

ANALYTICAL REPORT

Based on the Results of the
Study “Youth Involvement in
Local Decision-Making”:

 Bereznehuvatska ATC

The study was conducted within the framework of the Vidnova project implemented by the Charity Foundation “Stabilization Support Services” and the Public Union “Legal Development Network” in cooperation with the humanitarian organization “People in Need” and with the financial support of the Czech Development Agency.

INTRODUCTION

The study conducted among residents of the Bereznehuvatska community showed that there are certain challenges in engaging young people in community recovery processes and participation in local self-government. One of the main reasons, according to the respondents, is that young people sometimes do not feel sufficiently motivated to actively participate in addressing local issues. According to adult participants, distance learning during the pandemic and the lack of relevant social connections may have affected the level of activity of young people in community life. In addition, economic difficulties and limited local employment opportunities reduce the interest of young people in further life in the community.

Community representatives note that closer cooperation between youth and local authorities is needed to increase youth engagement. In particular, the respondents pointed to the positive experiences of other communities, where the support of local authorities allowed for the implementation of several successful youth initiatives. The study participants noted that support for similar initiatives in the Bereznehuvatska community could be a driving force for positive change.

In addition, among the proposals for youth activation, it was suggested to expand opportunities for communication and exchange of experience through social networks, as well as to provide more space for meetings. The study participants are convinced that such measures will help create conditions for more active involvement of young people in local government processes, contributing to community development and increasing mutual understanding between young people and government officials.

Further research and support of youth engagement is of strategic importance for the community. Regular monitoring of youth involvement will not only allow local programs to be adapted to current needs but will also become the basis for long-term changes aimed at integrating young people into the social life of the community. It will also contribute to sustainable development, in which young people can play a leading role in ensuring both the social and economic progress of the community.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted to analyze youth involvement in decision-making **at the local level in the Bereznehuvatska community.**

A total of three **focus group discussions** were held (hereinafter referred to as FGDs) (two with young people aged 14-19 and 20-25, and one with parents and teachers), as well as **five in-depth interviews** (hereinafter referred to as IDI) with key stakeholders, including representatives of the authorities, social workers, leaders of youth councils, and representatives of youth centers and spaces.

KEY FINDINGS

The representatives of the Bereznehuvatska community who participated in the study mostly stated that the level of youth involvement in the processes of restoring their community and developing local self-government is low. The main reasons for this are the passivity of young people and poor interaction with local self-government representatives. Young people do not want to actively organize and participate in addressing community problems because they often do not see their future in the community and do not feel supported.

According to the adult participants of the study, it was the years of distance learning that had a negative impact on building social ties among young people and their involvement in community life. An important factor that discourages youth engagement is the economic problems of the community, including the lack of work and employment opportunities in the area of residence. In this regard, the majority of young people said that they do not plan to stay in the community after graduation. Accordingly, young people are less motivated to develop local self-government.

Among the barriers that also prevent young people from participating in decision-making in the Bereznehuvatska community is the lack of space for meetings and communication, as the only youth center is currently being utilized due to the destruction of the school.

The factor that could change this situation, according to the survey participants, is the actualization of youth involvement by the community and paying more attention to youth initiatives. Respondents cited examples of neighboring communities where several successful projects have been implemented thanks to positive cooperation with local authorities.

The study participants consider the use of the experience of other communities with more successful practices of cooperation between youth and local government to be an effective method of motivation. According to parents, the positive experience and example of other communities can thus inspire the youth of their community to drive change.

Regarding the impact of social media on increasing youth engagement, respondents' opinions differed. Adults believe that it will not help significantly, while young people are in favor of local government communication on social media, which will help young people to participate more actively in decision-making in their community.

Active support of youth initiatives by the local authorities was mentioned as the main recommendation from the study participants on how to involve young people in the development of local self-government in the Bereznehuvatska community. According to young people and adult residents of the community, support for youth initiatives will be the key to driving change in the community.

MAIN RESULTS

ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Representatives of the Bereznehuvatska community pointed out the low level of youth participation in local government and decision-making in the community. Sometimes young people are involved in projects implemented in the community by donors, but cooperation between local self-government bodies and young people is practically absent or almost invisible.

“The level is probably still low. I would like to say that before the war, there was no such thing as young people being involved in anything. Now, when the recovery processes and projects have begun, they have begun to involve young people. And it’s not just the local community that has begun to engage young people, but projects that are coming in. Here’s a restoration project that was there yesterday on the basis of our vocational lyceum... That is, someone else is engaging young people in this way so that local governments engage young people at the local community level - no, this is not the case.” (IDI, Maryna)

“Young people are not involved in solving any issues at all. They, in turn, due to their age, either do not understand that this is their future, their community, and they will have to develop it. And our local self-government bodies do practically nothing to involve young people in the work of the community.” (IDI, Dmytro)

The study participants emphasized that more active participation of young people in recovery processes could bring significant benefits by providing new ideas and fresh perspectives on community problems.

“Maybe they have some creative ideas that adults don’t have, for example. Because sometimes, you know, even in class, they have some creative answers, and you think that it was really cool, it was cool. It’s also very important to hear their opinion, because they have to live in this environment, they have to rebuild it, this environment, even in 5, 10 or 15 years.” (IDI, Maryna)

The respondents also noted a certain passivity and lack of motivation among young people and the belief that their decisions and actions cannot change anything.

“Young people, they don’t set themselves this goal, and maybe even think that they can’t change anything. But they are mistaken, they can change things, and they can make a big difference.” (IDI, Dmytro)

“We try to involve young people, but young people are not passive, but we have somehow initiative-free youth. So we don’t have such cooperation between local self-government and youth.” (IDI, Natalia)

Some interviewees see the reason for this in the impact of distance learning, which has been going on for several years, and the resulting lack of live communication between peers.

"They are very passive. I don't know why, maybe it's connected to the war... Look, when they were at school, they had communication: live communication with each other, with teachers, with other children. Now they are sitting in a room like this, by themselves, and they are just getting used to it, to this communication." (IDI, Iryna)

Young people themselves note that even when local self-government involves them in decision-making, it is done in a formal way. Young people believe that they have no real influence even on the processes of addressing issues that directly affect them, such as the format of schooling (online, offline, mixed).

"Once I tried to get to a meeting of the local council, but it didn't work. I wanted to barge in with a scandal about the school shelter. The school is in ruins. The shelter was arranged near the military registration and enlistment office and is a semi-basement. There was a meeting of the local council there, but we were not allowed to attend, they said it was not allowed. That was it." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"We were just asked if we were okay with it or not. They just raised their hands for and against... I think it was just for appearances." (FGD, Youth 16-19)

Also, the lack of motivation is due to the fact that most young people do not associate their future with this community.

"Most of them don't want to... Because young people all want to leave... Because there is nothing to do here." (FGD, Youth 16-19)

Young people's participation in the community's public life is limited to occasional visits to youth spaces created by NGOs. However, they do not currently have access to these spaces.

"The youth space in the basement has the Vulyk inside the House of Culture. You can come there and learn to make something on a 3D printer. The organization came to us with the aim of building something for young people so that [we] could be there and do something. But now young people don't come there - they are not allowed. Now children from the first to the fourth grades study there. Because we don't have a school, it was bombed." (FGD, Youth 16-19)

Another reason for the low level of youth participation in community recovery processes was the lack of prospects and jobs, as well as the high level of migration of young people from the community to western oblasts or outside the country.

"We have a lot of people who have left because we are very close to where the fighting was going on. We have a lot of damaged educational institutions." (IDI, Natalia)

"There is nothing for young people, no prospects at all. I understand my mother, why she said, 'Study,' to go somewhere, even to Mykolaiv, for example. Because there is nothing for young people here." (FGD, Youth 19-25)

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

According to the representatives of the Bereznehuvatska community, the lack of space where young people can gather and organize themselves plays a significant role among the main barriers that prevent them from being involved in community life and change. Other barriers include problems with establishing interpersonal communication, such as the isolation and seclusion of a large part of the younger generation. Young people primarily mention age and status barriers as the main barriers to active participation and involvement in everyday life and solving community problems.

"Some kind of youth space for them to relax, watch some movies, maybe discuss some of their ideas. There is no such place. There's a music school, one stadium, and that's basically it. So, of course, they just stay at home, on their phones, and that's the extent of their lack of activity." (IDI, Maryna)

"Fear is the most important thing for such events, where there are more strangers. This scares our youth away from participating in the life of our community with representatives of local authorities. My brother is 16 years old, they are like hedgehogs, they close up inside themselves, they need to be pulled out of it." (IDI, Dmytro)

The issue of drug proliferation in the community was also mentioned.

"And now the situation is very bad with drugs. You can easily buy the most terrible, hard drugs in Bereznehuvate. Yes. Salts, heroin." (IDI, Dmytro)

Young people themselves consider the main barrier to be the disregard of their opinions by officials and the lack of real results of communication with local self-government representatives.

"It is the confidence that young people will be heard, that someone will take it into account. Well, because, as is customary, young people are stupid, green, what to take from them? Those who have been in power for a long time will say that they know better." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"They do not hear. Probably one or two people, some small group, who come there, talk about problems, and when everyone is really rebelling, they can somehow move away from the topic, say that, for example, they will consider your request in a day or two, but in fact, no one does, they don't even think about it." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"Yes, most young people don't want to. For example, they tried it once and saw that there was no result. They have become more and more, so to speak, withdrawn and do not want to work in this field." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

Adult residents of the Bereznehuvatska community also name indifference, passivity, and disinterest in the cooperation of local officials as important factors that limit the initiative and participation of young people in local self-government activities.

"I don't think our authorities are interested in anything at all. If they didn't come up with these projects from donors and say, 'Let's rebuild, here are the projects, we will come and make project applications,' then no one would have taken the initiative on their own and done anything. My opinion is that no one wants to do anything, they just sit where they are as long as it's convenient for them." (IDI, Maryna)

Local self-government representatives themselves consider the lack of initiative on the part of young people to be the main problem.

"The authorities may want to, but I'm telling you that we cannot find and attract young people. Even in our house of culture, the director is so young and progressive. All the conditions are already in place for young people to come and do youth work. He also wants to create a youth council, but he has no initiative youth." (IDI, Natalia)

Among the resources that are lacking to engage young people in community life and activities, most participants mentioned the need to create a separate youth space where they could spend time and communicate with each other.

"There is no place for children to come and develop. Perhaps this could also be done in some kind of shelter. We have a shelter there, but it is not equipped, not made for children. Although we could have made a nook like that. So, unfortunately, yes, the security situation is bad, we have online classes, we don't go offline because, firstly, the school is destroyed, and secondly, there are no shelters in any school." (IDI, Maryna)

Respondents also pointed to the need for support from local self-government representatives and the creation of a separate position or department for youth work.

"In general, I think that it is necessary to create some kind of department, perhaps even a department that will deal with the involvement of young people, proactive youth, and in the future manage the issues of even training in the fields that our community will need." (IDI, Dmytro)

"There should be a trained person, a youth worker. It seems to me that this is the place to start. It can be on the staff of the village council, so that this person is interested in it. And I think then we will have everything." (IDI, Iryna)

The majority of respondents noted that there are no civic organizations in their region that would engage young people in local self-government.

"I wouldn't say that there are any civil society organizations in Bereznehuvate. Maybe they exist, but we don't know about them, unfortunately." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

The transportation problem in the Bereznehuvatska community was also mentioned as an important barrier to youth engagement.

“Our transportation logistics are extremely poor, because we have only one bus that goes to Mykolaiv and back. And it doesn’t run on Wednesdays at all. If we are talking about our institution, the lyceum, we were given a bus this year, but unfortunately, it only has, I think, 18 seats. That is, it cannot accommodate a large number of young people.” (IDI, Maryna)

ENGAGEMENT FACTORS AND DRIVERS

Young people have a request to participate in local self-government meetings, but as real participants, not observers. The main factor of youth involvement is the real support of their projects by officials and attention to their proposals. It is also worth using various forms of incentives to motivate young people to continue their activities, such as (non) monetary gifts, prizes, rewards, gratitude, mention in the local media, etc.

“I would like to attend a meeting, for example... And not just as a spectator, maybe to be listened to.” (FGD, Youth 16-19)

“Today, they are not ready, I don’t know, or they don’t see this, let’s say, interest. I mean, from the authorities and from them in general. They are simmering in it themselves, even the students, but they were very happy. As an editor, I can say that I wrote about their project in the newspaper and put a photo of them in the paper. Oh, my God, they were so happy that they were almost little stars: they were looking at themselves, and their mothers were happy, and so on. It was interesting for them, even in this way, to stimulate them a little bit: to write about them, to show them.” (IDI, Maryna 2)

“A reward. First of all, the opportunity to show this person who really offered it and did it. To thank them in some way, or let’s not even say with money, but, for example, maybe some headphones, maybe some snacks, maybe just attention.” (FGD, Youth 20-25)

“We need to co-finance it from our budget. Let it be 50-50, let it be, or not even co-financing. If they win a project, let’s give them some kind of incentive, some kind of stimulation. Let’s buy something for this youth space. All these ideas exist, but, as I said, they are stopped because of wartime and are not relevant. Although I don’t think it’s right. Our youth should always be relevant, and it’s not so expensive, it’s not millions.” (IDI, Maryna 2)

Young people also mentioned caring for their younger siblings as a factor that motivates them to get involved in the recovery process.

“Our younger brothers and sisters, who will also grow up here and experience all this like us, and we really want them to have something to do here.” (FGD, Youth 20-25)

According to the representatives of the Bereznehuvatska community, local self-government does not offer many opportunities for community consolidation and support for the creation of youth projects. The only such option mentioned is a youth center based in the local house of culture. But now it is only used as a shelter.

“The house of culture was opened. A youth center was opened. But I can’t say that there are a lot of young people gathering there. In the summer, when there were vacations, there were computers there, you could connect. People would come and play all kinds of games there. But now this room is used purely as a shelter.” (FGD, Youth 20-25)

Among the successful programs in which they participated, the respondents highlighted the project with the FORA NGO.

“By the way, last year we also worked with the FORA NGO. It was about the ecological system of our raion, and we also invited deputies and local authorities. My children and I also implemented this initiative, but unfortunately, very few local authorities were involved.” (IDI, Maryna)

Interviewees also cited several successful cases of youth involvement in community life in neighboring villages and towns.

“They have their own youth center for children. Children can attend. We visited, and the kids are free to come in and play that hockey, table hockey... There are a lot of people who are interested in sports there, in this youth center, there are some exercise machines and everything else. I mean, this is a place where they really come and feel free, not hidden, not hidden, with the head of the youth center. That is, a free place where they can spend time and be themselves.” (IDI, Maryna)

“There is a village nearby called Yavkyne. There is also a young head there. And he very often (I just have his channel, I read it) carries out various useful activities. They plant trees here, clean up the territory there, and he involves everyone: young people, the older generation, and everyone supports him. Yeah, we don’t have that here.” (IDI, Iryna)

“Of these examples, maybe we have a group on Viber. And, to be honest, I really like the way their head voices everything, everyone knows it, all citizens participate. They also made a kind of youth center: there are TVs and different computers, and everything is there for them. He said; ‘Thank you!’ He always thanks everyone. He is grateful that his community, people really all stepped up and did this.” (FGD, Youth 20-25)

ENGAGEMENT METHODS AND TOOLS

Among the methods that could help involve young people in community life and the process of its recovery, the study participants mention the example of peers from neighboring communities who have already had successful cases and projects.

“I think that our youth would be inspired by the same youth from the neighboring region who would come and talk about their achievements, that even during the war they implemented such and such a project, created it, and cooperated with local self-government bodies. That is, they could be inspired to invite, for example, our local authorities to invite some of these people, some team, for example, leaders, or a Youth Council that exists in Mykolaivska Oblast, Mykolaiv, or elsewhere, to show them this Youth Council, to create a Youth Council in our village.” (IDI, Maryna)

“It’s a pretty good trend when communities visit each other and share their positive experiences. Against this background, it is possible to organize some events between educational institutions that will highlight the opportunities for young people to participate in the work of local self-government bodies.” (IDI, Dmytro)

Some respondents consider additional training and informing parents to be impractical, as most parents do not have time for this in the current circumstances. According to respondents, motivating young people and teachers directly would be much more effective.

"Parents understand that it will also be interesting, but in the current situation, parents are mainly working to provide for their families. Sometimes they don't even have enough time to communicate with their children a little more. But teachers - they can help quite well and they know the potential of their students." (IDI, Dmytro)

Adult respondents consider the use of social media inappropriate, as if young people are not motivated, they will not be interested in the information presented on social media anyway.

"If there is no motivation, they may not be interested. They'll just, you know, look at it, glance through it, and that's it. They won't want to know more specifically what kind of project it is, what will be done there. So, I think it would be a good idea to motivate them first of all." (IDI, Maryna)

On the contrary, young survey participants consider social media to be useful, even emphasizing the extreme importance of public meetings of local self-government bodies and active communication between officials and young people through social media.

"Perhaps if these meetings, for example, were held even at the local council. If we've already reached, let's say, the point where we have Diia: digital documents, an electronic state. Why not come up with something that everyone can join in? Like online." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"Every community has local groups, Facebook, Viber. A few days beforehand, you make a short announcement. And if someone has any suggestions, let them contact us, let them prepare a plan as they see it." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

The young respondents also believe that young people lack knowledge, in particular about the organization of project activities, the procedures of local self-government, and the ability to properly convey their position during public speaking.

"Well, maybe the ability to present your position clearly, correctly, because a lot depends on it, because you start out. And researching projects - not everyone has the skills, not everyone knows how to do it." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"Probably, many people are not aware of how self-government bodies work. They don't know what is there, how decisions are made there." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

Among the examples of successful involvement of young people in community restoration, the study participants mentioned the improvement of a local park.

"When young people get involved, they have new ideas. They bring results. Like our children, it happened that they divided the park into some classes and so on, and everyone worked on their own area. Now this park has been forgotten. Children also have nowhere to sit, for example, just to have some space. Children were somehow involved in cleaning this park and putting up some benches. We also built a playground. We also made a volleyball court there, and the children bought a ball and a net. Children also play there, some of them gather. Well, who? Those who are not cold yet, so to speak. They also clean something there, take care of it, so to speak. That is, young people, if they want to, they will come up with some new ideas, so to speak, and it will be cool." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

Among the respondents' suggestions for more active involvement of young people in the recovery process, it is worth highlighting the process of organizing joint events and improving communication with local government representatives.

"They can organize some kind of cleanup, for example, planting a tree or cleaning up the area. How can you find a theme or improve your village, for example, by going out to help clean up the center? It's clear that in the center there are people who are hired to clean it, but further out, it's not really possible." (IDI, Iryna)

"Of course, we need communication. Local authorities should communicate with some adults: either teachers or parents, and, of course, with young people. First with all of them, then select the most active ones to work with." (IDI, Maryna)

Young people's proposals for assistance and improvement of their involvement are mainly focused on the need for real action, primarily on the part of local government representatives to consider and implement proposals and initiatives coming from young people.

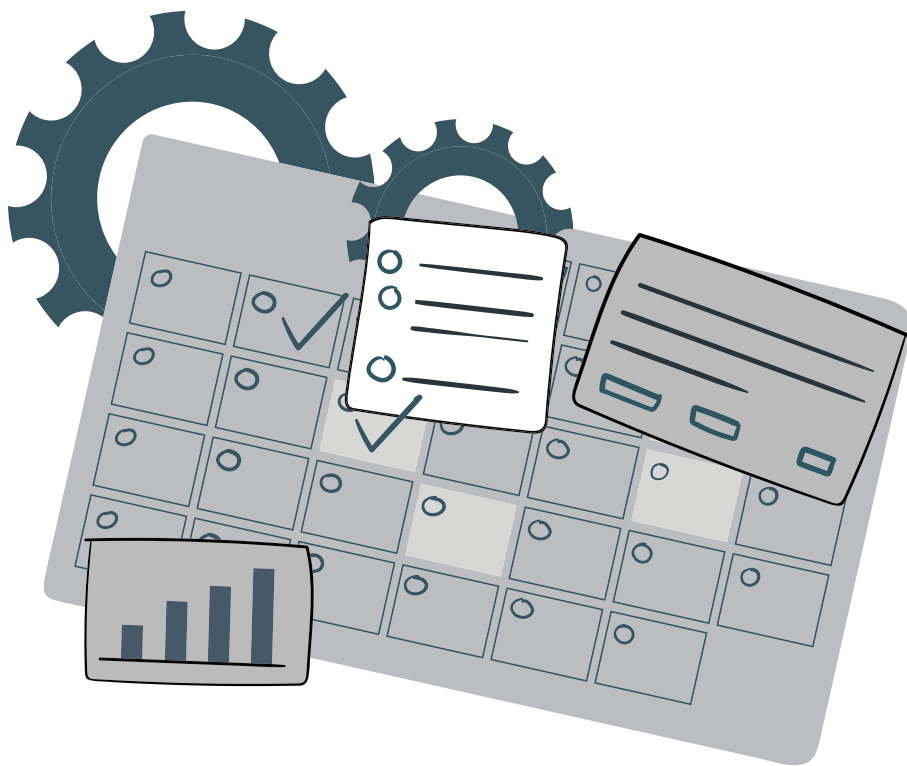
"Some actions of the authorities. There they can communicate about it, help with something, for example, also allocate some funds, maybe even unite with young people, with people to work, do something for people, even those benches, to show that the authorities are at the same level as people. That the authorities are also just people, not just some bigwigs and so on." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"To have support. Without support, nothing will happen. Support, as mentioned above, in terms of funding youth ideas, feedback, to be provided. Maybe some ideas are being submitted, but we don't know. We need to be aware of this." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

The opportunities for IDPs to influence the solution of community problems are insignificant, as respondents note a small number of IDPs in their community at present. They also note their low motivation to get involved in community problems.

"Very few, maybe one or two people, but very, very few. Because they are not aware, probably. There are just not enough people." (FGD, Youth 20-25)

"Again, they have no interest. Maybe everyone hopes that they are here for a short time. Let's just get re-connected and go back. What's the point of doing something for a place where we won't stay for long? We were IDPs ourselves when we left for Uzhorod. So, of course, there was nothing to improve there." (FGD, Youth 20-25)



Матеріали підготував Благодійний фонд «Стабілізуєшн Суппорт Сервісез» у співпраці з гуманітарною організацією «Людина в біді» та за фінансової підтримки Чеської агенції розвитку.