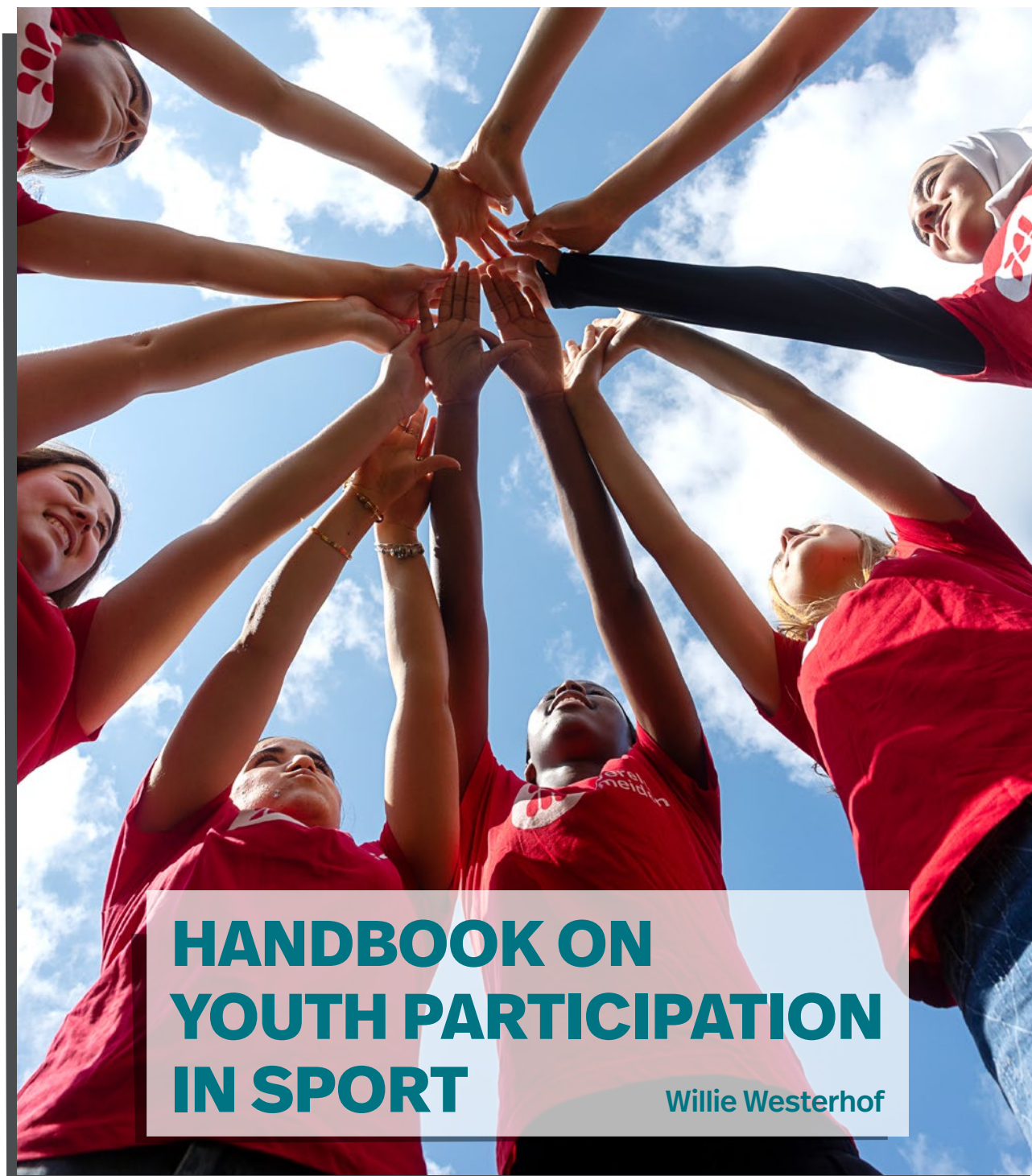


SPIN Youth

EMPOWER DIVERSE YOUTH



HANDBOOK ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

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The Erasmus+ sport project “Empower Diverse Youth – Build-up Youth Participation and Inclusion in Sport Organizations” (SPIN Youth) aims to increase the sport participation of young people from diverse backgrounds – in particular young refugees and migrants – and to create inclusive, non-discriminatory sport environments that actively promote diversity and equality.

Project duration: January 2024 – June 2026



For detailed information on the project and the SPIN network, visit www.sportinclusion.net
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1. Executive Summary

This handbook presents a practical and reflective approach to strengthening youth participation within sport organisations, based on the experiences and outcomes of the Erasmus+ sport project SPIN Youth – Empower Diverse Youth. The central premise is that young people should not only participate in sport as athletes, but also as co-thinkers, co-designers and co-decision-makers.

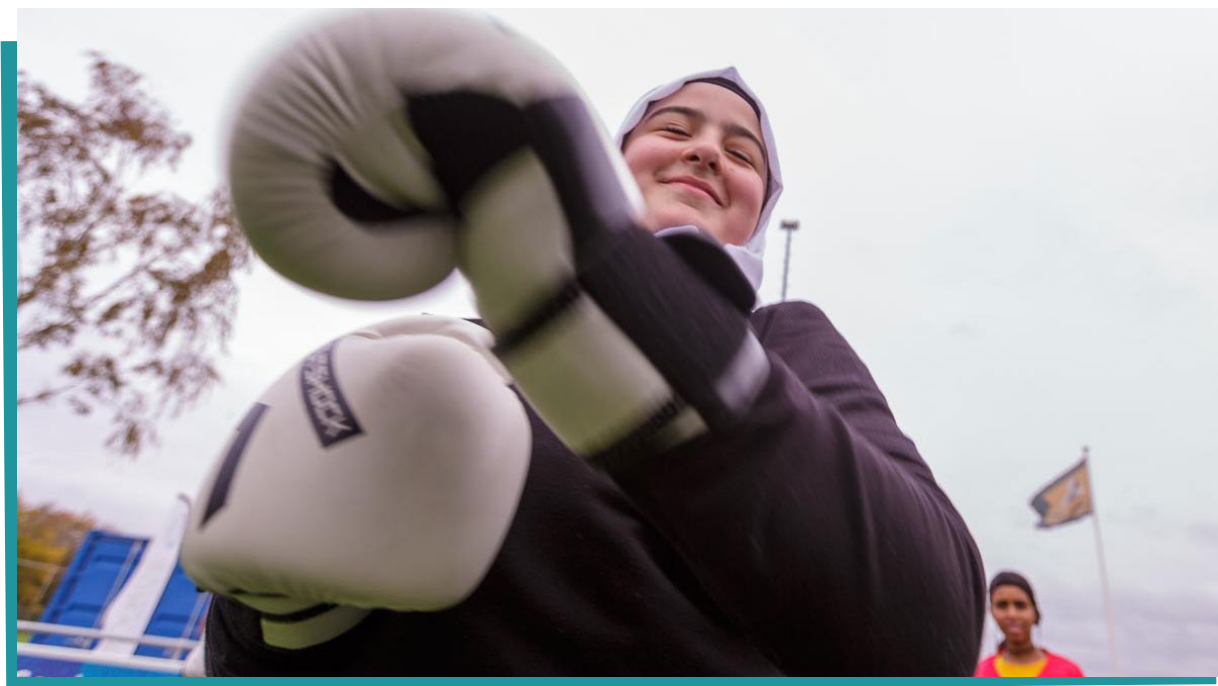
Youth participation is defined as a structural way of working in which young people have real influence over policies, activities and organisational culture. When implemented meaningfully, youth participation enhances ownership, reduces dropout, fosters inclusion and diversity, and supports the development of future volunteers and leaders. The handbook emphasises that participation is not a one-off project, but a continuous process requiring commitment from both young people and organisations.

A strong link is made between youth participation, inclusion and equality. The handbook highlights the importance of reaching young people who are often underrepresented and creating safe, accessible environments in which diverse voices are genuinely heard. Roger Hart's Participation Ladder is used as a reflective tool to assess different levels of participation and to avoid tokenism.

Drawing on concrete experiences from SPIN Youth, the handbook describes how youth panels can function as think tanks, research teams and action groups. Through youth-led action research and youth-led action plans, young people gain ownership while organisations benefit from relevant and innovative insights.

A clear step-by-step plan supports organisations in embedding youth participation sustainably, from formulating a shared ambition and creating organisational support, to implementation, feedback and continuity. Finally, success factors and common pitfalls are presented from the perspective of young participants themselves.

Overall, the handbook demonstrates that effective youth participation is built on trust, equality, clear expectations and structural embedding, and that it contributes to more inclusive, resilient and future-oriented sport organisations.



2. Introduction

Youth participation lies at the heart of an inclusive and future-oriented sport environment. Within the SPIN project “Empower Diverse Youth – Build up Youth Participation and Inclusion in Sport Organisations” (SPIN Youth), the active involvement of young people is central: not only as athletes, but also as co-thinkers, co-designers and co-decision-makers.

More and more sport organisations recognise that young people are indispensable to the vitality of sport. Nevertheless, in many organisations young people remain underrepresented in organisational structures and decision-making processes. Boards and committees are often composed mainly of older volunteers, creating a gap between organisational policies and the lived experiences of young people. This handbook offers practical guidance to help bridge that gap.

The SPIN Youth project, an Erasmus+ sport initiative, aimed to support sport organisations in creating inclusive sport environments in which young people with diverse backgrounds experience real influence. By working with youth panels, youth-led action research and youth-led action plans, young people were given a central role in analysing challenges and developing solutions.

This handbook is based on:

- existing knowledge on youth participation;
- the experiences of sport organisations and youth coordinators;
- and, most importantly, the findings, reflections and feedback of the youth panels.

The document is intended as both a practical and reflective handbook for sport clubs, sport organisations, municipalities and project leaders who aim to embed youth participation in a sustainable way. It combines vision, theory, practical examples and a concrete step-by-step approach.

3. What Is Youth Participation in Sport?

Definition

Youth participation in sport means that young people are structurally involved in thinking along, co-organising and co-deciding about sport policies, activities and culture. Young people are recognised as equal partners with their own knowledge, experiences and perspectives.

Youth participation is not a stand-alone project or a temporary activity, but a way of working in which young people:

- have influence on decisions;
- take responsibility;
- and are given space to learn and grow.

When young people are actively involved, their sense of ownership increases. They develop skills in communication, cooperation, leadership and critical thinking. For sport organisations, youth participation brings new energy, creativity and a better understanding of what motivates young people.

Why Is Youth Participation Important?

In many sport clubs, young people are highly visible on the field, but hardly visible beyond it. This often leads to:

- weaker attachment to the club;
- a higher risk of dropout;
- and policies that insufficiently reflect young people's realities.

By actively involving young people:

- engagement and loyalty increase;
- social cohesion is strengthened;
- and future volunteer and leadership potential is developed.

A young person from a SPIN Youth panel described it as follows:

“If you only come to train and then leave again, the club doesn't really feel like yours. But if you are allowed to think along, you stay involved longer.”

Benefits of Youth Participation

Effective youth participation leads to:

- stronger ownership and sense of belonging;
- innovation in sport offers and communication;
- bridges between young people from different backgrounds;
- a reduction of the 'age gap' between boards and youth;
- less dropout and greater continuity;
- development of social and organisational skills;
- and better alignment with societal challenges.

Professionals and volunteers also benefit from working with young people: they gain new perspectives and are better able to justify their choices.



4. Youth Participation, Inclusion and Diversity

Within SPIN Youth, youth participation was explicitly linked to inclusion and equality. The focus was not only on participation, but on co-building a sport culture in which everyone feels welcome, regardless of gender, background, disability or socio-economic position.

An intersectional approach was essential, as young people often experience multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously. For example, girls with a migration or refugee background may face cultural, social and organisational barriers at the same time.

Youth participation contributes to inclusion when:

- young people who are less often heard are actively reached out to;
- safe and open environments are created;
- and diversity is recognised as a strength.

As one panel member stated:

“We were all different, and precisely because of that we understood better what was needed to include everyone.”



5. Levels of Youth Participation: The Participation Ladder

To reflect on the level of youth participation, *Roger Hart's Participation Ladder (1992)* is a useful tool. The ladder distinguishes different levels, ranging from non-participation to genuine influence.

Genuine Participation (rungs 4–8)

- Informing: young people are informed about decisions.
- Consulting: young people give their opinions; adults decide.
- Advising: young people provide substantive advice.
- Co-producing: young people and adults work together.
- (Co-)deciding: young people initiate and make decisions.

Rungs 1–3 are often referred to as forms of non-participation:

- Manipulation
- Decoration
- Tokenism

Within SPIN Youth, participation often took place between levels 6 and 8. Young people had ownership over research, ideas and implementation, while organisations adopted a facilitating role.

Importantly, the ladder is not a hierarchy or an assessment tool. Not every situation requires maximum decision-making power. The key question is whether the level of participation fits the young people involved and whether they experience real influence and recognition.



6. Youth Participation as a Two-Way Process

Youth participation only works when both young people and organisations actively commit themselves.

Role of Young People

Young people contribute:

- experiential knowledge;
- creativity;
- insight into barriers and opportunities.

However, they can only participate meaningfully if they:

- are well informed;
- know what is expected of them;
- and receive appropriate support.

Role of Facilitators and Organisations

Facilitators need to learn to:

- let go and trust;
- coach rather than control;
- and deal sensitively with differences.

Organisations must ensure structural embedding in policy, sufficient resources and broad support. Only then does participation become sustainable and not dependent on one enthusiastic individual.



7. Youth Participation in SPIN Youth: Working with Youth Panels

Set-up of the Youth Panels

Within SPIN Youth project, youth panels consisted of 5–7 young people (aged 15–27), with diverse compositions in terms of age, gender, background and sport experience. Each panel was supported by two trained youth coordinators.

Youth panels functioned as:

- a think tank;
- a research team;
- and an action/activity group.

Youth-Led Action Research

Young people were trained in action research and conducted their own research on:

- needs and wishes;
- experienced barriers;
- and opportunities for inclusion.

This resulted in highly recognisable and relevant insights.

As one young participant stated:

“We were no longer a target group, but researchers of our own sport environment.”

Youth-Led Action Plans

Based on the research findings, the panels developed concrete action plans, which they presented and implemented themselves. Examples included inclusive sport events, intercultural tournaments and new forms of outreach.



8. Step-by-Step Plan for Youth Participation

The step-by-step plan below is based on existing knowledge on youth participation and the concrete experiences and feedback of the project youth panels. It describes not only what sport organisations can do, but also why these steps matter and how they can be implemented in practice.

Step 1. Formulate a Shared Ambition

A successful approach starts with a clear, shared ambition. Youth participation only works when both young people and adults understand why young people are involved and what role they are given.

Within SPIN Youth, young people were particularly motivated when the purpose of their involvement was clear and when they knew from the start where they could exert influence. Unclear expectations led to hesitation or dropout.

“It helped that we knew this wasn’t just for show – we were really allowed to think along about solutions.”

How?

- Discuss with young people and the organisation which themes are central (e.g. inclusion, sport offer, club culture).
- Make explicit which level of participation is aimed for (consulting, co-producing, co-deciding).
- Document these agreements and revisit them regularly.

Step 2. Create Support and Preconditions

Youth participation requires organisational support. In SPIN Youth, young people indicated that they felt taken seriously when they noticed that boards and staff stood behind the process.

Preconditions such as time, guidance and facilities largely determine whether participation is feasible and sustainable.

“When adults show they make time for you, you feel that your contribution matters.”

How?

- Ensure explicit support from boards and management.
- Appoint a youth coordinator with sufficient time and mandate.
- Take school schedules, work and travel time into account.
- Provide practical support (space, reimbursement, guidance).

Step 3. Compose a Diverse Youth Panel

The composition of the youth panel is decisive for the quality of participation. Within SPIN Youth, diverse panels led to richer discussions and more creative solutions.

Diversity goes beyond age and gender and includes background, sport experience, motivation and perspective.

“Everyone looked at sport differently – that made our plans stronger.”

How?

- Use existing networks, but consciously look beyond the usual participants.
- Cooperate with schools, community sport coaches or youth work organisations.
- Allow for multilingualism or different forms of communication.

Step 4. Build a Safe and Equal Working Environment

A safe group dynamic is a precondition for meaningful participation. Young people only dare to share their opinions when they feel safe, respected and heard.

Within SPIN Youth, young people indicated that an open atmosphere and clear agreements were crucial for discussing sensitive topics such as exclusion or discrimination.

“Because it felt safe, we also dared to say critical things.”

How?

- Agree together on behavioural rules related to listening and respect.
- Invest time in getting to know each other and group bonding.
- Ensure that facilitation is supportive rather than dominant.

Step 5. Work Youth-Led: Research and Co-Creation

A core principle of SPIN Youth was working with youth-led action research. Young people were recognised as experts of their own realities.

By letting young people research needs and barriers themselves, insights emerged that were often new to organisations.

“We know best ourselves what young people need in the club.”

How?

- Train young people in basic research methods.
- Combine peer learning with reflection.
- Discuss results with the organisation throughout the process.

Step 6. Support the Implementation of Youth-Led Action Plans

Participation only becomes meaningful when ideas are actually implemented. Within SPIN Youth, implementing their own plans gave young people a strong sense of ownership.

“It was energizing that we could actually implement our ideas.”

How?

- Facilitate young people in planning and implementation.
- Safeguard feasibility without taking over ownership.
- Make successes visible within and beyond the organisation.

Step 7. Embedding and Continuity

Without follow-up and feedback, youth participation quickly loses credibility. Young people in SPIN Youth stressed the importance of feedback.

“If you don’t hear anything after a meeting, you disengage.”

How?

- Always provide feedback on what happened with the input.
- Evaluate the process and outcomes together.
- Think about succession and continuity of panel members.



9. Success Factors and Pitfalls – Lessons from the SPIN Youth Panels

This chapter is based on systematic feedback from the SPIN Youth panels and their facilitators, collected through evaluations, reflections and feedback forms throughout the project. The insights reflect what young people themselves experienced as decisive for the success (or failure) of youth participation. Where relevant, these experiences are linked to broader research and practice insights.

9.1 Success Factors According to the Youth Panels

International Training as a Strong Project Kick-off

According to the young people involved, the international training in Rome provided a strong and motivating start to the SPIN Youth project. The training created a shared foundation for youth-led approaches and increased young people's confidence in their role as co-designers and decision-makers. The international exchange strengthened their sense of belonging to a wider European initiative and enhanced ownership.

“A valuable and educational start in Rome.”

Experienced Influence and Visible Follow-Up

The most frequently mentioned success factor was experiencing real influence. Young people indicated that their engagement increased when they could clearly see that their ideas were taken up, implemented or seriously considered.

This became visible in SPIN Youth through youth-led action plans, events and pilots that were genuinely designed and carried out by young people.

“When we feel that our voice matters, we also feel responsible for making things better.”



Clear Structure Combined with Space

Young people expressed a strong need for structure – such as timelines, intermediate deadlines and clear roles – as long as this was combined with space for initiative.

“The deadlines helped us to stay committed and take the work seriously.”

A Safe, Open and Equal Group Atmosphere

A safe atmosphere within the panels was repeatedly emphasised. Regular (online and physical) meetings, attention to group bonding and clear agreements made it possible to discuss sensitive topics such as exclusion and discrimination.

“Everyone could share their story without being judged.”

Combination of Face-to-Face and Online Meetings

According to the youth panels, a hybrid approach worked best. Face-to-face meetings were essential for building trust, group cohesion and open dialogue, while online meetings proved practical for coordination and international collaboration. The combination ensured both connection and continuity.

“Meeting in person really helped us connect, while online meetings were useful to stay in touch and keep things going.”

Diversity as an Added Value

Diverse panel compositions were explicitly mentioned as a strength. Differences in background, gender, age and place of residence led to broader perspectives and more inclusive solutions.

“Because we all came from different backgrounds, our ideas were stronger.”

Recognition and Appreciation by the Organisation

Formal introductions to staff and management, visibility of results and serious consideration of youth presentations strengthened feelings of recognition and pride, contributing to long-term motivation.

9.2. Pitfalls and Attention Points from Youth Feedback

Alongside success factors, youth panels also identified risks and challenges that provide important lessons for future projects.

Symbolic Participation (Tokenism)

When young people felt their role was mainly symbolic, their engagement quickly declined.

“It feels like you are there just because it looks good.”

Lack of Feedback

The absence of feedback after meetings or proposals was repeatedly mentioned as demotivating.

“If nothing happens after a meeting, you start wondering why you are there.”

Overload and Time Pressure

Combining panel work with school, studies and work was sometimes demanding, especially when expectations were unrealistic, tasks too extensive, or distances difficult to bridge.

Dependence on a Single Coordinator

In some contexts, youth participation proved vulnerable when it relied heavily on one enthusiastic facilitator.

An Overly Project-Based Approach

When youth participation took place only within the project timeframe and was not embedded in regular structures or policies, its impact remained limited.

9.3 Overarching Lessons

The feedback from the SPIN Youth panels shows that effective youth participation requires more than good intentions. Essential elements include:

- real influence and transparency;
- clear frameworks combined with space;
- safe and inclusive environments;
- and structural embedding within organisations.

These lessons form an important foundation for the recommendations in this handbook and are highly transferable to other sport organisations and Erasmus+ projects.



10. Conclusion

The experiences from SPIN Youth demonstrate that youth participation works when young people are taken seriously and given real space. It strengthens inclusion, ownership and innovation within sport organisations.

As one young person succinctly stated:

“It’s not just about sport, but about being heard and building something together.”

This handbook provides direction and practical tools, but the key lies in attitude: trust, equality and learning together.

Sustainable youth participation is built on:

1. a safe and accessible environment;
2. trust and mutual respect;
3. clear roles and expectations;
4. guidance and coaching;
5. space for feedback and personal growth;
6. structural embedding in policy.



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