

## Alternative forms of political participation: youth, co-production and participatory art

This is the summary of the in-person public event held on 12 November 2025.

You can access the [video here](#).

*Summary written by Zeynep Azra Koç*



On the 12th of October 2025, Contemporary Turkish Studies hosted an in-person public event examining how marginalised youth develop alternative forms of political participation through participatory art, co-production, and inclusive deliberation, transforming exclusion into meaningful engagement across the world, including Türkiye, South Africa and Uganda. The project was conducted with the careful selection of 38 youth participants aged 18–25, representing diverse genders and backgrounds. The event was titled “Alternative forms of political participation: youth, co-production and participatory art.”

The speakers were Dr **Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm**, senior lecturer in Politics of Gender at Manchester Metropolitan University; Dr Melis Cin, senior lecturer in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University; and Dr **Manu Lekunze**, lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen. Dr **Craig Walker** was unable to

attend due to unforeseen circumstances. **Melis Cin** and **Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm** presented on Craig Walker's behalf.

**Prof Yaprak Gürsoy**, Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event. In her introduction, Prof Yaprak Gürsoy welcomed the panellists and introduced them to the audience.

## The Photovoice Project

As the first speaker, **Dr Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm** provided an in-depth overview of the photovoice project, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). She portrayed it as an endeavour to find a “common language with policymakers” through the deployment of art-based social science methodologies and to empower youth voices across Türkiye, South Africa, and Uganda. She described how photovoice and participatory action research, pairing host and refugee youth as co-photographers, fostered collaboration, facilitated the sharing of lived realities, and shifted the focus from conflict to commonality. Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm highlighted that participatory action research framed the study's methodology, using art as a medium to enable epistemic resistance against societal marginalisation. Gaining visibility was identified as the end goal, especially towards NGOs, policymakers, and local authorities. Data was collected from 66 interviews, participatory workshops, and reflection meetings.



**Epistemic Injustice and Credibility:** Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm highlighted how the

project foregrounded the concept of epistemic injustice, which refers to the ways in which marginalized groups are denied credibility and voice due to factors such as age, gender, race, and migration status. Photovoice provided a structured avenue for participants to transform private experiences into collective narratives for social dialogue and policy engagement.

**Participatory Action Research:** Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm explained the study's methodology, drawing on multiple art-based approaches, including participatory video and graffiti, with the primary focus on photovoice due to its ability to “equalise the space” among participants. Pre-engagement workshops equipped youth with ethics, visual literacy, and practical photography skills, while trust-building exercises emphasised consent and respectful documentation, both crucial for responsible research practice.

**Fieldwork and Process:** Participants were paired. Refugees and hosts were teamed up and mixed. They were handed cameras and asked to document both shared and differing challenges. The process involved not only capturing images but also collective analysis: selection, evaluation, and deliberation over narrative impact. This culminated in collaborative exhibitions where youth curated their own work, moving from research subjects to recognised photo-artists presenting to peers, policymakers, and the wider public.

## Site-Specific Findings and Challenges

Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm detailed the varying sociopolitical landscapes among the participants:

- **Türkiye:** Open-door policies and institutional support for Syrian refugees contrasted with exclusion in other respects. Photo stories underscored discrimination, precarious living, and intersecting identities.
- **South Africa:** Hostility, xenophobia, and limited economic opportunities heavily shaped youth narratives, underscored by fieldwork coinciding with major xenophobic attacks.
- **Uganda:** Participants noted the relative “ideal” host community narrative through small land plots for refugees, but reality revealed ongoing discrimination and policy challenges.

Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm stated that special attention was paid to the gender distribution in Uganda due to the diversity of the refugee population.

The co-production steps were listed as follows:

- **Introductory & Ethics Training:** A process of trust-building, consent, and visual literacy, through pre-engagement workshops.
- **Outdoor Photography Sessions:** By pairing refugees and host youth, or through group fieldwork.
- **Photo Selection:** Each participant chose five images for the exhibition. The method of eliminating which photos to include in the exhibition added a dimension of communication.

Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm remarked how exhibition spaces, too often overlooked in participatory research, were treated as essential venues for agency and visibility. She also noted ethical dilemmas (such as self-censorship due to content selection near religious sites). She described how exhibition design was co-created through WhatsApp groups and open deliberation, setting valuable precedents for future art-based advocacy.

## Sociological Context and Personal Stories



**Dr Melis Cin** expanded on conceptual frameworks for youth participation, distinguishing between formal (e.g., voting, party membership) and informal (e.g., protest, social media activism, issue-based engagement) modes. She drew on fieldwork and broader literature to illustrate a global decline in youth engagement with formal democratic institutions and a corresponding rise in creative and sometimes unconventional civic activism. She

identified three main areas of political participation: political, social, and civic participation.

**Declining Formal Engagement:** Dr Cin highlighted the global trend of declining youth involvement in formal democratic processes, especially in “immature democracies.” Young people’s mistrust of elites and institutional actors pushes them toward alternative, more autonomous means of civic action. This is done through increased activities on social media and public forums. Occupy London is an example of alternative methods of political participation.

**Barriers to Engagement:** Refugees, women, ethnic minorities, and displaced youth face added difficulties: lack of recognition, cultural exclusion, and unsafe or unwelcoming political spaces. A lack of recognition and a third space is created for these groups, causing them to feel overshadowed even by the NGOs and political allies they work with. Dr Cin emphasised how artistic intervention provides low-barrier, creative spaces for self-expression.

### **Why Art Matters in Political Participation?**

Dr Cin highlighted why art could create a third space for youth to take part:

**Art Makes Politics Feel:** When youth photograph daily struggles or hopes, they humanise policies, allowing their feelings of inequality, displacement, and belonging to be communicated to the broader audience.

**Art Creates Spaces:** Exhibitions and performances become alternative parliaments and “third spaces” where those excluded from formal politics can speak.

**Art Builds Solidarity:** Shared creative processes link participants, as seen in the research project in which refugees and host communities engaged in a collective process of meaning-making.

**Art is Action:** Artistic expression does politics: it contests dominant narratives and reclaims visibility.

**Art speaks without Permission:** Art does not need institutional approval. A photograph or a performance can cross borders and speak truth to power. Dr Cin also remarked how a space is also opened for public deliberation.

### **Fieldwork Anecdotes**

Dr Cin shared powerful stories from the photovoice fieldwork:

**Spontaneous Connection in Istanbul:** A Syrian youth named Zahar teaching photography to a Turkish child in Sultan Ahmed exemplified how art can bridge language and cultural divides, leading not only to personal connection but also broader family and community engagement.

**Child Labour Narrative:** Taken by a Syrian youth named Muhammed, photographs narrated the dual pressures of precarity: money as both a survival tool and a silencing agent for children working in textile factories.

**Language Barriers and Art:** Many youths did not speak the local language fluently, particularly in Uganda and Türkiye. Public discussion requires a particular way of speech, whereas photography enabled new communication routes, offering participation unconstrained by verbal ability and social training.

Dr Cin cautioned against uncritical celebration of art-based activism, analysing the risks of “aesthetics of suffering” where the visual impact may eclipse substantive messages. She used the Little Amal project as an example, noting that the audience might get lost in the aesthetic. She described tokenism and issues of visibility in exhibition curation, connecting these observations to justice frameworks. Dr Cin drew attention to the fact that not all voices are equally heard; NGO and institutional actors can still dominate meaning-making.

## Exhibition Spaces and Power Dynamics

**Joint Presentation:** Due to the absence of Dr **Craig Walker**, Dr Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Dr Melis Cin presented this portion of the panel. The panellists examined the move from research and creation to public exhibition, highlighting opportunities and tensions.



Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm reflected on the triple function of exhibitions: as social commentary, as locations for community engagement, and as unique settings for direct policy advocacy. Power relations were analysed at every stage, from image selection to public messaging, emphasising the importance of designing truly participatory, youth-centred exhibitions. In Istanbul, the participants' WhatsApp group created the invitations and exhibition space, deciding on Hünkar Kasrı, an old Ottoman pavilion, to make it accessible and foster a sense of community. Since the area was part of a mosque, some images were eliminated.

Exhibition settings were carefully selected to ensure the participatory aspects of the project. Art pieces do not convey the same meaning to everyone, especially when the goal is to communicate with policymakers. Exhibitions were held in various countries. Three ways were listed in connection with the youth political agency:

### **Exhibition as Community Engagement**

Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm reflected on efforts to foster social inclusivity and support young people as agents of community transformation. By focusing on capacity and agency building, communities can empower youth to contribute meaningfully to positive change. These strategies also promote community and inter-community cohesion, strengthening connections both within and between groups.

### **Exhibition as Access to Decision-Makers**

Speaking truth and challenging the status quo can inspire meaningful change, while creating unique emotive connections to political power enables individuals and groups to influence decision-making in impactful ways. Dr Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm emphasised the roles of advocacy and network building as critical for amplifying voices and expanding support for key issues. Still, these efforts must also address the risks of co-option or political misrepresentation to ensure that authentic interests are truly represented in political arenas.

Dr Cin elaborated on how art can offer alternative avenues for political expression, but its potential as a form of participation is shaped by the power dynamics embedded within its spaces of display and reception. Consequently, while art can provoke reflection and dialogue on political issues, its impact depends heavily on the institutional and social hierarchies that govern visibility and legitimacy within the artistic sphere.

### **Power Dynamics within Exhibition Spaces**

**Türkiye:** Located near a mosque, the exhibition faced content negotiation, with specific images, especially LGBTQ-themed ones, being excluded after debate among participants about public backlash and personal safety. A photo with a queer woman wearing a headscarf received backlash from both the exhibition space and Syrian participants since the exhibition space was located near the mosque.

**Uganda:** NGO staff sometimes prioritised aesthetic quality over participant voice, leading to tensions about whose narrative “deserved” prominence, with youth pushing back against gatekeeping. The aim was to understand which voices were being cast out.

**South Africa:** Making the exhibition public was risky. With heightened xenophobic violence, organisers prioritised participant safety, resulting in limited public access and focused engagement with invited decision makers. The ambassador of Türkiye, the British High Commissioner, and a diplomat from the Uganda Embassy were present. Despite logistical challenges, key policymakers attended, allowing youth narratives to reach influential audiences.

### Reflection and Feedback

Dr **Manu Lekunze** contextualised the project within international debates on youth, displacement, and demographic trends. His remarks emphasised the following:

**Global Perspective:** Africa’s “youth bulge” and patterns of internal displacement present urgent challenges for civic participation. Despite widespread news coverage of the many Africans trying to cross the Mediterranean to southern Europe, most displaced Africans remain within the continent. This underscores the relevance of the Uganda and South Africa cases in the project. This displacement and growth in Africa’s population offers a statistic where around 1 in 4 people in the world in 2050 will be African, and towards the end of the century, this number will rise to 1 in 2 people. Therefore, African politics has global implications.



Dr Lekunze added that youth resorting to alternative methods of political participation involuntarily also indicates that the political space is stifled. He used the president of Uganda as an example, who has been in power since 1986, longer than most Ugandans are alive, since most Ugandans are under the age of 30. Authoritarians stifle the conventional methods of participation through rigged elections and exclusions. These alternative methods bypass successful authoritarian restrictions.

Dr Lekunze deemed the presented research necessary to raise awareness of issues that will affect all, while also introducing alternative ways to participate in public life. Bringing concepts such as epistemic justice into the discussion has broadened the scope of the study, allowing us to consider not only more familiar forms of justice but also the less apparent forms of injustice, such as epistemic injustice.

Audience Q&A focused on discussions of research ethics, the impact of visual advocacy, and community participation beyond project timelines.

For further information on the project, please see:

F. Melis Cin, Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, Craig Walker, Lorna Truter, Necmettin Doğan, Ashley Gunter & M. Melih Cin (2025) The politics of co-production and inclusive deliberation in participatory research, **International Journal of Social Research Methodology**, 28:4, 475-490, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2024.2411703

F. Melis Cin, Craig Walker, Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, Ashley Gunter, Necmettin Doğan, Lorna Truter, Frank Ahimbisibwe & Tominke Christine Olaniyan (2025) Political participation of refugee and host community youths: epistemic resistance through artistic and participatory spaces, **Journal of Youth Studies**, 28:3, 496-513, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2023.2273346