



Youth Participation That Works: Lessons from Community Foundation Halle



In this blog Lydia Bökelmann from Halle Community Foundation, Germany, reflects on the experience and lessons from their Youth Participation project. It set out to test various ways of connecting with and involving young people. Having explored how to find and connect with young people, the next step was to turn ideas into reality. Lydia concludes ‘Ultimately, it’s about empowering them to navigate these systems and take meaningful action in shaping their community’.

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Engaging Young People in Urban Development

Less waste, better street lighting, weather-protected spots to chill outside, or a ping-pong table - these are just some of the ideas and projects initiated by young people in Halle Süd. But how do you gather these ideas and motivate young people to turn them into reality? Youth participation projects is on the rise, which is great, but many initiatives struggle to engage this group in a meaningful and lasting way. Here’s a glimpse into our first year with the youth participation project dazwischenfunken, run by Bürgerstiftung Halle, where we tested different formats to connect with young people.

Step 1: Understanding the Neighborhood

The first step was to analyze the district and identify key locations frequented by young people. These included youth centers, schools, clubs with youth programs, and public sports facilities. These places served as initial points of contact to introduce our project. At the same time, we designed flyers that encouraged participation, including a QR code linking to an online form. This form allowed young people to submit project ideas and kick-start the implementation process. To ensure accessibility, we provided the information and forms in multiple languages commonly spoken in the district. The form itself was intentionally kept short - it simply asked for a project name, a brief description, the people involved, the necessary resources, the motivation



behind the idea, and contact details. In addition to that we were running a social media campaign with the same content.

Step 2: Connecting with the Target Group

To engage young people, we experimented with three different approaches:

- Peer-to-Peer Formats:

We developed a 1.5-hour discussion format and brought it to the district's youth centres. Open to anyone aged 13-21, these sessions were facilitated by specially trained peer moderators. The goal was to reflect on the neighborhood, move beyond simply complaining about issues, and instead generate ideas for positive change. By the end, participants filled out a project poster with their proposals.

- On-Site Engagement:



We placed a shipping container next to a popular skate park, furnished it with sofas and armchairs, and provided a music speaker, Wi-Fi and lemonade. Several afternoons a week, the space was open for young people to drop by. Since the skate park lacked sheltered hangout spots, this space was quickly embraced. Small, youth-driven events and workshops helped build trust and demonstrated that we were genuinely interested in supporting their ideas. Over time, young people began opening up about the issues that bothered them in their neighborhood and the changes they wished to see. Again, the ultimate goal was to form project groups and complete the project form.



- Collaboration with an All-Day School:



After running the peer-to-peer format at a school, we worked with a group of interested students weekly, alongside their teacher, to develop their projects. This approach was effective due to the regular and structured support. However, we noticed that students tended to think within school-related frameworks, possibly limiting their creativity. Some of their ideas sounded good in front of the teacher and are nice projects but may not have truly reflected their own priorities.

Results of needs mapping: 'lack of drinking water, not enough green space, feeling unsafe, no space for cold periods, access for people with limitations ...'.

Step 3: Turning Ideas into Reality

Coming up with ideas and putting them on paper is the easy part - seeing them through to completion is the real challenge. In a world full of distractions, where young people juggle school, family and hobbies, maintaining interest and commitment over time can be difficult. Most projects require patience and persistence, as the rewards often lie far in the future.

Our experience has shown that continuous engagement is key. The more young people are actively involved in every stage of the process, the more invested they remain. Even the smallest updates should be shared to show that progress is being made. Regular face-to-face meetings foster accountability far more effectively than online communication. Creating these moments of connection helps sustain motivation, ensuring that ideas don't remain just ideas but become tangible improvements in their community.

Key Takeaways

From our experience, we learned that engagement works best when young people feel comfortable in their environment. One of the most critical success factors is how well they relate to project leaders - commonalities like age, hobbies, music preferences, or sports help build trust. The pace and direction of the project must be dictated by the young people themselves.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The best experiences came from being open, relaxed, and genuinely listening to their concerns. If a suggestion initially seems unfeasible, it's essential not to dismiss it based on personal scepticism but rather brainstorm together to find solutions. Involving young people in every step - from decision-making processes to meetings with city officials - ensures they understand the process and remain in control of their projects. Ultimately, it's about empowering them to navigate these systems and take meaningful action in shaping their community.

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