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**BECOMING SMART WITH
AND FOR YOUNG PEOPLE –
CASE STUDY OF ESTONIAN
MUNICIPALITIES**

Master's thesis

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**NUTIKAKS KOOS NOORTEGA
JA NOORTE HEAKS
– JUHTUMIURING EESTI KOHALIKE
OMAVALITSUSTE NÄITEL**

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Author's declaration

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis. All the used materials, references to the literature and the work of others have been referred to. This thesis has not been presented for examination anywhere else.

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Abstract

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to analyse how municipalities can benefit through systematic engagement of citizens based on the example of fostering youth participation?

This thesis will examine the case study of Estonian municipalities by offering an overview about motivation and perspectives of prioritizing engagement of young people, i.e. fostering youth participation on municipality level. The aim of this study is analysing to what extent and derived from which drivers does the design and delivery of youth work services consider and respond to the situation, needs and expectations of young people of particular local government. Additionally the future-proofing dimension is considered, i.e. is the planning phase rather reactive to current problems or – based on prognosis, global megatrends, analytical tools and methods – proactively addressing emerging challenges of the future. In the sense of drivers the study aims to identify how the target group is prioritized, framed and approached from public servants *versus* decision-makers point of view and how the young people position themselves in this relation.

This thesis is written in English and is 64 pages long, including 6 chapters, 3 figures and 3 tables.

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1 Introduction

For years Estonian digital orientation and development of digital governance solutions has been a rather exceptional example of how the public sector can function and communicate with citizens mainly through digital means. In search of Estonian success factors for becoming pioneers in the field, the country's young democracy and drastic shift from Soviet patronage to Western meritocratic public administration system after restoration of independence in the early 1990s [1]. Despite positive aspects of engaging information and communication technologies (ICT) solutions to increasing participation in democracy or in general interacting between state and citizens, various critics have discussed related risks, such as manipulation, polarization, censorship and lack of anonymity [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 paralyzed for momentum almost the entire world by demonstrating how fragile might be depending only on physical solutions. Even if services are not provided entirely in digital platforms (due to tradition or burdens of the legislative system), they tend to at least partially include some digital elements or digitized business processes (e.g. identification, management or storage of data, creating logs etc.). Private sector organisations tend to adopt digital technologies for increasing their efficiency (including optimizing the use of resources) and allow higher flexibility to respond to changes in the market [3]. Although, recognizing the motivation of the public sector to redefine their current business processes, traditions and interactions with citizens is more complex. Solutions developed, adopted and mainstreamed by the public in Estonia, such as e-taxation or I-voting, do simplify the business processes for both the state as well the citizens, allow to choose appropriate channels for communication and contribute for achieving more seamless interaction. At the same time implementing such solutions on state level might increase the citizens' expectations to receive such interactions despite all governance levels.

Besides the well-accessible state level services in Estonia the situation on local level is more dependent on various factors, such as population, size and wealthiness of municipality, but also much pragmatic, e.g. political prioritization of innovative solutions. That does raise a question whether and in which proportion or extent the state has responsibility to create (more) enabling and favouring conditions to foster innovation in service delivery?

From state perspective, designing more responsive public services which would meet citizens' emerging needs and expectations, as well enabling their broader access to various services (despite users geographical location or socio-economic background), has been prioritized through state long-term strategy “Estonia 2035” [4]. Similarly to other European Union countries Estonia has an aging society model and taking into account Estonian post-Soviet period political traditions, electoral behaviour and patterns, the decision-makers tend to prioritize older voter groups, to react and address their (rather) short-term objectives in order to strengthen and secure their political position. Although, relying on global megatrends and various future scenarios, it becomes more crucial to consider long-term perspective and possible influences on younger generations who have limited opportunities to mitigate the causes, but have to tackle the outcomes.

Young people have various definitions throughout the World. In Estonia the legislation defines youth between the ages of 7-26 years [5]. Increasing the awareness and knowledge about young people is one of the enablers for solving various challenges, such as rather reactive (*versus* proactive) manner in policy-making processes, prevalent positions of young people inside the local communities (source of problems instead of resource for the community), imbalances between access to various youth work services etc. From the youth policy perspective all other policy fields influencing young people's daily lives – such as social affairs, education, labour market etc. – are important, but youth work services are one of the few which are dedicated to direct focus on young people's specific needs and expectations.

Today's youth are in public discussions often framed as future taxpayers who are responsible to ensure welfare and social protection for the growing proportion of elderly people. At the same time they are often excluded from or marginalized during relevant discussions (due to lack of life experience or prevailing viewpoints). That does raise the question of young people's opportunities for shaping their future in a way which would balance with high societal expectations.

In order to be more responsive as well future-oriented and predictive, sufficient collection and usage of various datasets and knowledge are key enablers. Estonian “Youth Field Strategy 2021-2035” aims “to adopt a comprehensive monitoring- and analysis mechanism which would provide meaningful input for more evidence-based and responsive services and decisions” [6]. Throughout previous strategic planning periods

tools such as “Youth monitoring” and Smart Youth Work concept were launched, which prioritizes developing various solutions in order to allow comprehensive and timely overview about youth emerging needs and expectations to enable (in longer perspective) more evidence based policy-making and shift its manner from reactive to rather proactive.

In addition to monitoring and analysis solutions, the “Youth Field Strategy 2021-2035” prioritizes empowering young people in the sense of fostering their active citizenship, creating enabling conditions and allowing meaningful self-realisation opportunities for their earlier engagement to society [6]. In order to be sufficient and impactful, not only the state level but also municipalities – who are obligated by the law to deliver various public services targeted for youth – should ensure and adopt relevant measures and initiatives by engaging youth opinions and address their needs [7]. Although similar to already referred age-based prioritization in municipality level politics, more vocal and active youth tend to participate and address their needs, which does leave to the background youth with diverse backgrounds (including those in risk).

This research will examine the case study of Estonian municipalities by offering an overview about motivation and perspectives of prioritizing engagement of young people, i.e. fostering youth participation on municipality level. The aim of this study is analysing to what extent and derives from which drivers the design and delivery of youth work services consider and respond to the situation, needs and expectations of young people of particular local government. Additionally the future-proofing dimension is considered, i.e. is the planning phase rather reactive to current problems or – based on prognosis, global megatrends, analytical tools and methods – proactively addressing emerging challenges of the future. In the sense of drivers the study aims to identify how the target group prioritized, framed and approached from public servants *versus* decision-makers point of view and how the young people position themselves in this relation.

The main research question in this paper is:

- MRQ: How can the municipalities benefit through systematic engagement of citizens based on the example of fostering youth participation?

To answer the research question, following sub questions are considered by author:

- SRQ1: What characteristics from modern governing theories are applicable in sample municipalities and their responsible officials?

- SRQ2: What elements from Digital Transformation theory are describing the status quo and future perspectives in sample municipalities?
- SRQ3: What type of good examples of youth participation could contribute for increasing the citizens' engagement towards and responsiveness of municipalities?

The author set following hypothesis prior the study:

- *H1: The services on municipality level are rather system-oriented than customer-oriented (services are meant **for** young people not designed **with** them).*
- *H2: The public servants responsible for youth work planning adopt rather reactive and experience-driven decisions than proactive and evidence-driven.*
- *H3: Youth engagement in decision-making processes is rather exceptional than systematic.*
- *H4: Young people participation experience and their relation to the municipality level officials and/or decision-makers defines their belief in reshaping the cooperation model.*

In order to respond to these research questions and hypotheses the study includes 6 chapters in total. The theoretical overview chapter does investigate concepts such as Digital Transformation and modern governing theories (such as New Public Governance and Co-Production) to identify current status quo of municipality level governance. Also, relevant international examples and good practices are considered in that chapter. In methodology overview chapter the principles for collection of data, formulation of sample for interviews and follow-up analysis has been explained. In case study chapter relevant background describing the relevance of investigating Estonian example as well the outcomes of the interviews are presented. In discussion and main findings chapter the author presents outcomes of the Case and the relevance to theoretical overview. Final chapter presents the conclusions and summary.

2 Theoretical Overview

To assess the position of young people as part of society in general, it is relevant to consider overall societal changes and these influences on youth position and wellbeing. The restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 and following the transition period from Soviet system to Western model expanded rapidly the variety of opportunities for those in the age between 20-30 years. Instead of limited options related to education or career pathways, opening to the West simplified the access to capital and resources, starting an independent enterprise or occupying prosperous positions. Compared to the previous career-oriented system (both in public as well private sector) the post-Soviet realm was rather favouring those who were willing to take risks, adopt and accept a “western-oriented” mindset. Besides the 1990's youth generation favourable conditions for self-realisation, the period had negative sides including increase in rates of crime, usage of substances which asked for intervention from the public sphere.

The post-Soviet period has perpetuated societal expectation of young people becoming independent already in their early 20's without experiencing any significant difficulties or barriers when entering the labour market or realizing their full potential despite previous socio-economic background. That can be considered as counterweight to “Western example” where such seamless and early transition to adulthood is rather exceptional [8]. In line with overall societal transition, the described perception of early independence (including starting a family or age of acquiring tertiary education) has increased in past years, which root causes might be sought from the unstable position of nowadays youth [9]. By the significant increase of youth unemployment rates, precisely the ratio of youth in NEET-status, the 2008's economic recession demonstrated how fragile is youth's position in the labour market context [8]. Such short-term setbacks does mostly affect young people wellbeing in particular momentum, although without timely response and adoption of appropriate mitigating measures the unsolved problems might lead to long-term, more exhaustive scars, such as decrease of youth trust towards democratic systems, degression of youth self-esteem, confidence or physical and mental health, which turn more costly for society [10]. The question is – how does these challenges and related needs from

a youth perspective become heard and responded on e.g. municipality level? Solution for that can be fostering youth participation.

2.1 Youth Participation

Due to age-restrictions young people might be excluded from political debates affecting their future. Considering the growing proportion of older people, youth are becoming a minority who are struggling to be prioritized by decision-makers. Although without sufficient opportunities to make themselves heard or present their opinion even on community level, the political apathy of young people does increase and (without acquiring skills for democratic participation) might lead to exclusion. Fostering youth participation could be a relevant solution for tackling the issue [11].

Youth participation can be considered as part of public policy and described as a process through or during which young people are engaged into discussions or decisions having a direct impact on them [12]. Checkoway et al. discuss that creating participation opportunities for young people should not be considered only from the perspective of policy- and decision-makers openness and goodwill when engaging (potential) beneficiaries to various discussions, but focus mainly on the social development of young people with overall aim to support their growth becoming active members of society by creating them favouring conditions for acquiring relevant skills and knowledge [13]. Derived from Schumpeter's political theory Dibou continues Checkoway et al. approach and highlights the importance of youth motivation and readiness to participate as well the framing of youth by policy- and decision-makers as well the public [14].

Based on a case study from England, Cooper discusses that youth political apathy might be the result of formulating the agenda mainly by public officials (without including topics important for young people). I.e. young people are distancing themselves from discussions which they do not find relevant [15]. Besides participation in physical spaces – such as youth councils or active groups on municipality level, student councils in schools and universities – Allaste and Saari investigate in their article the patterns and motivation of youth online activism (e.g. through social media opportunities). They discuss that online activism allows young people to represent their beliefs and interact only with topics important for them [16].

Youth participation can also be considered from a pedagogical point of view. Timmermann distinguishes in the article three paradigms of youth participation: (a) guiding children and youth towards becoming adult by training them acquiring societal norms and values, (b) prioritizing the self-actualization of young people by providing necessary individual assistance and support, and (c) initiating the social dialogue and introducing the societal agreements and values through active participation. Timmermann discusses, based on the example of the Netherland municipalities, that even if the active engagement of young people into the dialogue is defined in relevant plans, youth are not precisely engaged to democratic processes [17]. Such seeming participation practice can (similarly to previously described risk of exclusion) lead to young people mistrust towards the public institutions, cause their political apathy or even radicalisation. Based on international evidence, restoring the trust will demand more resources than initial effort for creating meaningful participation opportunities. In some contexts that might also demand adoption of critical youth work, i.e. empowering young people to more radically represent their opinions at community level [18].

Acknowledging the value of youth participation by the policy- and decision-makers can be distinguished and described through two main dimensions – (a) the perspective how young people are framed in particular momentum or related to society in general and (b) the extent and purpose how external parties (including interest groups, local citizens and other social or strategic partners) are engaged into governance. [12]. Based on youth insights Dibou does mention the difference in public servants attitude towards young people depending on the topic which is currently under discussion [14]. Checkoway et al. does highlight the power of media when portraying – based on individual or sub-group behaviour – youth as whole “troubled and troubling” or “problems in society”. When accepting and normalizing such generalization, it becomes difficult to mainstream “youth as resource” approach. In the sense of policy-making the focus tends to shift from “creating supportive conditions for youth self-development and self-realization” to “measures for tackling young people as a source of problem” [13]. Derived from that – the “reactive” versus “proactive” approach can be distinguished.

2.1.1 Reactive *versus* Proactive Participation

Reactive participation – in terms of youth participation – can be described as an approach where young people are engaged to process in order to validate preliminary results or ask

for additional input. Checkoway et al. described it through a budgeting process example where young people were allowed to propose suggestions to the already drafted version of the annual budget. The proactive participation on the other hand can be characterised through earlier engagement of young people by allowing them to provide insights already before the formulation of the budget project. Acknowledging youth participation from a reactive *versus* proactive perspective is crucial from allowing young people to be the agenda-setters, not only respond and provide feedback to already formed questions [13].

From another perspective the reactive *versus* proactive participation can reflect whether the orientation is directed to responding to the challenges of past or future. I.e. reacting to already realised risks or proactively seeking options for mitigating risks and tackling the upcoming challenges. Carabelli and Lyon described adopting creative methods for imagining about the future and acknowledging potential of contributing to realisation [19]. Dibou does emphasize that expectations towards youth in participation processes tend to be complex and challenging to relate. Young people expect to create additional links between participation and various non-formal education methods and formats [14]. Similar idea is also highlighted by Poli and Butt-Pósnik who notice the need for adopting participation formats more suitable for young people's needs in order to ensure that their opinions reach the necessary level of decision-making processes. ICT solutions might be one of the enablers in particular context by allowing timely exchange of information and knowledge, but also changing the nature of current traditions [11].

Considering that traditional participation formats are not relevant for youth of today, providing them seamless options in non-formal contexts (such as social media or other types of digital sphere) can transfer the attitude and habits to the physical sphere as well [11]. Allaste and Saari study confirm the outcomes of Wolfsfeld et al. that social media has potential to increase participation [20]. Speaking of creating favouring conditions for fostering youth participation, Checkoway et al. highlight the importance of support from so called “adult allies” – either policy- or decision-makers, their parents or youth workers – who can contribute to creating favourable conditions for participation (e.g. providing or translating the context if needed) [13]. Despite the environment, purpose or methods – enabling the youth participation as part of policy making is rather dependent on public officials willingness, which is in relation to the governing model.

2.2 From Weberian Public Administration to New Public Governance

Despite the traditional hierarchy-oriented public administration model being considered as an academic discipline since the beginning of 20th century, it has been defining the structure and logic of “old Western democracies” for much longer. By the Weberian public administration model the ideal logic of public administration was described through hierarchic structure and role of bureaucrats, which has been opposed through modern new management theories, such as New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG) [21]. Even though the Weberian public administration model was criticised for slowness, orientation to process (instead of results) and acquiring an element of authoritarian governing, it has still been recognized as the most rational form (particularly in context of its origins) [22].

By seeking good examples and innovation from private sector organisations and their management, the NPM was one of the first attempts to redefine the role of the public sector through prioritization of efficiency. Even though the critics have stated that public sector organisation can never shift from hierarchical structure to more horizontal one, various core values of public authorities (such as strict regulations and formalized business processes) can be changed [21]. Besides NPM potential to increase public sector resource-efficiency factor, redefining the cooperation model between public sector institutions and external parties from the private sector would also allow engagement of expertise, which is an enabler for increasing the service quality [23].

One of the main changes of NPM compared to traditional public administration is separating the policy-making from actual service delivery and outsourcing the service provision to external partners. I.e. instead of the implementation process prioritizing the end result. Van Gestel et al. define both the NPM and NPG as “response to growing complexity of societies” which would more thoroughly acknowledge the individual needs of citizens. The authors discuss that even though it becomes more challenging to distinguish the differences between these two concepts, the NPG tends to balance both Weberian public administration as well the NPM by leaving challenges (such as bureaucratic burdens and orientation to efficiency only) aside and seeking co-production opportunities between multiple actors [24].

Applicability of traditional public administration, NPM or NPG in post-Soviet countries has gained various authors attention on how to balance between positive outcomes (for example increase of transparency or meritocracy) and at the same time mitigate the negative effects, such as relatively high rates of corruption. Hilmer Pedersen & Johannsen discuss that a stable democratic regime in the country is one of the preconditions for all these disciplines. Despite post-Soviet countries' strong motivation in the 1990s to transition from communist system to Western model and acquire “Weberian” principles, as well derived from countries political history there are various risks and aspects that should be acknowledged, such as accountability and loyalty of public servants [25]. Reinholde et al. highlighted that even though the public administration discipline is over a century old – and can be considered as base for further NPM and NPG theories –in transitioning post-communist countries, the characteristics from all three disciplines could coexist at the same time. Adjusting to the new socio-economical realm and aiming radical changes (derived from high political as well public expectations) in a short time frame, have caused various chaotic outcomes. Similarly to Hilmer Pedersen & Johannsen, Reinholde et al. pointed out that due to weak public administration tradition, implementing NPM might pose a risk for transitioning countries through the illusion of achieving better results in a resource-efficient manner. Despite the risks implementing the “Weberian” principles was considered as a prerequisite when integrating post-communistic countries to Western political sphere [21].

Besides the pessimistic perspective both authors acknowledge the positive potential of NPM as well the NPG to become more citizen-oriented by initiating dialogue and fostering cooperation between public and private actors. NPM did create enabling conditions for engaging citizens to service delivery through co-production method [22]. The NPG does prioritize the role of acknowledging various norms and values, including creating more meaningful participation opportunities for the citizens. Through broader engagement of external partners and target groups the public sector does increase their accountability and increase efficiency. Hilmer Pedersen & Johannsen emphasize that even positive aspects include various risks, such as leading to particularism and questioning the role of representative democracy [25].

2.2.1 Co-production

Co-production can be defined after Fledderus et al. as regular and agreed cooperation between officials and the clients (or citizens) dedicated to public service delivery based on

trust factor (which is one of the expected outcomes for the process). By enabling the adoption of basic control, such an approach would increase the ownership of citizens, particularly at the municipality level and strengthen the connection with the community [26]. Clifton et al. continue that co-production approach changes the traditional perspective for the role of public authority [27]. Similarly to youth participation – insufficient implementation might lead to opposite results and distance the citizens from public institutions [26].

Grönroos discusses that co-production processes tend to focus only on the engagement of the citizens without meaningfully assessing and addressing the outcomes of such processes. Step forward should be acknowledging the value aspect of both the service design as well the participatory process itself which might not precisely lead to higher efficiency, but effectiveness (in the sense of being more responsive to actual needs) [28]. The reason why such co-production attempts tend to fail is described by van Gestel et al. through the role of responsible public officials, precisely their lack of necessary skills and knowledge [24].

Poli and Butt-Pósnik describe in their article the difference between “intransitive participation” and “transitive participation”. If first refers to rather indirect influencing opportunities, such as petitions, campaigns or activism in general (for the purpose of increasing the transparency of the public sector), then besides providing information the “transitive participation” aims for consultations and co-operation in close cooperation between public authority and relevant target groups [11]. Dibou emphasize considering the youth position in municipality, close cooperation (such as described under “transitive participation” or co-production in general) should be considered, because current approach (particularly in Estonian context) tends to be too narrow [14].

Even though the co-production is evaluated conveniently in face-to-face settings, adopting digital solutions during the process could support achieving the transparency for outcomes of the process [26]. Through digital tools the co-production could realize new means, lead to cost savings or in general increase the public value, but at the same time possess the risk of exclusion (due to lack of technical skills or access to technology) [27]. In the context of the 21st century the prevailing question is whether adopting digital solutions (through Digital Transformation) compliments the ambitions of NPM or NPG or does it even support countries transitioning from one approach to another. Drechsler does discuss that

basis for digital transformation is strong Weberian public administration, but also mentions the potential leading to NPM and vice versa [22].

2.3 Digital Transformation

The digital transformation is used as reference to either structural changes in industrial context or describing the shift of business processes inside organisations [29]. Considering the potential of digital transformation to achieve higher personalization for products of industries (without significant increase of prices) then similar effects might also occur in various services delivered by organisations [30]. Despite the perception that digital transformation aims only to improve already existing formats, services or products by digital elements, it also includes the digitization of current work routines [31]. Not only that the business processes could be transferred to various virtual environments, but the digital transformation urges organisations to reconsider the importance of data as part of their model [32].

Hess et al. highlight in their article four dimensions of digital transformation as (a) the current level of organisation adopting technologies, (b) ambition related to organisation values (defining those through change), (c) essential adjustments inside the organisation structure, and (d) the price of transformation process [33]. I.e. initiating the digital transformation inside the organisation demands finding sufficient balance between enabling conditions (current assets) and future-oriented ambitions. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved that digital transformation is not only representing the contemporary mindset and flexibility of organisations, but also increasing their resilience to cope with and mitigate various risks. Despite public expectations to return to “normal life” in physical context in earliest convenience, the pandemic has rapidly changed organisations’ former routines and business processes as well proved need for higher efficiency and coping with multiple platforms [3]. At the same time COVID-19 pandemic has increased the expectations towards big data and its role in the digital transformation context (by supporting organisations to transform e.g. through predictive learning opportunities etc.) [34].

To assess the current situation of organisation and analyse the further potential related to maturity of digital transformation, the maturity model is designed and discussed by multiple authors. Becker et al. identify maturity models through ‘descriptive’ or

‘prescriptive’ purpose, where ‘descriptive’ functionality allows to identify specific components for further developments and ‘prescriptive’ functionality leads organisations to specific measures or modifications which support achievement of expected maturity level [35]. Instead of predefined maturity stages Berghaus&Back conducted in 2016 research which used initial outcomes of ongoing processes as base for analysis. As a result Berghaus&Beck defined Digital Maturity Model consisting of nine dimensions (such as customer experience, product innovation, strategy, organization, process digitization, collaboration, information technology, culture & expertise and transformation management) and five stages: “promote and support”; “create and build”; “commit to transform”; “user centred, elaborated processes”; “data-driven enterprise”, which are described on Figure 1 [29].



Figure 1. Berghaus&Beck (2016) “Digital Maturity Model” referred by author

Similarly to Berghaus&Beck evolving approach Loonam et al. emphasize in their article the fact that ambitious and rushed ICT-initiatives tend to have higher risk of failure. At the same time there is also risk that without sufficient reforms and improvements the

organisations tend to harm their competitiveness. By investigating applicability of digital transformation in traditional organisations settings Loonam et al. highlight as prerequisite aligned structure and defined processes. The authors distinguish four kind of actions adopted and implemented by organisations which should in essence complement mutually: (a) strategy-centric actions (defining uniqueness through technological advantage compared to competitors), (b) customer-centric actions (merging various interaction platforms to engage the customers), (c) organizational-centric actions (acknowledging the full potential of other resources besides technological, e.g. human resources, understanding the need for digital solutions), and (d) technology-centric actions (creating favouring conditions for integrating technology and data to current model). The authors conclude their discussion by identifying the need for keeping holistic perspective, supporting bottom-up approach and adaptability to changes [30].

The adaptivity of Digital Transformation might be more convenient in private sector settings compared to public sector (due to less legislative burdens or higher risk tolerance). Hansen et al. analysed various municipalities' examples in context of adopting digital transformation. Based on the evidence, the authors emphasized the role of hierarchical motivation which e.g. from regional or state level can initiate the process inside a concrete municipality (even in situations where local leaders do not identify the need). The openness and communicating factor inside a municipality, which involves accepting different ideas on a leader's level, but also taking ownership for process and its outcomes by officials, does define the success of digital transformation [36]. The importance of communication (internally as well externally) was also emphasized by Mugge et al. [32].

Derived from Berghaus&Beck Digital Maturity Model, achieving the final stage – data-driven enterprise – is highly dependent on motivation at the executive level (to prioritize purposeful collection and usage of data, sufficient resource allocation and exploitation of various digital technologies) as well as organisation members willingness to adopt with changes [29]. Digital Transformation ambitions related to redefining core values and routines and prioritizing the user-centric perspective as part of organisations' business processes goes in line with previously described modern governing theories, such as New Public Management or New Public Governance.

3 Research Methodology

The theoretical overview provided evidence that modern governing theories such as New Public Management and New Public Governance have created more enabling conditions for fostering civic engagement into public services design and delivery with an overall aim increasing the responsiveness to needs and expectations with various society groups (including young people). Approaches such co-production does have limitations – such as focussing on engagement processes rather the outcomes and actual impact. At the same considering the influence of Digital Transformation, i.e. changing the routines and business processes inside the organisation and at the same time increasing the role of digital solutions when communicating with the target group, then there is potential for designing and delivering more responsive public services and enabling positive participation experience for young people.

In order to better identify the adaptability of theories in concrete context the author chose as empirical method the case study format. After Robert K. Yin the case study method can be applied for “investigating a contemporary phenomenon within real life context, particularly if boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” [37]. Based on the Yin the author used a multiple-case holistic approach to gather evidence from different types of municipalities and specify the applicability of outcomes in broader context [37].

The research is based on semi-structured and structured interviews mainly with public servants, who are responsible for youth work planning on municipality level. The interviews were conducted in two phases. First to identify responsible public servants' overall perspectives and relation to a particular topic, which was used as the basis for formulating the scope for theoretical overview and finalizing the thesis design. Second phase of the interviews were conducted after theoretical overview in order to assess and analyse the applicability in concrete case context. Since the thesis is considering specifically the youth participation in municipality context, interviews with youth representatives were conducted to validate the outcomes and engage youth opinions for discussion.

The main research question in this paper is: how can the municipalities benefit through systematic engagement of citizens based on the example of fostering youth participation?

To answer the research question, following sub questions are considered by author:

- What characteristics from modern governing theories are applicable in sample municipalities and their responsible officials?
- What elements from Digital Transformation theory are describing the status quo and future perspectives in sample municipalities?
- What type of good examples of youth participation could contribute to increasing the citizens engagement towards and responsiveness of municipalities?

When compiling the sample the author considered various characteristics such as regional coverage, dispersion kind of municipality, population size of municipality, profitability type of municipality and service level of youth work in municipality. As following the rationale for choosing the characteristics is described:

- **The dispersion kind of municipality** reflects how sparsely the inhabitants of concrete local government's territory are distributed, varying on a scale from 'central' to 'hinterland'. Particular distribution is also one component when calculating financial support mechanisms from state to local governments [38]. In context of the paper the dispersion kind demonstrates complexity which municipalities might face when delivering various types of services equally to all inhabitants. E.g. in 'central' type of municipalities it might be easier to engage young people with various backgrounds to consultation processes then in 'hinterland' context (due to lower dependency on transportation availability).
- **The population size of a municipality** enables estimating out of all inhabitants in a particular territory the proportion of young people. In 2018 the young people (from 7 to 26 years) formed on average 21% of municipalities inhabitants varying from 12,6% in rural and remote areas (including islands) to 26,4% in bigger centres [9]. The proportion of young people allows us to assess whether there is a critical mass for a variety of services. E.g. in municipalities with a rather small proportion of young people (in combination with a hinterland kind of dispersion model) it becomes more challenging for local governments to grant equal access to various youth services (from cost-efficiency point of view).
- **Profitability type of a municipality** reflects the revenues and tax based incomes of a municipality (per capita) on a scale from "Low wealth" to "Wealthy" [38]. In

context of the paper it allows to (a) evaluate local government flexibility to allow and finance the delivery of various services, and (b) assess political willingness of prioritizing young people and youth services provision. E.g. in case there are “Wealthy” municipalities which do not allocate sufficient resources for youth services delivery, it does reflect lack of political interest towards young people.

- **Service level of youth work in municipalities** consists of 4 sub-categories and 20 different indicators which are compiled with the outcomes of national registries and databases as well surveys. The scale varies from 1 to 9 which are distributed to levels “Basic” (1-3), “Advanced” (4-6) and “Excellent” (7-9). The sub-categories consider satisfaction and availability of youth work services, take into account how systematic is, by whom (employees) and in which conditions (infrastructure) the services are delivered to the target group [38]. In context of the paper the service level does indicate the strengths and weaknesses of youth services delivery in particular municipalities and allows to notice priorities.

Table 1. Description of sample for focus group interview

	Dispersion kind of municipality	Population size of municipality	Profitability type of municipality	Service level of youth work in municipality
Municipality A	Central	> 16 000	Moderately wealthy	Advanced (6 out of 9)
Municipality B	Central	> 16 000	Low wealth	Advanced (4 out of 9)
Municipality C	Centre with hinterland	> 16 000	Wealthy	Advanced (6 out of 9)
Municipality D	Hinterland	< 16 000	Low wealth	Basic (3 out of 9)

3.1 Semi-structured Focus Group Interview

In November 2020 the author conducted a semi-structured focus group interview with representatives from four Municipalities, whose profile is described in Table 1. The aim of the focus group interview was gaining general understanding how public servants, who are responsible for youth work planning on municipality level, do collect, value and use different kinds of data and knowledge about young people in their municipality. More precisely what is the role of evidence (such as data, general statistics, feedback from target group and service providers) and do they acknowledge links with other policy fields (e.g. social affairs, child protection, education etc.).

Prior to the interview the participants were asked to answer the question “Please describe the challenges you have experienced when collecting and/or using data related to youth services”. During the interview the participants were asked to share good examples of creating innovation, developing new kinds of monitoring tools or data-driven solutions in municipalities (particularly supporting the well-being of young people and gaining better understanding of their needs and expectations).

Based on statistics, analytical reports and other evidence-based resources the author designed prior to the focus group four personas (included as Appendix 2. Personas for the focus group interview) of young people with various backgrounds, who face multi-complex problems which should be at least partially the responsibility of youth work services. The aim of concrete personas was creating a common ground for participants to discuss. Through particular method the author aimed to understand how the public servants approach complex policy issues and prior to the focus group defined following hypothesis:

*H1: The services on municipality level are rather system-oriented than customer-oriented (services are meant **for** young people not designed **with** them).*

Based on these personas the interviewees were asked to respond following questions:

- a) Who could and should notice a particular persona in current settings?
- b) Which (already existing) dataset could point out particular persona needs and challenges?

- c) Through which available service or support mechanism could a particular persona be supported?
- d) What would be an ideal solution for a particular persona to enable them access to various self-actualization opportunities and ensure their overall well-being?

In addition to the structured interview part, derived from participants' responses, various questions related to examples of good practices were asked by the author.

3.2 Structured In-depth Interviews

Derived from outcomes of theoretical overview the author conducted in April 2021 four in-depth structured interviews with different municipality level public servants responsible for youth work planning to understand applicability of theoretical concepts in Estonian context and compare potential outcomes of the paper with public officials routines in practice. The profile of the interviewees is described in Table 2. Despite the fact that one municipality was represented both in focus group and in-depth interview, the respondent was not duplicating by allowing different perspectives and field-related experiences.

Table 2. Description of sample for interviews with public servants

	Dispersion kind of municipality	Population size of municipality	Profitability type of municipality	Service level of youth work in municipality
Interview E (Municipality A)	Central	> 16 000	Moderately wealthy	Advanced (6 out of 9)
Interview F	Central	> 16 000	Wealthy	Advanced (6 out of 9)
Interview G	Central	< 16 000	Moderately wealthy	Advanced (5 out of 9)
Interview H	Partially hinterland	< 16 000	Wealthy	Basic (3 out of 9)

The questionnaire (included as Appendix 3. Questionnaire for interviews with public servants) consisted of three parts: (a) youth work as service position in municipality, (b) young people as stakeholder position in municipality, and (c) cooperation inside municipality and evaluation of the service quality. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions being enforced between November 2020 and April 2021, the author decided to include a particular aspect to the questionnaire by allowing respondents to evaluate the impact of pandemic to youth and related services provision.

Through interview format the author aimed to understand how the public servants responsible for youth work planning on municipality level acknowledge the contextual characteristics (such as political will, service providers adaptiveness etc.) to adopt new methods and routines. In addition to H1 and based on the outcomes of theoretical overview the author defined following hypothesis prior the interviews:

H2: The public servants responsible for youth work planning adopt rather reactive and experience-driven decisions than proactive and evidence-driven.

H3: Youth engagement in decision-making processes is rather exceptional than systematic.

3.3. Interviews with Youth Representatives

To validate the outcomes of interviews with public servants the author conducted additionally in May 2021 three in-depth interviews with youth representatives (profile described in Table 3) from different municipalities, who have good knowledge and experience related to youth participation on both local and national level.

Table 3. Description of sample for interviews with youth representatives

	Dispersion kind of municipality	Population size of municipality	Profitability type of municipality	Service level of youth work in municipality
Interview I (Municipality G)	Central	< 16 000	Moderately wealthy	Advanced (5 out of 9)
Interview J	Centre with hinterland	< 16 000	Moderately wealthy	Advanced (4 out of 9)

Interview K	Hinterland	< 16 000	Low wealth	Advanced (4 out of 9)
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The questionnaire (included as Appendix 4. Questionnaire for interviews with youth representatives) was partially based on similar questions as for the interviews with public servants to compare whether there are common aspects of both parties. Additionally the author asked youth representatives to analyse the obstacles and challenges they have faced on municipality level, evaluate the attitude towards young people from relevant authorities and decision-makers as well propose opportunities for fostering youth participation and creating enabling conditions.

Through the interview format the author aimed to understand how youth representatives position themselves in municipality context and how their expectations and needs respond to and meet the priorities of youth work planning, perspectives of responsible officials and decision-makers. Derived from the theoretical overview the author considered youth representatives willingness to shift current routines and reconceptualize the youth participation on local level. In addition to previously defined H1 and H3, the author set following hypothesis:

H4: Young people participation experience and their relation to the municipality level officials and/or decision-makers defines their belief in reshaping the cooperation model.

4 The Case

In this chapter the author provides general contextual background about the Case as well present the main outcomes of the conducted interviews.

4.1 Background of the Case

Compared to other countries in the region – who are seeking solutions for seamlessly integrating youth with migrant background into the local culture – Estonia has tackled the issue of creating more favourable conditions for and in order to integrate the Russian-speaking minority. Since the restoration of Estonian independence (and economical as well societal aftermaths) there has been systematic attempts focussing on and actively supporting youth from Russian-speaking minority – through education, counselling or youth work opportunities [8]. The transition can still be considered as “in process” and demands attention and active contribution from all levels.

Despite the ethnic or socio-economic background, young people's access to exercise their rights is unifying and topical to all. The concept of youth rights which does highlight the need to create enabling and favouring conditions to allow young people full access to their fundamental rights and freedoms during their transition to adulthood. The concept addresses the need to extend and grant young people access to universal human rights – such as right to participate, have equal access to and experience respectful treatment throughout quality education and employment, social protection etc. – and allow young people to exercise these rights despite age, background or other limitations [39]. Acknowledging youth rights independently from universal human rights or rights of children is dependent by country. In Estonia the children and youth rights are protected and promoted jointly under the Chancellor of Justice respective area [40].

Similarly to global trends the urbanization is topical in Estonia, particularly by the young adults group (age of 17-26 years) [9]. After administrative reform enforcement in 2017, the small municipalities are still tackling the issue of attracting young people to return to their home regions (particularly after acquiring education). Besides referred global tendencies that also indicates unsuccessful integration of young people into their home communities, which might be derived from limited access to self-realization opportunities and support measures, such as access to various hobby education or counselling services, right to

express opinions and participate in democratic processes etc. By engaging and supporting young people to have their say when collectively designing public spaces or services, it can support strengthening mutual trust and acknowledging the potential of young people as an equal party of community. Although, without considering the heterogeneity of young people, their background related specific needs and expectations, such participation opportunities might increase the inequalities and harm the outlooks for underrepresented youth groups – those who are not capable of expressing themselves through available platforms or do not find suitable channels.

Considering youth position in societal context there is a tendency to adopt problem-related rather than resource-oriented perspective – there are roundtables and working groups appointed to tackle youth consumption of substances, increase the interior security and prevent breach of public order. Derived from COVID-19 pandemic example, instead of engaging young people in crisis management and allowing their meaningful contribution, the question “how to restrict youth gatherings” was prevailing without acknowledging the potential of informing their peers or contributing by solidarity activities. Instead of focussing on respective communication and clear messages, warnings and demands were addressed [41]. Despite such a crisis demanding timely reaction without an option to hear all groups in society, the aftermath and long-term scars might become inevitable and more costly to mitigate later.

Since administrative reform was enforced in 2017 there are 79 municipalities in Estonia (including 15 cities and 64 rural municipalities) who are operating on a one-tier local government system, having equal legal status and functions. There are various acts – such as the Local Government Organisation Act, the Territory of Estonia Administrative Division Act, the Local Government Financial Management Act etc. – which define the core functions and distribution of obligation between municipalities and state level institutions. The state level does centrally finance the municipalities (directly from specific tax revenue streams as well the state general budget) for services they have been appointed to deliver – e.g. the youth work services [42].

Despite the main aim of administrative reform in Estonia (to increase the capacity of municipalities, their service provision as well as reducing the inequalities between different regions) there are still significant imbalances between the size and wealthiness of

municipalities. To ensure municipalities sufficient support from state level, various measures have been adopted, either field, target group or region-specifically.

Considering the proportion of e-services Estonian state authorities provide for the citizens, there are also increasing expectations towards municipalities. From the state level relevant strategies and various practical solutions have supported local governments to increase the safety of infrastructure and adopt additional access-points for making governance more visible for citizens [42]. Digitalisation and paperless mind-set has been a good foundation for e-services in local governments. I.e. the state level does provide for municipalities ICT-related knowledge and concepts about perspectives which could be achieved [43] [44]. Additionally sufficient resources are provided through open-call or targeted investments. Related to youth field focus concept note dedicated for creating smart solutions as part of youth work was created in 2016.

The Smart Youth Work concept note is a policy tool which supports achievement of strategic aims defined in relevant state level and international policy documents. In essence the smart youth work is not an independent method, but rather a framework for developing innovative and smart solutions in cooperation of young people and youth workers to consider various challenges in society and related to technology. The core principle of concept note is that these smart solutions do not necessarily have to be adopted in digital means, but it should be acknowledged as one way to create additional access-points for youth with various backgrounds and also increase the efficiency of current routines and business processes [45].

The implementation of particular concept notes is supported by action plans and in cooperation of relevant partners. Specific focus is set to collection and analysis of various data, which would allow us to consider timely evidence and insights from young people to make more informed decisions and design appropriate services. As a prerequisite acknowledging the need for and training the data-literacy skills of responsible public servants on municipality level, youth workers, policy-makers and young people is prioritized [45].

4.2 Case Description

4.2.1 Semi-structured Focus Group Interview

Prior to the focus group interview the author asked from the interviewees to highlight weaknesses and opportunities which they have experienced in their daily operations. Responses are categorized and presented by the author in Figure 2.

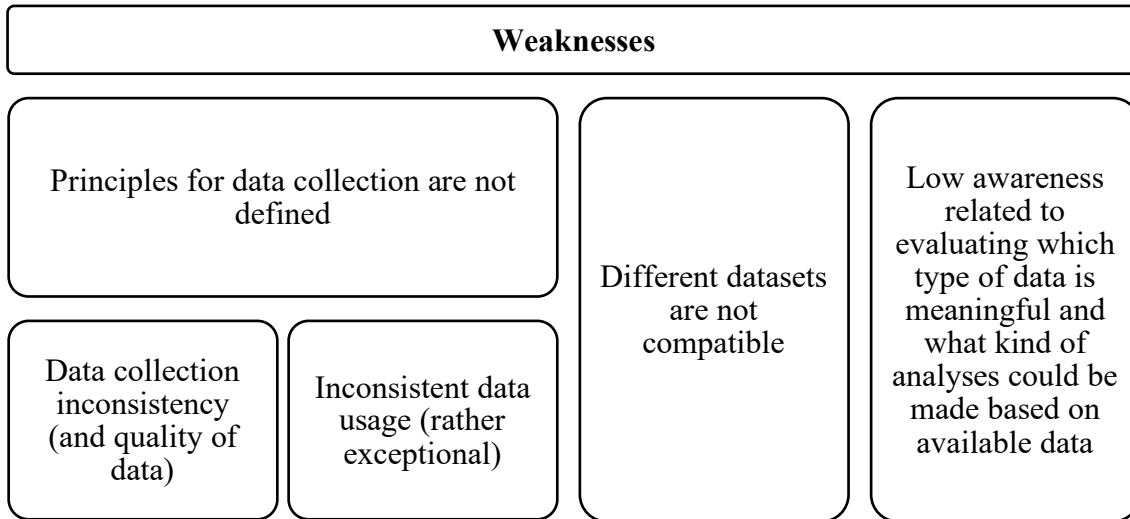


Figure 2. Weaknesses of collecting and using relevant data

Principles for data collection are not defined as described by respondents through three dimensions: (a) with community of practice (including public and private service providers), (b) inside the municipality structure, and (c) by the state level. For the community of practice the challenging aspect is motivating private providers to adopt common data collection principles (e.g. machine readable, following similar data structure) and central platforms. Although it is directly connected to the level of systematic prerequisites concrete municipality has – is it rather fragmented between different fields (each policy field uses a different platform) or centrally coordinated. The reason why different policy fields are using various platforms or systems is linked to the state level data exchange approach – e.g. are there standards defined which would enable reusing collected data centrally for investigating meaningful relations between different datasets and delivering new knowledge or allowing access to central databases (e.g. through X-road).

During the focus group the author specified the **data collection inconsistency** aspect, which was illustrated by examples of compiling manually different spreadsheet files in order to deliver expected outcomes. Reason for that is described by **inconsistent data**

usage – in respondents' experience delivering similar reports is rather an exceptional purpose to access different datasets. Also, considering that **different datasets are not compatible**, it might be the only option to create necessary comparison. Finally, respondents' low **awareness related to evaluating which type of data is meaningful and what kind of analyses could be made based on available data** can be considered as well the opportunity – better data-literacy and necessary support would allow overcome previously referred weaknesses.

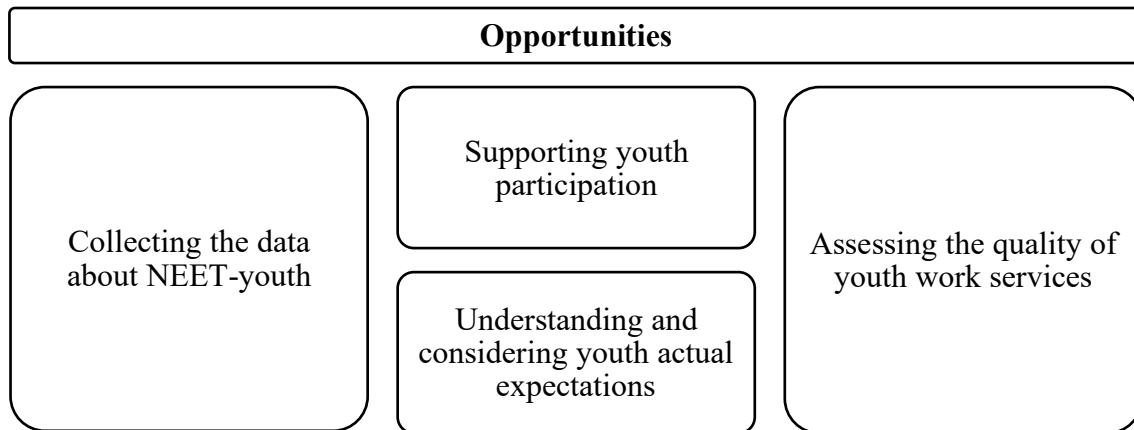


Figure 3. Opportunities of collecting and using related data sufficiently

Related to opportunities (which are presented in Figure 3) the respondents highlighted the need to gain better knowledge about specific youth groups who are currently off the sight, e.g. **collecting the data about NEET-youth** (who are not in education, employment nor training). During the focus group respondents elaborated that despite the state level registry-based tool for identifying young people at risk of NEET, for which the municipalities can apply access to, there is still a need for understanding specific needs and situations of NEET youth in concrete regions. In a broader perspective **understanding and considering youth actual expectations** goes in line with particular aspects. The respondents highlighted the need to have a timely overview of youth expectations about hobby education opportunities, events or access to various information, as well youth suggestions and ideas which related to **supporting youth participation**. Finally, assessing the quality of youth work services which in respondents opinion could be more timely and easier to monitor (compared to comprehensive analysis and evaluation processes).

During the interview the respondents were invited to share good examples of developing and/or adopting data-driven solutions as well highlight identified needs (related to

supporting young people). From the discussion three approaches could be distinguished: (a) further developing already existing data-driven solution based on community of practice feedback or practical needs (e.g. to sort and filter data, generate specific reports), (b) integrating youth work services to municipality centrally-coordinated solutions and (c) testing external solutions (e.g. adopting state level tools, joining cooperation projects which aims to deliver new solution taking into account partner's needs). The respondents agreed that the challenging part is convincing and motivating the private providers of youth work services to adopt solutions equally to municipality institutions.

The practical exercise for analysing personas and discussion during and after the exercise raised various factors which hinder the innovation on municipality level. First, considering the size and wealthiness of a municipality, systematic development of smart solutions might not be affordable or executable (due to high maintenance costs). Secondly, system- or even organisation-oriented thinking which might leave aside the end-user perspective (particularly young people). Thirdly the participants started the discussion about 'how to support a particular persona' and considered less the links to concrete datasets, which would allow e.g. early-detect young people in risk of NEET. The participants agreed that for "older youth" (20+ years) it is challenging to approach them in any means – after graduation the young people tend to disappear from municipality "radar" and are considered a matter of other policy fields or state level institutions. At the same time the participants witnessed the "older youth" are the target group they should aim to reach, even though the resources and levers are limited.

4.2.2 In-depth Interviews with Public Servants

4.2.2.1 Youth Work as Service Position (and COVID-19 pandemic influence)

In order to assess the youth work as a service position compared to other subjects in municipality the author distinguished three different dimensions: (a) responsible public servant personal perspective, (b) political decision-makers (e.g. council, government) perspective, and (c) position compared to other fields and services in response of municipality.

The respondents pointed out that youth work allows young people to challenge themselves through various activities and gain meaningful experiences (skills and knowledge) for future: *"You can find your strengths, experience positive feelings and know your limits."* *"Unlike the compulsory studies the youth work allows young people to investigate and*

develop the part they are ultimately good at.” Respondents who formerly worked as youth workers pointed out the opportunity of noticing the progress of individuals: *“Youth work allows you to create various opportunities for youth and at the same time witness their achievements and pay attention to small details about their progress.”*

In comparison to political decision-makers the respondents pointed out that behaviour is often experience-driven: *“Current mayor has been responsible for education and youth affairs as deputy mayor and has a better understanding of why it is important to fund various services. In case there will be a new mayor after elections, then we probably have to start from scratch.”* *“Distribution of resources inside the youth work budget illustrates the political priorities – about 90% of the funding goes to hobby education, which is the most relatable part of youth work and by remaining 10% we should cover the open youth work, youth participation, open-calls for youth initiatives etc.”* The respondents said that commonly the youth work provision is considered not from an empowering perspective, but as a measure for tackling negative outcomes: *“The decision-makers tend to be concerned about youth gatherings, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions period.”* It was also pointed out that the impact of youth work is challenging to translate into measurable scale: *“When you build something, then you can notice the progress and have concrete visible end-result. The work which youth workers do in the open youth centres is building self-esteem of young people or developing their skills which might become noticeable in years. Until that it is considered as an afterschool playing activity – the decision-makers do not acknowledge the progress nor importance of such methods.”*

Considering the youth work position in other fields and services, the respondents find it challenging to make all components as well the integrity of youth work relatable and understandable due to complexity of field: *“It is a headache – so many different parts. People do not understand what youth work is.”* *“Education and social affairs does overweight the youth work by default. We have to constantly explain why it is important to have these options available and what it means to young people's self-development.”* Precisely the misconception is often derived from personal perceptions: *“If I mention some independent components such as camps, youth centres, then they begin to relate, because they have participated there, but they have never considered that as part of youth work.”* *“For some the youth work is a method for dealing with youth in risk of exclusion or those who are disadvantaged. We have started to highlight the positive perspective – what are*

the strengths of methods we are implementing and which kind of success-stories have led us.” “Sometimes even my direct colleagues do not understand that fostering youth participation is part of my actual work, not spending free time.”

All respondents pointed out that besides the exhaustive restrictions and rearrangements caused by COVID-19 pandemic, it has also increased the political decision-makers interest towards and understanding about youth work as well acknowledging the importance of it: *“Instead of cutbacks the municipality is seeking opportunities how to create more conditions for young people.” “Our rural municipality mayor initiated a meeting with youth workers to discuss what would be the scenarios and young people's reactions after cancelling the restrictions.”* In the field of practice the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions has fostered provision of services in virtual platforms: *“Despite restrictions the virtual youth work is here to remain. Our youth workers are motivated to define concrete principles and describe methods. We consider that as an additional channel on how to interact with young people.” “It has become the new normal that you can join music lessons or dance classes by virtual means.” “There have been various campaigns and numerous efforts aiming at what one pandemic could achieve by a year.”* In addition to expanding the access for young people, digitalisation throughout COVID-19 pandemic restrictions has changed the working methods and information exchange between youth field workers: *“If previously it took ages to find suitable time and place for all, then now I can quickly arrange a meeting and provide information for all interested parties.”*

4.2.2.2 Young People as Stakeholders

In order to assess young people role as stakeholders in local level the author considered four aspects: (a) challenges and obstacles which – in respondents opinion – young people are currently facing, (b) youth work planning priorities (from responsible public servants perspective) accordance to youth actual needs, (c) framing of young people by decision-makers (considered as resource for the future *versus* problem to address and solve); and (d) challenges of already existing youth participation opportunities.

The respondents highlighted the importance of allowing young people access to various self-realisation opportunities, which includes two kinds of challenges. Firstly informing young people about all available activities and opportunities: *“We do not have a problem with lack of opportunities. We are struggling to make this appealing for young people. Many of them might not receive positive experiences just because they do not know about*

such opportunities. Communication is a key factor here – we are currently failing to maximize the potential the created opportunities include.” Secondly, the respondents do find it difficult to achieve sufficient balance between various options and the cost-efficiency factor: *“There might be two who are interested in learning ballet, but considering the size of our municipality as well as geographical location, how reasonable would that actually be? We have to consider really carefully what is affordable and what is not.”*

In addition to young people's needs and expectations related to youth work services, the respondents created link to youth role in designing public spaces: *“I have to admit – our municipality might be boring for young people – there should be more chances for socializing or spending free time, which would increase the ownership of young people. Even for designing areas targeted to young people it is challenging to make youth workers opinions heard or engage young people into this process.”* Besides negative experiences the respondents highlight positive tendencies: *“If 10 years ago there would have been a question of building a new skatepark or allowing youth to deal with extreme sports in public spaces, it would have not been a matter of discussion – the simple solution would be a ban. Now we are holding discussions on how to make it safe for all – for young people, pedestrians, drivers – and what role do the youth workers have in that. /-/-/ Young people are part of the community and should be treated as such, not hidden away to places where they do not disturb others.”*

Derived from the skatepark example and based on respondents feedback in general young people are usually not engaged into such discussions and their representation is rather expected through youth workers as best informed parties: *“When youth workers are involved, then young people are represented. We value youth opinion – they are the ones we are working for – but is it always necessary that they are around the table? Yes, sometimes it means that parties involved tend to think “what would be best for young people” without actually asking.”* Respondents witnessed that they are struggling with assumptions and mainstreaming the idea of consulting with young people: *“I have recommended the service providers to engage youth opinions into planning processes, but when I receive the applications, then obviously I can tell that no one has bothered to ask from young people. It is all the same.”* *“There was an initiative developed in order to attract young people to return to their home municipality after graduating university or*

studying abroad. These solutions were developed by officials without engaging experts or the target group itself and the feedback from young people was not appealing to youth.”

As one of the reasons the respondents point out that political decision-makers tend to consider young people rather as a problem than resource for the future: *“I would like to see that young people would have positive experiences – childhood they would like to have for their own kids one day. We would like to bring together local companies with young people to discuss future work topics and notice outlooks for improvements. Although youth-related discussions in council tend to be about youth groups on streets and what to do with them.”* *“It might not always be possible to engage young people and their perspective into processes which are formally regulated, such as procurement procedures.”* Considering the potential impact of lowering the voting age to 16 years in local government elections, the respondents were rather sceptical as to whether it has positively increased politicians' interest towards young people. Respondents pointed out that active young people are targeted as potential candidates or test groups for election programme promises: *“I know that member of the youth council was asked to join the party before elections.”* *“Political parties consulted with me on how to approach young people – for me it is rather a concern how to allow young people access to neutral information about elections.”*

Related to already existing youth participation opportunities the respondents agreed unanimously that current methods are not systematic enough and representation of young people with diverse backgrounds is challenging to achieve: *“It is easier to coordinate if you have something to rely on, systematic and more structured approach. There should be a local government level concrete representative body, but on grassroot level there should also be more flexible methods adopted.”* There were examples about youth councils and youth participation prioritization dependency on political willingness and motivation: *“Since we have not formally structured the youth participation in our municipality, then it is quite leader-dependent, which kind of mindset they have. If they understand the value of youth perspective, then it is good. If not, then we are struggling.”*

Respondents also pointed out various obstacles, such as attracting and engaging those who prefer to remain apolitical or who do not feel comfortable expressing themselves publicly, under their name: *“There should be more virtual participation opportunities available for those who like to remain anonymous or not join any formal groups.”* *“We do have formats for youth participation at various levels. A youth representative is also engaged to our*

cultural affairs committee, but the meaningful participation is still dependent on the courage of the young person – does he or she feel safe to speak up in these contexts.” The respondents acknowledged the risk of using the youth council format for political agenda purposes or private business: *“The number of candidates to youth council is quite low and members of political youth groups might use the council as a platform for their agenda. I was relatively afraid that the next membership of the youth council would form out of conservative candidates only.”* *“I have mentioned that for some youth it is a form of spending time with their friends – a platform to organise events together, not represent issues of their peers.”* Due to the extensive age span of young people (7-26 years) the respondents pointed out that it is challenging to ensure equal participation opportunities for all: *“I recommend not to bring different youth with broad age gaps to the same format together – the younger ones might not feel safe enough to express themselves.”*

4.2.2.3 The Quality Assessment and Cooperation

In order to assess whether the local municipalities acknowledge and prioritize the service quality the author considered following aspects: (a) regularity of cooperation between public servant responsible for youth work planning and the local community of practice, (b) importance of evidence-based approach in routines (including trends, prognosis and outcomes of service provision), (c) assessing the quality of provided services, (d) external motivators which influence service provision.

Respondents described two types of cooperation patterns between municipality and the community of practice (e.g. service providers, supervisors, youth workers etc.). Firstly “need-driven”, an irregular model which aims to inform rather than discuss: *“Since it is challenging to find suitable time for all then I must find some “treat” which would attract participants and besides that I can share or collect relevant information.”* *“We do not have tradition that every odd week we would share something – we have concrete channels, but we use them occasionally, if needed. /--/ I understand it is not enough – there is a need for more systematic networking and cooperation to be more impactful and support cooperation between partners.”* Secondly there are systematic approaches which are rather “tradition-driven” and oriented to timely exchange of information: *“We have a format which gathers once a month on concrete week and day – everyone knows about that and if possible, then join the meeting. We regularly change information by email and as far as I have heard this format suits everyone.”* *“We are systematically communicating with our units. With private sector providers and non-governmental organisations the*

communication is rather seasonal – before application deadlines or end of financial year the interest tends to be higher.”

Respondents highlighted various modifications in current routines and how they aim to increase the evidence-based approach in their processes: *“We have adopted platforms (such as ARNO and SPOKU) for monitoring youth involvement in various opportunities. We aim to have better understanding about youth interest in order to prevent overloading them with too many choices.”* Besides using digital platforms and collecting data sets, the respondents mentioned other formats such as face-to-face consultations or regular feedback questionnaires targeted to young people: *“Yes, we have good knowledge of who are the participants, in which age and at what time they prefer to visit youth centres or join other forms of youth work activities. Although we do believe in face-to-face consultations to have better understanding about young people's timely and actual needs. In our experience the outcomes of questioning 10-12 youth does represent the opinion of approximately 70%.”* *“Once a year we conduct surveys for young people, taking into account their age and designing questions based on that. We specifically target the groups we know too few about.”*

As alternative approaches, in order to acquire better understanding of young people, the respondents pointed out e.g. anthropological methods: *“We are curious about participatory observation research to know more about how young people relate to current urban design, and what they would like to experience in public spaces. We would also want to know more about patterns and motivation of young people – what would trigger them to visit youth centres, is the concept of these centres even relevant. Perhaps we find out that young people would be satisfied with safe rooms where they could gather and conduct peer-to-peer counselling, share their experiences – we do not know that.”* In addition to increasing the efficiency and relying on various evidence, the respondents also acknowledged positive outcomes for other parties: *“Implementing such information systems is good for parents – they are better aware of who and how they receive their contribution through the municipality.”* *“We are seeking ways to nudge private providers to adopt similar methods as we do. Currently we do not have any levers to use, but we try to connect provision of data to being eligible for applying the grants. We think it could be a win-win situation because they also benefit from that.”*

Regarding reactive *versus* proactive manner in youth work planning the respondents admitted that current perspective and adopted solutions are rather reactive: *“It is one of our weaknesses on the field – we have promoted that we are capable to react quickly on emerging needs, redefine our priorities and create ad hoc solutions. But at the same time we tend to distance from innovation.”* At the same time the respondents highlighted that they acknowledge and adapt to long-term changes in municipality by preparatory activities: *“We know that we are soon witnessing the influence of an aging society model and also the young people tend to move to the capital region or even abroad. That means in a longer perspective we have to evaluate whether we are capable of maintaining the same amount of youth work services or renovating the infrastructure.”* *“We acknowledged that changes in the school's network will most probably affect youth work provision and traditions – we started to think about mitigating the risks.”*

Considering the willingness to change current routines and business processes, the respondents distinguished between aspects. Firstly the leaders (including municipality and service providers) level: *“Unfortunately we do not ask too often from ourselves the “why” question – why is it important what we tend to prioritize. Some external perspective would be useful in that context. Not to compete with others, but to have a balanced perspective about strengths and opportunities.”* And secondly the community of practice, who tend to be sceptical about accepting risks: *“In the field we are lacking innovation – it is connected to willingness of taking and tolerating risks. Yes, we are constantly tuning the services, but these are rather minor improvements, not reconceptualizing the whole service.”* *“It takes time and needs thorough explaining why we need to make changes. Even if the feedback from youth or quality assessment is not positive, it is not trusted by some partners. We have to put effort into validating these outcomes.”* Considering the balance between state and local government responsibility the respondents reflected the need for state level support in order to adopt new approaches or create new and innovative solutions: *“Additional support mechanism for hobby education and activities provision has been a great example of state support and prioritization of topical issues. Something similar should be adopted for bringing innovation to the field.”*

4.2.3 In-depth Interviews with Youth Representatives

4.2.3.1 Youth Work as Service Position

In order to assess whether the public servants perspectives meet with youth representatives experiences the author considered following factors: (a) whether the young respondents acknowledge the role and position of youth work services similarly to representatives perspective, (b) how does the young respondents envision future-outlooks for youth work planning (compared to practitioners perspective).

Similarly to public servants the young respondents pointed out that youth work creates an enabling environment for finding out strengths, interests and talents as well as safe space for spending time: *“Youth work provides good and safe space for gaining experiences which are driven by youth actual interests, not defined by curricula. Also I think for youth workers it gives a chance to think outside of the box without any burdens – compared to school where you have only 45 minutes and a structured environment.”* Another respondent pointed out that youth work was providing guidance for preventing to become NEET youth: *“I think it was in favour of those who listened to me timely and wanted to really understand the root causes. Nobody was pressuring me to open up – being honest and transparent, as well as being an individual was the support I needed that time.”*

When asking the perceptions how public servants or political decision-makers could understand the importance or role of youth work services, the respondents highlighted that even though the youth work is promoted to be for everyone, it still tends to be targeted for those already in risk: *“If we speak about open youth work, then it tends to be considered the only space for those who are not participating anywhere else. Youth work should help to prevent facing such situations by empowering young people, but this service tends to be targeted mainly for dealing with the consequences.”* Young respondents believed that public officials and political decision-makers perceptions about youth work does not differ significantly and acknowledging the need of ensuring young people access to various youth work services is rather a question of presenting evidence and convincing arguments: *“I have understood that funding of youth work is not problematic for politicians. It is a question of how the public servant responsible for the field presents the topic in rural municipality council meetings for members.”* Another respondent reflected on the same topic that the challenging part might be the preparation of public servants: *“Despite the fact that there are laws and strategies for the youth field, it is still difficult to understand*

for various council members. It highly depends on the public servant responsible for the field how convincing the presentation is. Some officials are not so aware about other municipalities or even international practices and might not have good arguments.”

The respondents emphasized that youth participation is important only if it contributes to well-being and meaningful engagement of young people: *“There is no point to do it just for filling the indicator or because it is stated in the strategy. Only if it actually has some real and evidential impact.”* Compared to one of the outcomes from public servants interviews (youth worker can be considered as the main representative of youth opinion on local government level) the respondents remained rather sceptical: *“Obviously the youth worker can consult with young people, but it is to concentrate on the youth's actual thoughts. To allow more realistic experiences or examples to be heard, there should be young people directly involved.”* Despite that one young respondent was optimistic about youth worker potential of increasing the knowledge of and providing opportunities for youth participation: *“If school or home does not support young people acquiring e.g. citizenship education skills or speaking up for themselves, then in my experience the youth worker might have good influence on that.”* As potential risks one respondent highlighted that municipality level officials tend to engage only the active “podium youth” without acknowledging perspectives of youth who are disengaged or with different socio-economic background: *“I think it is wrong if youth councils are formed based on groups of friends or those who are already participating in school level student councils. I know that there are even cases where a public servant is choosing the members of the youth council without organising democratic elections – it is a problem to address. How will it contribute for engaging broad opinion and address needs of young people with various backgrounds?”*

Related to impact of COVID-19 pandemic and *ad hoc* adopted methods the respondents emphasized that both on national and local level there were examples which are worth keeping after the pandemic: *“There were two ministerial press conferences dedicated for informing young people and responding to their questions. I think it should not be the case of a crisis only, but rather become a new normality.”* The respondents elaborated that even though during the first wave youth were excluded from communication as well the crisis management (turned from resource into problem to address) then in longer perspective there were adjustments in favour of youth interests: *“Youth workers were in a way forced to adjust, because if your physical spaces are closed and you are not finding alternative to reach your target group, then in terms of work you fail. You have to earn your salary and*

that brought some of the youth workers out of their comfort zone. They are now more using different digital channels to communicate with youth which is good.” Another respondent mentioned that young people were addressing the shortage in service provision by themselves: *“I have followed Roblox and Discord servers created by youth who would like to discuss or play online games together. It was a youth response to lack of attention.”*

4.2.3.2 Young People as Stakeholders

In order to assess young people's role as stakeholders at the local level, the author considered two aspects: (a) how the young respondents position themselves in relation to local government, and (b) in which aspects public servants and young respondents' opinions mostly differ.

The respondents highlighted that for the community as well municipality young people might be a “wicked problem” to address: *“You would like to create enabling conditions for young people, allow them to design the public spaces and spend their time in there. At the same time it results in noise, gatherings (which are not in line with current restrictions). How to balance that?”* Another respondent elaborated that there is also lack of willingness to move further from acknowledging the “wicked problem”: *“The representatives of municipality tend to think about solutions which would “put the bandage on the issue”. If they would identify the root causes or think about actual impact that “bandage” provides for young people or community in general, I think there would be more impactful services available and less portrayal of young people as problem.”* One respondent described the youth engagement through “ducks on road” metaphor: *“There are those street signs which warn you because animals or birds are active in that part of road. You should be kind, take the speed down, understand their urge and try to continue your journey. I think multiple decision-makers have similar feelings towards young people if they arrive with a new idea or proposal – let's listen to them, but if possible I would focus on something more important.”*

Considering the potential impact of lowering the voting age to 16 years on local government elections, the youth respondents agreed with public servants' perspective that political decision-makers are more interested in engaging youth opinions: *“I know that there are political parties who have discussions about what they could do **for** young people. Also it is good to see that young people are willing to present their expectations for the candidates.”* Another respondent highlighted also the positive impact on engaging

opinions of even younger than 16 year olds, for example enabling 14 year olds to vote for participatory budgeting proposals. Based on a particular initiative, one of the respondents highlighted the positive influence young people can bring into a community: *“I think young people are also a driving force of community in the sense of pitching out-of-box ideas which have gained broader support in participatory budgeting context. I hope it will also prove the need for political decision-makers to increase youth self-initiatives funding.”*

The respondents had opposing opinions on whether the solutions are targeted for youth or designed with young people. Based on a similar example – creating a skatepark – the respondents' opinions varied according to experience from their home municipality: *“I think it has become more essential that such discussions are held with young people – do they like the draft of the project etc.”* Another respondent described creation of skateparks as failure due to lack of sufficient youth expertise in the early stage of the project: *“These are good role models of how not to engage young people. You just invest hundreds of thousands of euros on something which does not meet the youth's actual expectations.”*

4.2.3.3 Outlooks for the Youth Participation in the Future

In order to draw recommendations for improving youth participation and validate applicability of outcomes from the theoretical overview chapter, the author considered following aspects: (a) how does the young respondents acknowledge the role of public servants in creating enabling conditions and environment for representing opinion and achieving sustainable cooperation model, and (b) how to improve various youth participation formats to achieve representation of young people with diverse backgrounds and shift from reactive to proactive participation.

The respondents agreed that current participation model on local level is rather reactive than proactive. Youth engagement to different discussions tends to be compulsory, not meaningful or motivated: *“If it would be proactive then young people would be actually engaged to various discussion. Some reason there is lack on analytical part to understand the root causes. If we have for example identified group of youth who are in risk of falling out from the education system, they are already on radar of social workers or local police – everybody knows and discuss that it is a problem but nobody bothers to understand why is it so or try to mitigate further damages.”* As possible solution for preventing similar cases the respondents highlight the importance of approaching young people proactively: *“It is wrong to expect than young people should be the ones contacting with municipality*

and demanding right to participate. The municipality level officials in cooperation with youth workers should be able to profile and identify different youth with various challenges, initiate the dialogue and seek proactively for solutions.” For increasing municipalities capacity in that sense the respondents identify the role of state level institutions: *“In my experience the municipalities are really interested of different hackathons or other formats which would support them improving the quality. It is not always about the money but general knowledge and share of good practices.”*

Considering the further improvements of youth participation the respondents proposed various ideas from rotation based think tanks to creation of innovation and community centres: *“I think the ideal model of youth participatory body is related to thinktank format which has representative samples of youth rotating regularly. The scope of such a format would provide insights for municipalities on various topics aiming the future outlooks – basically being a smart contractor. Organising once a year vision conferences for bringing together youth, municipality level officials and decision-makers would allow to identify youth perspectives.”* Respondent elaborated that such formats should also pay attention to communicating the outcomes and analysing the results. Another respondent described as ideal the cooperation model between adopting quotas of youth from different areas of municipality in order to ensure more equal representation of all young people: *“I think it is worth piloting in concrete municipality settings. Despite the size of local government it is challenging to cover whole territory, but if it would compulsory to have every part covered – perhaps it works.”* The respondents highlighted the role of public servants also in the sense of advising young people creating a system and collecting evidence: *“Public servants should be the moral support who is not judging your ideas but rather trying to complement those (with data or general background information). Young people can be the ones designing and conducting surveys to identify needs of their peers. Although to maximize the knowledge from results the municipality official could share such information.”* Additionally the expectation of sharing theoretical background on how to represent the peers or principles of local government functioning in general was addressed by the respondents towards public servants: *“I think I am quite well informed, but even for me it is difficult to understand the role of rural municipality mayor or difference between state and local government.”*

5 Discussion and Main Findings

In this chapter the author reflects the outcomes of theoretical overview, proposed hypothesis and arguments raised in the Case chapter.

5.1 Discussion

*H1: The services on municipality level are rather system-oriented than customer-oriented (services are meant **for** young people not designed **with** them).*

Despite the attempts and ambitions, based on outcomes of the Case the municipality level is rather system-oriented. Considering the elements of three public sector management theories described in the theoretical overview chapter the Estonian model combines elements from Weberian public administration as well NPG. As a potential positive outcome of NPG and Co-production (through broader engagement of external partners and citizens) the higher level of trust was expected to be realized. Even though some of the public services (including from youth work services) are outsourced for private sector or non-governmental organisations to design and deliver, that does not precisely lead to higher efficiency (e.g. compared to services delivered directly by the municipality or as part of its structure). As discussed by the authors, lack of transparency might be issue in that context. If municipalities would increase presentation of evidences it would also favour the increase of trust, which was also highlighted by the respondents of the Case.

The system-oriented approach was also reflected through the interviews in the sense of identifying youth opinions representation mainly through youth workers. Even if it goes in line with core principles of representative democracy – which is the governing tradition of Estonia – that does not allow to meaningfully apply a customer-oriented perspective. Considering the arguments of respondents from public authorities, they do acknowledge the value of engaging youth perspectives, but the barriers are rather connected to – as mentioned by young respondents – insufficient knowledge about how to apply various methods. That aspect is also connected to one of the outcomes from theoretical overview chapter which emphasized the importance of increasing youth interest towards representing their opinion. It was also elaborated by the young respondents who highlighted that it is wrong to expect that young people should be proactive in that context. Possible solution could be – also derived from young respondents proposals – to create state level or regional

hackathons which would allow public officials as well decision-makers (in close cooperation with youth representatives) generate new participation formats, share good practices and seek for possibilities for creating sustainable, accessible and transparent participation opportunities. Not only it contributes for better and more meaningful engagement of youth, but creates enabling conditions for broader community engagement.

Previously referred trust and transparency factors might be relevant vice-versa. Considering the youth representatives on municipality level youth councils are changing on a regular basis (caused by election results, change of interests or educational level etc.) it takes time to build trust and acknowledge the potential of new membership. Also the willingness of young people to contribute for consultation processes is dependent on trust towards responsible public servants or political decision-makers. The consultation keyword leads to in general young people opportunities to define the agenda and propose topics of interest for them to make the participation process more meaningful and impactful for them. Designing and implementing alternative participation formats which would allow young people to be the agenda-setters could be relevant in that context.

Derived from Co-production and Digital Transformation theories, initiating and sustaining meaningful cooperation with external partners demands strong structure on institutional level. Reason why the current perspective on municipality level might be too system-oriented can be connected to being still in transition process. Considering very different maturity level of municipalities as well resources and motivation aspect, achieving the customer-oriented perspective might be too early to expect. Although the state level institutions can continue to *nudge* municipalities for acquiring different perspective and adjust current business processes.

H2: The public servants responsible for youth work planning adopt rather reactive and experience-driven decisions than proactive and evidence-driven.

From the state level various datasets and tools, which do provide comprehensive insight to young people's up to date situation, have been made publicly available. Based on the respondents feedback these tools communication has reached the target and public officials are aware of these, although not using them sufficiently on a daily basis. These sources are also equally accessible for all the citizens, including young people. At the same time there are various datasets generated and collected by the municipalities, which are not accessible

even for state level, not speaking about local communities. Even if there would be capacity on state level relevant bodies (such as Statistics Estonia, universities, state agencies or research centres) the restricted access to those datasets remain a fragmented perspective. Considering relatively low data-literacy of municipalities (or particularly responsible public officials) then these tools might not realise the full potential without improving parallelly the data-literacy skills. Based on potential outcomes of NPG and Co-production, engaging external partners or the target group contributes to increasing the service quality. Combined with various datasets it could benefit not only the public sector, but also the engaged partners.

The respondents acknowledged described potential and referred to several good practices, but at the same time it does not reflect from their routines and business processes. Although it is not precisely connected to low motivation of public servants, but rather limited by external parties. Through the interviews, the challenge of motivating private sector partners was illustrated. At the same time it is also a question of enabling conditions in municipalities in general. Following the Digital Transformation theory various municipalities in the sample can be considered on the second stage of the maturity model by acknowledging and prioritizing digital innovation on managerial level, but struggling to proceed for more systematic changes in organisation. In the sense of the maturity model engaging external partners is even further ambition.

Public officials have the potential to create comprehensive overview about the actual situation of young people in a concrete region, and at the same time acknowledge neighbouring municipalities' situation, basic characteristics about state level and international context, as well future-oriented perspective. Creating and using such perspective would allow to early notice challenges of “tomorrow” and address them more timely. It would be unfair to state that municipalities are currently not progressive enough, but derived from the respondents' answers the focus is rather on reactive solutions. Knowing and thinking more about “tomorrow” would allow young people to engage more purposefully, which is currently complicated, but (based on interviews) expected by young respondents. Until reaching further progress, repeating same kind of general questions (such as interest, problematic aspects, needs and expectations) will not allow to notice the root-causes of complex issues, e.g. what are the actual purposes of absence from available youth work services, what causes young people social exclusion, health problems etc.

The young respondents emphasized the need for receiving additional support for translating various evidence (both from state, but particularly from local level) to relatable knowledge, which would be useful for representing the emerging needs of their peers. Previously presented recommendation – to increase the public servants' data-literacy skills – would allow to more critically assess what is already known and what should be further investigated to find out the actual conditions of young people. As emphasized by the young respondents the youth representatives in youth councils or other kind of formats are willing to conduct such surveys or small-scale researches by themselves. Although sufficient methodological support would be necessary to allow realizing the full potential of collected evidences. Empowering young people to take the ownership in that question could also benefit previously referred trust factor – to present that youth contribution is more thorough and broader than just consulting or being informed.

H3: Youth engagement in decision-making processes is rather exceptional than systematic.

Even though there are formalized methods (such as student or youth councils) to engage young people's perspectives, these methods rather tend to be a platform for young people socialization or networking. When comparing various characteristics of sample municipalities no evidence were identified which would limit or support youth better representation (e.g. that wealthier municipalities dedicate more meaningful participation opportunities for young people). Even though – derived from interviews with young respondents the dispersion kind of municipality might be a challenging factor. After administrative reform in 2017 the municipalities were aimed to be more competitive, but based on outcomes of the interviews, there are rather mixed results varying from good role models to more challenging conditions (particularly in moderately hinterland or hinterland settings). Further research is needed to identify whether digital participation opportunities (which currently are rather limited on Estonian context) would resolve that challenge. COVID-19 pandemic illustrated in Estonian case that despite high proportion of digital devices users (particularly among young people) there are still regions where or youth groups for whom even the basic access is limited.

Increasing youth interest towards available participation opportunities is related to previously referred keyword 'transparency' which might also be supported – derived from theoretical overview as well evidence from the case – through digital solutions. Considering various consultation formats which are not consistent – e.g. debates between

young people and political level decision-makers, formalized councils or groups – the question of reflecting outcomes remains. I.e. designing and adopting a tool which would allow monitoring to what extent and with which result youth proposals or ideas were considered and implemented. Such fixed promises would create preconditions for increasing youth continuous interest towards discussion topics they are engaged to as well provide a basis for public officials to include such proposals in youth work strategic planning or have stronger arguments for budget negotiations with decision-makers.

The creation of a broader perspective which would reflect the actual situation of young people in a particular region (as well in regional, state or international level) would help to reduce the risk of youth representatives standing for their personal beliefs or needs leaving aside youth with diverse backgrounds. It would allow to identify and specify the aspects that young people need to be consulted with which does contribute to turning youth participation more meaningful on a local level. Similarly to public officials, that evidence should be translated to young people in order to better acknowledge the problem. Although as a precondition for considering the interests of youth, public officials and community of practice at the same time young people should become identified as essential partners in relevant discussions (instead of engaging youth workers as their representatives, which was highlighted during the interviews multiple times).

H4: Young people participation experience and their relation to the municipality level officials and/or decision-makers defines their belief in reshaping the cooperation model.

Youth participation can have various meanings on different levels. On the municipality level it is defined by listening to young people's thoughts, understanding their needs. On state and international level it has shifted to considering young people's needs, treating them as equal partners and empowering them to speak up. The question is how the same impact could be achieved on the municipality level which is the closest and perhaps only reachable connection point for young people. Derived from theoretical overview and outcomes from the interviews the youth work services (including youth participation opportunities) are dedicated for youth self-actualization and rather less oriented to educating young people how to participate. In a way the “learning by doing” method and empowering youth is good, but tends to favour only those who are already engaged. That does limit reaching those who are not interested or aware about existing opportunities, which can be expanded to communicating with other age and social groups of local

community as well. Since all of the young respondents were – despite their personal experience – optimistic about improving the youth participation opportunities at the municipality level, then there is too little evidence to evaluate particular hypothesis fulfilment. Even though the feedback from respondents illustrated that young people are motivated to improve the wellbeing of and opportunities for their peers as well community in general. Besides of creating innovative and more accessible participation opportunities, the already engaged youth could be further supported and be empowered to motivate their peers as well consult with other groups in society.

Topical problems and challenges are likely the outcomes and results of previous decisions or indecisions which might not be relevant or even related to youth of today. Engaging them in solving those issues might leave aside their current needs which will create a “vicious circle” – always being few steps behind and dealing with consequences not preventing emerging challenges. By allowing young people to provide insights and make suggestions in early years to call new initiatives which would meet their current needs and issues (and at the same time acknowledge rather extensive implementation periods of public sector shifts and initiatives) it would enable young people to witness the end result and experience that by themselves. That goes in line with the overall policy making process from agenda setting to evaluating the end-result, as well the positive value of youth work which was expressed by respondents (youth work allowing to witness achievements of young people and support the progress).

5.2 Answering the Research Questions

SRQ1: What characteristics from modern governing theories are applicable in sample municipalities and their responsible officials?

The author was comparing Weberian public administration, New Public Management and New Public Governance principles and aimed to identify the current status quo in sample municipalities as well identify further outlooks for improving the responsible officials capacity to be more systematic in sense of citizen engagement. Through theoretical overview, conducted interviews and contextual characteristics of the case, the author identified that various elements from different theories and concepts are mixed. Estonian public governing is strongly derived from Weberian public administration model due to concrete hierarchical structure, supportive legislative system and defined business

processes and routines, as well being dominant in sense of service delivery. At the same time in various fields – including youth work services provision – the service delivery has outsourced at least partially to private sector or non-governmental organisations. Even though the aim of outsourcing on municipality level is not precisely connect to increasing efficiency and targeting results. More likely there are elements of New Public Governance included, such as broader engagement of external partners into various policy-making processes. Even though based on the conducted interviews the author noticed that meaningful engagement is highly dependent on skills of public officials as well Digital Maturity of municipalities and further support should be provided from state level. Particularly in context of Co-production there is additional need to acknowledge engagement of e.g. youth representatives not only for consultation purpose, but considering their perspectives from early phases of the policy-making or service design processes.

SRQ2: What elements from Digital Transformation theory are describing the status quo and future perspectives in sample municipalities?

The author considered precisely two models related to Digital Transformation theory. First the maturity model to identify at which stage the sample municipalities currently are. The author noticed that all the sample municipalities are currently on very different level of maturity, which is not precisely dependent on size or dispersion kind of municipality. Even though sufficient resources and political willingness to prioritize innovation might be key enablers in that context. Secondly the author considered Loonam et al. model describing the kind of actions adopted and implemented by organisations. Based on the model many of the sample municipalities are going through the “organizational-centric actions” to acknowledge opportunities for improvements. Although there tend to be lack of strategic approach – new initiatives are rather project- or specific-field driven and might not be in line with municipality general needs and strategic aims. As well the customer-perspective is not sufficiently addressed nor acknowledged.

SRQ3: What type of good examples of youth participation could contribute for increasing the citizens' engagement towards and responsiveness of municipalities?

Derived from public servants opinions as well young respondents insights through the interviews the need for meaningful youth participation opportunities is challenge despite the characteristics of municipality or motivation of each party. Young activists are

expecting to be engaged in various formats and starting from agenda-setting phase, but at the same time struggle to ensure engagement and representation of their peers. The public servants tend to be challenged both from political decision-makers as well youth expectations. Increasing the access to and usage of various evidences (such as datasets, analysis and prognosis) would contribute for more evidence-driven and even future-oriented decisions, by allowing to early notice emerging needs and challenges, which municipality level is currently struggling with. In order to achieve responsiveness of public services two way communication is important – target group ability to address the expectations and needs as well their willingness to provide timely expertise for local governments. Although, considering that young people might be challenging target group to reach or engage, then solutions applicable for and accepted by them should also foster community level participation (besides democratic elections).

6 Conclusion and Summary

Based on theoretical overview and outcomes from the Case, the municipalities have the potential to become more smart, proactive and future-oriented in meaningful cooperation with external partners. Despite the governing model or current stage of Digital Transformation maturity the municipalities and responsible public servants hold the potential to acquire new skills and knowledge for supporting the participation of young people and become more aware about their situation through data-driven solutions.

Considering the theories introduced in theoretical overview there are various limitation to acknowledge. The base for youth work services in the Case context are rather oriented for the process, which could be better supported by following the Weberian public administration logic rather than outsourcing service provision to external partners. Considering the Estonian context – which caused by short democratic history and practice – is combining elements of all three management theories, it also might affect the position of young people and their relation to local government. By differing the policy-making and service delivery functions and outsourcing various services to external partners it has created a situation where relying on service provider expertise might in some context be more convenient than consulting directly with the interest group. The Digital Transformation at the same time creates more opportunities for collecting and processing the data and making predictions which complement the policy-making and analysis function. In that context the importance of engaging interest group through additional format might become questionable. At the same time in background of aging society model and urge to support the growth of future generations should overbalance these concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a gamechanger in the sense of *nudging* all sectors as well the citizens to redefine current routines and business processes. Realizing the full potential of the crisis creates enabling conditions for more resilient societies and future generations who would be the driving force in society as expected by the strategic ambitions of the field [6].

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10.05.2021

Appendix 2. Personas for the Focus Group Interview

Margit (19 year old girl) from a medium size, low wealth municipality who will soon graduate from high school. Keen to study, have some experience from hobby education, but does not have access to dance classes which she finds interesting. Suffers lack of knowledge about opportunities after graduation.

Tanel (17 year old boy) from a small, low wealth municipality who studies in primary school and due to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder he struggles to graduate his studies. Tanel is interested in the field of technic, but does not find sufficient realisation opportunities. Conditions in home are not favouring Tanel and might be facing the risk of becoming NEET youth.

Ruslan (22 year old man) from a large and wealthy municipality who has graduated vocational educational training. Currently unemployed, but finds incidental employment opportunities. Due to previous debts suffers from insufficient income. Has negative experience from studying, but would like to learn how to play guitar.

Jessica (25 year old woman) from a medium size, moderately wealthy municipality who is a young mother. Jessica aims to graduate her master's studies and is employed as assistant for a local company (currently works remotely from home). Due to lack of field-specific employment outlooks considers suspending her studies. Is interested in self-development (e.g. learning how to do ceramics).

Appendix 3. Questionnaire for Interviews with Public Servants

1. Youth Work as Service Position (and COVID-19 Pandemic Influence)

Q1: In your opinion what is the value of youth work?

Q2: Do you think it is different from a political decision-makers perspective? How does it differ?

Q3: How would you position youth work as public service inside a municipality? How does it differ from other public services – is it more easier/challenging to mainstream it?

Q3.1: Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced this position somehow?

Q4: In your opinion what is the main priority of today in youth work planning?

Q5: Which kind of additional support mechanisms has your municipality adopted to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic for young people?

Q6: Could you please highlight innovative methods which have been created during COVID-19 pandemic and could benefit the service provision after the pandemic as well?

2. Young People as Stakeholders

Q7: In your opinion, what challenges do young people face in your municipality?

Q8: In context of upcoming local government elections – have you noticed a shift in position of young people inside the community (e.g. decision-makers interest)?

Q9: How are the young people in general framed in discussions – rather as resources (drivers of change inside the community) or as a problem (challenge for interior security)?

Q10: In your opinion and experience – are solutions targeted to young people designed **with** or **for** them?

Q11: Do you find current youth participation opportunities on a local level sufficient enough or do you envision any further potential?

3. The Quality Assessment and Cooperation

Q12: How have you organised the communication between the municipality and various youth work service providers – is it rather regular and systematic or need-driven / occasional?

Q13: How would you evaluate the importance of quality assessment of youth work services (including the evaluation tool created by the state)?

Q14: In your opinion are the youth work services providers motivated to change routines and business processes or rather conservative for modifications?

Q15: What kind of specific data or knowledge about young people would you need for more evidence-based youth work planning?

Q16: How do you envision the balance of responsibility between state and municipality – who should be in charge of what part of youth work services design and provision?

Q17: In your opinion would comparative analysis between different municipalities nudge the decision-makers to prioritize the access to youth work services and the responsiveness component?

Q18: How does your municipality consider and address the future-proofing aspect – are the current activities rather reactive or proactive?

Q18.1 Is it different in the context of youth work services?

Appendix 4. Questionnaire for Interviews with Youth Representatives

1. Youth Work as Service Position (and COVID-19 Pandemic Influence)

Q1: In your opinion what is the value of youth work?

Q2: Do you think it is different from public servants and/or political decision-makers perspective?

Q2.1: How have you experienced that through youth participation?

Q3: How would you position youth work as public service inside a municipality? How does it differ from other public services – is it more easier/challenging to mainstream it?

Q4: If you could change something on youth work planning on a local level – what would you do differently?

Q5: Could you please highlight innovative methods which have been created during COVID-19 pandemic and could become “new normal” after the pandemic?

2. Young People as Stakeholders

Q6: In your opinion what challenges do young people face on the municipality level?

Q7: In context of upcoming local government elections – have you noticed a shift in the position of young people inside the community (e.g. decision-makers interest)?

Q8: How are the young people in general framed in discussions – rather as resources (drivers of change inside the community) or as a problem (challenge for interior security)?

Q9: In your opinion and experience – are solutions targeted to young people designed **with** or **for** them?

Q10: Do you find current youth participation opportunities on a local level sufficient enough or do you envision any further potential?

3. Outlooks for the Youth Participation in the Future

Q11: Are the municipalities currently rather reactive or proactive / future-proofing?

Q12: What should be the main function of youth participation on municipality level – addressing current needs, thinking about the future, combination of these two or something else?

Q13: What does the youth participatory formats currently lack of – administrative support from the public officials, more co-production opportunities?

Q14: How to strengthen the representation of young people with diverse backgrounds (to avoid over-representation of the active youth)?

Q15: What kind of specific data or knowledge about the condition of your peers would be useful to better represent the youth's actual needs on municipality level?