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**Voices
of Change**

Youth reflections on conflict, community and civic engagement

*Insights from **Focus Groups** by WOSM
and ESN International*



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Introduction

This report combines insights from two separate focus group processes:

1. A series of focus groups held during the 'Pieces of Peace' international study session, co-organised by the World Organization of the Scout Movement and the Council of Europe, exploring youth work, conflict transformation, and peace education.
2. A focus group coordinated by ESN International focusing on civic challenges and youth engagement in local communities.

The two processes were conducted independently but followed a jointly developed structure and methodology, co-designed by ESN and WOSM as part of a unified approach to achieve the objectives of the Voices of Change project.

The findings will contribute to the development of a tool that will enable young people to review their own reality before taking action at local, regional, and European levels.

The tool will act as a self-assessment process where young people will be enabled to look around them, understand the situations in their communities, the dynamics of discrimination, the presence or not of misinformation in the media, their level of engagement as an agent of change and the potential actions they can undertake for positive change.

The findings of these individual mappings will act as preparatory results for activities they will be involved in within the Voices of Change Project.



Pieces of Peace – Youth navigating conflict and peacebuilding

Overview

The 'Pieces of Peace' study session took place at the European Youth Centre Budapest from 3–7 March 2025. It brought together 24 youth workers from across Europe and neighbouring regions for a sequence of three progressive focus groups exploring conflict transformation, youth work, and peace education.

Focus group 1: Personal and organisational reflection

Participants examined their personal beliefs versus organisational practices on peace and conflict. Activities included a position-based exercise ("Where Do You Stand?") and a 'Hope & Harm' drawing activity.

Key findings included:

- A disconnect between youth convictions and organisational neutrality in non-political spaces



- Organisational inertia in responding to current events
- Need for safer, intentional spaces for dialogue on conflict and identity
- Low awareness among youth about peacebuilding principles
- Organisational inconsistency in applying peace and human rights values

Aha! moment: Realising that mandates for neutrality may unintentionally silence youth voices in high-conflict contexts.

Focus group 2: Creative personal empowerment

Participants visualised unresolved societal tensions using LEGO models and explored personal purpose using a Venn diagram (skills, passion, societal needs).

Key findings included:

- Political polarisation and misinformation erode community trust
- Persistent discrimination by ethnicity, religion, or gender identity
- Mental health stigma and lack of support in post-conflict settings
- Limited civic participation and inaccessible decision-making platforms
- Lack of formal peace education and conflict resolution skills
- Normalisation of violence in certain communities
- Disconnect between grassroots action and institutional backing



Focus group 3: Policy-oriented dialogue

A circle discussion with Anja Jokic from the Advisory Council on Youth addressed how personal insights can shape national and regional policies.

Recommendations included:

- Equitable funding for grassroots organisations
- Formal recognition of peace education in school curricula
- Training for young facilitators
- Inclusive representation of marginalised and non-European youth
- Better visibility for Council of Europe peace efforts
- Preventive approaches to peacebuilding
- Solidarity across conflict-affected regions
- Trust and empowerment of youth as peace actors

Aha! moment: Recognition that youth lived experiences can directly shape institutional policy when given platforms and support.



Youth perspectives on community engagement and challenges

Overview

This focus group took place on April 24th through an online session, bringing together 11 young people from various regions and cities across France and Portugal.

Participants were selected via the communication channels of ESN France and ESN Portugal, and the session was facilitated by ESN International.

The aim was to explore the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of young people within their communities. Participants were invited to share their perspectives on topics such as decision-making, inclusion, and what motivates them to engage in community life. The session followed a semi-structured format and was conducted in a safe, conversational space.

Youth realities and aspirations in the Community

Across the ESN-led focus group, participants described a sense of detachment from their communities - often feeling more like consumers of services than active contributors to public life. While some acknowledged initiatives like youth councils and student associations, these were seen as insufficient in addressing the broader lack of



platforms for genuine influence. Many young people expressed frustration over being unheard in matters that directly affect their lives.

Economic uncertainty emerged as a dominant concern. Rising costs of living, particularly related to education and housing, coupled with an oversaturated and often exploitative job market, have pushed many into precarious internships or to seek opportunities abroad. The strain of navigating these conditions is compounded by increasing levels of anxiety and stress, particularly in urban environments where the pace of life can feel overwhelming.

Safety was another pressing issue. Participants shared their discomfort with rising violence in youth-dominated areas - especially during nightlife - highlighting a deeper feeling of vulnerability and the urgent need for safer community spaces. These concerns were particularly stark in light of recent incidents, which underscored the lack of adequate protection for young people.

Inclusion was acknowledged as a work in progress. Although some positive efforts were mentioned - such as inclusive Erasmus programmes and accessible feedback mechanisms - participants noted persistent physical and systemic barriers that prevent full participation, particularly for minority groups or those with specific needs.

Youth participation and institutional engagement

Participants were united in their belief that young people must have a greater role in decision-making processes. They felt that youth perspectives are often more attuned to present-day realities and carry the creative energy needed to envision and implement



solutions. Involving youth not only improves the relevance of policies but also fosters stronger intergenerational understanding and shared responsibility.

However, institutional support remains uneven. While student bodies and associations offer some avenues for engagement, many young people are hindered by time constraints, competing responsibilities, and a lack of emotional or structural support. Even when opportunities exist, they are not always designed in a way that is accessible or motivating to a wider youth population.

Motivations, barriers, and empowerment needs

What drives youth to take action is rarely convenience. Participants cited alignment of values, a desire to make a difference, and the presence of committed peers as key motivators. Trust in the organisation behind an initiative - and clarity about its goals and accessibility - were also critical factors.

To feel confident and prepared to participate, young people highlighted the importance of developing practical skills such as communication, time management, and networking. Language fluency, particularly in English, was seen as a gateway to broader engagement. Equally important were structural supports: scholarships, inspirational success stories, accessible training opportunities, and clear pathways for involvement.



Visions for Change

When asked what they would change in their communities, participants expressed a desire for a more accessible cultural life and a deeper commitment to mental health. They called for ambitious pan-European initiatives - such as a Youth Awareness Festival - to foster a sense of shared identity and purpose. Finally, they urged institutions to give youth associations the recognition and support they deserve as vital actors in civic life and social cohesion.



Cross-cutting learnings

Both focus groups highlighted that young people today are navigating increasingly complex environments marked by social inequality, economic insecurity, mental health struggles, political polarisation, and a lack of accessible spaces for civic engagement. Despite these challenges, participants across both sessions demonstrated strong motivation, critical thinking, and a desire to take part in shaping their communities - if given the tools, spaces, and trust to do so.

Key takeaways include the urgent need for inclusive, safe environments where young people can reflect, express, and act. Both groups expressed a shared frustration with institutional delays, limited recognition of grassroots voices, and insufficient investment in peace education and youth agency. Recommendations consistently called for better access to training, mentorship, funding, and representation for youth-led initiatives.

These findings contribute directly to the Voices of Change project by:

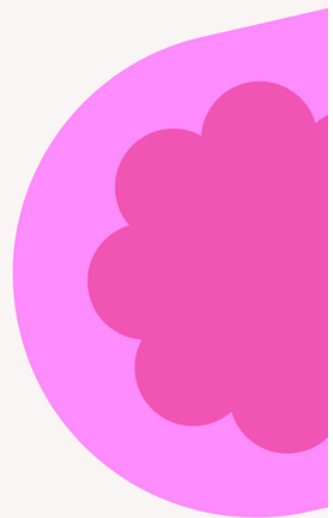
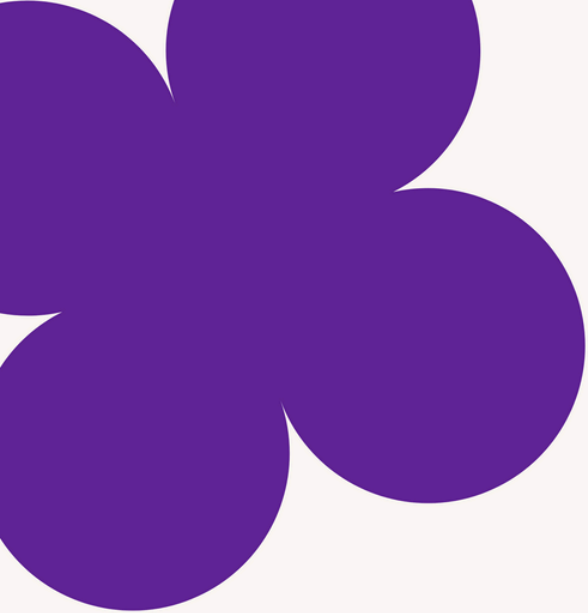
- 1) Reinforcing the need to build **durable and responsive capacities** within partner organisations to better adapt to societal change and meet young people's needs.
- 2) Supporting **long-term sustainability** in youth-led actions by equipping volunteers with the skills, tools, and networks to respond to crises and support social integration.
- 3) Emphasising the value of **dialogue and inclusive engagement**, where youth are seen not as passive beneficiaries but as active change agents and peer supporters.



- 4) Validating the importance of **removing structural barriers** to participation and recognising the roles of underrepresented youth as central to achieving cohesive, inclusive communities.

Together, the insights from these focus groups build a foundation for practical, youth-informed strategies that can be scaled across Europe. They affirm that when young people are empowered through intentional design, supportive structures, and meaningful participation, they can be powerful drivers of social cohesion, resilience, and transformative change.





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