

3.2.6 Youth, local economy and innovation Tuesday 1 April, at 09:15h

Moderator: Georgia Karavangeli, Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (ACPP) – REAS Red de Redes de Economía Alternativa y Solidaria, Spain

Panelists:

- Esmeralda Garcia, Programme Manager and Trainer, The Hague Academy for local governance, Netherlands
- Lidia Alejandra Mejía Tinoco, Executive Director, Chamber of Commerce and Industries of Choloma, Honduras
- Youssef Fennira, Chief Technical Advisor at the ILO in Tunisia
- Irene Martín, Project Officer at REDR (Spanish Rural Development Network), Member of the European LEADER Youth Network, Spain

Opening-welcoming:

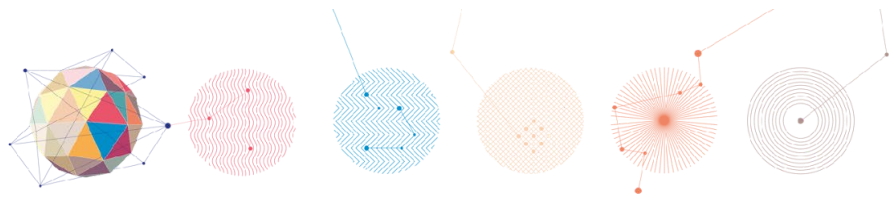
The session on “Youth, Local Economy, and Innovation” opened with a powerful reflection on the current global context — a landscape marked by political instability, the rise of a war economy, environmental collapse, and systemic injustice. In response to these profound challenges, the session was intentionally designed as a space of resistance and hope, highlighting youth as political agents and key protagonists of transformative change in local development.

Participants came together to examine how young people across diverse territories are not merely engaging in existing structures, but are actively reshaping local economies grounded in justice, sustainability, and care. The session emphasized that this is not a matter of symbolic inclusion — it is about fundamentally reimagining governance and economic models through intergenerational collaboration and community-rooted strategies.

The session sought to:

- Raise awareness of youth’s role in building sustainable communities.
- Promote collaboration among local actors to support youth-led change.
- Share territorial success stories that inspire replication.
- Build strategic partnerships for long-term impact.
- Influence the global agenda in view of the upcoming Civil Society Forum and the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (Spain, July 2025).

The session offered a rich and diverse array of perspectives and experiences, drawing from both local and international contexts. Participants had the opportunity to hear about inspiring initiatives such as **YOU(th) CARE for Change**, a Euro-Mediterranean project



promoting youth-led care economies; the **JEUN'ESS project** in Tunisia, which strengthens youth entrepreneurship through the Social and Solidarity Economy; and the work of **REDR** and the **European LEADER Youth Network**, which empower young people to engage in rural development and local governance across Europe.

Community-rooted strategies from **Honduras** illustrated how coordinated public-private approaches can support youth inclusion in territorial planning, economic recovery, and institutional innovation. Equally, the **Hague Academy for Local Governance** brought a global perspective, sharing practical experiences on how inclusive training and participatory governance methodologies can empower both young people and local actors to collaboratively shape democratic, sustainable development.

Throughout the session, speakers and participants reflected on how local governments, civil society, and the private sector can work together to **co-create resilient, caring economies** that place people and the planet at the center.

Structured as a **dialogue panel**, the session was designed to foster meaningful interaction and collective learning. Each speaker delivered a focused intervention, followed by a question posed by the moderator to deepen the conversation. After all presentations, a second round of dialogue allowed for cross-panel reflections and audience engagement, creating an open and dynamic space for exchange, insight, and collaboration.

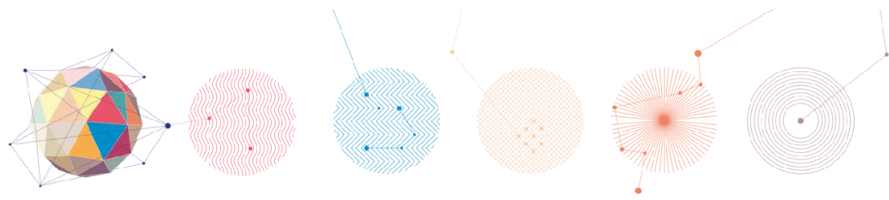
Speakers' Presentations

Esmeralda García (The Hague Academy for Local Governance, Netherlands)

Esmeralda García brought a strong global lens to the session, drawing on her extensive experience designing participatory training programs across diverse contexts — from the favelas of Brazil to cities in the MENA region and West Africa. Her intervention underscored the importance of cultivating **learning ecosystems** where young people and local governments engage together in shaping inclusive governance.

She emphasized that youth participation must move beyond tokenistic gestures. It must be **systemic, sustained, and co-constructed** — not a checkbox, but a transformative process embedded in local democratic practice. In her view, effective training programs must equip young people not only with technical skills but also with the **political agency** needed to act as leaders, innovators, and community decision-makers.

Her core message resonated deeply: *"If you involve me, you will understand."* For Esmeralda, participation is a dynamic process that demands active listening, shared responsibility, and a commitment to power-sharing. *"An active youth is a beacon for a community,"* she stated, reminding participants that strong participatory processes don't simply happen — they are deliberately built through inclusion, trust, and long-term support.



Lidia Alejandra Mejía Tinoco (Chamber of Commerce, Choloma, Honduras)

Lidia Alejandra Mejía Tinoco shared a compelling territorial experience from **Choloma**, one of Honduras's fastest-growing cities, where the **Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCICH)** has emerged as a leading force in driving inclusive local development. She highlighted how the Chamber has successfully **integrated youth into post-pandemic economic recovery, strategic planning, and local governance** by creating formal and institutionalized spaces for youth participation.

Through innovative collaborations and the adoption of a **Territorial Care Agenda**, CCICH has promoted community resilience and intergenerational engagement. One of the most significant milestones was the establishment of **Honduras' first Municipal Youth Council with its own allocated budget**, and the development of **COMVIDA**, a municipal program addressing the needs of children and youth.

Lidia underscored the importance of **public-private partnerships and international cooperation** as critical enablers in these efforts. She stressed that real transformation requires **tailored financing mechanisms, technical mentoring, and institutional recognition of youth innovation** — all of which are essential to ensure the sustainability of youth-led development.

Under her leadership, CCICH has achieved significant impact:

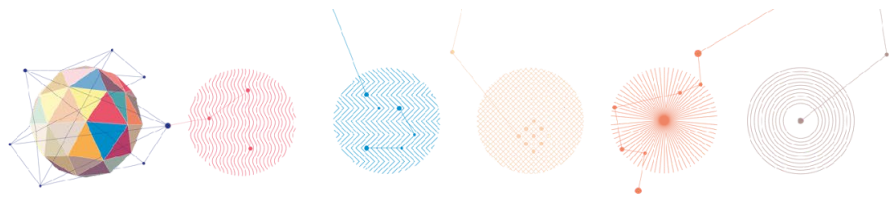
- **Trained over 1,300 individuals**, including youth, women, and business staff.
- **Reactivated 450 MSMEs** through technical assistance, access to financing, and market linkages.
- **Established seed funds and mentoring support** for youth-led entrepreneurial initiatives.
- **Coordinated cross-sectoral programs** addressing migration, climate resilience, and violence prevention.

Lidia's intervention made it clear that youth inclusion is not only a matter of justice — it is a strategic imperative for building vibrant, sustainable, and future-ready territories. She also stressed the importance of International Cooperation in supporting youth initiatives and sharing experience and knowhow.

Youssef Fennira (ILO Tunisia)

Youssef Fennira presented the **JEUN'ESS project**, an initiative by the ILO in Tunisia that harnesses the **Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)** to foster youth employment and territorial resilience. Active in **seven vulnerable regions**, the project has created over **3,600 decent jobs** and supported **176 SSE structures**, demonstrating how locally rooted strategies can drive systemic impact.

He emphasized the importance of **territorial anchoring**, where youth innovation is supported through tailored local ecosystems involving incubators, public bodies, and financial institutions. JEUN'ESS helped **reconnect youth with institutions and financing channels**, making these more accessible, relevant, and supportive.



Key components of the project include:

- **Local experimentation and learning loops.**
- **Strategic partnerships** with incubators, financial institutions, and public actors.
- **Tailored financial tools** to meet SSE needs.
- **Capacity-building for public institutions** to strengthen their role in SSE support.

Youssef also stressed the **advantage of local coordination**, which allows for faster response, greater familiarity, and stronger ownership among stakeholders. Tunisia's experience shows that **youth-led innovation, when rooted in community and supported by the right mechanisms, can influence both territorial development and national policy.**

Irene Martín (Spanish Rural Development Network - European LEADER Youth Network)

Irene Martín brought forward the often-overlooked perspective of **rural youth in Spain**, highlighting the stark reality that **youth represents only 9% of decision making in Local Action Groups**. Representing both the **Spanish Rural Development Network (REDR)** and the **European LEADER Youth Network**, she addressed the pressing need to open up political and institutional spaces to younger generations in rural territories.

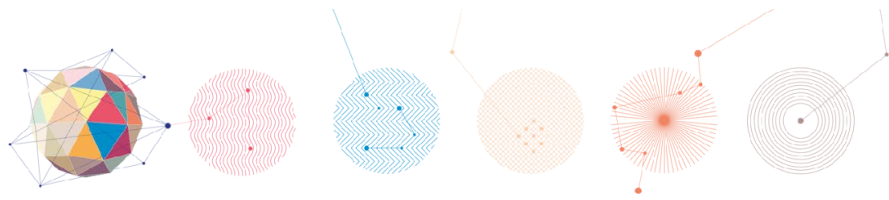
She emphasized that **young people are ready to enter and change the dynamics** of local development — bringing new energy, ideas, and a strong commitment to their territories. Through **Local Action Groups**, youth not only find a pathway to entrepreneurship but also an opportunity to engage directly with local administrations, influence territorial strategies, and participate in technical and policy processes.

Irene's message was clear: **to revitalize rural areas, we must value the potential of youth**, recognize their interest in local politics, and provide them with the tools and platforms to co-create the future of their communities.

Georgia Karavangeli (REAS Red de Redes de Economía Alternativa y Solidaria)

The **YOU(th) CARE for Change** project is a bold, cross-border initiative that places young people at the heart of territorial transformation. Funded by the EU's **DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising)** programme, it spans **12 countries** across Europe and North Africa, including Tunisia and Morocco. **REAS Red de Redes** participates through **RIPESSE Europe**.

From the start, the project has embraced a **youth-led, care-centered approach** to economic and social transformation. It began with a broad **mapping of youth-led initiatives** — including cooperatives, informal groups, grassroots collectives, and social movements — to identify emerging changemakers across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Building on this, the project is now supporting the creation of **Global Care Agendas**, strategic frameworks designed by young people to address the overlapping crises of inequality, climate breakdown, and social exclusion — placing care, interdependence, and ecological justice at the heart of local development.



The project also includes **international youth forums, awareness campaigns** on gender equality and social-ecological transition, and a **granting program** that will directly support youth-led initiatives, helping them implement their own solutions on the ground.

Young people bring a **critical, conscious, and ethical lens** to economic activity, grounded in values of **solidarity, justice, and sustainability**. Their initiatives seek not just financial viability, but the well-being of communities and ecosystems — offering a values-driven vision for local economies.

At the same time, the project has identified key challenges:

- **Lack of resources and institutional support**, including access to funding, training, and networks.
- **Economic and job insecurity**, often marked by precarious, poorly paid, and exploitative work that hinders long-term engagement.
- **Underrepresentation in decision-making spaces**, where youth voices remain marginalized.
- **Educational and awareness gaps**, especially around care economies, climate justice, and transformative alternatives.

YOU(th) CARE for Change aims to bridge these gaps by equipping young people with the tools, recognition, and resources they need to **co-lead the transition toward more just and caring territories**. It is not only a project — it is a **political statement** affirming the central role of youth in building the future.

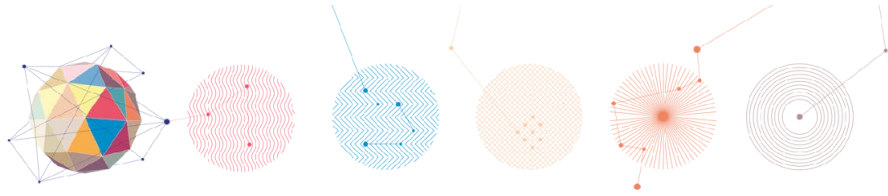
Conclusions

The session on “**Youth, Local Economy, and Innovation**” powerfully demonstrated that **young people are not only the future — they are the present**, already building and leading alternative economic and governance models rooted in **solidarity, care, and justice**.

Each intervention highlighted a distinct but connected reality: from rural Spain to urban Tunisia, from post-crisis Honduras to cross-regional initiatives like YOU(th) CARE for Change, youth are **actively transforming their territories**. What unites these efforts is a shared belief that the economy must serve people and the planet — and that **young people are key political actors** in achieving this shift.

Speakers emphasized several critical insights:

- **Youth participation must be systemic and political**, not symbolic. It requires active listening, shared decision-making, and recognition of young people as co-creators of governance and development.
- **Local-level action is strategic**. It allows for more agile coordination, closer relationships, and greater responsiveness — essential conditions for transformative work.



- **Inclusive training and ecosystem-building are key.** When local actors, institutions, and youth are trained and supported together, innovation becomes embedded and sustainable.
- **Institutional support must be adapted.** Access to finance, mentorship, and enabling policies should reflect the realities of young people — especially in contexts marked by precarity, inequality, and marginalization.
- **The solidarity economy and care-centered approaches offer a blueprint** for youth-led change — one that centers community well-being, environmental justice, and social cohesion.

Crucially, the session also shed light on **what youth need to continue driving this transformation**: recognition, resources, space for experimentation, and sustained, meaningful support.

We must not let these reflections remain within the confines of this forum. The voices, ideas, and proposals heard today are vital for shaping the financing and development agendas of tomorrow — **agendas that work for communities, not just markets.**

Let us move forward by creating **spaces of connection and care**, where young people feel seen, supported, and empowered to act. Let us invest in **locally grounded strategies**, ensure **equitable access to funding and opportunities**, and acknowledge **youth leadership as a force for systemic change** — not a temporary innovation, but a cornerstone of a more just and resilient future.

Thank you to all the speakers and participants who made this dialogue possible. **Let's keep building — together.**