



Constraints on and facilitators of young people's participation: the case of border regions of mainland Portugal.

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Highlights:

- Young people are involved in diverse types of participation, being engaged, disengaged or unpolitical.
- Young people perceive opportunities to organise initiatives but not to participate in local decisions.
- Constraints on participation and responses to promote it were identified.
- Context-specific barriers were mentioned by young people and policymakers.
- Municipalities and schools are priority contexts for fostering youth participation.

Purpose: This article aims to assess constraints on and facilitators of youth participation in rural border regions. Knowledge about regional participation of young people is useful for developing territorialised policies.

Methodology: Using a mixed method approach designed in line with theories of civic and political participation and youth studies, we analysed responses from young people to a questionnaire ($n = 3968$) and interviews with policymakers ($n = 36$) and young people ($n = 20$).

Findings: Young people are involved in diverse types of civic and political participation and perceive more opportunities to organise initiatives than to participate in local decision-making. Constraints on participation relate to the distance between politics, governance institutions and young people, weak strategies of municipalities, lack of youth organisations and mobility. Facilitators of participation include supporting youth-led activities or involving young people in local decisions.

Research implications: the study contributes to understanding youth participation in rural regions.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Concerns about young people's lack of participation, dealignment from politics and lack of belief in representative democracy have resonated globally, portraying young people as disengaged, apolitical or apathetic (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). This narrative has been strongly used by media, academia, and governments (Manning, 2013; Menezes & Makkawi, 2013) without discussing how the conventional concept of politics may contribute to this or the barriers to inclusive political participation. From a different perspective, other studies refute the notion of a disengaged youth (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli, 2006) and instead point to the fact that young people do not feel included by formal actors and organisations, leading to new forms of participation (Beck, 2001; O'Toole, 2003). At the same time, literature on political participation and civic engagement states that these activities are relevant to promote young people's personal and social development and to pave the future of democracies while re-generating politics (Pickard & Bessant, 2018).

In Portugal, young people's civic engagement and political participation follow the current European trends. Research has highlighted young people's disinterest in conventional forms of participation, such as voting or participating in political groups and the lack of belief in political institutions (Lobo, Ferreira, & Rowland, 2015). A recent national-level study developed in Portugal showed that young people aged 15 to 34 are not interested in conventional forms of political participation: Only 8% of young people said they participate in a political party, and 8.4% in social movements. This is the lowest figure compared to the results for affiliation with other groups and associations such as student/youth associations (12.3%), cultural or recreational groups (23%), sports groups (23.8%), and church congregations and other religious groups (28.6%; Costa et al., 2022).

An EU-level survey that asked what type of activity young people aged 15 to 30 had participated in at least once in the past twelve months found that young Portuguese were most likely to be involved in civic participation activities (34%), such as involvement in local and community organisations, human rights and climate change, and sports organisations (25%). Only 9% reported involvement in political organisations and parties, confirming the decline in this type of involvement (European Commission, 2022). When asked about the reasons why they do not participate in the different activities, young Portuguese said that they do not participate due to lack of time (34%), ignoring how to be involved (27%) or lack of interest (24%).

Due to concern with the disengagement of young people from conventional forms of participation, policies at the global, European, and national levels have been developed to support youth civic engagement and political participation. However, youth participation also depends on local youth policies, "especially as youth participation evolves mainly at the local level initiated by local authorities, youth work associations or youth-led groups" (Walther, Lüküslü, Loncle, & Pais, 2021, p. 192).

Since the early 90s, many European governments have been sensitive to the need to create conditions at regional and local levels to support young people. The *Revised*

European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life emphasizes the importance of supporting youth at regional and local levels in its preamble and highlights the importance of developing young people's active citizenship (Council of Europe, 2003). The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (Council of the European Union, 2018) shows a clear concern for young people in rural regions, acknowledging differences in young people from urban and rural settings, confirming the need to safeguard equality for young people growing up in different settings. It specifies a particular target: to "[e]nsure that young people in rural areas are actively participating in decision-making processes" (p. 15).

Several contributions have highlighted the growing importance of youth in local and regional political agendas, emphasizing the value of youth participation in public spheres as they foster knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and can therefore be considered an opportunity for non-formal citizenship education, which is fundamental to youth citizenship (Queiroz & Menezes, 2013). This fact also suggests that understanding the active role of young people also requires the development of policies and programs that provide young people with relevant and quality experiences at the community and local levels where citizenship education and democracy education can take place (McCowan, 2009; Rodrigues et al., 2019). In this sense, environments at the local and community level can be considered places where democracy can be learned (Ferreira et al., 2012b).

This article aims to contribute to the discussion on youth participation by examining young people's experiences, obstacles and opportunities for participation not as an isolated phenomenon but as dependent on social, cultural, economic, and spatial conditions. Understanding how young people deal with specific territorial challenges may contribute to a fair portrait of their relationship with traditional and new forms of being political and to a multisited construction of trust in future democracy. We understand youth participation as the deliberate and voluntary involvement of young people in institutions, movements and initiatives that impact their lives (Checkoway, 2011), related to civic issues that promote social well-being (Adler & Goggin, 2005), such as volunteering and community groups (Flanagan & Levine, 2010), and related to political issues, such as activities related to governance, government, and politics (Van Deth, 2014).

Growing up in rural and border regions brings additional local and situated experiences to further understanding global cultures. We consider it important to pay attention to these young people's experiences in their contexts to understand civic and political participation cultures and to create opportunities to voice their perspectives and their relationship with the locale (Trivelli & Morel, 2021).

After a theoretical contextualization and a methodological section, we will explore young people's experiences of participation, discussing the constraints and opportunities found in youth participation. This discussion will consider young people and youth policymakers' perspectives from thirty-eight municipalities located in border regions of Portugal. For this purpose, quantitative data from a questionnaire survey distributed to

young people and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with policymakers and biographical interviews with young people are used.

The diversity of authors of this article represents a diversity of stakeholders that contributed with both their perspectives and experiences, enriching the discussion and contribution of knowledge that this article aims to make. This proposal, besides academic (Authors 1, 2, 5, 7), includes as contributors a young person (Author 3), one teacher (Author 4) and one representative of policymakers (Author 6) involved in the research.

2 UNDERSTANDING YOUTH CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Young people are simultaneously portrayed either as a driving force in safeguarding a fair, peaceful and democratic society (Checkoway, 2011; Flanagan & Levine, 2010) or condemned as those announcing the crisis and the end of democracy, as their lack of political awareness, apathy, and distrust in politicians are considered a threat to democratic traditions (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Young people are seen as increasingly distrustful of state-based politics, whether of its process, institutions, or players (Henn & Foard, 2012), which also may explain the low voting participation levels among this population. They are represented as disengaged or apolitical and, simultaneously, as radically unpolitical or as designers of noteworthy forms of political involvement (Farthing, 2010). Others see young people's "perceived" detachment as a new lifestyle (Binder et al., 2021). Nevertheless, young people's civic engagement, protest activities or involvement in institutional politics are seen as crucial to personal and social development (Kovacheva, 2005).

Several distinct yet interrelated definitions of youth participation, political participation, and civic engagement exist. Youth participation implies the active and voluntary engagement of young people (Van Deth, 2014) and their participation in decision-making processes (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Political participation refers to the intention to influence governance structures, such as elections, or participation in political and policy implementation structures. It also refers to governance activities which aim to solve local or systemic problems (Van Deth, 2014). Civic participation refers to involvement in activities to promote the common good, solving social problems, or participation in voluntary activities or associations and cause-oriented movements (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Zukin et al., 2006).

A comprehensive understanding of new models of participation pushes against the strong tendency to labelling young people's relationship with politics from a polarised paradigm, either as disengaged or fully active in alternatives forms of participation (Binder et al., 2021; Earl, Maher, & Elliot, 2017; Farthing, 2010). However, it seems that a larger spectrum needs to be considered. A longitudinal study involving eight European countries by Enchikova and colleagues (2021), for example, found six patterns of youth civic and political participation: fighter, activist, volunteer, backer, online and indifferent. Literature has shown the relevance of recognizing various forms of youth participation in decision-making processes (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Trivelli & Morel, 2021) and has

discussed the growing disengagement of conventional forms of political participation and civic involvement. It highlights, for example, the vertical and hierarchical nature of participation as influencing the reasoning of youth participation, also demonstrated in other studies (Ferreira, Azevedo, & Menezes, 2012; Olsson, 2016; Pickard, 2019; Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Teorell, Torcal, & Montero, 2007). Young people seem to prefer more horizontal forms of participation where they feel their participation is more immediate, such as signing online petitions, sharing civic or political content on social networks (Malafaia, Menezes, & Neves, 2016) or even participating in digital platforms and online groups (Kitanova, 2020; Olsson, 2016).

Youth-led protests and “do-it-ourselves” are examples of new forms of political participation not recognised in youth policies, namely those intended to promote political engagement (Pickard, 2019). Other perspectives show the relationship of young people with politics as “radically unpolitical” (Farthing, 2010), a “powerful new form of action” (Beck, 2001, p. 159) that could be interpreted as a symptom of how traditional politics has been unable to address youth-relevant concerns (Binder et al., 2021).

The amplification of the repertoire of political action has been discussed as powerfully challenging the narratives about young people's apathy (Pickard, 2019; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). However, there is doubt that these new forms alone will compensate for the youth's fragile relationship with traditional politics due to the growing cynicism associated with the new forms of participation (Farthing, 2010). In other words, “there is a fear that the democratic capacity of these new forms of participation will not counter the democratic deficit emerging from the demise of traditional politics” (p. 187).

To understand how young people navigate different forms of civic engagement and political participation using different tools and concepts, it seems adequate to consider young people as a heterogenous population (Pickard, 2019). Tracking youth participation in disadvantaged areas such as rural and border regions benefit from such a perspective, as highlighted by Farrugia (2014) and colleagues (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2014).

3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION AS A SITUATED PHENOMENON: THE CASE OF RURAL AND BORDER REGIONS

There is less attention to young people's participation regimes in rural and peripheral regions, as Trivelli and Morel (2021) and Johansson (2017) noted. Youth studies often represent an urban/rural division grounded in metrocentric perspectives of consumption, leisure, or forms of participation associated with urban centres that influence regional young people's lives as they are “embedded in these cultural processes, which span city and country to create hierarchies of cultural distinction” (Farrugia, 2014, p. 301). Spatiality and spatial inequalities are analytical perspectives that bring additional reflections on power relations and representations that may affect the quality and density of youth participation in regional contexts (Massey, 1994).

Regarding rural regions, research has highlighted obstacles in raising awareness of civic and political participation. A lack of role models for young people in those contexts, a lack of community infrastructure for initiative development, and the problem of remoteness and distances from places of interest, which hinder youth mobility, promote greater isolation from extra-familial relationships and obstruct the diversity of relationships likely to emerge in urban or suburban contexts (Metzger, Alvis, & Oosteroff, 2020; Pritzker & Metzger, 2011). For example, of the 38 border municipalities in mainland Portugal, only twelve have a municipal youth council, which shows that there are not enough youth associations in the remaining municipalities, which is a prerequisite for creating such a local body.

It is already well-documented that social and economic factors impact young people's participation (Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Metzger et al., 2020). Higher levels of parental education are associated with greater civic and political participation development among young people (Metzger et al., 2020; N. Silva, Pinheiro, & S. Silva, 2022), and school experiences have been linked to the development of democratic knowledge (Pontes, Henn, & Griffiths, 2017). Considering that rural border regions in Portugal have lower attainment rates in higher education institutions and higher shares of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in comparison to urban settings (Simões & Rio, 2020), we may assume that there are additional constraints to consider when discussing youth participation in those regions.

Most border regions in Portugal, especially rural and landlocked ones, face structural territorial disparities compared to coastal areas (Farrugia, 2014; S. Silva, 2014). They are irregularly developed, have the lowest purchasing power per capita (Statistics Portugal, 2019) and are, in general, low-density territories with persistent social, educational and economic inequalities, when compared with urban areas, as official statistics and research has demonstrated (Mauritti, Nunes, Alves, & Diogo, 2019; Statistics Portugal, 2017).

Young people have been recognised as being the most affected by regional asymmetries regarding education, employment and mobility and opportunities for civic engagement and political participation (Mauritti et al., 2019). Past studies highlighted the diversity of young people's experiences in rural settings (Panelli, 2002) and acknowledged that crises, such as economic and financial ones, have diverse regional impacts and may amplify territorial differences, namely regarding the job market (Carmo & Matias, 2019). This situation has led to outmigration of young people, depopulation and isolation from major urban centres, affecting available resources (Lind & Stjernstrom, 2015). As stated in the policy brief *Shrinking Rural Regions in Europe*, "amongst the EU-15, the Nordic countries of Finland and Sweden (and Iceland) together with the southern European countries of Spain and Portugal had relatively high proportions of shrinking rural regions" (ESPON, 2017, p. 4).

Research has been arguing that young people have a certain distrust of politics and political bodies (Dahl et al., 2018), often due to a sense of distance from politics (at national and local levels) and political actors (M. Silva, Fernandes-Jesus, Loff, Nata, & Menezes,

2022). Although this could be true among young people also from urban contexts, in rural places, social, economic, and educational asymmetries impact the low level of participation (Metzger et al., 2020; S. Silva, 2014), reinforcing the impossibility of accessing formal structures of political participation in these contexts. Additionally, at the regional or local scale, mobility plays an important role in working as a facilitator or a constraint to youth participation. As in many other regions in the European context, “in many rural areas, public transportation is underdeveloped, usually with low frequency and poor connectivity with nearby towns” (Prieto-Flores & Gasparovic, 2022, p. 6).

Considering that young people growing up in rural areas share constraints and challenges with their urban counterparts, these may be exacerbated due to their geography-specificities. In this regard, situated and intersectional perspectives in research, policies and practices are fundamental to safeguarding their opportunities as young people.

4 METHOD

4.1 Design and procedure

This contribution is based on a national-level study entitled “GROW:UP – Grow Up in Border Regions in Portugal: Young People, Educational Pathways and Agendas”, and a mixed methods research design was used. Quantitative data from a survey and qualitative data from interviews with young people and municipalities’ representatives allowed us to explore young people’s conditions and experiences of participation in their home regions.

The data presented and discussed in this paper come from the 38 border regions of Portugal. For the survey, one school with secondary education was selected for each municipality. In cases where there were no schools with secondary education, one school with primary education up to 9th grade was selected. These schools were contacted by email and/or telephone, and the study objectives were communicated. The questionnaire was distributed on-site during classes. The questionnaire obtained the ethical endorsement of the Research Monitoring System in Education Environments of the Directorate-General for Education of Portugal (MIME), and its applications occurred in the school context. The anonymity and confidentiality of the data were ensured in compliance with the protection of personal data, according to MIME. The researchers ensured the participants understood the informed consent during the questionnaire application and emphasised that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Semi-structured interviews with policymakers were conducted *in situ* while in charge of educational and youth policies at the municipality level, and biographical interviews were conducted with young people from selected case studies. Case studies were selected after analysing questionnaires answered by young people and based on the highest scores on factors related to resilient communities, resilient schools, sense of belonging to the community, and sense of belonging to the school.

Table 1. Participants' demographics – frequencies and percentages.

		n	%			n	%
Region	North	2249	56.7				
	Centre	467	11.8				
	South	1252	31.6				
	NR	0	0				
Sex	Female	2141	54.0	Age	13-15	1744	44.0
	Male	1824	46.0		16-18	2075	52.3
	NR	3	.1		> 18	144	3.6
			NR		5	.1	
School year	9th	1315	33.1	Course attended, 10th-12th (n = 2645)	Scientific-humanistic	2428	91.87
	10th	1107	27.9		Vocational	198	7.5
	11th	816	20.6		NR	19	.7
	12th	722	18.2				
	NR	8	.2				
Number of books	0	84	2.1				
	1-10	580	14.6				
	11-50	1324	33.4				
	51-100	877	22.1				
	> 100	1042	26.3				
	NR	61	1.5				
Mother's education	No schooling	9	.2	Father's education	No schooling	15	.4
	1-4 years	218	5.5		1-4 years	365	9.2
	5-9 years	1164	29.3		5-9 years	1521	38.3
	10-12 years	1317	33.2		10-12 years	938	23.6
	University	864	21.8		University	556	14.0
	NR	396	10.0		NR	573	14.4
		3968	100			3968	100

Note: n = 3968

Abbreviations: NR, No response; DA, Does not apply

4.2 Participants

A questionnaire was delivered among 3968 young people from the 9th to 12th grade growing up in border regions (Table 1). Of these, 56.7% were from the northern region, 11.8% from the centre region, and 31.6% from the southern region. The north of Portugal has a higher population density and a higher number of schools. This sample is relatively proportional in gender representation (54.0% girls and 46.0% boys), and respondents were aged between 16 and 18 years (52.3%) or 13 and 15 years (44.0%). Regarding school level, 33.1% of respondents were in the 9th grade, 27.9% attended the 10th grade, 20.6% the 11th

grade and 18.2% the 12th grade. Concerning parents' education, mothers had, on average, higher levels of education in second grade and higher education than fathers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 36 *policymakers* in charge of educational and youth policies at the municipal level. Biographical interviews were conducted among young people aged between 15 and 17 (n = 20). Nine interviewees were students from the 10th grade and eleven from the 11th grade. Nine were male, and eleven were female students. The response rate for the survey was 95%.

4.3 Material

Regarding the questionnaire, which was developed for the current project (S. Silva & A. Silva, 2016), we selected:

- (i) one multiple choice question; Participants were asked to indicate activities in which they participate at least once a week.
- (ii) two closed-answer items, on a five-point Likert scale (from low to high) evaluating agreement; Item A = In my communities, I have opportunities to organise useful initiatives as campaigns and voluntary activities and Item B = In my community, there are opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making processes in local governing bodies.

Regarding reliability, the interrater reliability of the items was $r = .05$, $p < .001$. Face and content validity are assured: the items were constructed based on a comprehensive review of the scale that was strengthened by the experience of one of the authors, who conducted an ethnographic study with young people from border regions of Portugal. This provided insights into the language and clarity as well as the item structure and response scale used.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and after content analysis, we selected analytical categories that included aspects related to barriers to and enablers of civic engagement and political participation of young people. The scripts of these interviews had as main themes a) knowledge about the school network and the Municipality/region; b) policies, practices, and youth cultures; c) youth education pathways in relation to the border regions/rural hinterlands.

Regarding biographical interviews, we selected analytical categories referring to young people's understanding of participation and engagement, focusing on barriers and enablers. These interviews were conducted considering the following topics included in the script: a) past – advantages and constraints of growing up in border regions; b) present – living in border regions: educational path, participation habits, opportunities and limits of participation, current concerns of young people; c) future – future aspirations, transition to adulthood.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire survey will give a general portrait of youth participation cultures in this context and provide information about perceptions of community-based opportunities for their participation. Qualitative data will provide

insights into young people's and stakeholders' perceptions of opportunities for and barriers to youth participation in these contexts.

4.4 Data Analysis

For quantitative data, univariate normality was assessed (Kline, 2011), and extreme outliers were not found. Data analysis included descriptive analysis (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentages) and Student's t-test for independent samples.

Qualitative data analysis also involved frequency counts, distribution, and content analysis, particularly thematic analysis. First, we performed open coding, followed by axial coding, in which the coded text units were classified. The categories used in this article were: "barriers to youth participation", with the description "aspects that hinder the participation of young people in their contexts", and "facilitators of youth participation", with the description "aspects that facilitate/promote the participation of young people in their contexts".

5 RESULTS

5.1 Opportunities for participation and engagement in border regions: young people's experiences and perceptions

In our study, we aimed to understand participation as experienced in diverse spaces that are part of young people's everyday lives. We understand participation as situated, without a hierarchic perspective, and diverse, including traditional or unconventional configurations that enhance environments for youth voices and representation (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018).

Table 2 demonstrates the density of young people's distribution per type of participation activities. Overall, young people are more engaged in leisure activities and less in formal political activities. When analysing levels of participation associated with civic engagement activities, such as volunteering or associations, these outnumber levels of involvement in traditional forms of participation, usually entailing a longer involvement. These results seem aligned with trends at the national and international level (Costa et al., 2022; European Commission, 2022), where the lower values are associated with traditional forms of participation linked with structured bodies and political parties.

Table 2. Frequency distribution per activities in which young people participate at least once a week

ACTIVITIES	TOTAL	%	FEMALES	%	MALES	%
Clubs' sports activities	2567	64.8	1192	46.4	1375	53.6
Cultural events in the region	920	23.2	556	60.5	364	39.5
Volunteer activities	623	15.7	409	65.7	214	34.3
Regional, national and international youth associations/groups	490	12.4	297	60.6	193	39.4
Animal and/or environment protection movements	308	7.8	178	57.8	130	42.2
Civic movements, including online civic initiatives	262	6.6	133	50.8	129	49.2
Groups linked to political parties	151	3.8	62	41	89	58.9
Local political bodies (Municipal assemblies and youth councils)	107	2.7	57	53.3	50	46.7

A total of 151 young people involved in groups linked with a political party and 107 young people involved in local political bodies may be seen as low numbers compared to other activities. However, when placed in context, the numbers gain more relevance as we refer to young people from 38 rural municipalities, of which only around 20 have a consultive body (for example, a municipality youth council). A study report on youth municipal policies from Vieira and Ferreira (2018) indicated a dissymmetry between the seaside and the inlands of mainland Portugal regarding the distribution of organic structures exclusively dedicated to youth at the municipal level and revealed that most of the municipalities located in the inlands do not even have these structures. Thus, this apparent disengagement may result from a lack of identification of young people with formal political participation structures (Zukin et al., 2006) or, on the contrary, may be motivated by a lack of opportunities to participate in more formal structures because these structures are absent in these regions compared to other regions (Massey, 1994; N. Silva, Pinheiro, & S. Silva, 2022). This may suggest that social conditions influence how young people engage in political activities (Metzger et al., 2020). Furthermore, if we compare the results of civic participation activities with the results of political participation, we can say that they contradict the view that young people are apathetic and disengaged (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Henn & Ford, 2012).

Disaggregated data by gender show that girls are more engaged in the majority of participation types, with a focus on civic participation activities and youth associations, except sports activities and political parties, where boys seem to be more involved. Previous research indicates that women prefer independent and non-institutionalized contexts of participation and that girls are more involved in civic and community engagement and social movements (Gaby, 2017; Stefani et al., 2021).

More young people are involved in movements relating to animal and environmental protection (7.8%) when compared to civic movements (6.6%), groups linked to political parties (3.8%) and local political bodies (2.7%). Results from a Eurobarometer survey suggest a particular interest among the European youth population regarding protecting the environment and fighting climate change. The majority (76%) of young people from Portugal that participated in the study selected protecting the environment and fighting climate change as a priority (European Commission, 2019). Our study showed that young people from rural areas are also interested in these matters.

Some authors have argued that although rural places may represent additional constraints to civic engagement and political participation, rural environments may be facilitators and drivers for civic participation around themes that connect them to their community (Pritzker & Metzger, 2011). To better understand how young people assess their communities as places of constraints or facilitators of participation, we analysed two items of the questionnaire:

Item A = *“In my community, I have opportunities to organise useful initiatives such as campaigns and voluntary activities”*.

Item B = *“In my community, there are opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making processes in local governing bodies”*.

An analysis of frequencies and percentages (Table 3) suggests that most respondents have a medium level of agreement with the items, not committing to a clear position. According to the figures, young people only have a medium level of agreement about the existence, in their communities, of conditions that promote their civic and political involvement in aspects such as volunteering or local political participation.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution per item

Range	Item A		Item B	
	n	%	n	%
1 (low agreement)	379	9.6	603	15.2
2	777	19.6	911	23.0
3	1463	36.9	1400	35.3
4	855	21.5	637	16.1
5 (high agreement)	331	8.3	229	5.8
No Response	163	4.1	188	4.7
Total	3968	100	3968	100.0

An analysis of the average values of the young people's responses to these items (Table 2) reinforces the moderate agreement levels. These young people moderately agreed that there are opportunities to organise useful initiatives in their community ($M = 3.00$; $SD = 1.084$). In turn, they agree less on opportunities for young people to participate in local decision-making ($M = 2.73$; $SD = 1.103$). These results, when compared to those presented in the previous table (Table 2), suggest that asymmetries in participation opportunities,

particularly low agreement with the notion of having opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, may contribute to low participation among youth (Massey, 1994; N. Silva, Pinheiro, & S. Silva, 2022). Feeling excluded from decisions that affect their lives in some way may cause these young people to disengage from activities they perceive as unrepresentative of them and far removed from their reality (Farthing, 2010).

We also found gender differences in the results for both items: girls (compared to boys) have the highest agreement scores (respectively: $t(3802;3761.409) = -2.032$; $p = .042$; $t(3777; 3689.890) = -5.630$; $p < .001$).

5.2 Young people's understandings of opportunities for civic and political participation: meaningful places to be political

The interviews with young people bring additional clarifications regarding perceived opportunities. Young people mentioned places where they can be *political* and voice their opinions. School is the most mentioned context either because it is where they feel they may have a role in decision-making processes or because they understand it as the right place to be involved due to its social relevance in fostering opportunities and promoting competencies for active citizenship (Pontes et al., 2017):

When something is wrong, we can say it's wrong and that we want it to change. And I think that in this aspect it's good because they are also open to our opinions because they always want to improve. (Female 11th grade)

I feel that these are good things happening, I like this school regarding the debates. It allows me to debate. (Male, 10th grade, South)

In this alignment, schools are also arenas "in which political socialisation and learning are perceived to take place" (Amnå, 2012, p. 618) and can be promoters of civic and democratic engagement (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). Although schools may be considered "the least effective in spurring political outcomes" (Quintelier, 2015, p. 65), when compared with parents, peers, or associations, we found young people considering schools as places where they expect to participate. It is probably for that reason that young people critique schools when they feel that they are not creating opportunities for participation:

In terms of teaching, we follow a teaching paradigm that delivers the subject. There is no space to debate these ideas nor to reflect, which is what is really missing here. Because there is no discussion about anything, and I think that is missing, even if it is in class, a space to debate, to reflect. (Male, 11th grade, South)

This aspect referred to by this young male reflects what some authors have been arguing as the role of schools in influencing political participation through pedagogic models of teaching and learning (Campbell, 2008; Quintelier, 2010, 2015). The literature on citizenship education discusses pedagogical models and their influence on the development of this subject (Biesta, 2011). Citizenship education can provide a space in

schools for the development of skills for active and participatory citizenship (Menezes & Ferreira, 2014) if it is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but involves young people in matters that interest them, and in this sense can strengthen youth participation (Malafaia, Piedade, Ribeiro, Ferreira, & Menezes, 2022; Pais, 2005).

As discussed, there are changes in how young people understand their political participation as less constrained by political parties' structures and ideologies:

I've always felt that politics is something that, in my opinion, is not done in the best way because there are too many labels... And if I agree with this one, I can no longer agree with that one. I can, but in the eyes of society, it's already bad in certain terms. I'm not a label person, I'm an idea person. If I agree with this, I'll try to pursue it, if I agree with the other one, I'll try to pursue it. (Male, 10th grade, South)

In terms of politics, I don't know, I'm not really into that, honestly. I don't like politics. I wish there was more volunteering because, for example, a friend of mine is the coordinator of a volunteering project here. (Female, 10th grade, South)

These may be seen as examples of "active disengagement" (Farthing, 2010, p. 192), followed by a clear affirmation of willingness to be engaged in meaningful participation activities (Ferreira et al., 2012a). However, it also indicates that with the right conditions, young people can become involved in community activism (Farthing, 2010), which would undoubtedly be political. Moreover, it is expected that young people involved in those activities will probably become more politically engaged (Quintelier, 2015).

The following reflection points to crucial aspects to consider when developing local youth policies:

This initiative (from the municipality) had several purposes. The first one was to get young people's ideas, to create strategies... There's nothing better than listening to them to create better strategies that address their demands. Distributed in different thematic panels, participants shared their priorities and drew up a series of actions that were presented and discussed in the Municipal Executive Board. It was very interesting and innovative in the local context, as it gave the youth a voice and resulted in a list of creative proposals. It is a pity that this action was only intermittent and, therefore, the opportunity to consolidate a culture of youth participation was lost. (Female, University Student, North)

The project mentioned in the last quote was launched by the city hall in 2019 in collaboration with the municipality's youth and students' associations to summon young people to active citizenship and to listen to their concerns and contributions to shaping a consistent and proactive youth policy.

5.3 Policymakers' understandings and actions to support young people's civic engagement and participation

When analysing policymakers' discourses regarding understandings and actions to overcome global and local obstacles to young people's engagement and participation, we found five typologies of responses developed by policymakers to promote youth participation: *Support and motivation for youth-led activities and direct participation in decisions*; *Production of knowledge about local youth, for example, through local level surveys*; *Promotion/creation of youth-related organisations and bodies*; *Development of structured and coordinated policies*; *Reinforcement and alignment with national-level policies promoting youth participation*.

Municipalities develop participation opportunities to take advantage of the scale, i.e., proximity, inherent to micropolitan spaces, as in most rural contexts. *Support and motivation of youth-led activities and direct participation in decisions* benefit from that proximity and include local-based concrete actions to create spaces for young people to practise leadership and autonomy and to support youth activities and associations.

Also, they don't have a lack of activities, lack of ideas because, from time to time, we meet and talk, and in informal meetings we also talk. Things often come up informally, and then they develop the idea and move on. (Municipality/North)

They may even have a completely surreal idea, but if well worked out, with our help, we can get somewhere. I think that's important. (Municipality/Centre)

Developing a diversity of competencies among young people is one of the priorities referred to by youth-related policymakers at the municipal level. Those competencies are associated with the capacity to organise activities with autonomy or learn how to become involved in local governance bodies and sharing responsibilities.

Regarding *production of knowledge about local youth*, this relates to the capacity to identify and situate youth problems and priorities, as well as recognise their cultures, particularly cultures of participation at the local level, new forms of access to political information, and their tendency to be less willing to have long term commitments (Biner et al., 2021). Place-based knowledge allows a deep understanding of the most suitable actions to develop:

Only by meeting and understanding young people's difficulties can we guarantee these policies of motivating and retaining our youth. (Municipality/North)

We cannot wait for them to come to us, we have to go to them. (Municipality/South)

We are fully aware that our young people participate in the associations, I am aware of this. I am in charge of the associations (...), and we have very close monitoring. Whenever I am called to the associations, I try to be present. I think

I can say that just a few young people do not belong to any association, and we have several who belong to two, three... (Municipality/North)

In many cases, such as these, we found bodies of governance that are familiar with the young population and their experiences and priorities, which may impact on tailoring measures to promote youth participation on their terms. Active listening may allow a deeper understanding of young people's proposals for their engagement in meaningful civic and political forms of participation:

Another type of opportunity developed by policymakers relates to the *promotion/creation of youth-related organisations and local governance bodies*. This is a relevant practice in promoting civic and political participation not only because it provides space for youth-led activities and youth leadership but also because the number of associations is fundamental to creating youth councils at the municipal level. Although these types of bodies do not depend exclusively on the municipality city council, there are several contexts where the proactivity of municipalities is crucial:

They participate a lot more, of course, because they already have bodies where they can act, be heard... And obviously, being elected to these positions, they must also be active and proactive. They also present various measures, various suggestions. (Municipality/North)

One important driver which fosters young people's civic and political participation is the existence of a youth municipality council. This consultative body gathers local youth associations and takes part in local matters that interest young people, creating opportunities to develop competencies and raise awareness about the importance of being politically active. Youth municipal councils are understood as promoting "*civic awareness*" and making their members "*feel more comfortable with participating*" (Municipality/Centre).

Young people will leave this experience with the awareness that they can be useful to the municipality, which can awaken in them a desire to... I don't know, to take a more active part in politics, regardless of their party colours. (Municipality/Centre)

Civic and political participation does not exist without conditions, and municipalities are the most powerful structure to create or initiate those conditions and can directly promote "meaningful participation channels for young people" (Binder et al., 2021, p. 245).

The dimension *structured and coordinated policies* refers to developing an integrated approach to youth participation and is reflected in planning towards long-term results, such as raising awareness and monitoring young people's civic and political engagement.

I had people there, in the programme, who were 9th graders, but there were some people who were already at University. What is certain is that all of them could interact, and for me, it was a first test. A kind of work to see the reality from which

I can start working to do exactly the municipal youth plan: their policies for them.
(Municipality/North)

We always call on them to participate, whether in formal activities within education or in more cultural activities, and we are now structuring the volunteer group where they are also getting a lot of expression. (Municipality/South)

Long-term, sound local policies tend to be successful when they are based on an ecological perspective, i.e., when young people's lives are understood as a process that takes place in many ecosystems and when young people's development is understood as an integrated process that involves peers, families, schools, and other local organizations. However, national-level and global influences, policies and guidelines are also part of that ecology.

The *reinforcement and alignment with national-level policies promoting youth participation* is relevant in creating common ground and amplifying multi-level aspects of governance.

We implemented the Youth Participatory Budget and have already felt more participation since they can also present projects and have an active intervention in the municipality's policies, but mainly in policies addressed to them. We hope to increasingly try to have these proactive measures with the youth.
(Municipality/North)

Although there are different forms of local appropriation of national and EU-level youth policies regarding participation, the national initiative Youth Parliament was identified as an opportunity for young people from these regions to be able to participate in diverse activities:

We managed to get my school through, and as I happened to be the president, I also tried to help my colleagues get through. We managed to get the school and two of our ideas selected. One of our ideas managed to be selected, which was one of the things I liked the most about participating in this way. (Male, 10th grade, South)

In these regions, as opportunities to be involved in political and civic participation are scarcer, these national-level structured initiatives, such as the Youth Parliament or the Youth Participatory Budget, are important to motivate young people to participate in other participation forms.

5.4 Constraints on civic and political participation: young people's perceptions

The biographical interviews revealed several factors related to lower political participation among young people. One factor could be that they are not voters and therefore are not the target audience for politicians to encourage them to participate. This

is a clear barrier to connecting young people with politics and contributes to the failure to mobilize already reluctant youth:

Because young people are not voters, nothing is really aimed at them. (...) The interest that political entities can have in young people when they are not voters... there's no point in trying to please them. (Female, 11th grade, North)

This young girl sees the distance between young people and politics not as a consequence of the young people's disinterest but rather as a consequence of the fact that politics distances itself from young people because they are not useful for the policymakers. This could, as mentioned earlier, point to some reasons why young people do not participate in formal political activities. Others explain it with the lack of information about politics and point to the need to learn more about politics:

I think that regarding civic and political participation, we should be better informed because I'm not saying that there should be a subject in school, but a kind of club or something like that, where we could be better trained because I speak for myself that there are certain things that I don't understand, in terms of politics, and it would be something that I would like to know because it's always necessary to know what's going on in the country. (Female, 11th grade, South)

This misinformation about politics may contribute to the gap between young people and political participation, exacerbated by the fact that young people do not feel represented by or identified with traditional forms of political participation, which sounds problematic for the future of democracies. This may indicate how organizations, such as schools, can promote participation and expose young people to opportunities for political participation (Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019).

Specific constraints they have, such as problems related to mobility difficulties or calendars that are not suitable for young people that live in small villages, also prove to be a barrier to young people's participation:

Since I came here to study, I have lost a lot of time; also, because of transportation, I always lose two hours a day in transportation, and high school is a bit of a grind, so I ended up giving up participation activities. Outside of school, I would like to participate in the (political party name) programme, where I basically would go with them on field trips and just observe how things worked, but they usually have meetings at times that I can't go, so... it doesn't work out either. (Female, 10th grade, North)

So, I didn't join this project (volunteering project) because it's complicated to get rides, and I don't like to bother my parents all the time; but I would like to be in such a project in B (the town where she lives). (Female, 10th grade, South)

These last cases seem paradigmatic in rural border regions. Young people are aware of opportunities to become more active in political participation or social and civic engagement, but they also point to spatial obstacles, showing that peripheries exist within

peripheral regions. These examples show that it is necessary to analyse the causes of the apparent decline in democratic participation among young people and their disinterest in political participation.

5.5 Constrains to young people's civic and political participation: policymakers' perspectives

We found among policymakers an awareness about why young people are not involved in civic and political participation that resonates with young people's perspectives. Results indicated four types of constraints:

- A distance/gap between young people and local/national governance institutions;
- Weak municipal strategy regarding young people participation;
- Difficulties in developing a solid network of youth associations;
- Region-specific constraints related to mobility or demographics.

Regarding *distance/gap between young people and local governance institutions*, this typology includes aspects related to generation and cultural gaps, languages differences or young people who lack knowledge on how politics and local governance work:

There is a very big gap, a complete divorce, between young people and politics. So, [in their view] if it's a political party... then it's harmful. (Municipality/North)

For me, this is my challenge for the mandate: it is to decrease the gap between institutions, in this case, the municipality and the young people in the community. We don't communicate in the same language. (...). I feel that young people are interested, participative, and easily involved in things, but there is a big problem here that I have identified at the level of the municipality – not only this municipality but also the state-level organisations – which is the distance that exists, the gap that exists, between what is the institution – who represents the institutions – and young people. (Municipality/South)

This gap may explain why politicians are somehow unable to comprehend changes influencing young people's lives, such as privileged access to new forms of political participation through the Internet or new youth cultures or lifestyles (Binder et al., 2021). However, as the last extract allows us to understand, young people are understood as interested and willing to get involved.

As mentioned by Binder et al. (2021), "traditional political actors have not kept up with other societal actors in adapting their political communication" (p. 234), failing in what those authors consider to be the cognitive mobilization of young people, contrary to other contexts, such as online, which provides instant information and connection. This fact finds parallel discourses from municipalities when referring to what extent young people know local policies, particularly regarding youth:

It's funny because the survey we applied to young people was the year before last, and one of the questions we asked was whether they were aware of the municipality's policies to support young people and: no, they were not. (Municipality/North)

The barriers related to a *weak strategy regarding young people's participation* include lack of support for initiatives and proposals for young people, unstructured opportunities and the inexistence of municipal level bodies to participate in, misunderstandings about youth participation and the pre-eminence of top-down initiatives. Some municipalities refer to barriers coming from top-down initiatives and not considering young people's interests:

They (young people) wanted to organise a youth festival and if you didn't leave here to go and talk to them, you didn't go to the schools, you didn't go to the bars, you didn't go where they are. (Municipality/South)

Some municipalities, when asked about youth participation, tended to refer to activities usually promoted at the national level and to be implemented at the local level, such as the OTL – Free Time Activities [*Ocupação de Tempos Livres*] – or to activities that are organized by local entities which are not related to young people. They also tended to speak as if they were external and not active players in the promotion of young people engagement:

They always participate in those projects of the Portuguese Institute of Youth and Sport, of OTL, and they also always have those projects... They have a partnership with the international music festival that also takes place here during the summer... In terms of active citizenship, they are more dynamic, but it's more the cultural side. (Municipality/South)

I think young people are a little unmotivated. I don't know if it's because they don't want to have work, because everything is work. Everything is hard work, and we must leave some things behind to dedicate ourselves to it, but it was... there are associations, the football club, the fishing club, the hunting club, the mountain biking association that is also very dynamic, they go on many walks, but they are more focused on mountain biking, bicycles... it's all more for the sport. (Municipality/South)

Difficulties in *developing a solid network of associations* are visible in bureaucratic procedures necessary to create an association and lack of continuity of youth association board members. Some difficulties mentioned by municipalities regard the national registration procedures of youth associations and the low number of youth associations has an impact on the existence or not of youth-related bodies with a seat in local governance:

A few days ago, I was talking to a young man, and he also told me some things that turn out to be true, which are: the fact that the criteria of the RENAJ, the national registry, are so tight and so demanding that they end up hindering the process itself. (Municipality/North)

The weak existence, the little existence of youth associations in the municipality, there are very few. (Municipality/Centre)

Concerning the low number of youth associations are also *region-specific constraint*, namely the low percentage of the youth population. This is a structural problem regarding depopulation in many of these regions with an impact on the capacity of municipalities to act and invest:

We already tried to create more youth-related activities, but as we thought that (city name) didn't have it at the time but, in terms of youth, it doesn't have that relevance because we have few young people, and we opted not to dynamise it. (Municipality/North)

Additionally, mobility constraints associated with geographic distance from places where more activities could take place are obstacles to youth participation and restrain municipalities from organizing activities that might not have attendance:

What is certain is that there is a lack of activities for young people. (...) What happens is that these young people who live outside the city have no means to come here and be engaged in activities unless the council provides them with transportation. (Municipality/South)

The quantity is what it is, the territory is what it is, the numbers are what they are, but promoting activities for young people... Promoting a bad activity for young people in a big city always goes well. Promoting an excellent initiative for young people here won't go well because the result was not good... It wasn't good, because few people came, which limited us a bit... (Municipality/Centre)

The limited possibility of having formal associations, the high risk of failing when promoting youth-centred activities, and the existence of unclear spaces where young people may be active and contribute are clear, intersected barriers to young people's participation. The snowball effect of these factors is that youth participation is considered a box-ticking exercise or is defined ambiguously, and all that remains are adult-led initiatives, which are on a small scale. Moreover, because youth policies are mainly framed by national-level legislation, local-level specificities may represent a challenge for implementation and ensuring the effectiveness of those policies is left to the goodwill or willingness of local authorities (Walther et al., 2021).

Rural border regions seem to be less equipped at the resources level and, in some cases, at the mindset level to develop more sensitive youth policies. We found, however,

promising approaches which seem to be activating and supporting opportunities for young people's participation.

6 CONCLUSION

The reluctance of young people to be involved in traditional political participation is well documented (Bennett, 2008; Henn & Foard, 2012). Often blamed for contributing to the crisis of democracy, they are portrayed as lacking interest and uninformed about political affairs (Putnam, 2000). Traditional approaches to studying and interpreting young people's political and civic engagement are polarizing, for example, the dealignment hypothesis (Binder et al., 2021); the disengagement paradigm (Farthing, 2010); the paradigm that posits young people as active in other forms of political activity or understands this disengagement as a new lifestyle (Binder et al., 2021; Farthing, 2010). Farthing (2010) considers that this conceptualization fails at providing an accurate explanation about young people's political engagement as it requires one "to acknowledge that both engagement and disengagement are simultaneously occurring as young people navigate an entirely new world" (p. 182).

Although local policymakers identify obstacles to young people's disengagement, some perspectives consider young people as citizens in the making. While policymakers identify relevant obstacles to participation based on a polarized vision of political participation, which is still dominant, young people are pointing to a lack of palpable opportunities to participate in political activities that are meaningful for them. Nevertheless, local policymakers are willing to avoid adult-centric approaches in some contexts. Moreover, they are identifying and enacting forms of empowering young people from a situated approach, that is, considering their perspectives and appropriating youth policies from a local standpoint.

Our contribution explored portraits of civic and political participation among young people growing up in the rural border regions of mainland Portugal. We presented constraints on and facilitators to civic participation from local policymakers' and young people's perspectives. Some views were aligned between these two stakeholders, namely concerning distance from traditional forms of political participation and a communication gap that prevents young people from being closer to policies that affect them directly. Context-specific barriers were mentioned by both groups of participants, such as difficulties in being mobile and accessing spaces to be vocal, active and becoming more engaged in associations and volunteering.

Although young people are less involved in traditional forms of political participation, there are clear signs of other types of civic engagement and of being political. We found examples of young people being engaged, disengaged or unpolitical (Farthing, 2010). Understanding young people's interests in different forms of civic and political participation may promote their re-engagement in formal politics, which is fundamental to democracy.

These results, indicating that young people are engaged in a diversity of forms of participation, may challenge the disengaged paradigm constructed from an adult-centric standpoint, grounded on a limited understanding of youth participation which is often interpreted from a condescending perspective (Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Norris, 2004). Farthing (2010) calls attention to the fact that the theory of disengagement failed to explain what seems to be a general observation in this study: young people's involvement in volunteerism and other forms of civic engagement.

Some contexts in border regions already understood that it is important to recognize young people as being political on their terms by changing the narrowed concept of politics (Farthing, 2010; Manning, 2013) and critically fostering quality participation experiences (Ferreira et al., 2012a). We agree that "undermining the legitimacy of young people's new political forms is yet another way of silencing their voice in society" (Farthing, 2010, p. 187).

Many contributions have pointed out that schools are a favourable context for civic and citizenship education because of the diversity of learning spaces that foster relevant civic competencies (Biesta, 2011; Ribeiro & Menezes, 2022). As shown in this article, young people expect schools to provide opportunities for participation beyond the curriculum, such as problem-based programs or engaging students in community-based projects, so meaningful experiences should be encouraged in this context. Moreover, it seems important that citizenship education also considers new forms of youth participation, both in its curricular component and overall school concept.

However, although the findings indicate that young people recognize school as the default place of participation, the fact is that citizenship education and the development of cultures of participation are dependent on a variety of quality experiences from non-formal, informal and formal education contexts (Queiroz & Menezes, 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2019).

This study demonstrated that local and regional environments, municipalities and schools in particular, remain relevant contexts for initiatives; however, they are contexts where young people still do not have much room for manoeuvre.

Fostering meaningful participation experiences thus seems to depend more on an enabling ecosystem in which schools, municipalities and other social contexts are intentionally involved in creating high-quality opportunities for youth engagement. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to ensure the development and implementation of more decentralized and informed policies related to the specificities of young people's lives in the different regions of the country through the collaboration of local and national decision-making sectors, as well as the participation of other non-state actors. This can be achieved by ensuring that schools, municipalities, and other local structures, particularly nongovernmental stakeholders such as families and young people, develop collaborative mechanisms for designing and implementing situated policies at the regional level that encourage the inclusion of young people in the lives of their communities as full partners in co-designing solutions (M. Silva et al., 2022). Moreover, the opportunities created for

young people need to resonate with their interests, be attentive to new forms of participation, and foster opportunities for young people to be represented and engaged in decision-making in formal politics.

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