




# Youth, **Protests** and the Polycrisis

This presentation provides  
an overview of the report  
«Youth, Protests and the Polycrisis»

[Click here](#) to read the full report 

Around the world,  
more and more  
people are taking  
to the streets  
in **protests**  
and students  
and young people  
are at the forefront.



The increase in youth **protests** raises concern but also hope.

Youth activism reveals the gap between youth aspirations and the combination of crises – or ‘polycrisis’ – facing the world. Protests can turn to unrest, and demonstrators may face violent repression.

At the same time, young people’s activism is an expression of their agency to demand change and to present solutions.

We wanted to explore how and why young people are protesting, and what will drive future activism. We found that youth protests can play an important role in the construction of better futures. Activists and policymakers should take measures to harness this potential.



1.

Young people prefer **informal political engagement** – such as through protests and direct action – and various factors drive their activism.

2.

Young people use various methods in protests, often **combining online and offline actions**.

3.

Youth participation can mean more **peaceful and inclusive protests** – but even non-violent action faces repression by authorities.

4.

Young people contribute to protest **impact and social change**, but this does not always lead to direct gains for them.

5.

Past protest levels, rising food prices, declining satisfaction with life and increasing urbanization suggest that demonstrations and youth participation in them will **continue to rise**.

6.

Young people wish to become more **proactive protestors**, relying on peaceful methods and enjoying greater recognition for their **positive role**.

# Protesting peacefully is a human right



People gather in public spaces to protest: in marches, demonstrations, sit-ins or parades. The goal is to express their views and attract the attention of the authorities, the media and others.

Non-violent protests are a type of peaceful assembly. Children – individuals under 18 years of age – have the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, according to the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) gives all human beings the same right.

# Chapter 01 | Emerging trends in youth protests



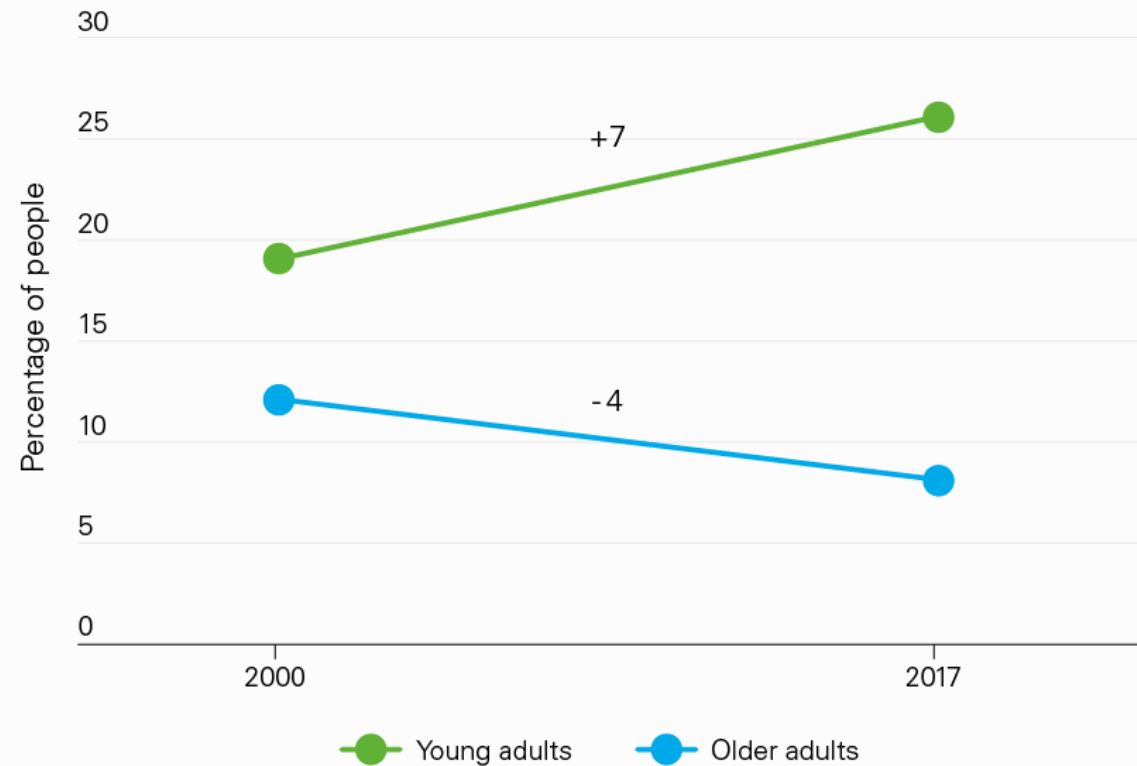
# Young people prefer informal to formal political engagement

People of different generations continue to be interested in politics, but youth have become increasingly frustrated with democracy – and some choose to exercise their citizenship in different ways.

Young people prefer informal means of political participation, such as protests, petitions or boycotts, rather than formal ones, such as being a member of a political party or voting in elections.

The way that young people participate in protests can help us understand their political aspirations.

Percentage of people interested in informal politics, from surveys in the 2000s compared with 2017



Source: [Morrison and Tyree \(2018\)](#).

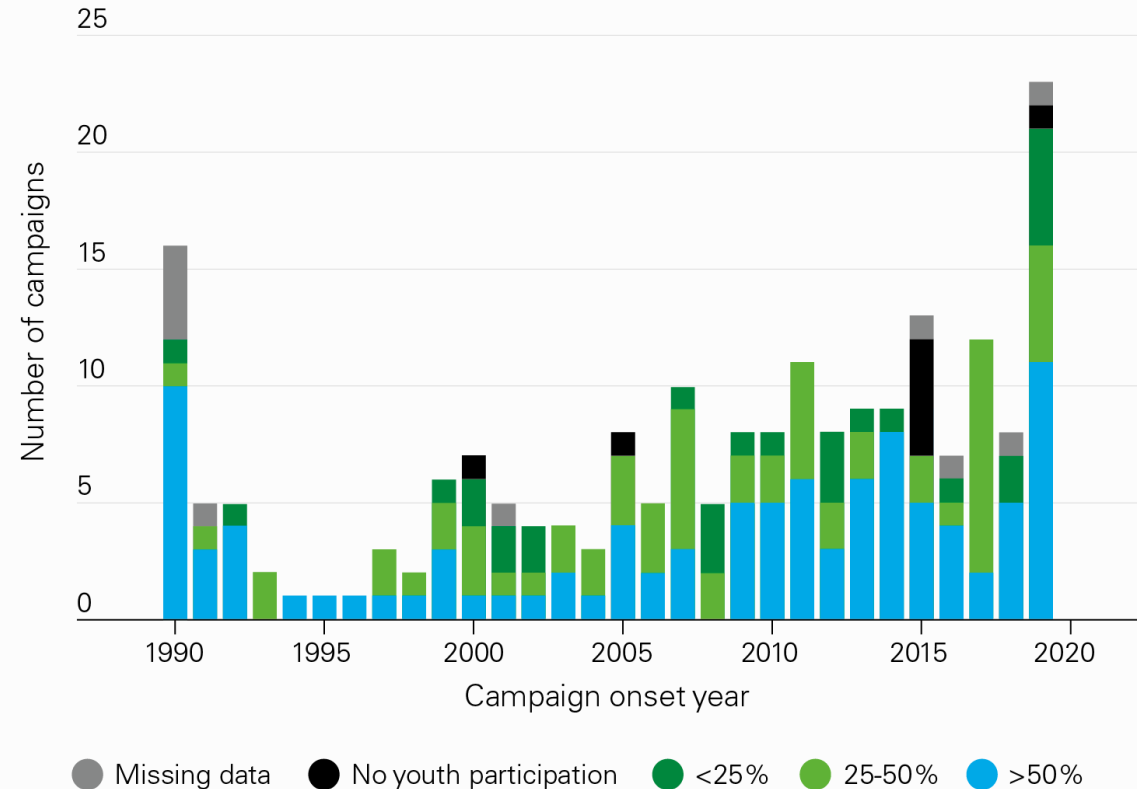


# Protests have increased in the past 20 years, with young people and students at the forefront

Protests, measured as individual events or as larger mobilizations aiming to change the government (“mass campaigns” or “mass protests”), have increased in the past 20 years.

Youth and students are also protesting more, and youth participation and leadership in mass campaigns have grown since 1990. In more than 80% of these campaigns, youth made up at least 25% of participants.

Youth front-line participation by campaign onset year, 1990–2019



Source: [USIP \(2023\)](#).

# Various factors and concerns lead to youth activism

Many factors can contribute to protests:



Cultural values



Political opportunities



Resources available to protestors  
(human, financial, organizational)



Structural factors  
(such as urbanization levels)



Individual characteristics  
(such as education level)

The economic, social and political marginalization of young people could explain recent youth activism. Some of the main concerns driving young people to the streets are:



Democracy



Environmental issues,  
particularly climate change



Discrimination on the  
basis of gender, sexual  
orientation or race



Other youth-related issues, such as  
education, work and living conditions

# Protests on global issues and international collaboration have increased



Young people have contributed to this global reach of protests through international efforts and collaboration.

It has become more common for social movements to organize international networks, increasing the number of protests on global issues, such as climate action or fighting racism. While people are more likely to protest on local events, local concerns can also spark movements across borders.

# Young people use various methods in protests, often combining online and offline actions



Online and offline engagement are linked – digital efforts can support and complement in-person activism. Protestors increasingly turn to digital action to mobilize quickly, share information, avoid repression and lower the costs of events.

But online mobilization also has its dangers, and may worsen digital gaps, lead to surveillance, and harm marginalized groups.

Young people play an important role in using different protest methods, including digital tools. Creativity and innovation contribute to more impactful activism, and young people have helped to make civic action more flexible, fast and diverse.

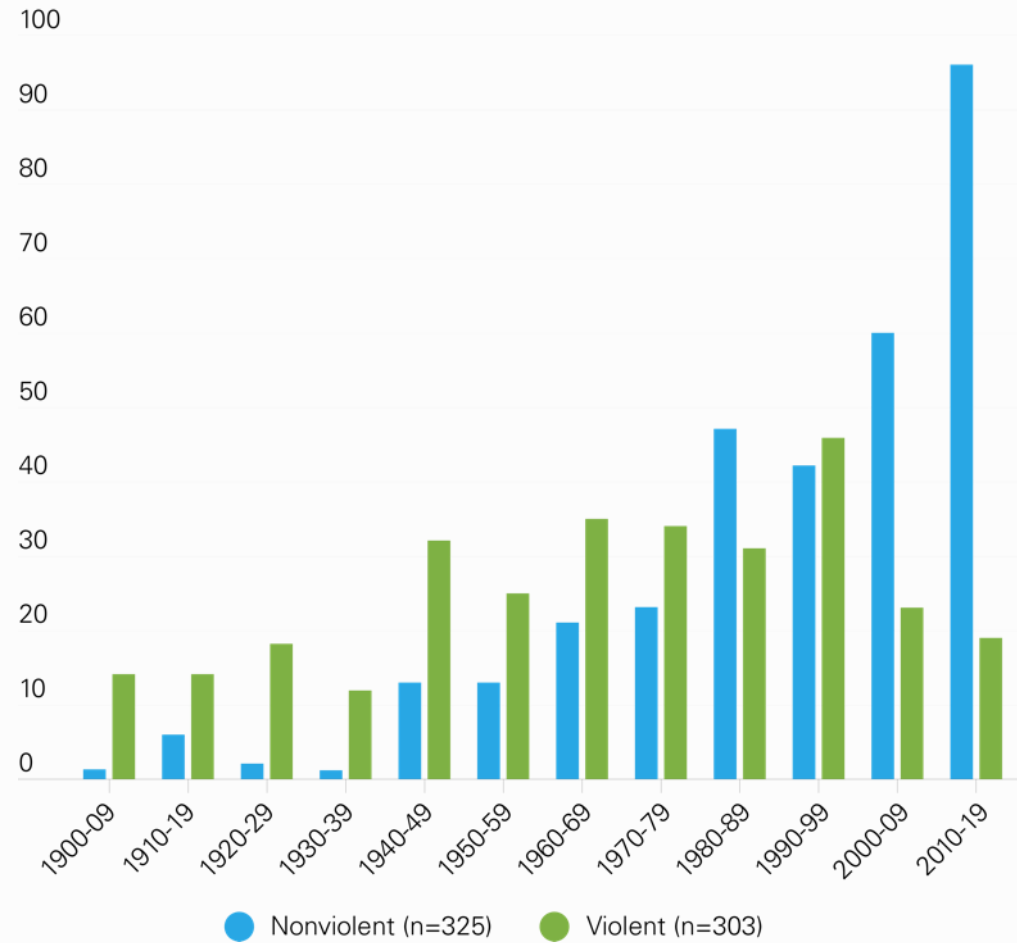
In Thailand in 2020, protestors used social media to put decisions to a vote and to inform members about the whereabouts of the police.

→ Read more [here](#)

# Youth participation can contribute to more peaceful activism

Overall, protests and mass campaigns have become less violent over time.

Number of non-violent and violent campaigns, 1900–2019



Source: [Chenoweth \(2020\)](#)



Most protests involving youth are peaceful. In mass campaigns globally, [student and youth participation](#) decreased the chances that protests would turn violent. In Latin America, [researchers](#) found that only 11% of more than 4,000 protests by college students involved violence.

These findings challenge a common idea that youth are violent or unruly, which authorities often use to justify violent repression.

# Protests with youth participation are more inclusive and larger



Protests with youth participation are more likely to be non-violent, larger and more inclusive.

In Latin America, larger protests were generally more peaceful and student participation helped increase the number of people on the streets. Protests with many young people also tend to include more diverse groups.

Even when people protest peacefully, they can face strong opposition from those in power.

Youth are demonstrating at great risk: Governments are more likely to stop mass protests pre-emptively and violently when they include or are led by youth.

In Iran, for example, mostly peaceful protests led by young women and girls since 2022, demonstrating after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini (Jina), have seen violent repression. Hundreds of people, including dozens of children and adolescents, have been killed, injured or detained.

→ Read more [here](#)



Youth participation  
contributes to  
**protest** impact  
and broader  
social gains...



Peaceful protests are more successful than violent ones. Non-violence gathers more people, which increases protest legitimacy, attracts more attention and leads to more diverse methods.

Since young people's participation help make campaigns less violent, larger, more inclusive and more innovative, it indirectly contributes to protest success.

Mass protests where young people are on the front lines may be more likely to succeed, according to research. Successful, peaceful mass campaigns with young people have been correlated with lower infant mortality rates – a common measure of social progress – five years after the actions, suggesting that youth-led protests contribute to broader social gains.

## ...But youth-led campaigns do not always lead to direct gains for young people

Even when mass protests are successful, youth leadership in these events may not create direct benefits for young people.

Five years after the campaigns in the research mentioned above ended, important social indicators for young people, such as youth employment, had not improved.

This suggests that youth may not have much say in the movements' decision-making. Some young protestors feel their participation is being used for the political gains of other groups, and barriers to gender equality mean young women often face even bigger challenges.

In Sudan, despite the leadership of young people's groups – particularly women – in the nationwide protests of 2019, political parties dominated the negotiations that established the civilian government, later abolished through a coup in 2021

→ Read more [here](#)

Chapter 02 | Future

protest

trends and youth perspective

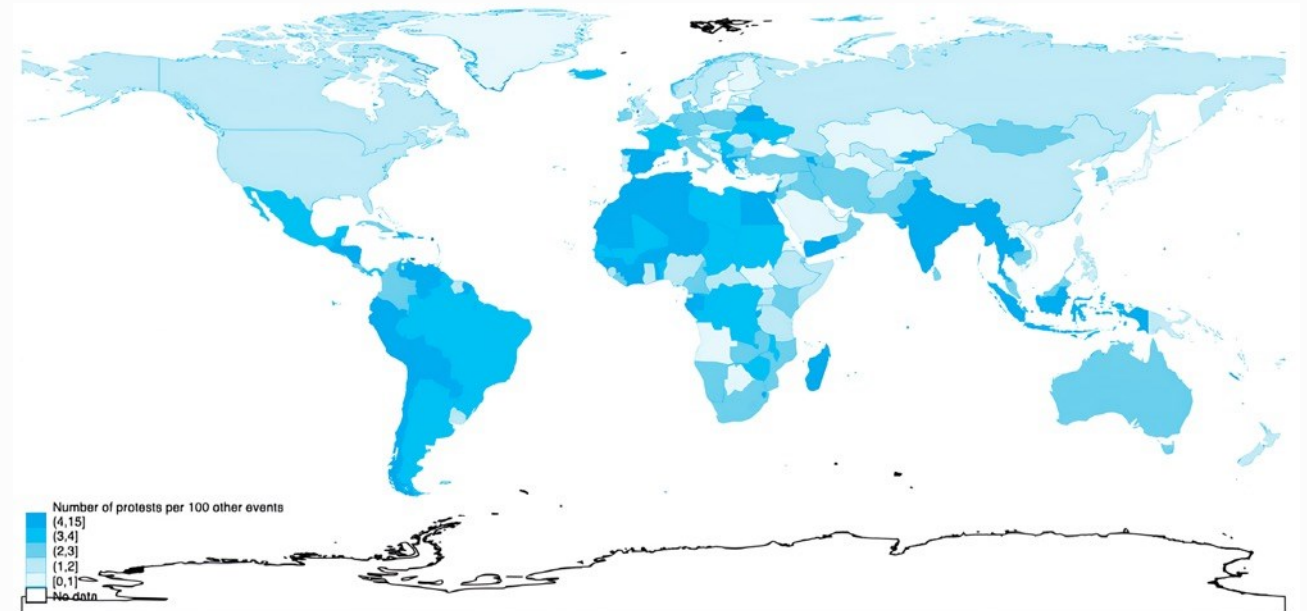


Past levels of **protests** are the most important factor in predicting future uprising

Past levels of protests may be the most significant factor in anticipating future events.

Activism is expected to increase, including protests with youth participation. Because protests spread across borders, this trend will likely not only affect places that have already experienced many demonstrations, but neighbouring countries and regions too.

Average number of protests per thousand events by country, 1980–2020



Source: [Cantoni et al. \(2023\)](#).

Food inflation is a strong predictor of protest levels, and the rise in food prices has long been linked to social unrest.

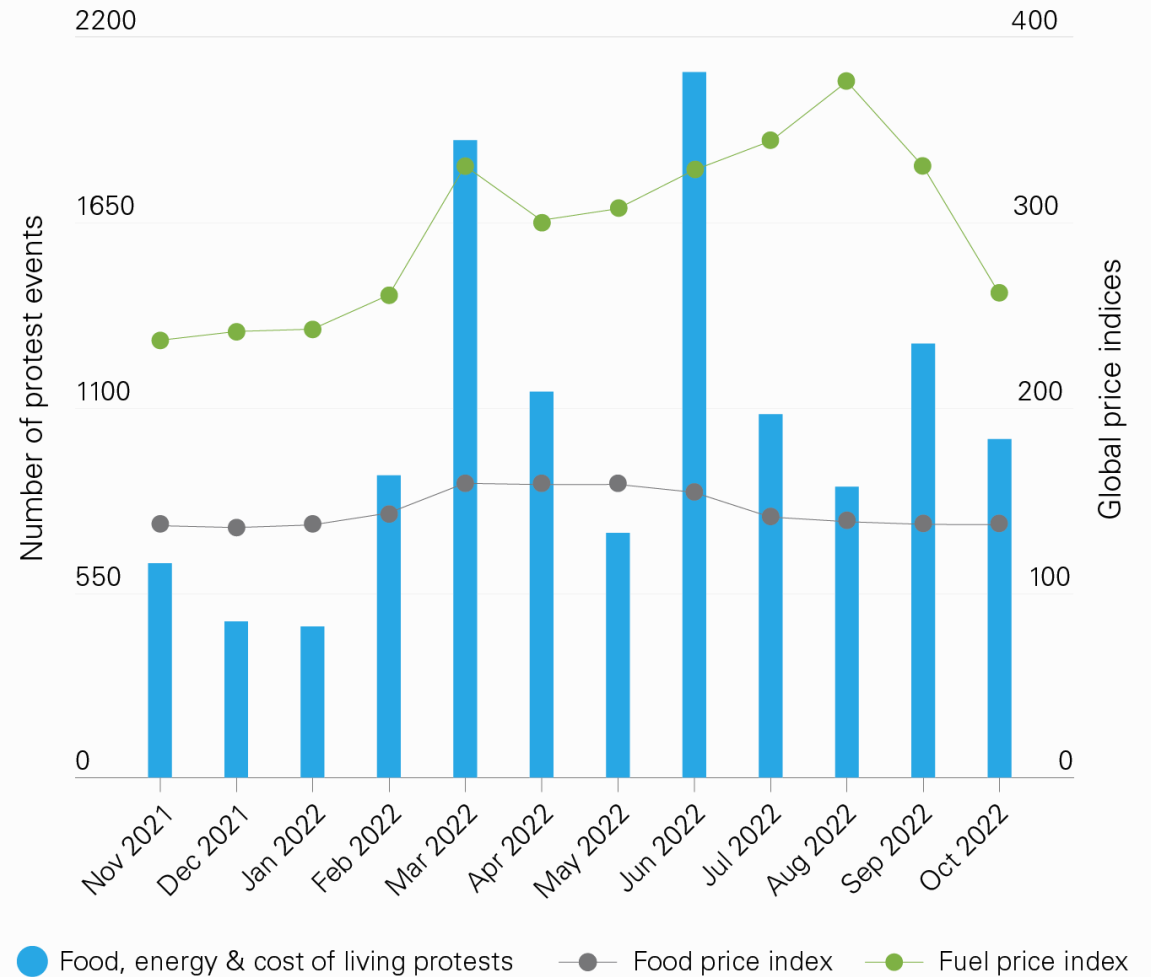
Source: [Hossain and Hallock \(2022\)](#).

Note: FAO food price index averages indices of meat, dairy, cereals, oils and sugar. 2014-16=100.

IMF Fuel (Energy) Index, 2016 = 100, includes crude oil (petroleum), natural gas, coal and propane

Protest events from authors' analysis of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).

### Food, fuel and cost-of-living protests





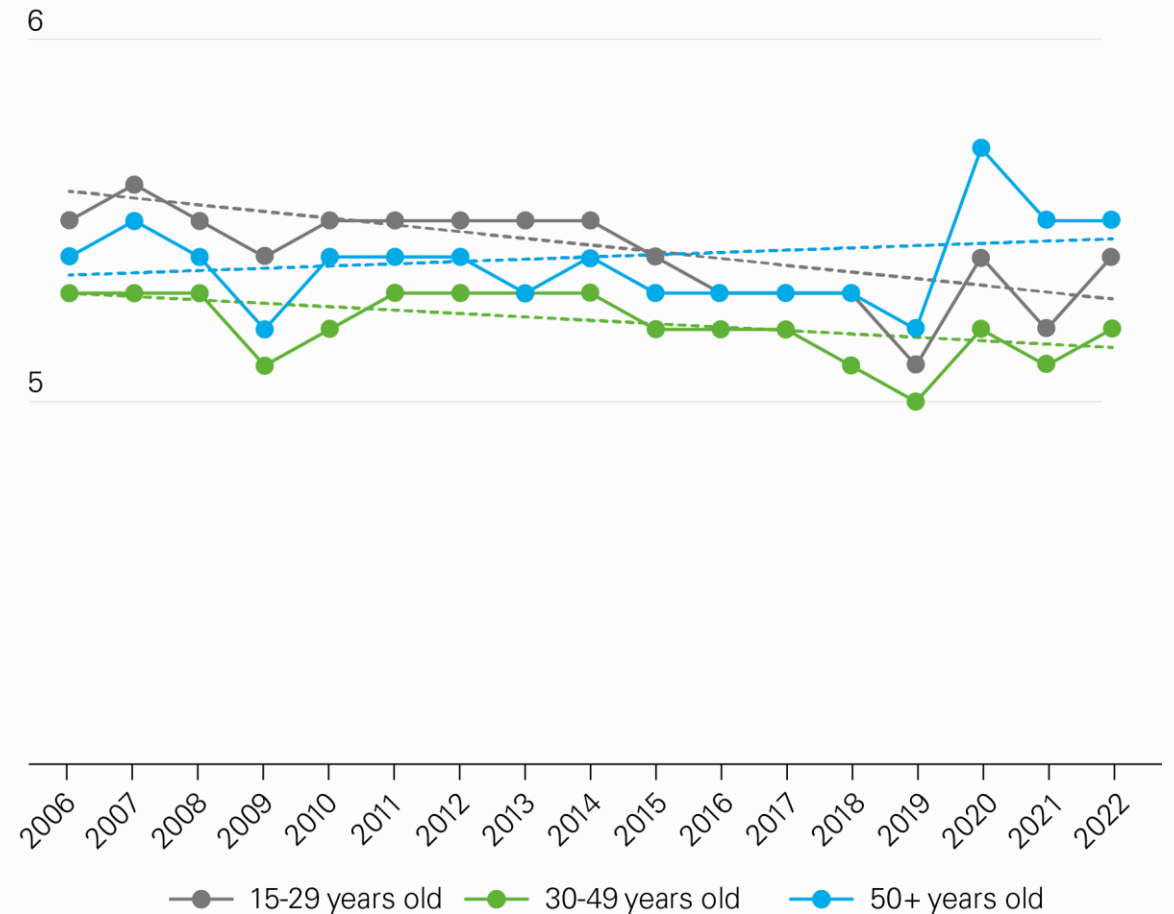
A key aspect of the polycrisis is the cost-of-living crisis. Between November 2021 and October 2022, more than 12,500 protests and riots against increases in food and fuel prices took place in close to 150 countries.

Students took part in around 10% of these events. With food prices still high in most countries, more protests about these issues are likely.

Continuing decline  
in satisfaction with  
life suggests more

protests

Global life satisfaction, measured on a scale of 0  
(lowest satisfaction with life) to 10 (highest satisfaction)



Source: [Gallup \(2022\)](#).



How people feel about their lives and a sense of deprivation can also help to predict protests. Using data on peaceful protests and strikes from 2007 to 2014 from 118 countries, [researchers](#) found that lower well-being strongly correlates with civil resistance.

People have been less happy with their lives [since 2006](#), but this reduction in life satisfaction has been especially important among 15–29-year-olds.

Between 2010 and 2019, there was a steady decrease in both the current and future levels of life satisfaction among young people in Hong Kong. In 2019, students were the majority of people protesting against new extradition laws, resulting in a political crisis not seen in the city in many decades.

→ [Read more here](#)



# Growing youth populations in urban centres is a strong predictor of protests

People in cities are more likely to protest than people in the countryside because they have more resources, are more connected to each other and can gather more easily.

Data from 1950 to 2010 in 98 countries found that the growing young population in urban centres is a strong predictor of protests. By 2030, it is estimated that a majority of the world's urban population – 60% – will be under the age of 18.



We invited a group of young people to describe their aspirations for activism and **protests** in the coming decades. This is what they told us:

→ Young people believe there will be more protests, which will require a proactive approach towards building a better future.

→ Science-backed and preventative protests will increase, calling for non-violence and the protection of protestors' rights.

→ The weight of the past, including human rights violations and exclusion, will slowly diminish, creating more engaged and inclusive activism.

→ Future protests will amplify silenced voices, using creative methods, digital technologies, art and innovation for broader impact.



Youth-led activism will contribute to a more just society, engaging young people locally and globally. Grassroots movements and intergenerational collaboration will redefine how policies and decisions are made.

Media transparency and public recognition will elevate youth protestors' roles as catalysts for positive change. Partnerships between youth activists and governments will be strengthened, eliminating adult-centrism and shaping inclusive policies for a more equitable future.

# Chapter 03 | Recommendations



For government stakeholders, including policymakers





**Listen** to and act on children's and young people's demands, including those that may lead to protests.



**Actively engage** with children and young people involved in protests as a rich source of insights and futures thinking.



Take measures to ensure governments facilitate children's and young people's rights to peacefully protest and to **express their views**.



**Do not interfere** with children's and young people's right to peaceful assembly based on perceived or actual risks.



Do not prohibit, block, disperse or disrupt peaceful protests unless on legitimate grounds.



Prioritize the prevention of violence during protests

For activists and members of social movements and other organizations mobilizing for

protests





Engage with young people and children as equal partners in decision-making before, during and after protests.



Take all measures to prevent violence during protests.



When involving individuals under the age of 18 in protests, conduct a risk assessment, plan risk mitigation and child safeguarding procedures.



Support young people and children to be politically and civically engaged, especially those most marginalized.



Create a positive environment for young people and children to facilitate their civic engagement and participation in protests.



Support adults to promote youth and child participation, ensuring the creation of more inclusive spaces.



# Glossary

## [Activism](#)

We refer to ‘activism’ as similar to ‘participation’, though this engagement typically takes place through direct action for a social goal, often defying social norms and traditions

## Adolescents

Individuals aged 10–19.

## Campaigns

please see the definition for ‘protests’.

## Children

as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are individuals below the age of 18.

## [Participation](#)

UNICEF [defines](#) ‘participation’ as a process through which individuals express their views and influence matters that concern them. By ‘civic participation’, ‘civic’ or ‘social mobilization’ or ‘civic action’, we mean “participation in public spheres to improve the well-being of communities or society”, including through protests.

## [Polycrisis](#)

the multiple and overlapping crises that have impacted the world in the past years, including increase in conflict, the climate emergency and the pandemic.

# Glossary

## Protests

in-person gatherings in public spaces, including marches, demonstrations, sit-ins or parades, that aim to publicly express their views and attract the attention of different groups in society, such as authorities, the media and others. In the quantitative work cited in this presentation, protests are usually counted as individual events. We also refer to findings from researchers that investigate ‘maximalist non-violent campaigns’, ‘mass protests’, ‘mass campaigns’ or ‘mass actions’ for short. These consist of several events over time that: (1) do not resort to violence or, when they include ‘violent flanks’, violence is rejected by the larger movement; (2) aim to “pursue regime change, secession or newly autonomous states”; and (3) involve more than 1,000 people over time.

## Social movements

are more organized efforts by a group of people who engage in collective action with a shared goal or vision. Protests are one of many methods used by young people and social movements to engage in civic participation and activism.

## Youth or young people

The United Nations defines ‘youth’ as persons aged 15–24, and UNICEF considers ‘young people’ those aged 10–24. The sources cited in this presentation do not define these terms consistently, so the age brackets vary and sometimes are not reported. We, therefore, use these terms interchangeably.

We thank all the young people, colleagues and experts who contributed to the research mentioned here.

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For a full list of acknowledgements, see report [«Youth, Protests and the Polycrisis»](#)

for every child, answers

