

Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative



Team Europe Democracy (TED)

Youth and Women as Political Drivers
Webinar - 5th of May 2026 (11:00 - 12:35 CET)

Outcome Report

Executive Summary

The Team Europe Democracy (TED) webinar on “Youth and Women as Political Drivers” brought together practitioners, civil society organisations (CSO), political foundations, parliamentary actors, grassroots leaders and representatives from the EU and member states to share experiences on how women and young people can move from symbolic participation towards political influence. Through all interventions, panellists emphasised that **democratic participation alone is insufficient unless it translates into agenda-setting power, institutional influence, leadership opportunities and sustained representation within political systems.**

Several speakers warned that participation mechanisms which remain consultative, disconnected from decision-making structures or limited to symbolic inclusion risk deepening frustration and distrust in democratic institutions, particularly among younger generations already disengaging from formal political processes.

A central message emerging from the discussion was that **youth and women must no longer be approached merely as beneficiaries of democracy support programmes or as consultation targets**, but rather as political actors capable of shaping democratic institutions and public policy. Speakers repeatedly stressed that **participation must be accompanied by structural transformation**. While many countries have made progress in increasing participation and representation, **deep-rooted barriers continue to limit influence**. These barriers include patriarchal norms, exclusionary political party structures, weak institutional openness, online violence against women in politics, shrinking civic space, funding limitations and the growing disconnect between formal political institutions and the ways in which younger generations increasingly choose to engage politically.

The webinar showcased a range of practical experiences from The Gambia, Senegal, Ethiopia, Zambia, Nigeria, Ecuador, Philippines, Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean region, alongside broader reflections from global democracy support programmes. **Collectively, these examples demonstrated that political participation requires a combination of individual empowerment through leadership training and political education, institutional reform within political parties and governance structures, innovative participation mechanisms, long-term investment, grassroots ownership and strong intersectional approaches recognising the diversity of youth and women.**

Participants also highlighted that younger generations increasingly engage politically through decentralised and issue-based activism, artistic and cultural mobilisation, digital platforms, protest movements and local initiatives. **Traditional democratic pathways are increasingly insufficient to engage many young people.** Several speakers therefore argued that



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democracy support actors, including the **EU and Team Europe partners, must rethink how programmes are designed and implemented.** Concerns were raised that many existing initiatives repeatedly engage already politically connected individuals rather than reaching excluded, frustrated or marginalised youth.

The discussions further emphasised the **importance of peer learning, institutional anchoring of participation mechanisms, flexible and adaptive programming and stronger collaboration between civil society, political parties, local governments and parliaments.** Ultimately, the webinar concluded that strengthening democratic resilience requires sustained investment in inclusive participation, particularly in a global context where democratic norms, civic space, rule of law and human rights are increasingly contested.

Speakers also **situated these challenges within a broader geopolitical environment characterised by shrinking civic space, democratic backsliding and increasing competition between democratic and authoritarian governance models.** In this context, inclusive participation and representative institutions were framed not only as governance objectives, but as central components of democratic resilience.

Narratives of Political Participation and Democratic Inclusion

The [ENoP | European Network of Political Foundations](#) opened the discussion by situating it within a broader global context of democratic resilience, shrinking civic space and increasing pressure on inclusive governance. A central challenge facing democracy support actors was identified: **how to ensure that women and youth are recognised not as symbolic or “ornamental” participants, but as political actors with substantive influence over political agendas, decision-making processes and institutional transformation.** ENoP underscored that strengthening inclusive participation requires moving beyond numerical representation towards a deeper understanding of **how political power is accessed, exercised and sustained** across formal institutions and evolving civic and political spaces.

Building on this framing, the [Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation](#), situated the discussion within wider debates on democratic governance, human rights, gender equality and rule of law. Belgium stressed that despite increasing levels of civic and political engagement, women and young people remain significantly underrepresented in positions of political leadership and decision-making. **This gap reflects not only persistent structural inequalities but also the reproduction of exclusionary dynamics within political parties, parliaments and wider institutional architectures, which continue to limit access to leadership pathways, particularly for younger generations and women.**

It was further highlighted that **younger generations are increasingly engaging politically outside traditional institutional frameworks.** Creative expression, digital mobilisation, cultural activism and community-based initiatives were identified as increasingly prominent pathways for political participation. **Rather than being treated as peripheral or secondary forms of engagement, these modalities were framed as legitimate democratic spaces** that require greater recognition and engagement from democracy support actors, particularly as they often constitute the **primary entry points into political life for younger cohorts.**

A key analytical point raised by Belgium concerned the persistent gap between participation and influence. The central challenge was therefore defined not as participation itself, but as **understanding how civic and political engagement translates into political power, agenda-setting capacity and sustained institutional influence.** Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of **looking at institutional cultures and leadership trajectories,**



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which continue to shape who is able to enter, remain in and progress within political systems. In this regard, women and youth were explicitly framed not as beneficiaries of support programmes, but as political actors, decision-makers and drivers of institutional change.

DG INTPA further reinforced these reflections by stressing the need to **move away from homogenised approaches** to women and youth in democracy support programming. Drawing on the [Women and Youth Democratic Engagement \(WYDE\)](#) programme experience, it was highlighted that effective and accountable democracies require a consistent **intersectional lens**, with deliberate attention to who is being reached and who remains excluded. Many initiatives continue to primarily engage already politically connected individuals, while marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, rural youth and economically disadvantaged communities, remain underrepresented. This was linked to the importance of better **understanding differentiated barriers to participation, including structural discrimination and intersecting inequalities**.

The growing challenge of **violence against women in politics** was also underscored, with particular attention to **technology-facilitated harassment and online abuse**. This was identified as a significant and increasingly pervasive barrier limiting women's participation, leadership and visibility, **especially among younger women operating in digital and hybrid political spaces**.

Across the framing, speakers consistently emphasised that strengthening inclusive political participation requires a dual approach combining individual empowerment with institutional transformation. **Experiences from WYDE showed that while leadership academies, civic education and capacity-building initiatives are essential for strengthening agency and skills, they cannot be effective in isolation if political systems themselves remain structurally exclusionary**. Progress therefore depends on simultaneous efforts to reform institutional frameworks, including political parties, parliaments and governance systems, in order to create enabling environments for sustained and equitable political participation.

From Structured Youth Representation to Artistic Activism and Local Political Leadership

Together, the interventions of **Abdoulie O. Bah** (The Gambia) and **Marie Hélène Ndiaye** (Senegal) provided complementary perspectives on how youth and women navigate, reshape and expand political space in contexts where formal democratic inclusion mechanisms remain insufficient to guarantee influence. Abdoulie O. Bah, Youth Governance and Policy Advocate, Clerk and Head of Administration of the National Youth Parliament and Chairperson of the EU Youth Advisory Committee, is a partner of [ALDA | European Association for Local Democracy](#). Marie Hélène Ndiaye, advocate for youth and women's political participation and founder of [Ubuntu Edutainment](#), is a partner of [HBS | Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung](#).

From **The Gambia**, **Abdoulie O. Bah** offered a detailed reflection on the institutionalisation of youth participation through the National Youth Parliament and related governance structures. His intervention underscored a core shift in approach: **moving from symbolic inclusion towards structured, representative and constitutionally anchored participation mechanisms**.

Drawing from experience within both national and international youth engagement structures, it was argued that while youth participation is increasingly recognised within democratic governance frameworks, the transition from participation to actual political influence remains a central challenge. In many contexts, youth engagement continues to risk becoming symbolic



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rather than transformative, particularly where **institutional linkages to formal decision-making processes remain weak or inconsistent**.

The National Youth Parliament was presented not merely as a consultative platform, but as a **youth-led institutional model designed to mirror formal parliamentary structures**, with elected constituency-based representation across all regions. This design was intentionally aimed at strengthening both **legitimacy and accountability**, ensuring that youth representatives are **directly mandated by their peers rather than selected through limited or closed processes**. This was framed as essential for **avoiding elite capture** and strengthening the political legitimacy of youth participation mechanisms.

A key innovation highlighted was the introduction of **reserved seats for women and for young persons with disabilities**, recognising that formal youth representation alone does not automatically guarantee inclusivity. These provisions were framed as **necessary corrective measures to address entrenched structural inequalities and cultural barriers** that continue to limit access to leadership for specific groups. **The institutional architecture therefore combined electoral legitimacy with affirmative inclusion mechanisms, reflecting a deliberate effort to embed intersectionality within youth governance systems.**

Beyond representation, Abdoulie O. Bah emphasised the importance of linking participation to capacity development and accountability. The establishment of a **National Youth Leadership Academy** was presented as a strategic response to persistent gaps in preparedness for political leadership, aiming to **equip young people with the skills required to effectively engage in electoral politics, local governance and parliamentary work**. In parallel, initiatives focused on **local government accountability and access to information** illustrated a shift towards decentralised governance engagement, **recognising municipalities and local councils as critical entry points for democratic participation.**

He also highlighted the **role of external partnerships, including youth collaboration with European actors**, in supporting programme implementation, while maintaining youth ownership of processes. Reflecting on his role within the **EU Youth Advisory Committee**, Abdoulie O. Bah further emphasised that structured engagement platforms supported by development partners can play an important role in amplifying youth voices, but only when they **move beyond one-off consultation exercises towards sustained dialogue and co-creation**. In this regard, he stressed that youth participation should not be approached as event-based engagement, but rather **as a continuous process** supported by **clear feedback mechanisms** demonstrating how youth contributions shape policy and programming outcomes.

Importantly, Abdoulie O. Bah stressed the increasing need to ensure that democracy support programming **reaches beyond already politically engaged youth, extending into rural and geographically marginalised communities**. He also highlighted the persistent structural barriers limiting youth political participation, including **restricted access to leadership pathways, exclusionary political party structures and the underrepresentation of rural and marginalised youth** within formal governance spaces. Addressing these barriers, he argued, requires **deliberate institutional reforms** capable of strengthening internal democratic practices and creating enabling environments for youth and women's leadership.

His account ultimately positioned youth participation not as a static achievement centred on access alone, but as an evolving institutional ecosystem requiring continuous reform, legitimacy-building and stronger integration with formal political structures. The central



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question, he argued, is **no longer whether young people are present within governance spaces, but whether their presence is capable of shaping political decisions, institutional priorities and democratic outcomes.**

From **Senegal, Marie Hélène Ndiaye** provided a complementary but distinct perspective, grounded in artistic activism, grassroots mobilisation and experiential political engagement. Her trajectory illustrated **how political agency can emerge outside formal institutional entry points, beginning with community-based initiatives** aimed at addressing exclusion, poverty and lack of opportunity at local level. Through the creation of youth-led spaces such as English clubs and cultural initiatives, she demonstrated how education, language acquisition and artistic expression can function as entry points for civic empowerment and collective mobilisation.

A central analytical thread in her intervention was the role of art as a political instrument. Theatre, poetry, music and storytelling were **not presented as peripheral cultural activities or “soft” dimensions of democratic participation, but as deliberate methodologies and infrastructure** for political awareness-raising, narrative change and collective mobilisation. This approach, conceptualised as artistic activism, **enabled the transformation of community experiences into collective political consciousness**, particularly among young people who were otherwise disconnected from formal political processes.

Her narrative also introduced a powerful **“zero to hero/heroine”** framing as a lived political trajectory rather than a formal slogan, used to describe the progression from marginalised youth contexts to positions of civic and political leadership. This was illustrated through her transition from community organiser to municipal councillor, highlighting both the **permeability between civic and political spheres** and the enabling role of sustained local engagement. Her experience demonstrated the capacity of young women leaders to shape tangible policy outcomes at municipal level, including the establishment of women’s centres, improvements in educational infrastructure and strengthened attention to gender-responsive local development.

At the same time, her progression to higher political office exposed persistent structural barriers, including gender bias, party gatekeeping and limited acceptance of independent political candidacies. Her decision **to run outside established party structures was framed as a response to exclusionary political dynamics and as an assertion of autonomous political legitimacy.** While this path faced significant institutional and procedural constraints, it further underscored her broader argument that **political participation must be understood beyond formal party systems alone**, particularly in contexts where gatekeeping mechanisms continue to reproduce gendered and generational inequalities.

From her perspective, strengthening inclusive participation therefore requires not only safer and more accessible political environments, but also greater institutional recognition of non-traditional forms of civic and political engagement. This includes stronger support structures for women and youth within political systems, as well as increased investment in cultural, artistic and community-based participation spaces capable of broadening democratic access, shifting political narratives and enabling alternative pathways into leadership.

Across both interventions, several converging messages emerged.

- **First**, participation requires more than access to formal spaces; it demands structured mechanisms that ensure representation, legitimacy and accountability, as well as deliberate inclusion of historically marginalised groups.



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- **Second**, political influence is closely linked to preparatory ecosystems, including leadership training, civic education and capacity-building initiatives that enable sustained engagement in governance systems.
- **Third**, participation increasingly occurs across hybrid spaces that combine institutional, civic, digital, artistic and community-based forms of engagement, requiring democracy support actors to adopt more flexible, context-sensitive and non-linear approaches to democratic participation and political inclusion.

Finally, both speakers underscored that youth and women are not passive beneficiaries of democratic reforms, but active political agents who are already reshaping governance systems from within and from outside formal institutions. Their experiences collectively reaffirmed that the future of democratic participation will depend on the capacity of political systems and external partners alike to recognise, support and institutionalise diverse forms of political agency while ensuring that participation is translated into sustained influence, leadership opportunities and decision-making power.

From Mobilisation to Influence: Reconfiguring Youth and Women's Political Participation Pathways

Building on the testimonies from The Gambia and Senegal, the expert panel provided a comparative and forward-looking reflection on how democratic systems, political intermediaries and support actors can better translate participation into sustained political influence. Across the interventions [ECES | European Centre for Electoral Support](#), [EPD | European Partnership for Democracy](#) and [Demo Finland](#), a shared analytical concern emerged: **while opportunities for participation have expanded, the critical challenge remains how to structurally embed that participation within decision-making systems that are responsive, inclusive and institutionally durable.**

ECES situated its intervention within the broader **tension between mobilisation and institutionalisation**, emphasising that participation without institutional anchoring risks generating frustration rather than influence. Drawing on experience from the [Indian Ocean Regional Youth Parliament \(PRJIO\)](#), implemented through the Governance, Peace and Stability (GPS) Programme of the Indian Ocean Commission with financing from Agence Française de Développement (AFD), ECES presented the initiative as a practical example of structured and institutionalised youth participation formally connected to national parliaments and public decision-making processes across the **Indian Ocean region**. Implemented with technical assistance provided by ECES, as lead partner in consortium with the French Media Development Agency (CFI), the initiative seeks to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive political participation through **regional parliamentary cooperation** and youth representation mechanisms.

Within this framework, youth representatives from **Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius and La Réunion** engage in a structured parliamentary process linked to national assemblies and public institutions. Through plenary sessions hosted across the region, participants deliberate on strategic policy issues, adopt formal resolutions and transmit recommendations to parliamentary and governmental actors at national level. The mechanism was presented as an attempt **to create institutional channels through which youth perspectives can directly contribute to legislative and public policy processes**, thereby strengthening the transition from participation to agenda-setting influence.

At the same time, it was underscored that **institutional design alone is insufficient**. The credibility and effectiveness of such mechanisms **depend on sustained investment in leadership development, advocacy, negotiation and policy engagement capacities**,



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ensuring that **youth representatives are equipped** to operate effectively within complex political environments. ECES further reflected on the **risks of disconnect between institutional platforms and grassroots realities**, noting that legitimacy gaps can emerge when structured participation mechanisms are perceived as detached from the lived experiences and immediate concerns of young people. This tension is compounded by the **diversity of youth experiences** and the need to continuously bridge institutional spaces with emerging forms of mobilisation and civic expression.

Particular attention was given to recent youth mobilisation dynamics in Madagascar, including the **Gen Z movement**, which demonstrated both the **political weight and mobilisation capacity of younger generations, but also the limitations of political mobilisation when it remains insufficiently structured, prepared or institutionally anchored to influence political reform and transition** processes over time. While such movements can rapidly shape political discourse and generate immediate political consequences, their **long-term influence often remains fragile** in the absence of sustainable institutional channels through which demands can be translated into policy and governance reform.

This reinforced the central argument advanced by ECES that the key challenge for democracy support is not simply to increase participation, but to **support structured participation ecosystems** that enable young people to move from mobilisation to influence and from symbolic engagement to political leadership and agenda-setting power. From a policy perspective, the importance of long-term investment by development partners was emphasised both in institutional participation mechanisms and in individual leadership development, recognising that sustainable democratic participation depends on the **interplay between institutional entry points and human capital development**.

EPD expanded the discussion by focusing on the evolving nature of youth political engagement and the growing structural mismatch between contemporary participation patterns and traditional democratic institutions. It was emphasised that **youth participation is not declining, but rather evolving towards more decentralised, issue-based, non-hierarchical and digitally mediated forms of engagement**. These emerging modes of participation differ fundamentally from the organisational logic of traditional democratic mechanisms such as elections, political parties, referendums and formal consultation processes, which are often perceived by younger generations as infrequent, highly formalised and disconnected from their lived political realities.

Drawing on comparative evidence, EPD highlighted that while young people remain politically active, particularly through protest movements and socio-civic engagement, they remain significantly underrepresented in formal political institutions compared to older generations. This gap reflects a systemic design challenge rather than political apathy. Referring to findings from the [Global Youth Participation Index \(GYPI\)](#), developed within the framework of EPD's youth participation work, it was noted that **younger generations frequently demonstrate higher levels of engagement in informal and protest-based participation than in institutional political processes**. These findings were presented as further evidence of the growing disconnect between traditional democratic participation mechanisms and contemporary patterns of youth political engagement.

In this context, EPD called for a **critical reassessment of democracy support practices**, arguing that many existing interventions remain overly focused on re-engaging youth through traditional democratic pathways alone. **Capacity-building workshops, policy dialogues and leadership trainings often continue to target already politically engaged individuals with backgrounds in civil society, electoral politics or formal governance spaces,**



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thereby reproducing existing participation inequalities rather than reaching politically disengaged or marginalised youth populations.

Reflections emerging from the **Youth Democracy Cohort** and related democracy support initiatives further highlighted the need for stronger attention to **equity, accessibility and differentiated outreach strategies within participation programming**. It was argued that democracy support actors must indeed move beyond homogeneous understandings of youth and better recognise the differentiated barriers shaping political participation across socio-economic, geographic and political divides.

EPD therefore advocated for a more **pluralistic ecosystem of democratic participation**, including deliberative forums, participatory budgeting mechanisms, citizen assemblies, neighbourhood councils and co-creation platforms designed to align more closely with how younger generations currently engage politically. These approaches were framed not as replacements for representative democracy, but as **complementary participation pathways** capable of expanding democratic inclusion and reconnecting institutions with emerging forms of civic engagement.

In this regard, initiatives such as the [Menu of Commitments for Youth Participation](#) and the broader [WYDE Civic Engagement](#) programme were highlighted as examples of efforts to diversify democratic participation mechanisms and support more adaptive and context-responsive democratic ecosystems. Concrete examples were shared from **Ecuador** ([Fundacion Datalat](#)), **Nigeria** ([PROMAD Foundation](#)) and the **Philippines** ([GoodGovPH](#)), where youth-focused co-creation initiatives facilitated direct engagement between young people and public institutions. In Ecuador, 29 youth participants developed policy recommendations on citizen accountability and youth employment that were subsequently taken up by government actors. In Nigeria, 7 youth-led co-creation tables prioritised the inclusion of young people with no prior experience in institutional dialogue processes, while in the Philippines regional co-creation dialogues enabled structured engagement between youth networks (60 young people) and three governmental institutions. These examples were presented as practical illustrations of how democracy support can create more flexible and responsive participation channels capable of reaching broader segments of youth populations.

Demo Finland complemented these reflections by focusing on the role of political parties as key gatekeepers of inclusive democratic participation. As **Finland's** leading expert organisation on international democracy support and a unique cooperative platform bringing together all nine Finnish parliamentary parties, Demo Finland emphasised that strengthening **inclusive multi-party democracy** remains central to democratic resilience in an increasingly polarised and authoritarian global environment.

It was underscored that while innovative participation formats are essential, **political parties continue to function as critical intermediaries between citizens and political decision-making systems**. Strengthening their capacity to include women and underrepresented groups is therefore indispensable for achieving democratic inclusion and equal participation in political life.

Drawing on programming experience from **Sri Lanka** and **Ethiopia**, Demo Finland highlighted concrete examples where **targeted support to women politicians and political party structures** contributed to measurable improvements in representation, leadership capacity and institutional responsiveness. In Sri Lanka, cooperation with the One-Text Initiative (OTI) between 2019 and 2023 focused on **strengthening women's political leadership skills, creating spaces for women within political parties and improving media representation of women leaders**. The initiative supported the establishment of a **multi-party network of**



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women councillors, leadership trainings and the development of intra-party gender equality plans. These efforts contributed to broader institutional and societal shifts, reflected in the 2024 parliamentary elections by record levels of women's representation and increased visibility of women political leaders. Over 600 women politicians were trained through the programme, strengthening long-term leadership pipelines and local governance participation.

In Ethiopia, Demo Finland's cooperation with the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) and the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) focused on strengthening the participation of elected women, women party members and women with disabilities within political and electoral processes. Particular emphasis was placed on **supporting women with disabilities preparing to stand as candidates** in the 2026 elections, as well as **strengthening capacities related to inclusive communication, media engagement and responses to online violence against women in politics.**

The programme was also presented as an example of **how institutional reform and targeted democracy support can reinforce one another.** In parallel to programme implementation, reforms introduced through the revised Electoral Proclamation 2025 lowered barriers for women with disabilities seeking political office by reducing endorsement signature requirements, lowering candidacy fees and strengthening accessibility obligations within electoral processes. These changes were presented as examples of how sustained engagement with political parties, electoral institutions and legal frameworks can contribute to structural improvements in political inclusion.

A key point raised concerned the **dual nature of political parties as both barriers and enablers of inclusion.** While party structures frequently reproduce exclusionary political dynamics, they also remain among the most effective institutional entry points for systemic democratic reform when effectively engaged. Demo Finland therefore stressed the importance of **working simultaneously at the level of party reform, institutional frameworks and leadership cultures, including through gender equality plans and engagement with senior party leadership to encourage male champions for inclusion and representation.**

These reflections were further situated within a broader **geopolitical context** marked by **increasing contestation over democratic norms and governance models.** Reference was made to Demo Finland's report, developed together with the European Democracy Hub, on [China's Development Playbook: A Test for European Democracy Support](#) which highlights how **shrinking international democracy support spaces may create opportunities for authoritarian governance models to expand influence.** In this context, concerns were raised regarding the **strategic instrumentalisation of gender narratives by authoritarian actors,** including selective approaches to gender equality and attacks on women's rights that ultimately undermine democratic governance and inclusive participation.

Across the interventions, the following takeaways emerged.

- **First,** participation must be institutionally anchored if it is to generate sustained political influence and policy impact.
- **Second,** contemporary patterns of youth engagement require democratic systems to diversify participation pathways and adapt to more flexible, hybrid and issue-based forms of political engagement.
- **Third,** political parties and formal institutions remain indispensable democratic actors, but must undergo internal reform to become more inclusive, representative and responsive.
- **Finally,** long-term investment in both institutional mechanisms and individual leadership capacities remain essential to bridge the gap between mobilisation, participation and political power.



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Collectively, the panel reinforced the central analytical thread running through the webinar: **democratic resilience depends not only on expanding opportunities for participation, but on ensuring that participation is systematically converted into agenda-setting power, institutional influence and sustained political agency.**

Strengthening Parliamentary Institutions for Inclusive Democratic Influence

Building on the preceding reflections on youth mobilisation, institutional reform and inclusive political participation, the contribution from [International IDEA](#) through the [INTER PARES | Parliaments in Partnership](#) project (part of WYDE programme) introduced a broader institutional perspective centred on the **role of parliaments as critical yet often underexamined actors** in enabling democratic inclusion. The intervention highlighted that while considerable attention is frequently placed on civic mobilisation, political parties and participation mechanisms, parliaments themselves remain central arenas where political inclusion is ultimately translated into lawmaking, oversight and institutional accountability.

From this perspective, a key analytical thread emerged around the distinction between presence and influence. Across many democratic systems, **women and young people are increasingly visible within political spaces, yet this visibility does not automatically translate into substantive influence** over political agendas, legislative processes or institutional cultures.

The intervention therefore argued that the central challenge for democratic governance is not solely how to increase participation numerically, but how to transform political institutions so that participation results in sustained decision-making power.

Within this framework, the INTER PARES programme was presented as an example of long-term parliamentary strengthening through **peer-to-peer partnerships between European national parliaments and partner parliaments across Africa, Asia, Latin America and wider Europe**. Rather than focusing exclusively on individual leadership development, the approach places particular emphasis on institutional transformation, recognising that **durable democratic inclusion depends on the rules, procedures, cultures and accountability mechanisms embedded within parliamentary systems themselves**.

On youth participation specifically, the intervention stressed the importance of assessing whether existing parliamentary engagement mechanisms genuinely enable influence or merely provide consultative visibility. Questions were raised around the quality of participation, the representativeness of engagement spaces and the extent to which **youth-focused mechanisms are structurally connected to formal parliamentary processes**. In response to these challenges, the programme has supported approaches aimed at integrating young people more directly into parliamentary life through **civic engagement programming, structured dialogue with parliamentarians and parliamentary staff and targeted learning opportunities** that extend beyond already politically engaged youth populations.

Particular attention was given to the [Youth Parliamentary Academy model](#), implemented in partnership with the **National Assembly of Zambia** and subsequently replicated in Benin. Through this model, young participants engage directly with parliamentary institutions, parliamentarians and staff in order to better understand legislative processes while simultaneously contributing perspectives on governance and public policy issues. Importantly, the initiative was presented **not simply as a training exercise for youth**, but as a transformative process for parliaments themselves, **encouraging institutions to critically**



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reassess how they engage citizens and how participatory mechanisms can be made more representative and structurally embedded.

On gender equality, the intervention reinforced several themes already raised throughout the discussion, particularly the limits of focusing exclusively on representation figures. Drawing on findings from the [Beyond Numbers Handbook](#) developed through parliamentary research and comparative analysis, it was noted that **while women in many contexts have moved from being a small minority to a more significant parliamentary presence, this numerical progress has not necessarily been accompanied by equivalent shifts in institutional influence, political culture or informal power structures**. Masculinised political norms, informal gatekeeping practices and institutional cultures continue to constrain women's ability to fully exercise political leadership, even where formal representation has improved.

This analysis led to a broader argument that **democracy support must move beyond an individualised understanding of empowerment** and address the institutional environments within which political participation takes place. Effective inclusion therefore **requires reforms not only to representation mechanisms, but also to parliamentary procedures, oversight functions, lawmaking processes and organisational cultures**. In this regard, the intervention highlighted examples of peer exchange partnerships that generated concrete institutional reforms, including collaboration between **Malaysia** and the **Italian Chamber of Deputies** which contributed to the adoption of a **gender impact assessment methodology for legislation and the implementation of a parliamentary gender self-assessment process**. Similarly, partnerships involving the National Assemblies of **Botswana** and **Zambia**, together with the **French National Assembly** and **Belgian Senate**, illustrated how peer learning can strengthen gender-sensitive parliamentary oversight and institutional reform.

A further important dimension of the intervention concerned the relationship between democratic institutions and civic space. **Rather than treating civil society and formal political institutions as separate or competing spheres, the discussion emphasised the need to understand them as interconnected components** of a broader democratic ecosystem. Sustainable reforms were shown to emerge most effectively **where reform-oriented parliamentarians, parliamentary institutions and civil society organisations are able to build coalitions around shared legislative and policy priorities**. In such configurations, parliaments can use their legislative and oversight powers to institutionalise reforms, while civil society actors contribute evidence, advocacy capacity and direct links to constituency concerns and lived experiences.

The intervention ultimately reinforced a broader conclusion emerging across the panel discussions: **that democratic inclusion cannot rely solely on access, representation or mobilisation in isolation. Instead, durable democratic participation requires interconnected systems that combine civic agency, institutional openness, parliamentary reform and protected civic space**. From this perspective, peer-to-peer parliamentary partnerships were presented not merely as technical cooperation mechanisms, but as instruments for long-term institutional change capable of strengthening accountability, inclusivity and democratic resilience across political systems.

Recalibrating and Lessons for Democracy Support

The Q&A session opened a space for reflection on how democracy support actors can respond to persistent gaps between participation, institutional responsiveness and political influence, as well as how programming approaches can better adapt to rapidly evolving political contexts.



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Two overarching questions framed the discussion:

- one focusing on **how the EU and Team Europe can most effectively support efforts to bridge the gap between youth and women's participation and actual decision-making power,**
- and another from the **Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Guinea-Bissau** questioning *whether traditional democracy support approaches, particularly training-based models for women and youth candidates, remain effective in increasingly restrictive or structurally constrained political environments, noting the example of the Central African Republic where such efforts have not led to increased parliamentary representation and asking what alternative entry points may be required.*

Across responses from **EPD, ECES** and **Demo Finland**, there was broad convergence that the current democracy support architecture is at a turning point, requiring both **methodological innovation and greater institutional flexibility.** While significant investments continue in elections, political parties and capacity-building programmes, speakers cautioned that these interventions often fail to translate into proportional gains in representation or influence for women and youth, particularly where deeper structural constraints within political systems remain unaddressed.

From **EPD's** perspective, emphasis was placed on the need to **diversify democracy support portfolios** beyond traditional institutional entry points such as elections and political parties and to invest more deliberately in innovative and participatory mechanisms aligned with **evolving forms of youth political engagement.** Interventions are often shaped by pressures to demonstrate measurable impact and minimise risk, leading to a systematic focus on already engaged, highly educated or politically connected youth cohorts. This, argued, risks reinforcing existing inequalities in participation rather than expanding democratic inclusion. The implication is **not only technical but also cultural:** democracy support actors may **inadvertently reproduce the very exclusion dynamics they seek to address by prioritising easily quantifiable outcomes over broader overreach into politically marginalised groups.**

At the same time, it was stressed that **such diversification should not come at the expense of core democratic institutions** but rather form part of a more pluralistic and **complementary ecosystem of engagement.**

In more restrictive environments, it was further suggested that effective engagement often requires a **sub-national shift in strategy,** focusing on **local governance levels where entry points for youth participation may be more accessible.** EPD noted that while national-level influence remains limited in such contexts, local government, district-level institutions and community governance structures can offer spaces for political agency and gradual institutional influence. It was further argued that CSOs often possess strong capacities in outreach and political communication but are less equipped in what EPD termed the **“middle layer:” the facilitation of structured interfaces between citizens and institutions.** Strengthening this intermediary function is therefore essential for translating civic energy into sustained institutional influence.

Complementing this, **ECES** highlighted the operational and structural constraints shaping implementation practice, particularly the **pressure of short programming cycles, rigid results frameworks and strong donor accountability requirements.** These dynamics, it was argued, **constrain the space for experimentation, iterative learning and “trial and error” approaches,** even where such flexibility is essential for innovation. Speakers underscored the need for **greater “licence to fail” within democracy support programming,** alongside more sustained and **long-term engagement frameworks** that



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allow interventions to evolve over time. At the same time, ECES emphasised the importance of **anchoring youth participation mechanisms within institutional systems**, moving beyond consultation towards more **structured integration** into decision-making processes, while also **reducing overreliance on external funding** and **strengthening institutional ownership**.

From a broader democracy support perspective, **Demo Finland** underscored the continued centrality of political parties as key democratic gatekeepers. While innovation in participation pathways is essential, parties remain decisive intermediaries for inclusion and therefore must be integrated into any systemic effort to strengthen women and youth participation. This includes **long-term investment in internal party reform, inclusive leadership development and mechanisms that embed participation within formal political structures rather than treating it as an external add-on**. At the same time, **peer-to-peer** learning across institutions and countries was highlighted as a particularly effective modality, given that innovation often emerges not only from established actors but also from parliamentary and institutional contexts within partner countries themselves.

International IDEA further reinforced the importance of flexibility and contextual responsiveness, particularly during moments of political opening or transition. Reference was made to **Nepal**, where recent electoral developments following youth-led (Gen Z) protests have created a rapidly evolving political landscape marked by the emergence of new political actors entering formal governance. This example illustrated the need for democracy support actors to respond rapidly and adapt programming when such windows of opportunity arise, often suddenly and unpredictably. It requires a shift away from standard programming cycles towards more **rapid-response, context-sensitive engagement**. In such moments, **parliamentary and institutional support must be able to accompany transitions in real time, particularly when new political actors and parties emerge from protest movements and civic mobilisation**.

This example reinforced a broader point made across the discussion: **democracy support must become more adaptive and opportunity-driven, capable of engaging not only with stable institutional environments but also with fluid political transitions where youth mobilisation translates into institutional change**.

Across contributions, **a shared structural concern emerged regarding the incentive systems underpinning democracy support**. The emphasis on measurable short-term results was identified as a key driver of risk-averse programming, which in turn contributes to a preference for “low-risk” beneficiaries and familiar interlocutors, rather than broader constituencies of disengaged citizens. **This tension between accountability and political impact was framed as a core challenge requiring recalibration of donor expectations and programming logics**.

In closing, **ENoP** highlighted several **key messages** emerging from the discussion:

- The importance of grounding **youth legitimacy in structured and institutionally anchored mechanisms** such as youth parliaments, electoral processes and representative governance structures, ensuring that participation translates into recognised political authority;
- The value of **investing in youth and women’s leadership capacities** alongside participation opportunities, including through sustained training, mentoring and experiential learning that strengthen long-term political agency, captured by the slogan “**zero to hero/shero**” trajectories of empowerment;
- The need to **move beyond “usual suspect” engagement** towards more inclusive and differentiated outreach strategies that reach politically marginalised, disengaged



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- or excluded youth and women, particularly those outside formal civic or donor-aligned networks;
- The importance of recognising and strengthening **innovative forms of political agency and participation**, including locally rooted initiatives and alternative pathways into politics, which often fall outside traditional programming frameworks;
 - The **centrality of political parties as gatekeepers of inclusion and democratic access, requiring sustained engagement and internal reform** processes to enable more inclusive leadership structures and decision-making cultures;
 - The often under-recognised but essential **role of parliaments** as democratic institutions that both shape and reflect political inclusion and which can serve as critical entry points for structured youth and women's participation;
 - The **need to respond to structural incentives shaping democracy support programming**, including risk-averse, output-driven approaches that prioritise easily measurable results over transformative and inclusive impact;
 - The importance of creating **space for innovation, experimentation and iterative learning, including recognising the value of a "licence to fail"** in order to test new approaches and adapt to evolving political contexts;
 - The **broader geopolitical and normative environment** in which democracy support operates, marked by increasing **global competition over governance models and influence**, reinforcing the need for visible, credible and values-based democratic engagement;
 - Against this backdrop, a shared call emerged for **more adaptive, context-sensitive and value-driven approaches that prioritise the quality and sustainability of impact over numerical outputs** and that are capable of responding to shifting political realities, emerging actors and evolving forms of civic engagement.

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