

Youth participation as key infrastructure in the face of eco- social unrest

Policy Brief

Resumen

The following report contains a series of recommendations aimed at promoting democratic resilience and youth participation in response to the widespread mental health crisis and eco-social unrest currently affecting this group. Based on the participatory podcast "Eco-anxiety, mental health and youth disaffection", promoted by the Platoniq Foundation as part of the School of Creativity and Democracy, concrete measures are proposed to guarantee the right to participate from a structural, community and intersectional approach.

Listening to and recognising young people as political subjects with a voice and capacity for agency is key to addressing the crisis of legitimacy facing our democracies. Guaranteeing real spaces for youth participation is not only a matter of justice, but also a strategic commitment to the democratic and climatic future of Europe.

A project led by: **Platoniq Foundation**

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Contact **Cristian Palazzi (cristianpalazzi@platoniq.net)**

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In collaboration with:



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OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Rethinking youth participation in the face of eco-social unrest

Context

Today's young people inhabit a global scenario marked by multiple crises. Added to the fragility of the international economic order are the climate emergency, caused by an unsustainable extractivist model; the migration and refugee crisis, driven by armed conflicts, humanitarian collapses and failed international policies (Sanahuja, 2024); the housing crisis, aggravated by the growing gap between housing prices and wages (INJUVE, 2024); and the information crisis, marked by the amplification of the reach and impact of disinformation in the media (SMILES, 2020).

The complexity of this "world of polycrisis" (Tooze, 2022) has a profound impact on the life trajectories of young people, who today face higher levels of economic vulnerability, job insecurity and existential insecurity. In Spain, the average age of emancipation has increased by 12% since 2011, reaching 30.4 years, one of the highest in Europe (INJUVE, 2024). Furthermore, 56.6% of young households live in rented accommodation (compared to 19.3% nationally), restricting their ability to save and increasing their housing vulnerability (INJUVE, 2024).

These crises not only generate economic instability, but also profound emotional distress. Currently, one in five young people suffer from poor mental well-being and 15% are at high risk of suicidal behaviour. Economic insecurity and concern about the eco-social crisis are the main factors affecting the mental health of young people (INJUVE, 2024).

These figures reveal a collective malaise that cannot be addressed solely on an individual basis, but rather as a social and structural problem. As Brugué (2024) points out, we are experiencing a scenario of public policy overload, in which traditional structures seem incapable of containing, understanding and responding to these complex problems.

This disconnect translates into an increasingly silent youth citizenry, which abstains from voting in elections or participating in public debate due to growing mistrust in a system that neither listens nor transforms (Gest & Gray, 2015). Although most young people still prefer democracy, more than half believe that the current democratic system does not work, a contradiction that increases their sense of frustration and powerlessness (INJUVE, 2024).

However, despite the stigma of an indifferent youth, behind this "silent citizenry" there is a strong desire for change. According to INJUVE (2024), more than 40% of Spanish youth participate in struggles for equality, climate justice and human rights, which portrays the presence of a critical generation that is moving away from traditional channels but is interested in participating and proposing changes in their environment.



Young voices against climate injustice

Faced with this diagnosis of discontent and desire for change, on Friday 11 July 2025, the Platoniq Foundation launched a participatory process focused on young voices, within the framework of the Public Policy Lab that closed the School of Creativity and Democracy. The aim was to open up a space for listening in which young people could express themselves, make proposals and reimagine democracy based on their own experiences.

The day began with the recording of the podcast "Eco-anxiety, mental health and disaffection," hosted by Alejandra Gallardo (Platoniq) alongside climate activist Sara S. Ribés (End Fossil BCN) and human rights lawyer Carla Riera. Throughout the dialogue, topics such as climate anxiety, mental health, the right to participate, the role of the collective and the place of creativity in political participation were addressed in depth.

During the conversation, both activists explored the links between young people's emotional distress, the ecological crisis, and political participation. In this context, they shared a diagnosis pointing to feelings of powerlessness in the face of political inaction, widespread social fragmentation, institutional fatigue, and the limits of participating under conditions of structural precarity.

"I can't imagine being okay when I know there's a genocide in Gaza, people without homes, or that my friend can't afford rent. Mental health also depends on our collective context." — Sara S. Ribés

"We're told everything depends on our attitude... But that only creates more guilt, more isolation. The problem is structural, not individual." — Carla Riera

They also discussed the need to put young people at the forefront of policies responding to the ecosocial crisis, and to reinvent forms of participation so they are more caring, accessible, and real.



Zines to Propose

Based on the discussions during the podcast, the day ended with a fanzine workshop, where participants were able to explore and narrate their experiences through collage and writing. These fanzines became "trigger pieces" that documented the ideas, desires and proposals of young people from a creative perspective.

This space served not only to promote listening, but also as a civic laboratory from which ideas emerged for a more just, careful, connected and participatory public policy. Based on the workshop, four strategic areas for action were identified, which are detailed below.

It should be noted that these recommendations have not been directly verified with the participants. These are preliminary conclusions drawn from a qualitative analysis of the information gathered during the dialogue and workshop. The Platoniq Foundation assumes responsibility for collectively validating, expanding or reformulating these proposals.

1

Incorporate youth eco-anxiety as a focus for action in mental health and climate action policies.

One of the main causes of psychosocial unrest and political disaffection among young people is not a lack of interest, but rather a low perception of external efficacy: many young people do not believe that their participation has a real impact on the decisions that affect them. This disconnect between participation and transformation generates frustration, resignation or abandonment of institutional spaces.

This problem is particularly acute in the context of the climate crisis and the growing emotional distress caused by the perception of a future threatened by ecological collapse. In the report "The Future is Climate" (2023), more than 80% of young people surveyed reported experiencing eco-anxiety. However, when institutions do not offer real channels for youth influence in decision-making, this sense of urgency turns into despair, withdrawal or even radicalisation.

"Eco-anxiety is a natural reaction to decades of ecological degradation (...) You feel powerless because you know that stopping using straws is not enough, but when you want to do more, there are no real channels for influence."

— Sara S. Ribés

In this context, recognising the link between ecological crisis, psychosocial distress and democratic participation is essential for designing effective solutions that understand the emotional and political impact of the problem. Public policies must acknowledge that eco-anxiety is not an individual disorder, but a collective response to the perception of intergenerational injustice and climate collapse.

Creating channels for meaningful participation and guaranteeing the right to comprehensive mental health care with an ecological approach will not only alleviate distress, but also strengthen democratic resilience.

ACTION LINES

1. Recognise eco-anxiety at an institutional level as a legitimate category in the field of mental health, linked to structural conditions and not just personal ones.
2. Include eco-anxiety in the 2024–2026 Mental Health Action Plan, with an intersectional and youth-focused approach.
3. Create psychosocial care protocols for young people with eco-anxiety within community mental health services.
4. Incorporate specific training on youth mental health and eco-anxiety in child and adolescent mental health centres (CSMIJ) and primary care facilities.
5. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, include content on mental health, ecological resilience and youth participation in the formal education curriculum.
6. Promote the creation of local youth climate forums where young people can discuss, propose and co-design mitigation and adaptation measures.
7. Establish mechanisms for collaboration with regional and municipal youth departments to ensure funding, physical spaces and support.
8. Include a specific line within the Youth, Health and Just Transition funds to finance youth-led projects.

2

Integrate youth democratic deliberation as educational infrastructure to strengthen collective wellbeing and hope

In recent years, large sections of young people have begun to turn away from institutional politics, not because of a lack of interest, but in response to a crisis of meaning and democratic effectiveness. When decisions are made without their participation, and consultation processes have no real consequences, the result is a combination of disaffection, cynicism and institutional delegitimisation.

"I've been an activist for years and I see that the situation is getting worse. You don't become radicalised, but you start to give up and lose hope." — Carla Riera

Faced with institutions that are often perceived as technocratic and distant, many young people are opting for alternative forms of participation: artistic collectives, climate activism, digital networks for reporting abuses, or community platforms for local action. Far from representing a retreat from the public sphere, these forms express a deep desire for political agency and meaningful participation, in the face of institutions that do not always offer real channels for influence.

In this context, there is an urgent need to rethink how to effectively integrate the visions, concerns and proposals of those directly affected by public decisions. Democratic deliberation emerges here not only as a technique for collective decision-making, but also as a way of rebuilding the link between youth, participation and community.

Various studies show that deliberation has the potential to strengthen a sense of belonging, mutual recognition, critical judgement, and political self-esteem. Furthermore, evidence shows that deliberative environments—especially in the school context—can reduce disaffection, combat polarisation, and generate shared horizons of hope (DEMOCRAT, 2024; Palazzi, 2025).

However, in order for deliberation not to be restricted to specific experiences, it must be recognised as a priority educational infrastructure, systematically integrated into schools, and linked to mental health, youth and participation policies.

ACTION LINES

1. Integrate deliberation as a structural methodology in secondary school, sixth form and vocational training, ensuring its cross-curricular presence in all subjects.
2. Include compulsory training in deliberative methodologies in teaching communities.
3. Create lines of state and regional funding to deploy Deliberative Assemblies in public educational centres, with external facilitation, emotional support, digital inclusion and accessibility.
4. Establish institutional mechanisms to ensure that youth proposals are integrated into the centre's decision-making.
5. Develop assessment tools that include indicators such as sense of belonging, perception of effectiveness and emotional well-being linked to participation.

3

Integrating emotions and creativity into youth deliberative practices

The traditional approach to education and democratic deliberation has historically favoured the use of argumentative rationality as the basis for civic participation. However, this model can exclude other expressive and emotional forms of participation, reproducing epistemic inequalities and limiting effective access to spaces for discussion (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000).

Especially in contexts of growing youth unrest—marked by eco-anxiety, precariousness, unwanted loneliness, and political disaffection—it is urgent to rethink how we listen to each other in democracy. In this sense, it is essential to recognise that politics is also expressed through emotions and creative languages, sometimes ignored by academic environments that privilege certain communication styles and modes of knowledge production (Haraway, 1991).

This is especially relevant in the case of young people, where many feel that they "do not know how to speak well," "are not prepared," or that "their emotions do not fit in." From this perspective, integrating the affective and creative dimension into deliberative processes is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a political act of epistemic justice and collective care. This recognition not only enriches the conversation, but also makes it more enjoyable, more inclusive and more honest.

In this regard, methodologies such as legislative theatre or the creation of fanzines allow deliberation to be connected with emotional dimensions and politics to be expressed through diverse languages (Boal, 1998). In addition to fulfilling a pedagogical function and facilitating language for participants in practice, this can reinforce deliberative legitimacy and even identify new areas of action that were not previously considered.

"It is perfectly rational to be afraid, to be angry, to feel (...) In fact, recognising that emotion is a good starting point before taking action and building resilience." - Arnaud Sapin.

ACTION LINES

1. Include content on emotional management, creative methodologies and active listening in training courses aimed at educators, youth workers, participation specialists and community health personnel.
2. Promote art-based methodologies as vehicles for youth political participation through municipal legislative theatre programmes in neighbourhoods and civic centres; collaboration with artistic and audiovisual groups in the formulation of consultation processes; etc.
3. Fund youth participation processes that involve a creative approach. Promote, both locally and nationally, calls for proposals that value processes based on emotional work and strengthening bonds between young people.

Conclusions

The emotional distress and eco-anxiety experienced by young people reflects their powerlessness in the face of global problems, their perception of loneliness, inequality, exclusion and the lack of hopeful prospects for the future. The proposals contained in this brief seek to offer concrete responses that guarantee real conditions for youth participation. Not only as a democratic tool, but also as a psychosocial care strategy that allows for:

- Building community, guaranteeing spaces where young people can meet, cooperate and express their vision of the world.
- Breaking isolation, through accessible, creative and emotionally safe formats.
- Stopping the pathologisation of suffering, to understand it as a legitimate response to a system that does not care.
- Open up democracy to creative, digital, affective and popular languages that connect with the real forms of youth expression.

These measures make it possible to rebuild trust and reactivate political imagination. In the face of despair in a world of polycrisis, it is crucial to offer young people the possibility of feeling part of something and of building a more hopeful alternative for the future.



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