Youth as partners in the green transition
Building sustainable communities

Anna Berlina
Introduction

Many municipalities in the Nordic countries consider youth engagement as a crucial strategy for building attractive and inclusive communities in line with the UN 2030 Agenda – and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, affirming that young people have the right to influence policymaking that affects them and participate meaningfully in societal development. The EU also lends its full support to youth engagement, stating that “Equipping young people, including those with fewer opportunities, with the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably and become active citizens is essential for building a sustainable future” (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Still, young people often feel excluded, with only two in ten young people in Sweden believing that they can influence local decision-makers (Mucf, 2021). To ensure child and youth participation in a meaningful way, municipalities must establish participatory structures, maintain positive attitudes toward children and youth, develop necessary skills and competences, and consciously select methods and tools (Nordic Welfare Centre, 2023).

This policy brief is based on one of Nordregio’s Localising Agenda 2030 webinars from 2023. It highlights concrete tools and processes employed by Nordic municipalities and NGOs to ensure systematic youth engagement and follow-up at the local level. During the webinar, municipal representatives from Gladsaxe, Denmark; Hafnarfjörður, Iceland; Tierp, Sweden; and Korsholm, Finland, presented their tested tools and insights, along with two Swedish NGOs: Future Minds and Youth 2030 Movement. The examples in this policy brief on how to engage youth for local development generally target children and young people aged 0-25, and in some cases up to 29 years of age.

Two central questions addressed during the webinar: How to ensure that young people can genuinely influence decisions that affect them; and how to conduct inclusive follow-up work.
Key Takeaways from the Webinar

Municipalities seeking to enhance children and youth engagement in local decision-making and sustainability work need to consider several crucial aspects:

- **Empower young people by providing knowledge and tools, encompassing both formal and informal learning structures.**
  Empowering young people requires furnishing them with knowledge on sustainability issues and tools that facilitate their participation in local development. Formal school education, informal learning, physical activities, and digital learning initiatives are all important components. Additionally, enhancing educational opportunities for teachers and youth workers to address sustainability in their practices is crucial. For example, Korsholm municipality and NGO Future Minds have developed non-formal learning programs to boost sustainability knowledge and skills among students and educators alike.

- **Develop inclusive processes and practices to strengthen the engagement of diverse groups of young people, including underrepresented and vulnerable groups.**
  It is important to familiarise oneself with the municipality’s scope and potential benefits of opting for the most sustainable choice in each sector. What follows is mapping the resources, such as competencies and budgets, which are available. For example, Vantaa has a Procurement Service Unit that works with a set of tools developed to identify sustainable products or services. Gladsaxe works with set targets, such as 80% of food served in schools should be organic. They also oblige contractors to increase social sustainability by for example employing vulnerable groups.

- **Sustain the youth dialogue process on a regular basis.**
  Ensuring that youth engagement occurs regularly and is integrated into the formal procedures and structures of municipalities is essential. Local youth councils have been established in Nordic countries to provide platforms for young people to engage with municipal decision-makers and influence local youth policies and decision-making. In Norway and Finland, having a youth council is now mandatory under the municipal law. Tierp municipality has a digital Youth Panel via an app called “Ung i Tierp,” aiming to enhance young people’s involvement in the local community.

- **Ensure follow-up by decision-makers.**
  Decision-makers should inform children and youth how their input influenced decisions and ensure that promises made during consultations are kept. For example, in Tierp municipality, decision-makers report to youth on what has been implemented (or not) since the last dialogue meeting. Youth coordinators hired in the
municipalities as part of *Youth Up North* project ensure that local decision-makers move from idea to action.

- **Develop partnerships with different actors in the municipality and young people.**
  Collaboration with various stakeholders, including municipalities, industries, academia, and civil society, is crucial for enhancing local capacity, exchanging knowledge, and ensuring sustainable results for children and youth. Building a broad network of partners working together to empower and engage youth in sustainable development helps develop durable and effective solutions. Cross-sectoral and multi-actor partnerships are integral to the successful and inclusive implementation of the Child Friendly City-Initiative and align with the key principles of NGOs Future Minds and the Youth 2030 Movement.

- **Make youth engagement a fundamental part of democracy.**
  Youth participation should be viewed as a democratic requirement rather than a project-based initiative. For youth participation to contribute to more resilient and inclusive communities and societies, it should be addressed as a systemic issue, rather than a specific initiative.
Nordic Good Practices for Youth Engagement

There are different approaches and methods employed by municipalities and NGOs in the Nordic countries to promote the engagement of children and youth. This overview highlights the examples presented during the webinar.

Tierp municipality, Sweden

Tierp municipality (21,000 inhabitants) has recently introduced two initiatives aimed at engaging young people and making better use of their knowledge and insights. As part of their strategy to tackle local social sustainability challenges, Tierp has focused on improving access to health services and social activities in the municipality. These efforts target several SDGs, for instance Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3).

A five-step dialogue on mental health

Considering that mental health is an important concern for young people, Tierp municipality initiated a project dedicated to mental health and well-being. The initiative aims to increase mental health literacy, involve young people in identifying and implementing preventive measures, and evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. The ultimate goal is to develop improved methods for addressing mental health issues while empowering young people.

The dialogue process employed in Tierp was developed by the NGO Tillia and consists of five steps:

1. Initial Workshops in schools: The first step involved organizing workshops at local schools, engaging 15-30 students per session. The workshops began with a broad discussion about well-being and mental health, gradually narrowing down to identify specific actions for improvement.
2. Formation of Youth Expert Group: A group of young experts was then created to ensure that the ideas, opinions, and suggestions captured during the workshops were accurately understood and incorporated into a report.
3. Report Writing: The third step involved writing a report and sharing the findings with various stakeholders in the municipality.

Figure 1. Five strategic focus points in procurement policy, developed in 2019 (Gladsaxe Municipality)
4. **Policy-Maker Engagement Meeting**: In the fourth step, a meeting was organized with local policymakers to discuss the report’s findings. This meeting led to both short-term and long-term commitments from decision-makers to act.

5. **Follow-Up**: Three months after the meeting with policymakers, these were requested to provide a written follow-up to the youth, outlining what actions had been taken (or not) since the last meeting. Among the concrete suggestions that emerged from young people were improvement in the school environment and school meals, better adult understanding of mental health issues, ideas for leisure time activities, improvements in public transportation, and a healthcare support system especially for young people.

*Source: Tierps kommun 2023*

**Introducing the app Ung i Tierp featuring a digital Youth Panel**

Launched in the spring 2023, the “Ung i Tierp” app features a calendar of events, a directory of activities, and youth-friendly meeting places, as well as information about school meal options. Additionally, it offers guidance on where to find psychological and social support services. Besides providing information, the app aims to actively engage young people in local governance by submitting their ideas for community improvement. Moreover, it includes an integrated digital Youth Panel, where young individuals can complete brief surveys on various topics, such as climate initiatives, and influence local decision-making. These surveys help inform municipal authorities about youth perspectives on key issues. The app was developed in collaboration with a company that also distributes it to other municipalities.
Gladsaxe municipality, Denmark, and Hafnarfjörður municipality, Iceland

Gladsaxe, with a population of approximately 70,000, and Hafnarfjörður, with about 30,000 residents, work strategically with youth engagement by aligning it with their broader SDG agenda. Both municipalities have also become part of UNICEF’s Child Friendly City Initiative to foster an environment that is favourable to children and youth involvement.

Anchoring children and youth engagement in municipal strategies, aligned with SDGs
Gladsaxe has integrated the SDGs into its municipal strategy for 2018-2022 and 2022-2026. This strategy comprises six cross-sectoral goals, one of which is “Children and Young People Shaping the Future.” This goal is consistent with several SDGs, including Quality Education (SDG 4), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Partnerships for Action (SDG 17).

In Hafnarfjörður, the municipal strategy is also aligned with the UN Global Goals, with an emphasis on wellbeing of residents. Becoming recognized as a child-friendly city by UNICEF is an important policy priority for the municipality.

Child Friendly City-Initiative (CFCI)
In 2019, both municipalities joined the UNICEF-led Child Friendly Cities Initiative. This initiative aims to support municipal governments in their efforts to build child-friendly cities by integrating the voices, needs and rights of children and youth into municipal policies, programmes and decisions. CFCI promotes real involvement and influence of children and young people in the municipal processes and activities (UNICEF, 2022).

To streamline its efforts in the framework of CFCI, Gladsaxe has developed a model addressing different areas of engagement and interaction with children and young people.

- The outer circle represents involvement in the local community. The goal is to empower children and young people to be active citizens by participating in the development of a sustainable city and a local community. This can be achieved through their involvement in projects, campaigns, municipal political processes, and leisure activities in local communities.

- The next circle focuses on the involvement in the daily lives, which includes day care centers, schools, and educational settings where children spend a significant share of their day.

- The innermost circle represents involvement in the individual’s life. While the municipal authority has limited influence over this circle—as it is primarily rooted in family settings—efforts are being made to ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people have their voices heard within the system.

All departments and units within the municipal organization have explored ways to modify their approaches in these three areas to better listen to and involve children and young people.

In Hafnarfjörður, the Youth Council is closely tied to the CFCI project. The Youth Council plays a significant role by participating in the steering committee meetings with representatives from the entire administration, and then shares insights with their schools. They gather wider feedback and input from peers and communicate it to the
committee, creating a feedback loop.

**Concrete activities implemented within the framework of CFCI**

**In Gladsaxe:**
- Conducting safety walks in challenged areas
- Improving conditions for children in (foster)care.
- Dedicating the Gladsaxe Day 2023 to Children and Youth Shaping the Future and inviting young people to contribute to the Gladsaxe Day programme
- Organizing public debates between children and politicians.

**In Hafnarfjörður:**
- Implementing gender studies and sex education in schools based on children’s feedback.
- Allowing children to submit ideas for municipal improvements through the “Better Town for Children” initiative.
- Establishing a Youth Assembly and Youth Council that propose changes to the town council.

---

**Figure X. Timeline and important steps in the implementation of the CFCI in Gladsaxe**

1. **Situation analysis (2019)**
   Areas to improve based on children and young people’s perspectives

2. **Developing an action plan (2021-2022)**
   Launch of initiatives, experiments and projects

3. **Evaluation and certification (2023)**
   Follow-up and update of the action plan
Korsholm municipality, Finland

Korsholm municipality is home to approximately 19,500 residents. Here, a main strategy to implement the local Agenda 2030 objectives is through the empowerment and engagement of children, youth, and teachers. And by using schools as platforms for sustainability education and innovative initiatives for change.

Empowering youth through education about sustainable development
The municipality implements two projects aimed at students ranging from preschool to upper secondary school. These projects both focus on educating the younger generation and turning them into agents of change within their communities, who encourage sustainable lifestyles among their peers and parents. In addition, the projects aim at equipping teachers with the knowledge and tools to address sustainability issues. A dedicated team of teachers meets regularly to develop a “learning path to sustainability,” outlining the subjects and topics to be covered at various educational levels. Moreover, the projects strive to enhance collaboration with external stakeholders, including NGOs, neighboring municipalities, and industry partners.

Climate teams as change-agents in schools
One of the outcomes of these educational initiatives is the formation of ‘Climate Teams’ or so-called ‘Sustainability Agents’ in each participating school. Guided by the teacher team, these Climate Teams inspire their classmates to propose and implement viable local solutions for sustainability. The municipality provides financial support for such initiatives.

During the autumn 2023, these teams will take part in hackathons, collaborating with Future Minds to develop innovative solutions to local challenges. Examples of concrete solutions introduced in schools include; the establishment of SWAP rooms to promote recycling and reusing materials and clothing; artistic decoration of recycling bins to attract usage; and the dissemination of practical tips for reducing energy, water, and material consumption.

Engaging youth in municipal governance
To further a culture of participation, the municipality is committed to organizing regular dialogues between young people and municipal leaders. These meetings serve as a platform for youth to express their concerns, offer insights, and engage directly with the decision-makers and processes affecting their community’s future.
Webinar insights in brief: Checklist for effective youth engagement

1. **Meet Them Where They Are**: Find young people in their natural environments, such as schools, youth clubs, and online platforms where they are active.

2. **Set Clear Expectations**: When organizing meetings or discussions, define clear objectives and agendas. Instead of vague questions, ask for input on specific topics to focus the conversation.

3. **Listen to Their Needs**: Approach young people with an open mind. Avoid preconceived notions about their needs, concerns, and desires. Actively listen to their perspectives; their insights are invaluable.

4. **Empower Them to Lead**: Trust young people to take the lead and contribute to the development of solutions. Engage them in activities like hackathons that encourage creative problem-solving.

5. **Highlight Positive Examples**: When discussing topics like climate change, emphasize positive examples and achievements. This can help alleviate climate anxiety among young people and inspire hope.

6. **Make and Keep Commitments**: Make concrete commitments to young people, and then provide regular updates on the progress of these commitments. Transparency is key to building trust.

7. **Sustain the Dialogue**: Continuously engage in dialogue with young people and ensure follow-up on their ideas and concerns. This ongoing conversation is vital for meaningful youth participation in local development.

8. **Acknowledge Diversity**: Do not approach youth as a homogenous group. Acknowledge and address youth who are rarely invited or from marginalized communities, including vulnerable groups and those with fewer opportunities.

**Main benefits of youth participation in local decision-making**

- **Knowledge-raising**: increased awareness about the youth perspectives among the policy makers which may influence municipal priorities and actions.

- **Enhanced decision-making**: including youth perspectives into informed political decisions ensures a more comprehensive view of local needs, enhances accountability and inclusiveness of policies.

- **Fostering active citizenship**: youth engagement helps to empower changemakers and future leaders by equipping them with the necessary tools and knowledge.

- **Creating more vibrant rural areas**: engaging young people may create a stronger, more connected community, where youth are more likely to stay and contribute to its economic stability and growth.

- **Innovation and creativity**: young people often bring innovative ideas and unconventional solutions to local sustainability challenges.
Future Minds - catalyzing sustainable development through youth empowerment in Sweden

Future Minds is a Sweden-based NGO with a mission to forge a collective force for a sustainable future by empowering young people. The organization achieves this through accelerating education for sustainable development, and by including the younger generation in tangible initiatives.

Accelerating education and collaboration across different sectors
Through its educational programme for sustainable development, Future Minds serves as a resource for training teachers. Moreover, the organization facilitates collaboration between youth and representatives from businesses, municipalities, NGOs, and academia. In collaboration with high schools, municipalities and industries, the organization arranges a variety of events, including sustainability hackathons, and provides educational modules that encompass research proposals for graduates and other student-led projects.

The educational program is structured around three core modules:

1. **Knowledge**: equips young people and teachers with knowledge, tools, and educational materials on sustainable development
2. **Outreach**: organizes events, activities, hackathons, and study visits to municipalities and businesses to provide real-world context
3. **Expertise**: offers assistance and mentorship for graduate students undertaking research projects and other sustainability projects.

Hackathons to develop solutions to local challenges
A cornerstone of Future Minds’ activities is the organization of hackathons, where participating municipalities and industries present real-world sustainability challenges as their cases. Participating high schools then choose the cases that they find interesting and relevant and allocate some time for preparation. During the hackathon, students transition from comprehending the root of the problem to generating ideas to solutions. Then they fine-tune a selected idea and pitch it to the case owner for potential implementation.
Hackathons offer a multitude of benefits for municipalities:

- **Youth engagement**: hackathons serve as platforms for engaging youth in real-world problem-solving and enable natural dialogue between young people and municipal leadership.
- **Joint problem-solving**: hackathons create an environment where municipalities and youth work together to find practical solutions to sustainability challenges.
- **Visibility**: hackathons allow municipalities to showcase their initiatives, thereby educating the next generation of leaders.
- **Future residents**: by engaging youth in developing solutions to sustainability challenges, municipalities are also preparing them as potential members of the local workforce and strengthening their ties with the local community.
Youth 2030 Movement

Youth 2030 Movement is a Swedish NGO that strives to break down barriers between young people and decision-makers. Its mission is to foster a more inclusive democratic system in which young people have an integral role, while also changing societal perceptions of power and age. To achieve these aims, Youth 2030 focuses on co-creating solutions jointly with youth and decision-makers and advocates for national systemic changes, such as lowering the voting age. As of 2022, the organization was active in 27 Swedish municipalities, primarily in rural areas.

Youth Up North

One of Youth 2030’s key initiatives which aims to find solutions for more vibrant rural areas together with young people, to reverse negative demographic trends and build stronger community bonds with youth. Through collaboration with civil society organizations, local businesses, and municipal bodies new methods for youth engagement have been developed and implemented with a focus on youth identifying problems that need to be addressed, and the solutions are co-created between decision makers and youth. Central to this work has been creating meeting places to enable direct interaction between young people and decision-makers and building long-term structures for strengthening youth influence.

Youth coordinators hired in municipalities

Within the scope of the Youth Up North project, three participating municipalities (Arjeplog, Dorotea and Boden) have employed young people as Youth coordinators. Their task is to enhance youth participation by developing engagement methods, establishing platforms for youth to participate and express their opinions, and implementing youth-centered activities and initiatives. This could also extend to organizing hackathons and workshops aimed at developing solutions. The focus is to support the co-creation of stronger and more vibrant communities, therefore pushing for systemic change of systems excluding youth.

Cross-sectoral local steering groups with a clear mandate and decision-making power

To ensure the project’s success at the local level, cross-sectoral local steering groups have been established. These groups meet regularly and comprise of leading politicians, municipal management, Youth coordinators, and other relevant decision-makers, along with a representative from the Youth 2030 Network. This collaboration is designed to maintain open dialogue and effectively implement the proposed solutions on all levels of the municipality. For further details and results, please consult the final report of the project (Youth2030 Movement, 2023).
Last but not least: youth voices. How would youth like to be engaged in local development?

Besides collaborating with municipalities and facilitate peer learning, Nordregio hosted a workshop for Nordic youth in May 2023 as part of the Gen Z Agency project: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas (financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers). The aim was to collect their views on local youth engagement and sustainable living. This is how they would recommend municipalities to engage with them – reconfirming several previously noted learnings from the webinar:

- **Make youth councils mandatory** in every municipality. Youth should have a genuine impact on decision-making by being insiders in the process.
- **Involve youth in the early stages** of local development projects to gather their insights and ideas.
- **Democracy**: consider youth-driven referendums on key issues.
- **Utilize schools as platforms** to ensure students are both engaged and informed about local issues and decision-making processes.
- **Include sustainability** issues already in elementary school curricula. Boost sustainable innovation in schools through projects and working groups.
- **Encourage eco-friendly initiatives** such as "Green Flag" schools and workplaces.
- **Housing**: seek young people’s opinions on housing market development.
References and recommended further reading

Council of the European Union (2023) Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the social dimension of a sustainable Europe for youth. 9135/23

EU YOUTH STRATEGY AT LOCAL LEVEL – Handbook
https://www.mucf.se/sites/default/files/2022/02/EU_YOUTH_STRATEGY_AT_LOCAL_LEVEL_HANDBOOK.pdf

Mucf (2021) Goda levnadsvillkor för många, men inte för alla
https://www.mucf.se/publikationer/goda-levnadsvillkor-manga-men-inte-alla

Nordic Welfare Centre (2023) Child and youth participation during crisis. Recommendations for decision makers in the Nordic region

UNICEF 2022 The Child Friendly Cities Initiative. Guidance Note

Youth2030 Movement (2023) Nyckeln till levande landsbygder
About this policy brief

This policy brief is part of the Nordic Council of Minister’s Localising Agenda 2030 in the Nordics initiative. It builds on a series of webinars produced by Nordregio since 2020 to facilitate knowledge exchange and peer learning between municipal and regional representatives, research institutions, and civil society networks working with the SDGs. On this website, you will find all previous webinars and reports featuring local Nordic frontrunners on Agenda 2030: https://nordregioprojects.org/agenda2030local/

See the recording from the webinar behind this Policy Brief: https://nordregio.org/events/agenda-2030-empowering-youth-for-more-sustainable-communities/

Author: Anna Berlina
Contributors: Åsa Ström Hildestrand and municipal reps.
Layout: Louise Ögland
ISSN: 2001-3876
DOI: http://doi.org/10.6027/PB2023:4 2001-3876