YOUTH EMPOWERMENT METHODOLOGY

UNGDOMSBUREAUET

Background

This methodology is linked to the project Attractive Nordic Towns[1]. Attractive Nordic Towns aims to ensure green redevelopment, competitiveness in Nordic urban regions, and to create towns that provide the framework of a good life. The collaboration consists of small and medium-sized Nordic towns from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway. The project is anchored in the following Sustainable Development Goals:

- Sustainable Development Goal 8: Good jobs and economic growth
- Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities
- Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnership for the goals. To create new innovative(green) businesses

The motivation for this methodology is that an active and empowered youth is needed to ensure the continued development of sustainable towns.

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[1] Sweco (2018):
www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8790c63ddb804757b5c556876ae2f73f/indicators_toolbox_attractive_nordic_towns_sweco.pdf

Introduction

It is vital that young voices are included in our society as young people are the citizens of the future and a central part of every democracy. It is a continuous task and a general responsibility to create a society where all citizens feel included and heard. Engaging young people is important and benefits more than just young people. It makes them care more for their local community, improves the quality of government services and creates a more democratic society in general. When young people are engaged in their local community it creates a coherent community in which all people feel represented and valued.

The empirical foundation for the Youth Empowerment Methodology consists of 24 individual interviews with both youth and stakeholders from the municipalities of Sønderborg and Narvik. Furthermore, we have conducted a workshop with young people from both cities participating, and 10 Vox pop interviews with students from Sønderborg Statsskole. We would like to thank all the participants for their valuable inputs.

The methodology seeks to provide the reader with hands-on tools, and tips for the involvement and engagement of young people – whether you are a young person yourself, or a part of what we refer to as the "experienced generation". A culture of involvement and engagement needs support from young people, as well as from other generations. One of our interviewees phrases it:

> *"The task is to create an openness, and a belief that we can do something, create something. And the task is for everybody: We need to believe that we can do it, and the people working in the municipality or elsewhere… If they think we are just some stupid kids who don't know how to do anything, well, then we will be those stupid kids who don't get things done"* (High School Student and a member of the Student Council).

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About Ungdomsbureauet

This report has been developed by Ungdomsbureauet (Translated: The Youth Bureau) in collaboration with Sønderborg municipality and Narvik municipality. Ungdomsbureauet is a non-profit organisation dedicated to empowering youth and promoting youth engagement. We wish to strengthen youth influence in societal matters and political decision processes. Our mission is to give youth opportunities. Opportunities to form opinions, to be heard and gain influence. Be it in society at large, in political debates, or in local environments. The organisation's vision is to help foster one of the most civically engaged youth generations ever seen in Denmark – and hopefully in other Nordic countries as well.

We have more than five years of experience with problem solving as well as comprehensive know-how about youth engagement and participation. Our portfolio consists of a versatile range of engagement and involvement tools, such as workshops, pop-up democracy events, mentoring, future workshops and storytelling. We also specialize in analysis, books, and creative happenings. Our experience from working with youth shows that empowerment and engagement of young people require different approaches depending on both age, current level of engagement, and anticipated degree of involvement and influence.
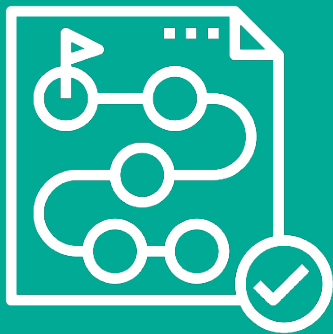
YOUTH EMPOWERMENT METHODOLOGY

Youth Empowerment Methodology

The methodology is a general and adjustable model applicable in different contexts. We outline various scenarios, choices and questions one must consider when involving, engaging, and empowering young people. We believe this to be the most sustainable solution, when looking for a methodology that can be applied across borders, cultural differences and in different political environments.

Furthermore, the methodology seeks to support a variety of different ways to engage and empower young people. Young people are not a homogenous group. Like adults, young people come from different backgrounds, have different interests and like to communicate and participate in different ways. The ways in which one group of young people get motivated and participate will not necessarily be the same for another group. Therefore, it is important that engagement is not simply offered in one format and that a variety of mechanisms and approaches are employed to reach a diverse group of young people. The mechanisms and approaches should always be employed with respect to the participants and the information sought from them.

Reading Guide

The following chapter contains do's and don'ts on how to engage and empower young people. First, you will find a step-by-step guide and a checklist with important questions you need to consider when engaging young people in your project.

Second, we present concrete and easily applicable tools that you can apply to support youth engagement.

Why, When, Who and How?

When you first think of involving young people in your project there are always four questions you should ask yourself: Why, when, whom and how.
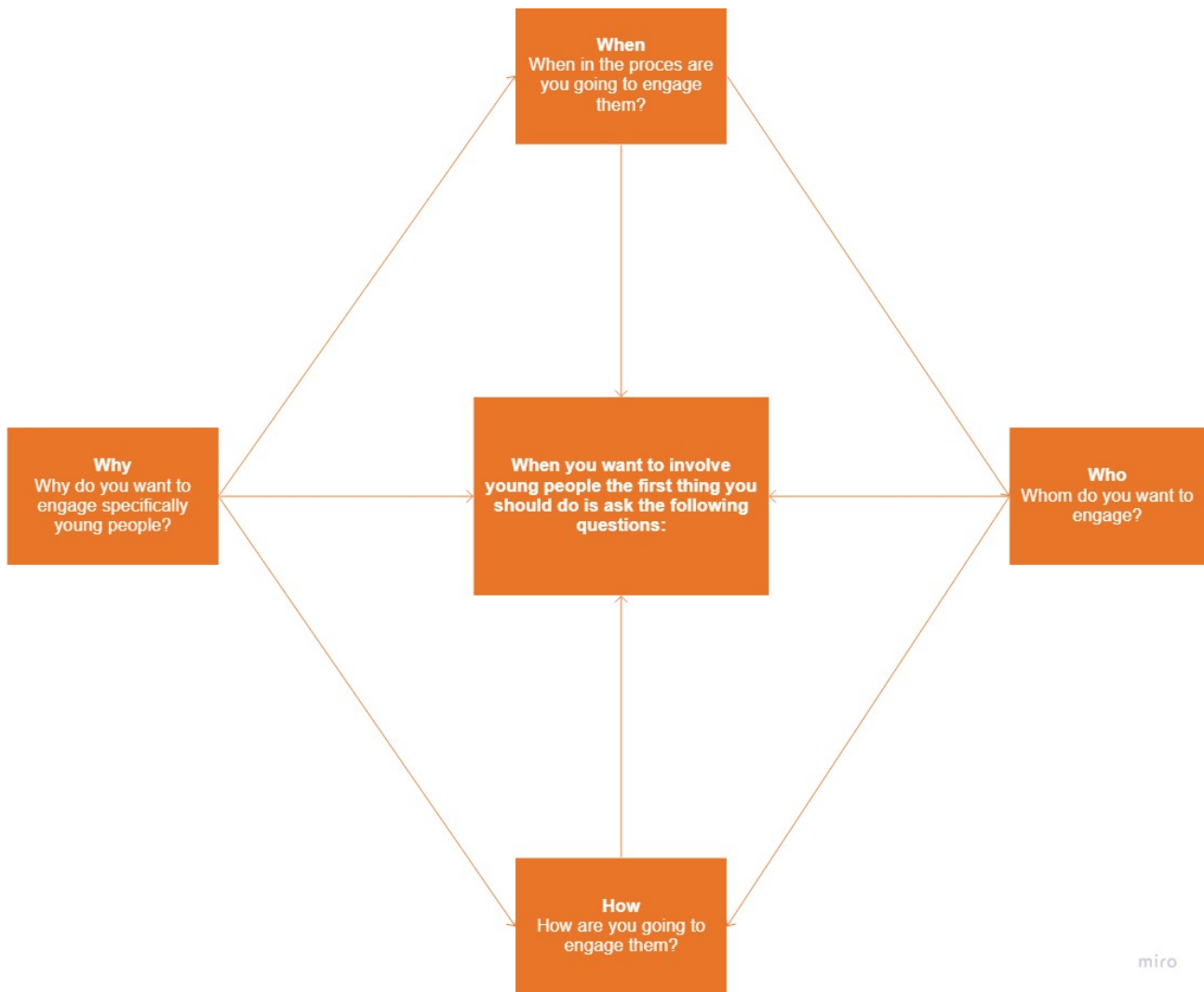
Why?

When you wish to engage young people, the first question you should ask yourself is 'why?'. You need to reflect beforehand on why you want to involve young people, and what they add to your project. Furthermore, you need to make your reasons clear to the participants, so they understand your reasons for reaching out. Young people most likely have valuable inputs that will strengthen your project, however sometimes it simply does not make sense to involve young people, e.g. if young people are not *actually* able to have any real influence in the proces. Therefore, you need to consider why you are engaging young people in the first place, what they add, and if the framework of your project supports actual participation.

When?

When in the process does it make sense to engage young people? Is it early or late in the process?

Early Stage

The early stage is where ideas are being generated and the project is taking form. Involving young people early on can contribute to a feeling of empowerment for the participants, as their input can shape and form the project from the very beginning. This also provides a sense of ownership among the participants. However, when involving early in the process it is vital to realize that some young people prefer to engage in a shorter timespan so make sure to discuss the process with your participants; how long do you need them to participate, and what kind of process do they prefer themselves? When involving early in the process it is also important to remember to give frequent feedback and make sure that it is transparent how their inputs and efforts made a change.

Late Stage

The late stage is where most decisions have been made. Being engaged at this point is sometimes frustrating because of limited influence on the

direction of the project. Engaging at this stage requires a rather clear-cut defined distribution of responsibilities to make it transparent and to ensure that everyone knows their role. If possible let young people take charge of the agenda and project, but with the boundaries you set. This will still ensure that the participants feel empowered even though a lot of decisions have been made, as they will still be able to influence the process.

Temporary Engagement

When engaging young people, it is important to realize that some people are having a difficult time committing over a long period of time. Young people are in a phase of life where they are still forming their identity and get introduced to new things constantly. They also have to make a lot of important life choices e.g. future education and work. Furthermore, young people have a lot of obligations to school, work, friends, family and so on. Accommodate this by letting people participate over a shorter period. Otherwise, you can apply a flexible framework approach, so that participants can sometimes spend less time or put in a smaller effort that fit their schedule and other obligations, and at other times put in more time and effort.

Who?

Whom do you want to recruit? Remember that young people are a catch-all description and that young people are just as different as any other age group.
Consider what is more beneficial to your project - to engage young people formally or informally. Are you reaching out to people in your network, or are you recruiting through a formal organisation like a student council, or through the educational system?

Network

We advise you to consider your own network when you need to find participants as this tends to be the most effective form of recruitment. Also consider the network of people you surround yourself with e.g. co-workers or fellow students. You can also tell young people about your project face-to-face at places where young people are present.

Social Media

In some cases social media are a useful platform to reach out to young people, but because of the information overload on these platforms, most social media groups, events, or posts should not stand alone. Rather, they need the support of more analogue forms of interactions for reaching out.

Educational System

If you need a wide range of opinions and people, consider recruiting through the educational system. Reach out to headmasters or teachers. If you have the resources, you should aim for more than one type of school. For example, do not by default only recruit high school students, but try to include students from vocational educations as well. Feel free to reach out but keep busy exam periods in mind and be careful not to put a lot of extra work to the teachers already busy schedule.

Organisations

You can also find organisations and recruit through these. This can lead to a lot of already engaged and involved young people who might want to put some hours into your project as well. However, people who are already active in an organisation are sometimes very busy so make sure you clear time expectations with the potential participants when reaching out.

How?

When you consider engaging young people, you should have a clear-cut plan. How are you going to let them participate? Will they be involved through surveys, workshops or volunteering? What is the aim? Will you collect inputs, or will you do actual co-creation where everyone, regardless of age, is an equal participant? How will you make contact and recruit the participants? How will you provide feedback? How will you compensate them for their expenses?

Communicate in Eye Height

Young people are sometimes more informal than older generations. It is not to be rude, different generations simply have different ways of expression. Remember to convey your message in simple ways. You should not need a higher education to participate and remember that what is common knowledge for one person might not be it for another.

Freedom within Framework

Trust goes a long way to ensure participation and empowerment. You need to provide freedom within the set boundaries of the project. Too much control or bureaucracy risks creating a feeling of burnout. We advise that you have a quick workflow and use the here-and-now momentum when your participants wish to act or be engaged in something. If it drags out due to e.g. bureaucracy the momentum might be lost. Also remember to give feedback on how their inputs has contributed, as this will make them feel more invested since they are making a difference.

Sustainable Relationships

Developing long term relationships is important for sustainable volunteerism. Spending time building and developing these relations means prioritizing

social arrangements, helping young people learn new skills and showing them trust.

Young People as Equals

Treat young people as equals and remember that 'youth' is a catch-all description. Be attentive and listen to their words and actions and understand that not all young people are the same. Do not neglect someone's inputs based on age. Also do not be over-excited for young people's input. They are no different from other people's inputs and should be treated with respect and consideration. Keep in mind that the goal should not be for you to benefit off young people, but rather there should be a mutually beneficial relationship. Offer something for their commitment, e.g. letting them be in charge, let them have responsibilities or maybe teach them something new.

Time Management and Output

When engaging young people, ask how much time they can spend on the project and explain how much time you expect it to take. Respect their schedules and help them plan their time. Young people sometimes have a hard time not going all-in on projects, so make sure you regularly ask how much work they have on their plate. If not, they might burn out or their school will suffer.

Coordinate Logistics

Young people find the logistics to be one of the central and most common issues when engaging in a project. Bear in mind that young people often have school lasting all day. It is not possible for them to attend during school hours and you should factor in some time getting from the school to the project location without being stressed. Also remember to have a dialogue about exams or upcoming assignments so you can schedule around it. Provide

a schedule for transport to and from the location of the meeting and end the meeting in due time, so it matches the bus and other practical factors. Make it as easy as possible to participate as it will encourage young people to become involved. This also means compensating for project-related expenses which involves transport to and from location, and that you will compensate them for food bought on the way or provide it during the meetings. Meetings are more productive with some food or snacks especially if they are held right after school hours or during the evening.

Check-List

Below you will find a check-list for things you should consider when engaging young people. When you have considered or done what we propose you can make a checkmark.

When you need the assistance of young people have you…:

☐ Asked yourself 'why', 'when', 'who' and 'how'?

When communicating with young people have you…:

☐ Made sure that you convey your message in a simple and easily understood way?

☐ Asked the participants how they prefer to communicate and receive messages? E.g. do they prefer texting instead of using Facebook or e-mail?

☐ Had a talk about expectations? Both in terms of the project-goal, and what they hope to get out of their participation?

When planning meetings have you…:

☐ Provided participants with practical information, and shared your contact information?

☐ Provided participants with food or a snack?

☐ Made sure that your meeting does not collide with the participants school hours, and other important logistics? If you do not know when their school finishes make sure to ask.

☐ Let the participants plan part of or the entire agenda? If not, have you thought about why?

☐ Reminded the participants of which project-expenses will be compensated and a guide on how to do it in practice?

When working with young people have you…:

☐ Have you checked in on the young people you work with recently and discussed the work burden?

☐ Have you recently made an informal social arrangement or included time in your meetings to develop a relationship between you and the participants?

☐ Let them handle the agenda recently?

☐ Given them freedom or control of part of the project recently?

☐ Made sure that it is possible to engage in a shorter amount of time which makes space for spontaneous young people?

☐ Provided your participants with regular feedback? About the development of the project, and the output of the participants work and effort in general?

Tools to Support Empowerment and Engagement

In the following chapter concrete tools to youth engagement will be presented. We recommend using those in addition to the above-mentioned questions 'why', 'when', 'whom' and 'why'. These tools and methods should be understood as a guideline and for inspiration. They should not be followed blindly but applied with audience in mind.

There are many different tools for different purposes. Consider how the chosen tool connects to the larger goal of empowerment. Be open about the tool you are using and what output you are hoping for. If it is a matter of co-creation point this out: "Now is the chance for direct influence" however, if you are more interested in just collecting inputs and collect ideas make sure the participants know this, and do not expect e.g. co-creation. We separate between four types of tools:

1. Divergent Tools

Tools for involvement that help you explore and collect ideas. These tools are useful for involving youth in the early stages of a project.

Be aware: Do not overstate what the output will result in. The main purpose is to get inputs, be inspired, and get knowledge of what your participants think about a certain theme, however, you cannot promise that their ideas will lead to concrete changes or projects afterwards. Also make sure not to explain it as co-creation.

Advantages: Divergent tools help empower in the sense that the participants gain a feeling of being taken seriously, heard, and listened to.
Divergent tools can be helpful in early stages of a project to make sure that your participants support the project or help point the project in a direction supported by them.

2. Convergent Tools

Tools that help select ideas and that are useful for decision-making. Convergent tools are useful if you already have a selection of ideas or options that you want the participants to choose from.

Be aware: If the participants have not been a part of the prior process the options can seem arbitrary or worst-case irrelevant to the participants.

Advantages: Divergent tools help empower in the sense that the participants feel that they have an actual output and saying.

3. Co-creation

Co-creation tools make all participants a part of the final result. Inputs based on co-creation tools can often be implemented directly. In processes of co-creation it is important that the output is co-created and not changed afterwards.

Be aware: If you aim for co-creation be aware of honoring this. In order to co-create the facilitator, need to let go of some autonomy and accept whatever input the participants bring to the table. Also make sure that what they co-create seem meaningful and relevant to the participants. Furthermore, co-creation-processes demand a high degree of reflexibility for the facilitator to make all participants contribute.

Advantages: Co-creation tools are useful for empowering the participants and make them feel listen to, involved and like autonomous contributors. The concrete output can also provide a feeling of pride and self-reliability.

4. Listen

Listening-tools aim to get inputs for further investigations and analysis. The aim here is not necessarily to have the participants formulate concrete ideas or get a direct saying, but rather that the participants are being carefully listened to and asked about relevant topics and themes. Afterwards these inputs are being analysed and interpreted.

Be aware: Of how you communicate.

Advantages: Divergent tools help empower in the sense that the participants gain a feeling of being taken seriously, heard, and listened to.

List of Concrete Tools

In the following chapter concrete tools to youth engagement will be presented. These tools and methods should be understood as a guideline and for inspiration. They should not be followed blindly but applied with audience in mind.

We hope that the following list of concrete tools will inspire you when engaging young people. Please note that the list is not a comprehensive list of all tools available, rather we urge you to search the internet for more tools or develop your own method or approach for your project.

Interviews
Most interviews take form of semi-structured individual interviews. The conversation is based on a guide which has been developed in advance however it is important to only loosely stick to the guide and be willing to listen and be interested in what the interviewee is presenting. The goal of this method is to get an insight in to the everyday life on the interviewee and can help developing a deeper insight into a certain problem-area.

Vox-pop Interviews
The vox-pop interviews are short interviews (often 3-5 questions) that have not been prepared in advance. This methods strength is to gather information from a lot of different sources and from a lot of different places which can give you a more nuanced insight in to whatever you are researching. The weakness is that the information you gather is very limited because of the short time limit.

Focus Groups
A focus group is a sort of group interview however there is no interviewer. Instead there will be a facilitator who creates the premises throws in a couple of questions when needed. The goal is for the participants to take lead on the discussions and the group conversation and the dynamics and interactions between the participants can provide you with a lot of information. Often, way more than a traditional 1 on 1 interview can provide. The weakness of this method is primarily gathering enough participants to make it meaningful because it is more time consuming than a 1 on 1 interview and you get less input from the individual person.

Surveys
A series of questionnaires which collects data on a certain topic. Widely used and an effective strategy of gathering a lot of inputs quickly.

Future Workshops

Future workshops are a way of structuring group work. It places the participants experiences and their wishes for the future in centrum when it comes to planning for changes e.g. in local community or in a workplace. This method has three steps:
- In the first step the participants describe what problems they identify. It is a phase where critique is in centrum and you highlight all the negative.
- After this phase is the utopia-phase. This phase is about wishes for the future and fantasizing about how e.g. your local community *could* be. There are no wishes or ideas which are too far-fetched.
- The final phase is the reality phase. Here you describe how to make the fantasies and wishes for the future real and anchor them in concrete projects.

Social Laboratories

In a social laboratory a diverse team of people meet who shares that they all have a stake in a certain issue. Here they develop and test out solutions. The team is gathered regularly in workshops to develop ideas. The ideas are tried in practice between the workshops often in collaboration with supervisors and mentors.

Featured Article Relay

A competition in the local daily press where young people are invited to write debates about whatever topic relevant for your project.

Speeches

Creating a platform where young people make speeches about something that is on their mind relating to your project. The workshop participants suggested that young people get invited to throw speeches at the Town Hall in the city council. This to both empower, make young people feel included, and to reduce the distance between the authorities and youth.

Study Trips

The young people from our workshop suggested that schools went on study trips to the municipality. Again, this might help reduce the distance between authorities and young people. In general, inviting participants to certain areas, organisations, or physical sites connected to your project it strengthens the participants' understanding of your project.

Mobile Conversation Saloon

In the mobile conversation saloons people gather to talk about a topic. The conversations starting point is often with a so called 'conversation-menu. The mobile conversation saloon brings the concept to places where young people gather. E.g. the conversation-facilitator visits young sport clubs, schools e.g. and gather inputs with different reflection activities after the initial conversation or by recording the conversation on video.

Art and City installations

Let young people express themselves through art. Places where young people can provide inputs about physical city installations through physical installations e.g. by the city hall. However, be sure that the installations are well thought through: What is the main goal with the installation? Does it need to be facilitated or does it speak for itself?

Digital Platforms

Digital platforms such as social media have a great potential as almost every young person uses some sort of digital platform already. However, it is not an easy fix. Too many young people speak of the over-use of Facebook and the overflow of silent Facebook groups or Facebook events with almost no one attending. You need to have good reasons to use social media as a platform of communication, and if the goal is to have an active group it needs a lot of groundwork. The most important thing is to simply ask which platform you should use and how.

If you have a new platform you want young people to use be aware that the information flow and eye-catch is intense on the internet. You will have to compete with many others who also want to catch the eye of the youth and among youth a feeling of apathy towards the online flow is starting to happen. So, make sure you do not use digital platforms as an easy fix because you think 'that is where the young people are'.

Online Community

A forum where young people can gather and provide inputs on which initiatives which can and should be implemented to reach certain political objectives and ambitions

Voting or Digital Voting

Voting on social medias, a website or an idea-app where young people can pick the ideas, they like the most in regard to different ideas. It can also be through SMS/text consultation.

It is also a way you can see if there is support for your idea: Get more people to stand up for the case and prove how many supports this by signatures or by more creative ways or means.

Young Ambassadors, Youth Councils and/or Citizen's Jury
Often a formal group of young people who can influence the decision processes around the municipality. These councils work varies a lot and the young people act both as facilitators of social events and as a political councilor. Or let a random selection of young people consider and make decisions on a certain topic. Also called citizens' jury.

Youth Secretaries
A unit with a budget to initiate and support projects which can realize goals in regard to a certain policy.

Dogmas
Dogmas are a set of rules and principles which needs to be fulfilled. Depending on the context some projects can benefit from having some clearly defined values to help you frase your project. It can be regarded as a check-list which is used to make it easier to decide which initiatives or decisions to prioritize.