

# ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

April 2025

## Empowering Local Communities and Youth in Decision-Making Processes

### Introduction

The issue of power, as it relates to addressing imbalances among local communities, youth, and multinational companies, was one of four main topics that came out of the ESDN's Youth Workshop 2024, which took place in Berlin on 05-06 September. The Workshop brought together 33 Youth Members from 19 European countries to learn and discuss a sustainable and climate neutral Europe by 2050 through the use of foresight and future scenarios. This Policy Note was written by one of the four thematic subgroups.

### Identifying the Core Problems

In recent years, significant challenges have emerged concerning the power imbalances between local communities, youth, and multinational companies in decision-making processes. Geographic disparities between rural and urban areas, superficial youth inclusion ("youth washing"), accessibility barriers due to elitism, the excessive influence of corporate lobbying, and a general lack of accountability and feedback mechanisms are some of the pressing issues. These challenges lead to a situation where local voices—especially those of youth and marginalized groups—are often overlooked in policy development, resulting in decisions that do not truly reflect their needs and aspirations.

#### 1) Rural-Urban Divide

Rural areas continue to experience limited access to opportunities, services, and resources compared to urban centers. The brain drain of young people from rural communities to cities further exacerbates this divide, impacting both community development and economic growth.

#### 2) Youth Washing

Despite some efforts to include youth in decision-making, true influence and meaningful participation remain scarce. Often, youth involvement is superficial, with young people only being included in consultations or decisions at very limited or symbolic levels.

#### 3) Accessibility Barriers – Elitism

Marginalized groups—including young people from underrepresented and remote communities—continue to face significant obstacles in accessing opportunities, educational resources, and decision-making processes due to elitism. This exclusion leads to unequal access and participation.

#### 4) Excessive Corporate Influence

The heavy influence of multinational companies through direct and indirect lobbying poses a major challenge to genuine community and youth participation in policy decisions. Corporate interests often overshadow the voices of local communities and young people, leading to unfair and unrepresentative decision-making.

#### 5) Lack of Accountability

Despite commitments from companies and governments, a substantial gap remains between policy promises and their actual implementation. There is a widespread lack of accountability, with insufficient monitoring and feedback mechanisms contributing to a lack of progress.

## Youth Network Members' Policy Demands

In order to address the core problems, the ESDN Youth Network Members developed 3 policy demands that are targeted at a combination of UN (UNDP, UN-Habitat, UNICEF, UN Global Compact, UNODC) and European stakeholders (European Commission (DG REGIO and DG EAC), European Network for Rural Development, European Youth Forum, Transparency International EU, European Ombudsman and European Court of Auditors).

- 1) **Improve digital infrastructure and create community hubs in rural areas.**
- 2) **Create genuine youth leadership programs and opportunities to reduce elitism in access to opportunities.**
- 3) **Promote transparent and ethical business practices and enhance feedback mechanisms and accountability**

---

### 1) Improve digital infrastructure and create community hubs in rural areas.

Solutions should focus on creating incentives for young people to stay in rural areas and mitigate the urban-rural divide.

- **Provide better internet access and technological tools**, so that rural communities can benefit from greater connectivity and opportunities.
- **Establish community hubs** in local communities that bring together young people and other community members to better access resources, participate in consultations, and receive training.

### 2) Create genuine youth leadership programs and opportunities to reduce elitism in access to opportunities.

The recommended solutions involve the establishment of intergenerational participatory processes. These measures will help ensure that youth voices are genuinely represented and valued throughout the

decision-making processes and help protect against “youth washing”.

- **Develop a participatory budgeting and consultation process** that involves youth.
- **Ensure the inclusion** of often forgotten youth from remote communities and social groups in the participatory process(es).
- **Create dedicated youth advisory positions** in steering committees within local communities.
- **Involve young people** in the implementation and development of initiatives.
- **Mandate a “Youth Engagement Scorecard”**, which provides professionals in the development sector the possibility to measure the level of youth engagement in programs or projects during different phases (design phase, implementation and post implementation).
- **Develop** mentorship programs and foster intergenerational dialogue.

### 3) Promote transparent and ethical business practices and enhance feedback mechanisms and accountability.

Strengthening transparency laws, promoting ethical business practices, and establishing independent monitoring bodies will help to counteract this undue influence. Promoting broader and more inclusive community representation in decision-making will also be vital.

- **Make reports for business lobbyists and politicians compulsory**, as this makes transparent the flow of money and vested interests.
- **Guarantee reporting is followed up by monitoring** through an independent and non-partisan body.
- **Provide increased access to seed funding** to encourage new businesses to stay in rural communities, as well as to encourage youth entrepreneurship in these communities.
- **Provide well-paid, entry-level job opportunities** for young people starting out in their professional lives.

- **Abolish and ban the practice of unpaid internships**, as this practice is not only unfair to all young people looking to gain experience for their professional lives, but unpaid internships are biased towards those who can afford to work for nothing.

## Conclusion

The combination of increasing digital infrastructure, creating inclusive decision-making processes, reducing elitism, and promoting transparency and accountability is essential to empower local communities and youth. By taking these actions, we can ensure that decisions made reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of all citizens. These efforts will also contribute to a more just, transparent, and sustainable system of governance at all levels, culture of shared responsibility and accountability, ensuring that institutions evolve with the needs and aspirations of the people they serve.