



REGIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE

Neighboring talks:

Youth Policies for the Future

SKOPJE
25-26
OCTOBER
2023

This two-day conference brought together around 100 young local decision-makers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, North Macedonia and Serbia. The event was a melting pot of mayors, members of municipal councils, youth officers, representatives of civil society, and local youth councils, all gathered to discuss youth policies and constructive narratives at the local level.

The primary objective of the conference was to foster a dialogue and facilitate knowledge sharing in a youth friendly atmosphere, aiming to strengthen mutual understanding, respect for diversity, and a constructive narrative at the local level. Participants engaged in identifying and discussing successful models and initiatives for youth participation in local-level decision-making across the region.

Key areas covered in the conference included an in-depth overview of youth participation policies and legal frameworks, along with the sharing of best practices. A significant focus was on capacity building and skills development to empower the youth in their respective roles. The event also highlighted various youth-led initiatives, showcasing their impact and importance in policy-making processes.

One of the key outcomes of the conference was the generation of recommendations that the participants in the workshops created which could guide future youth engagement and participation at the local level. This collaborative effort aimed to pave the way for more inclusive and effective youth involvement in decision-making processes.

This conference was organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as part of the “Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality & Trust” project, funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The project is implemented by a collaboration of UN entities, including UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO, and UN Women. This initiative highlighted the commitment to empowering young leaders and fostering an environment where youth participation is not only encouraged but also integrated into the fabric of local governance and policy-making.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund, UNDP or UN RCO North Macedonia.

1 All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

25
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2023

YOUTH POLICIES ON LOCAL LEVEL

On the first day of the conference, we explored the world of youth policies at the local level, delving into the nuances and impacts of these frameworks on the lives and aspirations of young people in our communities. Young people are the future of our societies, and their input is vital to shaping the policies that will affect them most. When young people are involved in decision-making, they feel connected to their communities and invested in their success. Local youth policies address a wide range of issues that are important to young people, such as education, employment, housing, healthcare, and recreation. Participants from a wide range of stakeholders, including UN agencies, national youth agencies and institutions, and young people themselves, emphasized the importance of youth involvement and youth policies on a local level, shared their positive examples and motivating thoughts to keep the youth moving forward.





EMILI MITEVSKA

*President of Youth Council of
Municipality of Veles*

The institutions must systematically involve young people in decision-making and joint policy building so that young people can regain their trust in the system.



LEUTRIM BILALI

*President of
Youth Council of
Municipality of
Gostivar*

Empowered by the potential of youth, we stand as architects of today's progress and guardians of tomorrow's legacy. In shaping our present, let us not only seize the moment with tangible actions but also draw wisdom from the lessons of the past generations, developing a clear vision for the future we aspire to build for our nation.

ROSSANA DUDZIAK

*UN Resident Coordinator
in North Macedonia*

The youth is a key agent of positive change. Fresh new ideas and the youthful energy to address social issues can bridge divides and achieve sustainable development.



SANJA BOJANIC

*Deputy Resident
Representative of
the United Nations
Development Program
(UNDP)*

Young people are the pioneers of change, breaking down the stereotypes, overcoming barriers and making things happen. Take the chance to talk to the local councils because local governments are the closest to the community, and this is where the change is taking place for the lives of the people.





JONE STANKOVSKI

*Head of sector for youth
and culture in Ohrid*

We must give to receive in return. As a municipality which invests in the youth, we have learnt that we must support and provide the young people with the means and spaces to educate themselves and develop creatively in their local community, so that they become active citizens who contribute to the development and progress of the community.



GORDANA CEKOVA

Head of Youth Sector
at the Agency for Youth
and Sports

The agency of youth and sports is fully committed to each municipality having a youth council through which young people will participate in decision-making in their municipality, opening youth centers and offices in each municipality so that the young people will have a chance to collaborate with each other and come up with ideas to change the local society.



“Challenges of **NON**function of youth participation on local level”

Exploring the challenges of youth participation on a local level today reveals a complex scenario, both from the perspectives of young people and the institutions they interact with. On one hand, institutions perceive a decline in the active engagement and participation of youth. On the other, young people feel their voices are not being sufficiently acknowledged or heard by these institutions. Despite having numerous digital tools that could bridge this communication gap, hurdles remain.

This situation is particularly evident in our region of the Western Balkans. The panelists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Albania and North Macedonia shared their unique insights, and highlighted the specific challenges and dynamics of youth participation in their respective countries. Through these discussions, it became clear that learning from our neighbors offers valuable lessons. We can gain new perspectives and strategies to enhance youth involvement and ensure their voices resonate within the institutional frameworks.



DOROTEA DESHISHKU

Political Advisor, Ministry
of Culture Youth and
Sports (MCYS), Kosovo

Just like laws and strategies that are not implemented and live to be words on paper, youth centers and public spaces without committed young people are just walls.



Coming across one of the main challenges of youth participation in all WB countries, being the lack of implementation of the youth laws and the strategies on each level of the society, we learned about the cross-sectoral nature of the youth strategy in Kosovo. Kosovo is preparing a long-term youth strategy 2024-2032, a vision which aims to make each ministry a youth ministry, drafting specific youth policies, along with financing and implementing the youth policy.



JUNIDA BAZE

Specialist at the Ministry of State for Youth and Children, Albania

We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.

It is always important to distinguish between real and meaningful engagement as opposed to formal participation. For instance, in the case of Albania, one of the first tasks I undertook when assuming my duties was to urge municipalities to fulfill their legal obligations and establish local youth councils as advisory bodies for youth issues at the local governance level. We have achieved success in this process, with the creation of 59 out of a total of 61 current local youth councils, compared to only 8 when we initiated this process. These are young people who run as candidates to be part of these local youth councils and have been voted in to represent themselves and their peers on youth-related matters. However, even though these forums have been officially established, members have been elected, and best practices have been made available, we have noticed few instances where they function effectively as genuine discussion and evaluation forums regarding local youth issues.

VLADIMIR KANOSTREVAC

Youth Council of Brčko
district of Bosnia and
Herzegovina.

I firmly believe that our success in enhancing youth participation lies in the power of collaboration and learning from each other's experiences, strategies, and practices across our nations.

The complexity of the political constellation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina being divided into 10 cantons translates into the youth policies and the lives of the young people in the country. Since there is no youth strategy on a national level, each canton creates a separate youth strategy according to the needs of the young people in the respective area. While this means there's a variety of experiences for young people depending on where they live, some cantons are setting positive examples with innovative approaches to youth engagement. These success stories highlight the importance of collaboration with neighboring countries. By sharing effective strategies and learning from each other, we can create better opportunities for youth participation across the region.



ZORAN ILIESKI

Expert on Youth Policy in UNDP

It is high time that we stop only planning and start doing. Young people need to be given the chance to be involved in the decision-making processes on a local level and feel the impact of their work."/ "The politicians need to change the matrix of understanding of the youth policies, that youth participation is not an opportunity they are giving to the young people, rather that it's a right that young people already have.



One of the main problems we are facing as a region is the brain drain of young people, which is tightly connected to the opportunities for youth participation in the decision-making processes and how trustworthy are the politicians promises. To break the gap between the promises and the implementation, in 2020 North Macedonia was the first country from the region to pass on the Law for youth participation, demanding that the institutions open their doors to the youth"



104

PARTICIPANTS

68

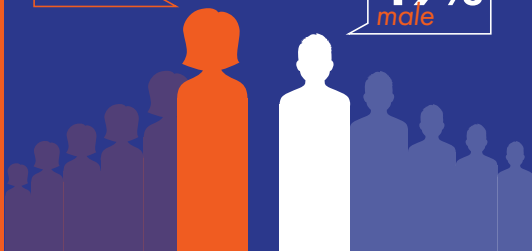
the first
day

64

the second
day

51%
female

49%
male



YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES

members of local youth councils, youth officers, delegates of youth organizations from North Macedonia and the region

STAKEHOLDERS

mayors, members of municipal councils, representatives from state institutions, from international organizations



WORKSHOP I

“Local Youth Council - Youth Voice in the City Council”



Moderator:

**GORDANA CVETKOVSKA
BOSHEVSKA**

youth officer from municipality of Bitola

This workshop focused on integrating the youth voice into municipal councils through local youth councils. The youth municipal councils are an excellent tool for youth engagement on local level.

Main Topics of Discussion:

- The primary aim was to explore the establishment and functionality of local youth councils, emphasizing the potential benefits and challenges of youth involvement in municipal governance.
- Significant discussion centered around the engagement of young people in councils and whether it brings tangible benefits to both the youth and the community at large.
- Strategies to ensure local youth councils' meaningful participation in municipal decisions were explored, with emphasis on aligning youth perspectives with community needs.
- The role of politically affiliated youth in these councils sparked a debate, highlighting the tension between inclusivity and impartiality.
- The necessity for adequate resources and support, including financial backing and annual programs addressing youth challenges, was emphasized.

Conclusions:

- ✓ There's significant variability in the operation and effectiveness of local youth councils across different regions, attributed to factors like political affiliations of municipal leaders and the level of awareness and motivation among the councils themselves.
- ✓ A notable conclusion was the inconsistent funding and support for youth initiatives by municipal councils.

The workshop underscored the diverse challenges in establishing and operating local youth councils effectively, pointing out the critical need for alignment, resource allocation, and consistent support to empower youth in municipal governance.



WORKSHOP II

“Youth Centres - Space for Young People”



Moderator:

**JOVAN
CVETKOSKI**

head of Youth Center in Ohrid

The workshop provided a platform for in-depth discussions on challenges in youth center management, emphasizing the strong commitment of individuals and organizations in creating beneficial spaces for youth. The session focused on establishing and managing youth centers, vital for youth development.

Main Topics of Discussion:

- The workshop was structured around the challenges of starting and running youth centers, with common obstacles such as space shortages, budget limitations, and lack of supportive policies being highlighted.
- The role of municipalities and the necessity of political will in supporting youth centers were emphasized, with discussions revealing varied levels of local government support. Key discussion points included the challenges of establishing youth centers, like inadequate facilities and budget issues, particularly in resource-limited areas like Krivogastani and Struga.
- Success stories, particularly from Mladinski Centar Ohrid, were shared, illustrating effective youth engagement facilitated by strong political support and resource availability.

Conclusions:

The session concluded with several recommendations aimed at improving the youth center landscape:

- ✓ Enhancing advocacy and awareness to highlight the importance of youth centers.
- ✓ Fostering cooperation and networking among youth centers and organizations.
- ✓ Ensuring active youth participation in shaping youth center policies.
- ✓ Capacity building for organizations managing youth centers.
- ✓ Data collection to demonstrate youth centers' positive impact.

The discussions highlighted the importance of dedicated spaces for youth, pointing out the challenges and offering solutions to overcome them, thereby enhancing the value and effectiveness of youth centers.



WORKSHOP III

“Youth Officers - Connection to the Municipality”



Moderator:

**VLADIMIR
SMILEV**

Youth officer of Municipality of Veles

This workshop focused on the critical role of Youth Officers in bridging the gap between young people and municipal governments, the discussion explored the dynamics of this relationship and ways to enhance its effectiveness.

Main Topics of Discussion:

- The appointment of Youth Officers across participating local government units was seen as a positive step towards engaging youth.
- Challenges were identified in the functioning of Local Youth Councils, including issues like member motivation and engagement.
- There was a noted lack of clarity around the legal duties and responsibilities of Youth Officers, affecting their effectiveness.
- A significant concern was the inadequate administrative support from municipalities, which hinders the officers' ability to fulfill their roles effectively.
- The commitment to addressing youth issues varied significantly across municipalities, influencing the prioritization of youth initiatives.

Conclusions:

- ✓ There is a need to make the role definitions for Youth Officers more clear to ensure their effectiveness.
- ✓ There is a need for improved administrative support to enable Youth Officers to perform their duties efficiently.
- ✓ Municipalities should demonstrate a higher level of commitment to youth issues to promote effective youth participation and representation.

The discussions underscored the importance of clarity, support, and commitment in enhancing the roles of Youth Officers, thereby strengthening youth participation in municipal governance.

Top of Form



WORKSHOP IV

“Local Youth Policy - Wheel for Youth Measures”



Moderator:

**AZRA SADIKU
NUREDINI**

Youth officer from Municipality of Gostivar

The session focused on the critical role of comprehensive local youth policies for engagement, empowerment, social inclusion, and crime prevention. Participants shared success stories, highlighting youth involvement in municipal decision-making and inter-institutional communication.

Main Topics of Discussion:

- The workshop highlighted the necessity of having well-defined youth policies at the municipal level, tailored to address specific needs and encourage active participation of young people in societal roles.
- Success stories from various regions demonstrated the positive impacts of youth engagement in municipal decision-making, supported by effective youth policies.
- The discussion also covered the “Wheel for Youth Measures” framework, emphasizing its role in assessing the impact of youth policies and ensuring their effectiveness and accountability.

Conclusions:

- ✓ Effective youth policy development strategies were discussed, including the establishment of youth councils, engagement with youth organizations, and the utilization of digital platforms for broader youth participation.
- ✓ The need for regular assessments and policy adaptations in response to emerging challenges was highlighted, stressing the importance of collaboration, technological adaptation, and continuous policy evaluation.

The workshop concluded that the “Wheel for Youth Measures” framework serves as a comprehensive tool for municipalities to develop and implement effective youth policies, ensuring ongoing engagement, support, and inclusion of young people in community development.



TEDTALK

How did I make a difference?!

In this uplifting session the spotlight was on the inspirational stories of young achievers from North Macedonia. Against a backdrop where young people often find themselves facing discouragement and skepticism, these individuals stand as beacons of hope and determination. Their journeys are not just personal triumphs but powerful narratives that challenge the status quo. From the arenas of female martial arts and public service to the stages of music and the dynamic world of business, these young visionaries didn't just chase their dreams—they caught them, nurtured them, and made them a reality. Their stories are a testament to the power of believing in one's dreams and the remarkable feats that can be achieved when determination meets opportunity in a context that often suggests otherwise.



GORDANA CVETKOVSKA BOSHEVSKA

WAKO Kickboxing
World Vice Champion

If I had listened to the voices telling me that kickboxing and karate wasn't for women, I would never have made it this far. Now I am a world vice champion, an international judge, and a leader in my community. Each punch I threw wasn't just for victory in the ring, but for every woman who's ever been told 'you can't.' Remember, the most significant victories are those that empower others to fight their own battles.



LUKA GEORGIEVSKI

*Musical Artist, frontman
of Funk shui*

Confidence isn't always about believing you can do something; sometimes, it's about having the courage to try, even when doubt whispers in your ear. My journey in music, from the humble beginnings of sharing songs through Bluetooth in MP3 format to now filling arenas across Europe, is a testament to this belief. Remember, it's not about having all the answers or being free from fear. It's about embracing the uncertainty, letting your passion lead the way, and finding your rhythm in the midst of chaos. That's how you evolve, not just in music, but in life.



DRAGAN JOSIFOVSKI

Executive Director
of Paket.mk

Studying in London was a chapter of learning, but returning home to start an online shopping platform was my leap into the unknown. To the aspiring entrepreneurs out there, my journey teaches one crucial lesson: Don't wait for the perfect moment to chase your dreams. Risk-taking is the lifeblood of innovation. If you have an idea, pursue it with passion and resilience. Opportunities don't wait, and neither should you. Dive in, make mistakes, learn quickly, and keep moving forward.



Screening of the film

“MY STREETS, YOUR STREETS, OUR STREETS”

The screening of the film “My Streets, Your Streets, Our Streets” provided a profound insight into the lives and perspectives of young people from three distinct cities in North Macedonia: Bitola, Struga, and Veles. The film masterfully captured the essence of the divisions prevalent in our society, underscoring the deep-rooted disparities mostly based on economic status, nationality, and religion.

The film’s narrative unfolded through the eyes of the youth, offering an unfiltered glimpse into their daily experiences and struggles. It highlighted how these societal divisions manifest in their lives, affecting their interactions, opportunities, and perceptions of the world around them. The portrayal was both poignant and thought-provoking, striking a chord with the audience and igniting a sense of empathy and understanding.

Following the screening, a vibrant discussion ensued among the attendees. The conversation delved into the themes presented in the film, with participants reflecting on their own experiences and observations of societal divisions. There was a consensus on the importance of acknowledging and addressing these issues, especially in the context of fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

The discussion also explored potential pathways to bridge these divides, emphasizing the role of education, community engagement, and policy reforms. The young voices from Bitola, Struga, and Veles, as represented in the film, were a reminder of the urgent need for collective action and understanding.

The film screening of “My Streets, Your Streets, Our Streets” was not only a showcase of cinematic storytelling but also a catalyst for an important dialogue on societal issues in Western Balkans region. It highlighted the value of listening to and learning from the perspectives of the youth, as they are not only the future of our society but also its present.



CONSTRUCTIVE NARRATIVES ON LOCAL LEVEL

On the second day of the conference we focused on constructive narratives at the local level, which are particularly crucial in the Western Balkans, a region marked by a complex history and diverse cultural dynamics. These narratives foster a sense of unity and shared purpose, essential in transcending historical divisions and promoting harmonious coexistence. By highlighting success stories, collaborative endeavors, and community resilience, they not only counterbalance prevalent negative stereotypes but also showcase the region's potential for growth and cooperation. In the Western Balkans, where local actions and voices often set the tone for broader regional relations, such narratives play a pivotal role in shaping a future that is rooted in mutual understanding, peace, and progressive development. By emphasizing the strength found in diversity and the power of collaborative efforts, constructive local narratives in the Western Balkans are key to fostering a more inclusive, prosperous, and united region.

WORKSHOP:

Constructive narratives among young people in the Western Balkan Region

The main aim of this session was to enhance the capacities of the young decision makers on the concepts of constructive narratives, social cohesion, mutual understanding, respecting diversity and social trust. The session was opened by presenting the research findings and outlining the best community and institutional practices from the study on “*Constructive Narratives on the local level*” by Professor Veli Kreci. The research captured the basis of the constructive narratives and the challenges that young people in the Western Balkan region face, and provided actionable recommendations for devising youth-oriented policies and projects.

EXPERT:

Veli Kreci

expert on constructive narratives

Constructive narratives are essential to empower young people to address the challenges around them and bring positive change in the Western Balkan region



The research findings presentation was followed by input from youth worker Ilona Olehlova on good practices of involvement of young people in their communities through various individual or project-based initiatives. During the input, the participants also had an opportunity to share their experiences, e.g., related to using social networks as platforms to express their opinions and their involvement in the communities.

MODERATOR:

**Ilona
Olehlová**

Youth trainer

Young people in the role of agents of change have the power to promote mutual understanding, respect for diversity, and social trust.





After the input part, the participants engaged in the discussion, bringing, e.g. good practices from North Macedonia related to the local youth councils or opening issues concerning young people, e.g. the lack of infrastructure in the rural areas, the need for legislative framework enabling active youth involvement in the decision-making processes in the Western Balkan Region.



WORKSHOP:

Constructive narratives from gender perspective in the Western Balkan Region

EXPERT:

Sara Milenkovska

expert from
UN Woman

I was thrilled by the vibrant discussions which can contribute to constructive narratives towards gender equality. Activists and municipalities can unite for positive change beyond any challenge!

MODERATOR:

Kristina Plecic

gender specialist in UNDP

Engagement and Participation:

The event witnessed active participation from diverse stakeholders, including representatives from civil society, activists, and members of the local community. The attendance and enthusiasm demonstrated a shared commitment to advancing gender equality in the Western Balkan Region. The attendees engaged in interesting positions, there were few cases of disagreement with the gender mainstreaming but were shared in a respectful and productive way. This shows the potential to engage deeper with the audience on issues such as gender-sensitive languages, education on toxic masculinity, education on gender disinformation and the role of social media in reproducing inequalities.

Discussion Highlights:

The discussions were rich and varied, covering a wide range of topics related to gender inclusivity. Participants shared valuable insights, personal experiences, and success stories that challenged existing stereotypes and shed light on the progress made in the region. Key themes that emerged from the discussions included:

- **Success Stories:** Participants highlighted successful initiatives and projects that have positively impacted gender equality in the region. These stories served as inspiration and models for further action.
- **Challenging Stereotypes:** There was a collective effort to identify and challenge prevailing stereotypes and biases that hinder progress toward gender equality. Participants engaged in constructive dialogue to dismantle harmful narratives.
- **Policy Recommendations:** Substantial discussions revolved around generating actionable policy recommendations to foster gender inclusivity. The exchange of ideas contributed to a comprehensive set of suggestions for local municipalities and activists to implement in their respective domains. Specific examples were: more trainings on gender equality, more action based activities and collective efforts on creating spaces for safety.

Next Steps:

The event concluded with a consensus on the importance of translating discussions into tangible actions. The following next steps were identified:

- **Activist Initiatives:** Activists committed to developing targeted awareness campaigns, leveraging social media platforms and community engagement to challenge stereotypes and promote positive narratives.
- **Municipal Engagement:** Participants recognized the need for increased collaboration between activists and local municipalities. Plans were discussed to establish better sharing of know-hows between at the municipal level.
- **Capacity Building:** Acknowledging the importance of continuous education, there was a call for capacity-building programs aimed at equipping both activists and municipal representatives with the necessary skills and knowledge to drive positive change.
- **Regular Forums:** Participants expressed a desire for regular forums and working groups to sustain the momentum generated by the session, ensuring ongoing collaboration and exchange of best practices.

In conclusion, the Gender Inclusivity Session was a resounding success, fostering collaboration, understanding, and commitment among diverse stakeholders. The momentum generated during the event sets the stage for tangible progress toward gender equality in the Western Balkan Region.



WORKSHOP:

Countering misinformation and disinformation in the crisis setting

EXPERT:

Zana Idrizi

UNDP Istanbul
Regional Hub

Sare Knoope and
Gabriel Van Oppen

iVERIFY UNDP
Brussels office (online)

Norik Selimi

Pikasa

In this session, an overview was provided on regional trends in information and disinformation, about political disinformation, crises, the infodemic. UNDP IRH shared effective practices in combating disinfo/misinfo, such as monitoring regional trends and responding through crisis management & response, fact-checking, and media literacy initiatives. A representative from Piakasa, a media intelligence company, demonstrated how diverse narratives influence public opinion. Additionally, the UNDP Brussels Office introduced the iVerify tool, highlighting its role as a fact-checking mechanism to verify information during elections in various countries. These examples underscore the impact of information pollution on democratic processes.



The Regional Youth Conference “Neighborhood Talks: Youth Policies for the Future” concluded with a resounding affirmation of the power of youth engagement and the importance of positive storytelling in shaping community futures. We had a conference that was youth friendly, participative and engaging, encouraging the young people to take the floor and explore the topics in-depth. Not only did we learn so much, but we also had fun. The participants were invited to join in the contest for creating a social media post with a picture of Skopje which resembles the notion of constructive narratives, and the winner would be the one who could collect most likes.

Participants left equipped with fresh insights, innovative strategies, and a renewed commitment to fostering inclusive, youth-centric policies that resonate across diverse communities. This gathering not only highlighted the potential of young voices in driving change but also set the stage for continued collaboration and progress in the realm of youth empowerment and constructive local narratives throughout the region.

