Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: From Consultation to Co-Creation
Recorded by: SOLIDAR +

Marcos Ros Sempere: To learners' communities and the most disadvantaged communities, we will take their voice and make it heard inside the European Parliament and defend the interests of participation and improve the daily lives of learners, because I think it is fundamental to have quality education and quality participation all across the European Union.

Aoife Coyne: Across Europe, many organizations and institutions are working to strengthen participation in education. Learners are often invited to share their views, yet the step from expressing an opinion to shaping a decision is not always straightforward. Understanding how different actors approach this question can help us to clarify what meaningful participation can look like in practice. Today we talk about this with Marco Ros Sempere, Member of the European Parliament, and Brikena Shomaki, Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform. Their perspectives bring together an institutional viewpoint and the experience of civil society, offering us a broader picture of how participation can be supported and how learners can be included more effectively in policymaking processes. This is the ENHANCE Podcast, a series which focuses on learner voice, participation and inclusion in adult education. I'm Aoife, Communications Officer at SOLIDAR. The series is part of the ENHANCE Project, a project co-funded by the European Union which works to support democratic practices in education and to strengthen the role of learners in shaping their learning environments. Here is my conversation with Marcos and Brikena. Thank you both for joining me today. First, I will ask you to introduce yourselves. Maybe I will pass to Marcos first.

Marcos Ros Sempere: Hello, everyone. I am Marcos Ros, a Spanish Member of the European Parliament in the Group of the Socialists and Democrats, and I belong to the Committee on Culture and Education. I have been involved in education and youth participation and engagement during the five years that I have served as a Member of the European Parliament.

Aoife Coyne: And now I'll hand over to you, Brikena, if you'd like to introduce yourself.

Brikena Shomaki: Hello everyone and thank you for having me. I'm Brikena, the director of the Lifelong Learning Platform, the European Civil Society for Education and Training, which is an umbrella organization gathering all education and training stakeholders from early ages throughout life, so in elder ages as well. And I've been also quite engaged in the youth organization students movement before I joined the Lifelong Learning Platform.

Aoife Coyne: Great, thank you both. So perhaps we can start by talking about how participatory processes can ensure that learner voices are heard in the policy making process.

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So Marcos, first I'll turn to you. How have you found as a policy maker that civil society can be involved to ensure that participatory processes include diverse learner voices, perhaps with a particular emphasis on those voices from more underrepresented backgrounds?

Marcos Ros Sempere: First of all, let me remind everyone that our treaties, especially Article 11 of the Treaty of the European Union, oblige the European Union and its institutions to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society. An article of an international treaty cannot be ignored, cannot be a footnote, and cannot be a wishful thought. They are very important to us, and we have to push for compliance with these articles. That being said, I think that European institutions have developed a lot of instruments and tools, like the EU Youth Dialogue, the Youth Check, the Youth Test, the Conference of the Future of Europe, the Direct Access. But I think that the freshest ideas always come from outside, from civil society organizations. They cannot always come from the majority or from privileged neighborhoods, but from people who are marginalised or underrepresented. We have to recognize that democracy does not only live in institutions; we have to encourage societies to go out, to make on-site consultations, and to try to reach these underrepresented or marginalized communities one by one — not staying at home or in the office, but going outside and making direct contact with these communities. For this, I think it is very important to take civil society organizations into consideration and encourage them to engage specifically with these communities.

Aoife Coyne: Brikena, would you like to pick up on anything that was said there? And in particular, I suppose with regard to civil society and its role in bringing diverse voices to the policy making process, what strategies have proved effective in engaging learners in policy making processes in your experience?

Brikena Shomaki: I would agree with Marcos in what he shared, and I would add that the beauty of democracy lies in the diversity of forms one has to participate in society. But to our understanding and knowledge, after the family, the classroom is the first space where democracy takes place and should be nurtured and taught. We believe that it is very important for education and training institutions, from an early age, to encourage these kinds of democratic structures and to have democratic structures in place so that learners can participate and defend their rights from a very early age. I think it is very important to have this democratic culture throughout the entire education and training system, and that it gives learners the opportunity and encouragement to participate in society through civil society organizations. There are plenty of community organizations surrounding schools, universities, training centers, and other formal learning environments, where learners can engage in different ways, advocate for different rights, and participate actively in society. So I think we need to encourage more of that and make sure that the barriers for participating are also taken

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out. I remember myself as a student representative when I first started university in Italy. I was a foreign student, and I could not be elected at Senate level as a student representative because I was a foreigner. So, there are many obstacles. This is probably more related to a migration background, but there are plenty of other barriers, such as social and economic ones, that do not encourage learners to engage in civil society, student movements, or youth movements more generally. So, this is very important, and it is also important that enabling environments are in place to make that possible.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Birkena. So you spoke a little bit there about the barriers that learners can face when trying to engage in or get involved in the policy-making process. How do you think that civil society and policy makers can work together to overcome these barriers? And this is a question for both of you, but maybe I can start with you, Brikena, if you'd like to develop this a bit further.

Brikena Shomaki: I think it's a difficult question in the sense that, by default, we are there to create those spaces, overcome those barriers, and engage as many learners, citizens, and people as possible in civil society. But in fact, not all of us and not to the extent that we should are inclusive enough. And that has different aspects and it's something that we need to continue working on, how to become more inclusive organizations. For instance, that is something we are currently working on with the Lifelong Learning Platform: how to make our organizations more inclusive by training staff to introduce more engaging and inclusive approaches to get younger generations - or all generations - actively involved in civil society. I think we also have to rethink the way we are structured and the way we welcome new people in, especially nowadays, when younger generations have different forms of participation, such as social media and all sorts of online engagement. And so, they don't see anymore the usual traditional civil society structures as fitting for them. And it's important that they can actually find themselves in civil society. I think we don't have the answer to how we can do that yet, but we need to work on that. And we need to join forces. There are plenty of examples of organizations, especially in the youth movement, where they try to introduce solidarity funds and solidarity actions in order to allow organizations or people who are disadvantaged and face barriers to participation to overcome them. So this is one way of doing it. The other way is to reach out and have inclusion and diversity strategies in our organizations to make sure that everyone can engage and is not discriminated against for any reason. I think these are probably some first important steps that we need to take and there is a lot of work still to be done for us to be fully inclusive. We also need the support of policy-makers to do that because that depends a lot on the capacity and resources we have. Our resources are very scarce, as are our capacities sometimes, especially when it comes to becoming more inclusive and building robust structures that are diverse and inclusive. So we need to work together to make that possible.

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Aoife Coyne: Maybe on this point, I can turn to you then, Marcos. How do you see the cooperation between civil society and policymakers in this regard? And how can institutions really foster spaces for meaningful participation?

Marcos Ros Sempere: I think that Brikena has already some key points that I fully share, but I think that as policymakers and civil society organizations we are already working together, what I think is much more necessary is to strengthen this work. So I don't think that we are not working together and we need to work together. I think that we need to strengthen the ways in which we are doing that now. For example, I can mention the Youth Check initiative, which is a useful tool to ensure that the impact of new policies we are developing at EU level - whether in the Parliament, the Council, or the Commission - is properly assessed. This type of assessment tool should be strengthened and applied to everything, not only as a pilot action. Okay, we have made some checks, but we need to go further. It is very similar for advisory bodies' opinions and programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. They already show how CSOs can work together, as there are interim revisions that take into account what CSOs say and so on. So I think that, for us, it is very important because CSOs bring perspectives from the ground, from reality, into the institutions. In some cases, these are perspectives that institutions do not fully capture, because even if we try to stay in close contact with reality, CSOs are more directly connected to it as it is your daily work. I think that policymakers must recognize and give CSOs the tools, resources, and spaces to be part of the process. But this is not a privilege or a favor, but a democratic obligation and a way to design better policies. So sometimes we receive criticism that we are privileging NGOs or CSOs or giving them funding. But this is very far from being a privilege or a favor. It is a way to improve the policies that we need to adopt and implement.

Aoife Coyne: Moving away a little bit from how this cooperation works in practice and focusing more on policy design and processes, what policy frameworks or guidelines support the integration of learners' voices into policymaking? And Marcos, I can come to you first here: what kind of policy frameworks are effective in this regard, and how can policymakers ensure that civil society and learners are meaningfully participating in the development of these policies?

Marcos Ros Sempere: I have been dealing with education all my life because I'm also a professor, and I am very close to young people at university. I think that education in all levels is our silver bullet. It can create everything that we want. And I think that we have to improve civic learning during the school years. For example, we advocated during the past term for the implementation of European citizenship education in all school levels of the European Union. This can plant the seed of participation because civic education teaches that democracy is only real when as many people as possible take part. But we cannot only plant a seed, we need to water this seed. We need to take care of this seed and to see how the tree is growing. We need

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to create permanent spaces where people are truly listening. I think that we cannot work without education. I think that good education is a fundamental tool. But we have to be honest, quality education is not cheap, it's expensive. We have to improve our budget - national, regional, local and European Union budget - to improve our civic learning or citizenship education. I also think that civil society organizations have the responsibility to remind policymakers that we must be very aware and invest in education, because otherwise we will have a society that falls into hate speech, disinformation, populism, and extremism, as we are currently seeing across Europe. I think it's very important to create environments that encourage, as you were asking, meaningful learner participation.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you, Marcos. And turning then to you, Brikena, if you'd like to pick up on anything that was said there and in particular about how civil society and policymakers can work together to design processes that really respond to the needs of learners.

Brikena Shomaki: I wanted to say that I fully agree with Marcos on the role of education and it being crucial for building democratic societies and engaging young and all people actually. I would fully agree with that, and with the fact that we need to create the right spaces, because education alone will not be enough if there is no space to practice and no structures where you can put that learning into practice. That is very important. And for that to happen, in my opinion, and this is where we can work more closely with civil society and policymakers, there is one important step to take: to recognize the rich diversity of learning environments. This means going beyond traditional schools, looking at where people learn, how they learn, and for what purposes. It also means broadening the definition of learning environments and recognizing the value of all these spaces, including civil society as a learning space. I think this is a very important step to take. And then we can see how different policies can address different needs in different spaces. Together with policymakers, we can advocate for and achieve a more holistic approach to education in our EU policies. By holistic, I mean policies that reach people in different environments, in different ways, and that are responsive to their needs. That is very important. And in terms of how we can work together, there are already plenty of initiatives that we are working on with Marcos, and on which we will continue to collaborate. You mentioned a very important threat facing civil society currently in the European Parliament. It is very important that we continue to work together to change and correct the narrative, and to trust civil society as a key partner rather than the opposite. We should also work together on policies such as the Union of Skills, which foresees, among its actions, the provision of basic skills for citizens in Europe. Within that, citizenship education, for instance, and citizenship skills are also considered basic skills for individuals. This is therefore a policy file we will need to continue working on. And then I think a very important policy file we need to work on together is the upcoming EU budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework, and within it the key programme

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that supports citizens' engagement, young and older people alike: Erasmus+. It is a flagship EU initiative that we need to ensure continues, is strengthened, and expanded, and that will be an important step towards a more democratic society. So yes, this is probably an area where we can continue to work together.

Aoife Coyne: You both touched on what's already in place at EU level in this regard. So maybe we can speak more about what more can be done. What do you think that the EU can do more to support Member States and civil society within the Member States to implement participatory processes that include learner voices?

Brikena Shomaki: If we look at the current discussions on the next EU budget, I think what the EU can do is truly mainstream support for civil society and ensure that they can play their role effectively by strengthening their capacities and providing them with the resources they need to do so, in cooperation with Member States and with authorities at national, regional, and local level. Because in fact, local authorities have a lot to say as well. So we need to really look at the different governance structures that will enable all of that to take place. It is very important that the EU supports this in the next EU budget and ensures that it is truly mainstreamed. There will indeed be Agora EU, which is dedicated to civil society, but we still believe this is only one solution among many, and that we need to mainstream support for civil society across all EU programs and budgets. We should ensure a key role for civil society in the implementation of policies, in raising awareness about those policies, and in bringing in learners' voices. And for that, we play a key role in the implementation of policies and in raising awareness. Without us, the EU cannot reach learners, and we are key actors in ensuring that learners have a voice and the right to express it in relation to EU-level policies.

Aoife Coyne: Coming to you then, Marcos, from the policy making perspective, what more do you believe the EU can do to support Member States and civil society in this regard?

Marcos Ros Sempere: Well, I think the EU has done a lot to support Member States and regional and local authorities. European institutions have made significant efforts, and they share the same view: participation must be real, not just symbolic. So I think we need to strengthen this idea. We know that if we have clear and open channels showing how young people's input is used, and if their involvement becomes a regular part of policymaking, it should not just be a one-time event after which we forget the conclusions that were reached. I think that the real challenge now is not to create more declarations, decisions, or legislation, but to ensure that the many we already have are applied consistently and effectively at every level, and that they integrate people's voices into institutions. Maybe we can stop creating more legislation and instead focus on building evaluation systems, monitoring mechanisms, and surveys to assess how existing policies are functioning. I think this is very important because

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sometimes politicians - I have to admit - we design a policy, make a declaration, take a decision, or adopt a regulation, but then we leave them behind and do not check whether they are actually working. We do not carry out evaluations, and we do not conduct broad surveys among communities in specific areas or across the European Union. It is very important to have this feedback. I think that in terms of intention, we have done a lot, and we have a very clear path marked out for collaboration between CSOs, Member States, regional and local authorities, and the European Union institutions. We have everything in place, but we now need to implement it effectively and evaluate how it is working in order to improve it. I think this is the path we have ahead of us for the coming years.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you both. To finish up then, this can be a moment to reflect on your own experiences. Can you maybe share an example of a situation in which learner input significantly influenced a policy decision and what was the outcome of this? And Marcos, if you'd like to go first, if you have something in mind.

Marcos Ros Sempere: Yes, for sure. I think that, for example, during the Conference on the Future of Europe, young people submitted proposals and focused on digitalization and sustainability, and afterwards the main political strategies of the European Union also addressed digitalization and sustainability. So we really listen when we open a genuine process. I think that we do listen to young people. Sometimes when I go to schools or high schools and give a talk, young students aged 12, 13, or 14 ask me a lot about climate change, the environment, and the future. I tell them that, for many Fridays, they stood at the doors of parliaments all around the world, and we have listened to them. So when there is a process, formal or informal—because this was the case with Fridays for Future, which was not a formal participatory process—it is still a process where we try to listen to young people's voices and engage with them. The same applies to the 2022 European Union Youth Dialogue. Young people contributed to national consultations and the European conference. They shared their perspectives, and their input was incorporated into the 2022 Council conclusions on the interim Erasmus+ programme evaluation. The feedback that comes from CSOs and citizens is used every time to adjust or readjust programme priorities. In this case, for example, there was an increased focus on inclusion and diversity, and on improving access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These priorities came from students and Erasmus+ organizations. So I think that when we establish a clear participatory process, we take the results of that process and incorporate young people's voices into subsequent decisions, legislation, or regulations.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you. And for Brikena, then, if I can turn to you, do you have an example in mind of when a learner voice has shaped a policy decision?

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Brikena Shomaki: Like Marcos said as well, I think there are plenty of good examples. I don't have one particular case in mind, but I could mention, for instance, the recent consultations on the Union of Skills, where we were regularly consulted as stakeholders, including learners' organizations, in shaping that agenda. What I mentioned before about basic skills and citizenship education was something we raised as a major concern, and we believe we were heard to some extent, because it was indeed included. So that was a success in terms of raising our concerns as learners' organizations and being heard. Another aspect that we also raised, and where we believe we were heard to some extent, was the call for community lifelong learning centers, creating spaces to get closer to disadvantaged learners of all ages. This is now reflected, to some extent, in the Union of Skills agenda, and we are very happy that this was possible. There are also plenty of other examples from the past in relation to Erasmus+. Like Marcos said, we have often been heard, perhaps not to the extent we would have liked, but we still managed to secure an increase in the budget that we were asking for, because there were many learners who wanted the opportunity to go abroad or to benefit from Erasmus+ opportunities. The demand is high, and we asked for a higher budget. Even if the increase was not as large as we had hoped, it still came in a very difficult financial context for the EU, so that is also a sign that we were heard. So I believe there are many good examples. Of course, there may also be frustrations and cases where we did not fully meet expectations, but there is room for improvement for everyone.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you very much to you both for your insights and for giving us a super fruitful discussion there. Before we finish up, are there any final comments you'd like to make?

Marcos Ros Sempere: As a final comment, I would say that we have many challenges ahead. We still have four years ahead in this mandate, but the main discussion on the table right now is the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Some may think that the MFF is only a budgetary document, but in reality, the budget is the main tool that shapes the direction of policy. So now is the time for policymakers, but it is also the time for CSOs to push policymakers to improve the proposal that has come from the European Commission. In terms of culture and education, the proposal is not as weak as in other areas, but we still need to improve it. We need to strengthen the budget for Erasmus+ initiatives, and we need a specific budget for civic participation, youth engagement, and related programs in the coming years in the European Union. And as a final comment, do not hesitate to count on policymakers, because we are here to listen to our voters, but also to CSOs, to all organizations, and to all communities, especially learners and the most disadvantaged communities. We will take their voice and make it heard inside the European Parliament and defend the interests of participation and improve the daily lives of learners, because I think it is fundamental to have quality education and quality participation all across the European Union.

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