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# Leadership in Action: How Religious Leaders and Local Authorities Can Foster Social Cohesion by Empowering Youth

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**The European Policy Dialogue Forum** brings together religious leaders, policy-makers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.

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Donald Winnicott, English pediatrician and psychoanalyst

*Wherever there is a young person throwing a challenge  
there must be an adult ready to take it up.*

## Executive summary

This policy brief highlights the crucial role of religious leaders and local authorities to engage young people when addressing their social and economic exclusion in promoting cohesive urban communities. As Europe becomes increasingly urbanised, cities can play a pivotal role in actively engaging young people's talents and bridging intergenerational gaps, harnessing the key role of religious leaders and actors. This policy brief advocates systemic youth participation in decision-making, emphasising the importance of dialogue across religious, cultural and generational divides to enable effective youth leadership. To achieve impact, these efforts should include open and frank discussions on contentious issues important to young people, such as diversity, inclusion, equity and equal participation. By outlining the challenges of marginalisation and the power dynamics young people face, particularly those from minority groups, this policy brief points to successful participatory governance models in European cities as examples of how to empower youth. When religious and secular leaders adopt approaches that resonate with young people's values and aspirations, they foster a conducive environment for meaningful community engagement that can unlock the changemaking potential of young people.

## Introduction

In an era of widening social divides, young people are leading the way in driving potential transformative changes across Europe. This policy brief highlights the critical roles religious leaders and local authorities play in empowering young people to transform cities into hubs of inclusivity and cohesion. As young people increasingly disengage from traditional structures of power, there is a need for a paradigm shift in youth engagement strategies that resonate with young people's aspirations for social justice and active participation in societal change.

This policy brief illustrates the urgency to harness the potential of young people as catalysts for change, advocating systemic youth participation in decision-making. It calls for a collaborative approach among religious and secular leaders to create empowering spaces for dialogue and action, bridging generational and cultural divides. In doing so, this policy brief envisions a future where the energies and talents of young people are central to building cohesive and vibrant urban communities.

## Overcoming Barriers: Empowering Young People Left Behind

The rising challenges faced by Europe's young people are marked by widening socioeconomic inequalities compounded with a return of conflict to the continent and the renewed recognition that warfare in other parts of the world has a direct impact on social cohesion and stability in Europe. These trends, resulting in a reduced likelihood of early economic independence and the growing exclusion from quality education, are exacerbated by ageing European societies whereby young people are structurally underrepresented in political bodies, including national and European parliaments. The outcome is a progressive alienation of young people from decision-making processes.



**Social cohesion** refers to fostering an equitable society where everyone has a sense of belonging and can participate fully in social, economic, political, religious and cultural aspects of life thanks to governance systems and stakeholders actively working to reduce inequalities and ensure the well-being and upward social mobility of all community members, especially marginalised groups.

By advocating a society where community members can enjoy equal opportunities for upward mobility, the principle of social cohesion calls for a concerted effort from secular and religious leadership to address inequalities. However, the level of exclusion that young people experience at different levels - especially those from marginalized ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds - significantly undermines their trust in traditional authorities, the same authorities responsible for societal change. Consequently, it's unsurprising that contemporary forms of youth participation are increasingly unconventional, frequently

favouring digital platforms and not tied to traditional religious or political groups. Examples of this shift include movements like 'Fridays for Future' and #MeToo.

This rise in unconventional youth activism prompts a re-evaluation of which leadership approaches are best suited to engage the younger generation so that its aspirations for social justice and inclusion can be properly addressed.

## Participatory Governance: Empowering Young People to Foster Inclusive Cities

As Europe becomes more urban, cities hold the special responsibility to act as dynamic hubs of diversity and innovation. Thanks to the proximity to their inhabitants, municipal governments are ideally placed to explore forms of participatory governance, a concept that captures the essence of leadership approaches that meaningfully engage community members in co-shaping solutions to common challenges. Involving young people through participatory practices offers unparalleled opportunity to regain their trust and unlock their changemaking potential for inclusive and cohesive urban spaces.

As recommended by the Council of Europe (2015), participatory practices, such as **youth councils** and **participatory budgeting**, stand out as exemplary models for amplifying young voices in urban governance. These initiatives not only provide a platform for young people to influence and co-design decisions that affect their lives but also act as vectors of political mobilization.



**Lublin, Poland**, host of the **European Youth Capital 2023**, implemented **participatory budgeting** by allocating a youth-specific budget in cooperation with the Youth City Council. The World Atlas of Participatory Budgeting offers further insights about these processes: <https://youthpb.eu/project/youth-civic-budget-in-lublin-poland/>.

The effectiveness of the above-mentioned participatory mechanisms often depends on the ability of participants to navigate complex institutional set-ups, which underscores the importance of targeted **capacity-building** and **mentorship programs**. Designed to empower and suitably equip young people with the necessary skills – such as the ability in expressing themselves, understanding institutional languages and reading cultural codes of interaction – such programs are vital for avoiding tokenistic practices while fostering meaningful participation and a genuine sense of ownership.



**Youth leadership programmes for youth mobilisation** – The **UK's ParliaMentors** offers youth leadership training and political mentorship. Run by the Faith & Belief Forum (F&BF), participants engage in social action projects throughout an academic year, supported by professional guidance to foster leadership skills among young people. <https://faithbeliefforum.org/programme/parliamentors/>

In striving for increased youth participation, challenges remain in ensuring that participatory practices are truly inclusive. A critical re-evaluation of youth participation paradigms suggests that increased efforts are needed to reach out to young people with fewer opportunities and empower those who suffer exclusion and discrimination, particularly because of ethnic origin or religious affiliation. **Youth work and non-formal education** serve as primary entry points to engage with marginalised groups, promoting a far-reaching upskilling of young people who would otherwise be left behind.

**Civic participation and volunteering** play a crucial role in youth engagement, offering pathways for personal development, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing community integration. Marginalised youth – particularly those from religious and ethnic minorities, including young migrants – can especially benefit from these forms of participation as they offer a unique opportunity to provide personal fulfilment and self-esteem, dispel harmful stereotypes and reduce violent behaviours. However, for these initiatives to be truly effective, their design and set-up should avoid adult-centric perspectives that can restrict the creative contributions of young people.



*Founded in 2008 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the **Mostar Rock School** provides a safe space for young people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The school promotes community engagement showcasing the changemaking potential of youth through public performances and bridging religious and ethnic divides. <https://mostarrockschool.org/en/>*

Cities that are able to balance opportunities for structured engagement and organic youth activism are more likely to flourish. This approach involves recognising the diverse ways young people wish to participate and ensuring that participatory governance mechanisms are flexible, inclusive and responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of young people. To do so, cities are called to dedicate spaces where community members cultivate a vibrant civic life that empowers young people to play an active role in their communities. The European Portal for Youth Organisations offers a comprehensive overview of networks that are engaged in supporting these efforts.

## Advancing Faith-Inclusive, Values-Sensitive Leadership in Action

Despite an increasing disconnection from traditional forms of leadership in politics and religion, young people remain actively involved in civic life, often through innovative and non-traditional platforms such as social movements and grassroots initiatives. This dynamic participation underscores the potential for religious and secular leaders to tap into young people's energy by fostering environments that encourage meaningful engagement and a sense of belonging. In this effort, dialogue methods are particularly valuable to foster mutual understanding in increasingly diverse communities due to their transformative power.

This approach is critical for addressing intergenerational power dynamics and identifying suitable ways to bridge divisions. In doing so, dialogue methods do not shy away from conflict but rather acknowledge it as a part of the process in building trust and understanding across different parts of the community.



Since 2015, the **KAICIID Fellows programme** has empowered over 400 mid-level professionals and young leaders from 90+ countries to foster peace, social cohesion and reconciliation in local communities through interreligious and intercultural dialogue. <https://www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/we-build-capacity/kaiciid-fellows-programme>

Without a willingness to address ethnic, religious and social inequity, cities will be unable to respond to the emerging challenges in increasingly diverse local communities. Efforts to build **cohesive communities** call for joint engagement between faith and secular leadership to promote an urban environment **grounded in values** that can resonate across cultural, religious and political traditions while centred on common principles of upholding human rights and human dignity. This continual collaborative approach should address the intergenerational gap in a systematic way, avoiding patronising approaches to ensure a genuine engagement of the young generation. Well-designed and suitably implemented dialogue methods can be particularly useful for unveiling power dynamics, building trust and mutual understanding across religious, generational and ethnic differences. Religious traditions can offer values-based guidance that can help (re)define societal norms across generations, intercepting suitably young people's desire for change.



The **Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) Ambassadors' programme** is an emerging network of young Jewish and Muslim leaders from Europe, dedicated to enhancing interfaith trust and solidarity. Under the mentorship of experienced rabbis and imams from the MJLC, the 'Ambassadors' implement jointly community-based initiatives, building bridges between their respective communities, offering an inspirational example of how young people can drive transformative actions at local level. <https://mjlc-europe.org/Article/mjlc-statement-on-the-ambassadors-programme>

In building bridges across age, religious and cultural groups, concerns persist over whether young women receive equal opportunities as men in faith-based and secular initiatives. Similarly, young people desire an open and critical discussion about pressing political and social issues like structural injustice and inequalities. Religions, with their profound influence on beliefs and behaviours, can guide significant shifts towards positive change. Yet, the role of faith in promoting social cohesion is often underestimated or poorly understood, requiring clearer communication beyond religious circles. On the other hand, secular institutions may be suspicious of how religious leaders can exert their influence on

young people. Enhanced efforts towards increased literacy in faith and public policymaking matters could help foster improved interactions between religious and secular institutions, unlocking their catalysing potential for greater youth engagement.



In **Leipzig**, Germany the City Council's Integration Officer convenes the Interreligious Round Table (IRT) biannually, uniting diverse faith actors to strengthen existing community initiatives, foster mutual understanding and implement joint projects.

<https://english.leipzig.de/youth-family-and-community/foreign-nationals-and-migrants/migrants-integration-and-intercultural-activities-in-leipzig/intercultural-leipzig/interreligious-dialogue/leipzig-interreligious-round-table>

In conclusion, young people value more policies than politics, favouring direct communication with established authorities to share practical solutions for their concerns. They lean towards approaches that are collaborative and egalitarian. This perspective prompts both secular and religious leaders to reconsider their strategies and methods for engaging with youth, aiming to foster more cohesive and inclusive communities. In this regard, the concept of servant leadership, emphasising care and support for community members, could serve as a guiding principle. A servant leader fosters growth, mental and physical wellbeing as well as critical thinking abilities. Embracing this approach could bridge the gap between traditional hierarchies and the participatory expectations of young people, paving the way for more effective community engagement in European cities.

## Recommendations



### FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

- Create mechanisms for participatory governance, engaging young people in co-designing and co-deciding initiatives that are beneficial for them and the whole community, such as youth councils, budgets or platforms;
- Create, and sustainably support, opportunities for interaction among and with young people – including dialogues, workshops or community cultural activities – that build relationships and common actions across lines of difference: age, religion, ethnicity, culture, social class, economic standing;
- Map local networks, actors and partners – including interfaith and faith groups – to support social cohesion;
- Invest in religious literacy and training to avoid prejudices and stereotypes as they relate to different religious communities.



### FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTORS

- Establish and foster spaces for dialogue and mutual interaction with secular actors, including civil society organizations, where differing values can be safely explored resulting in common frameworks for action jointly built for participation and partnership;
- Mobilise resources – financial, human and in-kind – within and across religious communities to provide young people with spiritual mentoring and support, especially for those coming from socio-economically disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds;
- Take an active role in the local community. Participate in local interfaith activities to build networks with other faith communities and civil society organizations. Jointly establish a long-term vision to tackle the challenges of social cohesion;
- Invest in building knowledge of legal and policy frameworks to improve understanding of common gaps that need to be addressed in dialogue initiatives.



### FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

- Advocate more space for and increased development of youth programmes, including initiatives that may differ from what donors would consider a 'suitable' approach;
- Act as bridge-builders between differing values across religious and secular institutions by combining dialogue and collaborative action with religious and secular leadership to engage young people across different social groups;
- Be a proactive and reliable source of information for religious and secular leaders regarding the situation of young people in local communities and provide examples of best practices that inspire innovative initiatives;
- Invest in religious literacy and training to avoid prejudice against and stereotyping of different religious communities.

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