



Chapter 9 »

The challenge of youth citizenship – From the margins to the centre

‘Your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of life longing for itself.’

Kalil Gilbran

As you read these words, several young people around the world will lose their lives – to AIDS, gun violence, the impact of environmental neglect, and to landmines. Many more will suffer as social support systems and the criminal justice system fail them. Others will suffer as a result of the failure of the so-called war on drugs, or will perish in various internal conflicts in countries around the world. Are young people, then, simply a problem that adults have to find solutions for?

The truth is that, on the contrary, despite all the challenges that young people face, it is they who offer the greatest scope for innovation, have the greatest courage, and are capable of donating an amazing amount of voluntary energy and effort. Young people are increasingly aware that they do not need to inhabit the fringes of public life. They are already beginning to occupy the centre in creative ways, expressing their frustration or anger with their circumstances. We should remember that question, ‘How old will you be in 2050?’, emblazoned on the T-shirts of young members of the Global Campaign for Climate Action delegation at the 2009 G8 summit. The youth delegates’ message was: the future belongs to us and we are going to do everything we can to ensure environmental, social and economic justice for future generations.

Young people are not simply tomorrow’s leaders, as is often said. They are, in very real ways, today’s leaders. The experiences of individual youth leaders, and the examples of the efforts of youth organisations, strongly suggest that youth is on the move – with greater skill, greater strategy and sense of purpose than ever before. Young people around the world are no longer willing to be mere spectators on the sidelines: they are central players at different levels in the public sphere.

The participation of young people in civil society is nothing short of a demographic imperative. Especially in developing countries, they are in the numeric majority. This is a growing tendency in many African

countries, as the decimation caused by AIDS reshapes the contours of the demographic map. The challenge faced by young people, as well as adult leaders of civil society organisations and their counterparts in business and government, is to create ways in which youth will be treated as fully fledged citizens. Young citizens have the right to be heard not only on policy issues that confront various countries, but also policy choices facing global institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations and its agencies. In short, I believe that advancing the agenda of youth participation is no longer merely a nice thing to do, but a critical thing to achieve.

In order to further explain this statement, I would like to disaggregate youth participation into three levels, investigating how it functions within the three tiered macro, meso and micro structure outlined in this text.

Levels of youth participation: macro, meso and micro

Macro

Increasingly, young people seek to address the fundamentals of governance, at both national and global levels. Over the past few years, young people have begun to question the very essence of the public institutions that govern them. We are familiar with the phenomenon of students and youth activists taking to the streets in protest at unfair international trade agreements or corrupt, authoritarian governments. At a national level, even in longstanding democracies, young people are voicing their dissatisfaction as public institutions appear increasingly impotent, unpopular and unaccountable. At a global level, young people have joined forces with experienced activists to raise fundamental questions about the governance of powerful institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In the process of proposing alternatives, they are challenging inequitable political and economic structures: for example, the dangers of wealthier countries having disproportionate influence over international financial institutions. Unconstrained by a 'That's just the way the world is' mentality, young people have the ability to pose questions in fresh ways that open the door to possibilities of fundamental institutional reform at both national and global levels. Another example of this is their questioning of the one-dollar-one-vote system of the World Bank and the IMF, at a time when world leaders have acknowledged that we need a new financial architecture that delivers greater equity and social justice.



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Young people have inspired adults to think with greater courage and vision in order to make substantive changes which address issues of governance and power, not just small administrative reforms. Consequently, one important aspect of youth participation is the opening up of debates and exploration of alternatives to the institutional arrangements that the adult world takes as ‘given’ and permanent.

Meso

In spite of the youth-unfriendly governance of public institutions, which leads to youth voices not being taken seriously, as well as the gaps in accountability or ‘democratic deficits’ within institutions, many young people are committed to working for positive social change. At the national and provincial/state-wide level young people, like many other socially excluded groups, find that with the rules of participation working against them, it becomes all the more critical to participate in order to try to influence outcomes. Sometimes this is done to limit the damage of policy positions, sometimes it is to advance a particular policy, and sometimes young people participate simply to gain a better understanding of the rules of the institutions and processes with a view to developing a long-term strategy to change and challenge these rules. Using a working definition of young people as people aged 30 and under, we find that they are often present in a range of national policy processes where there is scope for input and engagement by civil society organisations. On the down side, in order to be accepted in these processes they often have to hold back from advancing a youth agenda too forcefully, and feel compelled to subordinate this issue to other broader and more generic goals.

At a global level, young people are engaged to varying degrees and in a variety of ways with the diverse array of intergovernmental organisations and international processes. A growing number of international conferences have specific opportunities for young people to meet and develop their positions on a range of issues. The work of a range of visionary thinkers in institutions such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat has consciously opened spaces for youth involvement. While some might say this is too little too late, it is still an important foundation that can be built upon and consolidated in coming years. Seeing young people as active and positive social agents, and not as victims, is not only the right thing to do, it’s also clearly the smart thing to do.

There is a growing despondency in the ranks of many civil society leaders around the world as to whether engagement through dialogue with international institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO

and so on actually yields substantive benefits. It's a despondency shared by some youth organisations. Nevertheless, in the face of this anxiety, many young leaders still conclude that despite the limitations of consultative processes, it is critical that they stay engaged with the current institutional framework to make the best of what is available.

Micro

Young people want to do real things for real people through a range of innovative programmatic interventions. The number of young people participating directly in civil and political life via a diverse set of indigenous local and national youth organisations, is awe-inspiring.

The programmatic output of national and local youth organisations adds immense value to the overall social fabric in communities around the world. For example, the Chinese National Youth Foundation is engaged in youth leadership training as well as helping build schools in rural China. In Africa, various youth organisations are doing inspiring work around the pandemic of HIV and AIDS.

The Helping Hands youth organisation in Durban, South Africa, is a telling example of the way many youth-driven initiatives do not necessarily manifest themselves as formal organisations. Helping Hands has been operating as a non-registered informal voluntary organisation since 1980, engaged in such diverse activities as civic and political education classes, tuition in subjects such as mathematics and physics, coaching in swimming and athletics, as well as supporting various institutions offering care to abandoned children and those living with disabilities. Gender awareness programmes and racial justice programmes have also helped to share information, develop skills and build leadership. The range of their activities is remarkable, and I was privileged to have been part of the leadership of Helping Hands. When I reflect on the work that I have done with CIVICUS and its affiliates, in promoting citizen participation and strengthening civil society, I have little doubt that most of what I know was learnt in my years as a young activist, when the work of this small organisation helped to open my mind to the wider possibilities inherent in civil society.

Other global youth movements and organisations such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), the International Youth Foundation (IYF), the World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM), the International Alliance of the YMCAs and YWCAs offer great opportunities to youth to realise their potential. Right now, many of these institutions are grappling with how to engage young people in the governance of their institutions, believing



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that including young people more effectively in decision-making can only enhance performance. The efforts of inter-governmental organisations such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UN also demonstrate positive, albeit insufficient, trends of youth participation in a range of initiatives around the world.

Mapping out the challenges and opportunities for youth participation

Having examined the various levels of actual and potential youth participation in civil and political society, we must now consider the particular challenges and opportunities for youth participation. Here again, we must disaggregate our understanding of familiar concepts, including the most basic category of ‘youth’, to better understand the challenges and opportunities for youth participation

Recognising the diversity of young people

It is vital that in pursuing the objective of strengthening youth participation we do not treat young people as a monolithic entity. Failure to understand its diversity could have disastrous consequences. There are several key distinctions that need to be kept in mind. First, and most importantly, is gender. Second, there are the distinctions that different age cohorts raise. Third, we need to be mindful of occupational locations and groups: primary schools, high or secondary schools, unemployed young people, professional young people, students in tertiary education, and young workers. Fourth, cultural background and religion play identity-defining roles. Fifth, issues of race and ethnicity also need to be dealt with sensitively.

These diversities are not being brought up to suggest that young people cannot rise above such differences. In fact, less constrained by the baggage of tradition or history, young people are often better than their elders at establishing connections and uniting across these boundaries. They have the ability to lead the way in fostering greater racial and ethnic justice, for example, and greater religious acceptance and tolerance.

Young people and globalisation

It is untrue that globalisation is fundamentally a new trend. The quest to connect across geographical divides pre-dates the nation-state system as we know it today. However, the scale of interaction is far greater today due to advancements in the field of communications. Today, we find that young people are connected across national boundaries

more than ever before. The flow of information has, in fact, fostered a virtual youth community that manifests itself in different ways across the world. For example, the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) has a Children and Youth Task Force which is advancing the interests, participation and perhaps most importantly, the voice of young people in anti-poverty campaigning.

At the same time, we are confronted with the challenge of what Demos, a policy think tank in New York, has labelled 'economic apartheid'. Economic apartheid often has a distinct youth dimension. In spite of the fact that a small percentage of young people have benefited as a result of the information technology revolution, the sad reality is that while some speed off on the information super-highway, millions more are left behind, stuck in their potholes, further debilitated by a lack of technical knowledge or infrastructure. The dominance of English on the internet also means that many other language groups are excluded. On the positive side, information technology has played a pivotal role in broadening access to participation, while the sharing of experience has promoted cross-cultural learning and dialogue and had an impact on how young people interact with each other and society as a whole. Notwithstanding the inequity in access to information and communications technology, known commonly as the 'digital divide', young people are participating, learning and leading in creative, and often invisible, ways. Just because you cannot see them does not mean they are not taking part. The coming decades should see an increasing intensification of participation for those people who have technological access. Unfortunately, this means that those without access will be left further behind, providing us with a challenge to ensure more equitable access, and more equitable and effective participation for all young people.

Young people and the social exclusion debate

In the coming decades, it would be remarkable if humanity could judge itself not simply on the success of a few but, on the overall progress of the majority. In particular, humanity needs to rise to the challenge of addressing, in creative, dynamic and courageous ways, those who have been and continue to be excluded from the mainstream of public life. In societies around the world, young people have been 'marginalised', seen as the 'lost generation', a 'Generation X' in search of self-identity, victims in need of salvation. Young people's alienation from public life is, in itself, a form of social exclusion that needs to be addressed.



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We also need to pose the question: how can young people, notwithstanding their own feelings of social exclusion, contribute to supporting the struggles for justice of other socially excluded groups? Being sensitive to questions of social exclusion also opens a powerful window into the work of other constituencies striving to create a more just world, meaning the power of youth participation can be aligned with a community battling against issues such as environmental injustice or poverty; or help that community to find ways of connecting with other socially excluded groups.

The one caution here is that young people must ensure that when they interact with other constituencies, they work as partners, listen well, guard against framing people as victims, beneficiaries, recipients, clients or charity cases. It is critical that youth respect the integrity of the people they seek to serve. The African concept of *ubuntu* (community), given expression in the proverb ‘I am because you are’, is a powerful reminder that we acquire our identity, our sense of community, our meaning and purpose through our interaction with the other people in our lives. Therefore, when working with socially excluded groups, we need to be mindful that those of us who consider ourselves to be ‘serving’ others are in fact serving ourselves, since we often get so much more in return.

Young people and the challenge of leadership

Young people are increasingly assuming important leadership roles all over the world. This is something which needs to be consolidated, celebrated and expanded. The challenge is to recognise the multifaceted nature of youth leadership and ensure that there is always a conscious commitment to ensuring that leadership development is part of our work. Leadership development is a term that is frequently used in broad, sweeping terms. In reality, it is very much context-determined. From my position as a civil society practitioner, I see at least three distinct patterns of leadership development that are required in NGOs and other civil society organisations, applicable to differing situations.

First, there are youth organisations constituted and led entirely by young people. Here, incumbent leaders need to ensure that they do not allow their own leadership, however inspiring and excellent, to prevent the rise of the next generation of leadership.

Second, there is the situation of young people working in organisations governed entirely, or mostly, by adults. In such organisations,

there have been positive movements in the right direction over the last 10 years or so. Increasingly, young people are being brought into the governance structures of these institutions. For example, there has been a moderate rise in the number of young people being nominated to the governing boards of directors. The election of Rajiv Joshi, who played a key role in initiating the CIVICUS World Assembly and was a successful president of the Scottish Youth Parliament, onto the CIVICUS board at the age of 22, is one of several examples we can point to. There is also a greater push to employ young people in the ranks of the administrative and programming staff of these organisations. These trends need to be strengthened.

Thirdly, there is youth involvement in civil society organisations which do not focus exclusively on youth issues. Here, again, the challenges are somewhat different. In fact, it is harder to develop youth leadership in these settings, since it is often suggested that the vision and mission of an economic or social justice movement are so pressing that there is neither the time nor the resources to worry about youth leadership or other 'distracting' factors. Yet these organisations often rely on young people as their 'shock troops', 'foot soldiers' or 'work force'. Consequently, these organisations must think deeply about how they relate to their youth constituency, ensuring that their leadership role is not stunted, but encouraged. Ultimately, the future vibrancy of many organisations depends on achieving this.

Youth organisations, and indeed all citizens' organisations, need to think about nurturing youth leadership and come up with innovative ideas about how to do so. They need to make investments in leadership development that are smart, courageous, innovative and cost-effective. This entails an investment in time and locally available resources as well as the creation of conscious learning opportunities for young people, that take into account a full range of leadership skills. Fortunately, many innovative leadership programmes already exist. Such programmes need to be built upon, and incorporated as a natural part of these organisations' day-to-day life.

Young people and the challenge of gender equality

While serving a five-year term as a board member of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) I was able to witness first hand the inspiring work being done in its programme, Young Women in Leadership, and was overwhelmed to see how many young women stepped forward to participate in this programme's activities. The contributions of the women's movement around the world, which have



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opened up more spaces for active young women’s leadership and led to remarkable improvements in our approach to social issues over the past few decades, need to be acknowledged. More recently, the UN Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995, provided impetus to these developments, and many young women were inspired by the pre- and post-Beijing processes. Nevertheless, the disproportionately low representation of young women in public life is truly scandalous. Unfortunately, many youth organisations remain firmly dominated by young men and a range of societal norms hinder the participation of young women. The fact that young women usually carry a greater burden of responsibility with regard to domestic work, for example, reduces the amount of time available for participation in public life, and in many societies young women are actively discouraged from seeking avenues for public contribution.

Gender equality needs to be tackled by young people who believe that full democracy will never be achieved unless men and women share equitably in the democratic and economic process of their societies. Both the struggle for gender equality within (in youth organisations) and without (in the society as a whole) need to be tackled simultaneously. Thankfully, more and more people, including a growing number of men, agree that gender equality is going to be central to creating a world that is environmentally sustainable, and in which social and economic justice reigns supreme. Given that even in long-standing democracies women still occupy a largely symbolic or token presence in positions of influence, humanity needs to ask itself why is it willing to deprive itself of the vast experience, wisdom, sensitivity and creativity of more than half the world’s population.

Young people, democracy and governance

Increasingly today, citizens around the world are arguing that they want to be involved in public life beyond simply voting once every four or five years. The stale and old idea of ‘governance being what government does’ is being vigorously contested. Governance is being redefined as how policy decisions get made and what government and its citizens do, together and apart, to meet the needs of their societies. Thankfully, many enlightened governments and international bodies increasingly seek out the voices of citizens’ organisations to try to draw more people into the policy-making process. At a time when democracy is in crisis, with fewer and fewer people voting, this is vitally important. Electoral systems are becoming less and less accessible to ordinary people. There is diminishing internal democracy, transparency and openness within powerful political parties, even in countries with longstanding histories of party politics and a growing sense that national governments in poor

countries are powerless in the face of influential global institutions. Formal electoral democracy is unable to deliver economic justice in many parts of the world. All of these realities have combined to create a huge distance between elected officials and their citizens.

What, then, are the specific challenges for young people? The most important challenge is ensuring that youth does not slide into cynicism, but continues to remain critically engaged with democratic institutions, however flawed. Young people of voting age should vote, even if it is only to 'spoil' or invalidate the ballots as a sign of protest at the choices available to them. Apathy should be challenged.

I believe that the time has also come for a serious reconsideration of the voting age. Today, young people can have as much access to information as their parents, or even more. Young people take on important social responsibilities and have earned the right to participate in the democratic process. For some time now, many of us have been calling for the voting age limit to be reduced to 16. It is worth bearing in mind that President Nelson Mandela, in acknowledgement of the role young school students played in the struggle against apartheid, once called for the voting age to be lowered to 14.

Young people have a big role to play in addressing the democratic deficit at various formal and informal institutional levels. Historically young people have played a key role in struggles for democracy around the world. This involvement continues today. Many youth heroes have given their lives in the campaign to see democracy prevail, a recent example being the young Iranian activist, Neda Agha Soltan, who was shot and killed during protests in Tehran in June 2009.

At the macro level, we need to be looking at what substantive changes need to be made to the rules, procedures and laws that guide our lives at a local, national and global level. We're going to need the imagination and the creativity of young people, so as to think more courageously and innovatively about the changes that need to be made to ensure our public institutions are the best they can be to meet all of humanity's needs.

At the meso level, while recognising that institutional change is a marathon and not a sprint, we still need to ensure that the current processes function as effectively as possible. How can we get more young people running for public office, voting, campaigning and shaping the elections agenda? At a global level, how can we ensure, for example, that the regular UN conferences, such as the recent Copenhagen Climate Change summit, have a strong youth voice and



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presence? Young people and those not yet born are undoubtedly the most important stakeholders when we talk about the environment. The impressive contribution of young people to the campaigning at Copenhagen, which I witnessed first-hand, is clear testament to their awareness of this, and the passion with which they are seeking to ensure their contribution to the debate gets heard.

At the micro level, young people need to be engaged in specific projects around voter education, civic education, promoting adult literacy and so on.

All three levels of participation are important and it is incumbent upon young people to establish links between these levels.

Youth participation in developing a new world vision

Young people have the advantage that they are not over-burdened by the habitual cynicism of the adult world. They are probably better able to imagine a world where there is no homelessness or war, and one in which justice prevails. Clearly, one of the roles that young people should engage in is visionary scenario-planning. Getting young people to think about the future and about what new paradigms might work is essential. This need not be a solely long-term, romantic enterprise. Young people can and should be also looking at creative and new ways for organisations to operate and rethink their strategies.

I can provide two examples of novel ways in which young people have ‘broken the mould’. Rather than view the relationship between corporations and civil society organisations as primarily adversarial, or merely a flirtation sealed by a donation or grant, young people have participated in encouraging civil society organisations and businesses to creatively seek common ground, working out ways of channelling the considerable resources of the latter towards social development. For many civil society organisations, this approach of exploring common ground with business required them to ‘think out of the box’. CIVICUS has published a pioneering study called ‘Promoting Corporate Citizenship: Opportunities for Business and Civil Society Engagement’, which outlines the challenges, possibilities and opportunities for developing the relationship between NGOs and the business community beyond donations and funding grants, towards harnessing the full resources of the latter.

Another example of breaking the mould has to do with how we think about issues of gender equality generally, and an issue like violence

against women and children in particular. In the past, violence against women was treated as a woman's issue, to be taken up by women's organisations. In reality, as some men have repeatedly pointed out, this is fundamentally a men's issue. It is men who are the perpetrators and the problem is rooted in how masculinity is constructed and understood. Education and outreach efforts should target men as well as women. Rethinking some of our fundamental conceptual frameworks, and linking this new thinking to more substantive issues, can create a more just and equitable world. Young people, less influenced by the burdens of tradition and societal habit, are in a better position to recognise and act on these changing models. In meeting this challenge, young people have an indispensable role, putting them at the vanguard of instituting fundamental positive change within our societies.

From MAZES to GRACES – integrating youth work in broader social and economic change

Sometimes, the youth participation agenda is unable to move forward. It finds itself trapped in a maze because it cannot actively interact with the range of other social interventions that are under way. We can move out of this maze of isolation if we embrace the intersectionality of youth participation and youth citizenship with key areas of voluntary action for positive social and economic change. Inspired by those women activists who have refused to be parochial in their vision and have made common cause with other citizen movements that work for social and economic change, I propose the concept of 'GRACES' as a simpler way to talk about the challenge of intersectionality.

GRACES

- G stands for full gender equality and raises the question of what actions are needed to ensure the full participation of young women in public life.
- R raises the question of how we can work for racial justice and religious tolerance.
- A deals with age and ability.
- C deals with class, community and caste
- E deals with ethnicity
- S covers those that are otherwise socially excluded, such as people living with HIV and AIDs or other illnesses and disabilities, indigenous peoples and those who face discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Building intergenerational synergy

Advancing the agenda of active youth citizenship will not be served by romanticising youth participation. While we look at the abundant benefits, opportunities and energies that can be harnessed by youth to breathe new energy into what has become a stale and moribund public life, we also need to note the limitations that hold back youth participation.

In examining such limitations, adult public figures should recognise that each generation brings with it certain objective limitations. These limitations should not be read as something that should limit our capacity to make youth citizenship real and active, but should be understood as another challenge that needs to be met with creativity and realism.

Any agenda to harness the full participation of youth in public life should take as its starting point the need to develop and build appropriate generational linkages. This is a matter of priority, considering that the growing sense of alienation experienced by young people is linked to serious generational divides which mean we fail to utilise intergenerational synergy. The need for this sort of prioritisation is illustrated by the work done by the now defunct Global Meeting of Generations, a civil society effort which sought to bring together the wisdom of multiple generations in framing a new approach to sustainable development, and it is important that civil society comes together to create a successor to this forum.

Young people need to feel enabled to take initiatives to deal with the challenges that they face, and know that they possess the mechanisms that will permit them to contribute. Just as importantly, youth leaders and adults should encourage young people to be major societal stakeholders – stakeholders who have the ability to offer creative contributions to the challenges facing humanity as a whole. Any failure to do so will squander the enormous potential that active youth participation has to offer to the world, a potential the world cannot afford to ignore.