

# INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK

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## World Youth Openness and Democracy Summit 2025 Report

Alice Smith, Elena Vocale, Federica Baggio, Gavin Miller, Jessica Jahn,  
Jimmy Freiberger II, Kaitlyn Albertyn, Madeline Farinas de Leon,  
Ontiretse Moatshe, Otsile Nkadimeng, Peggy Molefi, Ruth Kasanga,

with the contribution of various other Youth Fellows

## Preface

For 50 years nearly 2000 football teams from all over the world gather in Gothenburg, Sweden, during a week in mid-July. Around 300,000 players, parents, coaches and spectators from around 70 countries, turn Gothenburg into a truly global sporting festival. This is the world's biggest kids and youth football tournament called Gothia Cup.

When the International Youth Think Tank (IYTT) looks upon Gothia Cup, we see much more than sports. We imagine how the teams all year round offer meaningfulness, physical exercise, and friendship for the players. We envision how coaches, team managers, and parents devote a lot of time and resources to provide football fields and other essential practicalities. We imagine how the teams contribute to local social cohesion and economic development.

On Gothia Cup's 50th anniversary we premiered our new activity - the Gothenburg World Youth Openness and Democracy Summit. It entailed that we for the first time summoned IYTT Youth Fellows of several cohorts (2020-2025), and three continents Africa, Europe, and North America. During five intense days the 20 Youth Fellows worked very long hours marvellously carrying out three challenging activities:

- Running Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDTs) with hundreds of people at Heden, Gothia Cup's main camp in the Gothenburg city centre
- Premiering the new IYTT method called Neighborhooding Democracy, entailing observations and OCDTs in five Gothenburg neighbourhoods, leading up to the exhibition Gothenburg DEMO 2025 at Röhsska Museum of Design and Art
- Hanging out with players, coaches and parents of 10 football teams from Germany, Guatemala, India, Italy, Kenya, Norway, South Africa, Great Britain, Tunisia, and USA

We could organize the summit thanks to a generous project grant from The Sten A Olsson Foundation. I want to extend my sincerest thanks to the foundation for supporting our endeavour. In way of thanks, the collaboration with Gothia Cup and Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft was indispensable and enjoyable. Warm thanks go to the hundreds of Gothia Cup attendees, and to people in the five Gothenburg neighbourhoods, who generously shared their ideas in the OCDTs. Big thanks go to the Youth Fellows who excellently have written up this amazing report, and to IYTT Project Coordinator Elena Vocale for coordinating the summit activities and the report writing.

My warmest thanks go to all 20 Youth Fellows who worked very long hours with challenging activities, and afterwards generously shared experiences and views of the summit, thus contributing invaluable to this report. In times of a rising authoritarianism, your energy, passion, and humility lend big hope for a brighter democratic future.

The strength of the IYTT lies in cultivating a mindset that values experimentation, dialogue, and collective responsibility. This ensures that the IYTT is always moving, always adapting, and always open to new thoughts. The current report is thus crucial for IYTT to evolve.

*Urban Strandberg*  
*Director & Co-founder, IYTT*

# Contents

<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Open Chair Democracy Talks Rounds .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1. Heden .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.2. Cityscapes .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Gothenburg DEMO 2025 &amp; Neighborhooding Democracy .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.1. City Tours .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Angered Centrum .....	8
Masthuggstorget .....	9
Nya Hovås .....	10
Wieselgrensplaten .....	11
<b>2.2. The Exhibition .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Angered Centrum .....	12
Masthuggstorget .....	12
Nya Hovås .....	14
Wieselgrensplaten .....	14
<b>3. Youth Fellows with Gothia Cup Teams .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4. Social Media Coverage .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5. Recommendations and Lessons Learned .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>5.1. Open Chair Democracy Talks.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>5.2. Gothenburg DEMO 2025.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5.3. Youth Fellows with Gothia Cup Teams .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The Youth Fellows.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>About the IYTT .....</b>	<b>22</b>

## Summary

The Report is a document produced by the Youth Fellows who participated in the Summit. It is a compilation of the activities that Youth Fellows undertook during the 5 days of the Summit, and it addresses their impressions and concerns to reflect on the program of activities, and its impact on Youth Fellows as well as on democracy.

The drafting of the Report was a coordinated effort that took place in the weeks following the Summit. The various sections are a description and analysis of Youth Fellows' experiences, while the Recommendations and Lessons Learned section compiles the results of the Reflection Form that was circulated among the participants and received 16 answers (out of the 20 Youth Fellows involved in the Summit).

## Key Activities

**Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDTs):** Youth Fellows engaged hundreds of people in conversations about democracy at public venues and Gothenburg neighbourhoods. Discussions revealed common associations of democracy with freedom, voting, and equality, but also highlighted disparities in lived experiences shaped by nationality, socio-economic background, and political context.

**Neighborhooding Democracy:** Youth Fellows explored Gothenburg's neighbourhoods through urban observation exercises, linking urban design to democratic life. Insights stressed the role of space in fostering or limiting community engagement, while also leveraging the power of outsider perspectives. Youth Fellows translated their observations into creative posters and multimedia content in the exhibition Gothenburg DEMO 2025.

**Youth Fellows with Gothia Cup Teams:** Embedding Youth Fellows with international football teams was intended to link sports and democracy. However, unclear communication, cultural and language barriers, and a lack of preparation reduced impact. Positive potential was noted if future engagements are better structured, with clearer goals and workshops before matches.

## Lessons Learned & Recommendations

**For OCDTs:** Clarify their purpose (data collection vs. community empowerment), revise and contextualise questions, provide training for handling sensitive views, and consider language support to increase inclusivity.

**For Neighborhooding Democracy:** Allow more time for preparation, strengthen collaboration with residents, ensure framing acknowledges outsider perspectives, and use trauma-informed approaches for sensitive topics.

**For Gothia Cup Engagements:** Improve communication with teams, conduct activities before the tournament, provide facilitator training, ensure cultural sensitivity, and establish clearer consent and privacy safeguards for minors.

## Overall Impact

The Summit offered Youth Fellows a unique platform to practice democratic engagement, reflect critically on democracy in diverse contexts, and experiment with innovative methods of outreach. While challenges emerged, the experience generated valuable insights for refining future programming and strengthening the role of youth voices in global democratic dialogue.

# 1. Open Chair Democracy Talks Rounds

## 1.1. Heden

The timing of our Summit colluded deliberately with the Gothia Cup's vibrant atmosphere, which filled the streets, parks and cafes with people from every corner of the globe. The energy and diversity in and surrounding Heden provided the perfect backdrop for the OCDTs, giving us countless opportunities to interact with visitors, share our work and learn from different perspectives. The OCDTs engaged hundreds of people, regardless of their age, sex, gender and or race, who stopped to participate and interact with IYTT Youth Fellows. The diversity of the crowd also created an enriching environment, offering a wide range of perspectives shaped by different cultures, experiences and worldviews.

The first question we posed to the participants after a brief introduction was, "What are the first 3 words that come to your mind when you think about Democracy?". It was fascinating to see the similarities and differences in the responses. One of the most frequently mentioned words, regardless of background, was "voting". Many people, whether young or old, instinctively link democracy with the act of casting a vote, reflecting how central this process is to the ways in which people view and experience democratic systems. Other answers touched on freedom, equality, human rights, political parties, and concerns about the new US administrations, revealing both shared values and nuanced cultural interpretations of democracy.

The following question we asked was "Do you feel free when it comes to choosing your life's path?". A clear majority answered "Yes", though many included important qualifications. Some described their freedom as real but shaped by structural or societal limits. As one participant put it. "Yes, to an extent...freedom of where to go, but there are limited options." Others expressed their sense of freedom in more individualistic terms by noting that "Yes, I wear what I want, say what I think".

However, not all responses were optimistic. Several participants voiced concerns about global inequality and social division. One reflected, "No, there are inequalities and dictatorships in the world. To be free is to travel globally, but the world seems to be set in a divide and conquer mentality, as if a dystopia is coming to life." Another linked their answer to the issues of migration, saying that the political system does not want immigrants in Sweden.

These varied perspectives revealed a complex picture. While many feel they have the ability to shape their own lives, there is a strong awareness that external factors, which can either be political, social, or economic, can influence, limit or expand those choices. The responses highlighted that freedom is not experienced equally, but it is rather shaped by where people live, the systems that they live under and the opportunities that are available to them.

The final question we asked was "What would need to change for you to be more powerful?". The responses were interesting in their variety. Some participants approached the question literally, focusing on tangible changes or resources such as money, which they believed could increase their influence and abilities. Others interpreted the question more creatively, imagining broader possibilities or even fantastical solutions. Many connected their answers to the earlier questions on democracy, reflecting on social structures, fairness and how power is distributed in society. One particularly striking response came from a 17-year-old participant who said, "Adults should stop thinking about your kids and listen more and underestimate us". This answer highlighted an

important generational perspective that feeling empowered is not just about formal opportunities or rights, but also about being heard and taken seriously.

Across the board, the answers emphasised that feeling powerful is deeply linked to recognition, inclusion and the ability to influence one's environment and society. Some focused on personal goals, as one participant simply noted that to feel more powerful, they would need to "make more money". Others expressed concerns about politics and social responsibility. Finally, some participants highlighted the importance of giving people a genuine voice in decisions that affect their lives. One remarked, "ask the people, they should have more power to influence their life." This perspective reinforced the notion that true empowerment is not only personal but collective as well and is tied to fairness, inclusion and the ability to participate meaningfully in society.

## 1.2. Cityscapes

Running OCDT has become one of the signature activities of us Youth Fellows. We don't just want to know about what people are thinking, what they see as important, worrisome, interesting, or inspiring, but we also want to give everyone a place to feel heard. We aim to show everyone, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or status, that their voice matters and they, too, can make a difference. At times, conversations are quick and offer just brief answers. While these moments may sometimes feel discouraging, it only takes one "I never really thought about this" to make us feel fulfilled. At other times, our questions open the door to meaningful conversations that could easily go on forever.

This year, on top of the OCDTs at Heden, we carried them out while we were on our "escapes" in some of Gothenburg's neighbourhoods: Masthuggstorget, Wieselgrensplaten, Angered Centrum, Nya Hovås, Wieselgrensplatsen. We did not reach the same number of people across all neighbourhoods, but indeed, we could gather some insightful considerations as to how people live in their city, depending on where they live.

Almost all of the answers we gathered in the first question, without any noteworthy distinction between nationality, age or gender, associate democracy with "freedom", and especially "freedom of speech". Other popular answers, in line with the answers we get from other OCDTs, are "equality", "voting", and "human rights".

Turning to the second question, the nationality of the interviewees seemed to play a big role in whether people feel free when it comes to choosing their life's path. People from Sweden mostly answered in the positive, saying that, in Sweden, they "can do and say what I want" and "have freedom and power"; there is "education, freedom and democracy". Especially, younger people feel like "they have a choice to finish school and go to university". However, some also felt that the "required military service can limit freedom and life trajectory".

Similarly, nationality played an important role. Young people (14-16) felt like they had power as citizens through organisations at school, but still considered that they could not have much influence without voting. Other age groups also agreed they have power thanks to the Swedish democratic system (47-year-old Swedish male) or by engaging in different civic society organisations (75-year-old Swedish male). The sentiment that it is hard to have an impact as an individual also stood out (38-year-old Swedish female). People coming from outside Sweden seemed to recognise the value of citizenship in the country as well, comparing it to the situation in Russia, for instance (35-year-old Russian male).

Some instances of discontent also emerged from our answers, especially in terms of what parties promise and what is achievable (“we are set up to believe we can do more than what we can do” Sweden, 18-year-old female), and who leads political discourses (“power is an elite project” Sweden, 29-year-old male).

As to what needs to change to feel more powerful, some answers strongly reflect what we Youth Fellows have included in our Handbook for Innovative Democracy. For instance: “having more clarity from politicians”; “A space where young people’s views about politics are heard, where they can talk and learn about politics”; “reduce voting age”; “less polarisation”. Indeed, these proposals tackle problems that make others feel hopeless towards the future (29-year-old Swedish male).

A desire to work on a stronger sense of personal responsibility also stood out from our answers. Different age groups (a 75-year-old Swedish male and a 26-year-old Swedish woman) from different parts of Gothenburg admitted that they should get more involved, do more research and make use of existing platforms to feel more powerful.

The answers we gathered cannot be taken as a comprehensive view of how people in the neighbourhoods feel, given the limited number and diversity of interviewees, as well as the specific time and day on which we carried out the interviews. However, it is always remarkable to recognise and acknowledge how strongly personal perceptions, both as individuals and as citizens, are shaped by the political context in which people live.

## 2. Gothenburg DEMO 2025 & Neighborhooding Democracy

This activity piloted a new method: **Neighborhooding Democracy**. It is designed as an urban exploration exercise aimed at reflecting on the connections between public space, community, and democracy. Participants visited different neighbourhoods of Gothenburg – Olskrokstorget, Angered Centrum, Masthuggs Torget, Nya Hovås, and Wieselgrensplatsen - following a structured methodology that included individual observations, pair sharing, group discussions, and direct engagement with residents through OCDTs.

The goal was to encourage a conscious and critical perspective on urban spaces, going beyond superficial perceptions to investigate how material elements shape both the liveability and the democratic dimension of a neighbourhood, while also acknowledging that observations are inevitably external and partial impressions, to be interpreted with caution and without claims of exhaustiveness.

The experience culminated in a collective exhibition: Gothenburg DEMO 2025. The groups translated their impressions into visual and multimedia posters, conveying the complexity of the neighbourhoods they visited and aiming to raise questions rather than provide definitive answers. This final stage gave concrete form to the work, transforming observations into a communicative output accessible to a wider audience, thanks to the invaluable help of Youth Fellow Jan Ferrer i Picò, curator of the exhibition. The central piece of the exhibition were posters that were exhibited at the Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft for a month during the summer of 2025. A permanent version of the exhibition is available in a series of videos publicly available online that depict the [complete display](#), as well as the reflexive process that led to the creation

of the five neighborhood posters of [Olskrokstorget](#), [Angered Centrum](#), [Masthuggstorget](#), [Nya Hovås](#), and [Wieselgrensplatsen](#).

In this way, **Neighborhooding Democracy** represents not only an exploration of different urban spaces but also an exercise in participatory and reflexive democracy, leveraging the power of an outsider's perspective while imagining more inclusive ways to involve local communities in the future.

## 2.1. City Tours

### Angered Centrum

Exploring a different part of Gothenburg allowed us to broaden our perspective, and we felt inspired to engage more consciously in the urban environment. Sensory elements, such as sound or smell, aren't things we usually notice or take time to engage with attentively. A key takeaway of this exercise was understanding urban spaces as *democratic*, an idea which we suggest the IYTT take further.

The structured progression of the activity – from individual observation to pair work and group discussion – was very effective. The solo reflection was particularly valuable, allowing us to engage deeply and personally with the surroundings. The area's diversity and slower pace, furthermore, left a strong impression. Sharing observations with a partner introduced new perspectives and highlighted how differently others can interpret the same space.

Collective reflections were valued during our group discussions, but we must remain mindful that we were outsiders with limited understanding of the local community. This became even more apparent during the OCDTs, which were challenging due to language barriers and a general reluctance from people to engage. It felt, at times, that our presence was intrusive or disconnected from the local context.

It was important to acknowledge that what we were confronted with in the neighbourhoods were *impressions*. This isn't to say that the *impression* doesn't carry with it some sort of truth - while we cannot claim to understand a neighbourhood in its full, nor the brevity of its culture, we can, minimally, understand how the neighbourhood presents itself to others. We think it is crucial to acknowledge this limitation when we consider how to use our findings, and understand that, for as much as we see, there could be far more that we don't see.

While some group members had more success speaking with locals, it is worth questioning whether conversations fully reflected the character of the place, especially given the language barriers. Moving forward, involving local facilitators or interpreters could greatly enhance the effectiveness of this type of outreach. Building deeper, more meaningful connections with communities – rather than observing from the outside – would help avoid the risk of making privileged assumptions about people and places.

Finally, Angered Centrum in particular was interesting as it presented itself as a democracy along the *periphery*. That is, the location was isolated from centres of social, economic, and political power in Gothenburg - or, at least, that was the impression we received, given the lack of public institutions in the area. These peripheral zones are the most important battlegrounds of retaining

and preserving democracy - they are where folks are most likely to be neglected, abandoned, and forgotten.

### **Masthuggstorget**

Masthuggstorget is a singular neighbourhood that hides pockets of vastly different worlds inside. Upon arriving, our group decided to travel in three separate directions; this way, we could see as much of the area as possible while also gathering our natural thoughts without a second opinion. We read the Observation Guide before stepping off the train to recognise what aspects of the neighbourhood to focus on, but ultimately decided to allow our paths to shape the experience for us.

We found that each separate direction we took held stark differences. One path featured hefty construction that limited the infrastructure that allows public gatherings to occur. The mere social encounters observed included well-dressed businessmen on lunch break or construction workers devising plans. This area was plagued with bothersome noises and numerous road closures, which added to the lack of community seen amongst the residents. The second path held numerous bars and restaurants; the cuisine was diverse, and the venues were welcoming. The streets featured an array of options, from pubs to family restaurants and even a dark strip club sandwiched between shops. Finally, the third path featured residential buildings in a serene upper level of Masthuggstorget. Cats with collars strutted through playgrounds, and young couples walked quietly through the roads. The large buildings were juxtaposed with singular residences surrounded by high fences and decorated with video surveillance devices.

Upon reconvening with each other, we were shocked by the vastly different observations recorded within a singular area. Masthuggstorget seemed to lack a common theme or level for community members to connect on; the trails blocked by construction and homes secluded within large fences illustrated this disconnect within the neighbourhood. Due to the vastly different scenes, we were left with numerous questions about the people within Masthuggstorget. Do those who drink here work here? Do those who work here live here? Do those who live here drink here? We found it important to recognise that a short venture will never derive a perfect representation of a town, which led us to numerous questions instead of definitive descriptions.

This experience was new and unique for our entire group. We often find ourselves moving through a city without truly delving into our surroundings; the infrastructure, people, and amenities can all tell an intricate story about a seemingly mundane place. This exercise allowed us to be present and hyperaware of the space we are in. Since Masthuggstorget was new to all of us, it was extremely helpful to observe the area in such a way that truly manifested a complex understanding of the

Another interesting aspect of the excursion is how each participant's background and preconceived notions affected their perspectives of the area. Our group included an American, a South African, and a Brit; we live in vastly different regions, which are bound to hold their own respective norms and standards. Had we all observed the same area, we may have derived significantly different analyses due to the background and experiences which shape our viewpoint. Still, we found that our diversity strengthened our examination of Masthuggstorget by allowing for fruitful discussion of the subjective peculiarities of the neighbourhood. We concluded our city tour with an intricate understanding of Masthuggstorget, along with a deeper acknowledgement of how our individual perspectives can shape a description of a place.

## **Nya Hovås**

Our group, composed of James, Elena, Madeleine, and Onti, carried out the observation exercise in Nya Hovås, a recently built residential neighbourhood on the outskirts of Gothenburg. The area is relatively new; residents told us it was developed only five to ten years ago, and its urban landscape reflected this. Clean, orderly, and modern, it gave off an almost sterile atmosphere. The central square was dominated by the supermarket parking lot, complemented by a few playgrounds. Yet, there were few signs of a vibrant communal life, as we could not spot any obvious gathering places or public spaces.

We started following the Observation Guide provided, but we soon found it necessary to adapt our approach to the specific features of Nya Hovås. We first observed the neighbourhood in individual sessions, recording sounds, taking photos and videos, and forming initial impressions of it. Then, we reconvened to discuss our observations as a group. Because the area did not easily reveal clear political or democratic dimensions, we chose to complement our observations by speaking directly with the few residents we encountered. These were mostly young families and retired people, who confirmed our impression of Nya Hovås as a functional residential space, designed primarily to satisfy essential needs (food, health services, leisure through a few cafés and bars) but lacking a deeper communal or political life. This combination of individual reflection, group discussion, and interviews (which started in the form of OCDTs to then moved to a more general conversation about the neighbourhood) became our working method. It allowed us to refine our understanding, despite the limitations posed by the type of neighbourhood under observation.

For most of us, this was the first time we deliberately analysed a cityscape from the perspective of democratic features. This perspective proved valuable, prompting us to notice not only what was present but also what was absent. The limited timeframe of a morning and the restricted number of people we could engage with were clear constraints, but they did not undermine the broader insights gained.

The Observation Guide helped orient our work, though we found that strict adherence to it was less effective in a neighbourhood like Nya Hovås. We found our decision to adapt by engaging residents directly necessary and useful. One lesson for future use of the guide might be encouraging observers to adjust methods depending on the nature of the area visited.

Our findings suggest that Nya Hovås is a good example of how a “designed” residential area can fulfil functional purposes while leaving little space for spontaneous civic interaction. The area seemed to embody the ideal lifestyle made of modern villas, new buildings, and well-kept spaces, but this vision did not necessarily translate into a strong sense of community in the case of Nya Hovås. Instead, the neighbourhood felt more like a collection of private households than a shared space.

This made the exercise meaningful in a different way: it encouraged us to critically reflect on the assumptions behind what counts as a “successful” neighbourhood. The absence of visible political or democratic life became, in itself, a political observation about how certain urban models prioritise efficiency, cleanliness, and consumption over community-building.

The excursion to Nya Hovås proved significant in revealing both the possibilities and limits of democratic observation. While the neighbourhood itself offered little evidence of vibrant political

or civic life, the process of observing and questioning its features helped us to critically engage with broader ideas of urban design, community, and democracy.

### **Wieselgrensplaten**

Our engagement with Wieselgrensplaten began not with a map, but with a mural. Disembarking from the tram, we were immediately greeted by an extraordinary, colourful piece of public art. Its vibrancy was palpable, and its imagery suggested a deep influence from the district's younger residents. This was not a top-down civic installation but a bottom-up expression of community identity, setting the tone for an area defined by multiplicity and cultural dialogue.

This initial impression was quickly reinforced by the bustling, diverse shopping district. A host of cafes, each with its own distinct character, catered to a remarkably heterogeneous community. The diversity was not merely ethnic or racial; it was generational, socio-economic, and cultural. We observed a seamless integration between native Swedes and immigrant communities, a dynamic most visible in the simple, daily act of sharing fika.

We got the sense that Wieselgrensplaten is not a monolithic entity but a living, breathing microcosm of modern Sweden. It is an area of profound juxtaposition: between concrete high-rises and green family homes, between established Swedish traditions and vibrant immigrant cultures, between a hopeful, family-focused future and an anxious, uncertain present.

Our Democracy Talks were crucial in uncovering this depth. They revealed that the visible harmony and integration on the street level are accompanied by undercurrents of concern about power, representation, and identity. The community is open and keen to engage, which is its greatest strength. However, this engagement also surfaces fractures between generations and worldviews.

In conclusion, Wieselgrensplaten is an area of beautiful complexity. It is a place where the stairs of an apartment block can become a forum for democracy, where a mural designed for children can define a public square, and where the simple act of two friends sharing tea on a balcony can tell a story of a community that, despite its differing opinions, remains fundamentally connected. It is a snapshot of a nation negotiating its identity, one conversation at a time.

### **Olskrokstorget**

The neighbourhood felt like a place of travellers – people who had been on long journeys, now spending time with those just beginning theirs. Many residents were older, perhaps grandparents sharing their days with the next generation. Others were still travelling in different ways, commuting elsewhere for work or carrying quiet personal journeys within them. We sensed that some were facing struggles, but these remained private, kept within the boundaries of home.

Despite this, there was a clear sense of community. The area was home mainly to senior citizens, including an assisted living residence, but also to immigrant families who had built their own networks of belonging. The tram ran through the centre like a heartbeat – the only fast-moving element in an otherwise gentle, steady landscape.

Around it stood rows of 1980s houses with small backyards and balconies, preserved in their original charm. The atmosphere was peaceful and familiar, yet never stagnant. Life there moved slowly, but not idly. Conversations stretched out. People greeted each other. The neighbourhood

felt fully lived in, calm but animated, rooted yet always in motion. It invited us to slow down, walk its streets, and notice the quiet energy that held the community together.

## 2.2. The Exhibition

### Angered Centrum

Overall, we thought the concept was strong, and the posters and materials served as effective media for communication. They offered a creative and engaging way to present our ideas and should definitely be replicated in future activities-with a few improvements.

Firstly, the exercise would have benefited greatly from deeper local involvement. At times, it felt like we were privileged outsiders making judgments about a place and its people. To create a more democratic and inclusive process, residents could be invited to engage directly, particularly by contributing to or responding to the posters. Their input would add authenticity, relevance, and greater depth to the work.

Similarly, acknowledging that we only received *impressions* of our neighbourhood was most important during our poster presentations, and this acknowledgement, we think, was only partly achieved. A more intentional effort could be made to reflect in the posters that what we are portraying isn't what we *know* the neighbourhood to be, but rather, what impression the neighbourhood left upon us.

In terms of visual cohesion, the posters appeared to lack a unifying design theme. While each was interesting individually, a clearer shared aesthetic or framework could have helped communicate that these were parts of a connected whole linked by our perspectives and tied specifically to Gothenburg. A more consistent visual identity would have strengthened the overall message.

Lastly, the process of having one person responsible for creating each poster was efficient and productive. While more time is always beneficial, the streamlined approach allowed for focused work and quicker results without compromising too much on quality.

### Masthuggstorget

While we were in the same neighbourhood, not far from each other, we had very different experiences of Masthuggstorget. We wanted to capture this in our poster by constructing a Venn diagram to present the neighbourhood as a series of distinct but overlapping spaces – exploring themes of transience, community care, and division.

The centre of the Venn diagram - the point of ultimate connection - features images from a public park, specifically a monument that commemorates the neighbourhood's history as a ship area. This contextualises the neighbourhood in its historic roots. Around that centre, we arranged clusters of images to represent different aspects of the area. The first cluster shows bars and restaurants – depicting third spaces primed for social connection but also revealing an area that is at odds with itself, with a strip club next to cafés. The second cluster shows a street right by the waterfront filled with construction sites and corporate workers in nice suits. This is an area of industry and movement, but it felt relatively lifeless, lacking the third spaces that encourage lingering.

The third cluster depicts a residential area with blocks of flats and public services like a community centre for blind people. While this is a place of community, smaller, fenced individual flats with surveillance signs created a sense of confrontation between the individual flats and the larger blocs around them.

Although these are three distinct areas, they have points of overlap that guided our placement. The first and second clusters reflect transience – spaces for work and socialising, but not necessarily community rootedness. The second and third are linked by themes of maintenance – whether through construction or acts of community care, like a group of teenagers pulling weeds from between pavement tiling outside their flats. The third and first clusters are both spaces for connection but are complicated by divisions.

Around the images, we placed questions that highlight our uncertainty and foreground the limits of our interpretation. Some reference specific images to invite viewers to engage beyond the photographs, while others are more abstract and reinforce the poster's themes of transience and rootedness.

Creating an exhibition about our observations during the City Tour activity was incredibly meaningful because it allowed our observations to culminate in a tangible output, giving the activity a clear sense of purpose and achievement.

The choice of an exhibition as opposed to other outputs was particularly apt because the poster mirrored the City Tour methodology. The IYTT Youth Fellows to observe them – with most of the activity centring around visual observations. By using the photos taken during the Tours to build a visual representation of our experience, the exhibition poster connected viewers to the same act of seeing and interpreting.

The posters were made even more meaningful by the exhibition's multi-media format, with a video and audio of our discussions accompanying our posters. This was done well as the posters were the primary focus of the exhibition – allowing people to form their own interpretations outside of our discussions and observations. The audio was treated as complementary – there for those who were interested, but entirely optional.

That said, implementation constraints prevented the exhibition from being as impactful as it could have been. We had less than a day to work on the posters while limiting the quality and depth possible. Additionally, the poster could have been enriched by having more than one person from each group working on it. Not only would this have added more hands, but it would have added more depth to the ideas and plans guiding the poster creation. Although we briefly discussed design plans as a group beforehand, the creative process necessarily requires adapting those plans to practical limits. Therefore, the person creating the poster had disproportionate control over the final product. Since much of the City Tour observations were done in groups, with the richness of the activity coming from Fellows sharing diverse interpretations and ideas, this was not fully carried through to the creation process.

The limits of the City Tour methodology itself also shaped the exhibition. Fellows only spent a couple of hours in their neighbourhood, and, while holding OCDTs with people in the neighbourhood was one component, most of our observations were visual, almost entirely speculative and relatively surface-level. This made the poster/ exhibition feel, at times, almost

superficial – what we observe spending a couple of hours in a neighbourhood on one Tuesday morning can't begin to fully capture the neighbourhood. Presenting a public exhibition about lived places with limited community engagement risked misrepresentation. This was exacerbated by the absence of explicit framing that these works were outsider interpretations; without clearer contextualisation, the exhibit could be perceived as reductive or even harmful. These problems reflect the City Tour method rather than the exhibition format itself, and suggest the value of narrowing scope or strengthening framing in future iterations.

Despite its challenges and limitations, the City Tour activity was a new and innovative way to explore democracy and civic engagement at a community level. Provided adjustments are made based on this pilot run, it is an activity that can and should be replicated in the future.

### **Nya Hovås**

Working off both our impression of the town we visited, called Nya Hovås, and our interactions with the people living and working there, we designed the Nya Hovås poster to ultimately reflect our incongruous findings.

The town was newly constructed, and despite having a bustling amount of people, particularly moving throughout the car-centric urban plan in their vehicles, it felt barren. There was a sterile element which is reflected in our mirrored background. There was clearly an abundance of curation in the town, which felt like a means of concealment and isolation above clarity and connection.

In the design of the poster, below Nya Hovås (written in their town's shopping marketing font) the viewer finds three observations we made. These were elements which we noticed, visually, during initial independent exploration of the neighbourhood and then later confirmed with each other as a group. These observations are paired with images which the viewer can physically lift, revealing a critical question concerning what they have just read below. These critical questions ask about the community, the natural world, and ultimately the way the architecture and design of the town itself may lead its citizens away from the keystones of democratic societies.

Although those who created the town might have been hopeful for its potential as an oasis from the city, if one removes themselves too far from diversity and interconnectedness, we find ourselves lacking the very sense of safety and belonging we were attempting to run towards. It is critically important to look closely, engage on your own accord, and be in constant dialogue with your surroundings; our poster design sparks that curiosity for the viewer as they themselves lift to reveal questions posed to them, likely a non-resident, and make assessments. All the while, the mirrored effect of the paper shows how they are always going to bring themselves and their biases to the table.

### **Wieselgrensplaten**

We tried to rise to the challenge of designing a poster that would reflect the complex and rich observation experience of the tour. For example, the pace in the neighbourhood felt intentional, a conscious embrace of the "slow life," where conversation and observation were valued over haste, a quiet dynamic we sought to capture in our poster's illustration of two elderly people sitting and observing. The soundscape was a tapestry of different languages, a constant auditory reminder of the many cultures that have found a home and a voice in this specific area, against a

backdrop of nature represented by the recurring chirping of birds, a motif also illustrated on the poster.

A critical and defining feature of Wieselgrensplatsen's urban landscape is its physical segmentation by a central road. This thoroughfare acts as more than just a transport route; it is a symbolic and tangible border between two contrasting modes of living. On one side stand the high-rise apartments, representing a very concrete, functionalist design ethos. These buildings, however, are far from the grim, grey towers often associated with such architecture. They are painted in a multiplicity of bright, joyful colours – yellows, blues, and reds – that express a sense of happiness and community spirit, the very essence of which is expressed through the bright blue and pink buildings central to our exhibition poster's design. The stairs leading to their entrances are not merely functional pathways but vital social spaces. We observed neighbours stopping to greet one another, and on several occasions, these very stairs became impromptu venues for our Open Chair Democracy Talks, as residents noticed our presence and were keen to engage.

The social fabric of Wieselgrensplatsen is as layered as its urban plan. Art is a constant, unifying thread. Beyond the initial mural, the area is framed by unique community art and graffiti. Crucially, this graffiti does not signal urban decay; instead, it expresses stories, cultural pride, and the beauty of the area's multiplicity. From expressions of international solidarity, such as the immigrant community's support for global causes visualised by the Palestinian flag in our poster, to local narratives, these artworks serve as a public canvas for the community's diverse perspectives, a character we echoed through the inclusion of a community board adorned with photos of various artworks and stickers.

The sense of community is palpable and intimate. We witnessed scenes of close-knit ties, such as the powerfully familiar image of two “aunties” having tea and gossiping on their apartment balcony - a universal gesture of community that transcends national borders and is directly illustrated on our poster, alongside uncles chatting at the barbershop. People were overwhelmingly friendly, welcoming, and open, demonstrating a keenness to engage with each other and with outsiders like us.

### **Olskrokstorget**

The poster portrayed the neighbourhood through the image of a tram, the element that best captured its rhythm and spirit. Inside the tram's windows, people of different ages and backgrounds were shown travelling together - elderly residents, young children, and families from diverse origins. The tram stood as both a literal and symbolic centre of the community: the one moving thread connecting lives that otherwise unfolded at a calm pace.

Through this image, the poster reflected how the neighbourhood's sense of belonging and quiet liveliness coexisted, carried forward each day by the steady motion of the tram.

## **3. Youth Fellows with Gothia Cup Teams**

Connecting International Youth Think Tank fellows and Gothia cup teams by embedding two Youth Fellows per team for a day of building rapport and having conversations proved to be no easy task. While there were Youth Fellows who connected with coaches, parents, and players in a way that built on the foundational purpose of our being there (the idea that the Gothia Cup “unites the world”), there were several groups that couldn't meet with their teams at all. And those who

did find there to have been great miscommunications between the IYTT, the Gothia Cup, and the teams themselves.

None of the youth players on the teams seem to know who the Youth Fellows were, what organisation we were coming from, or about the conversations we were preparing to have. Although the IYTT reached out with messages, videos, and paper materials before the interaction, it seemed like even the most excited, willing coaches didn't know what to expect. Ultimately, the players were more focused on playing the sport they love and exploring a country many of them had never been to. Which makes sense, as we were often catching them before important matches, or after losses and wins. To be frank, the experience left a bad taste in the mouths of many of the Youth Fellows who participated. But as with any group of proactive individuals, it also left us with a lot of ideas for how it can be bettered in the years to come.

There were a couple of elements which worked for the Youth Fellows, so it makes sense to start there. We found there to be a lot of potential in engaging with the teams, the young players had a lot of good ideas, and when we got them talking, there was a plethora of topics which they were interested in politically. Using the OCDD questions as a jumping-off point worked for those who spoke with the coaches, and for certain ages, the OCDDs were a good start for discussing with the players as well. But what was most successful was being able to be dynamic in what questions we asked and how we connected to the teams.

Many were interested in talking about sports and success in their field. Preparing the Youth Fellows as facilitators for these types of conversations would have gone a long way, as those with knowledge of the sport and of the teams' originating cultures had better luck when it came to engaging them deeply. In fact, this is the main area in which change was called for by the fellows. As mentioned, flexibility in the line of questioning and allowing for more conversational topics to come into play was valued by us as facilitators; many did not feel like they had the proper training to manage group discussions in that manner.

Much of our experience had been with the street Open Chair Democracy Talks, which were far more structured, quick, and primarily one-on-one. The coming years should feature, at minimum, a crash course in how to manage workshops of a political nature with youth, and how to create a safe space for them. There is a line where both the children and their adults need to consent to the topics of conversation, especially when considering some of the cultures these youth players came from. Yet, the youth need to feel comfortable to share without the watchful, and often critical eye of a coach listening in. In general, the Youth Fellows were underprepared in how to walk that line and create a safe space for dialogue. Especially when the environment we walked into was hostile to the idea of us being there in the first place.

In sum, the idea is there, but the execution could be made much cleaner for all sides of the discussion. And while our organisation can't control what the Gothia Cup necessarily does, or how coaches, parents, and players might act, we can control how prepared our Youth Fellows feel in managing large groups, children, and various cultures in these important but often sensitive topics.

## 4. Social Media Coverage

The IYTT social media coverage during the Gothenburg Summit reflected the rest of the week's programming – a positive step in the right direction for the organisation. Aimed at providing individuals a window into the life of a Youth Fellow participating in the summit, we chose to exclusively utilise Instagram, capitalising on the IYTT's established base of followers. Our primary goal was to further engage this group while attracting new followers interested in democracy, politics, and civic engagement.

To accomplish this, various Youth Fellows took part in “story takeovers,” sharing both their engagement in IYTT programming and their activities beyond these official events. This perspective permitted individuals already following to experience a curated, intimate perspective on the Summit and indirectly learning more about the IYTT's mission, values, and at the same time. This initiative allowed us to accomplish a portion of our social media goal, as engagement numbers reached a new high.

Posts and stories mainly reached our follower base, but content in collaboration with other accounts (mainly Youth Fellows' accounts) succeeded in enlarging outreach.

While our strategy succeeded in fostering engagement among existing followers, it was less effective in growing our audience, as Instagram Stories are primarily geared toward engaging current followers rather than attracting new ones. Additionally, event coverage varied in consistency, in part due to an informal division of responsibilities and a lack of day-to-day planning.

Proper social media management working to expand the IYTT brand and mission may seem like a non-essential activity in comparison to tangible programming, such as the Summit or working papers. However, in an increasingly digital world, the IYTT risks missing valuable opportunities to reach a larger audience, cultivate long-term engagement with stakeholders, and further its mission if this aspect is overlooked.

With this being said, the IYTT should invest in the development of a comprehensive social media and digital outreach strategy, utilising multiple platforms, short and long-form content, and targeted campaigns and partnerships focused on maintaining existing engagement and reaching new audiences. Further suggestions include establishing a clear content calendar and assigning defined responsibilities for coverage during major events, as well as diversifying content media to include videos, infographics, and interactive elements.

Building on the success of our social media efforts during the Gothenburg Summit, the IYTT is well-positioned to strengthen its digital presence by using social media as a tool to further its mission and programming. By expanding and refining this approach, the organisation can deepen its existing engagement and develop a broader reach, all essential components to supporting the sustainable development of democracy worldwide.

## 5. Recommendations and Lessons Learned

### 5.1. Open Chair Democracy Talks

The reflection of the IYTT Youth Fellows on the execution of Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDTs) over the Gothia Cup week illustrates that it is a powerful and inspiring concept with significant potential that would benefit greatly from further refinement and development.

For many Youth Fellows, this was their first chance at running OCDT's and in the usual IYTT spirit, these were tackled with confidence and enthusiasm. Youth Fellows enjoyed the freedom of engaging with strangers in the streets, armed with their own passion and intrigue about democracy. What made this opportunity particularly special was the vast, diverse range of people hosted in Gothenburg during the Cup, providing a truly unique representation of experiences. In true OCDT fashion, it allowed Youth Fellows to step out of their comfort zone and immerse themselves in the often zealous and emotional responses of people on the streets. Youth Fellows were pleasantly surprised by the variety of answers and how eager the young people were to get involved. One Youth Fellow reflected specifically on how it was valuable to hear pragmatic answers to questions about democracy and not just the usual academic jargon we are often used to.

These anecdotal experiences of Youth Fellows are of value to their personal perspective and understanding; however, the consensus of the group is that, in terms of value to IYTT, the exercise left something to be desired. One clear concern raised by the group is questioning the purpose of running IYTT for the strangers involved and for the IYTT mission. Many fellows asked whether OCDTs are for data collection, community empowerment, or to instil critical thinking? What was clear from the feedback is that a clear purpose needs to be designed.

Building on some of these concerns raised, if the exercise is for data collection, then work needs to be done to improve the integrity of the data collected; for example, the Youth Fellows need to be trained to ask closed questions without leading the participants. Discussions need to be had about what this data is collected for and where IYTT belongs in this area, where other organisations collect such data in more clinical ways. One suggestion has been mapping the data on a world map to show nuances between answers based on time and place. What is clear is that the IYTT fellows have valuable suggestions if data collection were to be the purpose of OCDTs.

Another avenue to be explored, which is close to the IYTT mission, is that of community empowerment. This would require less objectivity than the suggestion above and would allow more freedom in the conduct of OCDTs. One Youth Fellow summed up this conceptualisation of OCDTs as methods of community empowerment by suggesting that "Micromoments of recognition build democratic engagement". Once again, the consensus of the team is that if this was the intent for OCDTs, how could the information collected be improved and utilised better? If community empowerment were the cause, then the responses would have to be handled properly and sensitively so meaningful engagement can be assured. One way of doing this could be to use such responses for policy proposals, like those of the conference and summer camps.

One key issue with this approach to OCDTs is that Youth Fellows need to be trained to receive and handle bigoted views. In some instances, while running OCDTs during the Gothia Cup, the responses represented negative views about certain groups in society, which many Youth Fellows

felt uncomfortable receiving. This begs the question of how Youth Fellows are to handle fears about empowering negative views which exist in communities.

This leads to another key reflection regarding the conduct of OCDTs, which regards guidelines for holding OCDTs. The reasons for such would be to support Youth Fellows throughout the exercise and provide instruments for handling the challenges. One of namely is the rejection by strangers impacting Youth Fellows' mental health or confidence and finding ways to remain positive while carrying the burden of people's complaints. Some suggestions to overcome these challenges are to provide Youth Fellows with an OCDT guide or, more broadly, a Youth Fellow handbook with resources and guidance on what it means to be a Youth Fellow and how to handle some of the challenges this brings. What was clear is that although the rejection and content of some OCDTs can be overwhelming, the positive mindset of the collective and support between Youth Fellow friendship is key to protecting Youth Fellow wellbeing.

One final point needs to be addressed regarding the content of the OCDTs, specifically, reconsidering the questions and their value. Although reflections provided a wide range of suggestions as to why the question may need to be reconsidered and what the options were, the consensus was that revising the questions was necessary. One of the questions which came under scrutiny was “How much power do you feel to choose your life's path”, there were valuable comments about how this translated into different languages, something which needs to be considered going forward, and scepticism about the word “power” often having negative connotations.

Moving on to the logistics of the OCDTs, there were some comments about the linguistic barriers. Youth Fellows felt this was important because solely speaking in English prevents certain potentially lower socio-economic voices from having a platform. In the future, it was felt that there should be a range of local language speakers to provide this valuable skill. This was particularly prevalent outside of the centre of Gothenburg when Youth Fellows were assessing the democratic spaces of differing areas. To provide more value in understanding these areas, having a local translator needs to be considered to provide a full reflection of the local area. Another key feedback was how the location of IYTTs also needs to be better organised, in some areas where there were many Youth Fellows carrying out OCDTs, they would often approach people who had already been approached. Youth Fellows sensed there was an annoyance amongst members of the public from this. Furthermore, some Youth Fellows felt more comfortable conducting OCDTs next to the IYTT banner/sign as it made the organisation seem more established and legitimate.

All in all, the Youth Fellows agreed that the Gothia Cup was a good location to conduct OCDTs and, by and large, enjoyed speaking to strangers on the street about democracy. They feel that with some further refinement, this is an excellent element of the IYTT which could bring some great value to our cause.

## **5.2. Gothenburg DEMO 2025**

The exhibition was the most creative part of the week, giving Youth Fellows the chance to see Gothenburg through the lens of urban design and democracy. Going out into different neighbourhoods pushed everyone to notice details of the urban landscape they might otherwise overlook, and to think about how these connect (or don't connect) to democratic and communal life. This was especially appreciated for being a hands-on and direct observation of the city. People enjoyed being separated into different neighbourhoods and partnered with Youth Fellows

from different backgrounds, which made the reflections richer and brought in a variety of perspectives. The use of various media, photos, sound recordings, video, and drawings, was a highlight, as it gave space for more personal and creative ways of expressing ideas.

At the same time, there were areas where Youth Fellows felt changes would make the activity stronger. Several said it felt like doing two different things at once, part city tour, part democracy exercise, which sometimes challenged their focus. Others pointed out that the posters, while a good medium, were rushed: with more time and more than one person working on each group's design, they could have been clearer, deeper, and more collaborative. Another recurring suggestion was to make it more explicit in the exhibition that the posters were just participants' impressions, not a full or "objective" representation of the neighbourhoods. When engaging with residents, participants found some areas less open and welcoming, which made conversations harder. They suggested inviting translators or local citizens along to broaden the range of voices included, as well as adding more place-based questions to help connect reflections directly to the neighbourhoods. Some also flagged the need for trauma-informed training and more guidance on how to approach sensitive issues with care, to make sure the activity feels safe and inclusive for everyone involved.

The exhibition worked as an effective tool for thinking about the relationship between urban spaces and democracy. It showed that urban spaces can spark democratic reflections, but also that there's room to go further in future editions. Youth Fellows would like to see more time for preparing the exhibition, stronger collaboration with local communities, and maybe even longer-term engagement-like joining community events or having repeated exchanges with residents. These takeaways are useful foundations for the future, and they suggest that next time the activity could not only capture impressions but also build deeper and more lasting connections with the people who live there, giving back to the community the fruits of the observations.

### **5.3. Youth Fellows with Gothia Cup Teams**

On 17–18 July 2025, Youth Fellows were paired with ten international teams competing in the Gothia Cup. Their task was to embed with the teams – joining daily activities and speaking with players, coaches, managers, and parents - to explore how football teams act as social drivers in their communities.

While this approach has real potential, overall results were mixed. Some Youth Fellows were able to meaningfully engage with their team, with one group even bringing their team to the IYTT-Gothenburg DEMO 2025 at Röhsska. However, there were several challenges that prevented the engagement from reaching its full promise.

A major issue was around a lack of clarity and communication. The purpose of this engagement was not clearly/directly communicated to the Youth Fellows, which led to confusion, uncertainty, and differing understandings of its goals and how to go about achieving them. Additionally, while Youth Fellows had sent introductions beforehand, these alone were not enough, as the impression the Youth Fellows generally got was that the teams hadn't known what they were getting into when they committed. For example, Youth Fellows had conversations with parents where they communicated that they didn't understand the idea or rationale behind having these conversations during a sports tournament. To address this with future attempts, Youth Fellows need to be actively involved in shaping the goals and methodology of these engagements. Furthermore, teams need to be clearly and directly communicated with before they confirm their

participation, to ensure they understand the purpose. A better introduction and a clear line of communication established weeks in advance can improve clarity for all parties involved and help Youth Fellows build rapport with teams to support better connections with the teams.

As this engagement took place during the tournament, teams were naturally focused on sports, with players often playing multiple matches a day and parents having made significant financial contributions to ensure their child could attend. Additionally, teams that had lost were too upset to participate/be fully engaged. This could be addressed by holding engagements before the start of the tournament. One suggestion was to have dedicated workshops, which could provide structured spaces for Youth Fellows to connect with teams in advance, rather than trying to engage them between matches. If Youth Fellows are to be embedded with teams, this could happen on the same day/s as the workshop/s - allowing Youth Fellows to accompany teams during fun, informal activities around the city before and after. This approach would not only avoid interfering with teams during their competition but also help build rapport between Youth Fellows and teams, which can increase participation and facilitate more meaningful engagement.

Another factor that affects participation and engagement is the dynamics around Youth Fellow-team matches. Specifically, language barriers made communication difficult, and one Youth Fellow mentioned feeling uncomfortable being matched with a 17-year-old girls' team. Therefore, greater consideration of these dynamics is needed when matching Youth Fellows. Wherever possible, Youth Fellows should have at least a basic understanding of their team's language, and assignments should be made with sensitivity to gender and other factors.

One of the key strengths of hosting an engagement like this at the Gothia Cup is the diversity of perspectives. Youth Fellows expressed positive feedback about how they enjoyed engaging with teams from different countries and cultures. At the same time, this diversity necessitates that cultural awareness and sensitivity should guide everything from defining the purpose of interactions to engaging with teams. Democracy is perceived differently across historical and social contexts, which can shape the interactions in these engagements – particularly between adult Youth Fellows, mostly from Western contexts, and minors from African countries.

While the intention is to foster discussions around democracy, these dynamics influence how the conversations are received and how safe and comfortable players feel to engage. One group noted that their engagement with their team revolved around discussions on the philosophies and principles underlying sports and to what extent these were reflected in their lives, with democracy and politics scarcely being mentioned. This approach to discussions may present a neutral/less politically charged starting point to engagements with teams. Additionally, Youth Fellows should be equipped beforehand to navigate these dynamics thoughtfully and have strategies for fostering inclusive dialogue.

Concerns were also raised around consent, data privacy, and how players' perspectives were represented. As these engagements involved minors, consent was not always clear as participation was decided by coaches or team managers, and in some cases, players only engaged when encouraged to do so by coaches. At the same time, Youth Fellows observed that some players did not feel comfortable expressing themselves freely in front of their coaches. These dynamics highlight the importance of ensuring that engagements are genuinely safe and inclusive spaces. Going forward, clearer consent processes are needed so that minors and their guardians

fully understand what participation involves, and robust data protection protocols should be established to safeguard players' perspectives and prevent misrepresentation.

While challenges did arise, this was the first attempt at anything like this, so some growing pains are to be expected, and this does not undermine the potential of this type of engagement. To quote one of the Youth Fellows: "I reiterate that this project had a lot of potential – Gothia Cup is a rare space in which people from across the entire globe can come, put aside their differences, and engage in what is supposed to be a very principled and culturally significant activity".

## The Youth Fellows

Alice Smith, Emily Barcelo, Elena Vocale, Federica Baggio, Gavin Miller, Hardev Grewal, James Mottram, Jan Ferrer i Picó, Jessica Jahn, Jimmy Freiberger, Joe Earnshaw, Kaitlyn Albertyn, Madeline Farinas de Leon, Ontiretse Moatshe, Otsile Nkadimeng, Peggy Molefi, Ruth Kasanga, Sara Maria Barbaglia, Sophia Badhan, Zanna Anderson.

## Acknowledgements

The IYTT extends its sincere gratitude to the organisers of the Gothia Cup for their trust and collaboration during the Summit, and to the Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft for hosting the creation and exhibition of *Gothenburg DEMO 2025*. Our thanks also go to the Sten A. Olsson Foundation for making this project possible through their generous support.

## About the IYTT

The IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK is a think tank in which youth take the lead for democracy-strengthening activities to inspire decision-makers to innovate democracy and people to become more active citizens. Youth Fellows recruited via open calls for annual four-day conferences with 24 participants run the IYTT activities. To inspire decision-makers, Youth Fellows develop democracy-renewing proposals that are published in a user-friendly democracy handbook, in reports, working papers, and in policy briefs. Youth Fellows also inspire people to be active citizens through a variety of methods and projects addressed at local communities, bringing democracy closer to the daily life of people through sports, arts and dialogue. Our signature method, and the foundation of many of our activities, is the Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDT). Since its inception in Athens in September 2021, Youth Fellows have conducted OCDTs in over 50 locations and on five continents. The IYTT's early international advance is shown by an article in *The New York Times* in October 2022, and that our conferences are expanding to other continents, like the 2024 International Youth Conference in Stellenbosch, South Africa, and the 2025 conference in Washington, DC, USA.

