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PROGRAMME INTERREG ITALY-CROATIA 2021 – 2027

**DEMY-Coop
DEcision-Making Youth for cross-
border Cooperation**

**Output 1.1 Building capacities of public
authorities and stakeholders for
improving legal and administrative
collaboration and governance-related
mechanism in the Programme area**

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DEMY-COOP

Building capacities of public authorities and stakeholders for improving legal and administrative collaboration and governance-related mechanisms in the Programme area

July 2024





Output 1.1 Building capacities of public authorities and stakeholders for improving legal and administrative collaboration and governance-related mechanisms in the Programme area

the Output is edited to report implemented activities

Edited by EuRelations GEIE

Abstract

The objective of this Output is to contribute to the achievement of the specific aims of ISO1 “Better cooperation governance” by investigating cross-border obstacles to a better and more meaningful youth engagement in strategic decision-making. To better address these obstacles, with a view to their reduction and possible solution, the Output builds on the direct involvement of stakeholders and on their enhanced cooperation across borders.



Summary description

The DEMY-Coop project, its activities, deliverables, outputs and results take steps from the experiences of similar stakeholders in the microregional context, and tries to capitalise them in the Programme area. The developed solution thereby bears a high potential to lead to real change in the way local public authorities and stakeholders of the Programme area participate in territorial cooperation processes and in particular to the Adriatic Ionian macroregional strategy.

The solution builds several layers of action:

- Cross-border cooperation among DEMY-Coop partners, enhancing trust and knowledge exchange in a field of action that is related to the partner's priorities and mission;
- Direct involvement of local public authorities as territorial cooperation implementers aimed at the pinpointing relevant obstacles to the implementation of cross-border processes also through the identification administrative, legal or cultural barriers in procedures;
- Implementation of a people-to-people approach, namely directly involving young people, and in particular youth organisations, in finding the solution and identifying identify policy sectors in which their engagement can be most fruitful.

With this Output every governing body can access to a solution for developing effective youth empowerment, activation and engagement in local and macroregional decision-making.

NUTS regions where the Output was developed/implemented

The following NUTS regions have developed and implemented the tools: ITF22 (Campobasso), ITH35 (Venice), ITH36 (Padua), HR034 (Šibensko-kninska županija).



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Expected impact and benefits of the solution for the concerned territories and target groups

The Output was developed based on the deep involvement of stakeholders, which was realized in each implementing country (IT and HR) via mapping activities, identification on best practices, identification of procedures, awareness raising, local meetings, and networking. Each of these activities was supported with a focused methodology to build cooperation with public authorities and young people. On the one hand, it reinforces institutional capacities and skills of local and regional authorities to better cope with any thematic cross-border challenge they might need to face (environment protection, climate change, disaster management, connectivity, social inclusion etc.) and to better seize opportunities to modernize internally, while having a role in the implementation and appropriation of wider strategies such as the EUSAIR. On the other, it focuses on youth activation, empowerment and engagement. Young people are recognized as stakeholders of a new cross-border participatory governance model and youth engagement is highlighted as possible procedure to achieve sustainability of policies and strategies. The focus on youth engagement is particularly interesting if the recent Interreg and macroregional processes are taken into consideration.

In DEMY-Coop participating youth are well informed about the local and macroregional decision-making processes, about Interreg-related opportunities for youth and, at the same time, they are allowed a direct experience of territorial cooperation contexts that helps them gain ownership of policies and strategies, while understanding the political and administrative mechanisms to avoid loss of opportunities and access to resources. In this sense, the DEMY-Coop experience has demonstrated that youth engagement enables the production of useful and applicable solutions that have both a local application and a macroregional scope.

The active involvement of DEMY-Coop target groups in the activities that led to the development of Output 1.1 was largely beneficial to them and led them to acquire knowledge and skills to effectively manage decision-making processes within their respective territories.

- The same holds for the general public, who is exposed to acquiring a lot of new information about bigger political processes, EU opportunities linked to territorial cooperation.



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- A greater awareness of how bigger political processes work is the main benefit for youth and youth organisations involved in the project, for growing their knowledge and ownership of participation opportunities to which otherwise they would have limited access.
- National public authorities in Italy and Croatia, especially relevant ministries in charge of implementing the EUSAIR Strategy (the Italian and Croatian Ministries of Foreign Affairs) as well as Cohesion Policy (Cohesion Policy Department of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers), contributed by providing information about the current priorities of the EUSAIR and the creation of the ESUAIR Youth Council. This information was useful to both participating local and regional authorities and youth, to better understand the embeddedness of EUSAIR with Cohesion Policy and the related opportunities.
- The solution is beneficial to local and regional authorities as it promotes cooperation with the ministerial levels aimed at supporting a better appropriation of EUSAIR priorities, action plan and opportunities at territorial level. Municipalities, especially the smaller ones, benefit from an enhanced understanding their role as local stakeholders of macroregional and territorial cooperation. In particular, four municipalities (Padua and Montegrotto in Italy and Vodice and Murtur in Croatia) were directly involved in the development of the solution and signed agreements with the project partners to further capitalise them.

Expected impact and benefits of the solution for the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme area

The solution can be intended as an important tool for the Italy-Croatia Programme and for facing the territorial challenges that it aims to face. The solution is useful to improve the knowledge base about the legal and administrative cross-border obstacles and to enhance the institutional and strategic capacities of public authorities and stakeholders with reference to the specific, yet crucial topic of youth engagement.

Youth involvement in decision-making processes is a challenge in the EU, primarily because the resources allocated to it are not enough to ensure a continuous and strategic action. Youth are mainly seen as target of policies and their voice remains unheard and underrepresented. They are not fully recognised as community organisers, decision-makers and policy advocates. Yet, youth engagement is strategic to bringing innovative ideas and solutions to issues like brain drain, digitalisation, and sustainable tourism and in enriching the discussions about the future of Cohesion Policy and Interreg programmes beyond 2027.



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Young people are already part of European Territorial Cooperation, based on the recognition that they can help better achieve better and faster social, economic and territorial cohesion. In 2020, the “Manifesto for young people by young people to shape the European cooperation policy” identified five key policy fields important to the future of young people and issued twelve recommendations for better involvement of young people’s concerns in territorial cooperation, notably Interreg programmes and macro-regional strategies. Following the European Year of Youth 2022, Interreg programmes and Macro-Regional Strategies deepened the process of young people’s involvement in cooperation under many initiatives, among which “Youth4Cooperation” is aiming at projecting European youth in imagining their future in the 2028-2034 programming cycle. However, a more strategic approach to youth engagement and simplification of procedures are needed to involve youth organisations more effectively, including mobilising funds, creating synergies with central programmes, and using initiatives already in place. The DEMY-Coop Output 1.1 provides the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programmes with a knowledge basis for better coordinating with macroregional level processes, as well as to taking active part in Cohesion Policy initiatives that are aimed at offering young people meaningful opportunities for engaging, designing and implementing EU investments.

References to relevant deliverables

The Output is connected to the engagement activities implemented in project WP 1 and the related deliverables. In particular, deliverable D.1.4.3 Drafting a Cross-border Participatory Governance Model which offers a participatory process of structures and practices through which young people are actively involved to add value in the decision-making process, implementing strategies and creating policies that directly affect them.

The DEMY-Coop new Participatory Governance model is designed to promote continuous dialogue and consultation among the actors involved, facilitating a mutual understanding of problems and solutions and fostering more informed and shared decisions. It also encourages shared responsibility, as participants feel more invested in the decisions made and are, therefore, more likely to support and contribute to their implementation. Another key aspect of the model is the empowerment of young citizens by strengthening their roles in managing public affairs, increasing their ability to influence decisions, co-create policies and actively participate in community life. By promoting the collaboration between citizens and governments in developing innovative and effective solutions to common problems, it fosters inclusive democracy.



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DEMY-COOP is financed by the European Union through the financial support of the Interreg Italia-Croatia Programme 2021-2027.

1. Preamble

Youth is increasingly high on the EU political agenda at different levels of government. Based on the widely advocated assumption that the active engagement of youth in decision-making processes is especially important for supporting development and foresight efforts of governments, and more generally to reinforce democratic processes, institutions have put in place an increasing number of participation initiatives to ensure that the voices of young people are heard.

The youth of today are growing up in a rapidly changing world, with new challenges and opportunities brought on by technology, climate change, global interconnectedness, and shifting political dynamics. Their unique standpoint comes from being digital natives who are more attuned to global issues, more likely to engage in social movements, and more open to diverse ideas than previous generations.

In times of geopolitical turmoil, youth can offer a unique generational perspective on the many challenges that institutions and humanity have to face. Young people can ignite decision-making with creativity, energy and diverse talents.

Quality youth engagement is hence an opportunity for building decision-makers / young people partnerships to shape a better future for all. But how to ensure that young people are not only present in the political discourse, but are also enabled to contribute to the decision-making in a meaningful way?

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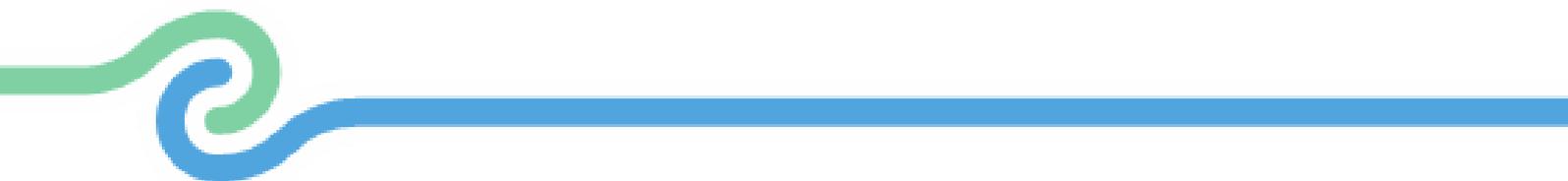
While youth participation in decision-making is often touted as a priority, the actual impact of these efforts remains limited. The structures and mechanisms put in place—whether at the national or international level—often face significant barriers to a true and meaningful involvement of youth.

At the national level, youth parliaments and councils are frequently sidelined, lacking the authority, resources, or political leverage needed to make significant changes. In many cases, their deliberations are non-binding, and the policymakers seem not committed to integrating youth perspectives into policy formulation.

Similarly, at the international level, while there are more opportunities for youth to participate in forums, conferences, and consultations, decision-making processes remain overwhelmingly dominated by established political leaders, diplomats, and experts. The influence of youth delegates often feels tokenistic, and their recommendations are not always integrated into the final policies or agreements.

The territorial cooperation approach devised by the DEMY-Coop project was found to facilitate youth engagement in decision-making processes as it builds multi-level governance and collaboration with stakeholders.

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2. The DEMY-Coop solution

The DEMY-Coop project provided a place-based yet scalable example of how youth engagement in decision-making processes can be supported and boosted, by:

- engaging with institutions to raise awareness of cooperation aimed at highlighting the role of youth and advocating youth cooperation in decision-making processes;
- identifying and easing the legal, administrative and cultural obstacles that hinder youth engagement in decision-making;
- facilitating the partnership between decision-makers and youth organisations.

The territorial and macroregional dimension that was part of the focus of DEMY-Coop helped identify virtuous mechanisms that are already in place as based on cross-border cooperation. But the feeling is that much is still to be done to further the dialogue and mutual learning among public authorities and stakeholders in order to develop sustainable mechanisms that can adapt to the changing policy needs as well as to the very aspirations of young people involved. Also, improving diversity, inclusiveness, resources, transparency, and advocacy are crucial.

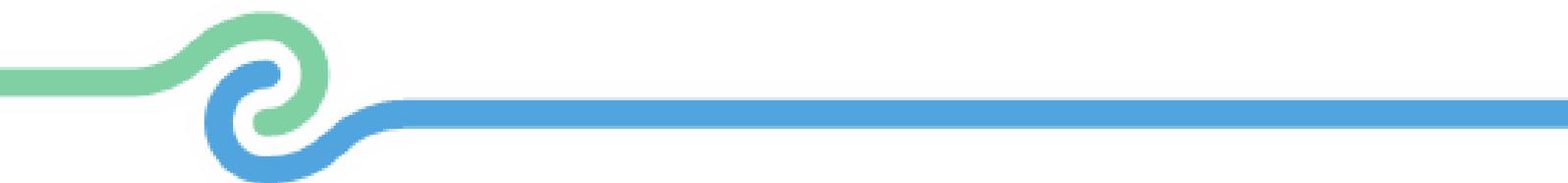
**Solutions are needed to establish
new and improve existing youth
engagement mechanisms in Italy
and Croatia.**

The DEMY-Coop project implemented its activities in Padua area (Veneto, IT), in Molise and in the Sibenik-Knin region. A particular attention was given to territorial cooperation processes related to the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian REgion (EUSAIR).

The goal of the project was to facilitate processes to consult, actively engage with and seek to encourage the engagement of young people and especially of youth organisations in strategic decision-making, including removing any legal or administrative barriers to participation.

Marked differences were found to exist in administrative and legal frameworks of youth policies, this being the biggest barrier to youth engagement across borders, basically due to a lack of alignment between the countries. Participation was found to be developed at different levels in the areas of implementation of the project and in general further investment in improving participatory processes and in institutionalising youth engagement is still required also through awareness raising. In particular, we can underline the need to build a real partnership and proper mechanisms at all levels and at all all stages of the process to truly ensure the full involvement of young people and youth organisations.

Many other cultural barriers were also highlighted, including linguistic obstacles, lack of transparency of decision-making and policy-making, lack of timely access to information, insufficient chances for training and mentoring, and challenges in navigating complicated decision-making structures.



3. Steps to create a youth engagement mechanism

1 Dedicate orientation meetings for civil servants who will manage youth engagement activities, as well as capacity building in better understanding youth, in promoting partnerships with young people and their meaningful engagement.

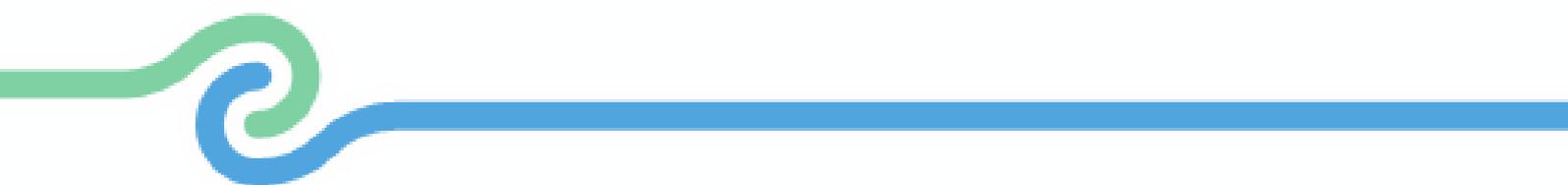
2 Identify obstacles to young people's participation and develop cross-sectoral plans and actions to overcome those obstacles to promote equal opportunities and sufficient social, cultural, educational and economic conditions to facilitate youth engagement mechanism, also foreseeing clear and effective monitoring framework to track progress against the initial commitment.

3 Map youth organisations in the specific area of interest, at local, regional, national or cross-border and invest in people-to-people actions to strengthen a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

4 Advertise intention to collaborate with youth organisations through an Open Call for Expression of Interest with explicitly clear terms and expectations, and selection criteria based on age, geography, and engagement.

5 Ensure diversity including every type of youth organisation (from sport clubs to art collectives, from civil society organisations to volunteering groups) and entrust-support youth organisations in reaching out and gathering inputs from other young people at all levels (local, regional, transnational, global), with particular attention to the recognition, inclusion and representation of marginalized youth.

- 6 **Distinguish among several degrees of youth engagement:** youth can be consulted, can partner or lead in your initiative. The field of the operational engagement can vary among actual decision-making to include education and training, producing knowledge, raising awareness and mobilizing, networks and partnerships, providing services, generating solutions to address societal issues;
- 7 **Involve youth organisations from the beginning** into the development of policy fields related to youth (review/consultation) through both digital tools and in person meetings.
- 8 **Provide coordination of integrated youth engagement actions** as well as dedicated space for institutionalised youth engagement in governing bodies and in several areas of action, including decision-making, education and training, knowledge production, raising awareness, networks and partnerships, providing services, generating solutions to address societal issues;
- 9 Ensure that the youth engagement mechanisms are **sustainable over time** and that their development, implementation and evaluation are supported financially.
- 10 Make youth part of an **horizontal cross-border cooperation** among authorities for identifying, discussing and tackling legal or administrative obstacles, as well as involve territorial cooperation stakeholders to bridge problems generated by obstacles that cannot be eliminated by local or regional actors.



4. Case story

Ivana's cross-border dream for youth cooperation

Ivana is a 23-year-old student from Grado (Italy), a picturesque town facing the Adriatic Sea. She studies Economics and Tourism in Venice and has been an Erasmus+ student in Pula, Croatia, for 6 months to study intercultural tourism systems.

In her free time, she volunteers with *Govani Insieme*, a youth-led association that organises cultural events, workshops, and community clean-ups.

Ivana and her friends are bothered by the fact that there's no real space in Grado where young people can gather, express themselves, or simply *be*. Ivana tells her friends that in Pula there is a vibrant youth center, the *Mladinski Center*, funded by the municipality, offering workshops, concerts, and spaces where young people could study, create art, or just relax.

Uncovering legal barriers: the meeting with the mayor

The idea sparks to requested a formal meeting with the mayor to suggest the establishment of a similar youth centre in Grado and to create an intercultural project with *Mladinski Center*. The mayor and his team listen attentively the idea, however, when the conversation turns to funding it, they hesitate.

The mayor explains two legal and bureaucratic obstacles:

- Italian municipal funds can not legally be allocated to foreign entities or initiatives outside Italy
- There is no local policy or structure to support youth initiatives systematically, making it even harder to carve out a dedicated budget or mandate for cross-border youth projects.

Turning challenges into opportunities: youth inclusion in decision-making

Over the following weeks, the mayor learns that *Mladinski Center* is more than a meeting place for young people, it is the premise of the *Forum Mladhi*, the official advisory body that the municipality of Pula consults for collecting youth needs and involve youth in shaping policies that affected them, including the drafting of a youth strategy and cross-border initiatives.

The mayor invites Ivana and *Giovani Insieme* to co-design the *Forum Giovani di Grado*, where young people can express their needs and participate in the local governance. Guided by its legal and administrative team, he start the process of preparing the necessary decisions, keeping informed the youth forum and consulting it every step of the way.

One step after the other, Ivana's dream becomes reality

The mayor contacts the Regione Veneto for guidance and Few months later, the Grado municipality secures funding for renovating an old building to be used as the premise of *Forum Giovani di Grado*.

He also finds out that the Veneto Regio manages the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme, providing for a cross-border cooperation framework between the two countries.

Ivana's dream comes true. The municipality of Grado and the municipality of Pula establish cooperation and secure a grant to support the creation of the first cross-border youth event—a joint cultural festival hosted on both cities, bringing young people from Grado and Pula together.

The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of its authors and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of EU and of the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme authorities.

www.italy-croatia.eu/web/demycoop

