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Report

# Participation in the decision-making processes of football (fan) organisations

The opinions of youth

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## The opinions of youth

In collaboration with Football Supporters Europe.

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Our goal is to contribute to well-founded policies aimed at promoting sports, physical activity, and strengthening the sports sector. We achieve this in several ways:

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We collect data and monitor the Dutch sports sector and policy programs.

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We develop knowledge and research methods through exploratory and in-depth studies.

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We interpret research findings and translate them into policy practice.

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We support policy decisions with expertise and advice.

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We provide requested and unsolicited interpretation and reflection in the role of a 'critical friend' of the sports sector.

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We work towards promoting sports science.

# Table of contents

## Participation in the decision-making processes of football fan organisations

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1	Background	5
1.2	Research-questions	5
1.3	Methods	6
<b>2</b>	<b>Barriers</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1	Organisational barriers	8
2.2	Image barriers	10
2.3	Young people's barriers	10
<b>3</b>	<b>Enablers</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1	Personal motivations	12
3.2	Individual enablers	13
3.3	Organisational/environmental enablers	14
<b>4</b>	<b>Good practices</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1	Norway	16
4.2	Spain	17
4.3	Sweden	17
4.4	Tunisia	18
<b>5</b>	<b>Relation to the literature</b>	<b>19</b>
5.1	Barriers	19
5.2	Enablers and good practices	19
<b>6</b>	<b>Implications for the toolkit</b>	<b>21</b>
6.1	Benefits of young people's participation	21
6.2	Level playing-field	22
	<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>
	<b>Appendix 1 - Focus group design</b>	<b>26</b>

# Introduction

**This chapter introduces the background of the project, the research questions and the method we used for our research.**

## 1.1 Background

Nowadays, the participation of young people (18 to 25 years of age) in the governance of football (fan) organisations is limited. The Erasmus+ project Future of Football (FOF) aims to increase that participation by developing a toolkit. Partners of the project are football fan associations from England, Germany, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Tunisia.

One of the obstacles these associations face, is the lack of a (well-thought-out) strategic approach focused on increasing youth's participation in football (fan) organisations. It is particularly relevant that such an approach builds on insights from the opinions and needs of young people concerning the governance of football (fan) organisations. After all, the toolkit is focused to increase their participation.

The central assumption within FOF is that the more the toolkit is in line with the opinions and needs of young people, the more successful it can be put into practice by the FOF partners in their respective countries.

## 1.2 Research-questions

The central research question within this report is as follows:

*How can a toolkit, focused on increasing the participation of young people in the governance of football (fan) organisations, be aligned with their relevant opinions and needs?*

Within this report, we will answer this central question via the following sub-questions:

1. What do young people perceive as barriers for youth participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations?
2. What do they perceive as enablers for youth participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations?
3. Which good practices have they experienced concerning increasing youth participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations?
4. How do the barriers, enablers, and good practices they experienced, relate to the ones we identified within the literature scan and comparative country analysis in the context of the FOF project?

## 1.3 Methods

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### Data collection

We will answer the research questions based on data collected with focus groups.

We chose focus groups for two main reasons.

- Firstly, this qualitative research method was suitable to gain insight into young people's experiences and perceptions of the governance of football (fan) organisations, particularly in relation to their needs.
- Secondly, focus groups were particularly suitable for FOF partners to stimulate discussion and interaction between young people. This was of importance, because adolescents and young adults (the groups that young people aged 18 to 25 belong to) influence each other's perceptions. Beforehand, we expected that this also would be reflected in the opinions and needs of young people with respect to the governance of football (fan) organisations. Focus groups were the ideal method to organise an interactive conversation between (the FOF partners and) young people.

The focus groups were conducted among young people that already participate in the governance of football (fan) organisations. In contrast to young people that are not involved, they are able to reflect on the added value of youth participation, as well as on the barriers, enablers, and good practices in this regard. In short: we can answer the research questions based on their opinions.

We – the Mulier Institute, as research partner within the FOF project – constructed the design of the focus groups (see appendix 1). They consisted of an introduction, a middle section, and a conclusion. The FOF partners used this design to speak with young people. In each country, one focus group was conducted, except for Spain, where two focus groups took place. Partners organised the focus groups physically or online. They lasted for one and a half hours. Per focus group, four to six participants were present, mostly a mix between men and women.

We decided that the FOF partners would conduct the focus groups, allowing the respondents to discuss the topic in their native language and in a familiar setting. However, this approach has some disadvantages.

- Not all focus groups were conducted by the same people or in the same way.
- The transcripts were not always completely accurate.
- The FOF partners are not trained researchers.

To mitigate these issues, we organised an online workshop to prepare them for the focus groups.

### Data analysis

FOF partners asked for permission to audio-record the focus groups. All young people agreed to that. The partners translated the audio recordings into an English transcript or summary and shared these with the Mulier Institute. Subsequently, we

analysed the summaries and transcripts based on a thematic content analysis. This analysis consisted of three steps:

1. In line with the research questions, we identified relevant texts in the summaries and transcripts about added value, enablers, barriers, and a level-playing-field concerning youth participation.
2. We summarised these texts into so-called codes.
3. Based on these codes, we designed a composition plan for how to report on the focus groups. This report is written based on that plan.

### **Data reporting**

Within the focus groups, the purpose was to collect as many ideas and suggestions as possible about how to increase youth participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations. This report reflects the wide range of empirical results that we collected. We will not always specify the focus groups or countries that findings come from, and we will limit the use of exact respondent numbers, as the wide range of content is more important than quantity.

Finally, we will use the terms ‘young people’ and ‘youngsters’ to refer to our respondents. We emphasize that these terms do not refer to and are thus not representative for all young people.



### **Reading guide**

Hereafter, this report consists of five chapters. In chapters 2 through 5, We will answer the sub-questions of our research.

- Chapter 2 and 3 are about the barriers and enablers that young people perceive.
- Chapter 4 concerns good practices they experienced to get themselves and other young people involved in the governance of football (fan) organisations.
- In chapter 5, we identify how the barriers, enablers, and good practices are related to the ones we identified in the literature scan and comparative country analysis that we conducted in the context of the FOF project.

In chapter 6, we will answer the central research question. In this chapter, we will describe suggestions for how a toolkit focused on increasing the participation of young people in the governance of football (fan) organisations can be aligned with their relevant opinions and needs.

# Barriers

This chapter is about the barriers that young people experienced to get involved in the governance of football (fan) organisations. We distinguish between barriers that originate from football (fan) organisations (in paragraph 2.1), from image (2.2), and from young people themselves (2.3).

## 2.1 Organisational barriers

### Hardly invited

In the focus groups, it was mentioned that young people<sup>1</sup>, to a lesser or greater extent, participate in their football organisations. However, they are not involved in the strategic governance sections of these organisations. Young people revealed that they are hardly invited to join these sections. To be more specific: established boards and board members within football (fan) organisations scarcely invite young people to think with them about the strategy of football.

*'Young people are often involved in various projects within the organisation, but they are frequently excluded from decision-making roles, because they are barely asked for it.'*

Similarly, on the level of projects within football (fan) organisations, it was mentioned that young people are hardly invited for and thus not involved in the designing phase of projects. That phase is important, because that is when decisions are made about goals and strategy (governance). Conversely, young people are mainly invited to join projects in football (fan) organisations when these are in the phase of implementation.

Because young people are hardly invited, they do not have profound opportunities to shape the direction of football (fan) organisations. Young people are not able to share their (innovative) ideas and perspectives. This undermines or can undermine their feelings of empowerment. Also, it creates or can create feelings of disconnection and frustration.

*'We feel disconnected or frustrated as consequence of that we are not involved in initiating or creating projects from scratch.'*

<sup>1</sup> We want to clarify that in this chapter, the terms 'young people' and 'youngsters' specifically refer to the focus group respondents (see paragraph 1.3).



### **Lack of contact**

Furthermore, lack of contact was identified as a barrier. More specifically, it concerns less contact between young people and the established boards and board members of football (fan) organisations, even though young people may want to be part of that board as well. It all begins with organising moments of contact, according to the young people that shared their opinion in the focus groups. Because this is where ideas are exchanged, and future leaders can be recruited.

### **Persistence and hierarchy**

It was noticed that older people were less interested in young people to take over their leading positions. This means that they are persistent in holding their governance positions:

*'I met resistance when I was going to take over as leader. The older people in [...] were not so interested in having a small young man of 21 who would be the leader. So then they worked actively against it, but we managed to persuade them in the end.'*

It can also be hard or discouraging for young people to position themselves within governance amongst older people.

*'Often it is quite quiet at annual meetings when you ask someone to speak. That can be an obstacle to getting more votes. If you are 16 years old at an annual meeting with 102 people where 90% is older than you, it can be scary to raise your hand and say something.'*

Also, age relates to hierarchy. Established older board members do not always take young people seriously within boards. Therefore, young people do not get the responsibilities or possibilities to prove their capability. Many young people in the focus groups mentioned that they want to make changes, but there is a lot of hierarchy, so it is difficult to reach the top decision makers.

### **Structure**

Within some football (fan) organisations, you must first be a member to become a volunteer. That means that to get involved in the governance of these organisations, it is also necessary to become a member, and sometimes even a volunteer. Some young people do not want to get involved in that way before they fill in a governance positions.

### **Costs**

Finally, it was highlighted that high prices are a concern for young people. This concerns the prices for attending matches and other events of football (fan) organisations.

## 2.2 Image barriers

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### Governance as a discouraging concept

To a lesser or greater extent, young people express that the term governance can be discouraging for them. Especially because they can feel like they must compete or participate in decision-making processes with experienced governors.

*'I imagine the word 'governance' can probably be a quite daunting aspect for young people, because you hear the word 'governance' and think you are going to walk into a meeting room, whether it be virtually or in person.'*

Governance as a discouraging concept creates feelings of incompetence and a lack of self-confidence.

### Dominant image: men as good governors

Gender is another barrier. Being a girl can be experienced as hard in a supporters environment dominated by men. Although girls can experience these environments to be inclusive as well, they will still feel that they are a minority, according to most participants of the focus groups:

*'It's not only easy to be a girl in a supporter environment, but I feel that [...] has been very inclusive and kind to me. It's not always easy to feel included in all conversations when there are few girls there. When we are going to participate, it is kind of like we fall a little outside.'*

According to the youngsters, there is a dominant image that a good governor is a man. Therefore, they see the governance of football (fan) organisations mainly as a masculine activity. They perceive a certain 'machismo' that hinders girls and women to contribute to the direction of organisations.

## 2.3 Young people's barriers

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### Less interested in local clubs

Young people may be more interested in national or international football clubs with a relatively big exposure than in local clubs with relatively little exposure, leading to less feelings of belonging to local clubs. According to young people, this makes it even more difficult to involve youngsters in the governance of football (fan) organisations of local football clubs.

### **Time constraints**

Lastly, young people cited time constraints as a barrier. In modern societies with many distractions and responsibilities, finding time to participate in a football (fan) organisation can be challenging. Especially in governance roles, which require a relatively substantial time commitment.

# Enablers

This chapter is about the enablers that young people experience to get involved in the governance of football (fan) organisations. Based on the opinions from the focus groups, a clear distinction can be made between personal motivations (paragraph 3.1), individual enablers (3.2), and enablers that originate from football (fan) organisations and the environment in a broader sense (3.3).

## 3.1 Personal motivations

Young people<sup>2</sup> expressed different kinds of personal motivation that enabled them to get into the governance of football (fan) organisations.

### Family and passion

Most young people started participating as a child and are involved in football (fan) organisations via their families. A few of them mentioned that for them, participating in the fan supporters club is a 'passion and lifestyle'.

### Having a voice

Another motivation for many young people is having a voice in the decision-making process. Among other things, they hope to contribute to the culture of a club as a member. One of the young people mentioned that he 'hopes to renew and innovate ideas and changes that go hand in hand with the current world and society'.

### Solidarity for the club

Solidarity for the club was mentioned as another personal motivation. Respondents mentioned that they want to do something for the club without expecting anything in return. This gives them a specific feeling of energy.

### Social aspect

The connection between the club's ideals and people was highlighted as important. This connects to another motivation mentioned by several young people, namely the social aspect and the possibility of making friends.

*'I participate because my club has many positive things. For a club to be viable, it has to provide things to continue to exist. This goes beyond the 90 minutes of the games. The social aspect is very important. You make friends and meet new people. Winning is important, but it is not the most important thing. If I can help to continue (to build) my club, that is more important.'*

<sup>2</sup> We want to clarify that in this chapter, the terms 'young people' and 'youngsters' specifically refer to the focus group respondents (see paragraph 1.3).

## 3.2 Individual enablers

Besides personal motivations, other kinds of individual enablers were mentioned.

### Personality

An enabler mentioned by most young people involved the personality of young people. According to the respondents, it is important to be courageous and daring enough to speak up when participating in governance. Moreover, being curious, making an effort, and showing commitment were factors mentioned that can help to get noticed by the organisation.

A change of mentality was also mentioned, in the sense that the experience should be a more important reason to participate than the matches.

*'It is about being active and trying to get involved. Use your voice, say that you want to. Then you also speak against the obstacles and show that you want to contribute.'*

### Spreading the word

Young people emphasised their importance in the governance of football (fan) organisations to speak up and spread the word. This can motivate and recruit friends and other young individuals to participate.

A suggestion was made that this can be easily achieved by inviting friends to meetings and activities. Furthermore, collaborating with young people from other associations to increase visibility and help each other out was also proposed.

*'Young supporters need to talk about how fun it actually is to be in a football stand in Norway, simply talk up the Norwegian supporter culture and recruit friends and bring them along.'*

### Starting small

Some young people highlighted the importance of starting small to ensure that the organisation does not perceive an initiative as a complete change, but can gradually adapt to it. The first step could be to propose a few tools, according to a respondent.

Moreover, other young people emphasised the importance of finding the balance between seeking changes and respecting and listening to the (older) members already in the organisation.

### 3.3 Organisational/environmental enablers

Young people noted that it should not only be the responsibility of youth themselves to actively seek involvement. Organisations should adopt a more proactive approach to reach out and engage members. Several aspects were mentioned, including 'hard skills', which are practical and task-oriented, and 'soft skills', which relate to interpersonal interactions and engagement.

#### Events and social media to attract young people

The most commonly mentioned enabler is organising events. It is argued that this helps people feel welcome and part of the community. For instance, 'open days' or social events can serve to recruit new young people. Additionally, organising such events makes it easier to meet other people and to make friends.

*'There is a limit to how well you can get to know people at a football match, because the main focus is the match. So, events under the auspices of clubs and supporters' clubs outside of matches, where people can meet up at a pub where you can actually talk to each other, are important. Then groups of friends can grow and become bigger. To recruit in that way outside of the football match and at events, I think that is important.'*

Increasing girls' participation was also highlighted, with suggestions such as hosting a 'ladies night' with discounted tickets or organising social activities before a game. Young people argued that bringing girls together helps them form a group and allows them to represent themselves collectively.

Moreover, multiple young people mentioned that social media can be an effective tool to attract young people. For example, short movies with a lot of 'action', like many supporters singing together, was mentioned as appealing to young people. Another suggestion was to adapt the approach in engaging youth through digital campaigns, for example involving popular YouTubers.

#### Prices and age limit

Young people from Norway and Sweden highlighted that high prices are a concern. They proposed that the club should offer discounted youth tickets for matches. Youth from Norway also noted that voting at an annual meeting can be expensive, and young people often prioritise their money elsewhere.

One youngster mentioned that in his organisation, discounted prices are given to members of the supporters club, which others saw as a good opportunity. Besides, reminders for young people to vote were suggested as beneficial.

Moreover, some young people mentioned that an existing age limit prevents younger children to stand with the supporters, which can lead to decreased interest. In contrast, young people from organisations without an age limit suggested lowering the minimum age to increase participation.

### **A welcoming and inclusive environment and the importance of values**

A welcoming and inclusive environment was highlighted as crucial factor in encouraging youth participation. This includes providing proper support, mentorship, and resources to help youth members integrate into the organisation and contribute effectively. Moreover, young people noted that organisations should show interest and acknowledge the commitment of young people, making them feel seen and valued.

The inclusion of young people in the organisation is considered essential. Within the focus groups, it was suggested that involving youth in the board and working groups is relevant to ensure that they see themselves represented, which can motivate others to become more involved.

Others recommended measures include establishing a youth committee and including young people in voluntary work. Moreover, young people mentioned the importance of making adaptations to accommodate everyone, such as adjusting the meeting times and offering the option of online meetings.

Furthermore, having and implementing values as a club was noted as important. This can inspire young people to participate and defend these values. For example, one such value which was mentioned, is showing respect to other clubs.

*'I want to be a part of (the club) because it has values that draw me in. It is how I see the world, so more people can enjoy it like me. Defending these values is like a symbol of the club.'*

### **Providing clear pathways**

Young people emphasised the need for organisations to provide clear pathways to facilitate youth involvement. They suggested that this could simplify the process for young people. According to them, this entails clearly informing youth about available opportunities and actively encouraging their participation in various projects and initiatives. They also highlighted that open communication channels within the organisation are crucial for participation, which make it easier to contact others within the organisation at any time.

This aligns with another suggestion, for a guide created by the organisation. This guide could explain various aspects, including the structure of the organisation, the roles of the club and trust boards, and the individuals involved. According to young people, such a guide would make the organisation more accessible and easier to navigate.

They also discussed a 'light' version of engagement, in which members are not (yet) required to fully commit. According to them, this approach allows younger people to explore and gradually develop a sense of commitment and responsibility.

# Good practices

Young people from Norway, Spain, Sweden and Tunisia shared examples of (supposed) effective good practices for enabling young people in the governance of football (fan) organisations. We will discuss them in this chapter.

## 4.1 Norway

### Tifos

A topic discussed frequently was tifos: visual displays like flags or banners made by football fans to show their support for their club. In Norway, tifo is seen as an activity in which young people<sup>3</sup> want to join. One of the youngsters mentioned that tifos are often promoted on social media, and at the last tifo, everyone involved was aged between 15 and 25.

Additionally, it is seen as great opportunity to get to know other people. In one organisation, a new young group was given the main responsibility for the tifo. Young people noted that this responsibility was important for these youngsters and can make them want to contribute more.

### Family kick-off

Another example mentioned was the organisation of a family kick-off, in which kids could paint their own banners, which created a sense of belonging. Young people emphasised that actually making or doing something yourself makes you feel included. They suggest this also applies to older supporters, for example by providing them with tasks at a match.

### Annual meetings

In the focus group on the Norwegian context, it was mentioned that annual meetings can be experienced as tense and therefore discouraging for young people. However, young people also acknowledged that these meetings can be helpful in youth representation and participation. A panel debate with young supporters at an annual meeting was mentioned as particularly useful for youth involvement.

One youngster from Norway noted that she left with a positive feeling after their annual meeting, because the age composition was balanced, and she felt comfortable speaking up during discussions. This experience motivated her to continue participating. Another youngster mentioned activities like bus trips to away matches help foster inclusion, as this provides an easy way to get to know each other.

<sup>3</sup> We want to clarify that in this chapter, the terms 'young people' and 'youngster(s)' specifically refer to the focus groups respondents (see paragraph 1.3).



## 4.2 Spain

In the focus group of Spain, many positive related to (youth) participation were shared. One youngster highlighted how their organisation fosters involvement:

*'In (...) [our organisation] you can participate, you can choose the anthem, the crest, the membership fees, you are part of it, your vote counts. When you are under 18, you can also get involved. I am not a number, I know everything that goes on here, all decisions are open. Seeing that your opinion and your vote counts can motivate people to join.'*

### Schools and universities

Additionally, an example was given in which clubs have agreements with local universities. This includes students being able to do internships in the club, which helps getting them involved. The club also reaches out to secondary schools and promote the value of sports, sometimes providing tickets for games as part of this initiative.

### Youth cards

Moreover, youth cards are offered, which the respondents emphasised as important, because it makes it more affordable to go to matches. Besides, pre-match meetings are organised, which is a good way to socialise.

### Foundations

Another example of broader inclusion mentioned was that their organisation invites people from various foundations, including those working with people with disabilities or with social integration of migrants, an NGO that works with immigrants and refugees, the Red Cross, and other nonprofits. They reserve a designated area in the stadium for these groups to gather and watch the match.

## 4.3 Sweden

### No political opinions

Swedish young people discussed that political engagement is less common in both elections and in the stands. They view this positively, as it reduces conflict and ensures that everyone is welcome, since political opinions are not heavily discussed. They believe that political engagement is more prevalent in other countries.

### Democratic structure

Moreover, Sweden's association democracy, exemplified by the 50+1 rule, grants supporters 51% ownership of the club's shares, significantly influencing decision-making processes. Young people from Sweden highlighted that this structure can greatly enhance engagement.

**Tifos**

They also pointed out that their Tifos are effectively shared on social media, which helps build commitment among supporters.

**Open day**

Lastly, an example of open day was mentioned, where young people are welcomed and engaged in activities. Young people consider it a positive start in fostering commitment among the youth.

## 4.4 Tunisia

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**Commissions**

In the focus group about Tunisia, young people highlighted the effectiveness of having dedicated commissions for different organisational activities, such as information systems, recruitment, and communication. The creation of specialised commissions was regarded as a successful strategy for encouraging individuals to actively engage in the desired area and are therefore a clear entry point for participation.

Participants of the focus groups stressed the importance of providing avenues for members to apply their skills and expertise in areas in which they can make a meaningful impact.

# Relation to the literature

**In this chapter, we connect the barriers, enablers, and good practices from the focus groups to the ones we identified in the literature scan and comparative country analysis. These are both reports we published before in the context of the FOF project.**

Paragraph 5.1 is about the connection of barriers. In paragraph 5.2, we discuss enablers and good practices, because these enable young people to participate in the governance of football (fan) organisations.

## 5.1 Barriers

We identified the following barriers in our literature scan (Greeven et al., 2023):

- a lack of awareness or knowledge of opportunities for participation in decision making processes by young people;<sup>4</sup>
- numerous practical barriers, with time being the main constraint;
- youth feeling unheard or not taken seriously by older and established board members;
- passive roles: when young people do get involved in governance, they often have their ideas ignored.

Two of these barriers also relate to the ones we brought to the fore in chapter 2. Firstly, young people are excluded in the designing phases of projects or are hardly invited to participate in governance. Therefore, they mainly fulfil passive roles in football (fan) organisations, in which their ideas are more often ignored than heard.

Secondly, because of governance as a discouraging concept and an image of good governors as men, young people, particularly girls, can feel that they are not taken seriously by (older) established board members.

## 5.2 Enablers and good practices

### Support

Support was identified as important enabler in the literature scan to create awareness and attraction. Support is broad and entails many aspects, one of them being to form desired values as an organisation. These values help young people to feel more committed through their identification with these values and their sense of belonging (Greeven et al., 2023). This was also brought up by the respondents.

<sup>4</sup> We want to clarify that in this chapter, the terms 'young people' and 'youngsters' specifically refer to the focus groups respondents (see paragraph 1.3).

Also linked to support is that respondents noted that starting small is beneficial, both for the organisation in recruiting and creating gradual engagement, and for their own process of trying to change things.

### **Communication**

Communication is a key enabler according to young people in focus groups. Social media was highlighted as an effective tool for engagement, and arranging meetings with a social aspect is crucial for getting youth involved. Annual meetings are one place where young people might be encouraged to participate, as highlighted in the focus groups and country analysis (De Kwaasteniet et al., 2024).

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility is also high on the list of young people's enablers. They emphasised the importance of diversity and a welcoming environment. They mainly focused on the efforts of organisations to make this happen. An example mentioned by respondents and seen in the country analysis (De Kwaasteniet et al., 2024), is offering lower prices for young supporters.

### **Meaningful involvement**

The dedicated commissions, like the example of Tunisia, within football (fan) organisations align with the enabler of meaningful involvement (Greeven et al., 2023). These commissions help keep youth motivated to engage by involving them in meaningful activities and giving them a sense of ownership, which encourages innovative ideas.

### **Ownership and active involvement**

Ownership and active involvement are demonstrated in events where youth can actively participate and create something themselves. An example brought to the fore in the focus groups and in the country analysis (De Kwaasteniet et al., 2024), is the involvement of young people in tifos. This responsibility fosters active involvement and makes them feel taken seriously.

# Implications for the toolkit

**In this chapter, we will answer the central research question: *How can a toolkit focused on increasing the participation of young people in the governance of football (fan) organisations, be aligned with their relevant opinions and needs?***

In paragraph 6.1, we will describe what young people perceive as the primary benefits of their participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations. In paragraph 6.2, we will describe the lessons learned from the focus groups to realise those benefits. More concretely, we will point out three core steps to activate the enablers and remove the barriers that young people experienced, from the toolkit. Thereby, the toolkit is focused on creating a level playing-field, in which young people have equal chances to get into the governance of football (fan) organisations.

## 6.1 Benefits of young people's participation

Following the FOF toolkit's lessons, supported by a literature scan, a country analysis and youth perspectives, is likely to enhance youth participation in the governance of football (fan) organisations. Moreover, the focus groups reveal two main reasons why young people<sup>5</sup> find this participation valuable.

### **Organisational vitality**

Firstly, their participation contributes to the vitality of football (fan) organisations. Young people highlighted that they bring fresh energy and innovative perspectives, helping football (fan) organisations connect more effectively with current and future young generations. Young people can relate to these generations and have the ability to quickly and adequately adapt to them.

This connection was seen as essential for football (fan) organisations on the long term, as these organisations are built on their members, fans, and supporters. To survive, they must adapt to changing and sometimes challenging circumstances, such as by using digital and technologic resources, according to young people.

### **Transferring knowledge, skills, and values**

For football (fan) organisations to thrive, it is – according to young people – essential to have capable future leaders. Youth participation facilitates the transfer of knowledge, skills, and organisational values (as part of the culture of football (fan) organisations) from older to younger generations.

Young people perceive that this empowers them and contributes to the sustainability of football (fan) organisations. Moreover, young people believe they can develop into capable governors of football (fan) organisations. To achieve this, it

<sup>5</sup> We want to clarify that in this chapter, the terms 'young people' and 'youngsters' specifically refer to the focus groups respondents (see paragraph 1.3).

is essential that they have the opportunity to engage, learn and gain practical experience.

## 6.2 Level playing-field

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### Inviting young people to participate

The first lesson learned from the focus groups is that it is essential to invite young people to participate in governance. After all, once the barrier of young people rarely being invited to participate is overcome, their motivation to drive change and express their voice can be realised.

The following actions can help to achieve this:

- › increasing the effective use of social media to promote and recruit young people;
- › lowering the price and age limit if necessary, so no interest from young people is lost;
- › including young people in volunteer work and/or creating a youth committee;
- › adjusting the time and place to make participation more accessible (for example online meetings);
- › actively inviting young people to join and speak at the annual meetings;
- › providing proper support and creating space for young people to be curious;
- › creating opportunities for young people to start small and explore getting involved in the governance of football (fan) organisations gradually;
- › hosting events and other activities outside of matches to ensure young people can bond with football organisations;
- › integrating social issues into projects/meetings to create meaningful involvement.

### Communication is key

The second lesson learned from the focus groups is that effective communication with young people is essential. Many young people emphasised the importance of communication by football (fan) organisations in various forms.

Effectively implementing a multi-pronged communication-strategy can help overcome the barrier of little contact. This can be achieved by:

- › including young people in volunteer work and/or creating a youth committee;
- › clear communication and transparency within football (fan) organisations, for example by creating a guide which explains the structure of the organisation and contact details;
- › creating moments of contact between members of the organisation and the possibility to exchange ideas;
- › providing clear pathways for available opportunities to simplify the process of involvement for young people.

## Shifting the culture

The third lesson learned concerns shifting the culture. The perception that only (older) men make good governors is deeply rooted in the culture of football (fan) organisations. Moreover, the limited interest in local clubs can be seen as part of the (inter)national football (fan) culture. Without a shift in this culture, achieving real change (i.e. more young people involved in governance) will be challenging.

One prominent issue is the domination of males and masculinity in football (fan) organisations. While it is impossible to completely change this social phenomenon, both organisations and young people can take steps to make changes within their reach.

Organisations can enhance this cultural shift by:

- › creating spaces for girls to gather and represent themselves, and ensuring they have the right to speak up and feel heard;
- › establishing and implementing values of importance to youth. This can help shift the culture and engage youth more effectively. These values are closely related to the football clubs themselves, but supporters also play a significant role. For example, showing respect to opposing teams and supporters is something youth may aspire;
- › reaching out to marginalised groups that are not represented in (the governance of) football (fan) organisations, to achieve their further inclusion. This might involve making arrangements with NGOs and foundations. Such actions demonstrate that an organisation cares about and is committed to supporting marginalized groups, thereby aligning with the values it promotes.

Young people who are already active in the governance of football (fan) organisations, can play a significant role in this cultural shift and in overcoming the barrier of limited interest by young people. They (can) do so by:

- › spreading the word: by demonstrating their passion for the clubs and highlighting the ideals and opportunities within fan organisations, they have the potential to recruit other young people;
- › sharing their experiences and tasks: this might help other young people consider reasons for getting involved beyond just attending the match;
- › making slight changes and listening to others, allowing the organisation to adapt gradually.





# References

Greeven, A., De Kwaasteniet, R., Nouwens, S., & Steenbergen, J. (2023). *Increasing Youth Participation in the Governance of Football Fan Organisations. Future of Football - Literature Scan into Barriers, Enablers, Relevant Practices, and Instruments*. Mulier Instituut.

De Kwaasteniet, R., Greeven, A., & Steenbergen, J. (2024). *Lessons learned from (less) successful youth participation practices. Future of football: results of a comparative country analysis*. Mulier Instituut.

# Appendix 1 – Focus group design

## Introduction (approximately 15 minutes)

Information for the moderator: You can use the next phrases to introduce the focus group. Please make sure this part doesn't take too long, as the middle section is of more importance.

- › Good afternoon, all. Nice to meet you all today. Thank you for participating within this focus group. We propose to start with a short personal introduction of each other. Could you tell your name, to which football fan group or organisation you belong, and how you are involved within that group or organization?
- › Our names are [...]. We represent the [...]. Our organisation is occupied with [...].
- › One of the projects we are working on, is called the Future of Football. The aim of the project is to get more young people involved within the governance of football fan organisations. Several European fan organisations participate in the Future of Football project. In the end, the goal is to develop a toolkit which can be used to raise youth participation in the governance of football fan organisations.
- › It is essential that the toolkit is based on the needs of young people when it concerns participating in the governance of football fan organisations.
- › Therefore, the aim of this online focus group is to capture the viewpoints of young people that want to or are already involved in the governance of sport or football (fan) organisations.
- › Within the upcoming hour, we will dive into the barriers and enablers you perceive and the way they can possibly be removed. Also, we would like to discuss making this fair for young people to have the same opportunities to get involved in the decision-making processes of football fan organisations.
- › We value inclusion, which means that this focus group is open, and everyone is welcome to share their perceptions.
- › We would like to have the possibility to listen back the focus group. Before we will start the discussion, we therefore want to ask you if you mind that we record this focus group? Of course, we will analyse the collected data based on applicable privacy guidelines. This for example concerns that we report about data anonymously and that we do not share the transcript with other stakeholders.
- › Are there beforehand any questions?

## Middle section (approximately 60 minutes)

Information for the moderator: Within the next 60 minutes, the discussion is about four topics. These topics are divided into relevant questions. Depending on the dynamics within the focus groups, maybe not all the questions are brought to the fore (with the same degree of depth).

### Youth participation

- › What does youth participation in the governance of football fan organisations mean in your opinion?

### Enablers

- › Why are you involved in the governance of football fan organisations?
- › Which things have stimulated you to participate in the governance of your football fan organisation?
- › If the respondents do not answer, provide some examples, such as: *feeling connected to the organisation or other young people in the organisation.*
- › How do you think young people can be (more) stimulated to participate in the governance of football fan organisations? Which actions need to be taken?
- › Possible follow-up questions:
  - What do you think has to be done by football fan organisations?
  - What do you think has to be done or can be done by yourself or other young people?

### Barriers

- › Did you experience any barriers to participate in the governance of your football fan organisation?
- › How did you overcome these barriers?
- › Thinking about other young people, what do you see as barriers to let them participate in the governance of football fan organisations?
- › How do you think these barriers can be removed? Which actions need to be taken?
- › Possible follow-up questions:
  - What do you think has to be done by football fan organisations?
  - What do you think has to be done and can be done by yourself or other young people?

### Level playing-field

- › How do you think it can be stimulated that a level-playing-field arises, which means that all young people have the same chances to participate within the governance of football organisations?
- › Possible follow-up questions:
  - What do you think has to be done by football fan organisations?
  - What do you think has to be done and can be done by yourself or other young people?

## Conclusion (approximately 15 minutes)

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- › Summarizing and concluding remarks.
- › Are there any topics underexposed within this focus-group?
- › Do you have questions and comments?
- › Thank you kindly for your time and attention.
- › The outcomes of this focus group will be used to draft a research report. And, of more importance, will be used to design a toolkit which helps to foster the youth participation in the governance of football fan organisations. The toolkit will be launched in 2025. Of course, we share it with you.
- › In case of questions or remarks afterwards, you can send an email to [...].

## General points of attention for moderators

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- › Essentially, the quality of focus groups depends on a clear introduction of topics and questions, managing the conversation concerning the time schedule, listening, summarizing, and asking follow-up questions.
- › It is important to ask short, concise, and specific questions.
- › It is important to not draw conclusion or ask biased or suggestive questions.
- › Make sure that the voices of all participants are heard as much as possible.
- › Not all the questions have to be answered by all participants.
- › Be aware that you are the interviewer and not the respondent. So, focus on asking questions and supervising the conversation, instead of answering questions by yourself.
- › Often, it is relevant to ask participants to give examples.
- › Important (conversation) techniques can be: an open attitude, wrapping up, to nod, to paraphrase and to confront participants with contradictions in a friendly manner.

A large, thick, orange abstract line graphic that starts at the top left, loops around, and then curves downwards towards the bottom right, resembling a stylized '3' or a calligraphic flourish.

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