

**Guidebook on co-creation and reflexive policy making**  
**Synthesis of the UPLIFT WP4 Results**

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UPLIFT – Urban PoLicy Innovation to address  
inequality with and for Future generaTions

## Deliverable 4.8

# Guidebook on co-creation and reflexive policy making

*Synthesis of the UPLIFT WP4 Results*

March 2023



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# 1 Introduction

This Guidebook is the final deliverable of the work package 4 (WP4) of the UPLIFT project. The overall aim of this work package was to explore how young people's voices can be put at the centre of youth policy. In order to do this, we carried out four parallel policy co-creation processes with young people in four different locations across Europe, each with a different focus – education, housing and NEET youth. The process took the best part of three years and involved several institutional stakeholders, as well as dozens of young people. This deliverable is a comprehensive outlook of the WP4 work in all four locations – Tallin, Sfântu Gheorghe, Barakaldo and Amsterdam.

It aims to compare the participatory work that has been done in the four WP4 locations and highlight the lessons we have learned from these processes. The final objective is to reflect on the value of co-creation as a method for participatory policy-making and to provide a series of recommendations for researchers, policy-makers and other organizations who would like to engage in a co-creation effort.

The first part of the Guidebook outlines the theoretical framework for Reflexive Policy Making. Chapter 3 addresses the general methodological approach we used, while Chapter 4 presents the context of each of the four locations. The subsequent five chapters address all the phases of the co-creation process: the preparation (Chapter 5), the setting up of a Youth Board (Chapter 6), the coordination and moderation of the process (Chapter 7), the formulation of a Reflexive Policy Agenda (Chapter 8), and its implementation (Chapter 9). For each of these phases we describe the activities and peculiarities of each location and compare them. Finally, in Chapter 10 we reflect on each aspect of the co-creation based on our experience. The final section also provides a critical evaluation of the added value of policy co-creation.

The Guidebook is based on two previous deliverables, the *Action Plans* (D4.1) and their updated version (D4.2), as well as on the *Individual Reflexive Policy Agenda* of each location, where more detailed information on each co-creation process can be found. The Guidebook is also connected to a *Policy Brief on the Application of Reflexive Policy Making* and to the *Training Material on the Reflexive Policy Agenda*. All the deliverables can be found in the [Research and Policy section](#) of the UPLIFT website.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the co-creation efforts of WP4 connects four different approaches: the capability approach (Section 2.1), participatory action research (Section 2.2), policy-co-creation (Section 2.3) and reflexivity (Section 2.4). While they might seem conceptually separate, these approaches come together in the work of WP4, as the co-creation process relies on the active participation of young people in order to enhance their capabilities and co-create a shared reflexive policy agenda. In Section 2.5 we outline how we combined and integrated the aforementioned approaches in what we call reflexive policy-making.

### 2.1 Capability approach

The Capability Approach (CA) is a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and normative approach for interpreting and measuring human development, poverty, inequality and well-being. It takes into account the complex relationships between resources, social context, individual conditions, individual preferences and actual choice behaviour. As such, it is one of the preferred theoretical lenses through which the UPLIFT project conceptualizes well-being and inequality and it played a particularly important role in WP3 and WP4.

The CA emerged in the 1980s as a new comprehensive multidimensional approach in reaction to the strong dominance of welfare economics and utilitarian approaches in poverty and inequality research. The CA argues that these traditional approaches towards poverty and inequality have focused too much on resources (income, wealth) and utility (desire-fulfilment, satisfaction) as indicators of human well-being. According to the CA, such a perspective is incomplete and potentially misleading (Kimhur, 2020). CA scholars argue that individual well-being is dependent on a complex interplay between various factors: objective and subjective, societal and individual, economic and non-economic. According to the CA, social policies should primarily have an empowering role. They should try to safe-guard and strengthen the capability set of people so that these people can make their own choices and live a meaningful and fulfilled life (Alkire, 2002).

Of key importance in the CA are the so-called capabilities that a person has. These capabilities are defined as the "real freedoms to lead the kind of life people have reason to value" (Sen, 1999). The so-called capability set of a person refers to the alternative combinations of so-called functionings that are feasible for this person to achieve. In this respect, functionings can be defined as the "various things a person may value being or doing" (Kimhur, 2020, p.4). Examples of functionings are: being nourished, being employed, having children, being healthy, being happy, being well-housed, having self-respect and being able to take part in the life of the community (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Capabilities and functionings are closely linked. The functionings show what people actually are (beings) or do (doings) – as well as what they would like to be or do – whereas the capabilities refer to the ability to achieve these beings or doings.

Having capabilities implies that a person has the freedom to achieve valuable functionings as an active agent, and not because he/she is coerced to do so (Kimhur, 2020). Therefore, capabilities should be seen as real rights, real freedoms and real opportunities. Which functionings people eventually choose from their capability set depends on their individual preferences. In the CA framework, these preferences constitute the link between the capabilities and the chosen functionings.

#### *What determines people's capabilities?*

The capabilities that people enjoy are strongly dependent on both individual and contextual (structural) factors. First of all, the so-called resources are of great importance, particularly on an individual level. Resources refer to the material aids (income, goods, services) that a person can mobilize in order to live the life that he/she wants to live. Together with the formal legal rights (e.g. the rights enshrined in the constitution) that people enjoy, resources constitute the formal freedoms that people have.

Before they feed into a person's capability set, formal freedoms are moderated by so-called conversion factors. Conversion factors refer to the fact that different individuals have different abilities to convert material aids and formal rights into valuable opportunities (Kimhur, 2020). Personal and group specific characteristics may result in remarkable interpersonal and intergroup variations in the conversion of resources into the freedom to achieve alternative lives. Individuals do neither have the same need for resources, nor have the same abilities to convert resources into real freedoms (Volkert & Schneider, 2012).

Conversion factors refer to personal characteristics as well as to social circumstances. On a personal level, individual features such as gender, ethnicity, intelligence, social skills and level of (financial) literacy determine to what extent people are able to transform their resources and formal rights into valuable opportunities. For instance, with the same level of resources, one may expect that a healthy person has more capabilities than a sick or disabled person who is constrained by its health situation (Volkert & Schneider, 2012). On a social level, social norms and social practices (real rights as opposed to the formal rights that are seen as part of the resources) are relevant conversion factors. Examples of social conversion factors are social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies and power relations (Volkert & Schneider, 2012). Just as the personal conversion factors, social conversion factors work out differently for different (groups of) people. For example, gender inequality may be a limiting conversion factor for women, whereas discrimination may limit the conversion possibilities for ethnic minorities. On top of the individual and social conversion factors, Robeyns (2005) considers environmental/geographical factors such as climate or geographic location as a third type of conversion factors. In the CA, socio-economic vulnerability tends to be seen as the result of a specific combination of lack of resources, constraining conversion factors and (a resulting) lack of free choice (Hearne & Murphy, 2019).

#### *Applying the capability approach to participatory research, social innovation and public service provision*



It is important to note that the CA can serve very well as an evaluation instrument for policy makers, but it can also offer a valuable research framework for academic researchers. After all, by investigating how resources are converted into capabilities, thereby unravelling relevant conversion factors, structural causes of inequity and injustice may come to light (Kimhur, 2020).

In the last few years, the CA has gained traction for these very reasons, and it has been used in several fields of both research and policymaking. Mainly it is used in social and health policy for youth and children, very often coupled with participatory processes and action research (Hart & Brando, 2018; Clark et al., 2019; Shearn et al., 2021), and in social innovation and management work (Batista & Correia, 2021; Howaldt & Schwartz, 2017).

In this regard, the CA has proven quite valuable in measuring the impact of social interventions and of social purpose organizations (White, 2018). In their work on social innovation, Von Jacobi et al. (2017) explain that social innovation truly capable of tackling marginalization depends on the participation of marginalized groups in policy design and implementation, in order to incorporate also their value sets in the policymaking process. In this way, social innovation is grounded in the doings and beings that all individuals, including marginalized ones, have reason to value, in the true spirit of the CA.

With regard to youth and children, involving them in participatory projects based on the CA has several advantages, both moral and methodological. From a moral point of view, participation in such processes may broaden their capabilities and opportunities, as well as upholding their right to be fully involved in the design and implementation of measures and services that affect them directly (Shearn et al., 2021).

From a methodological point of view, participation of specific, and often neglected, groups of users results in more effective solutions that better reflect their particular needs. Moreover, young people can provide original ideas, which, combined with the expertise and knowledge of other stakeholders, can produce interesting outcomes (Shearn et al., 2021).

#### *Policy implications of the capability approach in UPLIFT*

In WP4, new policy initiatives that intend to diminish urban inequality are co-created together with young people through participatory research. Because of the strong focus that it puts on agency, the CA very well supports such a research approach (see also Hearne & Murphy, 2019). The main objective of WP4 is to give young people a real voice in local policy making. Through co-creation techniques, young people are involved in the various phases of the policy-making process: problem definition, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

In this process the young people:

- Are taken seriously by the policy-makers. This aims to empower them and raise their self-esteem;
- Have the opportunity to express their needs and desires with regard to a given policy domain. This is expected to result in policies that better fit their needs;

- Gain valuable insights into the policy making process. This may have an added value for both their personal life and their professional career.

All the above objectives refer to enhancing the capabilities and/or functionings that young people have. Therefore, framed in terms of the CA, the co-creation process that is the core of WP4 aims to increase the capabilities and real freedoms (life chances) of both the young people taking part in the process and, in the long term, also of young people in general – by means of promoting a shift in policy focus and measures more tailored to their actual needs.

## 2.2 Participatory action research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was founded in the work of Kurt Lewin (1946 and 1952), who coined the term “action research,” and is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand human experiences. However, it goes beyond understanding; it also attempts to take constructive action in order to ameliorate difficult, often oppressive, situations (Olshansky, 2005). In PAR, the participants (who would normally be considered the “objects of the research”) act as co-researchers so that they might come “to a critical form of thinking about their world” (Freire, 1970). Thus, PAR refers to a social process where people engage in, examine and interpret their own social world, shaping their sense of identity.

McTaggart (1997) highlights the distinction between “involvement” and “participation”. He states that authentic participation means that the participants share “in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world” (p. 28). This is in contrast to being merely “involved” in research, where one does not have ownership in the project.

Instead, PAR aims to be an empowering process that requires collaborative reflection and that helps people understand and challenge the social structures which “limit their self-development and self-determination” (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998: 24). The approach can be summarised in seven key features:

- PAR investigates the relationship between the individual and the social;
- PAR is participatory in the sense that people engage in, examine and interpret their own social world, shaping their own sense of identity;
- PAR is practical and collaborative; it engages and connects with others in social interactions;
- PAR is emancipatory and empowering;
- PAR entails a process of critical reflection on the participants’ own situation;
- PAR is recursive (reflexive, dialectical), as it requires ongoing reflection on the contradictions of the social world that shapes the condition of the participants;
- PAR is expected to result in constructive action that improves the situation of the research participants.

The value and usefulness of the PAR approach lies not just in the knowledge it creates but also in its more inclusive way of generating such knowledge. This form of new knowledge (co)creation aims to challenge embedded, and often implicit, (biased) knowledges or assumptions employed in social policy. As such, it offers the possibility to reposition 'the researched' from being a 'social problem' to become 'a community of valorised and normatively legitimate subjectivities' (Farragua & Gerrard, 2016).

### *Youth Participatory Action Research*

A particular form of PAR is Youth Participatory Action Research (see Desai, 2019), an approach that promotes the engagement of young people in social policy research, giving voice to youth's concerns, and promoting activities that meet the needs of local youth within a community. It has mostly been applied in disadvantaged communities, thus teaching young people from marginalized backgrounds how to inquire about complex power relations, socio-economic struggle, and the consequences that larger structures of oppression can have on their lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). In the most advanced versions of YPAR youth are involved in all aspects of the research cycle: from formulating research questions to collecting and analyzing data to presenting findings and offering key recommendations that lead to social action and meaningful change (Mirra et al., 2016), but this can change depending on the project. Regardless of the proportion of participation, what is fundamental is the quality of the participation (McIntyre, 2007): YPAR aims to provide marginalized youth with an opportunity to exercise their agency by being civically engaged, developing their critical consciousness, and learning how to advocate for themselves and for oppressed communities (Dolan et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2017).

The methodology often used in PAR is recursive, and is often represented as a spiral of iterative steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, observation and the evaluation of the result of the action (McTaggart, 1997; McIntyre 2007). The work of WP4 is inspired by the principles of PAR, as it aims to empower young people and involve them in the process of policy co-creation, thus teaching them about complex interrelations and giving them the tools to have their voice heard in social policy making and enhancing their capabilities. However, due to the characteristics of UPLIFT – a large European project with many predefined objectives and actors – it was not fully possible to involve young people in the definition of the research questions or in the collection of data. Thus, it cannot be said – or at least not for all locations – that young people in UPLIFT acted as co-researchers. Nonetheless, the Youth Boards in the various locations had the possibility to focus the co-creation work on the topics they felt were most important within the larger themes proposed by the initiators of the process. Also, they co-produced knowledge and formulated analyses that went beyond their personal situation.

## 2.3 Policy co-creation

Current societal problems such as economic and environmental crises, failing educational systems and housing affordability issues are regarded as wicked problems, as they are complex and ambiguous in both their resolution and in the understanding of their underlying causes. In order to overcome the weakness of many policy responses to such complex problems and to meaningfully engage with them, the last decades have seen a pluralization of policymaking, in which government decision makers are not alone, but sit at the centre of a web of policy advisors from several sectors, from business and for-profit, to no-profit and citizens groups (Craft & Howlett, 2013). The increased presence of diverse stakeholders in the policymaking world is based on the idea that interest organisations and think tanks can enrich policy capacity and promote innovation (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017).

Within this trend, a new emphasis has been placed on innovation labs, or policy labs, as a way to enhance the capacity for public problem solving (McGann et al., 2019). They can be defined as “new organizational arrangements” (Timeus & Gascó, 2018) for enabling more experimental and user-focused approaches to public policy and service design. According to several authors, innovation labs draw on design inspired creative processes (e.g. human-centred design, ethnographic research) to generate and test policy solutions, in an iterative process that is carried out together with policy or service ‘users’ – or, more broadly, citizens (Nesti, 2018; Lewis et al., 2019; McGann et al., 2018).

This strong focus on incorporating user-driven perspectives is what differentiates innovation or policy labs from other, more traditional, forms of stakeholders’ involvement in policymaking. Indeed, these policy labs often aim to bring “into view the experiences and worlds of people affected” by different policies (Kimbell, 2016, pag. 316), in a shift from traditional models of public administration where citizens are mere passive policy consumers. According to McGann et al. (2019), despite being a top-down form of citizen involvement, the labs are emblematic of co-productive models of public problem-solving, and their proliferation indicates a shift towards co-productive governance models. This reflects longer-term trends in public management and administration. Indeed, public management and public service theory have been engaging with co-production and co-creation for decades (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Brandsen et al., 2018; McGann et al., 2019).

Within the public management context these terms capture a wide variety of practices and activities that entail the voluntary and active involvement of end-users. In the literature, the main difference between co-production and co-creation is that the latter puts more emphasis on generating value by and for end-users (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), but they are empirically used as interchangeable concepts. In co-creation, citizens are involved as partners, and their knowledge and experience are mobilized to a varying degree and in various stages of the design, management, and delivery of public sector activities – from simple co-implementers all the way to co-designers (Voorberg et al., 2015). The public sector activity where co-creation is most used is service delivery (Fledderus et al., 2014), but increasingly also regulatory

formulation and the co-creation of policy solutions to complex problems (Torfing et al., 2019). In this regard, Loeffler & Bovaird (2019) emphasize that it is important to engage the participating citizens with the most appropriate skills and knowledge. Specifically, it must be taken into account that citizens who are keen to use their voice are not always 'experts by experience', whereas the real 'experts by experience', in particular those from disadvantaged groups, do not always have the self-confidence to use their voice and are not always keen to have their activities scrutinised and debated.

The benefits of co-creation in public management and service delivery include building trust in institutions (Fledderus et al., 2014); enhancing democratic accountability in policymaking (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Durose & Richardson, 2016), and strengthening social cohesion by empowering marginalized groups (Torfing et al., 2019). Essentially, what emerges from the literature is that the involvement of citizens in co-creation is considered intrinsically valuable, a goal in itself, regardless of the quality or effectiveness of its outputs (McGann et al., 2019). Indeed, one of the key outstanding empirical questions concerning co-creation is whether this approach to public problem solving actually delivers solutions that 'address the needs of citizens in a robust way' (Voorberg et al., 2015).

But co-creation also has potential disadvantages and dark sides. Co-production processes can be co-opted by groups or organisations trying to legitimise their discourse. Moreover, also public institutions or officials themselves can use the co-creation process for this purpose. Indeed, the formal regulation mechanisms of "top-down" co-production in public service management affect power dynamics within the co-creation process. These can result in situations in which the very citizens that are supposed to be empowered are actually being co-opted and used for different purposes (Bovaird et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is a risk that the use of co-production in policymaking could incentivise a "piecemeal strategy" that focuses on narrow interventions, comfortably ignoring the causes of complex problems (Bovaird et al., 2019).

## 2.4 Reflexive policy-making

Many different definitions of the term reflexivity can be found in the literature on governance and policymaking, all slightly different, but all pertaining to the idea of self-critical reflection (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). Reflexivity has to do with the ability of consciously understanding concepts, assumptions and presuppositions and change them if necessary (Stirling, 2006; Malthouse et al., 2014), as well as with the ability to recognize our own influence on what kind of knowledge we create and how (Neil & Pascal, 2012). It is an expansive way of learning, leading to a change in perception and behaviour (Sol et al., 2018). Moreover, reflexivity can also be conceptualized as a strategy of dealing with complexity: "*the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action*" (Mezirow, 1991, pag. 162). In this sense, being reflexive can be an effective strategy to successfully deal with situations where divergences and conflicts can rise (Sol et al., 2018). Reflexivity can occur at an individual level, but it is at the collective level – as

social reflexivity – that it is most useful to define new concepts and courses of action (Perez, 2014). Indeed, a reflexive society should have the capacity to make existing norms and values more explicit and to consequently reframe and reorient beliefs and actions. (Wals et al., 2009). This can be defined as a social learning process (Reed et al., 2010).

Reflexive approaches to governance and policymaking systematically raise doubts about existing assumptions and practices and seek to find an enlightened alternative (Perez, 2014). They have the potential to unlock the implicit understandings and biases that different actors hold and use this to generate improved knowledge for future practice (Malthouse et al., 2014). Indeed, the term “reflexive governance” has come to define governance arrangements where institutions allow for a reflexive adaptation of regulations and procedures or where citizens have some capability to affect the design or implementation of governance procedures (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). Because of its focus on institutional change and innovation, the concept of reflexive governance has been significantly developed in scholarly discussions about environmental and sustainability policy, governance and transition (see Feindt & Weiland, 2018 for an overview of the specific fields of application and relevant literature). From these discussions, a number of key characteristics of reflexive governance emerge:

- It occurs where institutional and procedural arrangements involve actors from various levels of governance and/or various backgrounds and practical contexts;
- It implies an effort to reflect on and possibly adapt cognitive and normative beliefs;
- It strives to take into account and acknowledge alternative understandings of the problems;
- It strives to integrate multiple approaches to problem solution.

In this sense, co-productive models of governance can be considered a specific form of reflexive governance in which the transformation of existing information and assumptions into new interpretation and action happens by involving citizens in the reflection and evaluation process, as well as incorporating their role in the institutional arrangements (Sol et al., 2018).

## **2.5 Reflexive policy-making in UPLIFT**

The approach taken by UPLIFT in WP4 brings together different aspects of all the theoretical and methodological concepts discussed so far. While the more precise methods used in each implementation site are informed by the specific research questions and the policy domain involved, the basic approach is the same across all sites and it aims to enable collective processes of co-creation of policy with youth as the target group that can then translate into potential action for social change.

Inspired by concepts of reflexivity and reflexive governance, the work in WP4 aims to achieve a dialectical process between research practitioners, young people and institutional stakeholders in order to critically reframe the understanding of issues in several policy areas and co-create alternative options for policy approaches. We call this co-creation process

**Reflexive Policy-making.** In this sense, the process of co-creation is in many ways similar to that conceptualised in public management, but also different in some respects. By combining principles of participatory action research and policy co-creation we attempted to come to an approach that, despite being research driven, still afforded young people the ability to shape the process to their interest. The reflexive and iterative methodologies that are used in WP4 strive to empower young participants, to give them agency and a sense of ownership of the project.

In many instances of participatory and co-creation research, the work stops once a policy agenda is formulated. In UPLIFT we attempt to go a step further. On the one hand, the project is clearly interested in the process of co-creation itself; How can we engage young people? Which methods have the best potential for stimulating creativity? What institutional structures are most adequate for facilitating the co-creation process? But on the other hand, we are also deeply concerned with the outcome of the co-creation process – the so-called Reflexive Policy Agenda. To what extent does the process really result in innovative and effective policies that address the concerns of the young vulnerable citizens in a satisfactory way? To what extent are the policy-makers really prepared to take the outcome of the co-creation process seriously and implement the policies that are proposed? And if so, how should the new policies be monitored and evaluated in order to safeguard true reflexivity?

Last but not least, the WP4 research has an empowering and capability enhancing nature, as it aims to empower young people so that they can potentially improve the policies that are relevant for them. However, the empowerment of young people is not only a means. It is also a goal in its own right and it can provide a direct contribution to young people's well-being. Indeed, when collective and individual agency is enabled through participation, vulnerable young people become involved in decisions that affect their lives, something which in turn enhances their capabilities (Walker, 2018; Walker & Loots, 2018).

## 3 Methodological approach

### 3.1 Generic approach of the co-creation process

Based on the theoretical notions discussed in Chapter 2, all the UPLIFT partners followed a general approach for structuring and shaping the policy co-creation process. Important elements in this approach are the structural and inclusive involvement of a representative group of young people (in UPLIFT this is called a Youth Board), a strong commitment of the participating policymakers and implementers, the use of group discussions and activities in order to stimulate engagement and creativity, and regular feedback loops between the young people and the policy makers that receive their input. In this approach, four main steps can be distinguished:

#### *1. Preparation of the co-creation process: Institutional arrangements*

In this step, the institutional and academic stakeholder network that organizes the co-creation process is set up. The objectives and the focus of the policy co-creation process are determined and the stakeholders involved make agreements on how they will collaborate.

#### *2. Involving young adults in an inclusive manner*

In the second step, decisions with regard to the recruitment, the size and the composition of the group of young people to be involved in the co-creation process are taken.

#### *3. Running and moderating the actual co-creation process*

For the actual co-creation process, decisions need to be taken with regard to the type and focus of the organized meetings and the type of interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders. Furthermore, strategies to keep the young participants engaged and committed, and make the co-creation process as inclusive as possible need to be developed.

#### *4. Assessing the impact and follow-up of the co-creation process*

A policy co-creation process is intended to have an impact at different levels. First of all, it is meant to empower the participating young people. Second, it intends to change the mind-set of the institutions that are receiving the policy advice of these young people. Third, it should strive for an outcome – what we call a Reflexive Policy Agenda – that has the potential to be implemented in practice. And last but not least, it should make an effort to ensure the continuity and durability of the collaborative framework over time. In order to assess whether these objectives are met, a well thought-through evaluation strategy is required.

### 3.2 Differences in approach between the locations

Even though the general approach for the co-creation process is the same, some important differences in approach can be distinguished between the four different locations in which it



was carried out. These differences mainly refer to the topic and the scope of the co-creation process.

As far as the topic of the process is concerned, Amsterdam and Barakaldo focus on housing, Tallinn puts an emphasis on NEET youth (young people that are not in employment, education or training), and Sfântu Gheorghe mainly deals with education.

Other differences among the locations include the way in which the young people were involved, and the interaction between the young people and the institutional stakeholders. These topics will be analysed in Chapters 6 and 7 of this Guidebook.

Despite the above differences, we think that the cases are sufficiently comparable to draw more general conclusions about the 'do's and don'ts' in the different phases of the co-creation process, which is the ultimate goal of this guidebook (see Chapter 10).

In methodological terms, the UPLIFT co-creation approach presented two large challenges. The first challenge was the creation of an institutional framework to structurally involve young people in the policy making process at the implementation sites. The establishment of this framework was a necessary condition for the second challenge: the organization of a series of successful events in which academic partners, NGO's and the local government could collaborate with the target group of young people in the co-creation process. The rest of this document describes how the different locations dealt with these challenges, and reflects on the importance of context in deciding what approach is most appropriate.

## 4 Setting the stage

This chapter gives some more insight into the target group of the co-creation process, the problems that this group experiences, as well as the general institutional and policy context in which these problems are embedded. For more detailed information, we refer to the individual Reflexive Policy Agendas as well as to the national WP2 and WP3 deliverables.

### 4.1 Sfântu Gheorghe

#### 4.1.1 Target group and their problems

In Sfântu Gheorghe, there is a relatively high rate of early school leaving and unemployment among young adults, particularly those who did not attain upper secondary education. The challenges faced by the city are similar to those faced by many other Eastern-European cities, such as outmigration of young people, lack of well-paid jobs, and increasing social inequality. The segregation in the local educational system is strong, with some schools having much better school results than others. The less-performing vocational and high schools concentrate on pupils with a vulnerable socioeconomic background and limited access to the economic and cultural resources.

The target group for the UPLIFT project is defined as youth with complex needs at risk of early school dropout and social marginalization, such as those with low socio-economic backgrounds, low educational status of parents, commuting from rural areas, lacking adequate parental care, having special educational needs and mental health issues, and/or residing in segregated Roma settlements.

#### 4.1.2 Institutional and policy context

##### *National context*

Education in Romania is based on a free and equal system, with access to education guaranteed by the Constitution. The compulsory education path consists of 10 years, including primary and upper secondary stages.

The Law of National Education No. 1/2011 emphasizes equal educational opportunities for vulnerable groups and promotes the principle of inclusive education, thereby forbidding any discriminatory criteria in the education system. Sanctions are provided for cases where children are placed in special education based on factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, language, or religion. The law also includes provisions for preventing and correcting early school leaving such as a Second Chance program.

In 2015, the government adopted a strategic framework to reduce early school leaving, which has four pillars: ensuring all children receive quality education and attend school, enforce/stimulate the completion of compulsory education, getting early school leavers back in school, and developing institutional support. The law also establishes the role of the school

mediator and allocates special places for Roma students in secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. Although there are national programs supporting these pillars, there is no available data on their implementation and success.

### *Local context*

In Sfântu Gheorghe, national educational policies are not effectively translated into local-level policies and programs. The institutions lack cooperation and coordination and there is a weak feedback loop between these institutions and their target group.

Furthermore, the local education system is highly segregated, with large differences between good schools and bad schools. The local citizens have a commonly shared understanding of this school hierarchy. Parents with more resources will enroll their children in the most reputable schools (even though the National Education Law prescribes that students should go to a school close to their residence), regardless of proximity to their home. This leads to a widening of the social gap between families.

The problem analysis highlights the following issues:

- Lack of verifiable data at the local level due to an inadequate data collection system;
- Despite their opposite intentions, the national and local education system increase social inequalities instead of reducing them;
- The local education system is not inclusive. Selection begins at an early age, primarily by parents, but becomes institutionalized by the examination system by age 13-14;
- Investments in local education are mainly infrastructural and project-based, funded by EU funds, and lack a long-term vision of how the future generations in Sfântu Gheorghe should be educated. The result of this is a lack of investment in quality management and teaching styles.

The Covasna County School Inspectorate (Sfântu Gheorghe is part of Covasna County) has implemented programs to increase school results and decrease the dropout rate. The city has benefited from "Second Chance" programs since 2005 that aim to increase the rate of (re)integration into education and training for those who left school early or have not completed compulsory education. Although the programs have supported hundreds of beneficiaries, the success rate is below expectations because of teacher reluctance and high absenteeism. The impact of these programs is not rigorously assessed, and practitioners tend to attribute their failure to the beneficiaries and their individual characteristics.

However, the transformative potential of educational institutions has been demonstrated in the WP3 study that identified a middle school that made a positive change in the lives of some of its students. This school has made significant efforts to assist parents in raising their children, and the whole staff has a focus on keeping the children in school. The school uses special training, innovative teaching methods, and a conscious and supportive relationship with parents to create an attractive environment for both students and parents.

Despite the positive example mentioned above, the prevailing assumption is that the institutional actors in the field of education in Sfântu Gheorghe lack a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, needs, and aspirations of marginalized and often discriminated youth. As a result, public policies and services do not adequately consider the cultural, economic, and social nuances and resources of this target group. However, by participating in the UPLIFT co-creation process, the Sfântu Gheorghe team has endeavored to bridge this gap.

## 4.2 Tallinn

### 4.2.1 Target group and their problems

The target group for co-creation in Tallinn is NEETs; young people aged 15-29 who are not in education, employment, or training. According to Statistics Estonia, one-tenth of all young people in the 15-29 age group are NEETs, and the trend has decreased since 2010 but increased slightly in the past two years. There are significant gender disparities among NEETs, with men being overrepresented, and one-third of all NEETs in Estonia live in Tallinn. Nevertheless, Tallinn is not the most problematic region in Estonia as regards the share and situation of the NEET youth due to its better economic positioning and lower unemployment levels compared to other regions in Estonia.

Life opportunities for NEETs are limited compared to other young age groups, and in Tallinn, the challenges for NEETs include difficulties in finding long-term employment and the high costs of housing in the capital city. The reasons for becoming a NEET vary, including lack of material opportunities, incomplete education, and long-lasting mental health problems. A specific vulnerable group are young people who migrate from the poorer parts of the country to Tallinn. They run the risk to fail in finding a long-term job, especially if their educational path has been interrupted and supportive social networks in Tallinn are missing (e.g. Helemäe, 2018).

The data from the Estonian NEET-youth program 'Prop-Up' and various other studies indicate that incomplete education, Russian-language background, living in less economically developed rural areas, long-lasting mental health problems, problematic family background, unemployment, socio-economic deprivation, and early independence are among the key risk factors that contribute to the NEET status. In many instances, these factors also reinforce each other. The socio-economic situation in Estonia has improved over the last decade, but young people from Russian-speaking families are still at higher risk of exclusion. Indeed, many youth inequalities run across linguistic lines and there is a clear separation between Russian and Estonian language schools.

The focus of the policy co-creation process is to improve the youth policy that focuses at NEETs. The process aims to enhance services related to improving educational attainment and labour market access. The idea is that a higher educational attainment also results in better

labour market and housing outcomes. Overall, the goal is to create a supportive environment that enables young people to achieve their full potential and avoid the NEET status.

## **4.2.2 Institutional and policy context**

The Estonian government has implemented several laws and policies to address the issue of NEETs in the country. These include the Youth Guarantee Estonia Action Plan, the Social Welfare Act, the Youth Work Act, and three strategies: the Welfare Development Plan, the Education Strategy, and the Youth Strategy. The government has also collaborated with different actors, such as youth work, social services, education, health, internal security, and employment and careers, to support young people at risk of NEET and those in NEET status. Three main governmental initiatives - the Youth Prop Up programme, Hoog Sisse, and the STEP-programme - were implemented before the renewed Youth Guarantee initiative came into force. The latter initiative, the Youth Guarantee Support System, is a tool for local governments to support young people in the NEET status in their areas.

In principle, there already is a good support system for NEETs available in the Estonian and Tallinn context. However, the available support does not always reach the target group. The NEET youth often struggles to find and access the support services, whereas the Youth Work professionals do not always know where they can find the NEET target group, and what their characteristics and needs are. One of the main objectives of the Tallinn co-creation process is to close this gap. For this purpose, a logbook (identifies the characteristics and needs of NEET youth), an electronic platform (gives NEET youth easy access to support services) and training materials are co-created with young people.

## **4.3 Barakaldo**

### **4.3.1 Target group and their problems**

In the Basque Country (where Barakaldo is located, next to Bilbao), young people aged between 15 and 29 are considered a group at risk of social exclusion, particularly in relation to housing, employment, education, and income. Indeed, in the Basque Country, unemployment rates are much higher among young people than among older generations; young people are disproportionately affected by precarious employment conditions (temporary job contracts); and the NEET population has increased in recent years. The local housing situation is very much influenced by the economic cycle; i.e., favourable economic cycles are characterised by better employment rates, access to credit, and savings that make it possible to improve living conditions and housing while unfavourable cycles lead to the contrary. Currently, the pandemic is affecting housing inequalities. The youth in Barakaldo are not only experiencing difficulties in terms of employability, but they are also facing housing inequalities and, in some cases, difficulties in accessing their first home, especially because of the 20% down payment needed to buy a house and the high rent prices in the private housing market. In the whole region, prices in the private market are much higher than those of social housing, which is very scarce. Indeed, although buying is still the preferred option for young people in Barakaldo,

this is often no longer possible, therefore they have to resort to renting. Since the rental market in the region is rather limited, this often means having to live in a very modest apartment. The housing possibilities of young people are strongly dependent on individual and household characteristics, such as migration background, single parenthood and having to care for minors or elderly people. Housing is a foundational aspect of life, as other relevant aspects such as education and employment often depend on it.

For these reasons, in the case of Barakaldo the main topic of the policy co-creation process is housing exclusion for young people, with a focus on housing and emancipation policies. In particular, the target group is young people aged 18 to 30 with experiences related to the difficulty of finding and accessing affordable housing in which to begin their process of emancipation and their personal life plan. This is due to the fact that most young people start to look for housing opportunities once they begin university or vocational training, which start at the age of 18.

### **4.3.2 Institutional and policy context**

The Spanish Housing Law 3/2015 recognizes the role of local public administration as a key actor to guarantee the right to housing. Similarly, the Law confers specific competences to local administrations with regard to the organisation, promotion, management, adjudication and control of housing, as well as the provisional measures and interventions to guarantee the proper use of buildings and the fulfilment of their social function and, finally, the exercise of sanctioning powers in housing matters. Moreover, the Basque Housing Law recognises the subjective right of citizens to housing, which basically means that the public administration must provide dwellings to citizens. As such, the local housing policy context is the most important in terms of what possibilities it can afford to young people.

Social housing, whether for sale or rented, is one of the main policies aimed at people with a low income. Houses classified as "official protection housing" have a price controlled by public the administration and can be sold and/or transferred, but not at any price or to any buyer. The key policy implementers that act within the housing policy in Barakaldo are Alokabide – the Public Agency of housing, Etxebide – the Basque Housing Service of the Basque Government and Eretza – Barakaldo's Local Housing Agency.

The most outstanding policies introduced by these institutions are the following: The Bizigune programme<sup>7</sup> run by Etxebide and Alokabide encourages the rental of unoccupied homes of private property by paying a monthly fee to their owners and guaranteeing timely monthly rent payments, as well as returning the home as delivered. If it has been damaged in any way, it is repaired and returned in perfect condition. Apart from managing the Bizigune programme with private owners, the Basque Government owns a number of properties that it rents to beneficiaries with difficulties to access the conventional rental markets.

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.alokabide.euskadi.eus/que-es-el-programa-bizigune/>

The Gaztelagun programme or The *Youth Aid Programme*, introduced by the Basque Government's Housing and Territorial Planning Department, finances rent payments up to 50% of the rental price to people aged 18-36 years old.

There are also endowment dwellings, which are flats under a social rental scheme for young people. These homes have a rotating nature, with the tenant being able to reside there for no more than five years, and facilitate the first access to housing for young people.

The local housing agency Eretza promotes new official protection housing and rehabilitation projects. It channels requests for help in the case of rehabilitation of used homes, especially for facades, roofs, and installation of elevators. The aid is requested by the community of owners of the entire property. Eretza also manages the local emancipation aid, which provides young people with a subsidy to pay their rent.

## 4.4 Amsterdam

### 4.4.1 Target group and their problems

The focus of policy co-creation in Amsterdam is housing, specifically housing for vulnerable young people between the age of 18 and 32.

In recent years, the housing market in Amsterdam has undergone a significant transformation from a traditionally social rental dwelling-based system to one that is becoming increasingly commodified and financialized. As a result, the city is experiencing a serious shortage of dwellings, and housing affordability and accessibility problems have become more prominent, particularly for young people looking to enter the housing market. These issues are further compounded by the precariousness of the labor market for young people, making it harder for them to secure stable housing. Although the social rental sector could offer a potential solution to this problem, it has shrunk considerably in recent years, with waiting times that have grown to a staggering 13 years. Moreover, temporary rental contracts have reduced the security of households that do manage to find a rental dwelling, both in the private and social rental sectors.

The above problems have several negative consequences, such as a delayed emancipation and a prolonged co-residence of young adults with their parents, high housing costs for those who do reach residential independence, an increased reliance on intergenerational transfers to access homeownership, and a large impact on economic security throughout life.

Young people who are unable to access affordable and secure housing often resort to living in expensive private rentals, sharing homes with others, squatting, or leaving the city altogether. The Amsterdam housing crisis has become so dire that it also affects the choices that young people make in the field of education, the labor market, and personal relations. For example, it is increasingly common for young people to delay the end of their studies to be able to remain longer in their student accommodation.

The Amsterdam housing market developments have a clear spatial component, with gentrification pushing poorer households outside the central city neighborhoods. In these areas accessibility to jobs or education centers is considerably lower than from the more central areas, while commuting costs are much higher. This further exacerbates the housing crisis, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected.

#### **4.4.2 Institutional and policy context**

##### *National context*

The Netherlands has national policies to regulate social housing and the private rental sector, but they are not well-tailored to combat inequality on the Amsterdam housing market. In recent years, they have remained largely unchanged, and some have become increasingly market-oriented. This has further exacerbated the uneven outcomes on the housing market. The current government is developing policies to curb this trend, such as a stricter regulation of the private rental sector, but the results of these policies have not yet been visible during the UPLIFT research project.

Dutch rent regulation is based on a point system that assigns scores based on dwelling size, quality, and location. Below a certain number of quality points, dwellings have to be rented below a certain price threshold and qualify as social rental housing when they are owned by housing associations and regulated rent when they are owned by private landlords. Dwellings scoring above the threshold in the point system qualify as "liberalized" dwellings and can be rented without restrictions on initial rent levels, though the annual rent increase is regulated. However, as a consequence of recent changes in the point system, most rental units in expensive locations, especially Amsterdam, score enough points to be shifted to the free-market sector once sitting tenants move out, which has led to a decrease in the share of affordable rental housing in recent years.

Housing subsidies also exist, but they only apply to social rental housing and regulated private rented dwellings, which means that young households in the liberalized private rental market cannot get any state support towards housing affordability and are at the mercy of speculative high prices.

Until recently, in the Netherlands, there were only unlimited rental contracts, which offered good tenant protection. However, temporary rental contracts, which generally last for 5 or 2 years, were introduced in 2016 and offer less housing security. These contracts are used in many private rental dwellings, social rental dwellings for young people aged 18-28, and student housing. Temporary contracts were introduced to create a more dynamic rental market and increase rental options, but this has been difficult to achieve in Amsterdam's tight market, and the insecurity of temporary contracts can lead to significant issues, particularly for young people.



### *Local context*

Local housing policies at the municipal level related to social housing allocation, tenure and price differentiation, and housing construction are intertwined with national guidelines related to homeownership, mortgage credit, and social housing requirements. Thus, the municipality, along with housing associations, plays a role in shaping local housing opportunities for young people, mediated by national regulations.

The local housing policies of the city of Amsterdam focus on protecting vulnerable groups, such as the 40-40-20 rule for new housing developments. This rule dictates that 40% of new dwellings should be social rent, 40% should be affordable private rent or affordable homeownership, and only 20% may be developed in the higher price segment. Additionally, to temper the negative impact of buy-to-let investments, a “self-residence obligation” has been introduced in 2022. This obligation stipulates that dwellings with a cadastral value of less than €512,000 may only be sold to people who will not rent out the dwelling for four years after the sale.

## 5 Preparation of the co-creation process

In order to initiate any co-creation effort, careful preparation and planning is necessary. This chapter discusses some important aspects that need to be taken into consideration in this regard – the involvement of relevant stakeholders, the drafting of an action plan, and ethical considerations.

### 5.1 Involving relevant stakeholders

The first step for any policy co-creation process is to establish a (hopefully durable) institutional framework in which all institutional stakeholders collaborate with the target group (in our case young people).

Initiators are those stakeholders that recognize the need for a participatory process and take responsibility for setting things in motion. They can be of any kind, for example local administrations, research groups, service providers or community organizations. Clearly, a policy co-creation process can also be initiated bottom-up by the target group, but this is usually less likely and much more laborious. Indeed, having the interest or the motivation to initiate a co-creation process is not enough, as money is also necessary. In the case of UPLIFT the initiators were research institutes, NGOs, local governments or service providers for all four locations. The prominent position for research institutes is related to the fact that the co-creation was tied to a European research project, which also provided funding. Indeed, initiators in UPLIFT could be divided in research partners (usually universities or research centres) and implementer partners (NGO's, service providers or local governments). Research partners were responsible for the formulation of the research content, for the evaluation and for the official deliverables, while implementer partners were responsible for the involvement of young people, the provision of feedback to the proposed actions and ultimately the implementation of the outcomes of the co-creation. Both types of partners were jointly responsible for the identification of topics, methods and strategies for the group discussions. In addition to these two types of partners, each location tried to widen their stakeholder network by including other relevant partners, such as local institutions and gatekeeper organizations.

Local institutions, policymakers and service providers are necessary partners in order for the process to be effective in the creation of realistic and implementable outcomes. They do not necessarily need to be decision makers, but they need to have at least some lobbying power in order to be able to pursue policy change. In the case of UPLIFT the municipalities of all four locations were involved with the appropriate department, depending on the topic of co-creation.

Gatekeepers and mediators are fundamental to secure and maintain contact with young people (or any other target group), and to establish a relationship of trust. They can be civil society organizations, community groups, NGOs, neighbourhood initiatives and even youth or

social workers. Their main characteristic needs to be an existing relationship with the target group of the co-creation. In the case of UPLIFT, NGOs and local youth centres fulfilled this role in all four locations.

Stakeholder motivations for wanting to start or join a co-creation process can be very different. For instance, research oriented partners usually have an interest in the approach itself as much as in the outcomes, and are mostly interested in completing the process in an ethically responsible way, whatever the outcome. NGOs and community groups might focus more on involvement, participation and empowerment of the target group, while service providers and local municipalities or housing associations may be more outcome oriented, as they are trying to find more effective solutions. For this reason it is important to clarify roles and expectations before the co-creation process actually starts.

The first step for any policy co-creation process is to strengthen the cooperation between all initiator partners (research and implementer) and to search for potential additional stakeholders to establish a fruitful collaboration. It is important to identify the stakeholders that are most relevant for each specific co-creation effort. This can be a quite natural or a rather demanding process, depending on the size and quality of the network of the initiators, on the willingness of potentially relevant partners to join the project, as well as on the overall familiarity of institutions with participatory practices in each context.

In Amsterdam and Tallinn the set-up of a institutional stakeholder network was relatively easy, as the networks of the initiator partners were instrumental to the creation of a stable institutional framework. In the **Amsterdam** case, housing association Lieven de Key (implementer partner) and Delft University of Technology (TU Delft – research partner) were able to attract the interest of the municipality of Amsterdam thanks to previous collaboration and to a propensity of the local institutions for participatory practices. However, finding a gatekeeper/mediator was more difficult, and it was necessary to open a call for interest to select the most appropriate one. Ultimately !WOON (an NGO that protects the rights of tenants in Amsterdam) was selected to perform this role.

In the **Tallinn** case, one of the main initiator partners was AEYC, the Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres (implementer partner), which was not only in a very privileged position in terms of previous cooperation with both local and national government, but it was also the main point of access to young people. The University of Tartu acted as the research partner in the Tallinn case.

In **Barakaldo**, the main initiator partner Orkestra (Deusto Foundation – research partner) had already secured the collaboration of the municipality, but used the expert interviews carried out in Work Package 3 of UPLIFT to identify the gatekeeper/mediator partners for the co-creation work.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe** the creation of an institutional framework was more challenging, as it involved meticulous mapping of all potential stakeholders. The initiators – Suppedito (research partner) and LAG Sepsi (implementer partner) – carried out 13 interviews to assess the interest

and motivation of potentially relevant stakeholders, and later selected the most motivated and suitable ones.

All UPLIFT locations have stakeholders of at least three kinds: research institutes, local institutions or service providers, and gatekeepers/mediators. In Table 1 you can see an overview of all institutional stakeholders and their roles for each location.

Table 1. Overview of institutional actors for all locations

Location	Partner	Role	Role description
Amsterdam	Delft University of Technology (TUD)	Task leader and academic/knowledge partner	Provides scientific and methodological guidance for the co-creation process and its outcomes.  As WP4 coordinator, TUD acts as a mediator between the different WP4 locations, ensuring comparable processes.  Filters the results of other work packages and translates them into useful input to inform the co-creation process.
	Housing association Lieven de Key	Implementation partner	Sets up the stakeholder structure for the co-creation process.  Acts as a gatekeeper to reach vulnerable youngsters through its channels.  As a housing association, Lieven de Key is one of the recipients of the policy input that results from the co-creation process. De Key is committed to the implementation of the co-creation results.
	Municipality of Amsterdam	Implementation partner	The Municipality of Amsterdam is one of the recipients of the policy input that comes from the co-creation process. Together with housing association Lieven de Key, TU Delft and !WOON, they are part of the steering group that guides the co-creation process
	!WOON	Facilitator of the co-creation process	!WOON is the main contact point for the Youth Board and the main gatekeeper and recruiter of youth board members. They also take care of the practical organization and supervision of the co-creation meetings
	INBO	Facilitator of the co-creation process	INBO provides specific support to the youth board in Sprint 2, in which a new communal housing concept is developed.
Barakaldo	Orkestra (Deusto Foundation)	Task leader and academic/knowledge partner	Responsible for conducting the scientific guidance of the co-creation process, as well as for analysing and reporting the results. Filters the results of other work packages and translates them into useful input to inform the co-creation process.
	Municipality of Barakaldo	Primary implementation partner	The Municipality is the main gatekeeper and organizes the interaction between the Youth Board and the key stakeholders. Provides data and knowledge on the target group and on matters related to social exclusion and inequality.

	Eretza	Primary implementation partner	Eretza provides knowledge about housing inequality and housing regulations. It assesses the viability of the proposals and the way in which the different co-created inputs can be combined to develop effective policy proposals.
	Gazte Bulegoa	Additional implementation partner	Provides connections to the young generation, develops initiatives for increasing youth participation
	Goiztiri Elkartea	Additional implementation partner	Shares perspectives on housing inclusion and will receive input on this topic from the youth board
Sfântu Gheorghe	Supedito	Task leader and academic/knowledge partner	Sets up the stakeholder structure and a methodology for the co-creation process. Identifies potential members of the youth and institutional group and facilitates their participation in the process. Leads the co-creation project and facilitates meetings. Analyses both process and results of the co-creation project.
	GAL SEPSI	Implementation partner	Facilitates the enrolment of the institutional stakeholders in the WP4 process and organizes the meetings and workshops held with the institutions.  Keeps regular contact with the institutional group.  Will work on the final version of the Reflexive Policy Agenda based upon the information and data collected from the two stakeholders groups.  Facilitates the adoption of the collaboration protocol by the members of this group.  Represents the Reflexive Policy Agenda in front of the local decision makers, facilitates its adoption by the City Council.
	Municipality, Social Directorate Department from the Municipality, General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection Covasna County, Employment Office Covasna County, School Inspectorate Covasna County, Educational Resource Center Covasna County, 2 schools from Sfântu Gheorghe, Caritas Association, Malta Association, Red Cross Association, Diakonia Foundation	Additional implementation partners	Take part in the co-creation process as members of the institutional group, act a potential receivers and implementers of the policy ideas that result from the co-creation process.
Tallinn	University of Tartu (UT)	Task leader and academic/knowledge partner	Responsible for conducting the scientific guidance of the co-creation process, as well as for analysing and reporting the results.

		Recruits youngsters for interviews. Collects data and conducts analysis.
Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres (AEYC)	Implementation partner	<p>Sets up the stakeholder structure for the WP4 co-creation process.</p> <p>Recruits youngsters for co-creation activities.</p> <p>Collects data on the process and translates it into input for local and national authorities.</p> <p>Organizes activities for, and provides direct support to NEET youth.</p>
Tallinn City Government (TCG)	Main partner in the Tallinn co-creation process	<p>In charge of the creation and implementation of local policies related to NEETs.</p> <p>The main local level institutional partner involved in the co-creation process.</p> <p>Receiver and potential implementer of the policy ideas that result from this process.</p>
Education and Youth Board, youth organizations (Tallinn region group of the Estonian National Youth Council), service providers, educational institutions, youth work institutions, Social Insurance Board, Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Social Affairs, Tallinn Adults' Gymnasium	Additional implementer partners	<p>Take part in the co-creation process.</p> <p>Involved in the re-design of services related to NEETs</p> <p>Act as potential receivers and implementers of the policy ideas that result from the co-creation process.</p> <p>Recruit young people with a vulnerable background for the project.</p> <p>Responsible for the Chat development process at the state level.</p>

## 5.2 Drafting an action plan and setting goals

Partnership among stakeholders – institutional partners as well as youth board – means that planning and decision-making responsibilities for the research and co-creation process are shared. In this regard, it is advisable to agree on the scope, the focus and the expected outcomes of the co-creation before the process actually starts. Moreover, it is important that the roles and objectives of the different stakeholders – research partners, implementer partners, the youth board (or the young people in any other capacity) and any other third party – are as clear as possible since the onset of the process. For the scientific and institutional partners and the gatekeeper organizations involved, this means identifying roles and responsibilities with regard to the following aspects: recruitment of young people, organisation of group activities, data analysis and reporting of research findings, drafting of policy proposals and implementation of the action. Written agreements can help allocate

responsibilities, and can provide guidelines for the future, including with regard to the level of involvement of Youth Board members in the process management activities.

One additional thing that it is essential to take into account when preparing for a co-creation process is the budget. Finding money for this kind of activities is not always easy, and external funding – for example from the European Union – may be necessary, as local administrations and service providers may not have enough.

In UPLIFT, we used Action Plans<sup>2</sup> in order to clearly outline the strategy, the proposed actions and the partners' responsibilities for the co-creation process in all four locations. Moreover, the Action Plans also outlined a timeline and a plan to manage the whole process. These were living documents that were updated while the activities progressed: while the initial objectives remained the same, the strategies to achieve them, the timelines as well as some key actions or events could change to better adapt to evolving circumstances. After all, reflexive policy making is a process and, by definition, it has to be able to face change.

The Action Plans also identified the objectives of each co-creation process. Clearly, the goals of policy co-creation can vary according to which actors are participating and what is the agreed scope of the process. However, they can roughly be divided in **societal objectives** – the projected societal impact of the process, both for the target group and for society at large; **institutional objectives** – the impact on the local institutional environment; **policy oriented objectives** – the desired policy outcome; and **academic objectives** – what findings and methods can be generated. While each location explicitly formulated their own societal, institutional, policy and academic objectives, which flowed into their Action Plans, there was also a larger goal that UPLIFT wanted to achieve. This was to provide the opportunity for institutional actors to think together with young people, in order to develop policy solutions more attuned to their needs and to show that co-creation can be a sustainable and useful method for policy development. In a way, this overall goal encompasses the societal, institutional, policy-oriented and academic objectives.

In all locations the main societal objective was to provide the opportunity for young people – particularly those with a vulnerable background – to express their opinion on matters that regard them directly and to influence the policies that affect them. The final aim was the empowerment of the young people that took part in the process, both in terms of having their voice heard and feeling that they were contributing to the life of their city, and in terms of increasing their knowledge of the local policy context. Framed in terms of the Capabilities Approach, the societal objective of the co-creation process was to increase the capabilities and real freedoms (life chances) of young people. On a higher level, the societal goal was also the valorisation and legitimization of the social contribution of vulnerable groups in society.

From an institutional point of view, the common objective across locations was to foster direct interaction between young people and policy makers, with the final goal of establishing a

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<sup>2</sup> The Action Plans and their updated versions can be found in D4.1 and D4.2.

(hopefully durable) institutional framework that can increase the agency of “policy subjects”, and that can be replicated in different locations and policy areas. The main characteristic of such a framework would be to reduce the formal distance and power differences between vulnerable youth and institutional representatives/decision makers, bringing their visions closer to each other – thus contributing to the democratization of arenas of social production. In order to achieve this, it is also necessary to change the mindset of institutional actors with regard to participatory practices and to the ability of vulnerable citizens to contribute to policy making.

Academic objectives were similar in all locations, and consisted of testing assumptions about the role of citizen participation in policymaking through a novel methodology (*Whether and under what conditions is actual policy co-creation with young people possible?*), and in evaluating whether the UPLIFT project has been able to generate successful outcomes (*Have we been able to co-create a new piece of policy or to modify an existing one at any level?*).

Furthermore, among the academic aims there was also the production of local knowledge with regard to the chosen policy field and specific focus of the process. In particular, in Tallinn, one specific academic objective was to enhance scientific research on the topic of NEET youth in order to improve training programmes and university curricula for youth and social workers.

What was more specific were the policy oriented objectives, since the topic and focus of the co-creation was different in each location. In **Sfântu Gheorghe**, the more general policy goal was to improve the local implementation of educational and youth policies and create synergies between different sectors that are currently working in a fragmented way. On a more practical note, the objective was to create a policy framework that facilitates better access to education for vulnerable youth and contributes to reducing school abandonment and increasing employability.

In **Tallinn**, the main policy-oriented objective was to redesign services aimed at NEET youth, in order to improve their accessibility and flexibility and to provide more support for NEET youth in accessing education and the labour market.

In **Barakaldo**, the policy aim was to generate recommendations for improvement of existing measures and propose new initiatives in those youth policy areas (particularly in the field of housing and emancipation) that fall under the jurisdiction of the Barakaldo municipality.

Finally, in **Amsterdam** the policy objectives worked at two levels. For the policy advice to housing association Lieven de Key, the objective was to co-create new initiatives that would make the association’s policies and communication more adaptive to young people’s needs. With regard to the more general policy advice for the Amsterdam municipality, the final aim was to provide a different overall outlook that was more attuned to the evolving and heterogeneous needs of young people and, at the same time, to develop additional tools to help young people navigate the existing housing market.



In order to achieve the objectives outlined in their Action Plans, each location adopted their own method to manage the co-creation process and coordinate institutional action. Although it took different forms, in all locations a sort of steering group or committee has been set up that oversees the research and the choice of methods. This steering group safeguards that the research maximises the role of young participants to express their voice, and that their input is acted upon by the institutional partners.

### **5.3 Ethical considerations**

There are many ethical issues and inherent risks embedded in any participatory project. For instance, addressing power, authority, the interrelationship of race, gender, social class, level of education, and ability, as well as a whole host of other issues, require a deep commitment and awareness by researchers and participants. They should work together to provide equity, safety, and parity within the co-creation process.

In this respect, each UPLIFT WP4 implementation site developed context-dependent ethics procedures in order to respond to the specific needs of young participants and institutional partners. Nonetheless, some shared basic ethics principles were followed by all locations:

- The participants are explicitly and fully informed about the way in which their data and the information they provide (including images) will be used, stored and protected. Their consent is always obtained, through the use of information sheets, oral explanations and informed consent forms.
- Anonymization or pseudonymization of recordings and transcripts of focus groups and youth board meetings is provided at the earliest possible stage and data should be kept in a protected storage.
- Participants are treated as equal partners and collaborators, valuing their time and contribution. Their feedback is constantly asked to identify and address any discriminatory or stigmatizing effects experienced by the participants.
- Special attention is paid to ensure that all group members can equally participate in the open discussions, mitigating issues of power and authority that might get in the way of full engagement.
- Research findings have to be shared with communities in an accessible format whilst abiding by the agreed rules on anonymity.

## 6 Setting up a Youth Board

This chapter will explain and discuss the steps that need to be taken in order to come an inclusive Youth Board that can represent the voice of the young people during the co-creation process.

### 6.1 Recruitment

In recruiting young people the role of gatekeepers is tremendously important. These are people or organizations – like youth and social workers, or community groups and NGOs – that already operate on the ground and have an existing relationship with young adults, based on the provision of support, information or services. Without gatekeepers it is hard for institutions and research groups to reach young people. As such, it is very important to choose gatekeepers carefully, as they usually provide access to specific groups of young people, depending on the focus of their activities. Nonetheless, the use of other channels – particularly snowballing – is also necessary in order to reach vulnerable young people who have no links to organizations. The recruitment approach of all the WP4 locations entailed a substantial role for gatekeeper organizations, which then were able to develop the recruitment strategy best suited to the context, to their network and to the needs of the co-creation process, as well as a smaller role for snowballing and direct contact.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe** multiple strategies were employed to recruit and engage young people from both schools and the community, including those who may have lost touch with institutions. The recruitment efforts involved:

- Conducting meetings with school principals and teachers to promote the UPLIFT project in their classrooms;
- Partnering with organizations like the Red Cross and Child Protection Services to inform their target group about the opportunity to participate in the Youth Board;
- Utilizing peer-to-peer word of mouth, where youth could invite their friends to join.

The formation of Sfântu Gheorghe's Youth Board had a unique dynamic. After a few recruitment meetings, the group primarily consisted of Red Cross volunteers. Later, young people from Áron Berde Vocational School joined, while some of the original group members dropped out due to complex life situations and the demands of the group. The remaining core group was later expanded with occasional participants, such as young people from the Child Protection system.

In **Tallinn**, it was possible to recruit Youth Board members thanks to the collaboration with youth centres and youth workers who work directly with NEET youth. In addition, a few young people were also recruited directly by the project team members. Additionally, some participants were recruited thanks to active local youth groups and to the Tallinn Youth Council, which represents young people with various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds

from different city districts. Eventually, the representatives of the Tallinn City Council themselves became part of the Youth Board. Including the Tallinn Youth Council in the framework of the co-creation process was especially useful, because of the more permanent character of this institution, which means that the ideas resulting from the co-creation process can be implemented over a longer time span. All the gatekeepers were supportive to find substitutes in case any participant was to fall out.

In **Barakaldo**, the support of Gazte Bulegoa, Eretza, Goiztiri and Agharas as gatekeeper organizations has been essential due to the proximity of these stakeholders to the reality of the vulnerable young people in Barakaldo. Their role has been particularly relevant because the overall recruitment strategy was to contact young people who have benefitted from the programs managed by these institutions. In addition, young people were also recruited among the participants of the Youth Town hall Meeting, and among the young people that are part of the networks of Global Shapers Community, Agharas and Saregileak – all youth associations that work with migrants. Thanks to them, it was possible to also include young migrants from North Africa, who are more vulnerable and less represented in this type of participative efforts, thus making the composition of the youngster group more balanced.

In **Amsterdam**, !WOON started to recruit young people that were interested to participate in the UPLIFT co-creation activities through their networks and by making use of a social media and online advertising strategy. The online strategy was chosen because of the constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the young people were directly contacted by !WOON, whereas other were found through additional gatekeeper organizations in the field of social work or youth work, or through the networks of young people that had already been recruited (snowball sampling). Moreover, Lieven de Key has contributed to the recruitment by sending a letter to all their tenants between the age of 18 and 27 that explained the project and asked if they were interested in participating.

The Amsterdam recruitment strategy aimed to reach out to more young people than necessary, in order to have potential replacements in case some dropped out. Moreover, people who were contacted but were not available at that time were asked to join a "spare list", in case they wanted to join at a later stage. In the end, the Youth Board consisted of around 8 people who were structurally involved in the co-creation process, and attended most meetings, thereby guaranteeing a degree of continuity. After the first round of meetings, new Youth Board members were recruited by !WOON in order to compensate for attrition and bring new energy into the process. In addition, !WOON also recruited several young people that did not have the time or interest to become full-fledged Youth Board members, but that more incidentally participated in the co-creation sessions – a so called youth pool.

## 6.2 Size and composition of the Youth Board

As a result of the recruitment process, in each location a group of young people was able to join the co-creation and form a so-called Youth Board. The role of the Youth Boards is the same in all locations, but their characteristics in terms of size and composition vary depending

on the scope of the co-creation, on the nature of the gatekeepers and on the recruitment strategy.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe** the Youth Board consisted of 7 to 20 members, depending on occasional attendance. The Youth Board emerged organically from the larger youth group, based on the availability and interests of its members. Although it was not a stable structure initially, the core Youth Board enjoyed the support of the larger group throughout the process. The participants were aged between 17 and 24, mostly from vocational schools, with some of the older members working in various fields (e.g. bakery and post office), or actively seeking employment. Two participants were responsible for caring for children, while some others identified as Roma and around 20% came from rural backgrounds. Most participants identified as heterosexual. While the majority of stable members attended the same vocational school that hosted the group meetings, others had attended less prestigious schools. Many participants lacked sufficient familial support and some cases of domestic violence were revealed, albeit not explicitly.

In the case of **Tallinn**, the Youth Board has a somewhat less clear-cut character, since multiple youth groups were involved in the co-creation process. In total, 18 young people took part in the work of the Board. The main board team (ten members) included three youth with NEET experiences aged 16-20, three young persons with NEET experiences aged 21-26, two Tallinn school students with a Russian background, and two young persons who also participated in the Tallinn Youth Council. Altogether four youth from the main board team were young people who spoke Russian as their home language. Four youth from the main board team were male and six were female participants. In addition to the main board, eight young persons participated occasionally, based on their time available and depending on the topic. While some of the Youth Board sessions were organized as plenary meetings, there were also subgroup meetings to discuss in a more comfortable environment. Indeed, subgroups were formed on the basis of already existing contacts between young people – for example the young people from the same local youth organization who already knew each other formed one subgroup. This choice was made because when the groups were smaller participants were more likely to speak and discuss.

The Youth Board in **Barakaldo** included young people between 18 and 30 years, who live in Barakaldo or at least study or work in the municipality. The group was composed by people from different origins, including young migrants, and different socio-economic backgrounds. During the course of the co-creation process, the composition of the group has been fluid. Some of the initial participants did not stay for the whole process, while others decided to join later on. One of the key aspects has been that the people that joined the process in the beginning invited new participants to the group, which has been essential for the engagement of new youngsters. This strategy was not planned, but emerged spontaneously in the process. Taking this mobility into account, all the Youth Board sessions started with a brief overview of the stage of the process in which the session was framed, so that new people that were joining would quickly feel part of the group and the process. The minimum number of young people

in a Youth board session has been 6, and the maximum 12. Overall, a total of 20 young people have participated in the Youth Board, but only 4 of them were women.

**Amsterdam's** Youth Board is composed by young people between 18 and around 32<sup>3</sup> that are, or have been, in a vulnerable housing situation in the city of Amsterdam – including homelessness. The recruitment process resulted in the set-up of a stable Youth Board of around 8 to 10 active and fully committed members, who participated in all or nearly all the co-creation sessions, and of a so-called youth pool – a group of 15 to 20 young people who have been involved in a less intensive way and who participated in a limited number of co-creation sessions. This double structure allowed on one hand to have continuity within the co-creation process, and on the other hand it provided a larger and more diverse vision about relevant issues and proposals. Indeed, there was also a flow between the two groups, whereby people who were only incidentally involved in the beginning took on a more proactive role later on, and vice-versa. In terms of gender, there was a balance in the Youth Board, although some sessions had a slight overrepresentation of women. Ages ranged between 18 and 32 with relatively many participants in their 20s. In terms of ethnic background, the group was diverse, and there was a good mix between working and studying Youth Board members. Also on other aspects, the diversification was high. One of the Youth Board members has been homeless, whereas there were also Youth Board members who were single parents, with physical disabilities, or with refugee status. With regard to education, participants with a somewhat higher education were overrepresented, despite efforts to include youngsters with a lower education as well. All Youth Board members were to some extent vulnerable in the field of housing.

### 6.3 Inclusiveness and gender sensitivity

The goal of the Youth Board is to articulate the voice of the target group of young people. To be able to optimally fulfil this role, it is essential that principles of diversity are respected in its composition. Moreover, it is of crucial importance to be sensitive to differences within the target group of young people, for example with regard to gender and ethnic background, and to assess how such differences could influence both the process and the outcomes of the co-creation project. Youngsters with various backgrounds should have equal opportunities to participate and have their voice heard. Moreover, the policy initiatives that result from the co-creation process need to take into account that youngsters with different genders and/or ethnic backgrounds may experience different problems, and may therefore also need different solutions.

Unfortunately, a balanced gender (and ethnic) composition of the Youth Board does not automatically lead to gender equal processes and solutions. Additional efforts are needed from the process planning and facilitation side. In the day-to-day interaction between

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<sup>3</sup> Although according to the UPLIFT definition, young people are defined as people younger than 30, we have decided to also include some people in their early thirties in the Youth Board. This is due to the fact that also this group suffers from serious housing accessibility and affordability problems.

stakeholders (youth board meetings, meetings of institutional stakeholders, meetings in which youth and institutional stakeholders meet) it is necessary to be sensitive to differences between people of different genders and ethnic backgrounds in terms of attitude, tone of voice, and participation in discussions. In all UPLIFT WP4 locations we strived for a setting and atmosphere in which everyone could feel safe and free to express their opinion.

In constituting the Youth Board in **Sfântu Gheorghe**, several factors were taken into consideration in the recruitment phase: age distribution, gender balance, ethnic inclusivity (the presence of Roma youth), special situation of the youth with regard to child protection services (residential care, foster care). However, the youth group did not include the most vulnerable members of the segregated Roma community in **Órkő**<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, involving such groups would have required additional resources in terms of time, finances, and professionals. Specific recruitment and retention strategies would have been necessary, for which the project lacked sufficient resources. Moreover, a specific preparatory process would be needed, including prior connections with the community, good field knowledge, extra preparation time to assess specific needs, and mapping necessary conditions for participation, as well as field visits during the process. Nonetheless, the composition of the group reflected deep vulnerabilities as identified in the first phase of the process. Regarding gender equality, no special measures were required as the number of girls and boys was fairly equal. However, efforts were made to ensure equal participation of both genders in group work and discussions with institutional stakeholders.

In **Tallinn**, the most sensitive target group was formed by six young people (on a total of 18 members) with a NEET status. Their participation in the meetings and the co-creation process in general was supported by applying specific supportive measures and special care (i.e. arrival to the meetings was supported, food was offered and the youth worker always supported them, offering also language support for the Russian language speaking youngsters). It had to be considered that for those young people participation in meetings and discussions, or visits to institutions, was not usual, and they had to be prepared for the events beforehand. Gender equality was also the goal of recruiting the group. Both females and males were represented – 60% were females and 40% were male participants. During the discussions it was ensured that both genders would have an equal possibility to express their ideas and get feedback.

From the beginning of the **Barakaldo** co-creation process, the objective was to come to a diverse representation in terms of age, gender, origin and socio-economic background, in order to develop a Reflexive Policy Agenda that could include a heterogenous perspective. Nevertheless, it has not been easy for the facilitator team to guarantee the diversity of the group. Some of the Youth Board members belong to a group of people that is usually not reached by institutional mechanisms and existing policies. This is the case for young migrants that came to Barakaldo as a non-accompanied minor and that, once they turned 18, became non-accompanied young migrants, with little support or assistance from the institutional

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<sup>4</sup> See the Sfântu Gheorghe WP3 Case Study Report.

realm. This group of young people is greatly vulnerable, as they are non-citizens until they are allowed to obtain the Spanish nationality. However, this is a difficult process with very strict requirements, thus not many of them actually achieve it. This results in challenges in getting a job, finding a house or receiving education. In addition to these difficulties, young migrants also have language and communication barriers, and a lack of social and support networks. Reaching this group was especially difficult. However, in collaboration with Goiztiri Elkartea and Agharas, that work with them on an everyday basis, it was possible to include some of these youngsters as well. However, the representation of men and women has not been balanced throughout the process, with only four women participating. The main challenge has been to attract (migrant) women to the process. Indeed, most of the young people that arrive to the Basque country from North Africa, the region of origin of the migrant youngsters participating in the process, are men, which might help explain the low number of women. Nonetheless, the facilitators have tried to implement other measures, which could foster gender equality, for example using inclusive language and giving special attention to the participation of women in the debates.

When recruiting new members in **Amsterdam**, !WOON has purposely looked for youngsters that would contribute to the diversity within the Youth Board composition, therefore the background of both the Youth Board and youth pool members was diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnic background, and housing situation. With regard to inclusiveness, moderators strived to provide equal opportunities to participate and have their voice heard for youngsters from all backgrounds, as it is of crucial importance to assess how differences with regard to gender and ethnic background could influence the process and the participants' feeling of safety and empowerment. Diversity and inclusiveness has been taken into account also with regard to the outcomes of the co-creation process. Indeed, the resulting policy initiatives tried to take into account that youngsters with different genders and/or ethnic backgrounds may experience different problems, and may therefore also need different solutions.

## 6.4 Commitment strategy

The participatory work in all WP4 locations operated on the grounds of clarity and trust. It was important in the beginning to be clear and explicit about the reasons why the UPLIFT project was involving young people – we needed to hear their voice if we wanted changes in social policy to be effective; what was expected of them – engagement and reflection; and what they would get in return – being taken seriously, empowered in their condition of policy co-makers and not simply policy subjects. Most of all, we made sure to highlight the fact that by joining the project they could voice their problems to local institutions and have a chance to influence local policies that affected them. All of these were considered as valuable motives for participation by young people; nonetheless, since co-creation is a long process that requires a substantial commitment in terms of time and effort, it was crucial to make the meetings and the general circumstances of the co-creation process attractive for them also from a more mundane point of view. This could be achieved by providing refreshments and occasions for social engagement during the Youth Board meetings („pizza nights” or similar concepts), by

organizing additional events or activities that could be interesting or attractive for the target group (training sessions, workshops, interviews, performances), or even by providing some non-monetary incentives. Financial compensation could also be a possibility, depending on the context. However, due to the regulations of the European Commission, we were not allowed to use the UPLIFT budget for providing financial compensation to Youth Board members.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe** no explicit commitment strategy was developed; the commitment from the group members was built in an implicit manner. According to the feedback of participants, their motivation for participation was the possibility to be together with peers and friends but also with adults who pay attention to them, and to their problems and ideas. There are some factors that might also have contributed to engagement:

- stability of the facilitators: good relationship, safety in the group;
- stability in meetings: relatively frequent meetings (biweekly, two afternoons, adapted to the availability of the group members);
- good group cohesion was the engine of the group;
- taking the lead in turns, according to the topics of interest;
- taking responsibility in presenting the group work (creating videos, written materials);
- occasional facilitation by different group members, assisted by the adult facilitators;
- playfulness;
- shared meals;
- offering a youth camp and travel to Barakaldo (UPLIFT consortium meeting in September 2022) as incentives.

Thus, the time spent together, the attentive and supporting presence of adults (the facilitators), the learning opportunities (self-development and learning about institutions and social systems), and the opportunity to influence and make a change were the most important incentives for the youth group.

Similarly, in **Tallinn**, the participation of young people in the work of the youth board was not related to external motivators (e.g. remuneration or rewards). The participation was based on their own motivation, based on a voluntary contribution. A trusting environment was created for young people, where they felt like experts based on their own life situations. The organizers always created a supportive and comfortable meeting space. Some kind of snack was always offered to make sure that the participants' well-being was taken care of.

The youth board meetings were conducted by professionals with experience in youth work, who had good skills on methods of working with young people. This made it possible for young people to feel that they are needed, that they are good experts of their own lives, and that their contribution was necessary for the policy co-creation process. A positive, safe and supportive atmosphere also ensured the functioning of the meetings and the participation of young people. In every meeting one youth worker and two experts were present, who helped



to create a safe environment for group work and discussions. The youth worker was rather a supportive person, not a moderator. The two experts performed the moderator role.

In **Barakaldo**, it has been essential to foster three main elements in order to make participation attractive: (1) to transform participation into a meaningful process for young people in terms of achieving tangible actions which will lead to changes in local housing policies (2) to develop their individual skills and capabilities and (3) to generate a safe and fun space, in which the young people could feel free to express themselves, give their opinion and learn.

Different non-monetary incentives have been put in place in order to create trust and engagement among youth board members and make the process more appealing. Examples are the provision of office materials, opportunities to participate in open door activities (such as field trips), an invitation to the UPLIFT consortium meeting, and participation diplomas. Another tangible action has been the filming of a video that, apart from explaining the UPLIFT process, emphasizes the importance of co-creation processes as tools for policy making.

It has also been essential to create an accessible space for youngsters so that they feel engaged and comfortable. Thus, the venue and the schedule of the sessions have been adapted to their preferences and needs. Moreover, it needed to be a space for them to feel safe and have fun. In incorporating these two elements, it was key to include innovative methodologies/ice breaking activities and to offer food to generate a more informal atmosphere.

In **Amsterdam**, what emerged as important for the Youth Board members is that getting involved in the co-creation process would provide a valuable learning experience – of research, of policy making, of cooperation among different groups – that could be useful for future education, training or job purposes, as it would look good on their resumes. In this regard, the institutional stakeholders made themselves available for the Youth Board members when they had questions or wanted to learn more about a specific topic.

In addition, in order to make the sessions pleasant, the Amsterdam team provided food and refreshments, as well as occasions for social engagement during the Youth Board meetings. Furthermore, the municipality of Amsterdam decided to pay a so-called volunteer fee to the most active Youth Board members, as a compensation for the large amount of time that they have invested<sup>5</sup>. Last but not least, three active Youth Board members were invited to participate (with all costs covered) in the UPLIFT consortium meeting in Barakaldo, Spain, that took place in the autumn of 2022.

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<sup>5</sup> Since the Municipality of Amsterdam is not an official UPLIFT partner, this payment took place outside the framework of the UPLIFT project.

## 7 Coordinating and moderating the co-creation process

This chapter discusses some important elements with regard to the coordination and moderation of the co-creation process. Subsequently, we deal with capacity and trust building (7.1), enhancing creativity (7.2), interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders (7.3), adaptation to crisis situation (7.4) and evaluation (7.5). For each of these elements, we provide a synthesis of what has happened in the four different UPLIFT WP4 cities. The lessons that we draw on the basis of this synthesis are further discussed in Chapter 10.

### 7.1 Trust and capacity building

A Youth Board functions well if there is sufficient trust, respect, safety and internal cohesion among its members. For this purpose, it is important to carefully plan trust building activities and the process of community forming.

Next to trust building, capacity building is a necessary step in order to allow the Youth Board members to have effective agency during the process, and be able to fully understand the context and dynamics of the problem. Participatory Action Research, which is one of the main methodological principles behind our Reflexive Policy Making Approach (see also Chapter 2), emphasizes the role of knowledge generation to empower the participants. During the co-creation process, the participants start a cycle of knowledge generation and critical reflection that is intended to lead to spot-on proposals for solving existing problems, but that also empowers them in their personal life. Thus, capacity building not only serves the co-creation process but also contributes to the enhancement of the skills and capabilities of the Youth Board members themselves, hence to their empowerment. This Section will further explain how the different WP4 locations have organized their trust and capacity building activities.

In the preparatory phase of the Youth Board in **Sfântu Gheorghe**, there were no less than 27 meetings and a 3-day youth camp. In this phase, there was a strong focus on group dynamics and stages of group development (forming, storming, norming and performing). The Youth Board members were prepared for collaboration and learned about leadership skills and representation abilities, defining shared values, and identifying resources for cooperation. This phase was crucial in building the foundation for the Youth Board to be effective and successful in its mission.

The trust and capacity building methods that were applied mainly focused on self-reflection and self-expression. These were new skills for the Youth Board members, since the Romanian educational system doesn't emphasize these qualities. Self-development games and collaborative group work were used, adjusted to the interests and preparedness of the group. Among other things, these games focused on identifying and expressing one's emotions, attuning with oneself and others, identifying inner strengths and supportive relationships, (learning to ask for help etc.), but they also included collaborative group work. Implicit learning also occurred through raising consciousness of one's experiences, finding the support of the

group, being mirrored by the group and having the compassionate attention of the adult group leaders. To give an example, in one of the sessions the Youth Board jointly developed a concept for an ideal city for Young People (Eldorado), including the rules, laws and of cohabitation principles that come with this. The group also reflected on democratic leadership and democratic practices and paid a visit to the city hall where they met with the mayor and the vice-mayors.

Inspired by the academic literature on Participatory Action Research, the local co-creation team in **Barakaldo** also used a variety of trust and capacity building methods, as shown in Table 2. By means of example, Figure 1 shows the icebreaking exercise involving collaborative drawing, conducted in the second session of the Barakaldo Youth Board. In this session, the participants were asked to choose a pair and to draw the hair of their counterpart. Then, they were asked to recover their drawing and choose another pair. This second time, the pairs had to draw each other eyes and give back the drawing to their counterpart. The process continued until each person had a complete drawing of her/his face based on how others see them. It usually leads to very funny drawings of the different participants, which makes the atmosphere relaxed and informal, thereby providing a good basis for content-oriented follow-up activities.

Furthermore, in order to enhance trust between young people and institutional stakeholders, the Barakaldo team appointed one of its youngest members as a so-called 'youngster facilitator'. This 'youngster facilitator' was the central contact point for the Youth Board and had the following responsibilities.

- She is the person to contact with queries and she is in charge of channelling the demands of the young people;
- She contacts the young people to confirm their assistance at the sessions and shares the agenda and the results of the sessions with them;
- She is the manager of the communication channels of the young people: she moderates, and manages the WhatsApp group.
- She reviews relevant written documentation (presentations, messages etc.) from a young person's perspective and proposes to make them more accessible (in terms of language) if there is a need for it.
- She performs a tutoring role towards the young people: she helps them with preparing presentations, she encourages young people to present, etc.

Table 2. Summary of methods and activities for trust and capacity building in Barakaldo

Overall objective	Specific goals	Methods and activities
Creating a safe and fun space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creating a space where the youth can express themselves</li> <li>- Building a relationship of trust between participants and generating cohesion</li> </ul>	<p>Icebreaking activities to warm up and get to know each other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You are what you eat – Present yourself as your favourite food item</li> <li>- Collaborative Drawing: how the rest sees us</li> <li>- Where Do You Stand?</li> <li>- "Tell us something good that has happened to you lately"</li> <li>- Outdoor activities</li> <li>- Dinner together (each session)</li> <li>- Going for a drink together</li> </ul>
Generating a shared vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Data collection for understanding the challenge</li> <li>- Interpreting data: How do we make sense of the data we present?</li> <li>- How do we communicate our ideas</li> </ul>	<p><b>Data collection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policy mapping / organization mapping</li> <li>- Role playing</li> <li>- Storytelling</li> <li>- 'Listening mode' exercise</li> <li>- Presentation by policy experts: "how does it work in urban policy planning?"</li> <li>- A survey exercise with quiz</li> </ul> <p><b>Interpreting data</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group dynamics: path finder technique</li> <li>- Deconstructing the challenge or problem through a logic tree</li> <li>- Design Thinking Methods ("4-STEP Creative Problem Solving for Business" from Enric Segarra) (see illustration 3)</li> </ul> <p><b>Communicating ideas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reaching out to other young people via their social media by quizzes</li> <li>- Volunteering for communication of YB results</li> <li>- Preparation of presentations by YB members to present their ideas to the Social lab.</li> <li>- Designing a communication output (video)</li> </ul>
Taking part in the governance of the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Orientation of the contents, agenda and proposals towards the empowerment of young people in discussing their ideas and making decisions</li> <li>- Management of the expectations of the participants</li> </ul>	<p><b>Empowerment of the young people throughout the process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Direct open questions in the session</li> <li>- Quizzes: through Slido, Google form... (see illustration 2)</li> <li>- Summary of the sessions sent out after each session asking for their feedback (via WhatsApp)</li> </ul>

Connecting to knowledge and external debates

- Connecting theory and practice, reflection and action to generate collective capacities

### **Presentations on policy related topics**

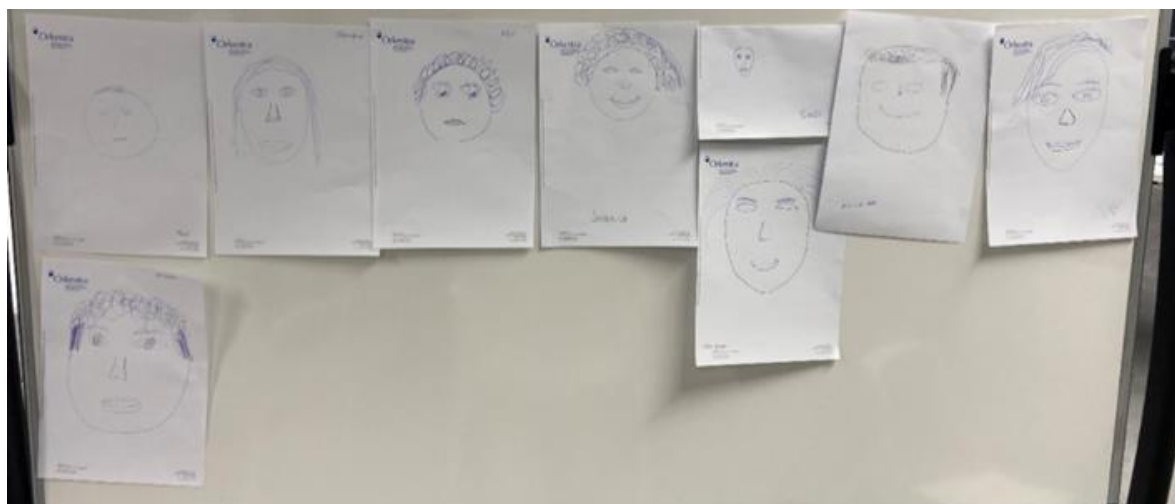
Knowing more about:

- The role of a municipality in policymaking
- The role of an elected politician / technician in policymaking
- The competencies of the local institutions working with youth and housing in Barakaldo

### **Presentation by experts**

- What is an ordinance of the City Council?
- Presentation of the Emancipation aid – Eretza
- Presentation of the research around what are the policy gaps identify by policy implementers and young people for improving policies (result of WP3)

Figure 1. Collaborative drawing used as ice-breaking activity. Source: Barakaldo team



With regard to **Tallinn**, a co-creation approach has been used in Estonia's public sector for at least five years, with several instructional materials created. This approach supports bottom-up discussions and solutions, encourages a diversity of opinions, enhances effective cooperation between parties, and enables mutual learning. It served as an important source of inspiration for the Tallinn co-creation process.

In the Youth Board sessions, a strong emphasis was put on group dynamics. These dynamics can be divided into five stages - getting to know each other, finding your role, building trust in the team, developing joint responsibility for achieving the goal, and taking action. The moderators of the meetings supported the group dynamics and encouraged participation from all group members. A database of educational materials was used to choose thematic tools and games.

An important aspect of establishing and sustaining positive relationships with young people has been the consistent involvement of a youth worker from the youth centre in every session. The youth worker has established a high level of trust with the young people, which made it easier to reach out to them and involve them in the sessions. Additionally, the youth worker has played a crucial role in facilitating communication between institutional stakeholders and the Youth Board, ensuring that the needs and perspectives of the young people are fully represented.

In **Amsterdam**, trust and capacity building was particularly important in the first Sprint of the co-creation process when the Youth Board had to be developed from 'scratch'. In this Sprint, the Youth Board members could choose from a "menu" of educational activities the ones that would most suit their needs and interests. Among other things, the proposed activities included a webinar by TU Delft about social housing in the Netherlands, informal one-on-one (online) lunch meetings with professionals from the Municipality and housing association Lieven de Key, excursions and links to various relevant webpages and documentaries.

During the second Sprint, the capacity building activities focused less on overall housing issues and more on the specific subject of communal housing. For this purpose, the Youth Board members visited two communal housing projects of housing association Lieven de Key.

Finally, in Sprint 3, the institutional stakeholders – both from Lieven de Key and from the Municipality – set up a "hotline" where Youth Board members could contact them during the day if they needed information or explanations about housing policy. Furthermore, a general introduction into local housing policy was provided in the inventory sessions of this third co-creation trajectory.

Even though the capacity building activities in Amsterdam were largely content related, they also served the goal of enhancing social cohesion and trust within the Youth Board. For this purpose, food and drinks were present at the physical sessions. Furthermore, the moderators of !WOON were of the same age group as the Youth Board members, and they took on a role that is similar to that of the 'youngsters facilitator' in Barakaldo.

## 7.2 Enhancing creativity

In order to come to fruitful co-creation outcomes, it is important to fully use the creativity of the young people and tap into their real life experiences. Principles from the fields of brainstorming and design thinking can be helpful in this respect. In order to make discussions interactive, several methods can be used such as the Open Fishbowl method, where people constantly change between listener and speaker, or the World café, where discussions in small groups are combined with plenary discussion. Live polling platforms (such as Mentimeter or Slido) can be used for collecting opinions of all the participants that are present. Subsequently, the results of these polling platforms can be the basis for further discussions.

In case of conflicts or diverging opinions between group members, the Lewis Deep Democracy method may be useful. This is a set of tools based on the principle that conflict is a learning

opportunity. By focusing on the needs of the minority group, it helps to engage with different views, thereby giving voice to all participants.

Taking into account the above principles, in **Sfântu Gheorghe**, creativity was enhanced by using methods like world cafe, collaborative board games and give space for exploring and implement ideas. Youth Board members volunteered to complete tasks between meetings, such as making videos and conducting a small scale inquiry among other youth from the city regarding the problems they struggle with. The work of the Youth Board throughout the preparatory phase was to create a problem map starting from a broader perspective which included all life domains and arriving to the specific theme of education and schooling. The problem map included the results of the inquiry and it was used as basic input for the institutional group, where the topics raised by the youth were further developed. The Youth Board members were very creative by themselves, the only contribution that was offered was the safety and support of the group leaders and the framework of the project, namely a free space for experimenting and expressing their own ideas.

In **Tallinn**, the use of various methods such as a world cafe, personality creation workshops, and round table discussions, as well as homework assignments, allowed for a good participation and engagement. The use of interactive tools, such as mind maps, helped to spark creativity and encourage active participation.

The **Barakaldo** team has applied a wide range of techniques in order to generate creativity: surveys and quizzes, role playing, story-telling, listening mode exercises, path finder techniques and logic trees. Furthermore, design thinking was used, allowing the young people to map out problems, create personas, and develop tailor made solutions for these personas.

In **Amsterdam**, brainstorm boards and word clouds were used (see Figure 2), both physically and online, to collect thoughts and information about problems and solutions. Various decision-making methods were employed, including World Café and variations of the CONSENT and Deep Democracy methods. The World Café method involved splitting into groups to develop brainstorm boards or discuss topics, and reporting conclusions back to the Youth Board. The CONSENT and Deep Democracy method involved presenting, discussing, and voting on proposed recommendations, with only unanimous decisions making it to the final list. An online polling tool was used to democratically vote on advice and policy ideas to present to institutional stakeholders. The Youth Board also used a shared online document as a living document to work out ideas for questions and advice to the municipality. Most work was done during live or online sessions, with minimal homework to avoid overburdening participants.

Figure 2. One of the brainstorm boards that was used in Amsterdam. Source: Amsterdam team.



### 7.3 Interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders

Essential in our approach of reflexive policy-making with young people is a fruitful interaction between Youth Board members on the one hand, and institutional stakeholders on the other.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe**, the interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders only took place after a long preparatory phase for both groups. In their first meeting together, the Youth Board members presented the results of their problem analysis to the institutional group. The institutional group was instructed to listen to the issues identified by the youth without providing any immediate feedback. This approach was designed to prevent the institutions from attempting to persuade the youth to adopt their perspectives or proposing solutions at this stage. Instead, they were encouraged to remain open, attentive, and receptive to the experiences and insights shared by the youth group.

The importance of this meeting was that for the first time, individuals from various institutions involved in education, employment, and social welfare for the city's youth were given an honest portrayal of the lacks and problems faced by these young people. It turned out that many of the attendees were unaware of the everyday struggles faced by the youth. The meeting was empowering for the youth, who felt supported by the facilitators, as well as for



most of the institutional stakeholders. However, some of these stakeholders were a bit frustrated for not having the possibility to “respond” to the youth, and not being able to express their disagreement.

The next phase aimed to co-create policy solutions and brought together youth representatives and institutional stakeholders for a two-day workshop. Participants included eight members of the Youth Board and seven representatives of the institutional group. The workshop used ice-breaking activities, group discussions, and presentations to identify common problems, including lack of motivation, poor teacher-pupil relationships, a lack of purpose in education, and a lack of supportive communities. Working groups were then formed to address each issue and develop actionable solutions, including promoting learning-by-doing approaches, providing career counseling, establishing mentoring programs, and building supportive communities. The proposals from the working groups constitute the basis of the Reflexive Policy Agenda for improving access to quality education for vulnerable youth in Sfântu Gheorghe.

During the workshop, it became clear that young people and institutional stakeholders largely identify the same problems, but that they have a different perception on the background of these problems. While the Youth Board members focus on identifying problems and finding solutions at the school level, the institutional stakeholders tend to diagnose problems and seek solutions at the district or national level of educational policies.

In **Tallinn**, direct interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders has been fairly limited. Since different institutions operate in their own rhythm and have busy agendas, it has been difficult to organize meetings in which both young people and institutional stakeholders could be present at the same time. Nevertheless, the project team has made an effort to ensure that the ideas and needs arising from the discussions with the young people reach the appropriate institutions involved. In particular, the mediators/facilitators were the ones who directly translated and transmitted the results of the work with young people to the decision makers.

In **Barakaldo**, the co-creation process followed a pattern of cyclical interaction between the Youth Board and the Social Lab (where the Youth Board presented its ideas to the institutional stakeholder group). In the last stage of the process, the two groups have worked together on the co-creation of new policies and initiatives in the so-called Batera space. This way of working has allowed the young people and the policy-makers to maintain a constant communication throughout the process. Nevertheless, it was a challenge for the Barakaldo team to safeguard a constructive atmosphere in which the institutional stakeholders take the Youth Board completely seriously. In the Social Lab, the facilitators employed tools that fostered active listening and facilitated genuine dialogue between the two groups, with a particular emphasis on encouraging policymakers to listen actively to the youth. During debriefing sessions, the facilitators reflected on the need to use plain language in the sessions and to improve the active listening skills of the policymakers. They concluded that better tools were necessary to ensure that youth participation was taking place on equal terms with policymakers.

In **Amsterdam**, the interaction between the Youth Board and institutional stakeholders occurred at various phases of the co-creation process, and the nature of the interaction varied accordingly. During the early phases of the Sprints, the meetings that included institutional stakeholders focused on capacity building and knowledge-sharing related to the problem at hand. At this stage, the institutional stakeholders offered their expertise to support the Youth Board. Later in the Sprints, during the feedback stage, the interaction between the Youth Board and institutional stakeholders became more equal as they collaborated to find practical solutions to the policy proposals put forth by the Youth Board. However, tensions occasionally arose during these feedback sessions because the Youth Board felt like they were being judged by the institutional stakeholders. The Youth Board also had mixed feelings about the feedback provided by the institutional stakeholders on their proposals. Some stakeholders criticized the ideas for not being innovative, but the Youth Board's focus was on developing ideas that addressed the needs of the target group, rather than being solely innovative. The facilitators from !WOON played a crucial role in moderating these feedback sessions and reducing the distance between the two groups, improving their mutual understanding and collaboration.

## 7.4 Adaptation to crises and unforeseen circumstances

The future is inherently unpredictable, as exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted our lives and the UPLIFT project right from the start. The pandemic heavily impacted the initial activities related to the co-creation process at all four locations, although in different ways. In addition, changes and a lack of clarity within the local stakeholder network further impeded the progress of the process, particularly in Tallinn and Barakaldo.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe**, COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the stakeholder level but less so on the Youth Board. During 2021 and 2022, face-to-face meetings with the Youth Board were held regularly as regulations allowed after-school activities, and one of the schools was able to host these meetings. However, organizing meetings with the institutional group proved to be more challenging. The COVID-19 crisis overwhelmed the institutions, as they had to reorganize their regular activities, which required extra management capacity. As a result, fewer meetings with the institutional group were organized than originally planned.

The COVID-19 crisis also had a significant impact on institutional stakeholders in **Tallinn**, making it challenging to involve them in the research process as they were preoccupied with addressing the immediate effects of the pandemic. Therefore, the Tallinn team opted for a step-by-step approach to involve the most committed actors first. Additionally, changes within the institutional structure of the Tallinn City Government during the first year of the project posed a hindrance, requiring the team to find new contact and familiarize them with the project. With the suspension of activities by the Tallinn youth council, alternative strategies for involving youth groups had to be developed. At the onset of the pandemic, most of the work in Tallinn was done virtually. Fortunately, since Estonian youth work already utilizes a virtual and online environment, it did not necessitate significant changes. However, virtual work

negatively impacted group dynamics within the youth group. Physical meetings in later stages of the co-creation process helped to compensate for this deficiency.

In **Barakaldo**, the co-creation activities faced substantial delays due to both a lack of clarity between the implementation partners and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. The Youth Town Hall Meeting, which was the first activity of the process, was initially planned to occur much earlier but was ultimately organized in September 2021, several months behind schedule. Despite the challenges, most of the co-creation sessions were held in person, with participants taking preventive measures like wearing masks to ensure everyone's safety.

In **Amsterdam**, the recruitment of young people had to be done online through social media, !WOON's website, direct emails, and phone calls to young people in the partners' networks. This probably had a consequence on what kind of people could be reached. Indeed, the Amsterdam Youth Board is relatively highly educated, which is due on one hand to the fact that in Amsterdam even those with a high education and good job experience housing problems, but on the other hand it probably also depends on the recruitment process. It is believed that in-person events and meetings in youth centres, vocational schools, and social housing complexes could have reached a more diverse group of individuals. To address this issue, additional Youth Board members were recruited in person during the other Sprints. Also most of the activities in Sprint 1 had to be carried out online. This slowed down the bonding of the Youth Board members. However, thanks to the enthusiasm and engagement techniques used by the facilitators from !WOON, the group gradually came together and started a very fruitful work relationship that continued in person for the other two Sprints.

Although the COVID-19 situation resulted in delays and changes in the planned activities, the co-creation process's added value was not substantially impacted. The timelines were adjusted, and in-person events were turned into hybrid or fully online activities if necessary.

## 7.5 Follow-up and evaluation techniques for the co-creation process

Evaluation is an essential aspect of Reflexive Policy making, and any co-creation process must be continuously evaluated on multiple fronts. Firstly, evaluation and feedback should be an integral part of the co-creation trajectory. Participants should be given the opportunity to provide their opinions on the participatory process, including whether it respects the voices of young people, whether it is inclusive, and whether the practices and strategies are working as intended. For this purpose, in UPLIFT quantitative and qualitative research methods have been applied at all four WP4 locations to gain insight into the experiences of participating Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders. Additionally, all local co-creation teams have provided a qualitative reflection on the local co-creation process.

However, it is equally important to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda. Does this agenda represent a change in social policy, and are the proposed and implemented solutions more effective in addressing youth problems while reflecting young people's input? In our view, the accountability of institutional parties is critical to the

success of any co-creation process. Therefore, evaluation and feedback sessions with participation from both the Youth Board and institutional stakeholders need to be scheduled after decisions for policy implementation are made.

In **Sfântu Gheorghe**, the co-creation process has been evaluated in a joint meeting with the Youth Board and the institutional group that took place in February 2023. In general, the participants were positive about the process that was followed, although they also had some suggestions for improvement:

- An earlier bonding in a less formal context between the Youth Board and the institutional stakeholder group would have been desirable to build the connection;
- A shared understanding of how each institution work, especially in the context of elaborating or validating a strategic document would have been useful in the institutional group;
- A more stable (every time the same people) representation of institutional stakeholders, preferably on management level, would have been desirable and “guest experts” could have been involved occasionally, depending on topics;
- The workshops for the institutional stakeholder group could have been more activity and game based, just as they were in the Youth Board group.

In addition to the above comments, the local co-creation team has also identified some learning points and recommendations about the different phases of the co-creation process. These learning points are integrated in the reflection in Chapter 10.

In **Tallinn**, a qualitative approach has been used to evaluate the co-creation process. During each meeting, reflective feedback has been asked for. This allowed each participant to express his/her opinions of, and experience with, the process. For this purpose, the following questions have been asked:

- What was meaningful to you about the experience?
- What do you personally take away from here?
- What was most important to you?

In addition, the Tallinn project team has also made a continuous analysis of the entire process through discussions within the local co-creation team. The results of these discussions are incorporated in the learning points of Chapter 10.

In **Barakaldo**, two types of evaluation methods were used: facilitator evaluation after each session and evaluation questionnaires filled out by the participants to gauge their level of satisfaction at the end of the co-creation process. With regard to the first aspect, the Barakaldo team worked in a structured way, setting up a work plan for each session with insight into the topics, objectives, and working methods, sometimes in collaboration with the Youth Board. Notes were taken during meetings and facilitators held debriefing sessions after every meeting to evaluate the work plan and reflect on the social atmosphere within the group. To measure

overall satisfaction with the co-creation process, the Barakaldo team distributed questionnaires among both Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders. The survey results show positive feedback from both groups.

In **Amsterdam**, a survey was developed to assess the extent to which the co-creation trajectory achieved its objectives. The survey was distributed to all participants in the co-creation process, with a slightly different version for the Youth Board and the institutional stakeholders. The Amsterdam team asked questions related to four aspects: overall success, process quality, added value of co-creation, and the future of the Youth Board. Sixteen people responded to the questionnaire (7 from the Youth Board and 9 from institutional partners), and the quantitative results were discussed in a follow-up discussion session with representatives from both groups. Overall, the survey results were encouraging regarding the objectives set at the beginning of the co-creation process. The majority of respondents indicated that the process had a clear added value and should be continued in the future. However, the evaluation results also show that relationship between the Youth Board and the institutional stakeholders needs more work, as well as the trajectory towards implementation of the policy proposals.

## 8 Reflexive Policy Agendas

The individual Reflexive Policy Agendas (RPAs) of the various WP4 locations provide a detailed account of the outcomes of the co-creation process. In this chapter, these outcomes will be synthesized (Section 8.1 to 8.4). For a discussion of the differences and similarities of the RPAs that were developed at the different locations we refer to Chapter 10.

### 8.1 Main policy recommendations in Sfântu Gheorghe

The reflexive policy agenda for Sfântu Gheorghe is the result of a long and time intensive process in which particularly the institutional stakeholders needed to be convinced of the added value of the UPLIFT-project and its way of working. Fortunately, at the end of this process, the institutional group members started to think critically about their own role in changing the system and fully supported the basic principles of the Reflexive Policy Agenda that they co-created together with the Youth Group.

Based on these basic principles as well as on the results of the UPLIFT research in the other work packages, the local co-creation team has written an extensive Reflexive Policy Agenda that is summarized in this chapter. This Reflexive Policy Agenda was discussed with both the Youth Board and the institutional group during a one day long workshop that took place on February 22, 2023. This workshop has resulted into the validation of the main points of this agenda, although on some aspects adaptations or additions were requested for. These requests are already incorporated in the RPA that is presented in this Section.

The objectives of the reflexive policy agenda include reducing differences between schools at all levels and ensuring that all children in Sfântu Gheorghe are enrolled and stay in the educational system until at least the 10th grade. These objectives are part of a long-term vision that requires changes in attitudes and mentality over at least two generations, as well as engagement from policy makers in the local public administration. To lay the foundation for achieving this long-term goal, the following actions have been prioritized.

#### 8.1.1 Long-term Reflexive Policy Agenda

##### **Priority no. 1: Development of auxiliary school infrastructure**

The quality of school facilities across the city needs to be improved to meet the following standards: access to a cafeteria with free or subsidized meals, dormitory with access to hot water, large classrooms with enough space for all pupils and natural light, gym and outer sport facilities, green spaces, accessibility for people with impaired mobility, laboratories where needed, a teachers' common room, proper IT equipment in all classrooms and availability of spaces for after-school activities. In addition, local public transportation should focus on serving pupils who travel daily from nearby villages to Sfântu Gheorghe, for example by initiating a special transportation pass for pupils or facilitating carpooling by setting up an online network of families who travel from the same villages to Sfântu Gheorghe every day.

The rationale for prioritizing the improvement of school facilities is to address the issue of varying infrastructure across educational institutions in the city, which often influences (resourceful) parents' decisions when choosing a school for their child. By bringing all schools and kindergartens up to the same standard, it may increase interest in other schools beyond the top three rated institutions in the city.

This priority will require collaboration between the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe, the County-level School Inspectorate, and school headmasters. The voices of youth should be represented by pupils' organizations and the UPLIFT Youth Board (or the Youth Parliament). The first step will be to implement a 5-year municipal-level school rehabilitation program, starting with the most neglected schools.

### **Priority no. 2: Strengthening the triangle of cooperation: school-parent-pupil**

The research in the UPLIFT project has shown that there are serious flaws in the relationships between schools, parents and pupils, which can be a barrier to a successful school career for pupils. In order to remove these barriers, the triangle of cooperation school-parent-pupil needs to be improved. Various initiatives outside the classroom can be helpful in this respect, such as a sensitivity training for teachers, visiting hours for teachers, family visits, a "Get to know your teacher" day, volunteering and involving parents in school life, a learning by playing programme, a "Reversed Role Day" (be a teacher for a day) and the organisation of school days together with the families.

Additionally, to provide adequate support to vulnerable children in need, teachers should receive training in the field of children's rights and institutional frameworks, such as where to turn if anything unusual is suspected in a child's behaviour. The connection with family support services should also be strengthened, such as involving the Child Protection Service in extracurricular group activities that support school staff and families. Professional teams should be available to support both teachers and parents, enabling them to better help children in need.

The initiative to improve the triangle of cooperation between schools, parents, and pupils should be driven by the schools and pupils themselves, with support from the Inspectorate and the Municipality, and taking into account advice from pupils' organizations and the Youth Board. To strengthen the relationship between school and parents, pupils from 7th grade onwards should be encouraged to organize 'out of the classroom' activities with the support of school staff. For younger pupils, schools should take the initiative to organize such activities with input from pupils. The aim is for these events to take place 3-4 times per year.

This initiative will require some financial support, as well as guidance from knowledgeable stakeholders. A city-level program, supported by the county-level Inspectorate, may be established to provide extra support. Teachers are often overwhelmed with other demands, so this program should be aimed at alleviating their workload by providing necessary resources. The involvement of the Directorate of Social Services and the Child Protection Service is also

important as they can offer professional assistance in handling cases that go beyond the teachers' expertise.

### **Priority no. 3: Getting the schools ready for handling violence in school**

The issue of bullying and the feeling of isolation among students was the primary focus of the Youth Board's research, which surveyed 80 students across the city. The results indicate that students, regardless of the perceived status of their school, commonly experience bullying or feel helpless when confronted with violent incidents or scenes in school. Unfortunately, teaching staff is often unaware of the extent and impact of this problem.

In response, the Reflexive Policy Agenda recommends that schools and the Municipality take this issue seriously and launch a city-wide training program for teachers on how to handle violence, bullying, and racism in schools. Additionally, self-awareness and support groups for students should be established, regardless of their role as perpetrators or victims. Finally, every school should ensure wide access to psychological counseling for students.

To promote awareness and understanding of these services, a powerful campaign is recommended that challenges the prejudices people hold against psychologists, social services, and students who use these resources

Other concrete proposals:

- Enrolling schools in the "Hero School Program," based on a Hungarian model that promotes cooperation, empathy, active listening, and teamwork by developing a personalized activity portfolio with the guidance of an independent mentor.
- Implementing restorative practices for community development and conflict resolution.
- Creating brochures, flyers, and other information materials for schools that provide guidance on handling violence, bullying, and racism in schools.
- Hosting inspirational talks by recovered drug addicts, anti-bullying advocates, and anti-racism advocates.

The implementation of these measures should be a collaborative effort involving the municipality, schools, county-level Inspectorate, Directorate of Social Services, Child Protection Services, Educational Resource Centre, and Youth Board. The teacher training should begin in the 2023-2024 school year as part of a city program financed by the municipality. In a rotation system, all teachers in the city should participate in at least one of the courses offered.

Furthermore, schools should establish support groups with the assistance of their school psychologists (if available). For schools lacking sufficient support professionals, the county-level Inspectorate and the Resource Centre should request additional positions from the Ministry of Education, and if not possible, the Municipality should allocate resources to cover these activities. External professionals should help schools organise non-mandatory self-awareness groups that are open to all interested individuals.



To promote the value of self-awareness groups and encourage participation among students, the Youth Board should utilise its network and collaborate with the Youth Bureau to inform students about the potential benefits of joining such groups

#### **Priority no. 4: Employing more support staff in education (supporting teacher, school mediators, developing teachers, logopedists, school counsellors)**

In Romania, most schools lack auxiliary professionals such as education experts who can assist students with learning or other challenges. To address this gap, the Reflexive Policy Agenda proposes creating a pool of educational experts that can serve all schools in the city. Additionally, the following complementary initiatives are recommended:

- Developing the capacity of individual schools by providing external support to the board of educators to develop a shared institutional vision and value system;
- Promoting access to and informing students and their parents about available support provided by existing personnel, such as through School Counsellor's Day;
- Expanding the network of professional practice schools for future educators to include schools attended by students with special education needs or attention deficits.

The proposal is based on the premise that the Romanian school system primarily relies on frontal teaching methods, providing little individualised support to students. The current approach prioritises lexical and knowledge-based learning, with two primary evaluations, particularly the end-of-8th-grade exam, significantly impacting a student's future opportunities by determining the level at which they can continue their education.

However, many students require additional support to pass these evaluations, often relying on support from their families or other external sources. This leads to a disparity, where students without such support, such as those from families with low educational backgrounds or those working in multiple shifts, have fewer opportunities to pursue higher education. The introduction of auxiliary professionals can support these students in understanding and engaging with the material, resulting in improved evaluation outcomes.

This initiative may extend beyond the framework of the Reflexive Policy Agenda as the formal process for employing additional auxiliary personnel in schools requires a decision from the Ministry, based on a request from the County School Inspectorate. However, this formal pathway is perceived as not very promising, and as such, the Municipality, together with other relevant institutions such as the County level School Inspectorate, Educational Resource Centre, local branch of the Romanian Psychologists' Collegium, and universities, must find local solutions to address this urgent problem.

The creation of a city-level pool of educational experts to provide auxiliary support to schools and meet the assessed needs of students in their learning activities is one such solution. The implementation of this proposal is scheduled to begin in the 2023-2024 school year, with a preparation period in 2023

## **Priority no. 5: Creating a supporting environment in all schools**

The co-creation process revealed that by the age of 13, many pupils lose interest in school, education, teachers and adults in general. As they enter high school, they often forget about the benefits of learning and the meaning of being in school. To address this issue, there is a need to create safer, more supportive, and engaging school environments. The following initiatives are proposed:

- Strengthening the motivation of pupils and teachers through:
  - Engaging new methods in education;
  - Promoting a learning by doing approach;
  - Access to a safe learning environment;
  - Promoting the practice of appreciation and self-empowerment;
  - Access to career counseling and information.
- Giving purpose to the act of learning and teaching, by:
  - Special interest clubs;
  - Mentoring programs;
  - Thematic activities for pupils and adapted classes on specific topics (e.g. national celebration days, global warming);
  - Life skill courses, such as financial education.
- Creating supportive communities in schools, by:
  - Recurrent community building actions;
  - Activities combining work and fun;
  - Creating green spaces around the school together with the pupils;
  - Conflict management courses and trainings for teachers;
  - Creating a pleasant environment to encourage pupils (including those from more disadvantaged backgrounds) to stay in school as long as possible;
  - Developing common teaching methods and organising interdisciplinary thematic teaching weeks within a school.

In order to successfully implement this initiative, it is essential to involve the school staff and the pupil councils at the school level. Specific activities that could be implemented in the short term include club activities, practical classes, gaining useful knowledge for everyday life, especially in vocational schools, and organizing events for pupils. These activities should take place on a regular basis, every month or at least in every teaching module (5/school year), and they should be organized collaboratively between pupils, teachers, and other school personnel. The implementation of this proposal can begin in the upcoming school year and should be further developed in the years to come.

## **Priority no. 6: Enhancing inter-institutional cooperation/networking**

The UPLIFT co-creation process has revealed that there is very little collaboration and interaction between educational institutions and other stakeholders that are directly or indirectly involved in the educational process. Each stakeholder has its own interests and responsibilities, and there is hardly any sharing of experiences or collaboration among them. This results in parallel universes that function independently and do not understand each other's working methods and objectives.

To address this issue, the RPA proposes setting up an educational working group (a bit similar to the institutional group during the co-creation process) at the city level, consisting of representatives from schools, the Municipality, social services, the Youth Board, the County School Inspectorate, the Educational Resource Centre, legal counselors, the Youth Bureau, NGOs, and the labor force agency. The purpose of this group is to foster collaboration and communication among stakeholders, and to find local and alternative solutions to nationwide problems in the educational system.

The working group should have regular meetings, at least once a month, to discuss urgent problems and develop intervention strategies for the upcoming years. The Municipality should take the lead in setting up this group, but the success of the initiative depends on the commitment and participation of all stakeholders involved.

### **8.1.2 Policy agenda for the short run**

In preparation for political decision-making on the implementation of the long-term vision, it is recommended to already implement some short-term actions. These actions should focus on organizing a structured follow-up for the Youth Board and implementing elements of the long-term Reflexive Policy Agenda that require relatively limited investment and preparation.

#### *Organizing a structural follow-up for the Youth Board*

To ensure a sustainable future for the Youth Board and the process of reflexive policy-making, it is necessary to integrate the process, the participants, and the findings of the UPLIFT project into the youth and educational policy-making process of the city. The Youth Bureau of Sfântu Gheorghe, which is initiated and run by the vice-mayor, will play a major role in this process, with support from LAG Sepsi. The following actions are proposed:

1. Involving the Youth Board into the Youth Bureau's work

The Youth Bureau, initiated by one of the vice-mayors of Sfântu Gheorghe, aims to improve the position of young people in the city. As the objectives of the Youth Bureau and the Youth Board are similar, a closer collaboration between the two would be beneficial. One way to achieve this is by involving Youth Board members in strategic decision-making processes related to youth work in the city. Additionally, the Youth Bureau could offer volunteer and training programs that may be of interest to Youth Board members. Finally, the Youth Bureau

is working to establish a Youth Parliament, which could potentially be integrated with the Youth Board.

2. Conducting the know-how transfer of the current Youth Board to new members, thereby assuring continuity in their work.

The core team of the UPLIFT Youth Board consists of young people in their final year of secondary school or older. Many of these young people have either started university or entered the workforce, making it challenging to bring them together, particularly without a clear goal or action plan. It is, therefore, essential to recruit, train and involve a new generation of Youth Board members moving forward. The vice-mayor, in collaboration with the Youth Bureau, has already begun organizing meetings with the Youth Board and assisting them in recruiting new members. The LAG Sepsi association will handle the training of new members, while the Youth Bureau will be responsible for involving them in activities, actions, and policy-making processes.

#### *Implementation of specific elements of the Reflexive Policy Agenda.*

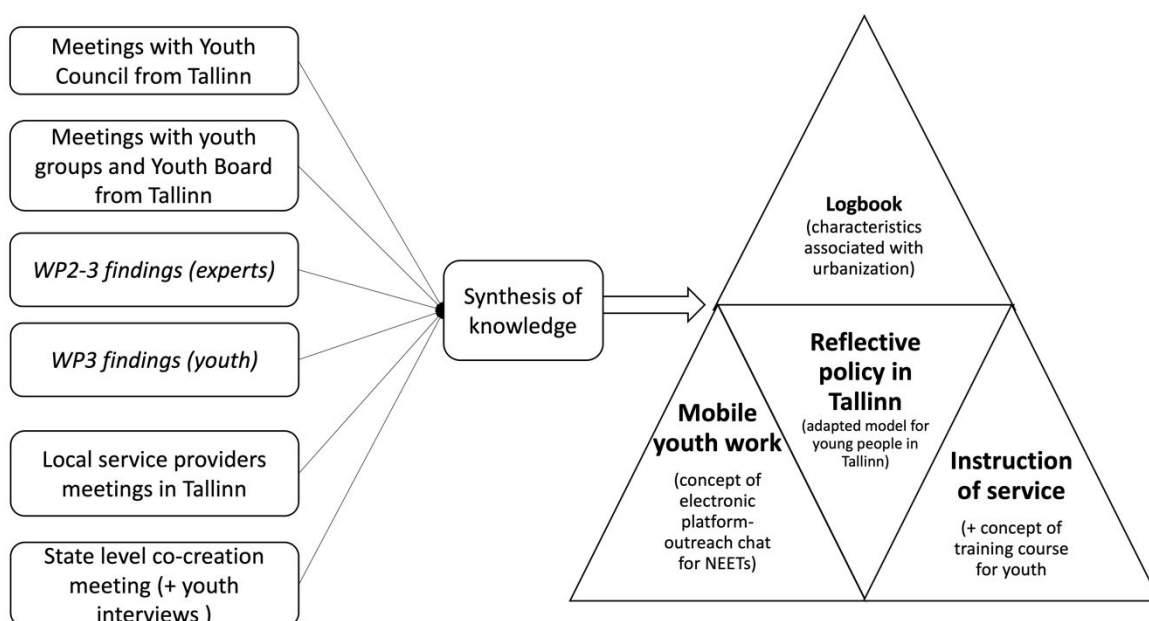
While many of the objectives of the Reflexive Policy Agenda have a long-term horizon, some concrete actions were formulated by the Youth Board based on their expressed needs for change in their schools. These actions include setting up a self-awareness group in schools, organizing "reversed days" where pupils become teachers, and monthly group activities on various topics like watching movies and discussing them or bringing up hot topics and discussing them.

These proposals can be implemented in the short term with the collaboration of the Youth Board, pupils' councils, and the LAG Sepsi association. To get started, the Youth Board should meet with pupils' organizations and seek approval and support from school administration. The activities can begin in the current school year and continue in the next. Pilot projects will be formulated to kick-start the short-term implementation of the RPA (see also Section 7.5.2).

## **8.2 Main policy recommendations in Tallinn**

The policy co-creation process in Tallinn produced outcomes at two different levels (see Figure 3). Firstly, specific tools and materials were co-created to help youth workers reach and support vulnerable NEET youth. Secondly, a comprehensive Reflexive Policy Agenda aimed at improving the life chances of NEET youth in Tallinn was developed.

Figure 3. Input and outcomes of the Estonian co-creation process within the framework of UPLIFT



### 8.2.1 Development of tools for the Estonian Youth work

The co-creation process with young people has resulted in the development of several youth work tools, including training materials aimed at enhancing the capabilities of the NEET youth target group, a virtual youth platform that improves access to services through an artificially intelligent chatbot, and a database on NEET youth known as the Logbook, which is equipped with analytical and visualization tools to improve evidence-based decision making. The different co-creation meetings with young people ensured that their needs, suggestions, and experiences were incorporated into the development of these tools.

### 8.2.2 A policy agenda for improving the life changes of NEET Youth

In addition to the development of the specific tools mentioned above, the Estonian co-creation process also resulted in some more general policy recommendations, that are summarized in this Section.

#### Tackling problems related to early school leaving

Early detection of young people's problems is a major challenge in Tallinn schools, leading to high rates of early school leaving. Learning difficulties, mental and physical health issues, school bullying, and other serious problems often go unaddressed or ignored by schools due to a lack of resources and personnel. This issue is widely recognized by stakeholders, and systemic solutions at the national level, such as increasing the number of school psychologists and other specialists and raising their salaries, are needed to address it. In the meantime, providing accessible training and study materials to teachers and other school staff on how to

recognize and intervene in students' special needs and on school bullying can help to provide more individualized learning programs and flexible learning paths. However, it's also important to provide teachers with the support they need to implement these approaches, which may include reducing class sizes or hiring more assistant teachers.

### **Increasing awareness of career choices and increasing young peoples' ability to choose the speciality (and school)**

Another problem concerns the lack of awareness of different career choices and the problems and sometimes even the inability to choose a school and speciality after graduating from the basic school (aged 7-16). There is a small number of vocational education centres in Estonia that offers young people, who have failed to continue their studies in regular vocational education programs, an opportunity to follow a yearlong transition and orientation program. This program provides them with information about different specialities and career choices and offers short term internships. There is a need for more such programs since they can support vulnerable young people in finding out what kind of vocation would be suitable for them. Of course, such a solution is rather expensive and it can probably not be offered to very large groups of young people.

A somewhat cheaper solution may be to enhance career counselling in schools (particularly in basic schools). Currently, this kind of counselling is of rather unstable quality in Tallinn (see also Beilmann *et al.* 2022). It depends on the school administration if, and if so to what extent, career counselling is provided to students. This may lead to situations where young people who would need the counselling the most (e.g. young people from families with a vulnerable background) are the ones who miss out on this counselling. It is suggested to gather different services for young people (incl. career counselling) under one roof into so-called youth houses, where young persons can get a professional and friendly advice without a fear of stigmatisation (see also Beilmann *et al.*, 2022).

### **Increase awareness of young people about the existing services and educational choices**

Vulnerable young people are often rather poorly informed about their opportunities in formal and informal education, as well as on the labour market. The Estonian youth work sector provides various services, activities, projects and programs to young people (many of those are specially focused on vulnerable young people and NEETs in particular), but the target group cannot always find these services. Therefore, it is crucial to provide young people in vulnerable life situations with information about the different opportunities offered to them by the youth work sector because these services may somewhat compensate for the lack of support and attention that they received in school and/or at home. In order to improve the information availability, the following proposals were put forward.

- Use QR codes in bus stations and bus stops to guide young people to important websites about living, studying and working in Tallinn;

- Special 'Tallinn-focused packages' could be developed in different languages (Estonian, Russian, English) (e.g., funded by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund);
- Poster and social media campaigns could be organized by youth workers so that young people would know about the services and youth work in general;
- Youth trustees and youth ambassadors could be set-up in every district who convey information to young people.

### 8.3 Main policy recommendations in Barakaldo

In its latest phases, the Barakaldo co-creation process has focused on designing solutions to the housing challenges faced by young people in the municipality. This work has been preceded by the identification of five main areas for improvement.

The first area of improvement is represented by the modification of the Emancipation Ordinance of Barakaldo – a legal document that contains the requisites that young people require to access public housing aids – and the websites of the autonomous and local institutions that contain information regarding the emancipation of young people. As regards this, the young people are aware of the difficulties, particularly bureaucratic, that come with making changes in the ordinance in the short term.

The other areas of improvement involve issues of accessibility, communication and adaptation to the different realities that young people face, as well as counselling in issues related to emancipation. When requesting an improved accessibility, young people refer to the simplification of the requirements to access housing grants and programmes, the simplification of the administrative processes to access aids and grants, and the clarification of the information about the actors and institutions that offer these tools and programmes.

Regarding the improvement of communication of the programmes and aids, the Youth Board emphasizes that the contents that outline requirements and procedures should be written in a simple, clear and understandable language. Also, documents should be available in several languages and easy to understand summaries should be present on the official webpages of the Municipality.

With regard to the adaptation to the different realities that young people face, the Youth Board has highlighted that local housing programmes and legal documents, such as the ordinance, are designed and communicated with a particular 'standard' young person in mind. People with disabilities or people from migrant backgrounds that do not possess these standard characteristics may therefore not have the same opportunities when they apply for these aids.

Finally, regarding to counselling for emancipation of young people, the Youth Board members observe that there is not enough information available on what it means to emancipate and the responsibilities that come with this. For instance, to know what a bill is and how to pay it, how to pay a mortgage, or even how to do the laundry.

These five areas of improvement have been translated into four specific actions – the so called “proposals for policy improvement” – that constitute the Reflexive Policy Agenda of Barakaldo and that are listed below.

### **1. Setting up an emancipation school for young people in Barakaldo**

The aim of this proposal is to provide the young people that decide to emancipate in Barakaldo with the tools to initiate a pathway by themselves. These tools will be provided through workshops oriented to practical matters, that go from learning how to pay the bills to Do It Yourself activities. The emancipation school is designed as a dynamic proposal, in the sense that it will adapt to the demands that the participants identify.

The proposal will be carried out by Gazte Bulegoa, the youth office of the Barakaldo Municipality. They will be in charge of the design of the emancipation school, of the communication of the different activities and of facilitating the sessions, including design of the contents and scheduling and planning. However, the Youth Board members and other interested young people will also have the opportunity to provide input for the agenda and the content of the emancipation school sessions. Furthermore, they will be asked to evaluate the initiative.

### **2. Development of tools to improve access of young people to the aid for the promotion of youngster’s emancipation in Barakaldo**

The aim of this proposal is to make it easier for young people to find the information they need to request the aid for emancipation. The objective is that young people find the information in a centralized, simplified, and easy way.

Gazte Bulegoa, the youth office of the Barakaldo Municipality, will be in charge of making the information regarding the economic aids and relevant programs for the promotion of the emancipation of young people more accessible, in communication with the Social Action and Housing department of the municipality and ERETZA. At a practical level this means, reviewing the webpage where the information is uploaded, organizing informative workshops and intensifying the diffusion through its social media channels. Moreover, Gazte Bulegoa will continue with individual counselling, guaranteeing that the young people that visit the office receive the adequate information regarding the aid and other relevant details of the housing domain.

### **3. Reflection upon the realities of the young people in order to adapt the local housing policies and ordinance to their needs**

The aim of this proposal is to collect available information and get a full picture of the different modalities of households residing in Barakaldo. In order to do this, Eretza, in collaboration with the Youth Department of the Municipality, will organize meetings between the Urban Management Society of the Municipality, other institutions that have gathered information related to the composition of the households of Barakaldo, and the young people from the



Municipality. The objective of gathering this data is to modify the different mechanisms in place in order to adapt them to the necessities of the young people that live in Barakaldo.

#### **4. Generation of synergies with other municipalities in housing strategies to foster the emancipation of young people**

The aim of this proposal is to generate connections between municipalities, particularly the ones in Ezkerraldea, the geographical area in which Barakaldo is located, in order to foster coordinated action in matters of youth emancipation. Among the different formats in which this generation of synergies may happen, a discussion forum emerged as the most likely alternative.

The proposal will be carried out by Eretza, the Urban Management Society of the Municipality; Gazte Bulegoa, the youth office of the Barakaldo Municipality and; the department of social action of Barakaldo. In this case, each one will develop specific tasks: Eretza will prepare the contents related to housing matters and policies and will contact housing departments of other municipalities; Gazte Bulegoa will bring its expertise regarding youth policies and will contact the youth departments and organizations of other municipalities. Finally, the social action department will be in charge of the logistics of the different encounters between municipalities.

### **8.4 Main Policy recommendations in Amsterdam**

The first set of points in the Reflexive Policy Agenda elaborated in Amsterdam is about two rather focused initiatives that provide a clear and workable policy implementation path: the housing information platform and the communal housing concept. These emerged at the end of the first two co-creation Sprints. Nonetheless, although the institutional stakeholders have recognized the feasibility and value of these proposals, it is still difficult to implement them, as the timeframe of policy-making is longer than that of policy co-creation and policy-makers have to respond to multiple interests.

The second set of points in the Reflexive Policy Agenda consists of recommendations of a more general nature, aimed at shaping the overarching approach of local actors – chiefly the municipality, but also housing providers – towards youth housing. These are the results of the last Sprint, where the discussion was broader, less focused on problem solving and more focused on making municipal policymakers understand what is important and/or problematic for young people in the Amsterdam housing market, and what they would like the municipality to focus on in the coming years. As such, the road to implementation of these recommendations is longer and perhaps even more uncertain, although there is reason to believe that they will at least be taken into account in the development of the new municipal housing vision, given the effort that the municipality is putting into participation processes.

### 8.4.1 General housing policy recommendations

#### **Provide support to youngsters with a temporary rental contract that is (almost) ending and that have nowhere to go on the housing market.**

The expected effects of such a recommendation would be less housing insecurity and less young people moving back to their parental home. Although this is a general recommendation, in their manifesto the Youth Board has suggested what this support would entail in practice. As a starting point, they would like to see the municipality step up its efforts to provide guidance and create new housing options for young people who earn too much to qualify for social housing, but do not earn enough to afford the high rents and meet the income requirements in the private rental sector.

Secondly, there should be a “safety net” in place for all young people whose temporary youth contracts expires and who do not have prospects of moving on to a new dwelling. To some extent, the municipality has already taken this recommendation into account because from mid-2023, these young people will temporarily get ‘priority points’ (*startpunten* in Dutch) in the social housing allocation system, which increases their chances of finding a new social rental dwelling. Although the Youth Board is really pleased that the municipality of Amsterdam participates in this experiment, they also observe that it is not a solution for young households whose temporary rental contracts expire before the mentioned date. Therefore, according to the Youth Board, these households should receive a one year extension of their temporary rental contract so that they can also take profit of the temporary reform of the social housing allocation system. The actors involved in this measure should be the municipality, but also all social housing providers.

#### **Facilitate house sharing among young people and support young people that want to start a housing cooperative or a co-housing initiative.**

Currently, sharing a housing with peers (particularly if there are more than 2 people involved) is not an attractive option on the Amsterdam housing market. Regulations are complex and not well-known and there is a need for a better facilitation and information provision. Additionally, the manifesto indicates that housing cooperatives would be a very efficient way to allow young people to own their home in an affordable way and live collectively, but that they are not very well-known either. Thus, clearer guidance and simpler procedures should be provided to set up housing cooperatives.

The above recommendations could have a positive effect not only on young people, but on anyone who would like to live in shared accommodation, including the elderly. More collective and clustered living for the elderly could vacate the dwellings in which these households are currently living, thereby offering more housing options for the younger generations (the principle of circulation on the housing market).

The actors involved in the above measures should be the municipality, but also housing providers and perhaps the national government (they could for example make housing allowances available for people who share a house, which is currently not the case).

**Build more large scale youth housing complexes at the edges of the city. Make sure that these complexes have sufficient facilities (supermarkets, cafes) and a good 24 hour public transport connection to the city centre.**

As the Youth Board highlighted, young people are very aware of the rules of the free market, and as such they do not expect to be able to live in the centre of Amsterdam, in high quality housing, for very cheap prices. Indeed, many Youth Board members are well-prepared to live in the peripheral parts of the city region and they see merit in the construction of large student and youth housing complexes at the edges of the urban area. However, such complexes will only be attractive if they have access to adequate services and facilities, such as public transportation (preferable also during the night), supermarkets and socialization opportunities (e.g. cafes).

These are general urban planning recommendations that could be implemented by the municipalities that collaborate in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region.

**Counter empty buildings with a good registration system and a clear regulation. Start a project that invites people to develop creative and innovative solutions for empty buildings.**

Amsterdam has relatively high real estate vacancy rates, partially due to dwellings being bought as investment and not let out, and partially due to large (office) buildings being unused. To operationalize this recommendation, the Youth Board suggests to launch a specific hotline to report real estate vacancy, accompanied by a campaign to encourage people to report such vacancies. These reports could be collected in an online accessible database, so that citizens could submit projects to fill those vacant spaces with (youth) housing or other uses. They suggest that such a task could be coordinated and managed by a university or similar institution with relevant expertise, in order to minimize the workload for the municipality.

### **Involve and inform young people**

Many young people in Amsterdam lack knowledge about their options, rights and duties on the housing market. Consequently, they don't really know what they can do to improve their position. However, they do know what their problems and desires are. Therefore, they should not only be informed but also involved.

Obviously, the continuation of the Youth Board so that young people get a permanent voice in the housing policy development process in the city of Amsterdam is one of the main ways in which this involvement can be secured and facilitated. The co-creation process showed the importance of creating shared spaces where policy recipients and policy makers can meet and discuss problems and proposals in order to align new and existing policies to the needs of the

people they are meant to support. In particular, Youth Board members have come to value the experience and believe in its results so much that they decided to recommend to have a permanent institutionalized space at the municipal level where young people can express their voice with regard to youth policy, in particular for housing. In this regard, they also recommended to involve a permanent Youth Board in the lobbying process towards the national government.

With regard to information provision, the Youth Board advises to send all young people a 'Amsterdam housing market information package', when they turn 16 or 18, or when they move to the city of Amsterdam. This package should contain information about rights, duties and possibilities and refer to relevant institutions such as the local housing associations and !WOON. It could be linked to the virtual housing information platform that is further discussed below.

### **Lobby towards the national government for the reform of national policies that hamper the housing opportunities of young people.**

One of the biggest obstacles encountered by the Youth Board in drafting their manifesto was that many of the issues they wanted to raise are not easily tackled at the municipal level, because they rely primarily on national laws and regulations. Therefore, they proposed seven potential policy actions that the municipality should lobby for towards the national government:

- The national government is currently preparing a new law (the so-called 'Good Landlord Act') that should protect tenants from abusive and exploitative behaviour of landlords. According to the Youth Board, this law should explicitly address the malpractices in the housing market that often harm young people. Among other things, it should include fines for overcharging in the social sector and punishment for unreasonable service charges and harassment. Young people should be included in the further development of the law, as well as in upcoming information campaigns about it.
- Extend the regulation of the rental prices to the more expensive rental segment by increasing the liberalization threshold to at least €1100.
- Reform the rent allowance so that it better supports young people (particularly those between 18 and 23 who currently only have a limited eligibility for rental allowances). Make the rent allowance also available for people (not being part of the same household) who share rental accommodation or live in a rental dwelling with a rent level above the current 'liberalization limit'.
- Make bidding procedures for homes for sale more transparent.
- Make sure that elderly people are not cut from their state pension, rent allowance, etc. when house sharing. Given the current housing crisis, house sharing (between

individuals that are not part of the same household) should be stimulated and not 'punished'.

#### **8.4.2 Recommendations for specific policy tools**

##### **Virtual platform to provide objective information to young people looking for affordable and adequate housing in the city of Amsterdam.**

One of the main results of the discussions between the Youth Board and the institutional actors was that the housing market in Amsterdam is complicated and information about renting and buying a home is scarce, not up-to-date, sometimes conflicting and difficult to find. For this reason the Youth Board suggested to develop a platform entirely dedicated to providing clear, up-to-date and easily accessible information on housing rights and housing opportunities for young people who have to navigate the city's housing market. This is also in line with one of the general suggestions included in the manifesto, which proposed to inform young people about the complicated Amsterdam housing market by sending them an information package once they turn 16 or 18.

The basic idea behind the information platform is that it is run by the young people. They should decide on its structure and content. According to the advice of the Youth Board, sharing personal experiences, and looking for connections (for example someone to share a house with), should be key elements of the platform. Thus, the platform should depart from the 'life world' of young people, and not from the 'system world' of institutional actors, also in terms of language and communication means that are used.

Nevertheless, in order for the platform to be feasible, input (policies, regulations, housing options) and funding from the system world are heavily needed as well. Discussions about how to further develop the platform idea are currently taking place between the Youth Board, !WOON, the municipality and the Amsterdam housing associations.

##### **Communal housing concept**

This specific set of recommendations is meant for housing association Lieven de Key, but it could also be useful for other (social) housing providers that build inclusive and communal youth housing complexes. The Youth Board formulated a set of requirements for what they would see as a successful and inclusive communal housing concept with regard to five main aspects:

1. The building (architecture and identity, communal facilities and meeting spaces, sport facilities, lighting)
2. The dwelling/living unit (size, distribution, facilities, type of windows, comfort level)
3. The environment of the building (connection to public transport, facilities in neighbourhood, green spaces)
4. The social cohesion/community within the building (meeting spaces, freedom versus compulsory activities)

## 5. The contractual conditions (eligibility criteria, terms of the contract, rent levels, 'house rules')

The concept and report that the Youth Board presented together with INBO have been received by the project leader of the location that Lieven de Key is aiming to develop (Meer en Vaart). In the coming years, the Youth Board is likely to remain involved in the further location development.

## 9 Implementation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda and sustainability of Reflexive Policy Making

The UPLIFT co-creation process has resulted in the development of a Reflexive Policy Agenda at four different WP4 locations. However, due to the complexity, laboriousness, and time-intensive nature of this process, only limited implementation of the agenda has taken place so far. Nonetheless, efforts are being made at all four locations to increase the likelihood of policy implementation in the near future, mainly outside the scope of the UPLIFT project. In this chapter, we will provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding the implementation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda in each location and its future prospects.

### 9.1 Implementation in Sfântu Gheorghe

In the first semester of 2023, two pilot projects are planned to be implemented that are directly related to the Reflexive Policy Agenda. One of the projects will likely involve conducting sensitivity workshops for educators who work with vulnerable youth, while the other project will focus on building youth communities within schools. The precise specification and planning of these short-term interventions will be done collaboratively, with the goal of achieving consensus between the youth group and the institutional group.

The Youth Board members and the Institutional Stakeholder Group will oversee the implementation of these pilot projects, with support and guidance from the LAG Seps team. The primary objective of these projects is to test the effectiveness of some of the proposals from the Reflexive Policy Agenda and determine whether they can be extended to local multiannual programs.

During the UPLIFT project term, the first pilot project will be carried out, and subsequent projects will gradually be taken over by the Youth Bureau of the Municipality in terms of funding and coordination.

In the medium and long term, the objective is to integrate the Reflexive Policy Agenda into as many local policy instruments as possible and to involve the Youth Board in the city's Youth Parliament. The first step towards further implementation is to present the UPLIFT project findings to the Local Council during their March 2023 monthly meeting. Furthermore, Seps LAG has applied for support from the city's annual Youth Initiative Small Grants to secure funding for starting the implementation, and the funding request has been granted by the local municipal council.

Apart from the UPLIFT project, the Municipality of Sfântu Gheorghe established a Youth Bureau in 2022, led by the vice-mayor. The Youth Bureau conducted research among young people aged 14-25 in the city and initiated programs to address identified issues. In 2023 and 2024, the Youth Bureau will expand its activities to other aspects of the Reflexive Policy Agenda related to youth communities.

The Youth Bureau also aims to establish a Youth Parliament to enable young people to express their views and participate in municipal policy development. The idea is that the UPLIFT Youth Board will be represented and eventually integrated into this Youth Parliament. The vice-mayor has committed to overseeing the transition period and facilitating the transfer of knowledge from the UPLIFT Youth Board to the Youth Parliament.

Given that the current members of the Youth Board have completed high school and may no longer be involved in the Youth Board, it is crucial to transfer the work of the UPLIFT project and establish new ownership of the ideas. As part of the transition process, the renewed Youth Board will participate in a preparatory youth camp, where they will focus on personal development, knowledge transfer from the previous generation, and implementing short-term actions from the Reflexive Policy Agenda.

The Youth Bureau has requested a group of external experts to work on the city's Youth Development Strategy for 2023-2027, which is expected to be finalized in the first half of 2023. This strategy will place special emphasis on education and the involvement of vulnerable youth in the policy-making process. It is likely that some of the key elements of the Reflexive Policy Agenda will be included in this strategy. Both the mayor and vice-mayor of Sfântu Gheorghe have expressed their political commitment to making these changes

Additionally, the Local Development Plan has been made available for public consultation and is set to be discussed in the City Council in 2023. This plan has a dedicated priority axis for the desegregation of the school system. The Youth Board may have the opportunity to participate in the development of a concrete action plan for this priority axis and to contribute to the implementation of specific actions related to desegregation efforts.

On the international and national level, Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan for 2023 as well as some Structural European Union Funds, also focus on education and reducing school drop-out. Three of the segregated schools of Sfântu Gheorghe are already involved in the direct financial mechanisms, but there will also be funding for piloting inclusive schools nationwide. The idea is to transform two local marginalised schools into pilot schools where innovative education methods and management styles will be tried out. The upcoming European financial mechanism will have calls regarding pilot schools and LAG Sepsi team intends to partner up with two segregated schools in order to apply for these specific funds and implement parts of the reflexive policy agenda as a pilot project.

## 9.2 Implementation in Tallinn

Different than in the other three locations, the co-creation process in Tallinn not only led to a general reflexive policy agenda, but also to the actual development of three important tools for Youth Work professionals. The following outputs have been created so far.



## **Training material**

Guidance material (manual and social skills training programme) has been developed for the providers of services to NEETs. The aim of this material is to improve the provision of individualized services and to better coordinate these services (so that they are more in line with the needs and challenges of the NEETs). For this purpose, a so-called 'Guidebook' (manual) on the NEETs support system has been created. Also, an electronic tool has been developed based on this guidebook.

With regard to the social skills training programme, the co-creation process has enabled the Estonian team to identify the important topics that young people from different backgrounds need to learn about themselves, as well as about the educational and work opportunities available to them. These inputs from the young people have been integrated in the training material.

The soft skills training program for young people will be submitted to the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, which is currently developing virtual training for young individuals who require guidance to kick-start their careers. Additionally, this initiative will be incorporated into the training program of the Association of Estonian Open Centres, which is seeking extra funding to execute it.

## **Logbook**

The Logbook has been further developed, including better analytical tools and visualization possibilities (to enable the application of a more individualized case management approach). The database includes opinions of young people from Tallinn about the shortcomings/perceptions of the existing support mechanisms.

The co-creative process allowed the Estonian team to gather insights from both young people and professionals on the factors and characteristics that are relevant to effectively supporting this target group. Youth centres will use this information to develop their services and ensure that they are tailored to meet the needs of the young people they support.

All Estonian youth centers can use the Logbook, along with the new developments added during the project, free of charge. The city of Tallinn has applied for continued use, and negotiations are currently underway to determine whether this tool can be utilized by all institutions that work with young people in a NEET situation.

## **Electronic platform**

The development of the virtual tool – chat – has been aligned with the Youth Work Strategy 2035 (Ministry of Education and Research 2021) as well as the Children and Youth Program implemented by the Education and Youth Board . The preparation of this tool, including the Robot Chat, is ready, and it is currently being implemented to reach NEETs and other vulnerable youth. Due to legal restrictions (GDPR and uncertainty about who 'own' the chat), this implementation process has experienced some delay compared to the original planning.

Inputs from the co-creation process, such as interviews and group sessions, were valuable in building the platform. Specifically, the co-creation process provided insights into the type of virtual environment that young people are interested in joining, the type of questions they ask, how data exchange between specialists and young people can be facilitated, and which topics require immediate referral to a specialist instead of relying solely on the response robot. All of these considerations have been taken into account already, or will be taken into account in the implementation phase.

### **Better service provision**

The UPLIFT project's policy co-creation process has provided valuable input for the restructuring of national services for NEETs. As a result, a new service model called "Cross-sectoral NEET-status youth support and cooperation model of services for local governments. Description of the future model" has been co-created, tested, and validated by young people. The municipality of Tallinn, thanks to its involvement in the UPLIFT project, became a central partner in the national-level service design process. Therefore, the insights gained from the local policy co-creation process, particularly the voices of young people in the Tallinn region, will have a significant impact on policy development and implementation at the national level.

### **Implementation of the longer term Reflexive Policy Agenda**

Specific steps for the implementation of the longer term Reflexive Policy Agenda have not been taken yet. The plan is to continue collaborating with the established network of partners, including the Tallinn youth council, Tallinn City Government, and other relevant stakeholders, with the project's Youth Board serving as additional experts on youth issues. Through the co-creation process, the Youth Board became more aware of the work of the Tallinn youth council, and it is possible that some Youth Board participants will seek to join the council themselves. Youth workers can serve as important contacts to facilitate this transition beyond the project's completion.

## **9.3 Implementation in Barakaldo**

The institutional stakeholders in Barakaldo have recognized that, since the challenge of emancipation of young people is a complex issue that needs to be addressed in an interdepartmental way, there is a need to work in a coordinated way among different departments and institutions on the implementation of the measures that emerged from the co-creation process. Moreover, they recognized the need to work together with the young people throughout the whole policy process. Young people need to be involved, not only to know their opinion as users of the programmes, but also as partners and collaborators in the diagnosis of the problem. In the case of the co-creation process, having them on board since the beginning has allowed the institutional stakeholders to acknowledge the need to consider different realities within the group of youngsters. The recognition of this new way of working is key not only for the involvement of the young people in the implementation and follow-up of the RPA, but also for future actions carried out by the Municipality.

With regard to the implementation of the RPA, it is expected that the young people will have the chance to get involved in the decision-making process regarding the further specification of the proposed actions. To this end, a member of the staff of Gazte Bulegoa will serve as a liaison between local institutions and young people, with the specific objective of keeping the Youth Board members informed on the implementation of activities they have been working on. This liaison will contact the members of the Youth board so that they can be informed about how their proposals are being implemented and are provided with the chance to participate.

So far, practical implementation steps have been taken for all the proposals of policy improvement. With regard to the emancipation school, the first three workshops have already taken place in the facilities of Gazte Bulegoa on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022. In the workshops of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup>, a DIY session was organized and the activity of the 23<sup>rd</sup> focused on the basic information that young people need in order to decide between buying or renting a house. The idea is to follow-up with sessions in 2023 in order to tackle new issues in which the young people are interested.

With respect to the development of tools to improve access of young people to the aid for the promotion of youngsters' emancipation, the first action was carried out the week of the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2022. As this was the last week to apply for the emancipation aid of 2022, decision makers choose it to organize an informative talk in which the call for the aid was explained in detail. Information was provided about potential recipients of the aid, and about how, when and where to apply for it. The feedback of the young people who joined the meeting was very positive. The objective for 2023 is: on the one hand, to continue with these informative events, coinciding with the annual call of the emancipation aid and on the other hand, to review the municipal webpage to make it more intuitive, flexible and friendly.

With regard to the third proposal, the different local stakeholders have recognized the difficulties that exist in making changes to the local housing ordinance and the different support programmes. Nevertheless, it is expected that during 2023, Eretza will contact different key stakeholders, including the young people, in order to start collecting the information related to the compositions and experiences of the young households in Barakaldo.

In terms of housing policy synergies with other municipalities, the first discussion forum to find common ground was held on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2022. The event gathered around 60 people from different youth and housing departments of municipalities of the Basque Country. During the forum, the participants had the chance to listen to different expert voices and innovative experiences. Also, a presentation of the co-creation process of the UPLIFT project was given. The idea is to organize more discussion forums, preferably annually, to coordinate future action. Moreover, these forums could motivate additional external meetings that could also contribute to the generation of synergies.

## 9.4 Implementation in Amsterdam

All three sprints in the Amsterdam co-creation process have resulted in some clear new concepts and suggestions for a Reflexive Policy Agenda. From Sprint 1, the proposal to establish a virtual housing platform for young people was the idea that showed most potential. As a follow-up to this sprint, representatives of the Youth Board and !WOON have been in contact with representatives from the municipality to see if they could integrate the platform idea into plans that are currently being developed for the Amsterdam South East area. Unfortunately, these talks have been unsuccessful, as there seems to be too much divergence between the vision of the Youth Board and the vision of the municipality. Nevertheless, the awareness of the importance of clear and objective information provision for young people has clearly been raised among local housing stakeholders. Therefore, together with the Youth Board, the local co-creation team will continue to look for possibilities to put the platform idea into practice. For this purpose, the umbrella organization of Amsterdam housing associations, the local housing associations and the relevant municipalities will be approached in the beginning of 2023.

With regard to the issue of temporary contracts, Lieven de Key has gained useful insights from the Youth Board's discussions and advices. They aim to follow up and use this insight in 2023 when discussing temporary contracts in the framework of the new agreement ("*samenwerkingsafspraken*") between the municipality and all social housing associations in Amsterdam.

Sprint 2 resulted in a proposal for an inclusive communal youth housing concept for housing association Lieven de Key. The executives of Lieven de Key are positive about this concept and intend to implement it into their housing redevelopment plans for the Amsterdam Nieuw West area. Furthermore, specific elements of the proposal will be incorporated in other communal youth housing complexes that Lieven de Key is currently developing.

The real policy impact of Sprint 3 will only become visible in 2023, when the new housing vision of the municipality of Amsterdam will be established. However, some of the suggestions of the Youth Board have already been incorporated in the draft version of this plan. This draft plan was presented in February 2023<sup>6</sup>, and will be further discussed in the upcoming months. First of all, the draft plan mentions the term 'youngsters' no less than 36 times. Furthermore, the ideas that are developed for actively combatting empty buildings are largely aligned with those of the Amsterdam Youth Board. Also in line with the suggestions of the Youth Board (although specified in a different way) is that house sharing will be made easier, and that there are plans to improve the information provision to tenants. For the latter purpose, a platform where the offer of all available rental dwellings will become visible is planned to be set up. The municipality of Amsterdam also intends start a lobby towards the national government to get rid of temporary rental contracts in the private rental sector. In short, we conclude that the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amsterdam.nl/wonen-leefomgeving/wonen/inspraak-aanpak-volkshuisvesting/>

proposals of the Youth Board are quite well incorporated in the draft plan, although sometimes in a somewhat different way than they envisaged.

Taking into account the positive off-spin of the local co-creation process, we feel that there is a strong case for continuation of the Amsterdam Youth Board after the UPLIFT funding has ended. Against this background, !WOON has recently decided that they will continue with the Youth Board. Indeed, a fourth co-creation sprint, that focuses on collaborative housing for young people, has kicked off on January 30, 2023. On April 17, !WOON, Lieven De Key and TU Delft will organize a local and national policy conference, where they will present the added value of the co-creation process in general, and the virtual housing platform idea in particular, to local and national stakeholder networks. Hopefully this will be a first step towards a structural embedding of the UPLIFT approach of Reflexive Policy making with young people within the Amsterdam housing policy system.

## 10 Reflection and recommendations

The preceding chapters of this report contain a synthesis of the theoretical background, the methodological approach, the institutional and policy setting, and above all the results of the co-creation and reflexive policy-making process in the four UPLIFT WP 4 cities. These chapters contain a wealth of factual information on the different phases of the process that was followed. Furthermore, they show that, even though a common theoretical framework and methodological approach has been applied, each process has its own context-specific particularities.

In this chapter, we further reflect on the meaning and implications of our synthesis. What went well and what was challenging? To what extent does a different context result in a different co-creation approach? What recommendations can we give to actors that want to embark on a similar co-creation endeavour? At the end of the chapter, we also include a general reflection about the added value of the UPLIFT approach of reflexive policy-making.

Our reflections led to a number of 'lessons learnt' and recommendations for a successful co-creation process with young people, which are in bold in the text below.

### 10.1 Preparation of the co-creation process

Policy co-creation is a long process that requires a commitment in terms of time and resources from several different stakeholders, who might have a different understanding of what such an endeavour entails. For this reason, it is fundamental to **have honest discussions among stakeholders about objectives, roles, resources and capacity** in order to ensure full trust and understanding of the project, before any work actually begins.

For the same reason, it is necessary to **clarify what the principles of co-creation are and how they will be translated into the group dynamics**. For example, it needs to be explicitly mentioned who should be at the table and who is missing, where does the influence of participants stop and how can the equal role of the participants in the process be ensured.

Similarly, the topic and the focus of the co-creation effort – **what problem we are trying to address – needs to be transparent** from the beginning, since the group dynamics and the structure of co-creation process will depend on the problem's formulation and the envisaged outcomes.

The choice of who will take part in the co-creation process is a fundamental preparatory step. Indeed, a **high degree of openness and motivation is needed on the part of institutional actors** in order to carry out the kind of 'institutional introspection' that this approach requires. They need to be prepared to leave behind their regular way of working and **be receptive to the fact that young people can actually be experts about their own needs** and can be able to contribute to policy development. In this regard, the UPLIFT process highlighted that both institutional stakeholders and young people need a certain amount of time to get familiar with

co-creation as an approach. On one hand, youngsters need security and a safe space where they can develop, find their voice and be sure that they are being heard; on the other hand, institutional actors also need a safe space where they can express their possible doubts and difficulties. They need time to adjust to a new working method in contrast to their regular workflow and move past institutional scepticism.

In this regard, a relevant point to address in the preparatory phase is the composition of the stakeholder group at the individual level: who from each involved organization will actually take part in the meetings? It is important to ask whether managers or technical staff, or both, will be involved, as each solution carries advantages and disadvantages. Managers have more authority to implement the co-creation outcomes, but lower ranking executive staff might be more willing to relinquish their power and engage with young people at an equal level. However, when both are at the table additional power relations internal to the stakeholder group might emerge, that could generate reluctance in speaking up. A decision about this needs to be taken collectively very early on, and the process needs to take into account the internal dynamics of the stakeholder group as well.

With regard to the preparatory process, budget issues deserve a separate reflection. In the case of UPLIFT, the fact that this was a European project with a large budget allocated specifically for co-creation activities relieved us from the worry of finding money. However, other co-creation efforts might have to seriously **discuss where the money will come from and how differences in budget allocation are going to influence the process**. From our experience, we believe that when more powerful stakeholders – such as large municipalities or even national actors – come to see the added value of participatory policy-making, they will be more willing to financially support co-creation processes, even on a long-term basis and without the need for projects like UPLIFT. However, it is important to be aware of the risk that actors who take part in participatory processes while being the main sponsor might, even involuntarily, co-opt the process to make it more suitable to their interests, and sideline young people as co-creators.

Indeed, at the preparatory stage, it is crucial to **discuss with policymakers about expectations management and communication with young people**. Not only it needs to be clear what young people should expect from the institutional partners, but also – and perhaps more importantly for the long term sustainability of co-creation processes – the other way round. The reasons behind participation in such processes for young people are about feeling heard and trying to come to a solution for their problems, not to satisfy a need for innovative ideas on the part of local institutions. Clarifying this from the beginning helps to **build a relationship based on trust and not on extraction**, which is the foundation for a successful and equal collaboration.

Last but not least for the preparation phase, it is important to **agree on how the process will be coordinated**. What model of process coordination should be chosen depends very much on the number and type of institutional actors involved, as well as on their degree of previous experience with participative processes. Moreover, the key issue is the **extent to which the**

**young people (or any other target group) are involved in the steering and coordination of the process itself.** This can vary based on who initiated the project, the age of the young people involved, and the focus of the co-creation.

## 10.2 Setting up a Youth Board

Setting up the youth group that articulates the voice of the young people (the Youth Board) also requires careful preparation and consideration of several aspects, such as the recruitment process, the composition of the group, the inclusiveness in the interaction among the participants, the gender sensitivity and the vulnerability level of participants.

Gatekeepers are crucial to reach young people. **Organizations, groups, institutions and individuals of a different nature and background should preferably be involved in the recruitment process**, since the more varied the recruiting organizations are, the more heterogeneous the group will be. In particular, it may be worth collaborating with smaller organizations, as they sometimes are in contact with groups that are not accessible to more generalist organizations or institutions. **Tailor made strategies may need to be set up in order to reach specific demographics, or groups that fall out of the reach of institutional stakeholders and/or NGOs.** Moreover, peer recruitment and snowball sampling are also great ways of reaching young people that are not in touch with organizations, and of ensuring a good level of commitment.

With regard to recruitment, it is important to **strive for a gender balance and sufficient diversity in terms of ethnic background, in order to include as many different points of view as possible.** If necessary, specific recruitment measures (e.g. quota) or support facilities (e.g. child care for single mothers) should be considered in order to make sure that this ambition is met.

**Inclusivity should be fostered not only in the recruitment process, but also in the design and development of the different sessions.** Facilitators have to put in place specific tools to ensure that all the members of the process feel included, especially the more vulnerable. For example, due to structural constraints, sometimes women do not have the same opportunities as men to access public spaces. It is then important to make them know that their voices are needed and that they will be able to contribute in a level playing field where, if needed, measures will be put in place to guarantee their full participation (for example providing childcare during the meetings).

**The size of the Youth Board should not be too large (about 10 people), in order to foster an easy cooperation among Board members and allow space and time for all participants to express their opinions.**

Vulnerability of the youth group is also an important point to address. Since the scale of vulnerability can be very wide, the more heterogeneous the group is, the more facilitation it requires in order to allow all participants to have an active role. **Vulnerable youngsters should be prepared for making their voice heard and formulating their needs and wants,**



especially in conditions where many of them have never experienced in their lives that their opinion matters. In this regard, it is important that moderators and facilitators are aware of the specifics of working with young people and of what is happening in young people's lives in order to schedule meetings and discussions in a way suitable for them.

Finally, the level of commitment and the different ways of participating in the process should be addressed in the set-up of the Youth Board. It is good to have long-term commitment from Youth Board members in order to have continuity in the co-creation process. However, since the process is long and time intensive, it is advised to **allow Youth Board members to be flexible in their participation, and devise a strategy to replace members who drop out.** Due to different constraints some people, particularly from more vulnerable groups, cannot commit to attend all the meetings; allowing them to enter or leave the process when they need to or want to can foster the heterogeneity of the group and enhance its long term viability.

### 10.3 Topic, scope and approach of the co-creation process

While the general approach to the co-creation process follows the methodological guidelines discussed in Section 3.1, there are notable differences in approach across locations on a more detailed level. These differences primarily relate to the topic and scope of the co-creation process, as well as to the way in which the institutional stakeholders are involved in the process.

#### *Topic of the co-creation process*

The co-creation processes in Amsterdam and Barakaldo center around the topic of housing, while Tallinn's process focuses on NEET youth (young people who are not in employment, education, or training), and Sfântu Gheorghe's process deals primarily with education. Generally, **it is advisable to concentrate reflexive making processes on policy domains where the target group experiences significant challenges, and/or where there exists a substantial disparity between the target group's "life world" and the institutional actors' "system world."** The institutional partners responsible for initiating the co-creation process should determine its topic, while still providing space for the Youth Board to establish its own priorities.

In UPLIFT, substantial quantitative and qualitative research went into the problem diagnosis phase that fed into the WP4 work. Expert interviews with policy makers and implementers, as well as in-depth life course interviews with dozens of young people allowed us to identify the main issues where the detachment between the "system world" and the "life world" of young people was greater. This, together with the knowledge of the local partners, including young people, helped us to identify the topics on which to concentrate. Other co-creation process might not be able to devote as much time and resources to the problem identification phase. Nonetheless, it is important to **allocate at least some time to the problem diagnosis phase by talking to young people and policy makers before starting a participatory process.** Qualitative interviews offer a good insight into the main experiences of young people in

relation to youth policies, but also (online) questionnaires could help to get an idea of the main problems both young people and institutions have to face with regard to youth policy.

### *Scope of the co-creation process*

In Barakaldo, the scope of the co-creation process is relatively narrow, focusing on the emancipation of young adults and their initial steps in the housing market. Amsterdam also concentrates on housing, dividing the process into three distinct Sprints. The first two Sprints, which deal with temporary housing and the development of an inclusive communal housing concept, have a relatively narrow scope. However, the third Sprint takes a broader perspective, focusing on the development of a policy agenda in the field of youth housing. In Tallinn, focused activities that allow young people to contribute to the further development of already emerging policy tools in the field of youth work are combined with more open-ended youth group discussions. Sfântu Gheorghe, on the other hand, has limited structural local policies in place, resulting in a co-creation process with a broad and bottom-up character aimed at creating new policy tools to improve the local school system.

**The institutional partners responsible for initiating the co-creation process should determine the scope of the process in consultation with their target group. The decision about the scope has significant implications for the way in which the co-creation process is organized, the expected outcomes, the need for capacity building/community forming, and the time required to complete the process successfully.** Co-creation processes with a broad scope and/or the ambition to produce specific and detailed outcomes will require more time and capacity building than processes where this is less the case.

### *Interaction of institutional stakeholders*

In Barakaldo and Sfântu Gheorghe, there was an institutional stakeholder group that followed a process running parallel with that of the Youth Board. At the end of the process, the two types of stakeholders worked together in one group on the co-creation of new policies. In Amsterdam and Tallinn, there was no parallel institutional stakeholder group and the involvement of institutional stakeholders differed between the various phases of the activities of the Youth Board. In these two cities, institutional stakeholders and young people did not necessarily co-create new policies in the same session, but rather in a sequential way; Institutional stakeholders gave feedback to young people, or the other way round, and in subsequent sessions this feedback was integrated into the design of new policies or tools. Ideally, this leads to a consensus and the emergence of policies or tools that are valued by both stakeholder groups.

In our view, both approaches have their pros and cons. **Working with a parallel stakeholder group may have an added value if the problem under consideration crosses the competences of different institutional stakeholders, if collaboration in the stakeholder network is lacking and/or if different institutional stakeholders have a different diagnosis of the problem at hand (or if do they not have a problem diagnosis at all).** It may also be helpful when stakeholders have no experience of participation at all, as

participating in a parallel stakeholder group may help them to get acquainted with a new way of working. However, there are also a number of challenges. Institutional stakeholders tend to be very busy and it may be complicated to get them all together at the same time. Furthermore, mistrust, unequal power relations and different levels of commitment may hamper a fruitful interaction within the institutional stakeholder group.

As far as the interaction between institutional stakeholders and the Youth Board is concerned, we think joint co-creation sessions are ideal, provided that there is sufficient trust between both groups. However, if such sessions are difficult to schedule (e.g. because Youth Board members study or work during the day and institutional stakeholders might not be available outside working hours), a more sequential co-creation process (as happened in Amsterdam and Tallinn) may be a good alternative.

## 10.4 Running and moderating the actual co-creation process

### *Trust building and group forming*

**A successful Youth Board requires trust, respect, safety, and internal cohesion among its members.** Without these elements, members may only express non-controversial opinions, which can hinder the co-creation process. **Ice-breaking and getting-to-know-each-other activities, such as excursions and social events, should be organized in the early stages of the co-creation process in order to enhance trust building.** These activities should be planned with the input of young people and not imposed in a top-down manner. Trust building activities may stand alone, but they can also be combined with capacity building and problem orientation activities.

**Trust building and community forming processes take time and follow sequential stages, such as forming, norming, storming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). It is important to adapt trust building activities to these phases.** Additionally, social media and joint app groups can help the community and group forming process to continue outside formal sessions.

**Having a "youngster facilitator" can be beneficial in bridging the gap between the Youth Board and institutional partners, and in generating trust among Youth Board members.** The youngster facilitator should have a good understanding of the language and culture of young people, as well as that of the institutional partners. Ideally, they should be able to serve as a liaison between the two groups, helping to facilitate communication and collaboration.

**How long the trust building phase should last depends on the characteristics and the composition of the Youth Board.** If the Youth Board consists of very vulnerable young people, and/or if there is very little trust among the young people themselves, or between young people and institutional stakeholders, the trust building phase is likely to last longer than if this is not the case. At the same time, it is important to strike a balance between trust building and making progress on the problem at hand, as a prolonged trust building phase may lead to frustration among the Youth Board members and a lack of progress on the co-

creation process. It is therefore important to regularly evaluate the progress made in the trust building phase and adjust accordingly.

### *Capacity building for the Youth Board*

**Just as trust building, capacity building is crucial for a fruitful co-creation process.** Youth Board members may need to learn communication, listening, presentation, and reflection skills, and they may need to acquire knowledge about the 'system world' of institutions and policies. These skills will help them during the co-creation process but also in their personal lives. The focus of the capacity building activities of the Youth Board should depend on the specific topic of the co-creation process and the characteristics of the Youth Board. For instance, if the Youth Board consists of vulnerable youngsters, more time and resources may need to be invested in empowering and enhancing self-confidence than in the case of higher educated youth groups.

Capacity and trust building techniques are widely used and documented in the field of Participatory Action Research. Therefore, a wealth of inspiration for specific techniques can be found there. Many of the techniques used have a game-like character, which makes them attractive for the target group. It is also important to **ensure that the capacity building activities are interactive and participatory, rather than just being lectures or presentations. This allows for more engagement and involvement** from the Youth Board members and can lead to a more effective learning experience.

In our view, **it is essential for institutional stakeholders to be closely involved in the capacity building of the Youth Board.** Institutional stakeholders can provide valuable insights into the "system world" from which the Youth Board may profit. Capacity building activities can also be used to facilitate direct contact between Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders. For example, mini-internships, joint lunches, or visits to institutional stakeholder premises could be arranged. **By connecting Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders early in the process, their interaction during co-creation and feedback sessions can be smoother because they already know each other.**

### *Capacity Building for institutional stakeholders*

**We believe that capacity building is not only crucial for Youth Board members but also for institutional stakeholders.** To make the co-creation process successful, policymakers and professionals may need to change their mindset and become more open to the opinions and ideas of young people, especially if they have always worked in a top-down manner. Training sessions, managing expectations, and the use of "listening modes" during feedback and co-creation sessions may be helpful in this regard. **By providing institutional stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively engage with the Youth Board, the co-creation process can become more collaborative and inclusive.**

### *Enhancing creativity and commitment*

Co-creation processes are inherently creative, but there are techniques and tools that can help improve the quality of the Youth Board's work and the commitment of its members. Principles from the field of **design thinking** can aid in structuring the iterative process from problem diagnosis to conceptualizing possible solutions. **Mind maps** can be useful for brainstorming and organizing ideas. **SWOT analyses or the 7 S-model** of McKinsey can serve as conceptual tools for problem diagnosis.

Second, in order to ensure inclusivity and account for the diversity within the target group of young people, it may be helpful to work with **personas**. Personas are fictional characters that are created to represent the typical beneficiaries of a product or policy. They are designed to help policy-makers better understand the needs, goals, and behaviors of their target audience. Each persona has its own unique needs, strategies, and path through the institutional and policy landscape. By creating personas based on their own experiences and knowledge of their peers, the Youth Board can highlight perspectives and needs that may otherwise be overlooked by policy-makers.

However, enhancing creativity is not only about applying appropriate techniques. **It is also about creating a fruitful atmosphere and making sure that everyone can express their voice.** In our view, the key to achieving high levels of engagement is to incorporate group work and make discussions interactive. Within group work, it is important that every participant has the opportunity to express their opinion and actively contribute. For this purpose, **effective and empathic moderation of group sessions is crucial.** It is important to observe the group dynamics during meetings and ensure that very vocal or dominant participants do not dominate the conversation. Additionally, pairing people up in small groups, or using live polling platforms as a starting point for discussion, may also help to ensure that every Youth Board member can express their voice.

**Commitment may also be achieved if Youth Board members become responsible for carrying out a specific task**, for example conducting a survey, developing an ideal city or preparing a video or presentation. Such tasks may generate a feeling of ownership and enhance engagement among Youth Board members.

Last but not least it is important to **create an attractive atmosphere around the co-creation process, for example by providing catering and the possibility for social encounters around the sessions.** Depending on the context and the applicable regulations, monetary and non-monetary rewards may also be considered.

### *Interaction between young people and institutional stakeholders?*

**In sessions where young people and institutional stakeholders meet, it is important to have moderators who are neutral and objective towards both groups.** This helps to establish trust and credibility, ensures that the co-creation process is fair and inclusive and helps to address the inherent power imbalance between the two groups. To achieve this, it is

recommended to engage moderators from NGOs or academic institutions that do not have a stake in the policy-making process or the implementation of policies.

**As a method to prevent the institutional stakeholders from taking over the discussion, the moderators may ask them to go in the 'listening mode'.** This means that they have to listen to the experiences of the Youth Board, without having the opportunity to react to it.

**It is crucial for both the Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders to receive preparation before they start discussing policy related topics among each other.** For young people, this preparation may involve learning about policy and institutions and develop communication and presentation skills. For institutional stakeholders, it may entail opening up to receive input from their target group and becoming familiar with the principles of co-creation and reflexive policymaking.

**To ensure that the co-creation process is effective and the proposals of the Youth Board are taken seriously, it is important to have institutional stakeholders from both the operational level and the executive level present in feedback or co-creation sessions with the Youth Board.** Stakeholders from the operational level can assess the practical feasibility of proposals while stakeholders from the executive level have the power to decide on implementation. However, if power differences between these two groups are expected to create suboptimal or insincere outcomes, separate feedback sessions may be considered for stakeholders from different levels.

Since institutional stakeholders often use a different language than young people, communication issues may arise. To prevent this, **it may be necessary to review and adapt the written communication of institutional stakeholders to suit the language of young people.** In case of verbal communication, the facilitators (particularly the "youngster facilitator") could act as "translators" during sessions that involve both institutional stakeholders and Youth Board members.

In their feedback to the Youth Board, institutional stakeholders may refer to the impossibility to change current systems and policies ("the system is like this, such are the rules"). However, this should not be used as an excuse not to take action. In our view, **small changes that do not require a systemic change, such as changing the attitudes of professionals or providing better information, can still have a significant positive impact on the life chances and well-being of young people. Thus, if changing the system seems unrealistic, the co-creation process could focus on improving the functioning of the current system.**

One of the ultimate goals of meetings between the Youth Board and the institutional stakeholders is to reach consensus about the content and the implementation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda. **In order to facilitate this consensus reaching, discussion techniques such as Lewis Deep Democracy may be helpful.**

### *Dealing with crises*

Unexpected events, such as changes in the stakeholder network or the political orientation of the municipality, can occur during the co-creation process. The Covid-19 pandemic was by far the most significant crisis that we experienced, and it taught us important lessons on risk management and mitigation. **Crises can put a heavy burden on institutional stakeholders, and this needs to be taken into account when involving them in a co-creation process. In such circumstances, a step-by-step approach that prioritizes the most important and committed stakeholders is recommended.**

We also learned that if physical meetings are not possible, Youth Board meetings, institutional stakeholder group meetings as well as meetings between these two groups can occur online, although the trust building and group forming process may then take longer than in a physical setting. When recruiting Youth Board members online, there is a risk that the most vulnerable young people may not be reached. It is crucial to be aware of this and to develop alternative recruitment strategies to include these youngsters as well.

### *Evaluation of the co-creation process*

Co-creation with young people is a new activity in most contexts. Therefore, in order to learn from possible mistakes and improve the process iteratively, it is important to think upfront about sound evaluation methods. **A first step towards a valid evaluation is the formulation of clear goals before the start of the co-creation process.** Establishing concrete and measurable actions can make the stakeholders accountable for their decisions. Quantitative (survey) and/or qualitative research methods (focus groups, interviews) can subsequently be used to assess whether these goals are met. Since the goal of the co-creation process is different for Youth Board members than for institutional stakeholders, evaluation instruments need to be adapted to this. Anonymity, for example in questionnaires, and separate evaluation sessions for young people and institutional stakeholders can help obtain more honest answers.

However, goal-setting and evaluation should not only involve the co-creation process as a whole but also the separate co-creation sessions. **It is advisable to formulate a clear work plan before each co-creation session, preferably with involvement of the Youth Board.** This work plan could contain information on the topics to be discussed, the objectives of the meeting and the methods or tools that will be applied. **After the session, an evaluation could take place among the facilitators, again preferably with participation of the Youth Board.** To what extent did the work plan work out as anticipated? And if this is not the case, which 'learning points' can be extracted from this?

**In order to create a good empirical basis for subsequent evaluation, it is important to carefully map the whole co-creation process by making notes and/or recordings of all the sessions (internal monitoring).**

Co-creation trajectories can be complex and uncertain processes. Stakeholder relations may be complex and subject to change, co-creation outcomes cannot be predicted upfront and

the context in which the process takes place may change. Against this background, **it is important that the process and its coordination are sufficiently lenient and adaptable. In order to achieve this, we would recommend to establish a 'local co-creation team' with representatives of all the stakeholders involved.** Regular meetings of this team could be planned in order to keep track of the process and adapt to unforeseen circumstances. Depending on the context, it may be worthwhile to also include Youth Board members in this local co-creation team.

## 10.5 Towards a reflexive policy agenda

In line with differences in research approaches discussed in Section 10.3, the content and scope of the reflexive policy agenda vary among the four UPLIFT cities. For instance, the reflexive policy agenda in Sfântu Gheorghe is broad, strategic, and long-term oriented, but with some short-term implementation as well. On the other hand, the agenda is more focused and practical in Barakaldo and Tallinn. In the latter city, the logbook, the training material, and the virtual platform resulting from the co-creation process are (almost) ready for use. In Amsterdam, the RPA includes a mix of practical and strategic propositions.

When discussing and assessing the content of the RPA, a good management of expectations is crucial. **Youth Board members need to be aware of the fact that changing policies is a time-intensive and complex process, where many different interests are at stake, and that true system or policy change is hard to achieve.** Expectation management is equally important on the side of the institutional stakeholders. **Institutional stakeholders should not primarily expect innovativeness or 'out of the box' thinking from the Youth Board.** Youth Board members define problem solutions based on their own experiences and visions. These solutions may definitely be 'innovative', but innovation should not be the main criterion for judging the propositions of the Youth Board. What matters most is that the solutions that are formulated meet the needs of young target group.

One of the fundamental principles of reflexive policy-making is to continually evaluate policy development to ensure that policies effectively respond to the needs of the target group and take into account possible societal changes. **This requires policy monitoring and evaluation by the Youth Board to be an integral part of the policy implementation strategy.** However, since policy implementation, and therefore also policy evaluation, has a different time horizon than policy co-creation, many Youth Board members may not be there to evaluate the policies they have co-created. **To ensure that young people remain involved in future policy development and evaluation, a structural embedding of the Youth Board within the policy-making process is needed.** In order to realize this, **merging the Youth Board with already existing youth councils may be an option**, although a well-planned transition strategy is necessary. If no other youth councils exist, efforts should be made to give the current Youth Board a structural position in policy-making and implementation. The local co-creation team should make an effort to highlight the positive impact of the co-creation process to relevant decision makers at various levels of governance in order to achieve this.



## 10.6 Implementation of the reflexive policy agenda

Although the stakeholders who participated in the co-creation process support the content of the Reflexive Policy Agenda in all four cities, **it is crucial to recognize that the RPA is not a legally binding, democratically agreed-upon policy agenda.** Instead, it is the outcome of a participatory research process, rather than of local political decision-making. At present, the local co-creation teams are working to integrate components of the Reflexive Policy Agenda into official local policy documents and policy actions. The process is particularly advanced in Sfântu Gheorghe, although significant progress has also been made in the other three cities, and the effort is ongoing.

Transforming the Reflexive Policy Agenda (RPA) into legally binding and democratically agreed-upon policy documents is a challenging endeavor since it requires transitioning from the realm of research to the realm of local political decision-making. The dynamics involved in the latter may differ significantly, with longer implementation horizons, elections that may result in new visions and decision-makers, and the consideration of available budgets in balancing the added value of the RPA against other interests. As researchers, we have limited control over the outcome of this process. **Nevertheless, we believe that a well-defined dissemination strategy and the upfront involvement of key decision-makers can clearly enhance the likelihood of a successful implementation.**

In many instances, the implementation of the RPA will be an incremental and often also an insecure process. In such a context, **pilot projects are a good way to kick off the implementation of the Reflexive Policy Agenda.** The purpose of a pilot project is to assess the viability of the reflexive policy making approach, to identify and address potential issues and to gain feedback from Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders. Pilot projects cost relatively little money and time and can be a good way to lay the foundation for a broader implementation of the RPA.

## 10.7 Final reflection: the added value of the UPLIFT co-creation process

Three and a half years ago, when we initiated the co-creation process, we had ambitious objectives in terms of the impacts we aimed to achieve. These impacts encompassed societal, policy-oriented, institutional, and academic dimensions. It is now time to reflect on the extent to which we have accomplished our goals. Based on these reflections, we finally draw some general conclusions on the added value of policy co-creation and reflexive policy-making.

### *Societal objectives*

From our perspective (based on our own reflection and the available evaluation results) the primary lesson we learned from this co-creation experience is that young people place a high value on this type of participation - engaging in discussions about the issues that affect them, rather than just being talked about. Similarly, institutional actors recognized the importance of the knowledge generated during the process and gained a greater understanding of their

target group. However, it was not solely about knowledge creation; participants also acquired new skills and attitudes. Youth Board members gained greater self-assurance and empowerment and developed a better grasp of the functioning of the institutional actors' "system world." Institutional stakeholders, in turn, learned to listen more attentively to their target group and their experiences in the "life world", becoming more open to alternative and co-creative policy-making approaches. Therefore, we conclude that the UPLIFT co-creation process was undeniably successful in terms of transforming the attitudes of both groups.

On a more detailed level, some additional conclusions on the impact of UPLIFT on the empowerment of, and the capability enhancement for, young people can be drawn. According to the theory of empowerment, empowerment can be generated at multiple levels: individual, group and collective (Jo & Nabatchi, 2018). The WP4 co-creation processes can be considered empowering at all three levels. At the individual level, the young people who participated in UPLIFT gained knowledge of the topic and of the policy-making process. They also learned decision-making and group-working skills, and developed a critical awareness of what is possible to achieve with collaboration, as well as of the value of their experience and opinions. At the group level, the participants had the opportunity to join and influence decision-making, but also to network with peers and organizations and to learn about leadership and shared responsibilities.

On these two levels of empowerment, the capabilities of the participating young people were clearly enhanced. However, the UPLIFT co-creation process also aimed to generate empowerment and capability enhancement at a collective level, through the formulation of policies more suited to young people's needs and the increased visibility of young people's voices at the policy-making table. At least partially, we think this objective has been achieved as well.

Indeed, the WP4 work in the four locations has ignited or accelerated a change in the mind-set of institutional stakeholders with regard to the necessity and value of participative policy-making for youth policies (see Chapter 9 for an evaluation of the implementation and follow-up of the co-creation results). Even if the impact of UPLIFT stops right here, we have achieved a promise of change. Institutional stakeholders have started a different thinking about policy tools and measures that will potentially affect young people in general, not just the participants in the co-creation process.

### *Policy-oriented objectives*

In terms of policy-making, the overall objective of the UPLIFT project was to come to youth policies that are better tailored to the needs (based on their real life experiences) of the younger generations. In this quest, the focus was not only on the content of policies, but also on their accessibility, credibility and trustworthiness. The key question is: to what extent has the involvement of the Youth Boards been able to make a difference on these aspects?

We observe that involving the Youth Board in policy-making proved to be highly beneficial throughout the different stages of the co-creation process. During the problem diagnosis

phase, the Youth Board members identified issues that were not fully understood by institutional stakeholders (such as the impact of bullying on young people's well-being). Even when the issues were acknowledged, there were often significant differences in how they were perceived by the two groups. Moreover, the Youth Board's activities generated several policy suggestions that represent a significant departure from existing policies. Across all four locations, these policy recommendations share a youth-centred perspective and aim to enhance the capabilities of the younger generations.

While it is still too early to evaluate whether the UPLIFT co-creation process will result in significant policy changes, we believe that the Reflexive Policy Agendas are ambitious in their goals. The successful implementation of these agendas will depend on complex political processes, in which the RPAs will need to be balanced against other interests and ambitions. However, the commitment of institutional partners, policy-makers, and Youth Board members who have participated in the process gives us reason to be optimistic that some of the goals will be achieved, hopefully through a co-creative and reflexive approach.

### *Institutional objectives*

From an institutional point of view, the common objective across locations was to foster direct interaction between young people and policy makers, with the final goal of establishing a durable institutional framework that can increase the agency of "policy subjects", and that can also be replicated in different locations and policy areas.

With regard to this objective, we observe that in all four locations, the reflexive policy-making approach aided in establishing a shared comprehension of relevant youth issues at the local level, thereby creating common ground for a local coalition to address these issues. The fact that initiatives to continue with reflexive policy-making for young people are being pursued in all four locations is a clear testament to this success. Furthermore, since reflexive policy making is an eminently cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary approach, it also helps to enhance collaboration between institutional actors. Indeed, both in Sfântu Gheorge and Barakaldo, initiatives to strengthen the relationships between institutional stakeholders have been proposed/initiated as a spin-off of the co-creation process.

Of course, public participation and involvement of young people in policy-making is not a new phenomenon. Various cities across Europe, including Tallinn, already work with Youth Councils and Youth Parliaments. However, we have the impression that these institutions are often more disconnected from institutional stakeholders than the UPLIFT Youth Boards. Youth councils and youth parliaments tend to react to policy proposals and provide solicited and unsolicited advice to policy-makers, but they usually don't engage in joint co-creation activities with institutional stakeholders. In our view, the strong point of the UPLIFT process of reflexive policy making is that young people and institutional stakeholders work together on the creation of new policies, thereby creating common ground and mutual understanding. As a result of this, institutional stakeholders will be more committed to take the inputs of the Youth Board seriously.

### *Academic objectives*

Last but not least, the UPLIFT project has been a tremendous learning experience for all participants. We have gained a great amount of new knowledge on what works well and what works less well. Consequently, we have been able to formulate many useful recommendations for organizations that want to embark on a similar co-creation journey with young people.

Moreover, one of the strongest achievements of UPLIFT from an academic point of view is the generation of comparative research on co-creation. Due to the diverse meaning and use of terms such as co-creation and co-production in participatory research across different disciplines and domains, it is quite hard to compare studies (Brandsen et al., 2018). UPLIFT has allowed us to meaningfully compare four co-creation experiences that used the same approach in contexts that differ widely in terms of governance model, policy context, economic resources and focus of the co-creation, thus producing novel and precious findings. In the next period, we will make an effort to fully disseminate our fruitful findings to both policy makers and academics.

### *Final reflection: is it worth the effort?*

While the outcomes of the UPLIFT co-creation process have been undeniably positive, we must also acknowledge that the process required a significant effort. Although the length of the process varied across locations, it always included a considerable number of meetings. In addition, a significant amount of time was invested in establishing a relevant stakeholder network and in the set-up of an inclusive Youth Board that could effectively represent the voice of young people. Fortunately, within UPLIFT, we were able to cover these steps due to the project budget and timeframe. We are grateful for this opportunity. We believe that piloting and experimentation are necessary for genuine innovation.

However, we recognize that municipalities or service providers with limited budgets may be hesitant about undertaking an intensive co-creation process. They may question whether the required investment is worth the effort. While a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis is beyond the scope of our project, we can offer some qualitative reflections on this matter.

First and foremost, we would like to emphasize that we view co-creation processes as investments rather than costs. While co-creation does require an initial investment of time and resources, it also has the potential to generate substantial returns in the long run, as demonstrated above. While it is difficult to quantify and monetize the benefits of co-creation, we believe that even small optimizations of policies and tools can result in considerable monetary gains, given the large amount of money currently spent on welfare policies. These gains are likely to be much greater if on top of economic indicators, aspects of inclusion and well-being are taken into account as well: a social investment perspective. In our view, municipalities or service providers that doubt about the added value of Reflexive Policy Making, should be encouraged to consider the potential long-term benefits of co-creation, including more inclusive and sustainable policy outcomes, increased stakeholder engagement, and enhanced legitimacy and acceptance of policies.

In line with the social investment perspective mentioned above, we contend that co-creation processes should not be treated as one-off initiatives, but rather as the first step towards a permanent shift in the mind-set of policy-makers and institutional partners, and more fruitful interaction between stakeholders and their target groups. The level of upfront social investment required for co-creation processes depends on various factors, such as the nature and scope of the problem at hand, the characteristics of the current policies and institutional stakeholders, and the characteristics and vulnerabilities of the target group. We hope that the recommendations provided in this guidebook will help institutions to optimize their investments in the first phase of the reflexive policy-making process.

Once the initial investments are made, such as setting up a stakeholder network and a Youth Board, the efforts required to sustain the process are likely to be less intense, and the benefits of the co-creation process will become evident. Thus, although upfront investment is required, in the long run, the Reflexive Policy Making approach is likely to lead to more inclusive and sustainable policy outcomes, increased stakeholder engagement, and enhanced legitimacy and acceptance of policies.

In conclusion, we believe that our approach of reflexive policy making has a clear added value and can lead to more inclusive, sustainable, and effective policies. We would therefore encourage institutions and municipalities to take up the reflexive policy-making challenge!

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