



# LESSONS LEARNED IN SUPPORTING UNDOCUMENTED YOUNG PEOPLE ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

 **PICUM**

PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

This toolkit was compiled by Laetitia Van der Vennet, Advocacy Officer and Manuela De Koster, Advocacy Trainee and edited by Michele LeVoy, Director and Marta Gionco, Advocacy Officer of PICUM – Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants.

## Background

For the past two decades, PICUM members have worked with and supported young undocumented people advocating for change. This toolkit collects some of the lessons they have learned in the hopes of informing other organisations and young people doing, or wanting to do, the same work. The text is based on discussions at a two-day workshop 'Supporting and working with young undocumented people in advocacy' that took place in September 2022, in Brussels, Belgium. Participants at the workshop included youth advocates and PICUM members, including migrant youth-led organisations. It is supplemented by desk research. This resource does not aim to be exhaustive, nor does it pretend to be definitive. It simply aims to share the results from the workshop with other organisations and actors and provide a basis for further discussion and learning on this issue.

© PICUM, 2022

Cover image: PICUM

This publication was made possible with the kind support from:



SIGRID RAUSING TRUST



OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS



OAK  
FOUNDATION



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2021-2027). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	4
AN ARGUMENT FOR SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING WITH YOUNG UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE .....	5
Who is 'young'? What is 'youth?' .....	6
Arnstein and Hart's ladders of participation .....	7
IN FOCUS: EXAMPLES OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY FROM ACROSS THE WORLD .....	8
ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING YOUNG ADVOCATES .....	10
Volunteering and professionalisation .....	11
COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS AND YOUNG (UNDOCUMENTED) ADVOCATES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES .....	12
Opportunities .....	12
Challenges .....	13
Benefits and downsides of incubating within an adult-led, established organisation .....	14
HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG ADVOCATES .....	15
SUSTAINING THE WORK IN THE LONG TERM .....	17
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES .....	18



# INTRODUCTION

Youth participation can be understood as youth “taking part in decision-making processes either in the lives of young people or in a collective context; more broadly, it can mean taking part into an activity.”<sup>1</sup>

Political participation is “any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere.”<sup>2</sup>

This toolkit focuses on the participation of young (formerly) undocumented people in policy decision-making processes through advocacy and influencing.



© PICUM

1 Thomas, N., 2007, [Towards a theory of children's participation](#), International Journal of Children's Rights, 15 (2), pp. 199–218; Cahill, H. & Dadvand, B., 2018, [Re-conceptualising youth participation: a framework to inform action](#). Children & Youth Services Review, 95, pp. 243-253; cited from Council of Europe and European Union Youth Partnership, [Glossary on youth](#) [checked on 21 October 2022]  
2 Council of Europe and European Union Youth Partnership, [Glossary on youth](#) [checked on 21 October 2022]

# AN ARGUMENT FOR SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING WITH YOUNG UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE

It is important to ensure young undocumented people<sup>3</sup> engage with and can participate in the policy processes that affect them, for multiple reasons.

Firstly, participatory procedures and active participation are a way to address democratic deficits in public governance.<sup>4</sup> As migration governance entails numerous policies that negatively affect undocumented people's lives,<sup>5</sup> it is especially important to support undocumented people advocating for change.

Secondly, children and young people have the right to participate in decision-making that impacts their lives. For children, this is clearly enshrined in articles 12<sup>6</sup> and 13<sup>7</sup> of the UN Child Rights Convention.

Thirdly, supported participation processes help children and young people develop important skills that citizens need. It can teach them how to influence, discuss and debate, and help them understand how decision-making processes work.<sup>8</sup>

Fourthly, services and procedures whose design is informed by the experiential knowledge of those affected are, in general, more effective and more widely supported.

Fifthly, youth participation makes advocacy approaches more sustainable. Instead of assuming what young people need, consulting them when setting agendas avoids wasting resources. Likewise, the skills developed by young people when involved in advocacy are likely to ensure the continuation of this work in the long term.

“  
***Me being at an event or a certain meeting may just be tokenistic, but you can be sure I'll be using my token well.***  
 – Youth advocate”

“  
***Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship.***<sup>9</sup>  
 – Roger Hart”

3 ‘Undocumented people’ or ‘undocumented migrants’ are people whose residence is not officially recognised by the country they live in. They have not yet been able to obtain a residence permit or citizenship because of restrictive migration and residence policies. Many have had residence permissions linked to employment, study, family, or international protection, but those permits were either temporary or very precarious and their validity expired. There are also children who are born to undocumented parents and inherit this precarious residence status.

4 Kiilakoski, T., 2020, [Perspectives on Youth Participation](#), Analytical Paper, Council of Europe and European Union Youth Partnership

5 See for instance, PICUM, 2021, [Navigating Irregularity. The Impact of growing up undocumented](#); PICUM, 2022, [Insecure Residence Status, Mental Health and Resilience](#); PICUM, 2021, [Preventing and Addressing Vulnerabilities in Immigration Enforcement Policies](#)

6 “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

7 “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.”

8 Kiilakoski, T., 2020, [Perspectives on Youth Participation](#), Analytical Paper, Council of Europe and European Union Youth Partnership; see also Hart R., 1992, [Children's Participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4

9 Hart R., 1992, [Children's Participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4, p.5

It is especially important that organisations support undocumented (young) people and ensure they are involved in decision-making processes because they face quadruple barriers to political participation: as undocumented people, who cannot vote; in certain cases, as people of colour who are at risk of being marginalised in European societies; as young people, whose opinions may not be taken seriously because of their age and likely have not developed the social networks yet to influence informally; and as people who likely live in poverty and can ill afford spending a lot of time on advocacy.

Participation requires collaboration between formal civil society organisations and/or institutions and young people themselves, including when young people self-assemble. Ideally, it should be an equal partnership between the youth and non-youth involved.

Beyond gaining meaningful representation, young people benefit from being engaged in advocacy and supported by non-youth led organisations. Depending on the type of cooperation, it can facilitate the transfer of skills, resources, visibility, and power, as well as intergenerational learning and intercultural competency. It also creates opportunities for young people's career development.

### Who is 'young'? What is 'youth'?

There is no universal agreement on what ages constitute 'youth' or who qualifies as a 'young person'. As pointed out by the United Nations, "youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence."<sup>10</sup> It is therefore more fluid than other age groups.

On the EU level, the consensus seems to be that 'youth' lasts from mid-adolescence to 30 years old. The EU's Youth Strategy (2019 - 2027) does not include an explicit definition, but implies an age range from 15 to 29 years old.<sup>11</sup> The renewed EU Youth Guarantee targets people under 30.<sup>12</sup> Eurostat defines 'young people' as people aged between 15 and 29 years old.<sup>13</sup>

The Council of Europe and the Council of Europe-European Union Youth Partnership understand 'young people' as people aged 13 to 30 years old.<sup>14</sup>

In Germany, the organisation Youth Without Borders understands it as people younger than 27.

The migrant youth-led organisation Voicify argues that the usual age range should be extended somewhat for young people in migration, as they often have 'lost' some time compared to their peers because of their migration journey or because they might have been excluded from some processes due to their undocumented status. Voicify sets the limit at 35.<sup>15</sup>

10 United Nations, n.d., [Definition of youth](#)

11 Only data for this age range is mentioned in the strategy. European Commission, 2018, [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy](#), COM(2018) 269 final

12 Council of the European Union, 2020, [Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee](#), 2020/C 372/01

13 Eurostat, [Youth – Overview](#) [checked on 21 October 2022]

14 Council of Europe and European Union Youth Partnership, [Glossary on youth](#) [checked on 21 October 2022]

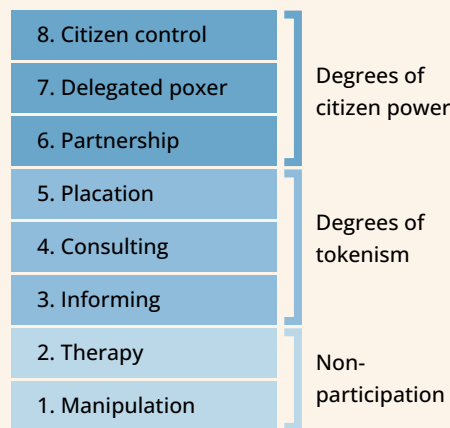
15 Voicify, 2021, [#PartOfEurope](#), p. 12, p. 39

### Arnstein and Hart's ladders of participation

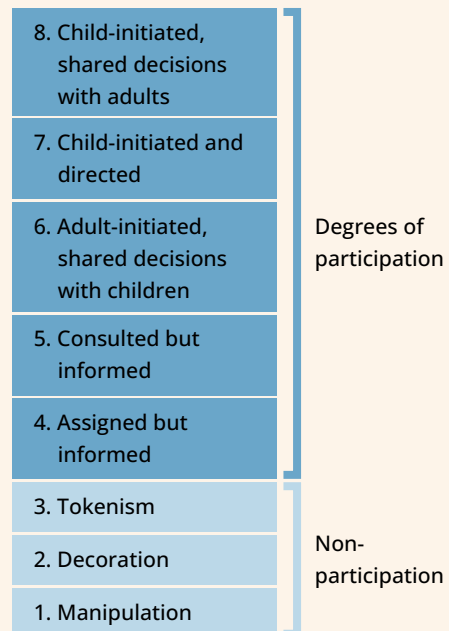
Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) is one of the most influential theories of participation. Arnstein rests her theory on the declaration that citizen participation is citizen power, arguing that participation cannot be achieved without sharing and re-distributing power.<sup>16</sup> She identified eight ladder steps, ranking from least to most participative: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control. Only the last three steps are considered to be forms of 'citizen power'.

Robert Hart based his ladder of child (or youth) participation (1992)<sup>17</sup> on Arnstein's theory. He also identified eight steps, the first three are 'non-participative', while the five last ones are increasingly participative.

**Sherry Arnstein – Ladder of Citizen Participation**



**Roger Hart – Ladder of Children Participation**



Together, these theories remain an important reference to critically analyse the degree of participation of movements, strategies, projects and campaigns.

16 Arnstein S., 1969, [A ladder of citizen participation](#), Journal of American Planning, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-224; see also Creative Commons, 2011. [Participation Models Citizens, Youth, Online: A chase through the maze](#), p 4

17 Hart R., 1992, [Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4

# IN FOCUS: EXAMPLES OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY FROM ACROSS THE WORLD

The following is a non-exhaustive list of organisations and movements which involve or have been created by migrant young people, many undocumented, formerly undocumented or with a precarious residence status. Several of the movements and organisations are part of PICUM's Youth Participation and Emancipation Group.



[Defence for Children \(DCI\) Netherlands' Youth Ambassadors](#) are a group of formerly undocumented young people whom DCI supported during their childhood. The initiative gives them a platform to publicly speak out about their experiences of growing up with an insecure residence status in the Netherlands. The Ambassadors directly support and give input to DCI's national advocacy work and meet with policy makers themselves. DCI aims to warrant the Ambassadors' wellbeing by holding informal debriefs after all meetings, and ensuring access to mental health services.



[Jugendliche ohne Grenzen \(JoG, Youth without Borders\)](#) is an association of around 65 young migrants and refugees living in Germany. Since 2015, JoG has sought to make the voices of people who are directly affected by migration policies heard. By means of national and local actions, JoG's decentralised volunteer network advocates for more just immigration laws, the regularisation of undocumented people, and against detention and deportation.



[Kenne deine Rechte \(Know your Rights\)](#) is a project initiated by the Lower Saxony Refugee Council. It aims to empower unaccompanied youth and young adults to know and claim their rights, and strengthen their political agency and ability to self-organise. The project provides information via workshops, child-friendly fact sheets and videos, offers counselling sessions, and advocates at the state (Länder)-level. The Refugee Council acknowledges its relative position of power vis-à-vis the participants by adopting a 'power-sharing' approach to its work. In practice, that translates into allowing youth to shape the agenda, as well as letting go of control of project's outcomes.



The [Sin Fronteras \(No Limits\)](#) project was initiated by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS). It is led by, and targeted at, young Latin American migrant women and girls living in the UK.<sup>18</sup> Since 2015, the project has created safe spaces where support networks and friendships can flourish. Its weekly workshops are co-designed by its participants. During these sessions, Sin Fronteras offers them space to organise politically, support their wellbeing<sup>19</sup>, explore their creativity, and receive counselling on access to higher education. Occasionally, the project invites external speakers to critically discuss topics such as identity, feminism and migration.<sup>20</sup>

18 The project is open to girls and women between 14 and 21 years old, who are migrants themselves, or are first- or second-generation descendants of migrants. Initially, workshops took place in London. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, they have moved online. Girls from outside London are now also able to participate.

19 For example, by organising group therapy sessions.

20 The women invited to speak are always also women with whom the participants can identify, i.e., with an experience of migration and Spanish or Portuguese speakers.





**United We Dream** is an (undocumented) migrant youth-led network with one million members across the United States.<sup>21</sup> The network was born out of the grassroots movement advocating for young undocumented people's access to regularisation and higher education, which emerged in the early 2000's.<sup>22</sup> United We Dream continues to campaign towards these goals, as well as to halt deportations. To do so, it 'builds power locally': through resources, education and leadership counselling, members are empowered to advocate for change in their states.



**Voicify** is an initiative which fosters the political participation of young refugees, exiled, migrants, asylum seekers and undocumented-led organisations<sup>23</sup> from across the EU. At the time of writing, Voicify is establishing a formal umbrella organisation to represent migrant young-led organisations at EU-level.



**We Belong** is a migrant youth-led organisation based in London. It mainly addresses young adults with an irregular or insecure residence status, who were born in the UK or arrived as young children. The lived experience of We Belong's founders, staff and volunteers informs its dual approach. On the one hand, the organisation advocates for equal access to education and change to policies that inhibit young migrants<sup>24</sup> from fully participating in British society.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, We Belong works to give them the skills and tools they need to make change possible themselves.<sup>26</sup>



In 2015, **Migrant Rights Center Ireland** established the **Young, Paperless and Powerful (YPP)** project to respond to the needs of undocumented young people growing up in the greater Dublin area. YPP became a safe haven for them to come together, share their stories safely and participate in an empowering youth project. Using creative tools such as art, music, and film, YPP members spoke out about the impact of growing up undocumented. In November 2019, then-Taoiseach (prime minister) Leo Varadkar stated on record<sup>27</sup> his commitment and support for the regularisation of undocumented children and young people, a position now held by most major political parties in Ireland. Thanks to the advocacy of YPP and its sister-campaign Justice for the Undocumented, the Irish government rolled out a six-month regularisation programme for undocumented people (including former students)<sup>28</sup> in 2022.

21 According to United We Dream's website [checked on 9 September 2022]

22 For more information, see <https://unitedwedream.org/who-we-are/our-story/>

23 Voicify uses the acronym Y.R.M.A.S.U.D. (Young Refugees, Exiled, Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Undocumented) to refer to both organisations and persons.

24 We Belong engages with 16–25-year-olds.

25 We Belong's 'Let us Learn' and 'Chasing Status' projects.

26 We Belong's 'Leadership Academy' project.

27 Joan Burton TD, 12 November 2019, [Undocumented Children](#), video [checked on 9 August 2022] [checked on 9 August 2022]

28 MRCI, n.d., [Justice for the Undocumented](#); Government of Ireland, 2022, [Scheme for long-term undocumented migrants now open for applications](#)

# ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING YOUNG ADVOCATES

Reaching young advocates, engaging them or supporting their advocacy work and keeping up engagement brings about challenges and warrants particular considerations. This especially pertains to undocumented youth, who face risks of criminalisation, detention and deportation, as well as other issues linked to socio-economic exclusion.

In order to facilitate the participation of (new) young people in a campaign, project or an organisation, it is first useful to offer various levels of engagement to them. This allows young people to advocate in a capacity that works for them, ranging from signing petitions, to co-organising actions.

A second way for organisations to attract new engagement is to quickly respond to news events that are relevant to their work. Because of the heightened media attention in these moments, responses are likely to receive more visibility, raise the profile of the organisation and hence compel new advocates to join. It may also inspire former advocates to become active again.

Third, organisations can extend their reach by using digital communications channels for engagement and community building. By using tools such as Zoom to host meetings, or Slack to share resources and divide tasks, more young advocates - including those in remote

areas - can be reached. Some organisations switched to online activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and then continued this practice because they noticed that this allowed them to reach out to more people.

Finally, collaborating with other organisations, or (community) activists also amplifies engagement, allowing to reach out to more young people and increase trust in the organisation.

To keep up engagement, the mental health of young undocumented advocates should always be considered, and their well-being supported. As they work on issues that affect them personally, young advocates can feel like they are carrying a burden, which eventually can lead to burnout. To support them, organisations should raise awareness on the potential negative and positive outcomes of their engagement, and most importantly, the personal risks they incur as a consequence. As it is very difficult to influence policy in the short term, expectation management should part of this process. In addition, organisations should organise regular check-ins and ensure that professional mental health support is available to their advocates. Lastly, organisations should create youthful and safe spaces where young advocates can come together - also for reasons other than advocacy.

The sociologist Roger Hart lists four requirements for a project to be truly participatory.<sup>29</sup> Although he lists these in the framework of child participation, the requirements are equally valid for young adult and adult participation. The elements he lists are:

- The children involved understand the intentions of the project;
- They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
- They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role;
- They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.

---

29 Hart R., 1992, [Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4

### Volunteering and professionalisation

Young people – and by extension people with lived experience – are often required or expected to volunteer their time, rather than be paid for it. While volunteering to contribute to a cause is laudable, institutions engaging with young advocates, as well as civil society organisations supporting them, should not expect young advocates to volunteer by default. Advocacy and lobbying are professions in and of themselves, and young people involved in this work should be remunerated for their time, especially if it concerns an ongoing commitment.

When civil society organisations or institutions wish to involve or support young people in political decision making or advocacy, they should invest in the young people involved. This includes:

- Not relying on young people to volunteer, but securing funding so that they can be adequately remunerated.
- Investing in their skills development (not only advocacy-specific skills but also to help ensure the young people can develop the skills to start their own organisation).
- Continuously nurturing a cohort of motivated young people to ensure sustainability of the project.



© PICUM

# COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS AND YOUNG (UNDOCUMENTED) ADVOCATES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

## Opportunities

When adult-led and youth-led organisations or youth collaborate, they can build powerful movements. The strengths and benefits include:

### Strength in diversity

When young advocates and established organisations collaborate, they can build on a more diverse set of skills, expertise, insights, networks, and experiences. A single issue will be tackled in a more holistic way by a single organisation or movement that harbours a diverse set of people with varied life experiences and perspectives under one umbrella. Collaboration improves the exchange of intercultural and intergenerational competencies from both sides.

### Skills and knowledge transfer

Established organisations can pass on key skills to youth in their own organisation, or to youth-led organisations. This fosters and prepares the next generation of advocates. At the same time, knowledge or experience youth advocates or youth-led organisations bring to the table can be an asset to an organisation's work.

### Sharing power, visibility and resources

Opening channels for youth participation and giving young people platforms to make their voices heard is a way in which established organisations can share power, and give youth advocates the opportunity to

challenge existing power dynamics. Sharing power includes sharing resources and visibility, which are often inaccessible to youth advocates.

### Meaningful representation

Collaboration is an avenue for undocumented youth advocates to acquire meaningful representation within established organisations and beyond, and to break the 'single story narrative' on what it means to be undocumented. For adult-led organisations, it is way to ensure that lived experience informs actions and forms the basis of decisions.

### Vitality and inspiration

Young advocates can be sources of inspiration to each other – and mobilise other young people to become politically aware and active. They can also be an inspiration to adults working in advocacy: the ideas and motivation of young advocates can revitalise their work and staff.

“  
*Young people's participation cannot be discussed without considering power relations and the struggle for equal rights.*<sup>30</sup>  
– Roger Hart

”

30 Hart R., 1992, [Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4, p.6

## Challenges

Certain challenges can however make the collaboration between youth-led organisations and/or young undocumented advocates and established organisations difficult. These include:

### Persistent adultism and tokenism

Adultism (the prejudice or discrimination against people because of their youth<sup>31</sup>) prevents young people from fully participation or having impact. Tokenism refers to “those instances in which [people] are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions.”<sup>32</sup> Both make the political participation of and activism by young people challenging and the work draining.

### Time constraints

Young people doing activism usually volunteer whilst having other commitments (e.g., work, study, family obligations, hobbies, social life, childcare) which limit the time they can commit to advocacy. As one participant noted, “having the time and space to speak up and engage in campaigning and activism is a luxury when you’re struggling to make ends meet.” In addition, opportunities to engage and influence policy makers usually take place during business hours, when young advocates may have other standing commitments. This can create a scheduling mismatch, where opportunities to influence change are missed. Any project must take these time constraints into account when working with young advocates, work around them and find tailored solutions.

### Residence status

People’s residence status can interfere with their advocacy work in many ways. First, undocumented activists often must overcome a well-founded fear of speaking up or being interviewed by the media, as they may be criminalised, detained or deported. They may also not want to involve family members. Second, undocumented people often live in or at risk of poverty,

and thus have to focus on meeting their primary needs first, especially if they cannot rely on a support network (like parents or fellow activists). Third, undocumented advocates and activists have fewer opportunities to engage with policy makers or other activists, as they may be formally excluded from political spaces<sup>33</sup> or may not be able to travel internationally.<sup>34</sup> Finally, travel and visa requirements can also make travelling difficult for activists who do have a residence permit, but one that does not allow for visa-free travel. Applications for Schengen visas, for instance, are slow, costly and can take longer than three months to apply for.

### Mental well-being

While advocacy work can often be stressful, the stress is doubled for people with lived experience of the issues they advocate to change. Ongoing stressors linked to people’s residence status, new and/or ongoing residence procedures should certainly be recognised, as are possible stressors at school, work or at home. Possible trauma and the risk of re-traumatisation should be acknowledged, and attenuated, and mental health needs should be catered for. Organisations should ensure the young people they work with receive mental health support when requested and calculate this into any work they do, and budget needed.

### Accessibility and language

Migration policies and legislation are quite technical and working to influence them requires familiarity with specific terminology. Acquiring a certain literacy in this field can be a challenge for some young people, especially at the beginning. For EU-level work, a good command of English is also required. It is important for organisations to familiarise young people with the relevant terminology. They can also play an important role in ensuring policy makers and young people understand each other and messages do not get lost in translation – both literally and figuratively.

31 Bell, J., 1995, Understanding Adultism: A Major Obstacle to Developing Positive Youth-Adult Relationships. YouthBuild USA; cited in King K., 29 September 2021, [The Problem with Adultism A prejudice that teaches kids their voices don't matter](#)

32 Hart R., 1992, [Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship](#), Unicef Innocenti Essays no.4, p. 9

33 E.g., when needing identity documents to enter a space, like a parliament.

34 E.g., undocumented activists cannot participate in international workshops or exchanges as they cannot travel.



## Funding

Many organisations, including established ones, as well as newly founded or grassroots projects face difficulties in securing funding for activism and advocacy or to cover staff costs. Long-term or core funding is especially difficult to secure. Short-term funding and project funding put a strain on organisations in different ways. It not only makes it difficult to sustain activities and advocacy campaigns over a longer period of time, but also causes additional strain as organisations lose staff when projects end and must onboard and train new staff when another project starts. Staff wages may also be low compared to other sectors or more well-established organisations, creating stress for staff<sup>35</sup> and/or causing people to resign and find more well-paid jobs elsewhere.

## The danger of the single issue

This goes both ways: advocates may focus exclusively on one issue, without seeing the interrelations with other issues and without building sufficient networks with advocates working on other issues. On the other hand, policy makers and civil servants may approach young advocates for single issues only – most often their lived experience, their perspective ‘as a young person’ or ‘as a migrant’ – even though they may have developed in-depth technical knowledge or expertise on a wider range of issues.

## Not seeing the impact

Most efforts to change policies require long-term investments and often require years, if not decades, of committed and unrelenting effort. This can be hard to accept when people see the urgency of the change that is needed. This can be especially challenging for young people starting out in advocacy and can cause burnout or disillusionment. Another facet of this exists when people’s participation is tokenistic and does not produce change because it is not meant to. This too can cause advocates to become disillusioned.

## Political climate

A political climate that is unfavourable towards migrants makes it more difficult to impact policies, and can increase the risks of speaking out.

## Consent

When working with children, organisations need to develop a child protection policy and consistently obtain the permission of parents or guardians. Both take time and effort and must be taken into account.

## Benefits and downsides of incubating within an adult-led, established organisation

### Benefits

- Fewer concerns about funding, human resources or organisational issues
- Provides time to gain experience before building one’s own organisation, and to eventually roll out one’s own project
- Possibility to use organisation’s facilities and network of contacts (e.g. funders and policy makers)

### Downsides

- Dependency on organisation’s willingness to facilitate and make space for young people’s work
- Need to discuss clear rules over ownership of projects and levels of independence while establishing the project objectives

35 Especially considering the rising cost of living.

# HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG ADVOCATES

During the workshop, participants highlighted four essential means by which organisations can better support young undocumented advocates and their organisations.

## **1. Create safe spaces**

Young undocumented people oftentimes face discrimination and structural exclusion and may find it difficult to trust others (especially established organisations). Safe spaces offer the necessary physical and social conditions that make young people feel comfortable and safe enough to express themselves freely and claim their rights confidently.

## **2. Provide legal and mental health support**

Young undocumented people often have an insecure residence status and risk being apprehended, detained and deported as a result of their public political actions. Sometimes, they have already experience of detention or other traumas linked to their migration journey. This means they are at risk of re-traumatisation. These two factors make it crucial for established organisations to provide free and tailored legal and mental health support to young advocates and undocumented youth-led organisations.

## **3. Promote (access to) platforms for expression and participation**

There are few channels through which the voices of undocumented young people are heard, and more importantly, weighted equally to those of adults. Organisations can support young advocates by setting up new platforms for participation and expression, or facilitate access to existing ones.

## **4. Mobilise documented young people**

The responsibility to call attention to the situation of undocumented children and youth should not lie only on their own shoulders. Nevertheless, formerly undocumented people who joined the workshop reported that it had often felt that way. Organisations can help young advocates alleviate this burden, by mobilising documented youth - who incur less risks when engaging in advocacy - to stand aside undocumented youth.

In 2021, Voicify surveyed 16 migrant youth-led organisations on the obstacles and barriers to full, effective, constructive, and inclusive political participation of migrant youth-led organisations.<sup>36</sup> Barriers included:

- The prevailing discourses on migrant communities as either threats or as beneficiaries, rather than partners, make equal participation impossible;
- Widespread denial that migrant-led organisations are an integral part of Europe;
- Difficulties to register as an NGO, including due to practical and administrative reasons. The survey mentioned “continuous and disproportionate scrutiny by banks” and high costs of registering as an NGO in some countries;
- Inaccessibility and rigidity of funding opportunities, exacerbated by a lack of information and transparency about and during funding processes;
- Heavy reliance on volunteers, which endangers the organisation’s long-term sustainability;
- Not being taken seriously as partners by other civil society organisations, institutions and governments. The survey mentions that organisations’ “intersectional aspects, along with their expertise beyond migration and diversity are often overlooked.”



---

<sup>36</sup> See Voicify, 2021, [#PartOfEurope](#)

# SUSTAINING THE WORK IN THE LONG TERM

Three important factors were identified to be necessary for the long-term sustainability of the work done with and by young people: funding and financial sustainability, staff well-being and retention, as well as membership and leadership.

## **Funding and financial sustainability**

Securing funding and financial stability is a challenge for most civil society organisations, yet this is particularly difficult for organisations which focus on advocacy work and for newly established and migrant-led organisations.

The lack of long-term funding available to migrant youth-led organisations<sup>37</sup> and to organisations engaging with young undocumented people in advocacy makes it difficult to plan for the future and achieve long-term goals. Accordingly, these organisations may struggle to retain staff and continually have to train incoming staff. This adds an additional strain on organisations. One participant reported that some funding cycles could be as short as two months.

When funding priorities and trends are not in line with the needs on the ground, organisations are constrained in their work, and can find it challenging to align it with their values and long-term objectives.

Although some funders – including governments – are interested in supporting young people's political participation, new (undocumented) youth-led organisations face significant practical hurdles in accessing funding. Lack of credibility (due to an absence of a financial record), limited literacy in grant writing and lack of connections are some of the main obstacles.

## **Staff well-being and retention**

Drawing a clear line between who is a 'young advocate' and who is 'staff' is not always possible. When staff are young advocates themselves, their work related to their lived experience can be draining at best and re-traumatising at worst. Even for staff without lived experience, working with vulnerable youth can constitute a strain on mental health in the long-term.

A good organisational climate, preventative mental health measures, and secure longer-term funding can lessen stress experienced by staff members, and increase staff retention.

## **Continued membership and leadership**

A challenge in ensuring sustainability of youth advocacy work is 'aging out'. Sometimes, when advocates become (young) adults, begin their studies and/or receive a temporary or permanent residence status, they wish to "move on" from their advocacy work, to focus on other aspects of their lives.

As young people inevitably become older, it is important for organisations supporting young advocates, as well as youth-led organisations, to assure renewed membership and train new leadership. Longer-term planning, mentorship, professionalisation and/or remuneration can ensure the sustainability of youth-led organisations, movements and projects.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## On participation and engaging young people:

- Creative Commons, 2011, [Participation Models Citizens, Youth, Online: A chase through the maze](#)
- ECRE, 2019, [Editorial: Refugee Inclusion – From Capacity Building to a Working Relationship](#)
- Eurochild, n.d., [Training Tool on engaging children in advocacy work on their right to participate in decision-making processes Advocacy Toolkit](#)
- European Network of Migrant Women, RadicalGirlss and Sciences Po Master's Students, 2021, [Young Migrant Women's Political Participation Toolkit](#)
- Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Ireland), 2015, [A practical guide to including seldom-heard children & young people in decision-making](#)
- SALTO Participation and Information, [Youth Participation](#) and [Youth Participation Toolkit](#)
- Weiss, J., 2020, [What Is Youth Political Participation? Literature Review on Youth Political Participation and Political Attitudes](#), Front. Polit. Sci. 2(1)

## On advocacy (including toolkits):

- Cyprus Refugee Council, Mosiaco, ECRE, SYVNIL, JRS Malta, aditus Foundation, Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland and Greek Forum on Refugees, 2022, [Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations](#) (includes toolkits for EU-level advocacy and national advocacy training)
- EPIM, 2019, [Migrant-led advocacy across Europe, challenges and opportunities](#)
- European Youth Forum, 2022, [Advocacy handbook](#)
- Save the Children International, 2007, [Advocacy Matters: Helping children change their world – A Save the Children guide to advocacy: Participant's Manual](#)
- UNICEF UK, n.d., [Youth Advocacy Toolkit](#)

## On undocumented children and young people:

- PICUM, 2016, [Hear our voices: Undocumented Children and Young People Share their Stories](#)
- PICUM, 2021, [FAQ Undocumented Children](#)
- PICUM, 2021, [Navigating Irregularity: the Impact of Growing Up Undocumented in Europe](#)
- [PICUM publications on children, families and youth](#)
- UN Human Rights, PICUM, National University of Lanús and UNICEF, 2013, [Human Rights of Undocumented Adolescents and Youth](#)







PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

Rue du Congres / Congresstraat 37-41,  
1000 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel: +32 2 883 68 12  
[info@picum.org](mailto:info@picum.org)  
[www.picum.org](http://www.picum.org)