

# There is no citizenship without participation!

## MIJARC Europe Position Paper 2019

“Citizens are not born but made.” (Baruch Spinoza)

Spinoza’s quote implies that citizenship is something active and a concept that can be learnt. MIJARC Europe as a network strengthening the participation of rural youth strongly supports this concept and works with non-formal educational methods to prepare young people to be active citizens.

Hereby, MIJARC wants to explain with the method of “See. Judge. Act.” how it defines citizenship, how active citizenship is lived and what supports it. Furthermore, there needs to be training that is even more effective, and the development of active European citizenship with young people.

### What is citizenship?

Approaches to citizenship vary throughout history and according to different countries, histories, societies, cultures, and ideologies, resulting in many different understandings of the concept of citizenship.

Our understanding of citizenship, as MIJARC Europe, reflects a multidimensional concept. Today's most common understanding of citizenship relates to a legal relationship between an individual and a state. Most people in the world are legal citizens of one or another state, and this entitles them to certain privileges and rights. Being a citizen also imposes certain duties in terms of what the state expects from individuals under its jurisdiction. Thus, citizens fulfill certain obligations to their state and, in return, they expect the protection of their vital interests<sup>1</sup>.

Referring to the previous explanations, citizens are part of a system of rights and responsibilities. If they participate actively in that system, they develop democratic citizenship. Participation is expressed by voting, raising voices individually or collectively, and by other means. In this way, a community and a state can be formed and influenced by, and people start developing a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Consultation Meeting for the Education for Democratic Citizenship Programme of the Council of Europe, 1996

belonging, which is also necessary and forms another layer of the concept of citizenship: the socio-cultural dimension.

In the end, our definition of citizenship has three dimensions - legal, political/democratic and socio-cultural.

These dimensions of citizenship are performed through social processes, which take place permanently, starting from families and continuing to the formal educational institutions, where we obtain basic skills (language competence i.e. reading, writing, and more), learn about our cultural heritage, and gain knowledge on political system, democracy, economy, and labour. We can put them in practice through non-formal education provided by civic organizations and obtain new social skills, through informal education, associations, mass media, neighborhood, and peer groups. Each individual should be able to apply different dimensions equally and as well as they can.

### **Citizenship & participation**

Participation in political and civic life is a fundamental human right recognized by several international treaties. Moreover, it is also a precondition for effective democratic citizenship. Through participation, we can build a society based on human rights, develop social cohesion, make our voice heard, influence decision-makers, achieve a change, and shape our future. To point out, active citizens use different methods (elections, protests, hearings, advocacy, and more, that can make your opinion public and make your voice heard) to achieve these kinds of actions. Considering the aforementioned point, it may be concluded that without these methods and active citizens, society would not exist.

## **JUDGE**

In our opinion, active citizenship engages all parts of society in the process of shaping it by offering different means of participation. To put it differently, all generations have to be part of forming our society and environment in which we are seen as citizens.

As MIJARC Europe, we speak up for young rural citizens, and we strongly support the view of the “Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life”: "Active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we want to build more democratic, inclusive, and prosperous societies." Young people want to shape their world and be a part of decisions affecting their personal citizenship and life. A vivid example of this is the “Fridays for Future” movement, protesting and aiming to stop the demolition of our environment and trying to activate stakeholders in politics, who would be able to set rules against the climate change. Another example of being an active citizen as a young European is to be a part of a youth organization as MIJARC’s all member movements are. Those movements are an ideal learning ground for young people to learn how to build their own opinion, how to advocate one's own opinion, how to find actions, and, finally, how to transform their interests into reality. These are just two out of many ways of commitment that young people show

by being active citizens. Despite all prejudices about inactive youth, they prove that they are eager to build their future, participate in the formation of the present and that they want to be engaged with stakeholders to have a say.

## **ACT**

### **Our contribution as MIJARC Europe**

MIJARC Europe, as a European network uniting rural youth, highly emphasizes the importance of youth participation in civic and political life in Europe. MIJARC Europe empowers young people to participate actively in society to represent and advocate the needs and interests of their organizations, as well as improve their own lives. As a platform of nationally represented NGOs, we work and advocate for the well-being of all young people living in rural areas across Europe. To promote our goals, we provide non-formal education to our members, educate and support them in participating actively at the European level, and bringing in their voices as active citizens.

MIJARC forms a part of being a responsible citizen through participating in actual debates on different thematic focus points, (i.e. sustainability, agricultural and rural development, international partnerships, youth participation, and gender equality). Especially the activities and the entire Workplan 2019 of MIJARC Europe are dedicated to the topic of youth citizenship and participation. We, as MIJARC Europe, created a workplan to empower youth (e)participation in civic and political life. Specifically, the main objective is to help rural young people in MIJARC Europe's network and beyond feel that they have the right, the means, and the skills to make a change at local level and motivate other stakeholders to support their ideas and create opportunities for youth participation together.

### **Our demand as MIJARC Europe**

Starting from ourselves and initiating actions on our range, we still see that political and societal stakeholders disregard and ignore many ways of participation. Young people are discouraged by taking over active citizenship. Consequently, MIJARC Europe is asking for more political, societal and cultural participation for young people. We do believe that young people should be real actors in our countries and not just decoration.<sup>2</sup> Young people are the present and the future of Europe.

They learn about participation through real involvement. Particularly, young people learn about democracy and participation both in formal education, such as schools or universities and through non-formal education in youth and civic organizations. Through learning by doing principle, young people become active agents of a change. In addition, for their commitment and youth

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Hart's model for "Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence).

structures, young people also need an infrastructure to work: they need financial and personal support from the European stakeholders to be able to maintain their non-formal educational work and their advocacy for the interests of young people. Furthermore, they need even more support in the era of fake news and growing populism to prevent themselves from being tempted by threatening contents and methods on democracy. MIJARC Europe is deeply worried by the difficult financial situation faced by the Council of Europe and the draft contingency-plan of Secretary-General of Council of Europe, which proposes to cut the budget of the Youth sector due to the reduction of its overall budget in the recent years. At the time, when anti-democratic ideologies are at peak, when all over the shrinking space for civil society is being discussed, we, more than ever, need the opportunities the Council of Europe has been offering during these years (i.e. to equip young people with skills for democratic participation, for peace and intercultural understanding).

Following the above, we, as MIJARC Europe, demand from the European Union, Council of Europe, the Church, and other institutions to guarantee, protect, and support youth participation.

Furthermore, young people face further challenges and barriers linked to their age; despite the ones already mentioned, (i.e. they are often exposed to job insecurity, unemployment, and discrimination based on their gender identities). Dealing with these kinds of issues, participation is not a priority for concerned young people. Thus, the well-being in all areas of life should be a further priority for politics to enable the youngsters to participate instead of dealing with existential threats. In former position papers, MIJARC Europe has already made proposals for dealing with these kinds of existential threats for young people.

A further problem young people often face is feeling too small to change something or that a single action would not make any difference. Additionally, sometimes young people do not know how to approach local authorities and ask for support or they feel that public authorities, in general, are not interested in cooperating with youth. Most young people are unaware of how information and communication technologies could be used to participate in political and societal life. In this regard, we need all actors of society to work together to inform young people about further possibilities of participation, be active citizens, overcome prejudices against youth, and remove the barriers to participation, including better citizenship education. In addition, we need an electoral reform lowering the voting age till the age of sixteen, strengthening political education, and a meaningful way of involving young people with having a say and not just being heard. Under these circumstances, advocacy will grow into participation and formation of our world and society.

We, as an international network, see the interest among young people all over Europe to participate in the process of shaping tomorrow's Europe. MIJARC Europe fights for democratic, diverse, and borderless Europe that values and encourages the participation of young people in its development.

As MIJARC Europe, we do believe that participation is facilitated when opportunities for participation are available, when there is a support to develop skills for participation, and when obstacles for participation are reduced. Thus, we ask public institutions to stand next to young people and youth organizations.