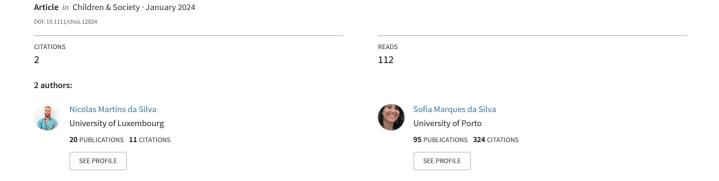# What can I do for my community? Contributing to the promotion of civic engagement through participatory methodologies: The case of young people from border regions of mainland Port...

2 authors:

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University of Luxembourg
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University of Porto
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What can I do for my community? Contributing to the promotion of civic engagement through participatory methodologies: The case of young people from border regions of mainland Portugal

Nicolas Martins da Silva [ID] | **Sofia Marques da Silva** [ID]

Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Correspondence
Sofia Marques da Silva, Centre for Research and Intervention in Educatio, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, Porto, Portugal.
Email: sofiamsilva@fpce.up.pt

Abstract

This article explains how participatory approaches can promote civic engagement among young people, resulting from their active involvement in the research process, namely identifying their communities' priorities and problems. Five project-building sessions were held with young people from five contexts located in the border regions of mainland Portugal. The data supporting this article were collected during sessions dedicated to identifying and exploring community-based problems and priorities and designing projects to address those local challenges. The results show the importance of contextualising young people's experiences and priorities, here related to their own community and its well-being and development. It is here that using participatory methodologies can create opportunities for young people to participate in processes of community change.

KEYWORDS
border regions, civic engagement, local development, participatory methodologies, young people

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The aim of this article is to explain how participatory methodologies can contribute to promoting civic engagement by drawing on the experiences of young people engaged in participatory planning processes in the rural border regions of Portugal. Our aim is to discuss how participatory research methodologies can provide opportunities for young people to actively engage in discussions about local priorities and to contribute to solutions.

In the last 5 years, European-level policies on youth and youth participation have focused on involving young people in designing policies that affect their experience and contexts. The *European Strategy for Youth 2018-2027* emphasises that 'young people should not only be architects of their own lives but also contribute to positive change in society' (EU, 2018, p. c456). That is, it understands youth as fundamental for social development at European, regional, national and local levels (EU, 2018). Regarding the Portuguese context, the participation of young people in developing their communities is not so evident (da Silva et al., 2022), despite the fact that the *Second National Plan for Youth* [Plano Nacional para a Juventude II] (2022) highlights the importance of promoting and recognising 'active citizenship and the civic participation of young people as active agents of sustainable development' (Council of Ministers Resolution no. 77/2022, p. 15).

Youth-led participatory action research can emerge as a space for young people to develop their civic engagement (Fox et al., 2010), which can enable greater youth action, as per the national and international guidelines towards social inclusion, democracy, cohesion and social development. Meanwhile, research and action approaches which involve research participants as stakeholders in the research process involve young people as co-researchers and community experts to promote social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2015).

Young people growing up in border regions have fewer real opportunities, seem less interested in being involved in more traditional forms of participation, and are eager to be involved in community-based projects (da Silva et al., 2023). Cultures of youth participation in border regions appear in line with national-level results, with low civic and political involvement (da Silva et al., 2022). However, young people in border regions also identify constraints to their participation related to a lack of opportunities due to a scarcity of infrastructures (Pordata, Base de dados de Portugal Contemporâneo,2022b) and the lack of interest of political actors in listening to their aspirations (da Silva et al., 2023).

Against this background, the aim of this contribution is to analyse how participatory methodologies with young people growing up in Portugal's border regions with Spain, which are primarily rural and characterised by disadvantages in economic, educational and cultural opportunities (da Silva, 2014), may contribute to promoting civic engagement through community projects designed by them and for their communities. The results show that participatory methodologies can contribute to creating opportunities for young people to participate in processes of community change by situating young people's experiences and priorities, mainly related to their own community and its well-being and development.

This article is structured as follows: first, a theoretical framework is outlined; this is followed by a methodological section, clarifying the options and the process; the third section includes the results and discussion and finally, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

Defining youth-led participatory action research (YPAR)

Participatory methodologies have been used in educational research, driving a paradigm shift that provides a central focus on the active involvement of communities and social groups in

research processes (Lenette, 2022). These methodologies are also situated, contextualised and relational. As Baum et al. (2006, p. 855) stated, they are 'directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships'. As an approach to research that seeks the participation of those involved, participatory methodologies aim to redistribute power within relationships in the practice of research and the location and production of knowledge (Brown, 2021; Smithson & Jones, 2021). Participatory methodologies are a type of research involving participants in identifying and solving a problem, with an epistemological positioning that perceives them as experts in their lives and communities and able to produce knowledge (Malorni et al., 2022).

YPAR is a situated approach with a focus on the participation of young people in research processes (Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Ozer, 2017). Ozer considers YPAR to be 'an innovative approach to conducting scientific inquiry that engages youth as experts and coresearchers, disrupting standard assumptions about who has the expertise to create knowledge about young people' (Ozer, 2017, p. 174). In other words, it is about integrating young people into the research process rather than considering them as a problem under analysis. In YPAR, young people's participation and action are central to knowledge production (Anyon et al., 2018; Ozer, 2017).

To this extent, YPAR promotes the democratisation of knowledge, involving young people as subjects of knowledge and valuing their experiences and citizenship while producing knowledge (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003) and is an approach that considers participants within their multiple contexts. The focus is on providing the opportunity for young people to bring their experiences, knowledge, perspectives and insights from everyday life. Hence, it facilitates an alignment of research interests with young people's priorities (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Brown, 2021) and values the expertise of individuals who live in the situation under investigation (Anyon et al., 2018).

The type of involvement of young people in research has been debated in the context of participatory methodologies. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) point out that this involvement can take place in four different roles: youth as subjects, where young people are the object of the research without, however, direct and effective participation; youth as consultants, where young people are consulted on specific aspects of the research; youth as partners, where young people, as partners, can participate in data collection and present proposals for their communities; and youth as directors, where young people can build their own projects and seek solutions for their communities. Despite this plurality, it is unanimous that when using participatory methodologies, young people's participation must be democratic and avoid the dominance of adult-centric analytical models (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2021). This presupposes robust epistemological vigilance to ensure that participation is carried out fairly and following the design of these methodologies (Malorni et al., 2022).

YPAR and the local context

Participatory methodologies seek to understand 'local knowledge and perceptions' (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1667) and value the experience of the protagonists and their participation as a vital element of the research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; McIntyre, 2007). In this sense, participatory approaches such as YPAR are, as some authors point out, community- and context-based (Anyon et al., 2018; Malcolm et al., 2020; Ozer, 2017). They emerge from issues surrounding young people and are community-based since young people are asked to identify problems relevant to themselves and their lives (Ozer, 2017).

Participatory methodologies such as YPAR are influenced by Freire's thinking on conscientisation, the importance of the relationship between consciousness and the world, where greater awareness is associated with a greater capacity to act for personal and social change (Freire, 1979). They are also acknowledged as methodologies with a transformative dimension, potentially promoting the development of the community in which they are carried out (Anyon et al., 2018). Participatory methodologies are not limited to the production of knowledge. As argued by Jupp (2007, p. 2833), 'such a research approach is expected to produce new forms of knowledge which would not be accessible without an active engagement from participants, and which, crucially, can be used to bring about social change', promoting change in the communities and in the participants based on the knowledge produced (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). This change can take place formally, for example, in terms of public policies or recommendations, but also informally, in terms of changes in the day-to-day experiences of the community (McIntyre, 2007).

YPAR: Young people as agents in their communities

YPAR is an approach that, by involving young people, recognises their knowledge and experiences as central to social change. It is about engaging young people to lead the process towards community changes based on their priorities as experts (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2017; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). This includes their right to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives and engage them in the process of analysis of the social, economic and political conditions of their communities (Ozer, 2017). This is aligned with the European Strategy for Youth 2018–2027 guidelines, which recognise young people as a resource for society and as actors to be involved in processes affecting their situations (EU, 2018). Young people, by means of participatory methodologies in research, become experts in their contexts and social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009), and these perspectives and expertise become a central resource for communities (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2017), with youth having a clear role in their communities and in improving local life (Malcolm et al., 2020).

Allied with this transformative potential of YPAR in communities in which young people emerge as protagonists for social change, the literature has also referred to the advantages of this approach for youth development (Buckley-Marudas & Soltis, 2020; Ozer, 2017). YPAR enhances the development not only of individual autonomy but also of a sense of identity and community (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ozer, 2017), particularly in terms of increased awareness of inequalities and social issues (Means et al., 2021). This can lead to greater youth engagement in social situations that surround them (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019; Malcolm et al., 2020) and can increase their involvement and capacity to create social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Malcolm et al., 2020) and to actively participate in democratic life (Buckley-Marudas & Soltis, 2020; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

YPAR: Promoting spaces for civic engagement through youth participation in research

Previously, we discussed the community-based nature and the involvement of young people in research as agents of change for their communities, valuing their expertise. As some authors point out, this involvement can promote youth development and engagement around situations affecting their lives and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019; Malcolm

et al., 2020). These perspectives on engaging youth as agents in their community towards its well-being and development, as presented by authors on YPAR, seem to be aligned with the concept of civic engagement, mainly related to individual and collective efforts in tackling matters of public significance (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

Widely debated in the literature, it is recognised that a watertight definition of civic engagement can be complex (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Definitions range from those aligned with more formal forms of political participation, such as voting and engagement in political parties (Putnam, 2000), through to more fluid forms of civic engagement (Norris, 2002). In parallel, the detachment of young people from more traditional forms of civic and political involvement, such as voting or participating in political activities or organisations, has been internationally (Farthing, 2010; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) and nationally recognised (Costa et al., 2022; da Silva et al., 2022), which sometimes leads to discourses perceiving young people as disengaged (Manning, 2013).

In this context, measures are being proposed for a more significant involvement of young people in more traditional forms. These include bringing forward the legal voting age from 18 to 16 (Ribeiro et al., 2022); investing in the involvement of young people in NGOs, youth associations and youth organisations (such as the Youth Councils, a municipal body that includes representatives from all youth associations, and the Student Councils) around issues that also concern them and influence their lives (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015); the creation of youth quotas in institutional bodies; the commitment to communication that is appropriate for young people and the strengthening of civic and political education in schools to develop skills and inform young people (OECD, 2017).

Some authors argue that youth engagement has not been in decline. Instead, it has been transferred to other forms, such as participating in digital media through social media and the internet (Mirra & Garcia, 2017), volunteering or integrating civic and political concerns into their everyday lives (Schlozman et al., 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). Not unrelated to this duality between traditional and new forms of participation, some authors present a more generic and encompassing definition of civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Zukin et al., 2006), focusing on involvement in causes to promote social justice, solve problems or promote the public good (Basok et al., 2006; Malafaia et al., 2018; Zukin et al., 2006). Adler & Goggin express this as 'how an active citizen participates in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future' (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241).

Work undertaken through YPAR can promote civic and political involvement of young people, as stated by Ozer et al. (2020) and Rogers and Terriquez (2016), since in identifying social problems and promoting social change, they are engaged as agents of change regarding the community and its development. Moreover, the commitment to social justice by pursuing social goals that challenge the decision-making status quo fulfils the definition of child/youth activism (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022) since 'when children and young people decide to invest their time and energy in collective participation activities, they usually do so because they want to make a change' (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022, p. 796). Finally, the Lundy model for child/youth participation, which offers a means of conceptualising a child's right to engage in decision-making and expression of their opinions based on four elements (space, voice, audience and influence) is essential to understanding youth participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives and communities. Besides the importance of voice and place for youth participation, it recognises the extent of this participation being heard (audience), that is, that young people are listened to in their priorities, and the importance of this participation to influence, that is, to produce change (Lundy, 2007).

METHODS

This article discusses data collected during the undertaking of a study that used participatory methodologies. This study, Grow up in border regions in continental Portugal: young people, educational pathways and agendas (Reference: PTDC/CED-EDG/29943/2017), was carried out in all 38 municipalities that have a border with Spain. It aimed to study resilient communities and schools, the experiences of young people and how they negotiate constraints and opportunities while growing up in these regions. The project included a questionnaire with nearly 4000 respondents and interviews with stakeholders from schools and municipalities. From the analysis of this data, five geographical contexts rated highest by young people in the survey and with the most promising approaches to youth development were selected to conduct the case studies component of the project. In this, the aim was to understand how communities and schools work together to promote rich social and educational environments for their young people. We also wanted to make an in-depth study, using biographical interviews, focus group discussions and trajectory maps, of the biographies of young people, looking at their experiences, cultures and future aspirations. Finally, the project included a participatory component in its design. This component was developed through YPAR in the five selected contexts to explore community-based projects with young people acting as local experts. For this purpose, project-building sessions were carried out with young people from the 10th or 11th grade. The scope of the project was explained to the schools' directors, who then indicated the young people who would be interested in taking part in the research. The groups were organised differently according to their own preference; in some contexts, an entire class participated.

By using participatory approaches, we sought to understand young people's priorities and find forms of resolution proposed by them for their contexts based on these priorities. Besides carrying out projects for their communities, young people, collaboratively with the researchers, developed a checklist of quality indicators for local policies and actions that address young people. YPAR enabled engagement with young individuals to explore ways to actively participate in their communities, offering opportunities for them to contribute to small projects aligned with their perceived priorities within their respective contexts. Given that these contexts have specific barriers to youth participation in particular traditional forms (da Silva et al., 2022, 2023), YPAR put young people at the centre and designs possible forms of engagement in meaningful collective projects.

Ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity and voluntary participation were ensured for the participation of the young people, as well as ethical issues central to participatory methodologies, namely issues related to the power relationships between adults and young people. This was done to ensure that the participation is as unconditioned as possible, with young people feeling their participation as effective as possible and less influenced by adult-centric systems (McIntyre, 2007). To this end, we endeavoured to create a safe environment, reinforcing not only the role of young people as experts but also the guarantee that their projects would be considered and respected as an essential part of the participatory component.

Due to the pandemic, the sessions were held online with Zoom software, involving 56 young people and five teachers. Participants were organised into nine groups (Table 1):

TABLE 1 Number of groups and young participants per context.

Context A	Context B	Context C	Context D	Context E	Total
1 group	3 groups	1 group	3 groups	1 group	9 groups
5 participants	18 participants	11 participants	12 participants	10 participants	56 participants

Each session, of a total of five, took between 50 and 70 min. The first three sessions were organised separately per context, the fourth involved all groups in which they shared their projects for feedback and changes, and the last involved presentation at a national and international level to a broader audience, from academia to civil society. Between each session, young people were invited to work on the project autonomously and with the mentoring of their teachers if needed.

Each session was recorded and transcribed. Data collected were analysed and categorised by the adult researchers using the thematic content analysis technique (Krippendorff, 2004). For this article, we will discuss results from the following categories (Table 2):

RESULTS

This section presents results focused on the contribution of participatory methodologies to developing civic engagement, analysing how the methodological process allowed young people to participate in their contexts as local development agents. This is followed by the organising themes of young people's projects. Finally, we reflect on the nature of the projects, exemplifying how they result from civic preoccupation and, as such, how they are representative of youth civic engagement.

Designing projects for their communities: YPAR as a tool to engage young people as agents in their communities

Participatory methodologies allow young people to become agents of social change by participating in research, identifying problems and seeking to act within their communities (Anyon et al., 2018; Malorni et al., 2022). The following table gives a more detailed account of the participatory process, structured by the researchers, of building projects for young people's communities (Table 3).

In each context, the first session began with a brainstorming activity, where young people were presented with the questionnaire results from their locality. This allowed us to create space to focus on the central aim of this session, which was to identify aspects that they considered a priority for themselves and their contexts. This diagnosis allowed young people to explore their views of the surrounding community as experts and to respond to problems identified by designing projects for social change (Means et al., 2021). The following excerpts are an example of this:

> ***Mara:*** I can start; I wrote social isolation. It has to do with the situation we are in. It can also be fitted into one of the projects or activities I had an idea for [...] because here our population is quite old and we need to take care of them, of the spirit of the senior, which is lost. They close themselves away at home; it is important to take care of them—they must continue to live. (Session 1, Context 4)

TABLE 2 Categories from data analysis.

Categories	Description
Young people's priorities for their communities	Priority aspects for young people featured in their projects
Young people's perception of the process of designing projects	Aspects related to the perceptions of young people participating in the process of designing projects

TABLE 3 The process of projects' development. Each line corresponds to a session developed, presented chronologically, where the objectives, main questions and activities developed are presented.

Session	Main goal(s)	Main questions	Activities
1 Identification of problem and priorities	Understanding priorities and problems from the point of view of young people	How do I characterise my community? What problems do I identify as relevant in my community?	Questionnaire discussing project results with young people. Discussion on priorities and social problems
2 Developing the problem and discussing its roots	Identifying quality indicators of projects and programmes to address youth and community issues and priorities	What can I do to for my community?	Photovoice: discussion of photos, videos and texts collected by young people as representative of social problems identified by them
3 Discussing strategies and project structure Drawing up the first draft of the project sections	Preparing the draft's project: priority, origin of the problem, objectives, action plan	How can I improve the problems/priorities that I have identified?	Discussion on aspects about quality criteria for projects Group work (designing projects for their communities)
4 Identification of project quality criteria and reviewing the project against those. Project pitching	To promote the sharing of projects between young people from different communities and discussion around quality criteria	Which quality criteria do I have to pay attention to?	Project pitching and discussion around quality criteria
5 Final presentation of the projects	To promote the sharing of projects to a wider community including local stakeholders		Presentation of the projects

This excerpt identifies a social problem in this context, namely the isolation of older people. The project this group will create will try to respond to the problem they identified (see Table 4, Group F). Here, the use of YPAR allowed not only a clear identification of a problem, which could be identified using other data techniques, but also enabled young people to be involved in this identification and, from there, in action for change through the materialisation of their project (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Means et al., 2021).

The identification and debate around the priorities continued at the beginning of the second session. In the previous one, young people were asked to record photographs, videos or texts during the break between sessions for further debate. This multimedia recording exercise enabled young people to position themselves as attentive researchers within their situation (Lam & Trott, 2022) and be involved in designing projects beyond the session context. The second and third sessions were developed around quality criteria for creating sustainable community-based projects, understanding young people as insider experts of their contexts (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009) and thus giving the floor to their contributions. After this moment, young participants were divided into groups according to interests and social problems identified. They began

TABLE 4 Social problems identified by young people and projects designed by them.

	Social problem identified	Project
A	Lack of youth involvement in activities to promote local tourism	Creation of tourism activities, such as tourist routes, involving young people to promote tourism and economic development
B	Generational distance and lack of knowledge of local traditions	Creating didactic activities for young people and other groups
C	Disuse of public parks	Refurbishment of public leisure areas
D	Transport network deficit	Development of a transport network between different points of interest to serve the population as well as to promote tourism development
E	Desertification and disinvestment in the region	Development of tourism activities to encourage young people to stay in the territory
F	Ageing and social isolation of the elderly	Creation of a network of volunteers to accompany the elderly
G		Development of community gardens
H		Promotion of contact with nature in an intergenerational dialogue
I	Lack of cultural activities	Promotion of cultural activities in underused spaces/ buildings

designing the projects to respond to the social problems identified and discussed. The following table includes the projects developed by young people for their communities inspired by the social problems/priorities they identified.

It can be observed that these young peoples' priorities do not focus exclusively on activities/ initiatives more directed towards themselves, even though they could, since they were asked what they considered essential to change for them and in their communities. They demonstrate civic concern for other community-level populations and challenges (Zukin et al., 2006), focusing on social and economic development (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Also, to point out, these young people are investing time in collective activities, such as these sessions for designing projects, and the activities that result from the nature of the projects (volunteering activities and fairs where they play a central role, as we will see later). These young people are energetic not only in responding to social goals but also filling the gaps that they identify in their regions and for local people, which reveals not only that they are not disengaged but some are activists for the causes that they believe are important for them (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parras, 2022), with a focus on providing and promoting social justice through initiatives that foster greater economic, social and cultural dynamism for the spaces. These initiatives promote attractiveness in their communities not only for the settlement of young people but also for the life of other populations or initiatives of a civic and intergenerational nature.

The fourth session, project pitching, brought together young people from all contexts around the first presentation of the project and a reflection on quality criteria which had been previously worked on. In this session, it was possible to discuss the projects in the light of these indicators, which allowed a refinement in this sharing and debate between young people.

Finally, the fifth moment resulted in a webinar, in which each group presented their projects to a broader community, including the scientific community, but also local stakeholders, school directors and others from school and educational contexts and other municipalities and regions

to create the possibility of implementing the projects in their different contexts. Considering Lundy's model on child/youth participation in the decision-making process (2007), this moment guaranteed space, voice, and audience since they could present their proposals and priorities as protagonists of the session. Regarding the parameter of influence, monitoring the effect of the projects on the communities is essential.

Following this process, young people, reflecting on the participatory process, highlighted its importance for themselves as young people in their communities:

> *Maria:* I think it was important for us to do this project also to think about what we need in our city and to be able, who knows, for our city to have new things, to innovate.
> *Adriana:* Maybe with these projects that we presented, the city will grow more... (Session 3—Context 2)

Maria highlights the importance of the process in triggering youth reflection on what the municipality needs and in promoting innovation. This example indicates that the use of YPAR promotes youth development as it enables an awareness of young people about their place in their communities and also about the problems they face (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ozer, 2017), which leads to a greater sense of community (Ozer, 2017). This is accompanied by Adriana's discourse which, in expressing her desire to develop her municipality following what was said by Maria, shows that the strengths of YPAR focus not only on the development of individual and community awareness among young people but also on social change through this youth agency (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

On the other hand, YPAR, as the literature states, puts the youth at the centre of research, valuing their knowledge as central to social change. When reflecting on the process, some young people once again highlighted the importance of their involvement:

> *Researcher:* Who wrote "giving more value to young people"?
> *Matilde:* I did... Because this project, as it is for young people, is allowing us to show creativity and what we are capable of.
> *Researcher:* "Make us feel useful". Who wrote that?
> *Julia:* I did, because I think that in [name of the city] young people are not useful; we did not feel useful for doing anything for our municipality, and I believe that now, with this initiative, we can feel useful ... (Session 3—Context 5)

It portrays the importance these young people attach to these sessions, seeing them as an opportunity to express their opinions and thus feel necessary for their communities' development. By 'making themselves heard', they participate in processes of social change as protagonists. This seems to contradict the view of youth apathy in participating and which appears to show that the recourse to YPARs, apart from being democratic in their genesis of redistribution of power for the construction of knowledge (Brown, 2021), is democratic by recognising the expertise of young people, who are often less heard (Jupp, 2007; Mirra et al., 2015) and do not have a place in the political discourse (da Silva et al., 2023).

Discussing young people's projects through the lens of civic engagement

As stated in the theoretical framework, we position ourselves around civic engagement, encompassing the involvement in the life of the community according to its needs, its development and the improvement of its conditions (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Malafaia et al., 2018; Zukin

et al., 2006). In this context, we analyse the projects developed by young people in an attempt to understand not only how they arise from situated concerns and contribute to the well-being of their communities through community projects but also to reflect on the priorities of these young people in relation to the civic and community essence of the projects themselves, wherein young people play a fundamental role as participants.

As observed in the preceding section, the projects developed by young people for their regions focused on the well-being of their communities and populations. Despite being designed by young people from different contexts, Projects A, D and E share the same principle. Through these projects, young people seek to construct activities and initiatives to promote economic and social development in their contexts. Those projects propose economic growth, mainly through job creation for the fixation of young people and, therefore, to combat desertification that characterises these contexts (Pordata, Base de dados de Portugal Contemporâneo, 2022a) and, in doing so, to promote social development. This concern aims to develop the community, to make it more attractive in terms of tourism by taking advantage of the local cultural potential that young people highlight, and for living in, improving the socioeconomic conditions of life in these communities.

Projects C and I focus on improving leisure and cultural opportunities. Border, rural and interior regions are characterised by economic, social, educational and cultural inequalities (da Silva, 2014). Thus, these young people seek to promote the refurbishment and reuse of spaces to organise activities of both a sporting and cultural nature (e.g. theatre performances, debates, sports activities—specifically project C). In a way, they also seek to return these spaces to the population, creating cultural, sporting, and social dynamism and thus promoting the population's well-being through access to scarce or non-existent activities and the requalification of spaces.

In Projects B, F, G and H, young people from different contexts prioritise addressing social isolation among the elderly as a priority and aim to establish support networks for the older population, while emphasising the importance of fostering intergenerational dialogue (particularly in project B). Projects C and I, even though from different contexts, share the aim of rehabilitating public spaces to encourage leisure and cultural activities.

In essence, these youth-led projects for aimed at their communities demonstrate civic and community concerns, targeting problems identified by young people through a situated assessment. It is recognised that the border regions of mainland Portugal, predominantly rural, exhibit asymmetries in terms of cultural offerings and an ageing demographic (da Silva, 2014; Pordata, Base de dados de Portugal Contemporâneo, 2022b). The priorities pinpointed and listed by these young people reflect the attributes of their communities. The projects, serving as a mean of resolution, tackle civic concerns associated with the overall welfare of these communities encompassing economic, cultural and social aspects. In addition, some projects highlighted the role of young people in the projects they seek to develop, placing them as directly engaged in those community development (Freires et al., 2023). Examples of this are projects F and H:

> *Clara:* As we mentioned here, the project will work as if we were the grandchildren of people who are isolated, far from their relatives, and have nobody. Basically, at least one day a week, for example, every Wednesday, we will try to be there. It will not be an obligation because any project we volunteer for is not an obligation but rather a sign of responsibility and commitment to the other and of affection. The main rule of this project is the contact number of the person, to listen carefully to all the stories and learn from them because we have this thirst for wanting to change the world. So we succeed, listening, accepting opinions, and learning from those who have already lived a lot. (Session 3, Project F)

Júlia: We want to bring nature to the elderly. To do activities in partnership with the nursing home as the older people do not go out, are bedridden, and don't leave there. So, they can see nature and have some contact in a certain way, schedules must be set up to take photos and visit the places... (Session 3, Project H)

These projects, as well as seeking to promote the well-being of older populations, aim to promote volunteering among young people, where they would participate in its pursuit. What distinguishes these projects is how youth involvement is imprinted; in these projects, young people become builders of a project and an integral part of it as volunteers. This project promotes civic engagement not only in its construction, since it results from a local preoccupation, but also at its root, as it aims for social justice and the population's well-being through youth participation.

In the same vein, project B, in addition to promoting greater intergenerational contact between the older population and young people through the development of didactic activities, seeks to provide answers to social problems in the community as a result of the activities. As it was mentioned by the group, the products resulting from these didactic activities would be sold at fairs to be organised. Also, the amount raised would be donated to non-governmental organisations, specifically voluntary organisations that distribute clothes and food to the needy population. Thus, in this project, civic engagement not only underlies its genesis and what drives it—in this case, promoting intergenerational dialogue that favours young people in proximity with local culture and older people to fight isolation—but a social concern is also present, more specifically with the initiative to collect funds for those in need.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As shown, the debate on youth civic engagement is somewhat controversial. Both international and national policies have acknowledged the significance of youth involvement in decision-making processes (EU, 2018; OECD, 2017). They highlight the contribution of young people in effecting social change by being participative and active citizens (Ross, 2012).

The apparent lack of interest among young people in more traditional forms of participation has been studied in the literature and recognised as an issue for policymakers (EU, 2018; Resolution of the Council of Ministers number 114-A/2018). Some authors have argued the emergence of novel formats of participation which are more fluid and ingrained in the daily lives of young people (da Silva et al., 2023; Garcia et al., 2022; Schlozman et al., 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). These include the use of digital media (Mirra & Garcia, 2017) and youth activism (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parras, 2022), which challenges the notion of a disengaged youth (Manning, 2013), by upholding engagement forms that diverge from more traditional ones.

YPAR has been recognised as a critical approach to research for promoting youth development (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) and youth civic and political engagement (Ozer et al., 2020; Rogers and Terriquez, 2016), as well as for its importance in promoting social change in communities through a youth lens and with youth participation (Buckley-Marudas & Soltis, 2020; Ozer, 2017). In the process of identifying social problems and seeking solutions within their realms (Ozer, 2017), young people are encouraged to critically reflect on their surroundings critically and are motivated to take action to solve community problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Means et al., 2021).

Effective youth engagement in research can manifest in different forms (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Participatory approaches require a departure from adult-centred models (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2021). Within this framework, our primary

concern was to ensure that the projects devised by the young people entirely reflected their priorities and expectations. Adult researchers assumed the role of facilitators and mediators during sessions, giving the young people complete autonomy to identify their priorities and explore solutions to the social problems they raised.

The projects designed by these young people were based on identifying social problems and priority situations for them. The exercise allowed us to understand that the priorities of these young people do not focus exclusively on activities/initiatives which could be more directed towards themselves but reveal a concern for other populations and situations at the community level, mainly aimed at development and social justice (Basok et al., 2006). Firstly, these young people contradict the vision of a particular youth apathy towards civic engagement. Secondly, YPAR can play a role in filling gaps in terms of spaces for young people's aspirations to be heard and in terms of creating an audience, influence and giving voice, following Lundy's model Lundy (2007) to them as active citizens in their communities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ross, 2012).

Promoting civic engagement through participatory methodologies can be observed not only in the methodological process, in identifying youth priorities for their communities and in the projects' design, but also in the very nature of the projects and activities that are created, putting them in the centre not only in terms of the research process (Anyon et al., 2018), but also as protagonists in solving problems they identified themselves.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This manuscript has not been submitted nor is under review or consideration by another journal. There are no other conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Nicolas Martins da Silva https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8288-3174
Sofia Marques da Silva https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2688-1171

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Nicolas Martins da Silva, PhD student in Education Sciences at the Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto (CIIE-FPCEUP), Porto, Portugal. His research interests relate to citizenship education, youth participation, place-based education, territory in education and mixed methods.

Sofia Marques da Silva, is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences and a full member of the Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE-FPCEUP) at the University of Porto, Porto, Portugal. Her research interests relate to research methodologies, place-based education, youth, sense of belonging and regional development, resilient schools, and communities.

APPENDIX A

The project-building sessions with young people were previously planned to take place in the form of a boot camp, within the framework of the Junior University organised by the University of Porto. In this 1-week boot camp, young people from the five case studies would discuss priorities, identify social problems and develop projects. They would also build quality criteria to

support their projects with APCER, an accreditation association. This work was to take place in July, traditionally a school holiday month.

However, the pandemic prevented this face-to-face work, so it had to be adapted digitally. This had repercussions on the contact time with these young people, spread over five sessions instead of intensively over a week. On the other hand, constraints related to the organisation of the young people's classes also arose, as this work was carried out when they were either in class or, in other cases, at moments after class. In conjunction with teachers and school directors, we ensured that these moments did not hinder the students' class activities.

The holding of these sessions, within the scope of the project and the doctoral project, was approved by the school directors, responsible teachers, parents, and students. They were also submitted to the Ethics Committee of University of Porto.