



PLACEMAKING

FALLING INTO PLACE: RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Exploring Participatory Placemaking & Creative Arts Methods in Rural Contexts,
as a tool to build Democratic values at the local level

Challenges in
Youth Participation

Voices of Youth:
Empathy Map
Insights

Youth Workers'
Capacity-Building
Needs

Collaboration
Dynamics

WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?

The "Falling Into Place" project, officially titled "Capacity-Building of Youth Workers in Participatory Placemaking & Creative Arts Methods in Rural Contexts, as a tool to build Democratic values at the local level," is an Erasmus+ funded by the European Union. "Falling Into Place," aims to empower youth workers and young people to engage in participatory placemaking and creative arts methods. This approach is designed to cultivate democratic values within rural communities.



WHAT IS THE REPORT ABOUT?

This infographic synthesizes key findings from the Local Alliance Building for In-Depth Needs Assessment Research, conducted by partner organizations [FACK](#), [APICE](#), [SDA](#), and [VKC](#). The research was conducted online and included 20 interviews with participants from four countries: Lithuania, Turkey, Italy, and Germany. Additionally, one international online focus group was held, comprising 24 participants. It aims to provide a foundational understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering democratic values at the local level through participatory placemaking, particularly within rural contexts.

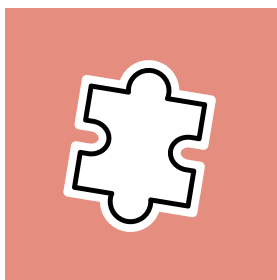


WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY PLACEMAKING?

Participatory placemaking is defined as a process that actively involves community members in shaping their local environment. This engagement inherently encourages the development of democratic values, fostering open dialogue, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility. Through this inclusive process, residents contribute their knowledge, creativity, and aspirations to the development of public spaces, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging, community cohesion, transparency, mutual respect, and civic engagement — all vital elements of a thriving democracy.

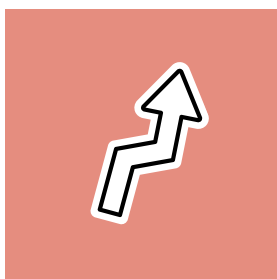
UNDERSTANDING YOUTH: CHALLENGES & PERSPECTIVES

A cross-country analysis reveals several pervasive barriers hindering youth participation in democratic processes and placemaking initiatives. These challenges are not isolated problems but form a complex web where each barrier reinforces the others, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.



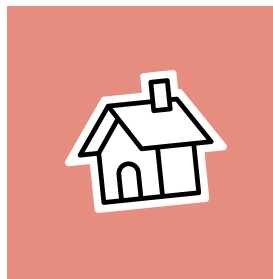
Distrust in institutions and broken systems: A widespread skepticism towards public institutions acts as a significant impediment.

In Türkiye and Italy, this distrust stems from systemic corruption, organized crime, and historical political instability. In Lithuania, past governmental neglect of rural areas has eroded faith in governance, while German youth express disillusionment with bureaucracy and a perceived lack of agency.



Social and cultural divides: Social fragmentation is a common issue that often manifests as intergenerational conflict.

In Lithuania, Italy, and Germany, older community members frequently resist youth-focused initiatives, viewing them as unimportant or disruptive. Türkiye experiences cultural codes and ageism that marginalize youth, particularly those with intersectional identities, further limiting their democratic participation.



Lack of Accessible Public Spaces: The absence of inclusive spaces where youth can gather, express themselves, and

engage in democratic activities is a consistent problem. Examples include: Türkiye's "divided urban islands," Italy's underutilized public piazzas, and Germany's closed schools. This lack of suitable physical venues inhibits community building and active citizenship.



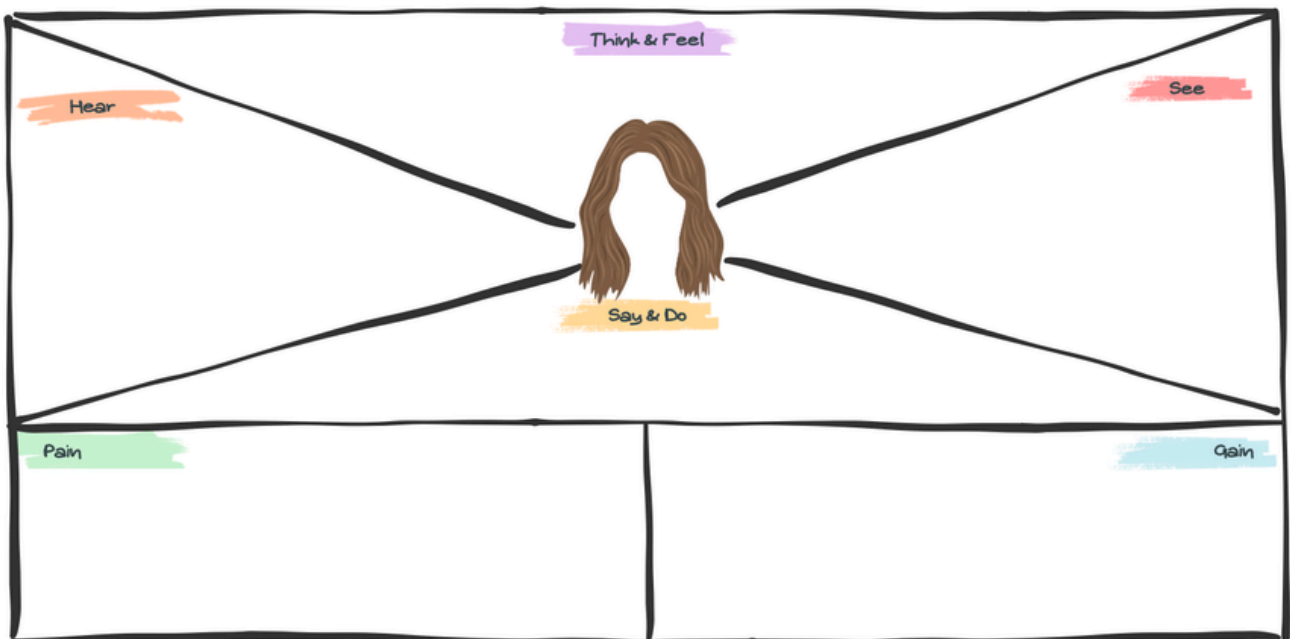
Barriers to Civic Engagement: Bureaucratic obstacles hinder youth from forming or joining civic initiatives.

In Türkiye, navigating complex legal systems to establish associations deters participation. Similarly, Lithuania's limited community engagement infrastructure leaves young people disconnected from opportunities.



Generational Fatigue and Low Motivation: Apathy towards democratic participation is a recurring issue.

This sentiment is particularly evident in Italy, where youth activism is declining, and in Germany, where disempowering societal narratives deter engagement.



VOICES OF YOUTH: EMPATHY MAP INSIGHTS

The empathy map tool was employed to gain a deeper understanding of young people's relationship with public spaces in their local communities. This methodology aimed to identify specific needs that placemaking activities could address. Through a series of interview questions about a chosen space in their communities, the interviewees were asked what they, "Think & Feel", "Hear", "See", "Say & Do" as well as the "Pains" and "Gains" related to that space.

ITALY

In Italy, the focus of the young people's empathy maps centered around two spaces which are not yet open to the public but are seen to have great potential as community spaces by the young people. The first one, Youth Centre in Galleria Zaffino, was a clothes shop, confiscated from the mafia and transformed into the first municipal youth center by APICE in cooperation with the Municipality of Reggio Calabria. And the second, Casetta dei Giovani Bocale is an abandoned and ruined house donated by a family to the church. It has then been offered by the church to the community, which has started decorating it. It is currently being rebuilt through an initiative run by APICE through a public project.

In both cases, the young people expressed great enthusiasm about these projects and their potential to bring a lot of benefit to the local communities. In the case of the Youth Centre in Galleria Zaffino, when responding to the empathy map regarding what they "See", the young person described it as, "a very new and well equipped space, colorful and imagined to respond to young people's diverse needs, with cool furniture and spaces for co-working and co-creation and simply for hanging-out together. But it's empty and with no lights because it's closed." When speaking about what they "Think & Feel", the young person described a range of emotions from anger to surprise and shock because the space remains closed and inaccessible to the public.

Similarly, the young person who spoke about Casetta dei Giovani Bocale, was positive about the place, saying, "People think about it with a "sparkle in their eyes", since they're looking forward to its renovation." But again like the other young person they expressed frustration towards the "very slow renovation work because of bureaucracy".

GERMANY

In Germany, empathy maps were completed by three young people. Two of the empathy maps focused on the town of Altenburg and its public spaces, while one young person looked more closely at the skatepark.

When speaking about the town itself, the young people described a safe and comfortable place with some good options for the public to gather, however they also see untapped potential in the town for more engaging, youth-centred spaces. In different ways, both described how they feel the town does not cater for young people enough. One young person highlighted a history of noise complaints and police interventions at an outdoor space where young people gather, while another young person expressed frustration because of the lack of retail options specifically for young people, which means her and her friends have to travel to bigger cities to find these. When speaking about the skate park, the other young person described a "lively and energetic" space for young people which is seen as a "symbol of youth culture" in Altenburg. They believe the skate park has a lot of potential to cater to the wider community in a more inclusive way by hosting events and workshops and by providing more of a multi-purpose space beyond the singular focus of skating.

LITHUANIA

In Lithuania, two young people completed empathy maps during their interviews. One focused on the town of Merkine, while the other spoke about their local town, Varena. Both spoke about their towns in general while also looking at some specific public spaces in those towns such as the cultural centres and an open youth space in Varena. When speaking about Merkine, the first interviewee described a culture of young people being excluded from

events and public spaces. She described resistance on behalf of the local community towards events for youth in the cultural centre as well as negative experiences young people had as a result of being made to feel unwelcome by some staff in the cultural centre. "Inclusivity is not promoted enough and young people are not included or invited to public spaces. The cultural centre is often locked/not open enough. Feels unsure if it's really open and inviting to the public to use." "Some staff have not been welcoming towards young people. Often the events are for old people and there are objections from some members of the community to events for young people." Despite these negatives, the interviewee spoke of her fondness for the cultural centre and said that she and the community "feel at home there". She sees that there is an urgent need for a youth space in the cultural centre and that there is potential for such a space if some of these issues can be overcome.

The second interviewee expressed some similar concerns when speaking about his experience as a young person in Varena. Specifically, that he and other young people had been made to feel unwelcome by a member of staff at the cultural centre. However, he also said it's a place where he likes to meet friends from time to time and which often puts on events for young people. When speaking about the "Open Youth Centre" in Varena, the interviewee described a space where he and his friends never like to go because it is always occupied by a certain group of young people that are unwelcoming towards others outside of their group. He described how they dominate that space and it is only used by them to play video games. Because of this, he feels it is a wasted space which could cater better to the wider community of young people and their needs.

TÜRKIYE

In Türkiye, the empathy maps completed by the young people both looked at a community space called 100.yıl House. While one interviewee was extremely positive about the space, the other had different feelings. The first spoke enthusiastically about the diversity of amenities provided by the centre and how it promoted inclusivity and democracy.

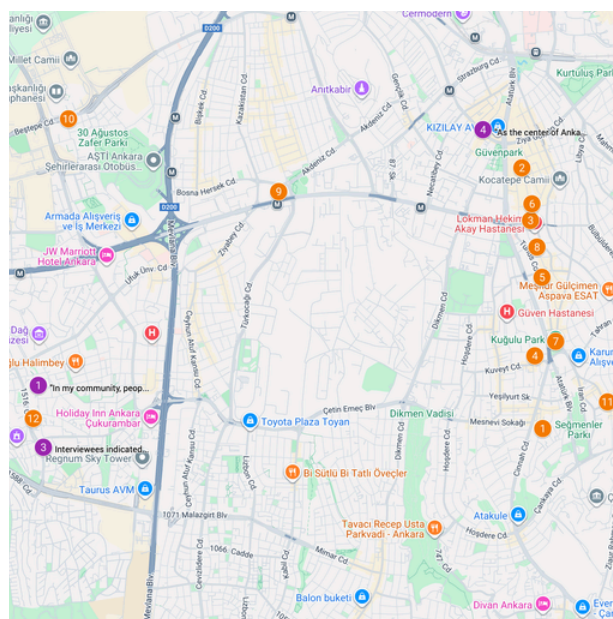
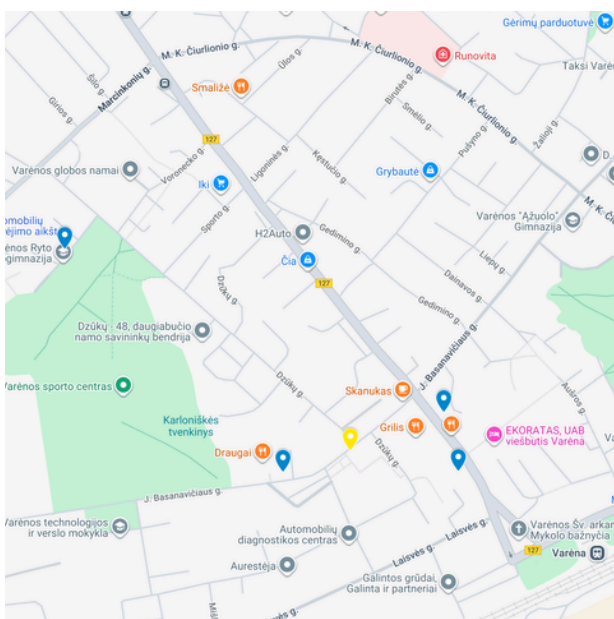
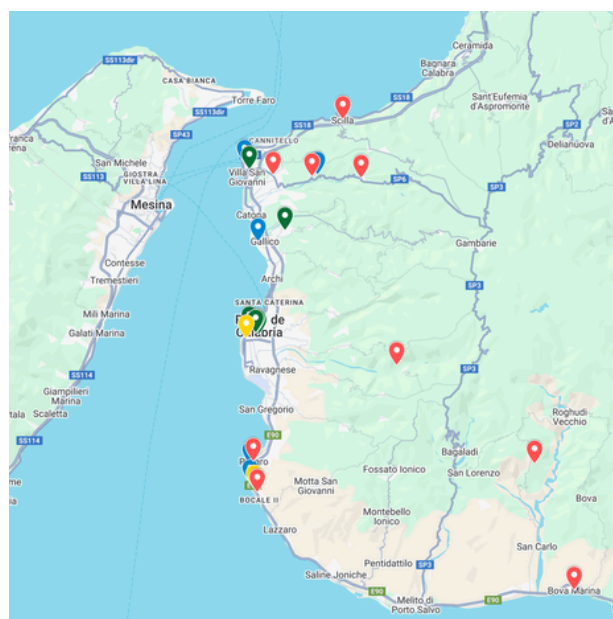
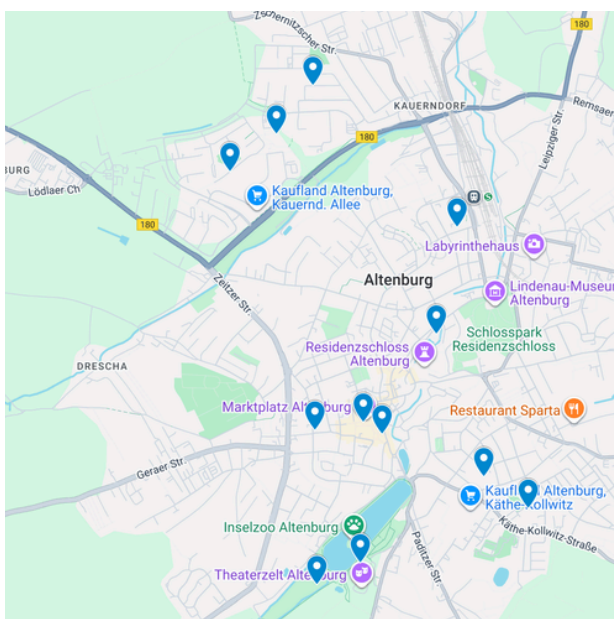
"The dining hall is the most discussed aspect of the space. The provision of free food services makes it highly attractive and accessible, especially for those with limited economic means. It stands out as a crucial feature that draws attention, even among people who might not actively participate in other activities within the space. Study halls are another feature that receives some attention. These spaces are important for students." And they went on to say, "I think it is a magnificent place. A very beautiful concept. It is a concept that all local governments in Türkiye should implement. It has a dentist, a cafeteria, benches in front of it, art areas, I think it is an example in every field. This is one of the pillars of democracy. It is successful that different educational and cultural areas have been created. I think public spaces should be created in this way."

The interviewee also mentioned that there was still more potential to be tapped in this centre, noting that the garden space was not being used and could provide further space for community gathering. The second interviewee who is a NEET youth had a very different experience of the same space, "When I walk past it, I don't feel like I belong and it doesn't belong to me...I don't use the space because I have no knowledge and no idea about the space. I don't even know what I can benefit from." The second interviewee saw also great potential in the space yet expressed her frustration with the lack of welcoming staff and availability of the scope of activities there.

MAPPING COMMUNITY SPACES

This visualization offers a clear overview of vital community spots identified across Italy, Germany, Turkey, and Lithuania. This visual representation was compiled from insights gathered during interviews with young people and youth workers. It highlights

public spaces — some specifically designed for youth, many others naturally adopted by them — that are crucial for fostering democratic values, promoting inclusion, and encouraging engagement with social and political issues. As well as spaces where young people feel comfortable simply socializing and spending time. The aim of this map is to visually present these diverse locations, showcasing their current use and immense potential for future youth-led placemaking initiatives within their respective communities.





BARRIERS AND NEEDS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORKERS



LITHUANIA

The youth workers identified a number of barriers that they believe prevent people from using public spaces and from engaging in community based activities in these spaces in general.

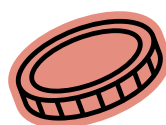
One interviewee identified a "rural attitude" towards public institutions which stems from years of feeling left behind by the state and social/geographic isolation which has resulted in a lack of trust and a loss of faith in government, democratic processes, civic engagement and public institutions. This theme was recurring across the interviews in Lithuania and points to an overall cultural barrier to community engagement with public spaces and to the promotion of inclusion and democratic

values. It was also highlighted that there is a lack of structure and information available to the public for the promotion of inclusion and democratic values in public spaces resulting in further barriers to engagement. One interviewee highlighted a lack of investment in rural public spaces which they feel contributes to public spaces being inappropriate and not fit for purpose. A barrier common to all the interviews was the issue of a lack of adequate transport in rural communities which makes it difficult for people to travel. Another barrier which was mentioned was the problem of excessive levels of bureaucracy when it comes to trying to carry out renovations to old buildings. There is often a need to upgrade buildings to make them more accessible for example, however the bureaucratic process can require a huge investment of time and energy.

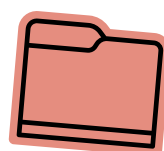
SUMMARY:



Cultural Barriers:
A "rural attitude" resulting from social/geographic isolation and lack of trust in public institutions, democratic processes, and civic engagement.



Infrastructure Issues:
Lack of investment in public spaces and inadequate rural transport.



Bureaucracy:
Time-consuming administrative processes hinder renovations and accessibility improvements.



Youth Engagement Challenges:
Limited emphasis on civic education and democratic values as well as an apparent lack of adequate social skills.

ITALY

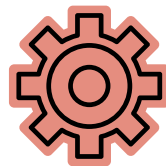
Much like in Lithuania, the interviewees highlighted barriers that are quite specific to rural communities. Problems of poor infrastructure and accessibility due to a lack of public transport for example. However, in Italy, there are a number of very unique barriers which apply to the area and are not found elsewhere. There is a serious lack of trust in public institutions and democracy because of the

prevalence of organised crime which has gone as far as infiltrating the whole system. Therefore, members of the community do not want to invest in the area and choose instead to survive by themselves. The issue of organised crime is a major barrier that came up repeatedly across the interviews. Another barrier that was mentioned by one interviewee, is the problem of small towns/councils. When there are many small councils in rural regions with less than 1000 residents, it struggles to remain relevant enough to receive any interest or investment.

SUMMARY:



Youth Involvement:
Difficulty engaging youth due to rigid, pre-designed schedules that do not adapt to their needs and which young people find off-putting.



Infrastructure and Transport:
Inadequate transport and poor rural infrastructure.



Institutional Trust Issues:
The prevalence and subjugation of local councils by organised crime undermines trust in democracy and public institutions.



Small Councils:
Towns and councils are too small and fragmented which limits the investment they receive and means they struggle for relevance.

GERMANY

In Germany, one barrier which was identified was a breakdown in the relationship between the local government and young people. One interviewee feels there is a lack of willingness on behalf of the local government to support or collaborate with local youth. Young people aren't perceived favorably by the local community or the decision makers and therefore there is not enough priority or investment given

to the needs of youth. This leaves young people in the position of being reluctant to engage. This social disconnect contributes to the outmigration of youth from rural areas like Altenburg. This results in demographic stagnation, a loss of innovation, and a sense of powerlessness among the youth who remain. The rise of conservative and far-right ideologies creates tension and a lack of inclusive spaces. This particularly affects minorities, migrants, and LGBTQ+ individuals, further entrenching inter-group discontent.

SUMMARY:



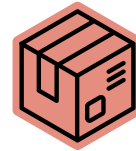
Youth-Government Relations: Weak collaboration between local government and youth, with young people feeling undervalued and unsupported.



Perception Issues: Negative community attitudes toward youth discourage engagement.



Ideological and Social Divisions: Rising far-right ideologies create tension and exclude marginalized communities, deepening social divides.



Economic and Demographic Issues: Youth outmigration from rural areas drives stagnation, drains innovation, and leaves remaining youth feeling powerless.

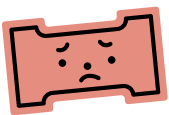
TÜRKIYE

The interviewees from Türkiye listed a number of barriers which people face in using public spaces. Political issues, marginalisation and stigmatisation of specific groups and safety and discrimination were some of the main themes that came out. For a number of specific groups of society there are many barriers to using public spaces. For example, violence against women is common and as a result, women are not provided with a level of safety to feel they can participate in public spaces. Political oppression and restrictions on freedom of expression contribute to a climate of fear,

preventing young people from organizing and advocating for change. This leads to decreased participation in democratic processes, volunteerism, and youth work, creating a cycle where youth voices are absent from decision-making.

Additionally, ageism reinforces the perception that young people are not active contributors to society, further alienating them from civic life. Women, in particular, face significant safety concerns in public spaces, exacerbated by daily experiences of violence or exposure to news about violence against women. Their lack of representation in administration prevents meaningful changes in urban planning, reinforcing their exclusion from public life.

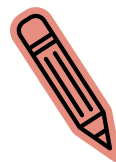
SUMMARY:



Political and Social Oppression: Restrictions on public gatherings, marginalization of LGBTQ+ groups and minorities, and lack of safety for women.



Financial Sustainability: Short funding cycles and lack of practical tools for fundraising.



Local Needs: Diverse regional needs and spatial practices require tailored strategies for engagement.



YOUTH WORKERS' CAPACITY-BUILDING NEEDS

Youth workers across all participating countries consistently identified a primary need: to engage with youth more effectively. This recognition stems from the rapidly changing world and evolving youth behaviors, which necessitate updated methodologies.

As one Lithuanian youth worker articulated, "the world is changing so fast and young people also, then the methodologies also need to be updated. Young people don't feel that youth workers understand them. They're not trying to understand, they're trying to impose their own method. No one can learn anything like this. You have yourself in the position of learning". This sentiment was echoed in Italy, where it was noted that young people are not inspired by pre-designed programs that fail to adapt to their needs. German youth workers similarly expressed a desire to understand "what drives them and how we can create a sustainable level of interest and participation".

This collective observation points to a crucial requirement for youth workers to embrace continuous learning and adaptability. It suggests that the most valuable competence is the ability to adapt and learn from the youth themselves, moving away from rigid, prescriptive methods.

Future capacity-building efforts should therefore not only deliver specific content but also foster a mindset of continuous learning, co-creation, and responsiveness to evolving youth needs, making the training itself a model of participatory engagement.

Specific competencies identified as lacking or needing improvement include:

Digital and Technical Skills for project planning, communication, and implementation.

Communication and Cross-Sector Collaboration for engaging diverse partners, including private-sector organizations, and exploring varied funding opportunities.

Motivating and Engaging Young People to sustain young people's interest and long-term involvement, understanding their motivations rather than imposing pre-set agendas.

Resource Development and Sustainability for financial sustainability, particularly in rural areas with limited local government support

Needs Analysis and Local Adaptation for conducting needs assessments and tailoring approaches to the unique spatial practices and specific needs in different regions.

Technical Knowledge in Placemaking for better understanding of how to physically transform spaces, including urban dynamics, design principles, and the psychological effects of space.

Theoretical and Conceptual Knowledge for applying theories from urban anthropology to design inclusive and psychologically engaging spaces.

Social Construction and Inclusion for using participatory frameworks to ensure equity in social dynamics.





COLLABORATION DYNAMICS: HEAT MAP INSIGHTS



Actors/Decision Makers	Youth Workers (Avg Rating)	Young People (Avg Rating)	
Non-Governmental Organizations	Very easy (5)	Very easy (5)	5
Cultural Institutions	Somewhat easy (4)	Somewhat easy (4)	4
Educational Institutions	Somewhat easy (4)	Somewhat easy (4)	
Local Youth Council	Neutral (3)	Somewhat easy (4)	
City Council	Somewhat easy (4)	Neutral (3)	3
Local Council	Neutral (3)	Somewhat easy (4)	
Regional Government	Neutral (3)	Neutral (3)	2
Public Bodies	Somewhat difficult (2)	Neutral (3)	
National Government	N/A	Extremely difficult (1)	
Other (Church/Student Groups)	Very easy (5)	Very easy (5)	1

Ratings based on a Likert scale: 1 = Extremely difficult, 5 = Very easy

The data consistently demonstrates that collaboration ease decreases as the level of governance becomes more distant from the local community. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Cultural Institutions, Educational Institutions, and "Other" entities such as churches or student groups consistently received high ratings for ease of collaboration from both youth workers and young people. This pattern reveals a "proximity-trust" gradient: organizations that are physically and functionally closer to the daily lives of youth and youth workers are perceived as more approachable and collaborative. This is likely attributable to direct relationships, shared local context, and a

clearer understanding of immediate needs. Conversely, higher-level institutions, particularly the National Government (rated "Extremely difficult" by young people), and Public Bodies, were perceived as distant, bureaucratic, and less responsive. This reinforces the broader issue of distrust in institutions identified earlier in the report.

For effective placemaking, strategies should prioritize leveraging existing strong local alliances while simultaneously advocating for simplified engagement mechanisms and increased responsiveness from higher governmental tiers. This also suggests that empowering local decision-makers and creating direct channels to youth is more effective than top-down mandates.



FALLING INTO PLACE

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Participatory Placemaking & Creative Arts
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fallingintoplace.eu



Name of the Publication: Falling Into Place: Research Insights Exploring Participatory Placemaking & Creative Arts Methods in Rural Contexts, as a tool to build Democratic values at the local level

Name of the Project: Capacity-Building of Youth Workers in Participatory Placemaking & Creative Arts Methods in Rural Contexts, as a tool to build Democratic values at the local level

Relevant Work Package and Activity: Work package 2 Local Alliance Building & Initiatives Mapping- Activity 1

Credits

Partner Associations:

FACK e.V.
Varėnos kultūros centras
Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Derneği (SKD)
Agenzia Di Promozione Integrata Per I
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Date:

September 2025

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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**Co-funded by
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