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Understanding the public participation of young people in border regions of mainland Portugal: youth as local development agent

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ABSTRACT

Although young people are recognized as stakeholders who should be involved in public participation, engagement by youth advocates in local development and decision-making is scarce. Young people's input tends to be seen as less valuable, especially when the prevailing positions on development overemphasize economic interests. This article is based on research conducted in rural border regions in mainland Portugal. We conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of the municipalities ($n = 36$), a questionnaire ($n = 3968$) and biographical interviews with young people ($n = 50$). The results suggest that young people see themselves as capable of contributing to the development of their regions, whilst demonstrating innovative views, with some even proposing a paradigm shift that encompasses a new way of thinking about sustainability and quality of life. We argue that local bodies of governance would benefit from an intentional involvement of young people in local policy making processes, especially when they are focused on local development.

Introduction

The engagement of young people in processes of participation and decision-making in different spheres of social life, and especially in issues that affect young people directly, has become a matter of growing interest (Akiva, Cortina, and Smith 2014; Becevic and Dahlstedt 2022; Finlay 2010; Rios, Neilson, and Menezes 2022; Silva and Freires forthcoming; Trivelli and Morel 2021). In general, the literature reveals an area of constant tension in which meaningful participation by young people is defined by a sense of symbolic involvement, sometimes based on consultation and at other times marked by decision-making under the influence of adults who constrain the young people's perspectives (Korfiatis and Petrou 2021; Kwon 2019; Lekies, Baker, and Baldini 2009).

The orientation towards engaging young people in processes of participation and decision-making has an echo in the field of local development, through the recognition that the knowledge network that underpins this orientation benefits from the

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incorporation of different stakeholders (Marín-González et al. 2021). In this viewpoint, young people are acknowledged as agents capable of acting both in the design and the implementation of policies (Akiva, Cortina, and Smith 2014; Simon 2022; Trivelli and Morel 2021).

Evidence suggests that a delay in the active involvement of young people in policy design and planning might be explained by the persistence of structural obstacles, such as the predominance of adult-oriented institutions (Finlay 2010; Heinrich and Million 2016; Martinez, Jones, and Connolly 2020). However, in the case of local development, it is becoming harder to ignore young people as primary stakeholders (Fragoso 2005; Silva et al. 2022a).

Against this scenario, in this article, we address the issue whether young people are active community stakeholders, and discuss the potential role they may have in co-designing and implementing policies at the local level. Although there is a vast body of literature centered on youth participation in Portugal (e.g. Malafaia, Ferreira, and Menezes 2021; Menezes and Ferreira 2014), very few of these studies establish a connection of participation with local development policies (Silva et al. 2022a). It is within such a gap that we approach the case of 38 municipalities in the border regions of mainland Portugal, drawing on young people's perspectives about the challenges and solutions for their home regions – therefore, problematizing if and how young people actively engage in local development processes.

The case in focus is of interest for covering rural regions, where, traditionally, participation mechanisms are less explored (Trivelli and Morel 2021). Its reading can advance insights to comprehend how other similar sociodemographic contexts could foster active youth participation in policymaking, something particularly relevant for rural areas, where one third of the European Union population live (EU 2018).

In the remainder of this article, then, we problematize the issue of young people as central stakeholders in decision-making, departing from the case of local development. We privilege the youth perspective on this matter, and also draw on the views of the municipalities and schools' representatives. The decision to include a range of voices reveals a conception in which youth participation in the context of local development can only be forged within the interaction of the different stakeholders (Marín-González et al. 2021). This is why we resume the concept of community resilience (e.g. Silva and Silva 2022; Ungar 2018) in the theoretical framework. Further sections refer to the method of the study and its results, discussing the potential contribution of youth to thinking about and promoting policies addressing local development.

Young people as active community stakeholders: reflecting on engagement, participation and communities with resilient approaches

The understanding that local development is best achieved through the mobilization and engagement of the diverse actors composing the knowledge network that underpins its sustainability (Marín-González et al. 2021) has made evident the open door for youth engagement, either in the process of participation in decision-making or in real action (Korfiatis and Petrou 2021; Makhoul, Alameddine, and Afifi 2012) aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of their communities.

The youth-as-assets literature affirms a number of advantages for both children and young people regarding their participation in the socio-political sphere, highlighting how useful their involvement can be for the community (Makhoul, Alameddine, and Afifi 2012). These advantages include: the nurturing of decision-making capacities (Torres-Harding et al. 2018); the development of deliberative competencies, democratic attitudes, and political efficacy (Cano-Hila, Pose, and Gil-Jaurena 2021; Korfiatis and Petrou 2021); and the fostering of social awareness and related action, equipping the young people for further political participation (Carey et al. 2021).

Equally importantly, the engagement of young people (and children) and their recognition as competent citizens enhances their feelings of belonging to a community, while mutually contributing to integrity for themselves and their communities (Makhoul, Alameddine, and Afifi 2012; Torres-Harding et al. 2018). When it comes to community engagement, the literature also suggests that input from those often excluded from decision-making generates a more representative dialogue to inform action (Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2019). Likewise, it is acknowledged that projects designed with the active cooperation of children and young people tend to be accepted better by them, thereby becoming more sustainable (Cano-Hila, Pose, and Gil-Jaurena 2021). In other words, the community-level engagement of vulnerable people, or those traditionally left behind, through decision-making and participation, seems to have the potential to improve community resilience (Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2019). Young people, a heterogeneous group(Crowley and Moxon 2018; Silva and Freires forthcoming),have diverse access to decision-making processes, requiring context-oriented participation strategies (see Corney et al. 2022).

Resilience, from an ecological perspective, refers to the capacity of a system to anticipate, adapt, and reorganize itself under conditions of adversity in ways that promote and maintain its successful functioning beyond the scope of self-correction (Silva 2021; Silva et al. 2022b; Ungar 2018). Within such a framework, community resilience is then defined as the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members so that they can succeed in environments marked by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise (Magis 2010). In this way, community resilience reveals a shift in perspective from community deficits to the potential of communities to facilitate the mobilization of resources when they are available (Silva and Silva 2022).

Starting from a systemic approach to resilience, Ungar (2018) identifies a series of principles underlying the concept, including the principle centered on diversity, redundancy, and participation. It is argued that systems are generally stronger when more elements across more systems participate (Ungar 2018). In this sense, it is relevant to consider that even within the same system, hierarchies and questions of privilege and power amongst those participating might disturb participation (Becevic and Dahlstedt 2022), just as resources availability and access to them can interfere in the dynamics of resilience (Silva et al. 2022b; Silva and Silva 2022; Ungar 2018).

Youth participation adds complexity to the dynamics of power relations. As Corney et al. (2022) argue, different models of youth participation can become embedded in an adult-controlled service or system, including the more recent ones, which conceive power as a fluid entity enacted within networks of people through their everyday actions. This can work as an added barrier to fostering participation as empowerment and agency while targeting youth participation (Crowley and Moxon 2018), since it

demands, at a first level, overcoming the cultural belief that supports adultism, i.e. the conception that young people are still in the making as citizens compared with adults (Corney et al. 2022).

Taking the municipalities of the border regions of mainland Portugal and the related issue of local development as an example, our argument is that the fostering of resilience in such contexts benefits from the active engagement of young people, both in the planning and execution of programs aimed at tackling local vulnerabilities, which consistently encounter young people as their targets.

Youth engagement in such a process is complicated, however, because it challenges norms within social systems (Martinez, Jones, and Connolly 2020). There is evidence of the continuous symbolic involvement of children and youth in terms of social participation (Korfiatis and Petrou 2021; Martinez, Jones, and Connolly 2020), revealing a 'pseudo-democracy' (Korfiatis and Petrou 2021, 1702) in which their voices are not respected or acted upon seriously. Hart (1992) has conceptualized these practices under the initial steps of his ladder of participation typology – the manipulation, decoration and tokenism levels. These stages depict adult-led practices that translate into forms of non-participation (Cornwall 2008). Such a scenario illustrates the challenges involved in the promotion of co-management or co-creation dynamics, as defended by more contemporary models that foresee opportunities and spaces for young people to participate in decision making (Corney et al. 2022; Walther et al. 2021).

In Portugal, the literature focused on the relationship between local development and youth participation is scarce (Silva et al. 2022a). Research is instead centered on issues associated with the political dimension of participation (e.g. Malafaia, Ferreira, and Menezes 2021; Menezes and Ferreira 2014). In the studies apprehending the links between local development and youth participation, the discussion orbits around education-related issues (Caetano, Freire, and Machado 2020) and employment (Simões 2018). Together, they emphasize the continuity of a logics of government that, despite encouraging the active involvement of local actors, remains inscribed to a centralist conformity of regulation (and evaluation) of projects (Antunes and Barros 2019).

In the light of our argument that young people can play an important role in terms of the social and community capital of their home regions, the remainder of this article particularly relies on young people's own voices to discuss how they read, interpret, and propose action for the local development of their regions – we include the voices of municipalities and schools' representatives as well, since they impact how youth participation can help by (un)balancing power (Cornwall 2008; Walther et al. 2021). From our perspective, these young people, growing up in the border regions of mainland Portugal, seem to hold innovative views on sustainability, quality of life and wellbeing that are capable of underpinning meaningful policies.

Method

The study discussed here derives from a large-scale project focused on youth pathways in the border regions of mainland Portugal (Figure 1). The [omitted] project investigates how communities may foster the development of youth pathways while avoiding risk factors like school disengagement and less opportunities for participating in diverse contexts of social life. The project aims to understand how individual, contextual, institutional, and

Figure 1. Municipalities of the border regions of mainland Portugal.

systemic elements interact in young people's lives. Border contexts in mainland Portugal frequently consist of rural and/or remote locations, each with its own set of obstacles, in particular associated with depopulation and economic factors.

Data were collected in the 38 municipalities highlighted in Figure 1. The instruments included questionnaires targeting young people in the 9th to the 12th grade of school ($n = 3968$), and interviews with representatives of the municipalities (mayors or education and/or youth councilors) ($n = 36$) and school representatives (members of school management bodies) ($n = 38$). The questionnaire (Silva and Silva 2016), approved by the System of Monitoring Research in Educational Environments of the Portuguese Directorate-General for Education, focused on young people's perspectives about the experience of growing up in the border regions of mainland Portugal. They were applied in person at schools. Questions were grouped into three main dimensions: resilience of young people and contexts, sense of belonging to the school and the region, and school and community engagement. The interviews with councilors and school management staff were oriented towards their understanding of contexts, challenges, policies, and related practices.

In a later stage, the project conducted five case studies in five different municipalities from the Portuguese mainland border regions covering all three macro-regions – North, Center, South. These contexts were chosen based on the highest scores obtains in the questionnaire regarding resilient schools indicators and resilient communities indicators. Then, students in the 10th to the 12th grade participated in six focus groups ($n = 30$) and

50 of them (10th and 11th grade; 10 from each municipality) participated in biographical interviews. These focus groups and biographical interviews sought to gain a deep understanding of the young people's own conceptions concerning their pathways. Young people explored aspects of private and social life as well as educational experiences from the past, the present and expectations for the future. Selection criteria included diversity in terms of sex and area of study (vocational training and scientific-humanistic courses). All participation was voluntary and was compliant with international research ethical guidelines. Students were contacted for the study through their schools.

This article privileges the young people's perspectives on how they (can)engage in processes of local development. Therefore, analysis focuses mainly on data from the biographical interviews and focus group discussions conducted with the young people. Additionally, we draw on the responses to a few items from the questionnaires that relate to local development issues. Moreover, our resources include the interviews with the municipalities and schools' representatives in order to frame conceptions and practices concerning youth participation (see Table 1 for full data sources).

The data analysis is based on descriptive statistical analysis, Student's t-tests for independent samples, One-Way ANOVA and Pearson's bivariate correlations of the questionnaires (5-point Likert scale items), carried out using IBM SPSS, and on content analysis of the interviews and focus groups, for which NVivo Release was used. The mix methods approach allows us to identify trends of youth participation and related expectations in terms of local development in the border regions of mainland Portugal (via questionnaires) and at the same time correlate these trends with contextualized perspectives of interested stakeholders (via interviews).

All the data are anonymized, and the excerpts illustrating the analysis only provide information on the participant's group (CM – Municipality representative; SCH – School representative; YP – Young person), gender (in the case of a young person) (F – Female; M – Male) and geographical region (North, Center, South).

Results

Participation in local development: the perspectives of young people

How young people relate to local development and imagine their contributions can be organized into two main dimensions, corresponding to the present action and future action. While in the present, much of the action has to do with social intervention and community support, the perspectives of the future mainly imply intervention based on professional duty. Further detail is organized in the following subsections.

Table 1. Data sources.

Instrument	Participants	*n*
Questionnaires	Young people (9th to 12th grade)	3968
Interviews	Municipalities' representatives	36
	School representatives	38
Focus groups	Young people (10th and 11th grades)	30
Biographical interviews	Young people (10th and 11th grades)	50

Acting in the present: local development as activated by young people through social intervention, community support and entrepreneurship

The questionnaires answered by 3968 young people in upper secondary education (9th to 12th grade) reveal the fact that the young people living in the border municipalities of mainland Portugal see themselves as having a high potential to contribute to their region's development (Table 2). Data disaggregation per region reinforces this finding, with all regions scoring higher than 3 (for a range of 1-5) for item 7 of the questionnaire. In this study, the greater concentration of people in the North region as opposed to the Center and South regions follows the trend registered in Portuguese population in the year 2021 (Statistics Portugal 2023).

Consistently, data disaggregation for item 7 shows that only two municipalities scored below 3 (with a range of 1–5), and, overall, the mean values range from 3.7 to 2.86 (see Supplementary Materials). This means that, in general, young people recognize that they themselves are crucial stakeholders for local development and growth. The biographical interviews provide evidence of how the young people view their current contribution to local development, emphasizing, in particular, their active involvement in social interventions and community support.

> **I am coordinator of the Red Cross youth**, of our regional delegation, from a local parish (where I live) and a neighboring one, and that is it, I have been busy. **I always wanted to participate in volunteering**, I have always had this intention, and I first volunteered at a nursing home. (YPF South)

It seems that young people tend to become more involved in projects that activate local resources to the benefit of their local contexts (Magis 2010) than to follow traditional forms of participation that are more abstract and have less visible impact. Despite some of the young people demonstrating a sense of disengagement from politics, they show an interest in the existence of social intervention and community support opportunities. When not directly involved in projects, they refer to peer initiatives:

> (…) **I would like to have more volunteering opportunities**. For example, a friend of mine (…), she is the head of a volunteering project here in a local parish, a project that covers the entire municipality. (…) this project promotes rideshares from the parish to the municipality center (…). (YPF South)

Although the young people grasp the fragilities of their municipalities, they are inclined to perceive the positive aspects of their regions with which they can engage. Notwithstanding this, the social dynamics prompted by both the school and the community itself are seen as enablers of broader youth participation.

Table 2. Young people's perception of their potential role in regional development.

Item	Region	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
7. As a young person, I have a lot to offer to the region where I grew up	North	2210	3.24	1.12
	Center	461	3.30	1.08
	South (Alentejo)	1056	3.28	1.14
	South (Algarve)	186	3.11	1.08
	Total of valid responses	3913	3.25	1.12

> I think I have always had opportunities, despite the municipality being small (…). But I think that both the school and the community itself do their best in terms of trying to implement new things in the city and they are always innovating (…). (YPF South)

Because many municipalities in mainland Portugal's border regions lack access to higher education infrastructure or even upper secondary education (Silva and Silva 2022), young people are forced to leave their communities if they wish to study for a degree. Likewise, a restricted labor market, typical of rural areas (Power 2017), prompts many of them to seek employment outside their hometowns. Along these lines, the questionnaires reveal a substantial correlation between the items 7 and 12 (Table 3).

According to the data, the more strongly a young person perceives themselves as having a lot to offer to their region, the more strongly they understand that if they ever leave their region, it will be to return sometime in the future (Figure 2). This sense of engagement supports an increased feeling of belonging (Makhoul, Alameddine, and Afifi 2012; Torres-Harding et al. 2018), which might be the basis of the strong intention the young people have to return to their hometowns in the event of leaving.

In fact, in the biographical narratives, we come across examples of young people who have left their regions and later returned to their home contexts. For those who return, a possible path is to set up a local project based on the expertise they have gathered while they were away. This entrepreneur profile adds to youth participation in social intervention and community support as the main ways of contributing to local development in the present.

> Yes, I have some friends who also went to Lisbon to study (…) and who returned to the municipality and are setting up an agriculture project there. (YPM North)

Both the qualitative and the quantitative parts of the study sustain the idea that young people see themselves as capable of promoting the local development of their region in the present. This perspective is anchored in the young people's own acknowledgment of themselves as being more politically engaged nowadays, using unconventional forms of participation, i.e. outside formal structures (Crowley and Moxon 2018), as when they design volunteering projects by themselves. However, the data reveal that the young people tend to indicate that they anticipate having more prominent participation in local development dynamics in the future.

Envisioning the future: young people's understanding of their potential contribution to local development

Our results indicate that young people tend to agree with the idea that they are able to contribute to their regions as young people. Moreover, aligned with what we have argued

Table 3. Correlation between the idea of returning to home region in the case of leaving and self-perception as an important stakeholder for local development.

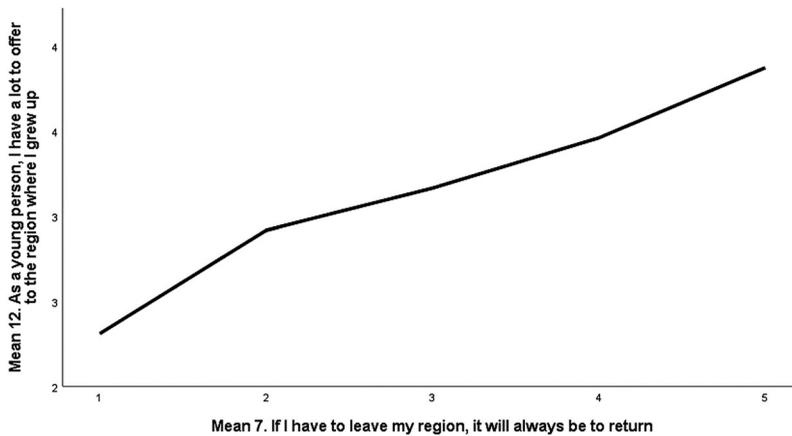|		12. As a young person, I have a lot to offer to the region where I grew up
7. If I have to leave my region, it will always be to return	Person Correlation	.413***
	n	3904

Note: ***$p < .001$.

Figure 2. Simple line mean of items concerning the sense of belonging.

elsewhere (Silva et al. 2021), young people see themselves as being attached to their home regions and as having a role in local development and improvement. In this sense, once again, the data suggest that young people seem to be able to combine their need and willingness to leave their local region with their ties and responsibilities towards their local community.

For the young people from the municipalities in the mainland Portugal border regions, leaving does not mean abandoning their homes. Rather, it constitutes a chance to improve the kind of contribution they can offer to their hometowns. In a way, it means that young people recognize that resources availability interferes in the dynamics of participation. The existence of human and material resources (infrastructures, public services, etc.) is an indicator of community resilience (Ungar 2018), and its recognition is fundamental to foster community-based initiatives. This factor is also fundamental when young people think about the future.

> **Although I want to leave**, I shall come here, **I want to come here, and participate, and see what can be improved in the municipality** and I also intend to have a role in that, [to identify] what there is to improve and help in that aspect. (YPF South)

Young people admit they want to leave and highlight the desire to return (Silva et al. 2021). In this sense, they foresee contributions to their regions into at least three different spheres of participation/involvement: political involvement; contribution through their future job; and entrepreneurial participation.

Active political involvement

Young people feel they need an active voice in political terms, which can be achieved by engaging in social intervention and support activities. For some of them, integration into the political arena might mean more structured goals, with perspectives aimed at legislative positions.

> (…) I like the land itself, the things that are available, but not for living. [If I had to come back] **I would try to**, I could say, **run for president**, for example, **found a party**, try to enter in a

different way so that people would also change their mentality. (…) **I would like to have a voice**. (YPM South)

If, on the one hand, entering politics as a political candidate might appear to be an extreme plan, it might, on the other hand, be indicative of a sense of frustration in the present. The issue is that, in some cases, young people feel that they are not heard or valued, and that their spaces to participate have shrunk (Korfiatis and Petrou 2021; Trivelli and Morel 2021). To address these difficulties, they see their future action as being centered on the provision of a 'breath of fresh air':

> Yes, I think the [available] activities are unattractive for young people, and I think whoever is responsible for them is sometimes very old (…). And, sometimes, **they do not give young people a chance**, because they think **youth cannot handle it**, and then I think this breaks their ideals and everything. **I want to bring a breath of fresh air** [in the future]. (YPF South)

Contributions to local development through future jobs

A second nucleus of the youth perspective on participation/involvement in the region's local development, in terms of the future, is centered on the young people's future jobs and related expertise. This reveals that the young people are aware of local needs and have a macro view of their regions, giving them a preview of how their future jobs could enhance local life.

> About the role to play in the municipality in the future, it would be different depending on the profession I had, because if I were a tourism technician, it would be easier for me to bring something new. **I would like to bring projects to this region**, because it is a region that needs some work development**. Projects based on agritourism**. (YPF South)

The projects imagined by young people depict creativity and, furthermore, show that they interpret their contribution as providers of the resources lacked by their regions. Therefore, they see their desired educational paths as fulfilling both their personal goals and their region's necessities, clearly promoting the community's resilience (Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2019; Magis 2010) by increasing its resource capital (Ungar 2011).

> About the future role in the municipality, **in terms of me following medicine**, [I would mention] **even basic care**, because **our region lacks primary care a lot**. (YPF South)

Involvement through investment and entrepreneurship

Young people's perception of their role as active agents in local development in the future encompasses a strong dimension of involvement through investment and entrepreneurship. The nucleus of this idea is the recognition that local labor markets are incapable of absorbing the workforce, especially when specific fields of youth interest are in question (Almeida 2017). In this context, entrepreneurship becomes essential, since one is not expecting to be employed by formal structures as it can be the case for the plans discussed in the previous subsection. Because young people consider variables such as funds for investment, it also seems natural for them to believe that investing in their locality takes place after 'settling' in life, usually in a different region, since a sense of 'returning' prevails in their speech.

And there is always **the opportunity to come back here when we have settled in life**, is there not? Imagine that **I would leave and then settle down away from here, but then I would return and maybe set up my own company** or something here. But it would be easier for me to come and create my own business than to come and try to apply for something here (…). (YPF South)

Investing in and evolving local markets under any circumstances means giving up personal dreams. This is visible in those cases in which business plans revolve around the academic education that the young person intends to receive.

I, in my region, I would try to open a publishing house. Thinking big**, I would try to open a publishing house**, to edit books and that would be it, I think that could be it. (YPF South)

For those struggling to match academic perspectives with the local labor market, a solution seems to reside in the scenario of remote work. The young people see the possibility of working remotely as an additional chance of remaining in, or returning to, their home region.

(…) I intend to have a job in which it is possible to **work from home**, not exclusively from home, but when I feel like being in this territory (…) that I am able to be at home (…). Something related to computer stuff or that does not need me to be in contact with many people. (…) **if I get a job like that**, I think it would be possible, **I would return taking into account that I could work from home**. (YPF South)

From the desire to remain at home arises the importance of mobility as a key factor for local development. Despite affirming their desire to live in places where they would have access to all sorts of infrastructure, some young people comment on the possibility of remaining in their home region and undertaking daily trips.

If it is not possible to have my job in the municipality, I can make an effort to, for example, **stay in the municipality and travel to certain places I want to work**. (YPM South)

The more common narrative, nevertheless, is founded on the perspective of an inevitable move followed by a later return. In line with the correlation between young people wishing to stay in their municipalities and perceiving themselves as central stakeholders for local development, it seems clear that the more they see themselves as able to contribute to local life in the future, the more they are likely to tell a narrative of returning.

[If I left the municipality and later returned, my role in the region could encompass] developing more activities of youth interest, I would **check what the interests of young people would be** and try to develop more related activities. (YPF North)

Young people have a strategic view of their contexts (Akiva, Cortina, and Smith 2014). They are able to identify potential sources of business in accordance with the strengths of their municipalities. Not surprisingly, tourism is mentioned in a considerable number of future projects:

So, when I have money, my brothers and I are thinking of **building a guest house in the municipality**, in a nearby village or close to my mother's home, because the Spanish come here a lot for tourism and we can benefit from their money. (YPM North)

Future contributions to local development through involvement in investment and entrepreneurship have a focus on jobs. This job generation covers a wide perspective

far beyond private interests. The young people's narratives encompass the acknowledgement that investments need to promote an ambitious approach, focused on bridging local potentialities to foster opportunities that provide sustainable local dynamics, as well as redistributing both power and resources (Becevic and Dahlstedt 2022; Ungar 2018). They would participate in this process if they had the means to do so.

> [I: If you could do something to improve some aspects of the municipality that you think could be improved, what would you do?] (…) maybe **invest in something here that would draw attention**, so that there would be other investments later on. Because **someone has to invest so that later there are more opportunities**, because then it would create more jobs and with that it could attract more people to the city and it would be good. (YPM South)

Participation of young people in local development: the perspectives and contributions of municipalities and schools

Starting from people's interests and sustaining their collective participation at different levels of decision-making are some of the characteristics associated with local development (Fragoso 2005). When it comes to involving young people in local policies for which they are clearly relevant stakeholders, specific attention should be paid to significant existing opportunities, whether they translate into participation within formal structures or more unconventional practices (Crowley and Moxon 2018).

The intention to promote participation is depicted in many of the statements by the education and youth councilors in the border contexts, who even place young people at the center of social change and local development. There is a desire on the part of the municipalities to involve the youth population, both in local policies in which they play a role as interested members of the public, and in political, civic, and social issues that impact the population in general. This position is revealed, for example, in the promotion of specific spaces to hear young people, as in the case of the Youth Forum, or in the broader involvement of young people in structures such as the Municipal Youth Council and the Municipal Youth Assembly:

> (…) we implemented the Municipal Youth Council, and **it was not very easy to involve young people**, because **they were** also **not used to being heard**. Hence, there was not that proactivity from the youth themselves. Since then, we have implemented it, though, and **we have achieved some active participation and greater interest from young people**. (CM North)

Actions that appear to show a clear intention of municipalities to stimulate the non-conventional participation of young people in the life of their communities seem, in some cases, to go beyond the more conventional consultation or involvement of the young population in decision-making processes (Martinez, Jones, and Connolly 2020). Although in most cases the measures and approaches are led by the municipality rather than co-designed, the municipalities show an awareness of the relevance of engaging young people in public participation. Likewise, they consider young people fundamental to the response to context-specific challenges such as depopulation, talent retention and the limited labor market.

There are a number of actions and programs that put youth at the center of local development concerns and policies, although it is less evident that programs and actions of this nature are launched by young people themselves, i.e. they have a strong adult-led character (Walther et al. 2021), or they presuppose participation within a framework of tutoring, where voices are instructed rather than acknowledged in the negotiation processes (Cornwall 2008). This kind of approach may not be very positively received since it is grounded on more directive and incorporation perspectives (that is, it includes only listening, rather than promoting empowerment (Becevic and Dahlstedt 2022)). However, these may be among the few opportunities for the population to pronounce on their needs and acquire some resources.

> (…) I am probably speculating, but they [the young people] have a great proximity to the municipality. **Many of them are studying outside and, yet participate as members of the Municipal Assembly here**, which means that they want to participate actively in the life and political decisions concerning the municipality's development. (CM South)

How municipalities perceive the role of young people in local development policies is varied and can be systematized according to three different perspectives: incorporation, functionalist and participative. The incorporation perspective, which seems to prevail in the thoughts of the education and youth councilors that we interviewed, suggests a discourse oriented towards the encouragement of the active participation of young people in both the reflection on and the promotion of policies. In general, it is expected that, based on the infrastructure and resources provided by the municipalities, young people will be able to enhance their life trajectories, collaborating, in an organic way, with the dimension of local development.

> (…) when we look strategically to our municipality, the two areas that we perceive as potential sources of income for the population are agriculture and tourism. (…) hence, we try, of course, to promote these activities for young people, together with the schools' cluster, making available vocational offer within these areas, but **the answers are based on what the young people want**. (CM Center)

A second perspective is based on a functionalist logic, in which there seems to be less room for listening to the interests of young people, with the young population functioning more as the target audience of the development strategy (see Cornwall 2008). In this form of action, young people ultimately become responsible for taking advantage of the opportunities that are granted to them in terms of education and work. Their role is, therefore, to adhere to structures that have been designed, *a priori*, according to their needs.

> **We** also **have other kinds of** support, **measures**, **to encourage young couples to stay in the municipality** (…). (…) we facilitate the acquisition of land so they can build a house. We have been doing that in the industrial area, i.e. our municipality sells land to any entrepreneur who wants to establish here in our industrial site for only one penny each square meter. (CM North)

Finally, one can infer that there is an empowering perspective in which municipalities perceive their role to be associated with that of a facilitator, promoting dynamics that reorganize both power and resources control (Becevic and Dahlstedt 2022; Ungar 2018). Local development policies, in this approach, are fueled by the way in which

young people mobilize their own creativity to add value to the municipality. In many circumstances, though, this logic of thinking about and implementing policies ends up focusing on measures that seem to have a more palliative character, through stimuli that translate into subsidies or one-off prizes, in the context of training or work.

> I think the City Hall has made efforts in this direction [stimulating young people's entrepreneurship], by **creating structures to host companies**, as happened with the business idea contest. Three graduates who developed their own business, in the field of tourism, won the last contest. (CM South)

In line with these perspectives, there is a vision, which is reinforced by the school representatives, in which young people will contribute to regional development once they return to the municipalities to work after having left to study. This type of expectation is supplemented by the need to create conditions for young people to participate fully in their professions. The creation of job opportunities is seen not as an end in itself, but as an opening for new avenues of development. In one specific case, the creation of a vocational school tailored to the region's needs and specificities emerges as a strategy both for retaining local young people and for attracting young people from elsewhere:

> [A professional school would] not only attract young people coming from outside, but also [support] **locals to stay here**, having further possibilities to work here. (…). If it went well, (…) [there would be] **more young people with entrepreneurial projects** who want to do things in the municipality itself (…). (SCH South)

The building of a link between the educational offer and the interests and/or potentialities of the municipality is a common trend in the responses of the school representatives and councilors. The basic understanding is that enabling young people to gain knowledge in areas that may hold potential for local employment responds to the interests of the young people at the same time as it promotes local development policies.

> The vocational courses that we have had are also **courses that have local employability**. We have invested heavily in social support and in the area of tourism, which translates essentially into catering courses. Right now, there is a pastry/cooking course ending. (…). The **youth who take vocational training stay in the region**, these ones stay, because the courses (…) are also proposed and built with this intention in mind and because young people also easily find work in the areas of their training, they are staying. (SCH Center)

The whole strategy is often associated with the need to ensure that the youngest part of the population settles down, then, tackling issues of depopulation (Almeida 2017). Local and regional development depends on young people returning to their hometowns. This is why local programs focused on specific areas may support other community interactions and networks, rebuilding and redistributing resources through the different systems (Ungar 2018).

> Here, **there is a Business Park that ends up absorbing many of those who leave**, who even get a job outside, but then come back. For example, a while ago I was with a couple, both of them were my students and they had moved to Aveiro, they had studied and worked in that region, but now they have come back and ended up getting a job here. (SCH North)

Conclusions

This paper focuses on the issue of young people as active community stakeholders within the framework of local development in Portugal. In this sense, it analyses how young people perceive their contribution to local development dynamics both in the present and in the future, in current and prospective ways. It also provides the perspectives from schools and municipalities on how young people can be engaged in such processes. Together, the different actors seem to corroborate the important role of young people in the maintenance of the knowledge networks that underlie local development.

The results demonstrate young people's capacities not only to identify issues in their hometowns, but also to reflect strategically on solutions. Their views on issues that directly affect them reveal a strong sense of community awareness, as the ideas they put forward confirm an overarching strategy that addresses collective needs, meaning they do not seek personal salvation. That strategic community thinking alone would justify the engagement of youth more actively in processes of decision and policymaking.

From the point of view of institutions, the first steps towards a more participatory political life seem to have been taken. Nevertheless, there is a long way ahead. The adult-centered perspective of institutional organizations persists as a barrier to the expressive integration of young people into civic, social, and political life. Still, the fact that governing institutions at least suggest openness to the engagement of those who are traditionally left outside decision-making processes suggests that there has already been some sort of achievement.

The study of youth participation in local development dynamics in the border regions of Portugal is relevant because it unveils how active participation can be nurtured in contexts characterized by added challenges to young people who inhabit it, namely, restricted opportunities in education and employment. The perspectives developed in the article affirm two arguments. First, young people have concrete knowledge of their home regions' fragilities and strengths and they refer availability to work upon these factors. This awareness, though, cannot be taken as a guarantee that they would not leave or later return to their home regions if ever leaving, since the rationale in focus is mostly projective. Anyway, the data seem to confirm a strong sense of belonging. Second, formal participation remains adult-centered although there are clues about institutions growing will to move towards more empowering practices. The examples in the discussion section can enlighten similar contexts on possible ways to pursue participation while engaging youth as assets for local development.

These processes of direct public participation are of vital importance in more fragile contexts, as is the case in the border regions of mainland Portugal. Integrating young people into local development dynamics reinforces the chances of setting policies that reflect their priorities, whilst their engagement contributes to actions that are both more lasting and more successful, leading overall to an increase in local resources. For such dynamics to take place, it is important to address the problem of how participation can be enabled, and to invest in opportunities to foster learning about this. After all, participation results from socialization and education taking place in formal and informal contexts. As our empirical evidence shows, young people are competent citizens who are ready to take an active part in creating change.

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