



Youth Citizen Social Science as a Pathway for Youth Social Inclusion



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YouCount
Youth Citizen Science

Introduction

Embracing young people's perspectives is crucial for improving policymaking addressing youth social inclusion. This policy brief shares the voices of young citizen social scientists (aged 13-29 years) who took part in the EU funded YouCount project. They talk about what social inclusion means for them and how to achieve youth social inclusion and suggest ways to make it happen. Building on the findings from YouCount's research, the brief also summarises potential positive drivers for social inclusion and the impacts of using a youth citizen social science to address social inclusion. It also includes a series of recommendations for policymakers who want to embrace youth perspectives for youth social inclusion through the adoption of youth citizen social science.

The YouCount project in a nutshell

YouCount is a project (2021-2023) funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. YouCount addresses one of Europe's most pressing challenges: How to increase social inclusion for young people?

A crucial way to answer this question is to understand how young people view and experience social inclusion and what are the opportunities to improve social inclusion. YouCount's research included young citizen scientists participating to co-create knowledge and social innovations together with local and regional stakeholders.

The young citizen scientists participated in YouCount through 10 local hands-on youth citizen social science projects in 9 European countries focusing on different youth groups and aspects of social inclusion such as social participation, social belonging, and citizenship. Young people have gathered and shared views and experiences of social exclusion and inclusion in their daily lives by participating in research as well as contributing from their experiences and observations in the YouCount App, conducting dialogue forums, workshops and taking part in local living labs and national workshops with key stakeholders to discuss findings and new innovations and policies. The project also involved co-evaluating the impact and understanding how co-creative youth citizen social science worked across and within the ten local hands-on youth citizen social science projects

Putting the views and opinions of young people at the centre: the Meaning and Paths to Foster Youth Social Inclusion

Engaging young citizen scientists in collaborative research has not only contributed to co-creating new knowledge on social inclusion but has also laid the groundwork for future policy adjustments to address youth-raised issues. The following paragraphs synthesise the main points that YouCount's young citizen scientists have discovered around social inclusion, unveiling new opportunities for enhancing social inclusion as perceived by the youth.

The meaning of 'social inclusion' to young people

The concept of social inclusion has been revisited because young people questioned the usual understanding during the YouCount research. These are the key findings about what the young citizen scientists in YouCount think about 'social inclusion':

1. Young people need social inclusion to be more grounded in their reality

A considerable number of young voices expressed a challenge in understanding and relating to the terms 'social inclusion', which appeared to them as too abstract. It can be beneficial to use more grounded concepts with youth, such as emphasising the more tangible elements of citizenship, engagement, and belonging. This can help them grasp the idea better.

2. Young people's interpretations of social inclusion need to be acknowledged

Young people understand social inclusion in ways that see the three pillars typically defined by researchers - participation, belonging, and citizenship – as overlapping and interrelated. Thus, the frameworks presented to young people need to be adjusted to their interpretations.

3. Young people expect a more dynamic and active involvement in the youth social inclusion process

Young people see the achievement of youth social inclusion as an ongoing, dynamic process where they aspire to be active contributors rather than passive recipients, who are 'socially included'.

Fostering youth social inclusion according to young people

By departing from the multiple issues young people perceive as significant about social inclusion, young citizen scientists can contribute to create social innovations that address social inclusion. YouCount's research identified six key critical issues that were commonly highlighted by young people as important for social inclusion; and six opportunities for social inclusion in their daily lives.

Six critical issues of youth social inclusion

Young people highlighted six critical issues that affect their social inclusion:

1. The environment significantly impacts youth inclusion, involving structural uncertainties, unwelcoming feelings, lack of social spaces, and deteriorated school environments.
2. Safety concerns, tied to crime, violence, and discrimination, affect youth's sense of security, espe-

cially in public spaces and neighbourhoods.

3. Prejudice and xenophobia toward young migrants result in exclusion, limited access to services, and societal integration challenges.
4. Society perpetuates negative stereotypes of youth, hindering youth inclusion through unfair judgments, patronising attitudes, and restricted engagement in societal issues.
5. Limited financial resources, unclear employment prospects, and poverty directly impact social inclusion, limiting the access to opportunities and discouraging a sense of belonging.
6. Limited involvement in decision-making, insufficient voice recognition, and complex bureaucratic procedures constrain youth participation, fostering frustration and exclusion.

Opportunities for social inclusion that youth find in their daily lives

The perspectives shared by young citizen scientists regarding opportunities for social inclusion in their daily lives show diversity, yet there are commonalities among them.

1. The opportunities for Social Inclusion are very Diverse and Unknown:

They recognize the wide array of opportunities that contribute to social inclusion, extending beyond traditional notions, and the low level of awareness young people have of them. For example, young citizen scientists identified that participating in certain places, events like music concerts or 'gigs', interest groups, and communities are positive as they feel they belong there.

2. The Support of Third Sector Organizations is critical for Youth Social Inclusion:

Support of third-sector organisations is crucial for fostering social inclusion among youth, as evidenced by young people who acknowledged the importance of third-sector organisations, highlighting their positive impact on social inclusion and well-being.

3. Opportunities are limited by Barriers Faced by Different Groups:

There is a need to implement inclusive policies to overcome barriers faced by marginalised groups, ensuring equal access to social inclusion opportunities. For example, hard of hearing and physically disabled young people faced limitations due to inaccessibility and environmental barriers.

4. Importance of Education and Learning Opportunities:

Young people value the opportunities to learn, build competencies and skills in their areas of interest.

5. Importance of Leisure Opportunities:

Leisure opportunities were emphasised for bringing people together, promoting connection, well-being, and a sense of belonging.

6. Benefits of International Engagement:

Young people benefited from the YouCount project, attending consortium meetings, connecting with peers from other countries, and engaging socially and politically. International collaborations provided young people with diverse experiences and perspectives.

Positive drivers for youth social inclusion

The findings from the local cases with young people and local stakeholders across nine European countries in YouCount suggest the need for a transition from a pure welfarist perspective (that is, addressing the needs of excluded groups) to a relational one (that is, both excluded and included groups are encouraged to interact) when it comes to social inclusion so that a comprehensive approach can be adopted. In this vein, any intervention or project aimed at fostering social inclusion should not solely target individuals' needs, but also consider the physical, bureaucratic, and psychosocial characteristics of the contexts in which individuals and social groups reside. Consistently, the following positive drivers for youth social inclusion were identified:

1. You can only feel included in a community if you feel that it meets your needs but also represents a safe place where you can express your ideas even though they are not the same as those of the majority.
2. You need to feel that the community pays attention to everyone's characteristics and contributions to the same extent.
3. Community members need to be open to interpersonal differences, to be empathic to others, and to trust them.
4. Responsibilities for common goods need to be taken and shared by all community members despite interpersonal differences, so that everyone has opportunities to promote changes to improve the whole community.

Potential effects when enhancing Youth Social Inclusion through youth citizen social science

YouCount research explored the innovative potential of youth citizen social science to co-generate in a multi-actor setting new, actionable, and policy-relevant knowledge on youth social inclusion, revealing its potential effects in several crucial fields:

1. Youth empowerment:

Besides gains at the scientific level, YouCount showed significant gains for participants. Young citizen social scientists participating in the research teams for a longer time period, experienced an increase in their knowledge of citizen social science, in their ability to perform tasks related to conducting youth citizen social science, and to interact with their social environment. Social beneficial outcomes for participants were also identified such as strengthening their social networks, increased participation opportunities, acknowledgment of social realities, and improved communication patterns within research teams (between professional scientists and co-researchers).

2. Development of social innovations with and by young citizen scientists:

YouCount showed that young citizen scientists can contribute to potential social innovations addressing social inclusion, by having set the grounds for collaborations where youth have a central role:

- **Youth Contribution and Systematic Information Collection:**
Young citizen scientists play a crucial role in systematically collecting, structuring, and examining vital information for research topics. Stakeholders acknowledge the unique insights gained through the young citizen scientists' contributions, emphasizing the need for regular collaboration.
- **Youth Collaborative Work with Stakeholders and Institutional Impact:**
Collaborative efforts with stakeholders have commenced, showing potential for influencing diversity strategies within institutions.



- **Implementation of Youth-Led Processes:**
Youth-led processes encourage young individuals to actively shape agendas, develop research methods, analyse data, and lead meaningful dialogues.
- **Establishment of Democratic Decision-Making Processes:**
Local living Labs and other spaces for collaboration in YouCount proved as catalysts for transitioning decision-making from hierarchical structures to inclusive, participatory models.
- **Empowered Young Citizen Scientists and Expanded Social Networks:**
Young citizen scientists experienced acknowledgment through media recognition, leading to increased access to an expanded social network. Examples include organizing meetings with high-profile officials and highlighting their growing influence and impact.
- **Changes in Social and Power Relations:**
Observations reveal significant changes in social interactions and relationships, fostering new connections among diverse participants. New relationships emerge across diverse backgrounds, geographies, and age groups, fostering collaborative spaces that may not have otherwise occurred being based on equal footing.

3. Youth's key role in Dissemination, Exploitation, and Communication Strategy

This strategy is crucial for maximising project impacts where young people play a significant role in implementing the strategy, by actively participating in delivering scientific results and disseminating and communicating findings.

Example - box: Supporting youth-friendly jobs in Norway.

This example from the youth citizen social science case in Norway, illustrates how engaging young citizen scientists in youth citizen social science has raised important issues about youth social innovation. Moreover, it shows how the young citizen scientists got involved in co-creating a social innovation. Specifically, the innovation involved a shift in job design practices, where stakeholder organizations initiated cross-sector and cross-institutional collaboration to develop job opportunities based on input from the young citizen scientists, offering a solution to the issues raised by these youth contributors.

Youth-led identification of critical issues for social inclusion

When gathering data in the research process, the young citizen scientists in the Norwegian case found that other young people talked a lot about how a part-time job can work be socially inclusive. This changed the team's conversations from jobs as inclusive in themselves, to the quality of the jobs offered to young people. The idea of formulating requirements for a job to function as socially inclusive emerged.

Young citizen scientists' involvement in co-creating a social innovation

A part of the idea was suggesting that different employers join forces to provide a variety of tasks and collaborative opportunities, and a support structure so that their young staff members feel better integrated into society. Through a process facilitated by the adult researchers, the young citizen scientists developed seven criteria for youth-friendly jobs that were presented to the stakeholders in the national policy workshop in 2023.

The seven criteria for socially inclusive youth employment are as follows:

1. I contribute to society.
2. I learn new things.
3. I am listened to and I get to say my opinion.
4. I collaborate with others and do not just work alone.
5. I get help to build a network and think about my career.
6. I get to know, and I feel community with, my bosses and colleagues.
7. I use my energy.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Based on what young people identified and suggested, the following recommendations for policy and practice are identified as essential to foster greater youth social inclusion. These recommendations are for consideration by policy and practice organisations at all levels that are aiming to address youth social inclusion processes:

Increasing Intergenerational Dialogue

Intergenerational dialogue was a powerful and key aspect of social innovation in the YouCount living labs. We therefore recommend that local, national and European governmental institutions and other organisations with responsibilities for developing policy and practice in youth social inclusion:

1. Consider what practical mechanisms to put in place to ensure the involvement of young people alongside adult stakeholders.
2. Actively engage with existing youth groups and organisations, including those specialist groups supporting, for example, young refugees or young disabled people to support young people's participation.
3. Invest time and money in developing and supporting these youth associations, committees, projects and NGOs to ensure there is the knowledge about youth issues and participation.

Creating More Social Inclusion Opportunities

Our research found that opportunities for young people to participate in society, to feel a sense of belonging and connection to place, and for young people to enact their citizenship were different across countries. We recommend that the organisations in charge of fostering youth social inclusion need to offer:

4. Resources to set up youth-specific groups and spaces where young people can flourish and develop their potential.
5. Volunteering and work placement opportunities that are meaningful to young people in a range of workplace settings that meet their different aspirations.
6. Opportunities for political and citizenship training, including ways for young people to be engaged in local politics and leadership.

Amplifying Youth Voices

We found limited opportunities for young people across societies to have their voices heard. To amplify youth voices in policy and practice we recommend that local, national and EU institutions need to:

7. Provide opportunities for young people to actively participate in policymaking so that they can influence policies that impact on their daily lives and communities.
8. Offer opportunities for young people to be involved in decision making in designated youth spaces such as 'Youth Zones', including the opportunity to direct and manage projects. That is, youth projects run *by* and *with* young people.
9. Consider the benefits offered by youth citizen social science projects as effective mechanisms for hearing and amplifying young people's voices.

Youth citizen social science as a strategy for youth social inclusion

We discovered in YouCount that young people might feel empowered to actively participate in social inclusion by adopting a youth citizen social science approach. Youth who participate in such projects acquire the knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to do research, speak up for themselves, and have a say in decision-making processes. Additionally, it can be a means of incorporating young people with other stakeholders in co-creative problem-solving initiatives. Therefore, we encourage policymakers and other institutions promoting youth social inclusion to:

10. Encourage youth active involvement in creating policies and social innovations that address their concerns about social inclusion by supporting and funding youth citizen social science programs.
11. Make use of youth citizen social science approaches to promote collaborations between many stakeholders (as discussed before these can be policymakers, youth groups, and organisations and NGOs, among others) and young people creating innovative solutions that address the multifaceted challenges of youth social inclusion.
12. Acknowledge the challenges in achieving the ambitious goal of scientific publications in co-creative citizen social science when compared to traditional social sciences. Recommendations for more feasible objectives, additional resources, and time allocation for research and analysis are proposed for youth citizen social science.
13. Consider the real scale of engaging youths, stakeholders, and policymakers in youth citizen social science. YouCount's research shows that the scope of public participation expected in youth citizen social science when compared to the scale of participation of citizen science in other scientific disciplines might be different.

According to our research, the ideas and opinions of young people that are crucial for promoting youth social inclusion are in line with the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (European Commission, 2018), which highlights the significance of young people's empowerment, connection, and active participation in tackling European challenges. Furthermore, based on our empirical research, we suggest youth citizen social science as an innovative way for addressing the challenge of social inclusion, while accomplishing with the EU Youth Strategy's goals.

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