



## Empowering Youth Leaders for Democratic and Inclusive Engagement: The ENGAGE Project's Online and International Training Courses

Lucia Cintia Colibaba<sup>1</sup>, Irina Gheorghiu<sup>2</sup>, Lucretia Pascariu<sup>3</sup>,  
Emil Juverdeanu<sup>4</sup>, Claudia Dinu<sup>5</sup>, Stefan Colibaba<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Life Sciences Iasi, Romania

<sup>2</sup>Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany

<sup>3</sup>EuroEd Highschool Iasi, Romania

<sup>4</sup>EuroEd Highschool Iasi, Romania

<sup>5</sup>Grigore T Popa University Iasi, Romania

<sup>6</sup>EuroEd Foundation Iasi, Romania

### Abstract

*This article is a study based on the ENGAGE Youth project (Empowering Next Generation Advocates for Global Education), financed by the European Commission, Ref. no.: 2024-1-RO01-KA220-YOU-000250540. A group of youth and educational institutions from France, Czechia, Germany, and Romania are implementing the project. All of these organizations have rich experience with projects in Europe, youth development, human rights, and inclusion. The ENGAGE Youth project fills a need by providing an online course and training programmes for youth leaders (YLS) at both national and international levels. These programs focus on EU values, cultural diversity, inclusion, social justice, and civic participation. The project aims to equip youth leaders with the knowledge, skills, tools, and methods they need to include everyone and teach young people about democracy and European values. The article presents the courses developed within the project. The online course examines important topics such as EU values, intercultural dialogue, inclusion, social justice, leadership, digital citizenship, project management, impact assessment, motivation, and interconnection. The face-to-face international training session builds on the online course and further focuses on experiential learning, active participation, and co-creation. It aims to assess and refine the online course material, improving participants' skills in project design, impact evaluation, and youth engagement, with a strong focus on translating knowledge into tangible community actions. The article outlines the primary ideas derived from the findings of the international training course for youth leaders.*

**Keywords:** youth development, youth leaders, human rights, inclusion, international training, online course

### Context

The 73 million young people in Europe who are between the ages of 13 and 30 make up a significant part of the Europe's population and can influence its future [1]. However, 24.1% are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with the Czech Republic having the lowest rate at 9.9% in 2024 (Eurostat) and Romania having the worst at 29.5% [1]. Additionally, studies show that younger generations lack a sense of belonging to the European Union since they typically tend to be less informed, active, and interested in democratic processes [2, 3, 4, 5]. Such views might seriously undermine democracy, particularly in light of the enormous challenges Europe is facing from the rise of alternative radical forms of participation and growing anti-democratic tendencies. Research shows that experiences of inclusion and exclusion are associated with civic engagement [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. Therefore, in order to prevent disengagement from the European project, we must continuously supply knowledge and useful settings in an inclusive and significant way. Promoting democratic principles and understanding, as well as including young people in democratic processes and decision-making, are important EU priorities. Information, authority and voice, power sharing, openness, accountability, and both material and non-material assistance are necessary for meaningful inclusive young civic engagement, underscoring the necessity of customized engagement tactics.

### The ENGAGE Youth Project: Aims, Partnership, Target Groups and Results



The European ENGAGE Youth project (2024-1-RO01-KA220-YOU-000250540) aims at filling the gaps in today's youth development. It allows youth leaders (YL) to empower youth with real tools and inspiring activities that are based on European ideals, democratic processes, social justice and inclusiveness. It seeks to promote awareness of diversity and inclusion across Europe, by providing all youth, especially those at risk and those with impairments, equal access to opportunities. The overall impact of the project is positive societal change and the tackling of pressing social challenges [12].

The partnership is made up of NGOs with rich and fruitful experience in European projects, youth development, human rights and inclusion from France, Czech Republic, Germany and Romania.

The target group of the project is young people directly related to youth (youth leaders, youth workers and educators), those who can further disseminate the information (multipliers/facilitators), young people interested in the issues of the project and young people with fewer opportunities.

What sets the ENGAGE Youth project apart is its comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach, with research as the core pillar that drives all activities. This research influences the formation of knowledge and skills, the development of resources and the co-creation processes in international sessions. It also informs the development of useful exercises, discussions, feedback and awareness initiatives. Thanks to the wide and inclusive approach of the project, including theoretical, practical and digital tools, its results are impactful and transferably successful: the code of ethics, self-assessment tool, online course and international training session.

### **The Online Course**

The online course responds to youth leaders' needs related to youth development as they were identified by a questionnaire conducted on an impressive number of participants. The insights revealed that the course should be structured as a flexible, blended programme that combines theoretical knowledge with practical exercises, case studies, and mentorship opportunities. The online course has 10 modules and 20 practical activities designed to actively engage youth in inclusive and democratic participation. The modules focus on topics identified as priorities by the research findings, including Europe and young people, social justice and equity, cultural identity, civics and leadership, project management, digital citizenship, diversity and inclusion, motivation strategies, gender, social, economic, and health, and impact evaluation. The platform is flexible and accessible, enabling youth leaders to continue their learning and professional growth at their own pace thanks to the platform, which also allows updates about best practices, concerns, and innovations in youth leadership, advocacy, and civic involvement. The online course includes multimedia content (videos, podcasts, images, etc.), quizzes or interactive exercises accommodating diverse learning styles, needs, and preferences. Moreover, its engaging and dynamic content can enhance youth leaders' motivation to have a significant impact on their communities and beyond.

### **Description of the International Training Session and its Future Developments**

Building on the online course, the face-to-face international training session followed a non-formal education approach and further focused on experiential learning, active participation, and co-creation of knowledge. It aimed to assess and refine the online course material, improving participants' skills in project design, impact evaluation, and youth engagement, with a strong focus on translating knowledge into tangible community actions. The training programme for youth leaders (YLS) was designed as a practical, participatory and learning experience within the ENGAGE Youth project. The training promoted exchange of experiences and good practices among youth workers and engaged young people; it tested and experimented inclusive methods developed within the Engage Youth project to foster young people's civic engagement; it built and strengthened a European network of individuals and organisations working in youth work, non-formal education and active citizenship. The international training session focused on youth civic engagement and the inclusion of all young people, and took place in Opavský Mlýn, Czech Republic, from 26 to 29 March 2026.

The target group consisted of youth work professionals and volunteers (youth workers, educators, teachers, association staff and volunteers) and young people engaged in associations, civic initiatives or civic service programmes; young activists and civil society actors interested in participation and inclusion issues. The training involved 25 participants sent from the partner organisations across Europe: Romania, Germany, Czech Republic and France.

It was developed in response to the needs of youth leaders and young people identified through an empirical questionnaire, which gave the programme a strong evidence-based foundation. Its main aim



was to present the project to YLs and to test a selection of inclusive methods developed to foster young people's civic engagement, participation and active citizenship.

The ENGAGE Youth international session brought together YLs from project countries with different backgrounds, experience, and culture, to share best practices, tools and resources, thus enriching their experience, cultural awareness and understanding, promoting inclusion, tolerance, solidarity. Through interactive sessions, with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds and by examining various perspectives YLs learned to foster inclusive spaces, embrace diversity, and prevent and combat discrimination.

Participants gained invaluable insights into the ENGAGE methods that they could use effectively or adapt to their own contexts and how to apply these methods with their youths to increase inclusion, civic engagement and bring about positive social change (Table 1). What makes these methods useful is their inclusive, participatory nature and their ease of adaptation to different contexts. They assist YLs to create learning spaces through dialogue, cooperation, creativity and reflection, beyond traditional teaching. According to the youth leaders who attended the training sessions, these methods encouraged them to work as a team, be creative, listen actively, be aware of inclusion and diversity, plan projects, exchange experiences and prepare for action with young people.

The methods together can cultivate practical facilitation skills and a deeper ethical awareness. They help young people to learn about European values, to identify inequality, to communicate respectfully, to reflect on their experiences, to analyse community problems and to become more active citizens. This is why they are of particular importance in multicultural youth work where participation, inclusion and mutual understanding are essential.

**Table 1**

Method	Short description	Main objectives	Why it helps youth leaders
<b>EU in Action – Design Your Own EU Nation!</b>	This is a creative group activity where YLs explore European values, EU institutions and democratic processes by imagining and designing their "EU country." To explain complex concepts in an accessible way the method can include videos or visual materials.	To raise awareness of European values, active citizenship, democracy, participation and cooperation; to encourage creativity and teamwork.	It assists YLs in providing interesting and useful explanations of complex European subjects. The approach enables young people to learn through creativity, dialogue, and teamwork rather than merely presenting the EU through theory.
<b>Art of Active Listening</b>	A communication-based activity focused on respectful dialogue, listening, and empathy. It can be used to help participants discuss sensitive topics in a constructive and non-violent way.	To develop active listening, empathy, respectful communication, respect for different opinions and intercultural dialogue.	It provides youth leaders with a useful tool for facilitating group discussions, particularly when young people have diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, or viewpoints. It encourages safer communication and lowers the risk of misunderstanding or conflict.
<b>Understanding Equal Opportunities – A Sweet Life For Everyone</b>	A role-play activity that places participants in diverse, two sided-coin positions. It helps them experience and reflect on exclusion, inequality, and access to opportunities.	To increase awareness of discrimination, inclusion, diversity and equal opportunities.	It helps youth leaders make abstract issues such as inequality or exclusion more concrete. As the activity can stir strong emotions, it also trains youth leaders how to manage sensitive topics carefully and responsibly.
<b>Dixit Cards</b>	A reflective method using image cards to help participants express feelings, impressions and learning outcomes. It is especially useful when participants may find it difficult to speak directly.	To support reflection, feedback, introspection and emotional expression.	It helps YLs create a safe and creative space for participation. The cards encourage young people to express thoughts, feelings indirectly, which can be



			useful in multicultural or multilingual context.
<b>Problem Tree – Solution Tree</b>	A structured group method where participants identify a community problem, explore its causes and effects, and then turn these into plausible solutions and actions.	To develop critical thinking, teamwork, project planning and community action.	It helps YLs guide young people from identifying a problem to figuring out realistic solutions. It is applicable, accessible and useful even for groups with no prior experience in project planning.
<b>Waterdrop Interview</b>	A reflective and evaluative method encouraging participants to share experiences and learning gains and to realise the value of their actions.	To support evaluation and recognition of learning impact.	It offers excellent opportunity for YLs to gather feedback and encourages young people to realise how important their participation can be.

### Further Developments

Participants' international experience will be further enriched through, first of all, national cascade experiences and, then, interactive, "into-action" sessions with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the first stage, YL will pilot the project proposed methods to verify their usability and impact. This stage will enhance YLs knowledge of the methods they can use, their abilities to apply them to their context and their leadership skills. This will boost their confidence in building trust and mobilizing community to tackle challenges and create social cohesion. The interactive, "into-action" sessions will encourage the exchange of ideas, best practices, and experiences among YLs and youths, internationally and nationally. This will ensure the practical and applicable part of the project. The international "into-action" sessions will also provide opportunities to establish partnerships with peers and organizations from Europe focused on promoting youth engagement and civic participation. Ultimately, the international action sessions may contribute to YLs engaging in their society and becoming successful agents of change, and in their turn enabling young people to become knowledgeable, alert, and involved citizens in society.

### Evaluation of the Training Programme

The international training session took place in Oparnensky Mlyn, an old mill, which has roots back to the 16th century. The aim was to bring together YLs from project countries with different backgrounds, experience, and culture. The programme followed the same topics as the online course. The training session unfolded in an engaging and dynamic atmosphere stimulating communication, collaboration and creativity. Participants learned not only from trainers but also from each other by sharing positive experiences and valuable lessons. Examining the evaluation methods can exemplify how creative and inspiring the training session was.

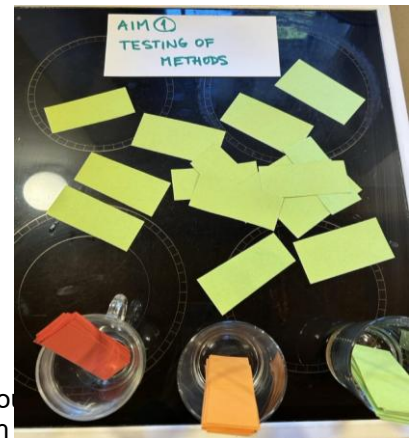
The first evaluation format was a formal evaluation, where the participants filled in a questionnaire (See Findings and Discussion). The second method (Figure 1) was a voting method: the participants had to vote with colored cards whether the aims for the ENGAGE international training session were achieved (green=yes, orange=maybe, red=no).

Fig. 1

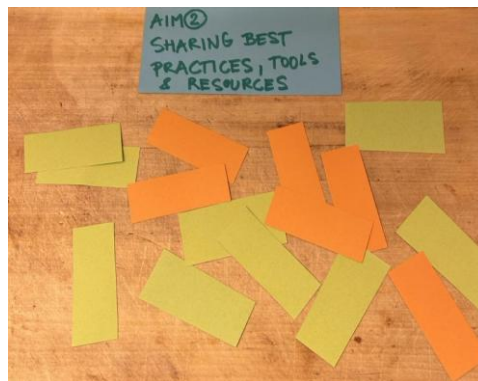


The “Sharing best practices, tools and 2) followed the same strategy. The participants thought that this aim was

resources high achieved.

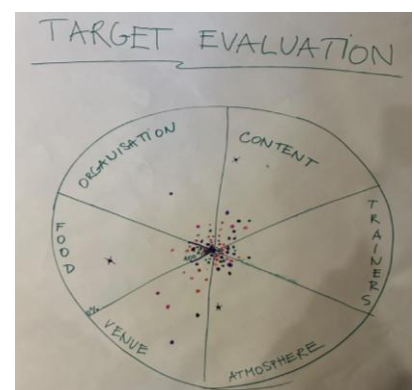


**Fig. 2**



The “target evaluation“ method (Figure 3) allowed multiple categories to be evaluated anonymously. The participants had to make a dot with a pen for each criterion (organisation, content, trainers, atmosphere, venue, and food); the closer the dot was to the centre, the more satisfied they were with the category. The dots in the content appeared to be positioned slightly in the middle. The majority of the participants seemed to be pleased with the different categories. However, there were some issues, such as one participant being dissatisfied with the organisation and the venue was not being suitable for five participants.

**Fig. 3**



The “Head-heart-hand“ method (Figure 4) was a multifaceted method that asked participants to consider their experience through three lenses: head - what they learned, heart - what touched them



or stirred their interest and finally hand - what they would do differently and what their suggestions were.

Fig. 4



The course generally enjoyed appreciative feedback from participants. Participants showed their interest in learning new strategies and tactics for working with young people, such as innovative and creative approaches and techniques such as problem/solution trees, as well as strategies that are captivating and enjoyable for larger groups. They also emphasized that the course met their expectations related to their need for understanding diversity, developing active listening skills, and learning from other participants' professional experiences. Additionally, several youth leaders stated they improved their English language proficiency and communication strategies to use when working with young people.

The participants expressed their interest in the participatory activities, such as open-space conversations, games, and energizers, which they will definitely use to increase youth's engagement. The stories, experiences, openness and obvious enthusiasm they all shared touched everybody. The general positivity, the variety of perspectives on youth work, and the chance to network and gain knowledge from peers throughout the world were all encouraging.

The course was successful because it gave participants fresh perspectives on the work with young people and created an inspiring environment of excitement and sharing. The practical exercises and the vibrant idea sharing were the most valued features. Participants would welcome more in-depth training sessions in the future and are excited to put what they have learnt into practice. Overall, they liked the location and the venue. Their main points of criticism were that the seminar room was a bit small, that it had to be rearranged between sessions and meals, and that an additional space for sessions or informal time would have been beneficial.

To sum up, the participants learnt some new methods, were positively impacted by each other's motivation, optimism and ideas and wanted to adapt the methods to their target groups or take some advice and good practices to improve their youthwork. The participants were very happy about the contents of the training and the fact that they met other inspiring people. The flexibility of the programme and the organisers was really appreciated, and the nature close-by was a good occasion to explore other faces of the Czech Republic.

### Findings and Discussion: Main Characteristics and Innovative Features

As most of the participants emphasised, one of the main characteristics of the programme is its strong non-formal education approach. The course combines ice-breakers, energisers, teamwork activities, role play, reflection tools, co-creation sessions and open-space discussions. Activities such as Power Tower and the Banana Song helped create group energy, trust and interaction, while methods such as EU in Action - Design Your Own EU Nation!, Art of Active Listening, A Sweet Life for Everyone, Problem Tree - Solution Tree, and Waterdrop Interview supported deeper learning around European values, cultural identity, inclusion, project planning and impact evaluation.

The multicultural dimension of the training was also one of its key strengths. The session brought together 25 participants coming from diverse backgrounds, from partner organisations across Europe. This diversity created a rich learning environment in which participants could exchange experiences, compare youth work realities in different countries, and reflect on inclusion, diversity and active citizenship from multiple perspectives. The European character of the programme was reinforced through its focus on EU values, EU institutions, civic engagement and cooperation among organisations working in youth work, non-formal education and active citizenship.



A key innovative feature of the programme is that it does not only present theoretical content, but invites participants to test, adapt and evaluate practical methods that can later be used with young people. For example, participants were encouraged to choose which methods would be most suitable for their own groups and to reflect on why. The co-creation session, “From Learning to Action,” also supported participants in developing national plans to put the methods into practice with young people. This makes the course action-oriented and directly transferable to youth work settings.

The training also placed strong emphasis on co-creation and peer learning. Participants were not only asked to take part in activities, but also to reflect on how these methods could be used with their own groups. The session “Choosing the Method for My Group” encouraged participants to assess the relevance and adaptability of different tools for their local contexts. The “From Learning to Action” co-creation session further supported participants in developing plans in national groups for organising follow-up activities with young people. This approach transformed the training into a collaborative space where knowledge was jointly produced through exchange, experimentation and shared reflection.

The international training session was strongly participatory in both design and delivery. Rather than positioning participants as passive recipients of information, the programme invited them to test, adapt, discuss and evaluate the methods developed within the ENGAGE Youth project. Activities such as Power Tower, EU in Action - Design Your Own EU Nation!, Art of Active Listening, Problem Tree – Solution Tree, and the Waterdrop Interview encouraged active involvement, teamwork, reflection and group problem-solving. This participatory structure allowed youth leaders and engaged young people to learn through experience, dialogue and practice, which is central to non-formal education.

The way the training session integrates European values and institutions with active listening, cultural identity, disability inclusion, equal opportunities, community action and impact evaluation is another innovative element. The participants appreciated the use of videos to define and clarify complex EU-related concepts as well as the creative tasks such as designing an EU country, which encouraged teamwork, imagination and active engagement.

Additionally, the programme also demonstrated the role of reflection and emotions in learning. Tools such as Dixit cards encouraged introspection and feedback, helping participants express their impressions and make sense of their learning experience. Role-play activities, especially those dealing with privilege and disadvantage, helped participants better understand exclusion, diversity and social inequalities, although the programme also recognises that such methods need careful facilitation because they can produce frustration or strong emotions.

As discussions revealed, participants attending such a course can gain several important benefits. They can strengthen their facilitation skills, improve their understanding of inclusion and diversity, learn new non-formal education methods, and become better prepared to support young people’s civic engagement. They can also develop stronger communication, teamwork, project planning and evaluation competences. At the same time, they benefit from international networking, peer learning and the opportunity to exchange project ideas and good practices with other youth leaders and organisations.

Practical transferability was another important characteristic. The training was designed not only to develop participants’ understanding, but also to equip them with concrete methods that could be applied in their own context. Activities such as Problem Tree - Solution Tree were considered clear, structured and usable even with participants who had limited prior knowledge, because they supported inclusion step by step in the thinking processes. This makes the programme particularly valuable for youth leaders who need adaptable tools for working with diverse groups of young people in different educational, civic and community settings.

Overall, the international training session can be understood as a participatory and multicultural learning space that combined non-formal education, peer exchange, co-creation, and practical experimentation. Its innovative value lies in the way it connected European values with inclusive youth work methods and transformed them into concrete tools for civic engagement. By attending the training, participants gained not only knowledge, but also confidence, methods, networks and practical strategies for supporting young people’s participation in diverse communities.

## **Conclusions**

The international training session was both a pedagogical and practical activity. Thus, the participants in the international training session were able to use the training session as a hands-on learning engaging in various activities on inclusion and active citizenship as well as a training programme. The main value of the international training session was that it combined three different areas of education: non-formal education, multicultural and experiential exchange, and practical application of learning. The



participants did not only gain an academic experience regarding European common value systems and civic engagement, but also gained exposure to experiential learning methods such as teamwork, role playing, reflectivity, peer learning and co-creating and therefore provided them with an opportunity to use that experience to assist them in the real-life application of their practices. Thus, the international training session afforded the participants in this training session an opportunity to cultivate ways to adapt what they learned in the international training session back in their own communities. Another critical issue that the participants of the international training session gained from the training was the development of their competencies in facilitative roles aiming at supporting inclusive and democratic participation of youth. Through the training session, the participants developed tools to assist young people in being able to voice their thoughts and opinions, listening, working together, analysing problems, understanding diversity and taking action in their communities. In its entirety, the programme contributed to Youth Leaders' professional development and enhanced the overall quality of their work. This training programme's innovation does not result only from implementation of new techniques, but also from combining multiple techniques into one coherent learning pathway that includes: European Values, Inclusion, Cultural Identity, Disability Awareness, Project Management, Impact Measurement, and Community Action. It provides participants with opportunities to co-create knowledge with others in addition to actively engaging in the learning process.

There are some limitations with the programme, such as requiring longer time periods for certain reflective activities and careful management needed for activities using techniques such as Open Space and Role Play so that all participants could understand the process and feel comfortable. Despite these limitations, the programme represents a strong model for training youth leaders generally, as it develops competencies in professional practice, encourages democratic participation and supports development of inclusive environments for Youth Work throughout Europe.

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