



## **Abstract**

The latest generation is required (e.g. by the *omgevingswet*<sup>1</sup>) to participate in the Dutch democracy but falls short of the knowledge, education, and know-how to participate effectively. Recently, to combat the issue at hand, the Dutch parliament has been putting more attention toward other organisations to reduce the general knowledge deficit and gaps while providing the necessary education and tools for efficient and effective youth participation. The main aim of this thesis is to find key factors which can increase effective youth participation in local governance so as to increase the futureproof representation of young people from all socio-economic backgrounds. This has been researched by identifying existing issues, obstacles, thresholds, and bottlenecks to pinpoint concrete solutions, recommendations, and action points that can be used to lower the threshold of participation in local governance sustainably while also increasing general knowledge levels.

The research follows two case studies: the Youth Council of Apeldoorn and the NGO Tienskip, which both take a different approach but have the same goal of connecting local youth to respective government institutions. The objective for both is to reduce gaps between local governance and their individual young participants which highlights the issues and barriers they face in stepping into the world of local democracy. By showing young people that their capacities and ideas matter they effectively decrease the idea that the government is a “*ver-van-je-bed show*”<sup>2</sup>. By utilising the existing capacities and enthusiasm of young people while actively bringing them closer to local governance more young people can be reached to balance out the *participative elite* and enhance effective youth participation in local governance as to *Futureproof* governance. The results of this research have led to a couple of concrete recommendations which can be implemented to foster effective youth participation in municipal governance.

- 1) Actively provide young people with the tools (e.g. how to give an effective elevator pitch) necessary to navigate local governance;
- 2) Give young people the confidence to preach and act on their own initiatives and ideas;
- 3) Bring together young people and policy-makers to facilitate conversation;
- 4) Emphasise on the capacities and resourcefulness of young participants, which will allow trust and active participation to flourish;
- 5) It is vital to keep in mind that young people are individuals and not a group which shares the same opinions;
- 6) Young people should be involved in shaping youth participation: ‘*voor en door jongeren*’<sup>3</sup>.

**Key concepts:** Participative elite, local governance, youth participation, democracy, civil society, regional development, *Mienskip*, and Dutch governance.

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<sup>1</sup> A newly introduced law for new projects taking place in the Dutch environment.

<sup>2</sup> Far away from the individual living environment of people within a community as mentioned by a Tienksip employee in a focus group.

<sup>3</sup> For and by youth.

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## **Introduction**

The latest young generation within the Netherlands misses the knowledge and tools to persevere as active citizens within the Dutch democracy. Since 2016, the theoretical knowledge levels of democracy have decreased among young Dutch people, going down by 2.87%, and only 59% of young Dutch people expressed monitoring updates within Dutch politics (Daas, et al., 2023, p.37,40; de Groot, Daas & Nieuwelink, 2022; Schulz, et al., 2022; Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2023). In comparison, this is 67% on average for all other countries in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Daas, et al., 2023, p.40; de Groot, Daas & Nieuwelink, 2022). The differences in knowledge distribution among educational institutions in the Netherlands are also significantly more visible than in other countries (Schulz, et al., 2022). This leads to sizeable differences in the knowledge of individuals within the Netherlands, while educational institutions have a legislated role in increasing citizenship competencies for the new generations of Dutch society as well as strengthening the purposefulness of citizenship education (Daas, et al., 2023; de Groot, Daas & Nieuwelink, 2022). Newly introduced legislation has added ‘active participation’ of society within decision-making processes as a requirement (*Omgevingswet*, 2024, article 23.4.). Thus, the latest generation is required to participate in democracy but falls short of the knowledge, education, and know-how to participate effectively.

Recently, to combat the issue at hand, the Dutch parliament has been putting more attention toward (non-)governmental organisations and youth councils to reduce the general knowledge deficit and gaps while providing the necessary education and tools for efficient and effective youth participation (Daas, et al., 2023; Participant 9, personal communication, May 17, 2024; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2024). They support and subsidise organisations that educate young people on democracy and active participation within local governance. The ideology behind this is that participation is a means to give young people a voice in politics and participation can help municipal governments shape policies with regard to the local context (Participant 9, personal communication, May 17, 2024; Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024)). In an open debate on the 13th of March the Dutch Minister of Interior and Kingdom Relations, Hugo de Jonge, stated that the Ministry already works with, and will keep subsidising, several organisations to strengthen democratic citizenship and accessibly introduce Dutch democracy and workings of the State to young people (Bruins Slot, 2023; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2024).

To strengthen this, Daas et al. (2023) found that educational institutions are vital in enhancing competencies and giving the tools to young people to aid them in becoming self-reliant participating citizens in their adult lives. Education, then, has the potential to bolster participation and regain the lost confidence and interest of young people in their capabilities regarding active citizenship and participation; although, most young Dutch people trust in democracy as a form of governance (Daas, et al., 2023; Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2023). In light of the above, this thesis will give

recommendations on how organisations can help strengthen the capabilities, within a democracy, of young people and give them the tools to become self-reliant citizens.

This thesis will aim to advise policy-making institutions on the importance of connecting to and with the youth and local communities, by providing a case study of two organisations already successful within the municipal scope of effective youth participation in the Netherlands. This is to find concrete action points that can help foster effective and efficient youth participation with low thresholds in municipal decision-making processes. The research uses two case studies: the Youth Council of Apeldoorn and the NGO Tienskip, which both take a different approach but have the same goal of connecting local youth to respective government institutions by giving them an active role in the process. By analysing both and connecting them with a comparative analysis of academic works, the core objective is to find key factors which can increase effective youth participation in local governance so as to increase the futureproof representation of young people from all socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Study objectives**

The societal relevance derives from the necessity to look beyond the already participating group of people; those who are inherently interested and at the forefront of participation. Rather, a much larger group young people, lack the time, intrinsic motivation, resources, capacities, and knowledge to participate in local governance but still hold valuable opinions and ideas to foster a flourishing future, or they are simply not confident enough in their capabilities to do so (Daas, et al., 2023; de Groot, Daas & Nieuwelink, 2022; *Omgevingswet*, 2024). This thesis strives to shed light on how a more diverse group comprised of young people can be included in local governance to increase the role and diversity of people participating and *futureproof* local governance practices by highlighting active communal participation by a larger and more inclusive group (Apraku, Morton & Gyampoh, 2021).

The initial question is about how to diversify and enhance effective participation beyond the *participative elite* (van der Meer, 2018). This is a small group of people with the time, intrinsic motivation, and resources to participate in local governance. They often overshadow a larger part of society which lacks access to these resources, time, and the capacity to participate in the – often – complex world of local governance. Their influence reduces the inclusive and diverse representativeness of local governance, and their influence is to be equilibrated to foster effective and representative youth participation in local governance. The nature of representation should go beyond motivated individuals and look toward the community as a whole; as this is much more representative than merely the *elite* intrinsically motivated to participate.

The Participative Elite is a symptom of the barriers young people face (e.g. participating can be too expensive or not tailored to specific cultural backgrounds). This can lead to a skewed outcome of existing youth participation: there is indeed participation, but this does not represent the whole

young population but rather the participating few. To increase representative and effective participation, all symptoms that strengthen or increase the barriers should be balanced out to effectively create *Futureproof* governance. The question arising from this notion is how young people who do not participate in local governance can be involved to start actively participating.

Another objective of this study is to find out how newly involved youth can stay motivated and become self-reliant in their acquired active and sustainable participative roles. Keeping young people motivated and giving them the tools to become self-reliant active participants in local governance and increase their capacities for future efforts is hence the ensuing, yet as equally vital step. Lastly, this inherently connects to the lowering of the thresholds for participation in local governance, which has to be shaped sustainably to be future-proof for the next generations. This can be done by identifying existing issues, obstacles, thresholds, and bottlenecks and then pinpointing concrete solutions, recommendations, and action points which can be used by policy-makers, municipal organisations, NGOs, and gatekeepers within a community to be able to sustainably lower the threshold of participation in local governance.

This thesis shall answer the research question: what are key factors in shaping effective youth participation on municipal scales? To pinpoint recommendations which help increase youth participation in local governance and strengthen the futureproof representation of young people from all socio-economic backgrounds. The first section will outline central concepts concerning youth participation and Dutch democracy to create a conceptual framework. These main concepts include democracy (e.g. Herodotus (1996) as one of the first to mention democracy and Lijphart (2012) on majoritarian & consensus democracy), participation (e.g. Arnstein, (1969) and his ladder of citizen participation), and civil society (e.g. De Tocqueville (1835)). The second section will dive into the methods and the third section will introduce the organisational structures and working of both *Tienskip* and the *Yough Council of Apeldoorn*, followed by the experiences of young participants and others involved within those organisations. The thesis will then ground these results in a fourth section and contribute to the existing literature, by adding the perspectives of young people in the Netherlands and giving concrete recommendations to increase the effectiveness of active participation.

## **Theoretical framework**

After identifying boundaries to youth participation in municipal and local governance and having outlined recommendations for policymakers, another objective of this paper is to increase and analyse youth participation in municipal and local governmental institutions. Consequently, the central concepts used are democracy and participation, especially emphasising the facets that include young people. Next to this, the concepts of locality, community, and the cultural backgrounds of individuals and groups which exist within the municipal scale have been analysed, as they are vital in putting the existing participative narrative into perspective. This goes hand-in-hand with the notion of the ‘participative elite (van der Meer, 2018), the ‘Frisian paradox’ & Frisian ‘*Mienskip*’ (Planbureau

Fryslân, 2020), regional discontent (van den Berg & Kok, 2021), regional justice (van Vulpen, 2023), the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), and Riskscales – “*temporal-spatial phenomena that relate risk, space and practice*” – (Müller-Mahn, Everts & Stephan, 2018. p.197). These concepts are central to understanding the differences between regions, the local knowledge spheres, and why the context of the living environments of society is vital in research.

Furthermore, recent voting patterns and outings of populism in the Netherlands have highlighted decreased trust in the government to deal with rising issues and increased the democratic backsliding in national governance (Cebulak & Lippert, 2024; Proszowska, Jansen & Denters, 2023). These low levels of trust diminish the support for representative democracies yet support theories of critical citizenship (Ouattara & van der Meer, 2023). Increased participative efforts can prove central for governmental institutions to reduce resentment (Innes & Booher, 2004; Mikulewicz & Podgórska, 2020) against decisions made across the country, and between regions in the Netherlands. This can also improve the knowledge and capabilities of young people in the Netherlands (Daas, et al., 2023; Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2023) and aid in including the required levels of active citizen participation in decision-making processes (*Omgevingswet*, 2024).

### *Participation & Democracy*

#### **Participation**

According to De Tocqueville (1835) associations working outside the sphere of governmental institutions are essential to fight incipient democratic decay and despotism. These associations (what we now view as ‘civil society’) have a direct role in solving societal issues and can tackle them without involving any federal state or governmental institution. De Tocqueville (1835) remained sceptical of the problem-solving skills of governments above local townships as the distance between national governments and local people was too great for adequate capacities in tackling problems. Any action taken would be uninformed and heavy-handed, which paved the way for resentment against policies (Mikulewicz & Podgórska, 2020) and regional discontent (van den Berg & Kok, 2021). In De Tocqueville's (1835) philosophy, the local associations and individual perspectives held value, as citizens could trust each other and develop civic skills by partaking in local decision-making. Therefore, the focus should be on becoming self-reliant and active participation, to reduce the necessity of a national government to make uninformed decisions without taking into account local and indigenous knowledge systems (Apraku, Morton & Gyampoh, 2021). The absence of this locality would lead to an endless vicious circle of cause and effect, as the top-down nature of national governments and the decrease of local inclusion would only increase and exacerbate the existing inequalities (De Tocqueville, 1835) which would inherently lead to societal and spatial injustices (van Vulpen, 2023).

The scope of this thesis is on youth Participation within the local spheres, which is also one of the four core principles discussed within the United Nations (UN) Convention for the Rights of the

Child (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, n.d.). This principle is based upon the notion that children have a role as *agents of change* (von Braun, 2017) and should be equal partners in realising their rights. Then, the idea of future-proof governance must include the participation of young people according to the UN (1989). The connection between active participation, development, and human rights has already been made within the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Development in 1986. Article 1 of this Declaration states:

“The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.” (United Nations, 1986. p.vi).

Coming back to the United Nations (1989) Convention for the Rights of the Child, article 12 states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

This stresses the importance of active participation for young people and the necessity to include the voices of young people in decision-making processes (Roodt & Stuurman, 2011; United Nations, 1989). Additionally, participation has also been highlighted in the Rio Declaration, during the UN Convention on Environment and Development emphasis has been put upon civil engagement. Explicit objectives were outlined, emphasising the responsibility to enable active engagement by ensuring access to information and providing opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making processes (Hügel & Davies, 2020).

Furthermore, there are many ways to increase the quality of participation rather than the quantity. According to Frank (2006), enhancing the quality of youth participation can be achieved by: creating an environment in which they understand the socio-political context within their livelihood; giving the young people a voice and agency (also taking them seriously as agents within their context); inspiring creativity; co-create with relevant stakeholders; and working within the capabilities and resources of the society and its individuals.

### **Consensus Democracy in the Netherlands & the *Participative Elite***

Democracy as a governmental ideology is currently how Dutch society is shaped and the daily lives of people in the Netherlands are shaped by the way this democracy works. According to Herodotus (Herodotus, 1996; Martin, 2011), the foundations for good governance and democracy start with equality. In theoretical democracies there is no single ruler above the population, everyone is



equal. It hereby differentiates from tyranny, where one person is unequally above others and not held accountable for their actions. In the philosophy of Herodotus, the democratic system has benefits as it diminishes the main flaw of tyranny: even the best man will stray away from their morals when presented with power without accountability (Martin, 2011). Thus, in Herodotus's (1996) democracy, there is no corruption or avoidance of the law. In democracy lies freedom, which is considered the root of strength (Herodotus, 1996).

Recent developments have opened up many theoretical ways in which a democracy can be organised and run (Bogaards, 2021; Lijphart, 2012). Modernised democracy exhibits a variety of formal and informal institutions, which can be contrasted with the basic definition of democracy: 'government by the people or, in representative democracy, government by the representatives of the people' (Lijphart, 2012. p1). Dutch democracy is leaning towards the consensus model as described by Lijphart (2012), where the objective is to include as many people as possible. This creates a fruitful terrain for youth participation and ensures people's opinions are integrated into policies (e.g. with *Omgevingswet* (2024)) as everyone has an equal spot at the table that leads to negotiations.

A staple within this modernised ideology is the impact and inclusion of civil society (De Tocqueville, 1835) in decision-making and engagement in designing policies which go far beyond mere tokenist inclusion (Arnstein, 1969). In addition, within the local and national governance in the Netherlands, the multi-level nature is central as power is distributed across these levels (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020; Thorbecke, 1826). The nature of Dutch competencies and power distribution is separated across many task-specific jurisdictions, which are often flexible, overlapping, and divided across a wide range of levels; a multi-level governance system described by Hooghe & Marks (2010). This type of governance is beneficial for tailoring competencies to specific issues, while a downside is the absence of coordination between the number of jurisdictions (Hooghe & Marks, 2010). In addition, there is still a gap in academic understanding of how learning processes within a multi-level governance approach influence climate adaptation projects (Gonzales-Iwanciw, Dewulf, & Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2020).

Democracy is the vocation of the people, but to what extent are people from *all* socio-economic backgrounds partaking in Dutch democracy? As far as democracy is understood according to Lijphart (2012), the goal is to represent either the majority of the electorate (majoritarian democracy) or as many people as possible (consensus democracy in the national and local government). Herein, Dutch politics can be described as leaning toward the consensus model (Bogaards, 2021; Lijphart, 2012), where all political parties are more or less equal. Recently, however, the discourse on the *Participative Elite* has infringed itself into the Dutch society and media (van der Meer, 2018). This idea suggests that there is indeed a participatory democracy in the Netherlands but not everyone is involved in the same manner, while participation in decision-making processes in the Netherlands in some cases is even required (e.g. *omgevingswet* (2024, article 23.4)).

In this case, participation is much more than voting alone but rather follows the degrees of citizen power as described in the *ladder of citizen Participation* (Arnstein, 1969). Participation here goes even further than information sharing and consultation and should consist of citizen power in decision-making processes, or delegated power to citizens from a government where deemed appropriate. Governments are already taking steps to see participation beyond the mere notion of voting. In 2024, the Netherlands implemented the *Omgevingswet* (2024). Within, it states that before decision-making processes commence, it is mandatory to gain the knowledge and interests of all concerned stakeholders. In this regard, participation is not only a core principle but a legal requirement. However, only a small number of people – hence an *elite* – have the time, resources, and knowledge to participate in these existing participative efforts (such as new initiatives starting from the *omgevingswet*) from local governments, resulting in this group vocally overpowering others in local governance (de Vries & Oostveen, 2017). Therefore, this research looks to analyse the current Dutch society to assess the barriers they face in entering the world of democracy and active participation, and then balance out the influence of the participative elite by decreasing barriers to participation.

### *Society and shared identities*

*Communities* are often used within social sciences but are hardly ever elaborated upon other than the abstract common shared understanding of community as a group of people belonging together based upon functional relationships (Titz, Cannon & Krüger, 2018). Consequently, the concept has lost a concrete definition and is used in a *'bewildering variety of ways'* (Barret, 2015. p. 182), even becoming a staple to gain a form of moral license that is supposed to guarantee participation from the “real” people and ethically justifies community-based research (Titz, Cannon & Krüger, 2018).

The paradoxical nature and inherent inclusion of inequality and inequity within the terminology of a community (Titz, Cannon & Krüger, 2018) create another bias away from the local context. In contrast, the local context is central to understanding the values and motivations of people within a society. Thus, the locality is vital to find grassroots causes and effects which enhance or bolster local Risksapes as well as being the spark that potentially causes societal and regional discontent (e.g. Müller-Mahn, Moure & Gebreyes, 2020; van den Berg & Kok, 2021). Furthermore, the inclusion of the local context is central to the success and effectiveness of development (Apraku, Morton & Gyampoh, 2021). In other instances, the exclusion of local input has been shown to increase resentment of the implementation of innovations (Mikulewicz & Podgórska, 2020). Nyong, Adesina & Osman Elasha (2007) found that recognising and including local knowledge adds to the willingness to effectively use externally introduced interventions and technologies thereby reducing the resentment for adaptation measures from outside the Risksapes the society in a context faces.

Research (e.g. Trogrlić, et al., 2021) has also shown that including the local context in designing development and adaptation improves the capacity of a locationality to build societal resilience with a focus on long-term sustainability within the temporal-spatial context of local Risksapes (Müller-Mahn, Moure & Gebreyes, 2020). This is coherent with the central points for effective youth participation, which are capacities, resources, and long-term sustainability with the desired output of self-reliant participative societies intertwined with the local context, landscape, and community (Frank, 2006; Visser, Moree & Emlen, 2024). In light of the above, within this thesis, I also take the stance that participation in democracy is a vital element to ensure resilient, self-reliant societies, which is needed to create futureproof local governance.

### *Dutch Politics and Regional Differences*

The Netherlands is fragmented on multiple dimensions, enhancing both party and citizen polarisation (Moral & Best, 2023). In Dutch politics, this decentralised multi-level governance system is often called *Het huis van Thorbecke*<sup>4</sup> (Raijmakers, 2014). This is identified as the separation of power across three levels: national, provincial, and municipal. All three levels have their own competencies and govern these responsibilities themselves. Liberal statesman Thorbecke codified this as the Dutch decentralised unitary state, where municipalities would supervise and govern specific tasks previously held by the provincial governments (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020; Thorbecke, 1826). With this decentralised structure of power separation, the local societies gained more governing prowess, bringing governance closer to the people affected. Thus, leading to a centralised supervision and local operation of governance in the Netherlands. This is particularly specific to the Dutch “Polder” model – *polderen* in politics then denotes the deliberative process of give and take – in which mutually constraining and influencing bodies exist (de Vries, 2014; Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). In this system the municipalities and provinces have general competencies in which they are formally licensed to act in all matters they deem relevant but at the same time, they are constrained within the framework of the Dutch legislative system.

However, fragmented governance can lead to conflicts and enhance opposites in the Dutch political sphere. Concepts such as regional discontent (van den Berg & Kok, 2021) and regional justice (van Vulpen, 2023) best showcase this, as they illustrate the regional divides in the Netherlands (van Vulpen, Bock & van den Berg, 2023). This is most strongly expressed in anti-establishment attitudes, such as the perception of one’s region not receiving their fair share of government investments and can increase the institutional distrust of some regions. However, especially in rural areas of Friesland (Tienskip’s operational sphere) the subjective well-being levels are paradoxically high (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020).

To understand the context of *Tienskip*, the Frisian concept of *Mienskip* is central. The similarities between the two start in the name, but find much deeper roots of connectedness. *Mienskip*

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<sup>4</sup> The House of Thorbecke.

is the Frisian community, especially the Frisian sense of community which includes society actively contributing to enhanced livability in the province (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020, van den Bergh, 2022). This sense of societal cohesion is often highlighted as a distinct Frisian community-building heritage (van den Bergh, 2022). The terminology *Mienskip* is inscribed within the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Netherlands as ‘*the interconnectedness between [Frisian] people that is utilised to protect the community*’ (Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland, n.d.). It is the basis for a deep sense of belonging, interconnectedness, and interdependence among citizens. The contemporary usage of *Mienskip* also strengthens the Frisian communal cohesion while inherently distancing itself from the urbanised centres of the Netherlands (van den Bergh, 2022). Herein, the other sides of *Mienskip* become visible, as Frisians are often wary of external inputs while clinging to their sense of community (van Heezik, 2013), acknowledging that within *Mienskip*, there is a fear of diversification of the province (van den Bergh, 2022). This creates a prevalent *us-vs-them* narrative in Friesland which enhances the feelings of regional discontent (Halink, 2022; van den Berg & Kok, 2021) as the Frisian society feels left behind and distant from the Western regions of the Netherlands. This narrative also relates to Apeldoorn, as they are also part of the Dutch regions which are often neglected in favour of economic hubs in the West (van den Berg & Kok, 2022; van Vulpen, 2023).

Another concept characterising the Frisian community is the *Frisian paradox* (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020). The inherent paradox of Frisian society exists as the Province of Fryslân consistently scores low on economic indicators while scoring high on livability indicators (Kooiker, 2022; Planbureau Fryslân, 2020; van den Berg & Kok, 2021). This can be attained as the Frisian society favours quietness and space, a strong *Mienskip*, cultural and economic homogeneity, cohesion of the Frisian culture and language, a high level of responsibility for their living environment, a low importance on valuing money and status, and safety (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020; van den Berg & Kok, 2021).

The Frisian community lacks financial resources but is more content and happy in their living environment than other provinces in the Netherlands (Kooiker, 2022). This is also highlighted by Anema et al. (2021), which states that the disposable income for Frisian households is among the lowest in the Netherlands while satisfaction with living environments is among the highest. The province scores much worse on economic indicators and facilities while scoring relatively high on subjective well-being, society, safety, and environment in comparison to other places in the Netherlands. In comparison, the data collected by Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2023) shows that for Gelderland – the place of operation for the Jongerenraad Apeldoorn – economic indicators score relatively high, while the trust in institutions is low.

The municipality of Apeldoorn itself puts much emphasis on improving the green areas, and conditions for living, working and leisure, thereby highlighting Apeldoorn’s green urbanity and central location within the country (van Loon, Oosterlynvk & Aalbers, 2019). Within “Apeldoorn 2020”, the municipality visionised to become a key regional area where future demographic and

economic growth would be concentrated (Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2001). Within this process, they took a risky and optimistic approach, which led to an increasing debt where projects had to be reshaped to fit within budgets (van Loon, Oosterlynvk & Aalbers, 2019). In addition, the municipality strives toward a circular and sustainable future within its governance systems (Müller, 2022) and for participation (Participant 9, personal communication, May 17, 2024).

Demographically, the city is rising, and the central location in the Dutch landscape leads to a migratory rhythm where people who commute to work across the Netherlands find housing. Compared with other Dutch municipalities in 2015, the attendance rate for municipal elections is below average at 53.1% and social cohesion scores<sup>5</sup> are average in comparison to comparable municipalities in the Netherlands at 6.4/10 in 2022 (Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023b. p.21; Smeets & Dagevos, 2016. p.77). This differs from Fryslân, where *Mienskip* allows for strong social cohesion (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020). Participation in Apeldoorn's local spheres should be strengthened within the municipality to strive for a more sustainable future (Müller, 2022). Consequently, Tienskip and the Jongerenraad Apeldoorn place themselves in different operational environments.

## Methods

To best answer the research question, this thesis primarily employed a qualitative methodological approach consisting of focus groups, interviews, and field notes. This allows for an in-depth understanding of both Tienskip and the Youth Council in Apeldoorn as well as allowing them to tell their stories. To achieve this, focus groups have been organised with employees and board members of both organisations, interviews have been held with external parties, participants have been observed during events, and the social media of both organisations have been analysed to gain insights into their internal and external workings (e.g. between Tienskip and their respective volunteers and participants and the dynamics between Jongerenraad Apeldoorn and their facilitators). The data has been analysed and transcribed to find common themes and anecdotes to pinpoint concrete bottlenecks and best practices.

The general aim of the thesis has been operationalised by researching existing organisations working on increasing effective youth participation and their ways of reaching out to people and motivating them to participate, to find best practices within municipal governance. Organisations that have been analysed to achieve this are Tienskip<sup>6</sup>, an NGO in Fryslân trying to bridge the gap between local youth and governance by broadening the definition of democracy (Diekman, 2023; Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024; Tienskip, 2023a), and Jongerenraad Apeldoorn<sup>7</sup>, part of the municipality of Apeldoorn who facilitate the council to include youth into their policy-making. These

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<sup>5</sup> Social cohesion here means how connected people feel with others in their neighbourhood and city (Manca, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> 'Tien' comes from 'Tiener', (teenager in English) and the name derives from the Frisian *Mienskip*. *Mienskip* is the Frisian culture and society (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> The Youth Council for the municipality of Apeldoorn.

two organisations make for an interesting comparative study, as they both share the common objective of including young people in municipal governance and reducing participation thresholds, yet both come from different starting points. Jongerenraad Apeldoorn is facilitated by the municipality of Apeldoorn itself, while Tienskip is an independent NGO. Additionally, both organisations are receiving commendations for their efforts from the local and national governments (Bruins Slot, 2023; Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023a). Tienskip is reaching out to more than 3500 students in 2022-2023 and the Jongerenraad Apeldoorn has more than 50 active members (Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023a; Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024; Tienskip, 2023a).

### *Data Collection*<sup>8</sup>

Data collection during this research will follow the narrative of passion and commitment which teaches us that ways of knowing are always already partial, moral and political (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Research, in accordance with Denzin & Lincoln's (2011) vision, should have an ample supply of methodological rules and interpretive guidelines, be open to change and to differing interpretations, exist within the notion that there is no gold standard for qualitative research, understand that inquiry is always political and moral, and objectivity and evidence are political and ethical terms.

Three (respectively: 3, 3, and 7 persons) focus groups have been organised with employees and founders of Tienskip as well as young participants of the Youth Council in Apeldoorn, to gather and explore the complex understandings and interactions that the young participants and board members or facilitators have with their everyday environment (Conradson, 2013; Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). Focus groups here are central as this offers participants the freedom to discuss the topic on their terms, not bound to the questions of the researcher (Hay, 2000). This has the additional benefit of limiting the specification error due to the subconscious biases of the researcher. Interaction here is key, and one of the more distinctive characteristics of the focus group is the ability of group members to share their thoughts and ideas in a group setting where participants can respond to each other, as opposed to in a one-on-one interview (Goodman, 2011; Morgan, 1996). The interactive aspect of focus groups also allows participants to explore different viewpoints and formulate and reconsider their ideas and understandings of the topic. One of the most important aspects is the ability of participants to reflect on their motivations and values and find out if there is a commonality between them. This offers the chance to find out what key drivers are for people to participate, or facilitate participation in their respective communities and their roles within those.

Three (one 2-person group interview, and 2 solo interviews) interviews have been held to gain more insight into the relevance of respective organisations and put their work into the context and motivations behind the philosophies of the governmental systems in which they are working. Here, the Youth Council of Apeldoorn have been interviewed to gain insight into their visions for the future.

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<sup>8</sup> Overview of interviewees is found in [Appendix B](#).

Additionally, the municipality of Leeuwarden has been interviewed, as well as the Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations to gather information about their ideologies concerning youth participation. These interviews are semi-structured and the interview guide can be found in [Appendix A](#).

During events organised by Tienskip (5 workshops) and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn (1 monthly meeting), information has been collected to understand the context and ambience of the organisations. This data will consist of short conversations<sup>9</sup>, photographs, and field notes made during the events. Lastly, the research will also include documents provided by the organisations which have been assessed. Tienskip hosts a Podcast (Tienskip, 2023-present) on Spotify where young participants are asked to share their experiences and ideas. Additionally, the Youth Council of Apeldoorn and Tienskip both have an active social media presence and policy documents available for this research.

### *Research ethics*

The research has been sent to the ethics committee of Campus Fryslân and gained ethical approval from the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, per the supervisor of this Thesis. Audio recordings have been made, when consent was given before recordings were made, to be able to process the data gathered in interviews and focus groups during the data collection. They are only accessible by me, the researcher, to be able to keep the data confidential. Due to the period of data collection being multiple months, between the 1st of February 2024 and the 27th of May 2024, participants will have a significant period to consider if they want to participate as well as having the opportunity to cancel any involvement at any time due to the voluntary nature of the research.

As both organisations are focused on youth participation, there were participants involved who are younger than 18. The general age range is 14-21, which is also the target group for the organisations researched. Consequently, I have made sure that informed consent is given by all relevant people and stakeholders involved, to overcome any potential risks for young people under the age of 18 involved. Additionally, the topic does not involve any sensitive elements but informed consent remains vital to maintain freedom and safety for all participants.

### *Positionality*

The choice for the two researched organisations came from previous direct personal experiences with the organisations. By volunteering and giving workshops for both organisations I have gotten into the dynamics of active youth participation from two different perspectives. My personal experience with the Youth Council of Apeldoorn is a direct connection to the founders of the Council, with whom I have had extended discussions about perfecting youth participation in local

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<sup>9</sup> Hence the fact that there are more ‘participants’ referenced in the results section than the added amount of people in all focus groups and interviews. To keep the referencing coherent, the persons who provided short comments also gained a ‘number’ to keep their personal information confidential.

spheres. Concerning Tienskip, I am an active volunteer for the organisation where I help organise events and am responsible for reporting on social media during events. Therefore, the choice has been made to include two organisations in which I, the researcher, have had previous experience to be able to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics during this Thesis. To minimise the effects this has on the scientific nature of this thesis I have opted to leave out my personal experiences within the results section and only include the data gathered during interviews and focus group discussions to gain a coherent overview of youth participation according to Tienskip and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn and their respective participants.

### **Tienskip & Jongerenraad Apeldoorn: Organisational Structures & events**

The objective for both Tienskip and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn is to enhance youth participation in municipal governance and reduce the issues and barriers young people face in stepping into the world of local democracy. By showing young people that their capacities and ideas matter, they effectively decrease the idea that the government is a “*ver-van-je-bed show*” (Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024). Therefore, as Tienskip and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn both work within this ideology to give young people practical know-how, getting results and reaching positive developments for local societies becomes much more accessible than with mere theoretical knowledge of the democratic system of the Netherlands. Currently, the emphasis of the Dutch government is on active participatory governance (Bruins Slot, 2023; Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023a; *omgevingswet*, 2024). Tienskip and The Youth Council in Apeldoorn (Diekman, 2023; Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023a; Tienskip, 2023a) play a role here by giving young people the confidence to act and be involved, which is vital in reducing barriers, keeping young people motivated, and reducing the impact the *participative elite* (van der Meer, 2018) has on local governance (Frank, 2006).

NGO Tienskip is not allied with any local governmental organisation, while Jongerenraad Apeldoorn is part of the municipality of Apeldoorn (Gemeente Apeldoorn, 2023a; Participant 7, personal communication, May 9, 2024; Tienskip, 2023a). There is a main difference in funding opportunities as Apeldoorn has a set budget. At the same time, Tienskip relies on different subsidies, the Dutch government, and external funds to operate. They both operate to connect young people from different – ideally all – socio-economic backgrounds and allow them to be the actors of their change within their capacities.

#### *Tienskip*

Tienskip connects with young people by working with schools and organising events with their students. The idea came into existence in 2015 when the founders of Tienskip saw that the practical implications of democracy were missed in their High School (Participants 6, 7, and 8, personal communication, May 9, 2024). They felt that this practical aspect, gaining information about



being an active citizen and how to deal with local democracy, was lacking in their curriculum. Active participation, according to Tienskip and in line with Arnstein (1969), is much more than voting and relates to the dynamics between citizens and policy-makers, but current society misses the 'democratic ethos'<sup>10</sup> (Participant 7, personal communication, May 9, 2024). to become active citizens according to the board of the Tienskip. The starting point for Tienskip, as one of the founders told me during an interview, was the absence of a football field in a Frisian village (Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024). However, when a group of young boys tried to address this they found many barriers within bureaucracy to fixing.

Organising and creating ideas often takes too much time for citizens to work out themselves voluntarily. A spokesperson jokingly mentioned that municipalities sometimes try to solve this by giving people money to become active and organise their ideas, paradoxically creating civil servants instead of active citizens (Participant 7, personal communication, May 9, 2024). This gave birth to a feeling and idea to bring young people closer to local governance to allow these participative acts, such as creating a football field, to flourish in local spheres. Their goal is to broaden the definition of "democracy" to include the social-cultural sides of democracy which includes active and effective citizen participation (Participants 3, 4, and 5, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

Tienskip hosts workshop days called: *Tienskipdagen*<sup>11</sup>. These events facilitate focus groups composed of different young people and issues they face in their daily lives. They then try to find concrete solutions for these problems. A spokesperson for Tienskip expressed that this emphasis on issues which directly involve the society discussing them and solving them with those people regains some trust in and understanding of the local governance and overall national political systems (Participant 4, personal communication, April 30, 2024). These points are echoed by Daas, et al., (2023), Cebulak & Lippert (2024), Proszowska, Jansen & Denters (2023), and Universiteit van Amsterdam (2023).

Tienskipdagen are often organised together with an educational institution and are mandatory for students. This has the benefit of having a wide variety of young people attending such events. According to Tienskip, this is a key driver which allows them to reach a great diversity of young people (Participants 3, 4, and 5, personal communication, April 30, 2024; Participants 6, 7, and 8, personal communication, May 9, 2024). During multiple brainstorming sessions, the students then identify the problem and all facets surrounding it. After this, they try to find solutions which are practically possible and relate to something that lies within the capabilities of their group. They are then supported to deliver an elevator pitch to their peers about their ideas and talk about how they will solve the issue.

After the day, the students get the opportunity to continue their projects, with the support of Tienskip to try to implement or achieve their ideas. The idea behind this is that these events are also a

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<sup>10</sup> By this, the Tienskip board mean the capabilities and knowledge to act within the Dutch democracy.

<sup>11</sup> Tienskip projectdays.

starting point for societal and sustainable development in the area. For example, during one of the days, a group of students from an MBO<sup>12</sup> school had the problem that they wanted to play sports more but everything was expensive. HBO and WO students already had a pass which gave discounts for sports in Leeuwarden. During the brainstorming, the group found that a pass for discounts would help to get many more MBO students to play sports. They then drafted a presentation for the local council and presented it to them. Within four months, the pass was ready, and currently, all MBO students also get discounts on playing different sports in Leeuwarden (Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024).

During an interview with the board of Tienskip (Participants 6, 7, and 8, personal communication, May 9, 2024), they expressed that they wanted students to practically experience democracy by giving them tools and time to brainstorm about the issues the students face in their daily lives. Their motto is *Doe er zelf wat aan!*<sup>13</sup> (Tienskip, 2023a; Tienskip, 2023b). The events also bring together students with people working in the field of local democracies and policy-makers, who can help the students achieve their ideas. The aim is that an environment is created where students and their problems are taken seriously, and they feel listened to concerning their ideas. Spokespersons of Tienskip expressed in an interview that it is vital that the students feel comfortable to be themselves (Participants 3 and 4, personal communication, April 30).

Furthermore, the ideology within Tienskip is that the world of local governance is not complex at all, but that knowledge of how to find your way is absent. As local governance is closer to the people than the national government, the choice to focus on the local spheres rather than national ones is the core foundation behind Tienskip (Participants 6, 7, and 8, personal communication, May 9, 2024). They aim to take democracy and bring it closer to one's home, by discussing problems that are close to the participants and asking them: *Wat wil jij dan?*<sup>14</sup> (Participants 3, 4, and 5, personal communication, April 30). This is achieved with with a group of young volunteers, to make Tienskip 'voor en door' young people (Nationale Jeugdraad, n.d.; Tienskip, 2023), which often creates a more enthusiastic and understanding sphere. Practising democracy versus preaching democracy [*oefenen versus beoefenen*"], entails that Tienskip gives a practical experience rather than explaining the rules and systems of democracy (Participant 4, personal communication, April 30, 2024; Tienskip, 2023). This is in line with the building blocks for sustainable youth participation identified by the Nationale Jeugdraad<sup>15</sup> (Nationale Jeugdraad, n.d.).

Tienskip's mission and vision is clear and separable into three pillars: The vision is separated into three pillars, "*Op naar een maatschappelijke democratie, Democratie ontdek je pas echt door het*

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<sup>12</sup> MBO, HBO, and WO are different types of Dutch educational institutions. MBO: trades and technical occupations (college), HBO: professional orientation (University applied sciences), and WO: theoretical (University) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> loosely translated as: "If you want to change something, start by doing something about it yourself".

<sup>14</sup> What do *you* want?

<sup>15</sup> National Youth Council, an overarching organisation for other youth-focused organisations in the Netherlands.

*te ervaren en democratie moet toegankelijk zijn voor iedereen*<sup>16</sup> (Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024). This entails that Tienskip ought to achieve a social democracy, try to give all young people an opportunity to experience democracy and that the democratic system should be accessible to everyone influenced by society. In an interview a board member of Tienskip expressed that social democracy entails a system where democracy is close to the people, everyone experiences democracy daily, and the social side of democracy is the part that an individual citizen plays within the larger processes of democracy (Participant 7, personal communication, May 9, 2024).

### *Jongerenraad Apeldoorn*

The municipality in Apeldoorn set up a Youth Council in 2021, which young people in Apeldoorn have shaped. The idea was that the framework for youth councils needed more young people's input (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). This distinguishes the council in Apeldoorn from other youth councils in the Netherlands and fosters a different structure and goal. The vision of this council is to be without board positions (to also reduce the hierarchical roles within the council), have low thresholds, and not be too formal. They actively try to make everyone feel welcome and this allows for an incredibly diverse group of young participants within the youth council of Apeldoorn (Participant 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Instead of formal assemblies, they have informal meetings and young people do not have to apply with a lengthy letter and Curriculum Vitae. Joining events is also completely voluntary and the goal is not to write policies and letters but to have meaningful conversations with policy-makers and civil servants.

The events are often on a certain topic to allow young people to express their ideas and feelings and allow policy-makers to get the input of different young people within the municipality. Young people are presented with a bottom-up approach to address their issues while also allowing policy-makers to gain input from the participants during the events to make even top-down governance more representative. The Youth Council of Apeldoorn tries to be the bridge between the young people and the municipal workers in this sphere, to give young people the chance to talk to the people in charge of the topic within the municipality (Participant 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). The municipality is the main facilitator of the youth council and is also responsible for financing events. The council is bound to the system in which the municipality works and their existence is justified as long as the municipality sees value in the council (Participant 1, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Spokespersons who facilitate the youth council both expressed in an interview that the municipality until now has been very positive about the workings and output of the council, despite no measurable progress in the implementation of the opinions of young people within the municipality (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

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<sup>16</sup> “On to a social democracy, you only truly experience democracy by practising it, and democracy should be accessible for everyone.”

Two interesting cases of outcomes are the mobile website of the municipality itself and the policy implementation to look at blocks in neighbourhoods to identify opportunities rather than neighbourhoods as an entity. The mobile website was not set up coherently, and people from the youth council found this out which is the reason why the municipality changed that again. Additionally, the municipality often researches neighbourhoods to find out where opportunities are for development, while the members of the youth council expressed that there is a big difference even between blocks and streets within a neighbourhood (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Making it senseless to research whole neighbourhoods as an entity. This is implemented in policymaking in Apeldoorn now.

The main value provided by the youth council is the inclusion and active participation of young people in local governance and having personal contact with the young people in the municipality. The main measurable value is that there are young people from the municipality present in the city hall monthly (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). However, this scratches only the surface of what the visions and goals are for the youth council. It is also a place for young people from all socio-economic backgrounds to share their thoughts and be heard and understood by policy-makers. The monthly events facilitate an open environment focused on *“just talking with each other, and listening to the opinions of others”* (Participant 1, personal communication, April 30, 2024). The objective here is to go against the current bureaucracy, and also schools, which label and place people in standardised frameworks rather than focusing on the individual identity of young people (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

They show their young participants that the governmental structures and society, in general, are complex entities but that there is a possibility to cruise through that complexness positively (Participant 1, personal communication, April 30, 2024). This notion of being positive is vital in the way the Youth Council identifies itself. Another hidden goal is to show young people the importance of their own identity, norms, and values and give them the tools to *“create a better system than the one the current generation has created”* (Participant 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). The reason why their council works, according to a spokesperson of the Youth Council, is because of the personal enthusiastic and motivated nature of the young people and facilitators (Participants 1 & 2, personal communication, April 30, 2024). This allows for more creative solutions and also more colouring outside of the set rules. It also offers a space for open conversations, without political games. The party politics and populist ideas are left behind in favour of conversations and positive discussions: *Iedereen mag meedoen*<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Everyone is welcome.

## **Results**

The young people at the events of Tienskip can share their experiences and ideas in Podcasts and videos made during the events (Tienskip, 2023-present). During a video about a project day in the Hague, two students expressed that the day had been a positive experience for them (Tienskip, 2023b). They felt that their opinions were taken seriously by peers and policy-makers present at the event and they got the podium they needed to address issues they faced in their living environments. The humanisation of policy-makers also reduced their thresholds and made democracy feel much closer. Next to this, they addressed that facilitators gave them the tools to prepare for a good presentation and host fruitful brainstorming sessions. This motivated them to work further, and they expressed that they would keep on working on their projects after the workshop. Effectively, Tienskip here succeeded in their objective to give young people the tools to participate rather than explain democracy and enable young people to share their opinions (Participant 9, personal communication, May 17, 2024).

In the Podcast, it also often surfaced that students expected another boring presentation about theoretical democracy but were positively surprised by the enthusiastic, practical, and fast-paced characteristics of the workshop (Tienskip, 2023-present). The podcast is one way Tienskip allows young people to share their thoughts and ideas with the world. In an interview with Tienskip, they also expressed that they share this Podcast with municipalities and policy-makers to ensure that the student's ideas are heard (Participant 3, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Allowing the municipality of Leeuwarden to gain access to a broad group of young people helps them to format policies concerning the opinions of young people (Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024). Herein, the opportunity for students to work on their personal problems is crucial. Often policies are based on the averages of an area, while the anecdotes of individuals are much more valuable as they represent a minority which stays invisible by only focusing on averages (Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

The podcast's creative nature and openness also allowed for interesting conversations between Tienskip and the young participants. It often came back that their brainstorming sessions were interesting and that they liked the idea that they could work on solutions for issues directly affecting them in their daily lives. These issues are much closer to the hearts of the participants and are often good ways of narrowing the gap between local governance and individuals (Participants 6, 7, and 8, personal communication, May 9, 2024; Participants 11, 13, and 14, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Bringing the psychological effects closer to the people helps engage participants and promotes working seriously on the projects (Spence, Poortinga & Pigeon, 2012) as they perceive the solutions as possible improvements to their living environments. This enthusiasm and seriousness for creative solutions can be heard in the podcast as various students express trust and motivation for their ideas.

Students, however, expressed that they sometimes feel that the political sphere is far away from their living environment (Tienskip, 2023-present). Politics focuses too much on one-liners and

things happening on the national level (Tienskip, 2023b; Tienskip, 2023-present), making it difficult for them to envision their projects having actual effects. This is also true for the Youth Council in Apeldoorn, as policy-makers sometimes do not provide feedback on what they have done with the opinions of young people (Participants 16 & 18, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Tienskip tries to tackle this by actively mentioning and repeating different success stories to emphasise opportunities rather than problems and barriers, while young people within the Youth Council in Apeldoorn also expressed that in some cases they did get this feedback (Participant 19, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Thus, this depends on the policy-maker rather than the young participants or organisation. Enthusiastic volunteers, policy-makers, and moderators can often change the feelings of neglect of the opinions, a “lower” quality volunteer can be counterproductive and disillusionise young people that the government is as boring and complex as they previously thought (Participants 3, 4, and 5, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

Allowing students to gain insight and practical experience on how to talk about personal issues also helps to ‘*break the bubble*’ that exists within the municipalities, as expressed in the Tienskip podcast by an employee of a political party in the municipality (Moree & Boerema, 2024). She mentioned that the municipality sometimes has issues in reaching a *breed palet*<sup>18</sup> of young people – echoed by others within the municipality (Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024) –, and this is the perfect opportunity to bring together local policy-makers and young people. Students expressed that the Tienskip workshops are a great initiative, which motivates them to work on issues they face while also allowing them to discuss possible solutions with like-minded young people. The workshops are a great opportunity to step up to local governmental institutions and reduce the barrier to talking about issues as expressed by students in the Podcast (Tienskip, 2023-present). There is also a social aspect to this, as some young participants in the Youth Council in Apeldoorn expressed that they are not necessarily interested in politics, but the social nature and ability to voice their ideas with a low threshold made them join (Participants 11 & 12, personal communication, May 22, 2024). Within the Youth Council discussions are facilitated which bolster conversation where young people feel taken seriously (Participant 15, personal communication, May 22, 2024) and often ask *why* people think and act a certain way rather than attacking their ideas (Participant 17, personal communication, May 22, 2024).

The enthusiasm from facilitators triples down to the participants, and they can use creative ideas to work out solutions. This is also seen in every workshop, students express their desire to work further on the projects they designed (Participant 3, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Often, students also expressed their willingness to outline their ideas and pitch them to the local governments to achieve their goals while they gained the tools to create a pitch (Tienskip, 2023-present). In addition, almost all students expressed in the podcast that they face the issues they are tackling

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<sup>18</sup> Wide palette.

themselves, leading to discussions where students are intrinsically motivated to create a solution to improve their living environments (Tienskip, 2023-present).

## Discussion

As research and news items in the Netherlands have shown (Daas, et al., 2023; de Groot, Daas & Nieuwelink, 2022; Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2023) the latest young generation of the Netherlands misses the tools and capacity to participate in local governance effectively. In response, the Dutch parliament is shifting towards active participation, via, for example, the implementation of new laws and initiatives (e.g. *omgevingswet*, 2024). A bridge is needed between the government and the young population to enhance knowledge, education, and know-how to participate effectively. The Youth Council in Apeldoorn and Tienskip in Leeuwarden are initiatives that try to connect with local young people to find out what goes wrong and how bottlenecks and Risksapes (Müller-Mahn, Moure & Gebreyes, 2020) within their respective localities can be addressed. They do this with young people and by having a low threshold, to shape youth participation with young people – *voor en door jongeren* –, which is identified as a central building block by the Dutch National Youth Council (Nationale Jeugdraad, n.d.).

By bringing together young people with diverse backgrounds and reducing the conversation about theoretical concepts to a bare minimum while bolstering consensus and conversation, Tienskip and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn create a situation where young people are *agents of change* (von Braun, 2017). Vital here is the notion that the young participants are individuals with personal values and ideas and not a group of people who share the same opinions and ideologies. The idea of *agents of change* centres around the capacities and resourcefulness of their young participants, which is vital in gaining their trust and active participation (Frank, 2006). Young people are challenged to act out of personal motivation and capacities, which highlights the notion that young people are not one generalisable group and aims to include psychologically close issues to increase engagement (Spence, Poortinga & Pigeon, 2012).

The results show that there are concrete practices which can help form flourishing active youth participation and balance out the participative elite in local governance. The notion that policy-makers join the events and listen to the ideas makes young people regain trust in their local governance, as the policy-makers give a face and human nature to local governance and enhance the inclusion of local knowledge (Nyong, Adesina & Osman Elasha, 2007). Conversations here can create a bridge between policy-makers and young people which is a necessary part to bolster active participation and can reduce polarisations (Moral & Best, 2023). Both Tienskip and the Youth Council play a vital role here in bringing together young people and policy-makers. Taking the young people seriously and giving them the position as *agents of change* in personal issues while bringing them together intrinsically motivates the young participants in the events of Tienskip and the Youth Council of Apeldoorn (Participant 6, personal communication, May 9, 2024).

During the events, the facilitators are often also young people who play a role in enthusing the young people to think for themselves by giving them the tools to become self-reliant in politics and bring them close to actual policy-makers (Participants 3 & 4, personal communication, April 30, 2024). By taking them on a participative journey, the organisations succeed in creating an open sphere full of fast-paced brainstorming with peers and policy-makers, which oughts to help in decreasing overall resentment and regional discontent against local and municipal governments (Innes & Booher, 2004; Mikulewicz & Podgórska, 2020; van den Berg & Kok, 2021) and increase the participative capacities of a group of young people far beyond the *participative elite* (van der Meer, 2018). This *participative elite* is often highly involved to be involved and has a “*hoge betrokkenheid op betrokkenheid*”<sup>19</sup> (Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024).

Multiple participants have expressed that the initiatives help motivate their efforts as they feel like they can share their ideas, which are taken seriously (e.g. participant 15, personal communication, May 22, 2024; Tienskip, 2023-present). By bringing the policy-makers together with young people, an environment is created that bolsters conversation within the existing capacities and capabilities of the young participants. Then, the policy-makers can gain input from a group of people that are often left behind, an added benefit here is increased trust and support for policy-makers by more people (Participant 20, personal communication, May 27, 2024; Šaparnienė, Reinholde & Rinkevičienė, 2021). By giving the young participants tools, such as increasing presentation skills, to present the ideas they have, they feel more confident in their abilities and citizen participation, hence, forming a strong partnership between young people and the government to foster effective civic participation (Arnstein, 1969). Herein the young generations learn to become more resilient & capable and can address local governments with confidence in different governmental ideologies and societies, as the differences between Apeldoorn and Leeuwarden show (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023; Planbureau Fryslân, 2020; Smeets & Dagevos, 2016; van den Berg & Kok, 2021). This is to create a civil society as already has been described by De Tocqueville (1835), fitting within the Dutch Thorbecke model (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020; Thorbecke, 1826).

## Conclusion

This thesis has the core objective of finding key factors which can increase effective youth participation in local governance so as to increase the futureproof representation of young people from all socio-economic backgrounds. Firstly, the main concepts of participation and democracy have been outlined. Secondly, the Dutch governmental structures and institutions have been highlighted as they play an important role in the composition of both organisations. Thirdly, the organisational structures and ideologies of both Tienskip and the Youth Council in Apeldoorn are explained and, finally, the results of the focus groups and interviews are outlined to find concrete recommendations which can

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<sup>19</sup> Are highly involved on the topic of involvement or just to be involved.



help foster effective and sustainable youth participation in municipal governance. This is to allow young people to actively participate in local governance and lower thresholds for municipalities and policy-makers to gain input from these people to increase the impact young people can have to be much more than tokenist inclusion.

The findings of this thesis have shaped six concrete recommendations for municipal governments to consider when shaping sustainable youth participation to reduce the idea that the government is merely a *ver-van-je-bed show*. These recommendations are: actively provide young people with the tools (e.g. how to give an effective elevator pitch) necessary to navigate local governance, give young people the confidence to preach and act on their own initiatives and ideas, bring together young people and policy-makers to facilitate conversation, emphasise on the capacities and resourcefulness of young participants this allows trust and active participation to flourish, it is vital to keep in mind that young people are individuals and not a group which shares the same opinions, and young people should be involved in shaping youth participation *voor en door jongeren*.

Further research on this topic should focus on international recognition of effective and sustainable youth participation within international governance structures. This will allow for intercultural and large-scale international participative efforts to deal with emerging issues created by climate change. This also ties into the main limitation of this study, as the results are only applicable to the Netherlands. Both Tienskip and the Youth Council in Apeldoorn act within the framework of Dutch governance and results are only applicable to other organisations working within the same framework to flourish.

To conclude, the capacities and self-determination of young people involved with Tienskip and the Youth Council in Apeldoorn are enhanced and tools are given to create a new generation of self-reliant Dutch citizens. Even if these young people are not inclined to go further than joining the events, they still gain the experience of voicing their opinions and gaining the tools to sustain themselves as citizens. Therefore, by utilising the existing capacities and enthusiasm of young people while actively bringing them closer to local governance, a more diverse group of young people is reached to balance out the effects of the participative elite and enhance sustainable and effective youth participation in local governance as to *Futureproof* governance.

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*Declaration of interests*

There is no conflict of interest in this research. For confidentiality, the names of participants have been omitted from the submission and replaced by numbers.

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## **Footnotes**

- 1) A newly introduced law for new projects taking place in the Dutch environment.
- 2) Far away from the individual living environment of people within a community as mentioned by a Tienksip employee in a focus group.
- 3) For and by youth.
- 4) The House of Thorbecke.
- 5) Social cohesion here means how connected people feel with others in their neighbourhood and city (Manca, 2014).
- 6) ‘Tien’ comes from ‘Tiener’, (teenager in English) and the name derives from the Frisian Mienskip. Mienskip is the Frisian culture and society (Planbureau Fryslân, 2020).
- 7) The Youth Council for the municipality of Apeldoorn.
- 8) Overview of interviewees is found in Appendix B.
- 9) Hence the fact that there are more ‘participants’ referenced in the results section than the added amount of people in all focus groups and interviews. To keep the referencing coherent, the persons who provided short comments also gained a ‘number’ to keep their personal information confidential.
- 10) By this, the Tienksip board mean the capabilities and knowledge to act within the Dutch democracy.
- 11) Tienksip projectdays.
- 12) MBO, HBO, and WO are different types of Dutch educational institutions. MBO: trades and technical occupations (college), HBO: professional orientation (University applied sciences), and WO: theoretical (University) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2021).
- 13) loosely translated as: “If you want to change something, start by doing something about it yourself”.
- 14) What do you want?
- 15) National Youth Council, an overarching organisation for other youth-focused organisations in the Netherlands.
- 16) “On to a social democracy, you only truly experience democracy by practising it, and democracy should be accessible for everyone.”
- 17) Everyone is welcome.
- 18) Wide palette.
- 19) Are highly involved on the topic of involvement or just to be involved.

## **Appendix**

### *Appendix A: interview guide*

#### **Introduction**

Can you please introduce yourself and your organisation<sup>20</sup>?

What is the aim of your organisation?

What is the structure of your organisation

Why did you choose to work/volunteer at this organisation?

What moves you within the scope of youth participation?

How is your organisation categorised?

#### **Main questions**

What is youth participation according to you?

And to your organisation?

What is the importance of youth participation in (local) governance?

How do you ensure this within your organisation?

What is the goal of your organisation?

How do you ensure that local governance takes into account the output of your organisation?

Can you give some examples of outputs the organisation has created?

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<sup>20</sup> “The organisation” - is included as a representation of the organisations interviewed. Thus, this has to be changed into the name of the organisation during interviews.



*Appendix B: Overview of interviewees*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Type of interview</b>
1	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Interview
2	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Interview
3	Tienskip	Focus Group
4	Tienskip	Focus Group
5	Tienskip	Focus Group
6	Tienskip	Focus Group
7	Tienskip	Focus Group
8	Tienskip	Focus Group
9	Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations	Interview
10	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
11	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
12	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
13	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
14	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
15	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
16	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Focus Group
17	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Short Conversation
18	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Short Conversation
19	Youth Council of Apeldoorn	Short Conversation
20	Municipality of Leeuwarden	Interview