Forum: Special Conference on Security and Advancing Democracy

Issue: Encouraging youth to participate in local governance and decision making

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Introduction

According to Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), “No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.”¹ This commitment to nurturing youth was officially launched with the 1989 adoption and subsequent near-universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was a catalyst for change in attitudes towards young people, replacing the cultural assumption that they must not challenge their elders by declaring that youth are entitled to express their views on all matters and have those views taken seriously. In practice, this entails encouraging young people’s participation in local democratic governance and decision-making.

Yet, the 74th session of the UN’s Third Committee in October 2019, discussions still dwelled on the inclusion of youth in social development. Characteristically, a young delegate from Sweden, Katja Holboll, asserted that a society exclusive of young people is condemned to design faulty policies; there can be no civil society without the involvement of youth.

Although cliche, the phrase “the youth are the future” is most appropriately selected for the description of a municipality’s long-term sustainability. Youth must be included in all levels of decision-making for the enrichment of the social fabric but also for the timely preparation of the future power holders, aiming at the creation of an improved society. Encouraging youth participation calls for the sensitisation of the youth, restoring their interest in the work of the local government, and the

mobilisation of both state and local authorities for the creation of the necessary frame whereby they will express their views and seize opportunities to make impactful decisions.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Youth**

“Youth” is generally considered as the time period between childhood and adult age. The United Nations, specifically and independently of Member States' individual definitions, defines “youth” as people “between the ages of 15 and 24 years.” Under this umbrella, there is also a distinction between teenagers (13-19) and young adults (20-24).

Notably, though, the operational definition and nuances of the term ‘youth’ often vary from country to country, depending on its social, economic, political, cultural and institutional elements, a prime example being the fact that they allow youth’s equal treatment under the law at a different “age of majority”.

**Participation**

Participation is the process, rather than a one-off event, of taking part in an activity. Such involvement in governance and decision-making is a fundamental right and one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

According to the European Union (EU), “participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.”

Youth’s participation entails having agency and the ability to form opinions, take action and exert influence, which empowers young people to play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities.

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Background Information

We all make decisions every day: no matter who we are, where we are or what we are doing, we have decisions we make for ourselves. Personal decision-making happens all the time while choosing how to act, who to be around and what to do, with the aim of shaping a desirable lifestyle and milieu. Youth is no exception to this practice. They place themselves in positions of authority and purpose daily. They are not, however, isolated entities but part of a greater whole, their quotidian being overwhelmed by local and global developments that affect them directly. Migration, newly emerging technologies, global consumerism, and new hybrid cultural forms, juvenile delinquency, unemployment, unequal distribution of wealth and environmental degradation along with activism are only some issues that concern youth and its quality of life. When youth make judgments about these questions, join and actively participate in movements to create social change, they are engaged in community decision-making and governance.

Advantages of youth participation

The stimulation of youth’s participation in society, especially in local governance and decision-making, benefits both the young and the community. Consulting young people and thus drawing on their perceptions, knowledge, and ideas about current policies and frameworks are essential to both the development of effective public policy and the achievement of positive outcomes. Youth have a unique viewpoint and experience of situations: bereft of childish idealism but also free from adult cynicism, little do they accept a compromise for an average lifestyle and are resilient in the face of challenges. They have the strength, energy, and determination to challenge injustice and achieve sustainability. They themselves experience the established schemes, having to deal, for instance, with increased unemployment and insecurity at the workplace and social welfare programmes, which renders them a primary source of knowledge for their successes and failures, one unafraid to voice them both. Accordingly, the governments gain a realistic and frank view on their decisions which, if taken into account, ensures programs are appropriate and responsive, suitable to the society’s needs. The incorporation of young people’s views, therefore, brings a richness and depth to the improvement and delivery of policies.

Further, participation promotes the well-being and development of young people. It is by doubting, expressing their views and having their opinions received with respect and thoughtfulness that young people acquire confidence, build competencies, enhance skills and mould aspirations. They become reflective, considering their reality and working to understand its strengths and weaknesses, they seek and evaluate a range of points of view and act caringly, to make a positive difference for the
development of their community. Notably, development in its broader sense is “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.” Hence, a developed community inherently requires allowing all its members to participate.

Participation also strengthens the commitment to, and understanding of, human rights and democracy. Young people need opportunities to become acquainted with their rights and duties, learn how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others and understand how their actions affect the rights of their fellow men. Although democracy is often taught in schools, through simulation activities such as mock formal elections and model United Nations simulations, there are few references to the day-to-day arbitrary exercise of power at school level. Participatory processes in institutional settings will enable understanding of what practical democracy is and what are its implications.

Moreover, it contributes to the development of social competence and social responsibility. Indeed, the aforementioned skills and comprehension of ruling systems allow the establishment of one’s own political opinion and belief system contributing thus to the creation of an educated and mindful society. In turn, this promotes a more inclusive and cohesive local community. This is an essential ingredient for the maintenance of a healthy democracy. Indeed, participation represents a means for young people to advocate for themselves and transform their situations, offering an antidote to illiberal democracy. Young people are the next generation of leaders and decision-makers and, as such, it is essential that they are fully prepared to construct a better reality.

Models of youth participation

Young people have become active in processes as varied as the following:

1. Research
2. Programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
3. Peer support, representation, and advocacy
4. Policy analysis, and development
5. Campaigning and lobbying
6. Development and management of their own organizations
7. Participation in and use of the media
8. Conference participation
9. Youth councils and parliaments.

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Challenges to youth’s participation

The effort to encourage youth’s participation in local governance and decision-making is often challenged by a number of factors. To begin with, young people are increasingly disengaging from conventional political participation. According to the 23rd Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in October 2012, “they vote less, membership in political parties is declining, and they distrust political institutions” as a result of the governments’ failure to address their hardships (high unemployment rates, increase of job insecurity, difficult transitions from school to work, etc). Youth’s distrust of institutional politics is equally widespread in the United States, where 18-29 year-old people are losing trust in their government.

Youth’s feeling of marginalisation from the governance and decision-making is nonetheless justified due to their lack of access to most of the processes through which adults state their views. Young people can not articulate their socio-political concerns before they attain equal treatment under the law with the adult citizens, feeling that their views do not matter and that democracy does include them, unable to influence outcomes until they reach the “age of majority.” This usually happens at the age of 18. Significantly, countries whose legal voting age is set at 17 are Sudan, South Sudan, North Korea, Indonesia, Greece, European Union delegations and East Timor, while the countries whose legal voting age is 20 include Nauru, Taiwan, and Bahrain. Young people in Oman, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Singapore, Malaysia, Kuwait, Jersey, and Cameroon can only vote when 21 years or older, whereas in the United Arab Emirates they have to attain the age of 25 first, as it is the country with the oldest legal voting age in the world.  

Democracy, however, can, and should, be understood in much broader terms as participation in civil society. Lack of active engagement in existing political structures does not necessarily indicate an inability or a lack of interest in political issues. The Council’s research reveals that young people have not still detached themselves from democratic behaviour, their values remaining strong. When given the

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opportunity, they assert their desire for recognition of their right to participate and exert influence on social institutions, engaging in activities appropriate to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship.

Yet again, the government often does not ask for youth’s input in decision-making. Although government policy has an impact, directly or indirectly, on young people, it is developed and delivered largely independently of their opinion and in ignorance of how it will affect their day-to-day lives. A prime example of such a paradoxical gap between policy adoption and application can be found in the field of education: governments are greatly concerned about improving young people’s educational experience, yet very few implement measures to learn from students which teaching methods work or identify which factors contribute to school dropout rates. Similarly, the government of Bangladesh released children from the garment industry jobs, following a campaign to eliminate child labour, yet the majority had no choice but to engage in work that was even less appropriate and more hazardous than the jobs they had been forced to leave due to the lack of effective social welfare. Accordingly, many programmes designed to protect young people from the streets by offering institutionalized accommodations and education have failed because they have not sought the input of the young people themselves.

Additionally, the lack of resources, funding, and recognition of youth-led organisations obstacle to the achievement of youth participation. Governments, especially those of Less-Economically Developed Countries, are often unable to invest in youth services and organisations, failing thus young people. Awareness of and support for youth-led structures is yet to be enhanced. Likewise, decision-making processes at a national level created to take place online entail the risk of excluding young people who are hard to reach. Indigenous and rural youth, for example, may not have access to online participation mechanisms.9

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Cameroon10

In this country, as in many parts of Sub Saharan Africa, the practical applications of politics and governance hinder the full participation of youth. Although their participation is encouraged and their

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freedom well promoted, it is only used for political gains during campaigns, as the current power holders do not intend to leave office nor pass on the torch to new, and newcomer, decision-makers.  

The National Youth Council of Cameroon was created in 2009 as representative platform Cameroon’s youth to give young people a voice in the political processes and serves a forum for expression, coordination, dialogue, and action of youth organisations. Yet, it has been criticised by movements such as the “Action for Peace and Development” and “Gathering of Cameroonian Youth” for not effectively representing Cameroon’s youth, instead, being too dependent on the government’s own agenda.

**Germany**

The participation of young people is a basic principle of the German Federal Ministry for Youth and responsible bodies, given that young people are experts of their own when it comes to issues concerning them. Citizenship education is fully integrated into the German system of formal education and student councils are given great emphasis. There are also two important organisations organised by young people themselves: “Young Presse Germany” and “Resource Centre Youth Participation” support of the participation of youth in information making that is disseminated whose dissemination in local community work.

Additionally, there is a great number of local youth councils that represent the youth’s interests towards the public, politics and administration, and represent their views with regard to socio-political questions. An Innovation fund was also created in 2014 to support innovative youth policy, financing 42 projects focusing on topics of political and cultural education and youth associations’ work.

Notably, the legal minimum voting age in Germany is 18, though the voting age for local elections in some federal states, such as Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia, is 16 years of age.

**United Kingdom (UK)**

In the United Kingdom, there is no overarching strategy to increase young people’s political and civil society participation. Nonetheless, the government is committed to encouraging young people to get involved in social action. The strategy, therefore, is “to create a social action journey for young people.”

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Its elements include the #iwill social action campaign and the National Citizen Service, both of which aim to provide young people with skills for citizenship and community engagement.

British Youth Council is an independent UK charity launched for and by young people, it empowers young people and promotes their interests. Its Youth Parliament activities include the annual ‘Takeover Challenge’ in which organisations across England open their doors to children and young people to take over adult roles. Takeover puts children and young people in decision-making positions and encourages organisations and businesses to hear their views. The latest #TakeoverChallenge Day took place on 29 November 2019. An estimated 100,000 children and young people across England took over 1000 organisations, as part of Takeover Challenge in 2017 and 2018. Additionally, “Vote For Your Future” is an apolitical campaign set up during the 2019 European Elections, to get young people to vote that reached over 5.3 million young people on election day.\(^\text{14}\)

In 2018, a total of 1,106,788 young people from the UK took part in the annual ‘Make Your Mark’ ballot. This ballot gives young people across the country a say on what Members of the UK Youth Parliament should debate and vote on to be their campaign for the coming year.

Zimbabwe

For Zimbabwe, people aged between 15-35 years of age are considered “youth.” Accordingly, it has a large constituency of youth at 75% of the population.

The participation of young people in Zimbabwe in elections is very low and least impactful. Characteristically, statistics from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in 2018 show that out of 5.69 million registered voters, only 44% constitute youth. Obstacles to youth participation include intimidation, lack of freedom of speech, and gathering, as well as, a lack of knowledge and transparency. Young people are generally excluded from the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs and policies. Consequently, the older generation still clings to power, the ruling party for the past 38 years adopting policies that enrich itself and its supporters with budget allocation and monitoring meetings leading to uneven distribution of the country’s wealth.\(^\text{15}\)

International Youth Organism for Ibero-America (OIJ)

OIJ is an international multi-governmental, organization consisting of the IberoAmerican countries, that promotes “collaborative work and strategic alliances with governments, academia, civil

\(^{14}\) “REGISTER TO VOTE.” Vote For Your Future, www.vfyf.co.uk/.

society, international organizations, and private sector.” It is dedicated to the advancement and empowerment of youth through the implementation of programs and initiatives and its goal is to organise at least 17 National Youth Forums in IberoAmerica countries to encourage conversations and discussions between young people and social actors to identify challenges and strategies to strengthen youth’s employment. Their outcomes are presented on ministerial meetings to fuel the implementation of such public policies.

In December 2016, the UN GA decided to invite the OIJ to participate in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly in the capacity of observer.

TheGoals

TheGoals is “a free global education and learning portal on sustainable development solutions.” It is based on the principle of: “Raising awareness online, driving action offline” and offers courses on each Sustainable Development Goal enabling youth around the world to explore knowledge, explore global challenges and take local action. It is governed by the International Foundation for the Young Masters Programme, a Swedish non-governmental organisation recognized as a leader in innovative and transformative ICT-based education for sustainable development.

Youth Connekt Africa Hub

YouthConnekt is a platform designed to bring together African youth for socio-economic transformation. Its purpose is to combat the challenges faced by African youth by widening the pool of economic, social and civic leadership opportunities through National YouthConnekt initiatives: “it equips them with technical and financial resources, knowledge sharing and improved national ownership of the youth's socio-economic transformation agenda.” Essentially, the Hub supports already existing empowerment initiatives to propel their efforts.

Timeline of Events

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<th>Date</th>
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September 2nd, 1990

October 11th, 2008
The 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth unanimously approved the “Agenda 2020” on youth policy. The Bangladesh Parliament Secretariat in collaboration with UN Development Programme organised a Pilot Youth Parliament so that young people in Bangladesh would take an active role in public and political life through a National Youth Parliament.

February 27th, 2012
Conference on “Democratic Transitions in the Arab World and their Impact on Lebanon” held in Lebanon with the participation of youth in political parties

September 13th, 2013
International Youth Day 2015 campaign aimed at encouraging civic engagement and participation of youth in politics and public life.

August 12th, 2015
Jordan youth Innovation Forum workshop where students conveyed their vision for introduction of volunteer work in education curricula to the Minister of Youth and Sports.

February 15th, 2019
UN Youth Climate Summit.

September 21st, 2019
UN Youth Delegates call for meaningful work, inclusion in decision-making.

October 3, 2019

User, Super. “Youth Parliament.” Bangladesh Parliament,

International Youth Day 2015 For Youth.” United Nations, United Nations,

“The Minister of Youth Meets a Representative's Form Jordan Youth Innovation Forum and Appreciates the Youth Empowerment Projects.: THE JORDAN YOUTH INNOVATION FORUM.” The Minister of Youth Meets a Representative’s Form Jordan Youth Innovation Forum and Appreciates the Youth Empowerment Projects. | THE JORDAN YOUTH INNOVATION FORUM,

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- 44th Session of International Conference on Education, October 3-8, 1994, Geneva
- World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, March 13, 1996 (A/RES/50/81)
- Policies and programmes involving youth, January 20, 2000 (A/RES/54/120)

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22 User, Super. “Youth Parliament.” Bangladesh Parliament,
23 “International Youth Day 2015 For Youth.” United Nations, United Nations,
24 “The Minister of Youth Meets a Representative's Form Jordan Youth Innovation Forum and Appreciates the Youth Empowerment Projects.: THE JORDAN YOUTH INNOVATION FORUM.” The Minister of Youth Meets a Representative’s Form Jordan Youth Innovation Forum and Appreciates the Youth Empowerment Projects. | THE JORDAN YOUTH INNOVATION FORUM,
Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Governmental Action

- In Canada, the Prime Minister’s Youth Council offers impartial advice to the Prime Minister and the Government on issues of importance, such as employment, access to education, strengthening communities and climate change.
- In Burkina Faso, there is a youth leader who takes the role of an “ombudsman for youth” during the Sustainable Development Goal advancement and localization process. This individual reports directly to the Prime Minister and helps bring youth issues into his awareness.
- In the United States, youth participatory budgeting was organised in schools. Specifically, in 2014 the “Youth Lead the Change” enabled youth change agents to develop ideas for capital projects that would improve their city and allocate available funding for their implementation. In 2016, the Phoenix High School initiated a participatory budgeting process whereby schools undertook training, outreach efforts, idea collection events and meetings with district staff to turn ideas about ways to improve their schools into project proposals. These efforts culminated in voting for how to spend $26,000 in school district funds.
- In Bangladesh, under the auspices of the UN Development Programme, a National Youth Parliament was established to empower active citizens at both local and national levels, providing an opportunity for youth to contribute to the framing of national policy through direct dialogue with parliamentarians.

UN Activity

- The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) provides a “policy framework and practical guidelines for national action and international support to improve the situation of young people.”
The proposed actions include encouraging youth associations through financial, educational and technical support and promotion of their activities, and inviting Governments to strengthen the involvement of young people in international forums, inter alia, by considering the inclusion of youth representatives in their national delegations to the General Assembly.

- The United Nations Youth Delegate Programme organises the participation of young people to intergovernmental deliberations and negotiations at the UN, mainly the Third Committee of the GA, as part of their respective Member State delegations. The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden were among the nine countries that had at least one youth delegate as part of their delegations in 2017, allowing their youth delegates to speak on behalf of their country during their national review to detail the engagement of youth in the process.

**Possible Solutions**

The cornerstone of addressing youth-related concerns is solid national youth policy. Where such schemes do not exist, Member States are urged to promote their establishment on a cross-sectoral basis. Specifically, efforts to raise the voice of youth should be a continuing process, with set time-bound objectives and a systematic evaluation of the progress achieved and the obstacles encountered. Local, regional and national governance actors, along with national non-governmental youth organizations and the private sector, need to collaborate for the formation of well-rounded programmes. Special efforts could be dedicated on the allocation of responsibilities among governmental and nongovernmental entities, while the focus could also be directed towards strengthening national capacities for data collection, research, policy studies and training. Evidence of their outcomes and guidelines about effective and ineffective practices, so that programmes may be strengthened and streamlined, should be produced.

The creation of an enabling environment, meaning legal frameworks, for the participation of underage people in a broad range of processes is also pivotal to allow them a leading and impactful role. Indeed, youth policies and national bodies representing youth do not suffice: young people need to be acknowledged as partners and significant contributors to public policy. Their participation in electoral and parliamentary processes, public administration and local governance will revive their interest in citizenship. Yet, it is equally important that they have their own networks to articulate their concerns. This translates into youth-led initiatives, such as self-organised local youth councils that represent young people’s interests towards politics and administration and contribute in the formation of a general

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25 “World Programme of Action for Youth.” United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), UUN Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, caribbean.cepal.org/content/world-programme-action-youth.
framework for youth. At this point, the inclusion of all youth should be taken into account, as too often youth movements are dominated by the most articulate and socially engaged young people, while the more marginalized groups are excluded.

Additionally, interaction between elected leaders and youth would be mutually beneficial: local governors, and city leaders could listen to youth expressing their view on the issues affecting their lives and their ideas for addressing them, while young people could get acquainted with the political etiquette. Youth summits would be one interesting opportunity for officials and youth to have such a meaningful interaction. Similarly, youth could be welcomed in the running of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), getting involved as apprentices or interns and participating in consultative workshops or advisory forums.

Delegates are also urged to consider the role of the academic community. Educational institutions could nourish young people’s competences and capacities to participate actively in democratic practice through providing co and extra curricular courses on formal and non-formal citizenship, including topics such as combating right-wing extremism, migration and integration, violence prevention and gender mainstreaming. Yet, there should be no blueprints for developing participatory practice. The imposition of predefined methodologies would deny youth the opportunity to creatively develop approaches best suited to their unique situations. Young people should not learn how to replicate traditional adult models for democratic participation but ought to be equipped with the skills necessary to create their new approaches. The only directive should be commitment to the principles of respect, transparency, accountability and inclusion.

Overall, youth ought not be isolated from civic life. Delegates are encouraged to ensure young people’s access to processes and events. Their briefing on political developments, engagement in effective dialogue, participation in debates taking place, contribution in the drafting of policies and interaction with politicians in key positions of power are needed to re-ignite their interest in the local system of governance and strengthen their contribution to it.

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Appendix or Appendices

I. Why Youth Participation is Key, TEDxYouth@Maastricht
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOpqMWj25AE

II. Youth policy, Council of Europe
   https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/about-youth-policy