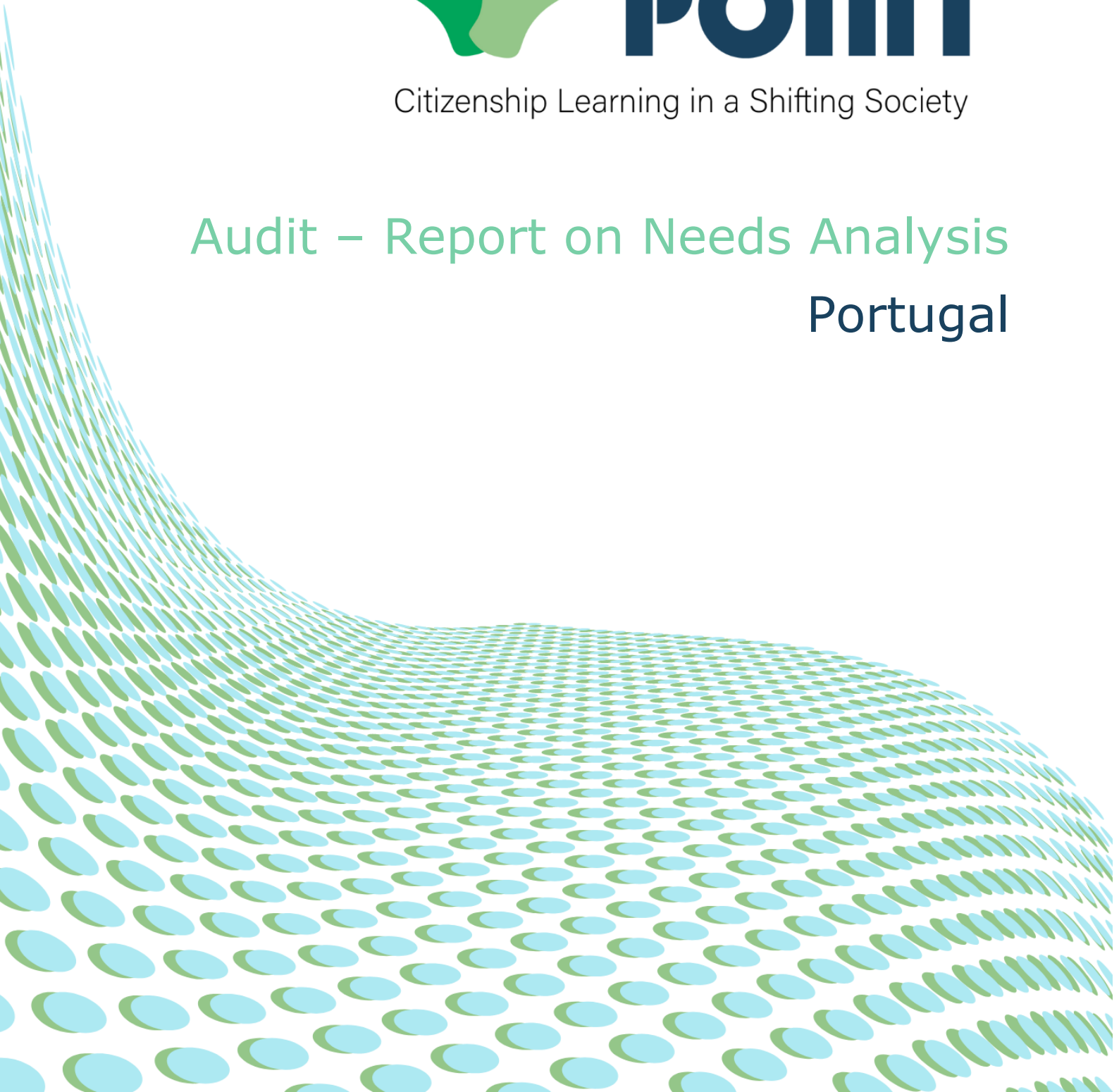




**START  
POINT**

Citizenship Learning in a Shifting Society

Audit – Report on Needs Analysis  
Portugal



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# Democratic Participation of Young Disadvantaged Adults in Portugal

## Introduction

Democratic participation is essential to ensure the participation of citizens in society and decision-making regarding important matters that affect not only their lives, but the whole community. Despite its importance, there are many barriers that interfere with citizens possibility of playing an active role in democratic life. This is particularly true when it comes to people from marginalised groups. Additionally, some trends might indicate that young people are increasingly straying from democracy.

To assess the situation of young disadvantaged adults (20-30 years old) regarding democracy in Portugal, Rightchallenge has implemented an audit among local disadvantaged communities and professionals who work with them daily. The audit was divided in two main parts: desk-research that included literature research and conversations with stakeholders, and field research based on the distribution of a questionnaire that assessed the needs, gaps, and assets, of the community.

# Context

## Historical and political background

To understand the youth attitude towards democracy and politics, it's important to understand some historical aspects that marked Portugal's democracy.

Since 1933, Portugal was ruled under the Estado Novo, a strict dictatorship characterized by values like traditionalism, nationalism, and autocratic ideas. During the Estado Novo period, censorship was high. The news were very controlled and it wasn't uncommon to have 'informants' even in small towns, that would let PIDE (the International and State Defence Police) know if someone showed discontentment with the regime. PIDE would then persecute, imprison, and interrogate them, sometimes resorting to torture and in conditions that led to death.

1961 marked the start of the colonial war between Portugal and some of its colonies: Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. This exacerbated the poor conditions the population lived in in an already poor country and made the gap between the people and the elites even bigger. This gap was also seen among the armed forces which led to a bigger divide between higher-ranking and medium-low ranking officers, which would also cause increasing dissidence and open manifestations of opposition to the regime. This was a key aspect that would later start a revolution leading to the fall of the regime and the start of democracy.

However, as one of the longest dictatorships in Europe during the 20th century, it wasn't until 1974 that big changes were implemented. On April 25th of that year, a coup d'état took place. Led by MFA (Armed Forces Movement), a group made up of military officers established in 1973, army regiments all over the country take over strategic points. Despite orders to fight back, other regiments and showed no resistance and joined the coup. By the end of the day, the regime was completely overtaken with almost no casualties, making this one of the most peaceful revolutions in history, thereby also known as the Carnation Revolution.

From this day forward, unprecedented changes happened in the country. There were no more political prisoners, exiles, or deportees (something that was rare in the country's history). New political movements started to appear and exactly two years after the revolution, on April 24th, 1976, the first democratic elections took place.

From April 25th, 1974, to the present time, Portugal has lived in a society that promotes democratic values. This scenario has allowed for freedom of expression and the free practice of citizenship. The population was given the right to a constitution, participation, and freedom of choice. Despite this, after the initial 'political awakening', democratic participation seems to be in decline, which is noticeable by the high levels of abstention in elections (42% in 2022).

Currently, Portugal is considered a constitutional unitarian semi-presidential republic, made up of four Organs of State: The President of the Republic (head of state), the Assembly of the Republic, the Government (headed by the Prime Minister), and the Judiciary of Portugal.

Regarding political views, ever since the first democratic elections in 1976, PS ('The Socialist Party', centre-left) and PSD-PPD ('Social Democratic Party', centre-right) have consistently occupied the top two positions in elections. With PCP ('Portuguese Communist Party', left) being the only other political party with elected representatives in the parliament since the Carnation Revolution. Although, PS still won the most recent elections for the Assembly of the Republic with

absolute majority (41,68%), the support for smaller most recent parties that focus more on causes and ideologies than the 'traditional' parties has been growing, particularly among the younger generations.

## **Social and geographic context**

After the revolution in 1974, Portugal acknowledged the independence of the colonies, and the colonial war came to an end. Portugal would since then become a country of immigration where citizens from former colonies would go to. The migration flow would increase in more recent years, with Portugal recognised as a country welcoming of migrants and refugees.

As the first migration flows started, the lack of laws regarding housing and territory allowed for the establishment of migrants from former African colonies to settle in places where construction was illegal. The emergence of informal slums with houses built with poor conditions. These locations, however, because of urban growth, would later gain importance considering the close proximity to the city centre. In the 90s, the State ordered the demolition of the slums and those living there had to move. The new social housing was developed in even more remote areas, creating an even bigger distance between people from groups at risk of exclusion and the rest of the community. It also made it difficult for the inhabitants to have access to the same services and resources. The marginalisation was even more emphasized, leading to growing crime rates, poverty, and stigmatization (Treviani, 2019). However, marginalisation was not the only thing that grew, the population also started to increase, with migrants (especially, but not only, from former colonies like Angola, Brazil, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe), gypsies, and Portuguese people with low social-economic status being the main resident groups.

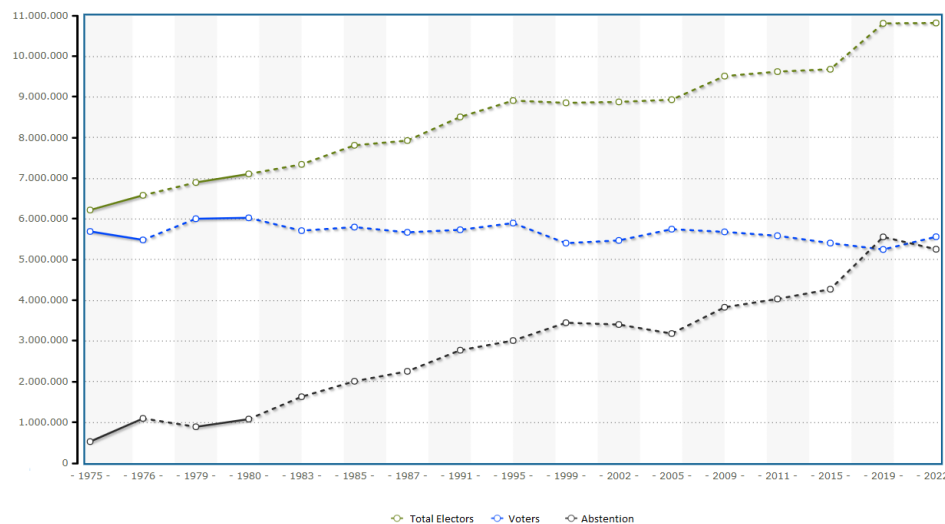
At present, although access to the urban areas is facilitated, there is still a social divide between communities living in suburban areas and the metropolitan area. Some of these areas are considered dangerous by the rest of the population and, in some cases, there is discrimination against those who live there. People who live in neighbourhoods considered dangerous face many issues when trying to fit in society. There are even known accounts of people giving different addresses when looking for employment in hopes of getting more opportunities. Criminality rates in these areas are also higher than the rest of the country causing even some of the residents to live in constant stress and in risk of suffering from common crimes like robbery or assault. Young people, in particular, are more prone to being in violent situations and are also more often than not exposed to dangers like drugs and illegal activities from an early age.

## Young people and democratic participation

Similarly to what is the European scenario, in Portugal there are two main perspectives that stand out when it comes to young people's participation in democratic life:

- (1) One of the theories is that young people have no interest in democratic and civic participation. They are selfish and do not care enough about society. The abyssal increase of abstention (as seen below) in elections through the years is used as evidence to support the perspective that young adults are not keen on exercising their rights and duties. While, since the first national elections, the number of electors has doubled, the number of people abstaining from voting has significantly increased, amounting to 42% of abstention in the 2022 elections.

Political scientist, António Costa Pinto, points out that the lack of participation from young people can be explained by them already being born in a democratic society and not feeling any concerns about it. This view is also commonly shared particularly among older generations who lived through Estado Novo and that feel like younger people take their freedom and rights from granted and are inactive and disinterested in society.



Source: PORDATA, 2022

- (2) In contrast, there is the theory that supports that young people are actually more active and informed about political causes and events, specifically when it comes to environmental issues, racism, and feminism (Marta, 2020). This perspective defends that young people are choosing to participate in society by other methods, such as activism or voluntary work, rather than traditional methods, such as voting.

Although both of these perspectives may have some truth to them, most recent studies have supported the later. According to MEP, Lídia Pereira (PSD, 28), young people's disinterest is limited to formal participation, since activities such as volunteering are prevailing among this age group. In addition, numerous studies indicate that people are less interested in conventional, hierarchical, and institutionalized ways of participation, and more interested in civic participation through associativism, which is seen as a more direct and immediate way to get results that allows social closeness and gives participants a 'louder voice' (Marta, 2020). Some of the most common ways of participation detected among young

people are volunteering, participation in youth organisations, participation in projects, campaigns and initiatives, youth councils, and student associations.

Young people have also distinctively shown they are active participants through online environments. This includes taking part in forums or group discussions, as well as posting, sharing, or commenting on political and social content.

But is there a reason for this change other than just natural evolution? And what are young people views towards democracy?

The main reasons appointed behind the disengagement of the younger generations from traditional participation is the lack of trust in political institutions and the incapacity of political institutions to cater to young people. In fact, a study that assessed young Portuguese people views towards democracy asked participants to rate their level of trust in different democratic institutions in a scale from 1 to 10. Political institutions were the ones with the lowest ranking, with the government receiving an average of 2.9 out of 10 in trust levels. Similarly, regarding trust in politicians, 75% of participants giving a ranking below 3 (Marcelo, 2016).

Despite these numbers, what is at stake is not young people reliance on democracy, but solely on democratic and political actors. When it comes to the belief in democratic ideals, another study has revealed that support from young Portuguese people is generalised (70.4% of participants). Furthermore, even among those who have not openly shown support, only 4.2% of participants said they disagreed that democracy was the best ideal to govern a country. The rest of participants (25.5%) had neutral or indifferent positions (Ferreira, 2007).

## The case of young people from marginalised communities

When it comes to young adults who belong to marginalised communities, the attitude towards democracy is not very different from their peers, although there are some more constraints and barriers that jeopardise their full participation in the democratic society. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrably have lower democratic and civic participation than their counterparts. This is not only true regarding traditional participation, but also regarding the new forms of participation popular adopted by younger generations. A study conducted in 39 countries focusing on unconventional forms of participation (like participating in manifestations, protests, or petitions) revealed that the probability of taking an active position varies according to formal educational levels, meaning that the less education someone receives, the less likely they are to be active participants (Stockemer, 2014).

However, access to education is just one of the aspects that can hinder democratic participation. The environment one lives and grows up in, the examples from family and friends can change the way young people choose to participate in society. Economic status also has a significant impact in trust in democracy (Marcelo, 2016). When they are subject to a history of marginalisation and social exclusion, it is more likely that young people will be less active. Although, it can also lead to the demand of equality and activism.

In certain cases, particularly migrants, there are additional barriers such as a sense of not belonging to the country or having cultural and political views. A myriad of studies highlight the less likeliness of migrants and ethnic minorities to participate in democratic society. However, the civic and democratic participation of young migrants is crucial for their full integration in society.

## Existing opportunities and good practices

**The National Strategy on Citizenship Education.** Implemented in all public and private schools. It brings the existence of citizenship classes to all school-age people. Because it's recent, it wasn't available to the current generation of young adults. It doesn't cater to all communities, as in the example of children from a gypsy background who often don't attend school or quit at a very early age.

**The National Plan on Democratic Literacy.** It's being developed by the government with the aim of reaching young people. It aims to increase democratic literacy and participation among the younger generations. Its implementation hasn't yet started.

**Participatory Budget for Youth.** It's a democratic participation process in which citizens between 14 and 30 inclusive can present and decide on public investment projects.

**BEM COMUM.** It supports social and community projects developed by young people, giving them the tools to implement them.

**Mypolis.** An app that outlines the existing political and democratic proposals in the area they live in, also giving them the opportunity to vote in the ideas they support, to present their own ideas, to show their concerns, and to talk to politicians.

**Política (NÃO) Importa [Politics (doesn't) matter].** An initiative developed by a group of young people with the goal of fighting youth lack of participation and increasing their democratic awareness.

**Vive a Democracia.** An online national campaign with the goal of promoting young people's participation in democratic life.



# Survey

## Methodology

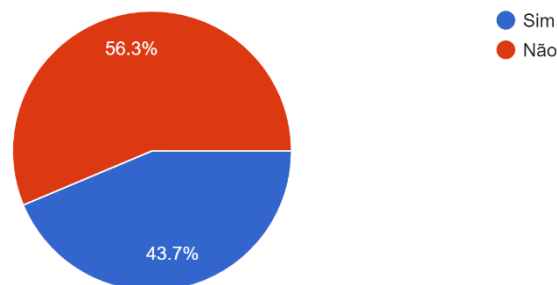
To have a better understanding of the needs and existing assets in the local community regarding citizenship learning and democratic participation, an online questionnaire was distributed among community members, with a particular emphasis on those who are also members of START POINT target group or who have experience working in close proximity with them.

The community audit, conducted in Portugal by Rightchallenge, was supported by stakeholders who helped to disseminate the online survey and to collect answers from relevant members of the local community. A total of 103 answers were collected.

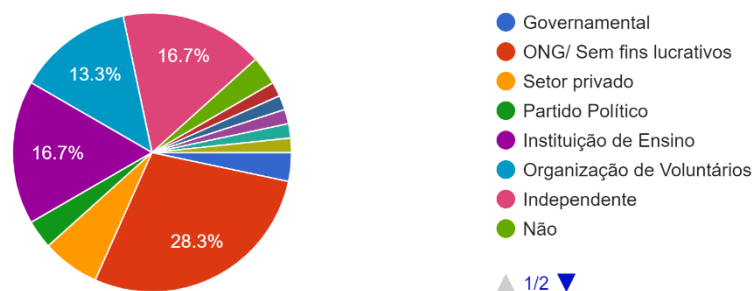
## Results

### Profile of the respondents

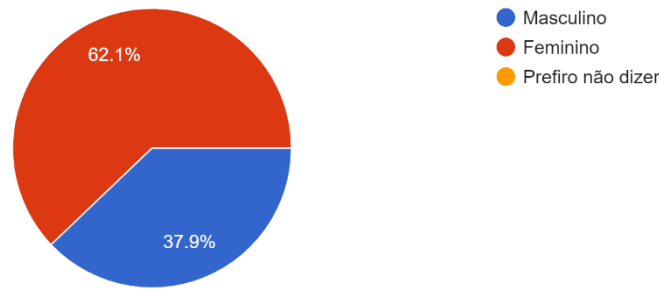
When asked if they identified as members of the target group (young adult interested in being more involved in social and political life), 43.7% of respondents said 'yes', while 56.3% answered 'no'.



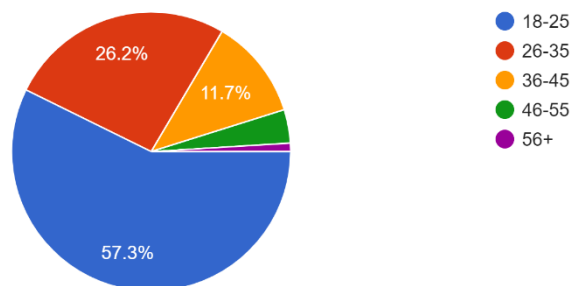
Among those who answered negatively, 28.3% had ties with non-governmental organisation; 16.7% worked in educational institutions; another 16.7% were independent; and 13.3% were part of volunteering organisations.



Regarding their gender, 62.1% identified as female, with the remaining 37.9% identifying as male.

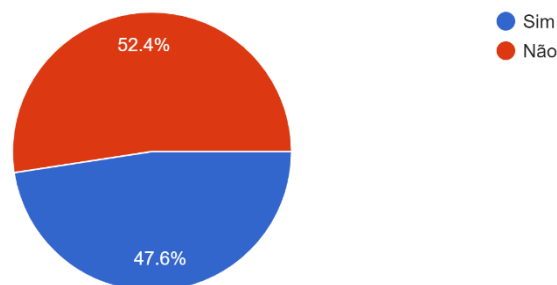


More than half of the inquires (57.3%) were part of the 18-25 years old age group, and 26.2% were between 26 and 35 years old. The percentage of people surveyed that had between 36 and 45 years old was 11.7%. The remaining 4.8% were over 46 years old.



### About democratic participation

When asked if they thought the target group has access to civic and social participation (volunteering, participating in group activities, in politics) in Portugal, 52.4% of the people surveyed saying 'no', and 47.6% answering positively.



Respondents were also asked if they were aware of any initiatives or good practices that promoted the participation of the target group in the country's social and political life. The results were as follows.

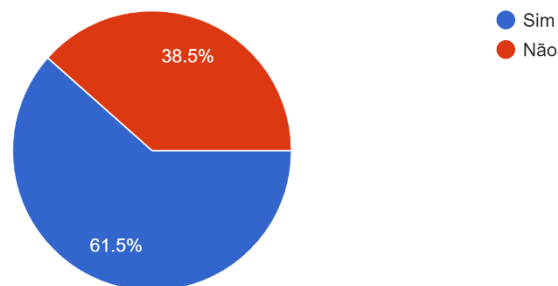
- 14 in 103 people said they were aware of such initiatives
- 4 in 103 people said they were aware of such initiatives, but that they were not affordable or free of charge

- 18 in 103 people said they were aware of such initiatives, but that they were only available in the capital or big cities
- 3 in 103 people said they aware of such initiatives, but that to access them, it's essential to have access to wi-fi or an electronic device
- 10 in 103 people said they aware of such initiatives, but that they were only available in the country's official language
- 68 in 103 said they were not aware of any such initiatives that were specifically made for the target group

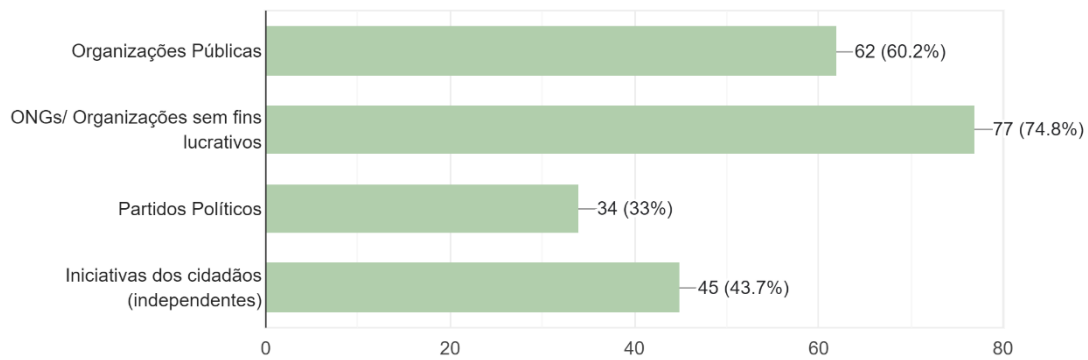
Respondents who were aware of any initiatives were asked to name them. The most mentioned answer was volunteering programmes, followed by initiatives and projects promoted by NGOs, youth organisations, youth parties, public bodies (such as municipalities), and projects at European level (such as Erasmus+ projects). Some initiatives and institutions were named for their work trying to integrate disadvantaged young people, particularly, but not only, migrants in society, such as Solidariedade Imigrante – Associação para a Defesa dos Direitos dos Imigrantes, Serviço Jesuíta aos Refugiados, Casa do Brasil de Lisboa, Centro São Cirilo, Cruz Vermelha Portuguesa – Plataforma FIRME, Amnistia, GEPE, Programa Iniciativa Jovem.

Some initiatives also named that are specifically to promote democratic participation among young people are 'BEM COMUM', Plano Nacional de Literacia Democrática, and national campaign 'Viva a Democracia'.

When asked if they thought these initiatives and good practices are also available to the general community, 61.5% of respondents answered positively, while 38.5% of disagreed.



Regarding whom the main bodies responsible for the initiatives and good practices are, 62 of the 103 people surveyed said it was public organisations, 77 out of 103 said it was NGO's and non-profits, 34 respondents answered that political parties were responsible, and 45 out of 103 said they were driven by the initiative of citizens.



Participants were asked about the main obstacles in promoting knowledge and participation among the target group. The results were as follows.

Obstacle	No. of respondents who agreed this was a main obstacle (out of 103 in total)
Lack of motivation	50
Lack of training programs/tutors	56
Lack of resources	58
Lack of accessibility (in terms of location)	56
Lack of accessibility (in terms of technology)	43
Lack of accessibility (in terms of language barrier/sign language)	48
Other	11

Participants who answered 'other' mentioned the target group lack of knowledge about the existing initiatives and the lack of promotion of such initiatives.

When asked what they thought are the main ways that information regarding ways to participate in social and civic life is disseminated in Portugal, respondents answered as presented below.

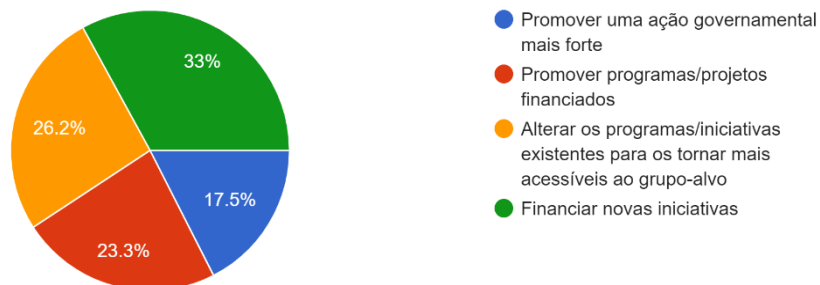
Tool	No. of respondents who agreed this was a main tool (out of 103 in total)
Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)	98
Traditional Media (TV, Newspapers, Magazines)	55
Printed Banners, Flyers in the streets	29

Word of mouth	43
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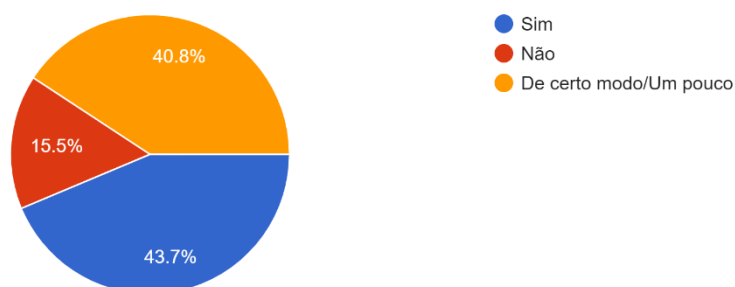
Participants were also asked what they think are the main obstacles that the target group faces when it comes to accessing the information:

- 55 out of 103 respondents said that the lack of fluency in the country's official language was a barrier
- 79 out of 103 respondents said the lack of resources were an obstacle to access information
- 62 out of 103 people surveyed blamed the lack of access to the capital or big cities as one of the factors
- 52 out of 103 respondents said lack of socialisation with the native population was an obstacle
- 52 out of 103 respondents selected lack of access to technology as one of the main barriers in access to information

When asked about how they would raise awareness about the existence, nature, and features of the issue of lack of participation of the Target Group to their country's democracy, 33% of respondents answered with the funding of new initiatives, 26.2% answered with the adaptation of existing programs and initiatives to make them more accessible to the target group. Furthermore, 23.3% of those surveyed answered with the promotion of organisation – funded programs, and the remaining 17.5% answered with pushing for stronger governmental action.



Lastly, participants were asked if they saw themselves as an active participant in the democratic society. 43.7% of the people surveyed answered 'yes', 40.8% answered 'to some extent', and 15.5% selected 'no'.



# Conclusions

Despite some evidence that democratic participation among the younger generations is decreasing, it's more likely that the way they participate is simply changing. According to different data, young people have been developing an interest in democratic participation through online means, volunteering, campaigns, petitions, and activism. Although, the rates of participation in democratic society is not as low as one might have expected, it's very clear that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds find many more barriers to active participation.

The existing good practices that promote citizenship learning and democratic participation are less accessible to the target group. Cultural, language, economic, and geographical aspects can significantly inhibit their ability to fully participate in democratic life.

The results of the audit survey have revealed that there is lack of agreement regarding if the target group members have access to civic and social participation or not. Furthermore, the majority of the participants weren't aware of any initiatives or good practices promoting young people participation.

This shows the need to develop and implement initiatives that reach young disadvantaged adults and truly give them the opportunity and tools to be active citizens in society.

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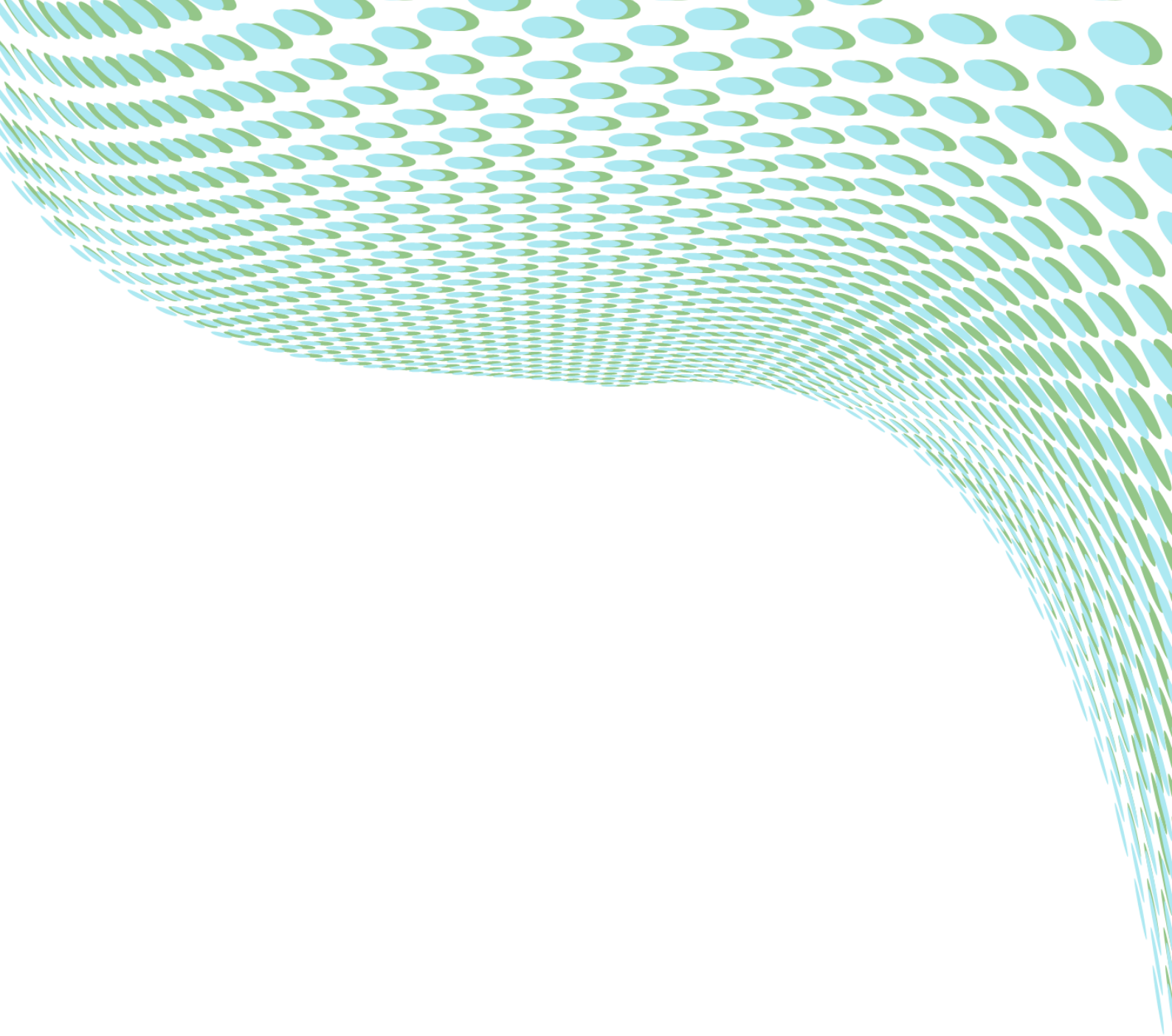
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Co-funded by  
the European Union

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Project no. 2021-1-DE02-KA220-ADU-000026469