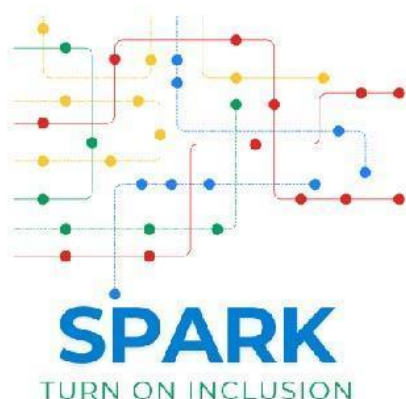


D2.1 Research Report on Youth Worker Needs

WP2 – Capacity building for youth
workers



Co-funded by
the European Union

**SPARK: Fostering Political Participation
among Young Europeans with Intellectual
and Psychosocial Disabilities**

Project Number: 101186990



SPARK

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Partners



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Introduction

This research report presents an in-depth analysis of youth workers' needs, based on research conducted by partner countries (Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, and Poland) regarding the political participation of young people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities. The social inclusion of this group is an increasing concern, as they remain marginalized from political decision-making processes. Since political participation is a foundation of democratic societies, the lack of information and resources to support their engagement is particularly troubling.

For this reason, a literature review was conducted, examining their democratic rights, the legal framework, and the role that families and caregivers play in shaping the political participation of people with disabilities. Moreover, focus groups with people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities were conducted to explore their perceptions of political participation, how they access information, and whether they feel included in their countries. As part of this process, participants were presented with scenarios depicting everyday political participation and invited to share their perspectives. In conclusion, the partners presented best practices from their countries, illustrating how the political participation of people with disabilities has been fostered in recent years.

1. Literature review

Barriers to the Democratic Rights of People with Psychosocial and Intellectual Disabilities

People with psychosocial and intellectual abilities face significant challenges in exercising their democratic rights across partner countries. Physical accessibility barriers at polling stations are common in **Greece** (Human Rights Watch, 2021), **Italy**, and **Cyprus** (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010), though Greece introduced postal voting in 2023 as an alternative (Postal Voting - Hellenic Republic - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Information accessibility is another major barrier. **Cyprus, Greece, and Portugal** (Beco, 2021) lack adequate voting information and guidelines for people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities (UNDP, 2021). Italy offers some materials in Braille, but inconsistently across polling stations, while generally lacking simplified formats for people with cognitive disabilities.

Legal restrictions remain problematic in several countries. **Cyprus and Poland** maintain laws that restrict voting rights for individuals under guardianship or declared legally incapacitated (Wojnowska-Radzińska, 2022; Babula, 2018). This contrasts with **Portugal** (Civil Code reforms, 2018) and **Spain** (LOREG, 2018)¹, where recent reforms have restored voting rights to thousands. In **Greece**, restrictive guardianship laws continue to limit decision-making autonomy (United Nations, 2022).

Spain stands out with a more comprehensive approach through its Strategy on Disability (2022-2030), aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and organizations like CERMI and ONCE provide limited but valuable training on political rights. However, these efforts remain insufficient across all partner countries.

Societal stigma persists universally, with people with disabilities often perceived as incapable of making informed political decisions. This perception contributes to their underrepresentation in political spaces. In **Greece**, systemic discrimination and limited education opportunities further restrict political engagement (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021), while in **Cyprus and Italy**, political parties rarely prioritize disability issues or inclusive policies.

Poland faces additional challenges in education and employment integration (Twardowski, 2014), with significant labor market participation gaps. According to GUS data (2022), there

¹ Ley Orgánica 5/1985, de 19 de junio, del Régimen Electoral General (LOREG). BOE núm. 147, de 20 de junio de 1985. Recuperado de: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1985-12813>

is a nearly 50 percentage point difference in employment rates between individuals with and without disabilities, reflecting broader social exclusion that impacts political participation.

Legal framework in all the countries

All partner countries recognize the right of citizens to participate in political life through their constitutions and have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). However, significant differences exist in implementation. **Spain** has established the most comprehensive framework, reforming the Organic Law on the General Electoral Regime (LOREG) in 2018 to restore voting rights to over 100,000 people with disabilities and passing Law 8/2021², which eliminated the guardianship system in favor of a support-based model. Similarly, **Portugal** enacted Law No. 49/2018, abolishing the previous incapacitation regime and introducing a supported decision-making model that preserves voting rights (Assembleia da República, 2018; Beco, 2021).

In contrast, **Poland**, **Cyprus**, and **Greece** maintain legal barriers through guardianship laws. In **Poland**, Article 62³ of the Constitution explicitly excludes individuals deprived of legal capacity from voting (Konstytucja RP, 1997), while **Cyprus's** Guardianship Law (Cap. 244)⁴ disenfranchises those under legal guardianship. **Greece** has constitutional provisions supporting disability rights (Articles 5.1 and 21.3)⁵, but its Civil Code still allows for restrictions on voting rights for those under guardianship. Italy has made partial progress with Law 6/2004, which limits but doesn't eliminate voting restrictions for people with disabilities deemed legally incapacitated.

² Ley 8/2021, de 2 de junio, General de los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad y de su Inclusión Social. BOE núm. 131, de 3 de junio de 2021. Recuperado de: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2021-8906>

³ Voting Restrictions Due to Guardianship Laws Article 62 of the Polish Constitution guarantees universal suffrage but explicitly excludes individuals deprived of legal capacity by a court ruling (Konstytucja RP, 1997). This restriction disproportionately affects individuals with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, preventing them from voting or standing for election.

⁴ Guardianship Law, Cap. 244. (2013). Laws of the Republic of Cyprus.

⁵ <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/syntagma/suntagma-tes-ellados-2019-anatheorememo.html>

While all countries have developed national strategies addressing disability inclusion, such as **Spain's** Strategy on Disability 2022-2030, Poland's Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, and **Portugal's** National Strategy for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2025, these frameworks generally lack specific programs targeting young people with disabilities' political participation. The persistent barriers across most partner countries highlight the gap between legislative commitments and practical implementation of inclusive political rights, particularly concerning youth engagement in democratic processes.

Role of families, caregivers, and youth workers

Families, caregivers, and youth workers play a pivotal role in either facilitating or impeding the political participation of young people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities across all partner countries. In **Spain**, these actors can provide crucial support in understanding rights and making informed political decisions, but can also become barriers through overprotective attitudes or underestimation of capabilities (CERMI, 2018). Similarly, in **Greece**, families serve as primary support networks but often emphasize welfare and protection rather than active citizenship, which limits political involvement (Kasimatis, 2022). In **Poland**, families influence political engagement through their attitudes toward disability rights, with supportive families encouraging participation, while those with limited knowledge may unintentionally restrict opportunities. In **Portugal**, caregivers can either foster autonomy by supporting engagement in civic activities or reinforce dependency by prioritizing protection over participation (Beco, 2021).

Youth organizations and third-sector entities contribute significantly to political engagement through structured support. In **Spain**, organizations like CERMI, Plena Inclusión, and the ONCE Foundation conduct workshops on civic awareness and produce accessible electoral materials (CERMI, 2018). In Italy, programs like the Youth Work Country Sheet and Youth Guarantee Program aim to promote social and political participation among young people with disabilities. However, these positive initiatives are not consistent across all countries. **Poland** lacks a unified strategy for supporting youth workers in promoting political participation

among young people with disabilities, while **Greece** has no comprehensive frameworks specifically designed to train youth workers in this area (Skordos et al., 2023). In **Cyprus**, youth workers can access training through the National Action Plan on Disability, but resources specifically focused on enhancing political participation remain limited.

Youth Perspectives on Political Participation: Focus Group and Survey Findings

Introduction and methodology

In all participating countries, focus groups were the primary qualitative method used to explore the political participation of young people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities. The discussions centered on three key themes: levels of political participation and awareness, experiences with the voting process, and concerns regarding inclusion and engagement in politics. Participants ranged in age from 18 to their early 30s, and all sessions were conducted in safe, supportive environments that encouraged open expression.

Specifically, **Greece** organized 2 focus groups, **Italy** organized 3 focus groups, while **Cyprus**, **Spain**, **Portugal**, and **Poland** each conducted one focus group. Altogether, approximately 50 participants took part across all countries. They came from diverse backgrounds and included individuals with ADHD, depression, anxiety, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, as well as other unspecified conditions. Recruitment methods varied by country, but participants were primarily selected through previous engagement with the partner organizations involved in the project.

General questions results

Responding to Question 1, "What does political participation mean to you?", participants in Greece linked political participation to civic duty, social justice, and accountability, with voting seen as both a right and a responsibility. Broader themes included advocacy, equality, and support for marginalized groups, reflecting a focus on societal change. In addition, **Italy** framed

participation as active community engagement, emphasizing personal influence and staying informed. Participants valued voting, following politics, and saw it as a right earned through historical struggles, blending civic responsibility with educational and social awareness. **Spain's** youth largely viewed politics as an adult-dominated arena marked by conflict, expressing indifference toward politicians. Their detachment suggests a generational disconnect from formal political processes. Furthermore, **Poland** had a narrow view, associating participation primarily with holding office rather than civic actions like voting or protests. Frustration with elite dominance and feelings of exclusion highlighted perceived barriers to democratic engagement. Finally, **Portugal** offered diverse views, ranging from voting and free expression to the desire for meaningful influence on decisions. The emphasis was on both individual rights and the collective power of being heard.

Regarding Question 2, “Can you share any experiences you have had with voting or political activities?” Participants across **Greece, Spain, and Italy** emphasized voting as a democratic duty but faced challenges such as political polarization, family influence on decisions, and, in **Greece**, a general lack of deep political awareness. While Italian participants described voting as a positive experience despite some accessibility barriers, **Cyprus** underscored the systemic exclusion of people with disabilities from political discourse, leaving many feelings marginalized. In **Poland**, experiences varied—some voters researched candidates carefully, while others relied on family advice or avoided voting due to confusion, overcrowding, or privacy concerns. Meanwhile, **Portugal** saw a mix of experienced and first-time voters, with many expressing interest in future participation, but no major structural obstacles were highlighted. Overall, while engagement with voting was seen as important, barriers like polarization, accessibility, and lack of representation hindered full participation in some countries.

When asked how they seek political information, participants across **all countries** highlighted the dominance of television and online platforms, with those in Italy and Poland specifically mentioning Twitter (X) as a key source. Additionally, in **Portugal, Spain, Cyprus, and**

Greece, many noted the influential role of family members in helping them interpret political news and speeches, which they often found difficult to understand on their own. At the same time, for Question 4, “Do you find the information easy to understand?” participants from **all countries** responded that it is complex to understand political information, and the need for simplified language and clear explanations was mentioned.

Finally, Question 5, “Do you feel that the policies of our country address your needs?”, participants across **all countries** expressed a sense of alienation from political processes. In **Cyprus, Portugal, and Italy**, accessibility emerged as a key concern, with specific calls for sign language integration to foster inclusion. **Greece** and **Cyprus** pointed to digital platforms as a potential tool for greater civic engagement, while **Italy** and **Poland** emphasized the need for better public awareness on leveraging digital tools effectively. These responses highlight a shared demand for more inclusive and accessible political participation across Europe.

Exploring Participation: Three Everyday Civic Scenarios

To better understand how people with psychosocial disabilities engage with civic and political life, the research team conducted a series of focus groups across the project’s partner countries. During these sessions, participants were invited to reflect on three imagined—but—realistic scenarios representing common forms of civic participation: attending a community meeting, responding to a political campaign outreach, and taking part in online policy discussions.

These scenarios served as conversation starters, helping participants share their experiences, concerns, and aspirations related to public involvement. The discussions revealed important insights into how individuals perceive and navigate these spaces, including the barriers that limit participation and the conditions that can help foster greater inclusion.

The following sections present each scenario in context, along with the key themes that emerged from participants’ responses.

Scenario 1: Participating in a Community Meeting

You're invited to attend a local community meeting about upcoming changes in your neighborhood.

Would you feel comfortable joining and sharing your views?

What would help make the meeting more inclusive for you?

What We Heard:

Across all participating countries, many individuals expressed a desire for smaller, shorter, and more welcoming meetings. Formal or lengthy formats often created barriers, leading to feelings of exclusion. Clear agendas, structured discussions, and visibly inclusive practices were cited as key to enabling meaningful involvement.

Scenario 2: Engaging with a Political Campaign

During an election campaign, a political candidate reaches out to people with psychosocial disabilities and invites them to share their views.

Would you be open to participating? Why or why not?

What topics would you want the candidate to address?

What would make this outreach feel genuine and respectful?

What We Heard:

Participants consistently valued the chance to be heard in political spaces, especially regarding issues like mental health, accessibility, and safety. However, in places like **Portugal** and **Italy**, some voiced concerns about feeling tokenized or used during campaigns, expressing a need for ongoing engagement rather than symbolic gesture

Scenario 3: Online Engagement

You come across an online forum discussing policies that affect your life.

*Would you join the conversation? What would help you feel safe and
respected online?*

How does online engagement compare to in-person participation for you?

Have you had experiences with similar meetings before

What We Heard:

Participants in **Poland**, **Cyprus**, and **Greece** appreciated the accessibility of online spaces but emphasized concerns around privacy, safety, and the tone of discussions. Many said they felt more engaged and confident when digital forums were clearly moderated and tailored to their needs. While online platforms can increase participation, trust and inclusion must be intentionally built.

Questions aiming at improving the situation

Across all partner countries, the topic that was widely discussed by the participants was the need to make political participation more accessible and inclusive. That being said, emphasis was given to the information material and guidelines, regarding political campaigns and voting, such as flyers and documents that are easy-to-read or even alternative and more interactive communication methods. Particularly in **Poland**, **Cyprus**, and **Spain**, participants emphasized the need to have accessible and quiet physical spaces, while participants from **Greece** and **Portugal** highlighted that, except from all the above, the biggest issue in question is how to combat social stigma, that is, following people with psychosocial and intellectual abilities. Closing, in **Greece**, **Poland**, and **Spain**, it was discussed to encourage Disabled People's Organizations, in order to play an active role in advocating for their rights, whereas in

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Portugal, Italy, and Spain, the focus was drawn to the systemic support needed for the improvement of the situation.



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2. Survey Results: Political Participation of Youth with Disabilities

This section presents findings from a questionnaire examining the political participation of people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities across six European countries: Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Poland, and Portugal. The survey targeted caregivers or family members of people with psychosocial disabilities, seeking to understand awareness levels about political rights, barriers to participation, and potential solutions. By gathering data from respondents with diverse backgrounds and experiences, the research aims to identify key challenges and inform targeted interventions to enhance political inclusion for this often-marginalized group.

First and foremost, the majority of respondents across all partner countries identified as female. In terms of age distribution, respondents varied significantly across countries. In **Spain** and **Greece**, most participants were between 18 and 25 years old, with the oldest in **Greece** being 35. In contrast, respondents in **Cyprus, Italy, Poland, and Portugal** ranged in age from 18 to 55 years old.

With regard to educational backgrounds, most respondents were highly educated. In **Italy**, the majority held a high school diploma, while in **Cyprus**, most had completed a Master's degree. In **Portugal**, education levels ranged from secondary school to doctoral degrees. Similarly, in **Spain**, participants mostly had a Master's or postgraduate degree. In **Poland**, many respondents had formal education degrees, while others had completed secondary or vocational education.

In relation to their connection with people with disabilities, responses varied by country. In **Cyprus, Italy, Poland, and Portugal**, the majority of respondents were close family members of people with disabilities. In **Spain**, some were also caregivers in addition to being family members. In **Greece**, most respondents were individuals with disabilities themselves, including

those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Schizophrenia, Anxiety Disorders, and Intellectual Disabilities.

The age of people with disabilities also differed among countries. In **Greece** and **Cyprus**, most individuals were between 26 and 35 years old. In **Italy**, they were typically aged 40 or above. In **Poland**, the age range was 35 to 54, while in **Portugal**, most individuals were between 18 and 35 years old.

In terms of **awareness about the legal rights** of people with disabilities to participate in political life, including both voting and running for office, the results showed interesting variations. In **Italy, Poland, and Greece**, over 65% of respondents indicated awareness of these rights. In **Cyprus**, 7 out of 10 people said they were aware. On the other hand, in **Poland** and **Spain**, between 25% and 35% of participants reported being uncertain or unaware of these rights. Overall, awareness levels among people with disabilities themselves were lower, with only 25% to 43% of caregivers stating that their care recipients were aware of their political rights.

Regarding **political engagement and participation in political discussions**, the overall picture showed **limited involvement**. Voting was identified as the most common form of participation, whereas involvement in political campaigns or party membership was rare. In **Greece and Cyprus**, some individuals had previously voted or engaged in political discussions, but without deeper involvement. In **Portugal**, most respondents reported that the person they care for had little to no engagement in political activities. While a few had voting experience, they encountered significant accessibility issues, and political discussions were often hindered by complex language and a lack of tailored materials. In **Spain and Italy**, political conversations were infrequent, with more than 70% of respondents stating that they never engage in political dialogue. Moreover, only a small proportion of caregivers actively support or encourage political participation among people with disabilities. Non-engagement rates were particularly high in **Italy, Spain, and Cyprus**, reaching up to 75–80%.

Although challenges persist, a **moderate sense of belonging to society** was reported, with 43–50% of respondents affirming this feeling. When it came to the perceived influence of politics on their daily lives, the percentages were slightly lower, around 35–36%.

Respondents also identified several barriers to political participation. One of the most common was the lack of accessible information and the absence of easy-to-read formats. Additionally, many found the voting procedures themselves to be inadequate. This view was shared by 60–75% of participants, especially in **Spain, Italy, and Cyprus**, where procedures were considered not suited to their needs. In **Portugal**, additional barriers included social stigma and discrimination, as well as the complexity of the political system, particularly its bureaucratic language and procedural difficulties. Respondents also cited physical and sensory barriers, such as inaccessible polling stations or environments not accommodating sensory sensitivities. Lack of interest was also reported by 35–37% of respondents across all countries, potentially stemming from the limited opportunities available for people with disabilities to participate meaningfully in political life.

Concerning digital tools and informational resources, the majority of caregivers across all countries reported being unaware of their existence. Recommendations included creating accessible voting materials, such as easy-to-read guides, braille ballots, and digital accessibility enhancements. Participants also stressed the need for political education programs tailored to individuals with disabilities, legal advocacy to strengthen political rights, and improved institutional support, such as caregiver training to promote engagement. Crucially, they emphasized increasing the political representation of individuals with disabilities and enacting policy reforms to enable genuine inclusion in political life.

3. Best practices across partner countries

The SPARK project also aims to highlight good practices across all partner countries regarding the promotion of democratic rights for people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities.

All partners selected three of the best practices implemented by their countries, towards raising awareness among the general public about the issue. This section aims to briefly present initiatives from each country.

In **Italy**, since 2021, the Italian Association for People with Down Syndrome (AIPD), launched the Inclusive Political Participation Campaign in order to raise awareness about inclusive policies, which aims specifically to raise public awareness and drive legislative reforms that support inclusion in political affairs. Also, since 2022, the Ministry of Interior launched the “Accessible voting” project, aiming to ensure that elections are inclusive, through materials, training of staff, and voting booths that were adapted, which increased participation at the end from people with disabilities. Lastly, since 2023, the Italian Federation for Overcoming Handicap (FISH) has launched a project focusing on training, advocacy, and creating self-advocacy groups to increase the involvement of individuals with intellectual disabilities in political affairs. It is worth mentioning that all three initiatives are still ongoing.

In **Spain**, practices differ, as they focus more on their impact at a local level. In 2023, in Madrid, through Plena Inclusión Madrid, a Municipal Office for Independent Living was established in order to offer all kinds of support towards autonomy and inclusion. Moreover, recent initiatives from March 2025 were established, like ‘Estamos Todos Juntos’ Mental Health Program, a free municipal mental health service offering support to adolescents, especially those with special needs. In addition, the same month, the project “Voces de Mujer” conference was organized in the Canary Islands to advocate for women caregivers and women with disabilities, through storytelling and policy proposals.

In the case of **Poland**, since 2021 is running the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities, as a strategic framework led by the government to promote social, professional, as well as political inclusion. Moreover, since 2021, Poland has had the chance to have in its capital, Warsaw, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE, which is conducting workshops to politically engage people with disabilities and offer adequate

tools. A past initiative that is worth mentioning was the “Active Disabled Project,” which was implemented between the period 2020-2023, which primarily enhanced occupational therapy and personal assistance services to support the autonomy of people with disabilities.

In **Cyprus**, the foundation “Stelios Ioannou Foundation Multidisciplinary Support” is doing a great work in offering integrated psychological and social services to promote independence and enhance autonomy for people with disabilities. Another ongoing project, called “Power in Youth”, is a project aimed at educating and empowering young people (13-30) in Cyprus, particularly in rural areas, to foster more inclusive communities, aligned with the EU Youth Strategy. Lastly, UNDP has developed and shared a resource guide to assist governments and civil society organizations in order to make political participation more inclusive by offering adequate tools to do so.

In the case of **Greece**, since September 2024, Self Advocacy meetings⁶ for political participation take place, hosted by Inclusion Europe, focusing on empowering through peer dialogue and strategic actions, political confidence, and participation from people with disabilities. Moreover, in October 2024, the Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (E.S.A.meA)⁷, launched the initiative “Inclusion in Democracy”, which is a national campaign advocating for accessible polling and political programs, in order to enhance policy engagement and reduction of structural barriers concerning political rights. Lastly, since 2021, JA Greece and UNICEF⁸ launched the “Generation Unlimited” initiative, under UNICEF, to support youth, including youth with disabilities, through digital mentoring and job opportunities, focusing on inclusion in the workforce and reduced unemployment.

⁶ Self-advocacy meetings in Greece to improve political participation | Inclusion Europe. (2024). <https://www.inclusion.eu/self-advocacy-meetings-in-greece-to-improve-political-participation>

⁷ Manqey. (2024, November 10). Άρθρο. Ε.Σ.Α.ΜΕΑ. <https://www.esamea.gr/el/article/symperilhps-h-sth-dhmokratia-to-dikaiwma-twn-atomwn-me-anaphria-sthn-politikh-symmetoxh>

⁸ Admin. (2022, October 14). Εστιάζοντας στις ευάλωτες ομάδες - Συνεργασία JA Greece & Unicef - JA Greece. JA Greece. <https://jagreece.org/programs/unicef-project/>

In the case of **Portugal**, we have four initiatives mentioned. The EXTRA-C project aims to empower young people with intellectual disabilities to actively participate in democratic life, with an emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility to support engagement in civic processes. The SPORTS4ALL program, first launched in 2012 and later expanded, offers educational and therapeutic activities for adults with intellectual disabilities. The MOV'IN program, since 2018, in cooperation with the Lisbon City Council, has been supporting adults with intellectual, motor, or visual disabilities to maintain their physical activity, addressing challenges such as transportation or financial barriers. Closing, the SAME project, which was developed in 2018, trains 20 adults to lead activities with physical sessions for both non-disabled and disabled participants. It is a 52-hour course that covers many topics, such as hygiene, autonomy, social skills, encouraging social connection between people, as well as political engagement.

Closing, we can tell that best practices from all countries differ, but all countries present great examples of what initiatives are able to do at a local or even national level, in enhancing the political participation of people with disabilities.

4. The critical role of support for youth workers

Youth workers across Europe play an essential role in empowering young people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Whether operating in urban centers or remote communities, these professionals face significant challenges in facilitating political participation among the youth they serve. Research conducted through literature reviews, focus groups, and surveys has identified several key areas where youth workers require additional support to effectively fulfill their professional responsibilities as agents of change.

PRIMARY NEEDS IDENTIFIED



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCES

1 Youth workers consistently express the need for specialized training to enhance their capacity to guide young people with disabilities in understanding political rights. Many report struggling without adequate accessible materials—such as easy-to-read formats, pictograms, or videos—that would make political concepts more approachable during their workshops and sessions. These professionals often find themselves attempting to translate complex political language into understandable content with minimal institutional backing for their efforts.

2 NAVIGATION OF FAMILY DYNAMICS

Youth workers frequently serve as mediators between families and young people with disabilities, attempting to help all parties balance protection with autonomy. Research shows that youth workers need support in addressing family attitudes that can significantly impact their work promoting political engagement. When facing overprotective environments or encountering low expectations from caregivers, youth workers require strategies and institutional backing to effectively advocate for their clients' independence.

3 INSTITUTIONAL AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Youth workers operate within legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures that often limit their ability to promote participation rights, particularly when working with individuals under guardianship arrangements. The absence of government-supported strategies specifically designed to train youth workers on political inclusion leaves these professionals without structured support systems. These systemic barriers directly affect their capacity to facilitate meaningful political engagement for the young people they support.

4 CREATION OF INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Youth workers recognize their responsibility to create inclusive, welcoming, and accessible environments for political participation, but frequently lack the resources necessary to do so effectively. While digital tools offer potential solutions for their work, youth workers need additional training in proper moderation and safety protocols to ensure they can facilitate respectful and secure online political engagement experiences for those they serve.

5 EMPOWERMENT OVER INFORMATION

Many youth workers report feeling restricted to providing information rather than fostering genuine empowerment in their professional practice. They express a need for resources and support that would allow them to move beyond awareness-raising and help guide young people with disabilities toward concrete actions—voting, speaking out, and self-advocacy. Despite strong interest in coordinating peer-led and community-based initiatives, youth workers often face insufficient funding and training opportunities to implement these approaches effectively in their work.



5. Recommendations

Political participation is not just a right, it is a vital pathway to inclusion and empowerment. For young people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, engaging in democratic life requires not only accessible systems but also informed, supportive environments. Youth workers are key to bridging this gap.

The recommendations that follow provide practical ideas and strategies to help youth workers foster meaningful participation, encourage autonomy, and create space for every young voice to be heard.

Recommendations

The following recommendations outline practical steps that youth workers can take to support and enhance the political participation of young people with disabilities.

Advocate for legal reforms that eliminate guardianship-related restrictions and support the autonomy of people with disabilities.

Raise awareness among youth about their political rights, with an emphasis on accessible civic education tailored to intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

Support inclusive voting procedures, including accessible polling stations, private voting spaces, and voting materials in easy-to-read formats.

Promote training for election staff to improve communication and sensitivity toward the needs of voters with disabilities.

Foster political representation by supporting initiatives that help individuals with disabilities join electoral lists or civic bodies.

Organise campaigns targeting families and caregivers to reduce overprotection and build a culture of independence and active citizenship.

Provide families and caregivers with tools and training, empowering them to support political engagement rather than unintentionally restricting it.

Combat social stigma by participating in or organizing training sessions for politicians and political candidates on disability inclusion.

Collaborate with schools and institutions to embed political empowerment into early education, especially in inclusive and special education settings.

Conclusions

In conclusion, all participating countries report a combination of legal, physical, and social barriers that hinder the political participation of young people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities. Greece, Italy, and Cyprus, in particular, face complex legal and bureaucratic challenges that restrict access to democratic processes. Spain stands out as a positive example, having implemented recent legal reforms and best practices led by NGOs to enhance inclusion. Meanwhile, the economic and public health systems in Greece and Cyprus further contribute to the exclusion of this population. In Poland and Portugal, the findings highlight a strong need for civic education targeting both caregivers and individuals with disabilities, alongside broader efforts to raise awareness. Across all countries, families play a vital role in supporting political engagement, yet their efforts are often constrained by a lack of adequate resources and institutional backing.

Empowering youth workers is key to advancing political participation among young people with disabilities. These professionals are on the frontlines of combating stigma and dismantling systemic barriers. With appropriate training, tools, and sustained support, youth workers can cultivate genuinely inclusive democratic spaces—environments where young people with disabilities are not only heard but are also empowered to actively shape their communities and influence the future.



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