Bringing Youth to the Table, with Eliane Trabulo

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Where policy decisions are made, and youth representation belongs.

Across international cooperation, inclusion, particularly of young people, is often reduced to a seat at the table without any real influence over what happens once they sit down. Eliane Trabulo, a youth advocate active in social innovation and international cooperation spaces, has spent her career pushing back against that model.

In an interview conducted on 2 July 2026 as part of an EPIS discussion, Trabulo spoke about what genuine youth participation looks like in practice, the structural barriers young people face when trying to enter the sector, and why she believes curiosity, not credentials, is the real currency of international work.

What Inclusion Actually Means

For Trabulo, the difference between symbolic and meaningful youth participation comes down to trust and access. “Meaningful youth inclusion means

that young people are not only invited to be present, but they are also the ones we are going to listen to, that we're going to trust, and that we're going to involve in real decisions," she explained.

In her view, inclusion cannot stop at consultation. Young people, she argued, need to be present from the earliest stages of a project — design, discussion, implementation, and evaluation alike — rather than being brought in once the key decisions have already been made. That shift, she said, depends on giving young people access to clear information and defined responsibilities, so that professionals can genuinely value the ideas they bring to the table.

The Real Barriers

Asked what most commonly keeps young people out of the social innovation space, Trabulo did not point to a lack of ideas. "I am seeing youth that already have ideas, motivation, and lived experience, but they do not always have the right network, funding, or institutional support," she said.

Access is only part of the problem. Confidence, she noted, is just as significant a barrier, especially in international settings where technical jargon can make young participants feel unqualified to speak up. Layered on top of that is a more practical obstacle: the cost of entry. Many of the young people in her community, she said, cannot afford to take on unpaid internships or unpaid opportunities, however valuable they might be for their development. "It is this type of barrier about money, about access, about visibility, and trust as well," she summarised.

Activists and Policymakers

When it comes to closing the distance between grassroots youth activism and institutional decision-making, Trabulo pointed to a combination of community-based and digital approaches. Tools such as youth consultations, co-creation sessions, and community dialogues, she explained, let young people speak directly from lived experience — giving policymakers a clearer picture of realities on the ground.

Digital tools, meanwhile, extend that access further. Collaborative platforms make participation possible for those who cannot attend official events in person, widening the circle of who gets to contribute. For Trabulo, the two approaches are not competing options but complementary ones, each addressing a different kind of barrier to participation.

Life in the Digital Era

Trabulo's assessment of digitalisation itself is similarly balanced. On one hand, she sees real opportunity in how accessible digital tools have become, allowing young people to build and share ideas that reach well beyond their immediate surroundings. "While it is powerful to communicate and share what we think, it can also lead to misinformation," she cautioned.

The sheer volume of information now available, she added, makes it increasingly difficult to separate what is accurate from what merely sounds convincing — a challenge that falls disproportionately on young people navigating these spaces for the first time.

Falling in Love with the Problem, Not the Solution

When questioned about the advice she would offer to students launching their own social innovation projects, Trabulo returned to a principle she had learned on a Design Thinking course: fall in love with the problem, not the solution. "For me, it will be to listen to the community before creating the solution," she said.

That means resisting the urge to build first and understand later. Before starting a project, she argued, founders need to grasp the context and the root causes behind a problem — which requires co-creation in the fullest sense: finding local associations, conducting interviews, and speaking with people from different backgrounds. Often, she pointed out, this process reveals that a proposed solution already exists in some form, and that the more valuable contribution is to strengthen or connect with it rather than duplicate it.

A Lesson from Her Own Path

Trabulo is candid about her own missteps. She spent the whole of her bachelor's degree in international trade, she said, largely for the sake of security rather than genuine interest. Looking back, she considers it a formative mistake — one that taught her that a degree title matters far less than how much a person is willing to learn, connect, and pursue opportunity and networking on their own initiative.

The skill she now considers most essential for navigating international environments is what she calls "curiosity with discipline" — an active commitment to understanding different cultures and contexts, sustained over time, such as by tracking a topic's policy developments week after week rather than engaging with it only occasionally.

A Vision for the Next Five Years

Looking ahead, Trabulo's hope is disarmingly simple: that youth involvement in institutional spaces stops being an exception and becomes the norm. "We should have youth included in whatever we are doing — with youth in the centre of everything".

She is also straightforward about the limits of current practice, noting that youth panels at diplomatic events do not always genuinely represent the youth community they claim to speak for — a gap she attributes partly to the absence of a precise, shared definition of who counts as "youth" in these settings. Change, in her view, should ideally come from institutions themselves. But she is not waiting for it. "We are starting, and the UN is

starting to notice, so we just have to keep up with that to be even more present for them to let us access these institutions".

For Trabulo, that persistence — showing up, building networks, and refusing to let inclusion remain symbolic — is itself the strategy. Not waiting for an invitation, but making the case, project by project, that youth belong in the room where decisions are made.

About the interviewed: Eliane Trabulo is a youth advocate and international cooperation professional focused on social innovation and youth empowerment. With experience spanning community dialogue, project co-creation, and grassroots engagement, she pushes to transform symbolic youth participation into genuine decision-making power in global policy spaces. Driven by "curiosity with discipline," she works to break down structural barriers, broaden access for young leaders, and connect local actions to institutional change.

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