# ENGAGING YOUTH IN SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITIES: A STUDY ON PROMOTING THE URBACT EUROPEAN PROGRAMME

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**Abstract:**   *THE AIM OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO PROVIDE AN APPROACH ON THE ISSUE OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AT THE URBACT PROGRAMME IMPACT ON URBAN DEVELOPMENT AS IT IS ESTABLISHED IN THE REPORTS OF URBACT. THE REPORTS'S EMPIRICAL DATA, WHICH WAS EXAMINED OVER A TEN-YEAR PERIOD, IS REPRESENTED IN THE ARTICLE ON THIS SOCIAL TOPIC. THE ANALYSIS WAS BASED ON SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS (CONTENT ANALYSIS), THIS ISSUE BEING DEALT WITH IN TERMS OF A FREQUENCY APPROACH. THE ANALYSIS WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT SOME THEMES RELATED TO THE ISSUE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, ACTIVE INCLUSION AND POLICIES ON YOUTH: CHILDREN'S EDUCATION ON URBAN SUSTAINABILITY, YOUTH SKILLS, YOUTH INFORMATION CENTER AND PLATFORM DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS; THE COOPERATION EFFORTS OF THE COMMUNITY ACTORS (NGOS, PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AND ECONOMIC AGENTS).*

**Keywords:**   YOUTH; EDUCATION; INCLUSION; URBACT; NETWORK OF CITIES.

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## INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies and initiatives for intervention have focused on the significant issues that European states and cities face. Currently, approximately ¾ of Europe's population lives in urban areas (74.3%) (Urbanization, 2021). This number will rise until 2050 (84%) (Urbanisation in Europe, 2020). The inequality, the lack of affordable housing (Miron, 2012; Hilber et all. 2022), the insecurity of the urban environment (Muggah, 2014), unemployment and legal issues (Constache, 2013; Gallie & Paugam, 2000) and congestion are among the major socio-political and environmental problems (Beilin & Wilkinson, 2015; Zhang & Li, 2018). At the same time, this gathering of people, infrastructure and businesses offers important opportunities to transform cities into engines of change and innovation (Ribeiro & Gonçalves, 2019). Thus, cities can be the source and solution for the current challenges. This is the reason why initiatives that promote the development of resilient cities and inclusion are the core of EU policy.

Since 2022, Urbact has been a pioneer for integrated urban development. To achieve this objective, Urbact encourages European cities to collaborate, to learn from their own experiences and to

exchange good practices, to strengthen their capacity and know-how, to share lessons learned throughout Europe.

Urbact acts as a catalyst that develops processes and tools known as the "Urbact Method", through which decision-makers, cities and citizens participate in the development of new models of local governance.

The Urbact method is based on 3 fundamental principles: integration, participation and learning through action (Stigendal, 2006).

The integration. For connecting, the integrated approach combines a number of different dimensions: vertical cooperation between all levels, from governance to local actors; horizontal cooperation between different political fields and departments of the municipality; territorial cooperation between neighborhoods, municipalities, rural areas and regions and the balance between hard and soft measures, hard meaning investments in infrastructure and soft representing the development of the human factor, such as administrative capacity and knowledge exchange. Within these soft measures, we integrate the policies and intervention dedicated to youth.

The Participation: a participatory approach is one that recognizes the voice of all those who have a say in the city. This implies the involvement of citizens, co-creation and a multi-level dialogue. Public participation is a positive dynamic in which all members of the local community are involved in the change process, stakeholders collaborate with the authorities to enhance urban living. They try to find solutions by creating a genuine feeling of accountability and ownership.

Learning through action implies an increase in the level of knowledge and working skills with partners, solving tangible issues through the design and testing of personalized actions. This includes managing the policy cycle from planning, resource identification and action planning for policy implementation and monitoring, impact assessment and internalization of lessons learned.

This part presents some theoretical considerations concerning youth participation and urban development. The notion 'urban development' is broader than 'youth participation'.

Urban development refers to the development of cities and other urban areas as engines of economic, social and educational development (Iosif, 2013), currently the focus being on the analysis of the sustainability dimension of each process, activity in the urban area (Wei et all., 2015).

Within the framework of this study, the city emerges as the location of choice for implementing policies aimed at improving the lives of youth. In addition, the idea of active inclusion—which encompasses youth engagement as well—focuses on a particular demographic individual: young people. Urbact's core concepts include active aging, the transition to the workforce, and the integration and activation of migrants.

Thus, the European forums through the Urbact programme (I-IV) have suggested to accompany European cities and countries in their development process, so that they become engines of growth, based on: mutual assistance, action-orientated; participative approach and strong methodological support (with the supervision of the Urbact experts who manage each topic).

The projects' goal is to find the most effective ways to involve young people in the creation of municipal policies and in the process of urban development (policy-making) (Brady, 2020).

*Why young people?*

Youth, in its particular sense, denotes a time when one moves from childhood to the progressive adoption of certain social roles and the solidification of a position within the social hierarchy. We define youth as a "specific stage in human development from childhood to adulthood, in the formation of personality and the acquisition of significant characteristics for future social integration

in society" (Mãrginean, 1996). A diverse approach is necessary due to the delicate nature of changes during youth. The feelings experienced during this period know a wide variability, specific to the age: from stress and anxiety in connection with personal and socio-professional perspectives to a lack of care or even ignorance in connection with the present and the awareness of the acquired status-role, states that sometimes combine with alienation (in the Durkheimian sense of the term) and frustration.

When we refer to young people, Romania is part of the category of states that have extended the definition of the term "young" up to the age of 30 (along with Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia and Spain). The European Commission's 2021 study on the participation of children and young people in civic and political life shows that these two categories are underrepresented in participatory processes (Neagu, 2015).

Upon examining the youth's socio-professional and economic setting, a number of characteristics and behavioral models are produced that impact the degree of community participation.

By participation in general we mean an action of involvement (subjective, through aspirations, attitudes and knowledge, beliefs) and integration (objectively, through the dynamics of interaction processes) in a system of social relations. The participation represents a value, insofar as it satisfies the human need for involvement and integration, it ensures the affective need of belonging and a way of being or identifying with that life that gives meaning and orientation to individual and social existence (Strâmbeanu, 2004)

In the context of Urbact, the well-being of cities depends a lot on how young people manage to maximize their potential and manage to develop their skills to fully contribute to society. Local actors and the authorities need to work together to satisfy the needs of the youth and prepare them for the social, cultural, political, and economic challenges of the future.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Content analysis was used to analyze how Urbact youth programme was framed on https://urbact.eu/. Urbact.eu is an updated site of the European action Urbact, which lists all 3 completed programs and updated data of the 4th one (ongoing until 2027). For this research we collected Urbact I, II and III data (URBACT III Report).

Each online article was operationalized in units of analysis. The total amount of online articles that was content analyzed was 126, published between 2014-2023.

The quantitative analysis has a twofold aim: on the one hand, to highlight the main themes of the articles; on the other hand, to see which connected topics are connected with the one of youth inclusion.

Thematic analysis is defined as the method used to identify and analyze certain patterns in a series of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), highlighting the main dimensions that are present in the corpus.

An intercoder reliability test was conducted on a randomly selected sample of 20% of the online articles. Cohen's kappa was 0.83.

**RESULTS**

Eight main topics were primarily covered by the online Urbact articles, and these are: education for sustainable development (ESD), diversity-tolerance, digital education, social-urban innovative actions (UIA), youth political participation, labour market, volunteering, EU youth activities (conferences).

The four most important topics by appearance frequency were: (1) education for sustainable development (ESD) (24,60%), (2) labour market (23,01%), (3) volunteering (16,66%) and (4) youth political participation (11,11%) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Issues in the online Urbact articles

| Topics | No. topics | % |
|---|---|---|
| Education for sustainable development (ESD) | 31 | 24,60 |
| Diversity, tolerance | 4 | 3.17 |
| Digital education | 8 | 6.34 |
| Social-Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) | 9 | 7,14 |
| Youth political participation | 14 | 11,11 |
| Labour market | 29 | 23,01 |
| Volunteering | 21 | 16,66 |
| EU youth activities (conferences) | 10 | 7,93 |
| Total issues | 126 | |

**Table 2.** Topics online articles by country.

| Country | Topics | % |
|---|---|---|
| Italy | Education | 29,03 |
| | Diversity, tolerance | 25 |
| Spain | Social-Urban Innovative Actions | 22,22 |
| | Labour market | 31,03 |
| Poland | Volunteering | 23,80 |
| | Youth political participation | 17,03 |

In order to understand how the European countries participate at Urbact programme, we cross corelated countries and the first 2 topics activities. For example, in terms of topics, for Italy the most

chosen one is education (especially, environmental education) (29,03%) and diversity, tolerance (25%).

**CONCLUSION**

This study was aimed to highlight the main themes of the online Urbact articles regarding youth. And revealed the following hierarchy in terms of young people. The hierarchy reveals that the most important aspect of every Urbact topic is the sustainability of actions for and with de youth.

The second implication of this study is that youth are key force for social change and a force for sustainable development.

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