foster family cases and the “Individualized Educational Project” (*Progetto Educativo Individualizzato*, P.E.I.) in residential care cases. Despite this specificity, data from the report mentioned above shows that children are involved in the drafting of these documents only in 24% of the cases. The most frequent measure in the accompaniment of the Individual Foster Care Project on behalf of the social services concerns meetings with the foster family (94%), individual meetings with the child (67%), with biological family (8%), group meetings in the presence of the child, his/her parents and foster family (4%), group meetings with children and parents (2%). For instance, in residential care service, the accompaniment of the Individualised Educational Project consists mainly in meetings with the child (72%) and individual interviews with one or both parents (45%). Group meetings with children and parents are less frequent (20%). In sum, in the case of institutional care the participation of the biological family and of the child himself/herself is much lower (19% and 12%, respectively). Since 2018, the Italian foster care system encourages youth active participation mainly through the experimental “Care Leavers project”, aimed at accompanying care leavers gradually towards autonomy until the age of 21, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies Agevolando Association. Among other actions and activities, the project foresees the organisation of “Youth Conferences” that are tools of active participation of care leavers at local, regional and national level in order to facilitate the exchange of experiences and to promote innovation with representatives of the national technical assistance, the tutors for autonomy and, in relation to the topics, also with local and regional representatives. Concerning care leavers’ participation in democratic life, the most important initiative in Italy is the “Care leavers network”, promoted by Agevolando Association, which is national network of young people aged 16-24 who live or have lived a period of their life “outside the family” (in a family-type community, institutional care, foster care), involved in a path of participation and active citizenship. In short, the network carries out advocacy and awareness actions (e.g., set of recommendations presented to European Parliament formulated by the care leavers), promotes training activities for

professionals and students who work or will work in the field of child protection through the direct involvement of young people in alternative care, carries out laboratory and storytelling activities and promotes self-help and mutual support among care leavers.

The **Portuguese** law states that in all proceedings and in the services provided to the child, their rights must be safeguarded to: (1) receive relevant information on their situation, rights, reasons for intervention, how this is carried out and what the alternatives are; (2) be heard and participate in the acts of the measure applied to them by the system, for example in the elaboration of their life project; (3) have their opinions taken into account in the decision-making process concerning measures that affect them according to their maturity and age; (4) be heard and participate in decisions relating to the management of the residential care facilities where they live; and (5) participate in the evaluation of the residential care facilities where they live. In short, the rights of protection and provision should be considered in close conjunction with the rights of participation considering the child as an active subject. Despite this, Rodrigues (2018) in a study conducted to evaluate the quality of Portuguese residential care shows that participation is one of the worst dimensions evaluated by children and youngsters as well as by professionals who work with them. The same study also concludes that the right for participation of these young ones is sometimes disregarded in the face of protection. Also, there is a shortage of studies concerning the involvement of young people when authorities/political power legislate about the foster care system in Portugal. There is a lack of interest in this topic not only by political power/authorities but also by the local community. Moreover, the Portuguese foster care system only provides recommendations regarding the promotion of active participation and citizenship. In fact, programs aiming to promote active participation, citizenship and children's rights in residential care are usually promoted by realisation of funded NGO projects. Despite the research conducted regarding youth participation, there is a lack of studies concerning care leavers' participation in democratic life. Yet, desk research conducted showed the existence of groups of young people in alternative care and care leavers' movements. For instance, Young Experts are an informal group of young people with experience in foster care, with concern on issues of children's and young people's rights during and after foster care. Its central mission is to promote the discussion around residential foster care and its different themes, opening doors to the debate. They want to break existing myths about children and young people in foster care and the implementation of support in residential foster care, based on a more participatory system. Also, the 1st National Meeting of Young People in Care/Care leavers, promoted by PAJE, aimed to be an event where young people with similar experiences share life experiences and motivate each other, but also an opportunity to promote reflection on residential care through the vision of young people who experienced it. More generally, the "I Have Vote on Matter" (*Eu tenho voto na matéria*) initiative, promoted by UNICEF Portugal, aimed to hear opinion of all children and young people living in Portugal, including young people in care, about what they want for their communities and how they would like to be heard, specifically at the local level.

In Romania, the care system doesn't emphasise young people's participation, meaning there is not an available teaching method that is used by the educators of the care system in the country. Programs addressing care leavers and programs that aim to prepare young people in care are usually promoted by NGOs like DGASPC Harghita and funded by European programs. Mostly these projects aim for independent life, namely to promote skills that would help them to find their place in the working society. A previous EU funded transnational project's study, in which Romania also took part, showed that the main problems that the care leavers and disadvantaged young people face are: lack of information on what participation clearly means and they are vaguely informed about the projects of the local NGOs. Few youngsters were asked about their opinion regarding the legislation of the law makers and they have an overall negative attitude towards the public authorities gen-

erally speaking. Concerning care leavers' participation in democratic life, although the involvement in socio-political life is reduced, a great number of the young people donate or volunteer to various causes, showing a clear preference for social involvement (humanitarian/charitable). In this sense, a study reveals that 16% of care leavers mentioned that they have participated in volunteer activities.

In that light the Youth Moving Consortium proposes:

a) Improve policies and legislation

- Governments should promote effective involvement of young people in decision-making on local policies, creating opportunities - through formal and non-formal education - for children to develop and implement values of freedom, democracy, citizenship and respect, as well as critical thinking and becoming responsible and active citizens in society.
- Governments should recognize specific knowledge and experience of young people in care and involve them when creating laws and regulations about the care system.
- The participation of minors at the initiatives of local authorities should not be on an occasional but on permanent basis, using what has been learned from the best practices to constantly promote their participation and listen to their opinion on topics of their interest.
- Institutionalise consultations with care leavers on matters that affect their lives in order to promote their active citizenship and participation. The indication is, therefore, to institutionalise this participation, making it permanent and guaranteeing adequate human, technical and financial resources and to affect legislative processes.
- Promote the involvement of children and decision-makers in a continuous and sustainable manner, increasing the quality of the public service provided for children in care.
- Encourage the development and support of youth advisory bodies at a local level.
- Encourage and support youth associations and their activities.
- Creation of a children/young people's Ombudsman. The Ombudsman should encourage spaces for dialogue and be in direct contact with young people/children, where they can complain and claim for their rights, stimulating their social participation and promoting the construction of a social and responsible citizenship.
- Provide children and youngsters with relevant information. This information should be easily accessed by young ones and also be relevant for them to form an opinion about (Willow, 2013).
- "Child friendly" language of the institutional documents.

b) Improve quality of alternative care services

- Children and youth from alternative care should be more involved in the decision-making process and their opinion should be heard and taken into account by social welfare professionals, especially when it comes to individual planning and leaving care.
- Obligation for children/young people to participate in the evaluation of the services provided by the care system.

- Alternative care services' environment should be promoting the idealisation and organisation of new activities at the initiative of young people.
- Alternative care services should develop and implement methods to promote youth participation, like for example, suggestion boxes (where the young ones can leave their opinions concerning the service), personalisation of individual/common spaces, negotiation of house rules and residents' assemblies (meetings to discuss and take decisions on matters concerning the house that operates in a democratic logic, with all the participant voting on decisions).
- Alternative care services should develop and implement programs that promote, besides other contents, children's rights, participation and active citizenship and social and personal competences or soft skills.
- Social workers who work with such children and prepare them for leaving care should have the capacity to promote children's participation in democratic processes and active citizenship. In order to do so, it is important to empower them to facilitate and implement participation mechanisms but also important to promote their personal and social competencies. Also, to work on stereotypes that influence the relationship between adults and young people, namely, considering the young one's incapable/incompetent to read and foresee their worlds of life (Willow, 2013).
- Alternative care services, namely residential care institutions, should provide conditions and openness for the participation in social life, so the young person can integrate a sense of collective responsibility.
- Foster families should be more involved and heard by the care system. Also, they should have access to different social services in local communities.
- Children and families should be involved in house rules from the start.
- Ensure systematic responses and services - A number of different NGOs (and foundations) provide support systems and services to youth living in and leaving alternative care. However, the quality of services offered by these organisations differ, which impacts the support offered to foster carers and those in foster care. If these organisations are less active in providing services, the foster carers themselves are forced to be more proactive if they wish to find support structures for themselves and their foster children.

c) Promote relationships and improve networks

- Social networks around the young person should be identified and strengthened. It is necessary to build supportive community-based networks and a compulsory interinstitutional framework where the municipality takes a more active role. Scientific evidence shows that a decisive factor to the success of young people leaving care is the establishment of a supporting network that includes an adult who may help them in good and bad moments (Rutman et al, 2005; Reid, 2007).
- Creation of the tutor figure. In Italy, the tutor is integrated into the network of relationships of the care leaver, collaborates with the social workers and helps the implementation of the actions envisaged in the individualised project. The tutor stimulates the network and social inclusion of the care leaver and is essential for fostering connections between the various care leavers involved in the experimentation and for the creation of Youth Conferences, that are foreseen to promote

the active participation of young people, to facilitate the exchange of experiences and to promote innovation.

- Establishing relationships of respect and dignity to the commitment to support children to express their wishes and opinions.
- Adults should be serious about what children tell them. This includes, value their opinions and wishes according to their maturity and age, in decision making processes.
- Strengthen social networks of young people in care. For example, Italian Care leavers network.
- Encouraging the exchange of good practices and networks between youth associations/informal groups and therefore, the intersectionality/solidarity between movements. The causes that young people advocate for are numerous and some of them can be inseparable from each other, especially when they aim for system reforms.
- Promote networking between organisations (e.g. NGOs, foundations) and between professionals working in the care system - For these professionals, networking is a major opportunity to share knowledge and experience and therefore, promote synergies and better practices concerning the work they develop in the foster care field (Oliveira et al., 2016). In Czech Republic, the Platform into Adulthood unites and connects organisations that offer support and development to young people with experience in institutional care, especially in their preparation for independent living. The lack of space for sharing experiences and information, as well as the effort to strengthen the voice of young adults, led to this activity.
- Promote associativism (even if informal) among children in care. For example, the Portuguese informal group “Young Experts”, is a group of young people with experience in foster care, with concern on issues of children’s and young people’s rights during and after foster care. Its central mission is to promote the discussion around residential foster care and its different themes, opening doors to the debate. They want to break existing myths about children and young people in foster care and the implementation of support in residential foster care, based on a more participatory system. Also, Romanian “Children’s Board”, consists of a group of children of different ages, from all over the country, coming from different family backgrounds and the child protection services, with different ethnic backgrounds and with a varied experience in the field of representation. For most of them, this is the first time their voice has reached the decision-makers, with 24 of the 30 members being recruited in the last months of 2019.
- Empower young people in care through involvement in community volunteering activities which would be an effective mechanism for their social integration, through increasing self-esteem, developing empathy and some communication skills outside the social network in which it works.
- NGOs and other institutions, especially the ones that develop their work with children in care and care leavers, should promote their participation in the work developed by the organisation. For example, in Croatia some care leavers participate in the work of NGOs by designing and participating in different activities and therefore, they become more active.
- Promote research on youth participation in democratic processes in order to provide data on the situation of foster children’s rights and needs regarding participation in the care system but also in general society.
- Promote dialogue among institutions, youth organisations and young people.

4. Key Lessons “to go”

- **Participation improves young people’s abilities**

Participation promotes an unique opportunity for young people to learn about the importance of hearing and respecting different opinions and value decisions taken democratically. Also, to respect other people’s rights and to recognize their own rights, namely the right to have their opinion heard by others.

- **All children/young people can participate**

Every child/youngster has an opinion on matters that affect them directly despite their age. Is up to us, adult people, to encourage their participation in the decision-making processes and provide adequate mechanisms for that.

- **All youngsters have competences to offer to other youngsters**

Young people can support other youngsters to improve their participation, for example, as peer educators.

- **Youth workers’ support is essential**

Young people’s participation is influenced by the level of support, trust and respect provided by the adult figure as well as by the opportunities for them to gradually understand responsibilities. The excessive responsibility can compromise participation of care leavers and their healthy development. In this sense, it is important for young people in care, particularly when they are leaving the system, to have an adult figure that provides them support and guidance. Adult people are responsible to provide an environment of respect and trust where young people take responsibility gradually, and therefore, promote their development in a holistic way.

- **Adult people can learn from young people’s experience**

Youngsters’ opinions and ideas can contribute to policies, laws and practices designed by the governments to improve children’s rights. Particularly, young people with care experience are unique experts in matters related to the alternative care system. In this sense, it is of most importance that adult people (youth workers, decision-makers, etc.) hear, respect and take their opinion into serious consideration.

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