

Understanding the Attitudes and Perceptions of Young People with a Migration Background: An Appraisal of Youth Development Policies

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ABSTRACT

Young people represent a vital demographic in shaping the social, economic, and political fabric of societies. Their participation is central to global and regional policy frameworks, including the European Union Youth Strategy (2019–2027), which emphasizes empowerment, protection, and integration of young migrants and refugees. In Germany, national and sub-national policies similarly prioritize youth engagement. However, young people with a migration background continue to face barriers that limit their effective participation. This study explores their levels of engagement, knowledge, and attitudes toward youth policy initiatives. A qualitative research design was employed using focus group discussions with participants aged 12–21 years, of African, Arabian, and Eastern European descent. Snowball sampling was used for recruitment. Data were analyzed through an inductive meta-aggregation approach. Results reveal persistent gaps in policy effectiveness for migrant-background youth, including limited awareness of youth policies and decision-making processes, political apathy, racism, Islamophobia, perceived exclusion of minority groups, unequal valuation of migrants by race/ethnicity, identity crises, and lack of safe spaces. Weaknesses in policy communication and information flow were also evident. While youth development policies in Germany are innovative, they remain insufficiently inclusive of young people with a migrant background, particularly in policy design and implementation.

Keywords: Youth Policies, Young people with a migration background, Attitudes, Perceptions, Migrant youths, Germany, Europe, Racism, Islamophobia, Refugees.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, debates on policy frameworks at the global, regional and national levels have increasingly focused on young people. This focus aims to create conditions that motivate young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to address current and future societal challenges. These skills empower young people to become influential agents of democracy and social change, playing an active role in civil society and economic development. To this end, policy agendas and frameworks on young people have emerged at the global, regional, national and sub-national levels.

The current global population of young people aged 15–24 is 1.2 billion, representing about 16%, and this figure is expected to increase over the next decade [1]. About 90% of this youth population lives in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). More than one-third of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly and implicitly reference this group, focusing on participation, empowerment and well-being [2]. However, progress towards achieving global youth development goals has been uneven, with many young people around the world still experiencing discrimination and limited political and economic inclusion [2].

To this end, the European Union (EU) Youth Strategy 2019-2027 is tailored to promote youth participation in democratic life and social and civic engagement, and to ensure that all young people, including third-country nationals, have the necessary resources to participate in society. The strategy emphasizes the importance of protecting young migrants and refugees and supporting their integration [3]. The strategy is closely aligned with the UN Youth Framework, which aims to facilitate greater impact and expanded action at country level to address the needs of young people, build their agency, and promote their rights to engage in and participate in policy and decision-making [4].

However, some assessments of youth mobility suggest that young people with a migrant background (YPMB) may not be adequately covered by these youth policy frameworks [5]. A report on youth transnational mobility highlights that YPMB are usually categorized according to ethnicity/country of origin or first- or second-generation migrant status [6]. This suggests that there may be gaps (of a subtly discriminatory nature) in our understanding of the situation of young people living outside their home countries, including an absence of their voice in these policies. Suffice to say, such categorization of youth mobility may have intentionally or unintentionally been done or studied retrospectively, based on countries of residence, in order to avoid considering the views of YPMB.

In recent years, social exclusion has dominated discussions on youth policy and the social development agenda. Young people face multiple vulnerabilities exacerbated by their age, agility, gender, migration status and cultural identity [7]. Therefore, emerging youth policies must address the specific gaps, risks and vulnerabilities of young people, particularly those from the YPMB, who are even more vulnerable, while bearing in mind resilience and adaptability. Young women and girls with a migration background are at an even greater risk of abuse, gender-based violence, discrimination and sexual violence [7]. For contextual purposes, social exclusion refers to processes that prevent individuals, groups or communities from accessing opportunities, resources and rights that are generally available to all members of society [7]. The factors driving social exclusion are more often structural, such as laws, values and belief systems, policies, institutional practices, organizational behaviors, and prevailing ideologies [7].

Due to their specific ethnic or cultural identities, as well as their disabilities, the YPMB face particular difficulties linked to the foregoing discussions [7]. For example, the YPMB are more susceptible to unemployment and more likely to lack access to decent job, and experience exploitative working conditions and inadequate access to skills and vocational training, as well as social marginalization and exclusion [7]. Therefore, a robust policy targeting specific age groups and effectively addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by the YPMB would need to provide protection, employment, social participation and inclusion.

Over the past decade, Germany and its federal states have introduced a variety of youth policies. There are questions about the effectiveness of these policies and whether their outcomes are inclusive, let alone whether they support young people in realizing their potential and becoming agents of change for democracy. More importantly, do these policies adequately consider how they affect young people's interactions and democratic participation, including the YPMB?

In Germany, there are 14 million young people aged 12 - 27, representing 17% of the total population [8]. The involvement of young people in political processes is widely recognized as an important cornerstone of democracy in the country. Between 2014 and 2015, the federal government drafted new youth policy principles and guidelines, as well as an independent policy framework called 'Youth Appropriate Municipalities' [9]. The aim was to ensure that development policy priorities adequately reflected the concerns of young people and strengthen their political participation. The independent youth policy and its complementary guidelines also promote equity for young people, considering them at all levels and in all places. At the national level, the government has identified 16 ways to promote greater equity for young people locally, drawing on the experience and perspectives of a various 'network stakeholders' [9].

Between 2015 – 2018, all 16 municipalities in Germany adopted the national framework plan "Youth Friendly Municipality". This commitment involves making them more youth-friendly by placing young people at the center of their local-level work, including their democratic participation and access to opportunities.

In Thüringen, the 'Youth Development Plan 2017 - 2021' was adopted in response to the nationwide call for an independent youth policy in the interest of all young people [10]. The plan incorporates the YPMB, especially those who have experienced displacement, and emphasizes the full and equal participation of all young people. It is crucial for YPMB that they feel they have equal rights and are included. Non-inclusion and a hostile atmosphere are particular challenges for YPMB. On 26 March 2019, the state adopted the Strategy for the Participation of Young People based on a political declaration of intent by the governing coalition of DIE LINKE, Die Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN. This formed part of a joint commitment to guidelines for youth participation in Thüringen. Both frameworks promote the equal participation and rights of young people in decision-making and the provision of quality youth services and contribute to the development of a democratic culture.

The study therefore aimed to appraise the inclusivity of young people with a migrant background and their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, these youth policy initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants aged 18 years or over. Written informed consent was also obtained from the legal guardians of participants under the age of 18. In this study, reference to young people with a migrant background is abbreviated as YPMB. Eligibility criteria for inclusion as a participant included

- An individual between the ages of 12 and 24.
- At least one parent or guardian must be from a foreign country.
- Parental or guardian consent for participants under the age of 18.
- Having lived in Thüringen for more than five years.
- An individual who is a first-generation migrant

Study Design and setting

The study employed qualitative research methods, such as focus group discussions (FGDs). This design primarily targeted YPMB who were aged between 12 – 24 and living in Thüringen. Two FGDs were conducted: the first group comprised seven participants of predominantly African (Nigerian and Liberian) origin, while the second group comprised six participants of predominantly of Arabian (Syrian) and Eastern European (Russian) origin. That standard medium of communication for each group was German, while English and Arabic were used as supporting mother tongues to enable easy and comprehensive understanding of the questions and discussions where necessary. The first group used German and English, and the second group used German and Arabic. Participants' country of origin was Nigeria, Liberia, Russia or Syria, either paternal or maternal.

Sampling and Data collection process

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. This non-probability sampling technique involves taking a random sample of individuals drawn from a given finite population or existing identified participants, who then recruit future participants from among their acquaintances [11]. A total of 13 participants who met the eligibility criteria. The median age of the participants was 16 years; the youngest participants was 13 years old, and the oldest participants was 21 years old. The participants included seven girls and six boys.

Participants and their parents or legal guardians were given an information sheet about the study, including its aims and expected outcomes, to allow for risk analysis. Informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all study participants under the age of 18. The first FGD took place on 27 December 2022 and the second FGD on 31 December 2022, both lasting 90 minutes. An FGD guide was used to facilitate the discussions. The FGDs were audio-recorded and consisted of at least six participants per session.

Measures

The FGD guide explored key issues and topics: knowledge of the youth plans, policies and strategies; attitudes towards political participation; perceptions of political inclusion and equality; social challenges to participation; and the role of access to information and communication.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using meta-aggregation approaches, which summarize data in a stepwise fashion and identify research themes based on pre-defined concepts [12,13]. This approach is a vital for extracting key themes and evidence and enhances the reliability of the data [14]. Following analysis of each individual transcript (first-order data), the convergence and divergence of views based on each of the above themes were identified (second-order data), and these were categorized based on the aggregation of thematic findings (third-order data). First-order data are the participants' direct interpretations, second-order data are the researchers' interpretations based on the first-order data, and third-order data are the researchers' interpretations of the original authors' interpretations [15-17]. All recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were coded based on the names of the clusters where the FGDs were conducted (e.g., G001 and G002) and the unique identifiers of the participants (e.g., RS1, RS2, ..., RS13).

RESULTS

Lack of awareness or knowledge of the youth policies and strategy

Although all participants had lived in the study setting for at least five years, none of them were aware of the 2017 - 2021 Youth Development Plan or the 2019 Youth Strategy. This included those who had resided in the state prior to 2016, during which period the 2017 - 2021 Youth Plan was being developed through public consultation. Nevertheless, some of the participants were familiar with what policy and policymaking process entails.

"I am not aware of these policy initiatives for young people (RS 1)". "I have not heard about these initiatives or plans...but I know what policy means (RS 7)". "Policy is when people come together to talk about rules and regulations and like strategic plans". "On the 8th of December 2022, I was with my class in Bundestag, Berlin and our guide encouraged more young people (Jugendliche) to participate in political stuffs" (RS 4)".

Poor attitude toward political participation

The participants' attitude towards political participation can be described as detached. This is based on how they feel society views their opinions, which are not considered important. This influences the YPMB's attitude towards political apathy. For those with African roots, it is their personal experiences of social and political engagements overtime that have led them to believe that their voices do not matter or will not be heard, despite knowing that they have human rights. Participants with Arabian and Eastern European roots commonly agreed that their experience of an undemocratic political culture, due to the country of origin of their parents or legal guardians, had influenced their thinking. That is, the political behavior shaped by societies where democracy is not practiced can impact future choices and socio-political participation.

"Well, I think my voice is useless when I say something, like others...because if we say something (migrants), for example, and the others (Germans) say something, then our vote is useless because theirs counts multiple times" (RS 1). "If I say something, it doesn't help because, in the end, only a few votes count. Well, then my vote doesn't count. That's why I don't take part in something like that" (RS 5). "We come from a different country where democracy is not practiced. In Syria, there is no respect for democracy. So, coming to Germany, it is hard to understand what democracy means" (RS 12).

Perception of political non-inclusion

The study shows that there is little or no visible political inclusion of the YPMB, which exacerbates the perception of exclusion. This perception is contributed to by a lack of knowledge, inadequate access to information, a language barrier and the non-inclusion of YPMB in policymaking meetings, organizations, clubs and representations, irrespective of the fact that policymaking is a free and open process. There was also a feeling that YPMB or migrant youths lack the capacity to influence policy change, as they do not have a platform, and their concerns are often dismissed or ignored - especially by the school system, which is their main source of daily interaction. When inclusion becomes a privilege, political participation loses its very essence.

"We came to Germany, and we were very happy that there are new people and a new culture, but then we were surprised the lack of acceptance, and I think it's called culture shock" (RS 9). "I feel like you only know about these policy initiative if you have the connections and your parents are influential...if you have parents that are included/involved then you will be too, but as long as you have nobody in that circle, you have nothing" (RS 4).

Racism and Islamophobia

Racism emerged as a dominant theme throughout the study. Participants expressed that most of their experiences were not color-blind. There was a feeling among the participants that the race factor could have played a significant role in the lack of extension of the consultation to the minority groups... alluding to the popular notion of "replacement theory", espoused by the extreme right wing of the political spectrum. Participation in everyday social activities often involves some form of racial prejudice and discrimination, including the use of the 'N' word. This has led to a strong reluctance to express oneself openly in public places for fear of racial aggression, dismissal, or ridicule. Secondly, religion (Islamophobia) was also mentioned by the Muslim Syrian and Russian participants in addition to the above factor.

"I think there are also other aspects that make things more difficult, especially if you are an immigrant, and that is racism. I think we all have experience of this, especially in schools, when you get the worst kind of feeling that you are not welcome in the country" (RS 7). "...There have been times when a teacher or student would say the "N-word" or when a teacher said something that was misinformation about Africa. When I go to tell someone, like the headmistress, I am told not to make a fuss. Or that they didn't mean any harm" (RS 4). "They think Muslims are symbols of terrorism. They see us and think we are bad people, even though they don't know us" (RS 5).

Unequal treatment/perception of inequality

Although the youth policy framework guarantees equal rights and treatment for all, there is a societal bias towards people of non-European ethnic origin. This bias is evident in participants' experiences at school and in daily life, as well as in the process of assimilation into German culture. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the preferential treatment given to Ukrainians compared to their own families in the same circumstances.

"A lot of Ukrainians can go to university without writing "abitur", but not us..." (RS 10).

"When I came to Germany, I was demoted to a lower class and stayed one full year learning German...I did not learn anything for one whole year" (RS 9). "People from Ukraine are treated much better than people from other countries...they get better accommodation and everything" (RS 7). "I know people who have been in Germany for three years and until now they don't have their papers and are stuck in the Asylum camp" (RS 8). "We had to learn German first, but Ukrainians go to school without learning German" (RS 10). "The state recruited many Ukrainian teachers to translate school lessons for them in Ukrainian language unlike us" (RS 8).

Social challenges to participation: identity and acceptance

The YPMB's concern were not only about their inability to influence or contribute to public policy, but also about being overlooked, considered insignificant, and not being properly represented in these policy consultations. This can exacerbate internalized identity shame or low identity esteem, which can lead minority

groups to attempt to whitewash phenomena in order to fit in. In theory, youth frameworks are supposed to provide young people with opportunities for democratic participation and ensure their opinions are taken into account in the policymaking process. However, it's hard to say to what extent YPMB are allowed to participate in the formulation and implementation of these policies.

"In class, when they are asking questions, I do not really identify myself as a Nigerian, I'm more German than Nigerian because, even though I came here when I was twelve, I grew up in the German system. Then people ask, where do you come from? I have this thought in my head that I don't know where I come from anymore because I'm not accepted as German since I wasn't born here and if I go to Nigeria I'm not also accepted either, because I don't live there, I don't know the culture and my orientation has changed...I think that's one thing that affects people's mindset" (RS 4). "...In my school, a teacher asked the class a question. Nobody knew the answer. Then he asked me, and I said I didn't know. He said that I must know because I am a refugee and should know about their land. He shouted at me. I was afraid to return to that lesson. Because of that, I didn't like the lesson anymore. I think that, as immigrants, we are not welcome at all" (RS 12).

Policy communication and information gap

In a democratic society, the importance of access to information and freedom of expression cannot be overstated. For the YPMB, who face many cultural and other barriers, it is particularly important to get information to them and create opportunities for two-way communication. During the discussion, participants identified Google, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram as their main sources of information.

"If you ask which of us watches the news, nobody and nobody also have time to read long messages either, except it's a short video talking about the main facts and people get this idea quickly (RS 4)". "I get my information from TikTok and Instagram" (RS 3). "Most of our information comes from Google, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok" (RS 2).

DISCUSSION

The study outcomes show that the youth policy initiatives relating to YPMB suffer from some unique gaps. These include a lack of awareness or knowledge of these policies and the policymaking processes; an inherently poor attitude of YPMB towards political participation (apathy); a lack of visible political inclusion of the YPMB, which exacerbates the perception of exclusion; a perception of racism and Islamophobia; unequal treatment or a perception of bias towards people with a non-European migration background, based on race and ethnicity; social challenges to participation, such as an absence of safe spaces owing to a lack of identity and acceptance; and gaps in policy communication and information flow.

A unique finding of the study was that none of the participants had any knowledge of or awareness of the youth policy initiatives. This was despite that fact that the policy development process involved a wide range of stakeholders, including youth organizations, clubs, educators, religious and governmental institutions. The study's outcome suggested that there is a strong disconnect between the public policymaking apparatus and the youth population in terms of effective policy communication. After seven years of implementation, it is a failure part of the target group of such a policy is unaware of it. This suggests that the current "Youth Development Plan and Youth Strategy" does not reach a wide audience, particularly among the YPMB. An improved strategy is needed to change this.

The school system is an effective way of raising awareness of youth policy and other related initiatives targeting young people. As most young people spend a good part of their day at school, it is recommended that these policies be integrated into the social studies curriculum. This recommendation builds upon the #IchStehAuf initiative, which was launched by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and endorsed by the Federal President of Germany: Frank-Walter Steinmeier [18]. The initiative calls on schools to advocate a day of action for democracy and diversity, which more than 1,600 schools and over 300,000 students participated in [18]. Rather than a one-day of event, the introduction of a national policy to institutionalize the social studies curriculum in schools would address many gaps, including democratic participation and diversity.

The school has become a focal point in the ongoing debate about its role in an immigrant society, drawing on recent evidence of poor academic performance and language proficiency among migrant students, as well as violent conflicts in schools often associated with the inability of YPMB (especially Muslims) to integrate effectively [19]. The school system occupies a strategic position as a multidimensional tool for engaging with YPMB on issues of democratic and political participation, as well as serving as a socio-cultural melting pot for integration. Germany has undergone changes in recent years, evolving from a nation considered culturally homogeneous to one characterized by diversity and immigration. The education system has been the most affected by this transformation and continues to struggle to cope with the rapid changes needed to meet the needs of young people, especially those from a migration background [20,21]. This has produced different forms of unequal treatment and discrimination, which have further unintentionally stifled the effective educational integration of students from different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds [21]. Nevertheless, while the challenges remain, the school system has evolved in its role of bridging the gap between transforming societies. However, more is still required, especially in the area of engaging YPMB in policy initiatives that target young people.

The cultural and political orientation of migrant youth from non-democratic countries significantly influence their attitudes towards political participation. Most participants from Syria and Russia were unaware of their rights within a democratic process or system. This is because they come from countries where democracy and popular participation in the political decision-making process are limited. Therefore, it was not surprising that none of the participants, especially those from Syria and Russia, were involved in political activities or social engagement outside of their families and school systems. "Can a person from another country - an immigrant - be involved in politics or policy in Germany? I didn't understand, which is why I'm asking. We come from a country where democracy is not practiced. In Syria, there is no respect for democracy. So, when we come to Germany, it is difficult to understand what democracy means" (RS10). It would be beneficial to include a seminar on democracy in the social studies curriculum at schools, targeting young people from non-European backgrounds, especially.

Another significant finding of the study is that minority groups face the challenge of being subconsciously perceived as immigrants. This leads to the belief that, even if they contribute their thoughts or ideas, nothing is usually done about it, because they are in the minority. In other words, minority groups feel that they are not seen as an active part of the society. It is quite worrisome that YPMB feel that German society views them based on their migratory roots rather than as important members of the society. This reinforces the feeling of exclusion and the idea that their voices do not count, which in turn discourages participation in political gatherings.

A recurring theme in this study was the idea that that YPMB do not feel that they belong or are accepted in their new home. This perception has the potential to create resentment towards the society and defray loyalty to the state, especially among YPMB who are first-generation migrants. Therefore, there needs to be a promotion of many educational programs to reverse the impression that YPMB do not belong here and that their ideas or thoughts do not matter. There also needs to be a deliberate policy of political education based on teaching about the democratic system, aimed at this demographic in general. Secondary schools in particular have an important role to play in this regard.

Examining the policy proposal and its implementation reveals a discrepancy between theory and practice. For example, the policy calls for inclusive development and political participation for all young people at all levels. However, communication and public dialogues are only conducted in German, as are the policy documents. Furthermore, participants in discussions are selected by organized bodies, clubs and organizations that do not necessarily reflect the diversity of the society.

The unequal treatment of European and non-European refugees was an interesting but disturbing finding. Participants questioned why refugees or immigrants from Ukraine were treated more favorably than others. This perception of unequal treatment further alienates political participation and social inclusion.

"They were not downgraded to lower grades/levels and were able to start school in Germany in the same grade they were in while in their home country. The government has also hired more Ukrainian teachers dedicated to translation in schools. Ukrainians have their own accommodation and don't have to go to refugee camps like we

do. They have the documents they need to start afresh in Germany, while other refugees who have been in the country for three or more years are still unable to obtain a work permit" (RS 7-13).

Racism was another factor identified as a barrier to participation. Participants revealed that engaging in everyday social activities is often met with some form of racial prejudice and discrimination. This leads YPMB to doubt whether they would be able to openly discuss youth policy issues in public places without experiencing racial resentment. It was also disappointing to learn that, by 2022, the use of racial slurs (the 'n-word') in schools had become normalized. While it may be difficult to generalize this based on the sample size of the study, it is nevertheless an unexpected outcome. Similarly, although the study didn't focus specifically on media coverage and portrayals of the YPMB, it is likely that negative media publicity and disinformation on social media have badly affected the state of immigrants (especially refugees), including young people. This conclusion was based on participants' feedback that immigrants are misrepresented in the media and portrayed as destructive.

The social challenge to political participation is not limited to the YPMB, but to the migrant community as a whole. However, this study's findings suggest that this challenge is being passed on from generation to generation within the migrant community. For example, one participant mentioned that only the best students (mostly German) are chosen to take part in parliamentary debates or external programs. This issue needs to be addressed collaboratively. In the future, it would be best if there were more consultation between critical stakeholders at all levels on this issue.

The current visible policy communication gap among the younger population, particularly the YPMB, must be addressed. Social media was the main source of information for the participants. This suggests that traditional media, such as radio and television, as well as organizational and government websites, which are mostly used for policy communication, should be diversified to reach the YPMB. One noticeable gap in the communication design and framework of current youth policies is how their content is disseminated to target audiences, especially the YPMB.

The study had some limitations, but these did not affect the findings. Firstly, the study was conducted during the Christmas period, which made participant recruitment difficult. Secondly, obtaining parental consent was initially slow but quickly overcome via confidence building. Thirdly, the use of snowball sample has its own challenges, such as the reliance on referrals, which can lead to biased samples because participants are more likely to recommend individuals who share similar characteristics and opinions on certain subjects. However, given the nature of the study, adequate representation was obtained in terms of spread, cultural diversity and opinions. The study had representation from three continents: Africa, Arabia and Europe. Also, while some questions in the study might seem leading, this was deliberate given the demographics of the sample, to allow participants to tell their own story. This is why there were follow-up questions on why and how. Overall, the limitations were mitigated and did not affect the study outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The main outcomes of this study were succinct and reflected the expected outputs based on its primary aim. While the youth policies were not designed with a premeditated discriminatory framework, they omitted a portion of the constituents considered vulnerable during the formulation and implementation processes. The unexpected lack of knowledge or awareness of these policies among YPMB, despite their ability to German, was rather telling. Therefore, it needs to be understood that, in the context of this study, the YPMB are likely to be vulnerable to the risk of social exclusion and suffer from local particularities of exclusion among young people. They are also a product of the intersectional nature of discrimination.

There was a clear difference in political participation and democratic ideology among YPMB from countries such as Liberia and Nigeria, where democracy is practiced to some extent, compared to participants from Syria and Russia, where democratic practices are very restrictive. Based on the results of the study, it is safe to say that there is no behavioral change program designed to develop democratic skills among YPMB. This piece is missing. Furthermore, although the policies are aimed at all young people, none of the existing organizational structures through which decisions are made and implemented are directly linked to, or representative of, the YPMB. Similarly, there is a need for a robust response to the concern that information dissemination related to

policy consultation and implementation is not sufficiently diverse to penetrate and reach minority groups such as the YPMB.

These policies have had a limited impact on the lives of migrant youths, who face serious socio-political challenges. There is a feeling among many YPMB that they are victims of discrimination and have not found their place or voice in the society. The education received in school and out-of-school does not provide them with the relevant information needed to foster civic engagement. Consequently, the propensity for political participation is extremely low due to the aforementioned factors. While youth policies are not the only panacea for improving the well-being of YPMB and ensuring their political participation, they are the most effective way of creating spaces and opportunities for YPMB similar to those available to other young people in society.

Finally, these youth policies were very innovative in that they met the objective of the nationwide call for an independent youth initiative in the interests of all young people. However, there are strong concerns about the lack of YPMB involvement in the formulation and implementation, among other factors highlighted above. The findings were quite revealing, and more efforts are needed to encourage the YPMB to participate in socio-political and democratic processes, and to change their negative perception. All the issues raised by the YPMB should be addressed to ensure their voices are heard and they are included as equal partners in the promoting democratic principles in society. The study offers approaches that can be developed into programs or projects as interventions to address the identified and documented challenges.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate Youth Policy into School Curricula

- Institutionalize youth development and democratic participation education within the social studies curriculum at secondary schools, ensuring continuous awareness rather than one-off campaigns.
- Include targeted seminars on democracy and civic rights for youth with non-European migration backgrounds.

2. Improve Policy Communication and Accessibility

- Translate youth policy documents and communication materials into multiple languages spoken by migrant communities.
- Use social media platforms, community radio, and migrant youth organizations to complement traditional policy communication channels.

3. Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces

- Establish youth centers and safe spaces where YPMB can discuss policy issues, share experiences, and engage with decision-makers free from discrimination.

4. Address Discrimination and Racism in Schools

- Implement anti-racism and diversity training for teachers and students.
- Institutionalize monitoring and accountability frameworks for handling racism, Islamophobia and any form of discrimination within schools.

5. Enhance Political and Social Inclusion

- Ensure direct representation of YPMB in youth policy development processes rather than relying only on organized clubs and intermediaries.

- Promote targeted mentorship and participation programs that give migrant youth real opportunities in policymaking and parliamentary debates.

6. Promote Equal Treatment of Refugees and Migrants

- Standardize support measures (school placement, language services, housing, work permits) to avoid perceptions of unequal treatment between European and non-European refugees.

7. Combat Negative Media Portrayals

- Collaborate with media outlets and influencers to promote positive narratives about the contributions of migrant youth to society.
- Support media literacy programs that empower YPMB to critically assess and respond to misrepresentation.

8. Strengthen Consultation Mechanisms

- Develop multi-stakeholder platforms (schools, local governments, civil society, youth groups) for continuous consultation with YPMB on issues of policy, democracy and integration.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

YPMB – Young People with a Migrant Background

API – Africa Partners Initiative

RS – Respondent

EU - European Union

CEREB - Center for Empirical Research in Economics and Behavioural Science

SPD - Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands

HoR - House of Resources

SPD - Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands

Declarations

Consent to participate

All participants aged 18 years and over consented to participate in the study by completing an informed consent form. In addition, parents/guardians of participants under the age of 18 consented on behalf of their wards using a written informed consent form.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available upon request.

Competing interests

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: GCA and EN.

Methodology: GCA.

Investigation: GCA, EN and JRA.

Result analysis: GCA, EN and JRA.

Writing – original draft: GCA.

Writing – review & editing: GCA.

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