BUILDING PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERMENT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING INCLUSIVE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Approximately 300 million adolescents live in East Asia and the Pacific. The region has never been younger. Yet, according to CIVICUS data, only 9 of the 39 countries in the region—representing less than 2 per cent of the population—have a civic space.

Young girls and boys must be empowered as equal partners in constructing the future of their nations. Young people's meaningful engagement and participation in social development is a right and is critically important for the present and the future.

Grounded in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation is a right that all ratifying governments (all but two in the world) have committed to upholding. It is a precondition to the enjoyment of other rights. And yet, young people's civic engagement remains a nuanced challenge and, in some countries, their civic space is under threat.

In lieu of the above, in October 2021 UNICEF's East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, together with World Vision and youth-led organizations, hosted the first regional conference on young people's rights to civic engagement entitled "*Building Pathways to Empowerment*".

Throughout the conference, barriers to systematically promoting meaningful adolescent participation were highlighted by young people and experts alike, including the need for inclusive spaces recognizing the diversity of young people's lived experiences and the need to build capacity of adults to understand how to engage adolescents.

UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office

In order to strengthen the discourse among practitioners, policy makers and young people in East Asia and the Pacific around the above themes, UNICEF commissioned a series of white papers that explore practical approaches and recommendations for promoting inclusive youth civic engagement in policy making, product design and other arenas.

We hope you will find these short papers useful to spark discussions and actions towards promoting meaningful engagement and young people's rights to participation:

Youth civic engagement: building bridges between youth practice and policy

Philippa Collin
Associate Professor, Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University
Co-Director, Young and Resilient Research Centre
Co-Director, Intergener8 Living Lab

Introduction

From Bangladesh to Bali young people are taking action and calling for governments, industry and communities to respond to issues that they care about. For example, in 2013, Bali-based school-students and sisters, Isabel and Melati Wijsen decided to do something to address the problem of plastic pollution that was consuming their island home. While still young students, aged 10 and 12 years old, they started a campaign, Bye Bye Plastic Bags, to ban plastic bags on Bali. Through local campaigning, clean up actions and leveraging social media, their campaign has succeeded in securing legislation in Bali limiting plastic bags and has grown to 50 local youth-led teams around the world.

The work and impact of the youth-led Bye Bye Plastic Bags campaign and its founders have been widely recognized internationally. The Wijsen sisters have been invited to address the World Economic Forum on sustainable development. They were named in The Times 'Most Influential Teens of 2018' list[1] and in the Forbes 2020 '30 under 30' list for social entrepreneurs[2] for their public advocacy and projects to deliver training and work opportunities for local women creating sustainable products from recyclable materials.

These young people are part of the largest youth cohort in history – approximately 1.8 billion people constituting almost 25% of the global population.[3] While few are launching campaigns that are featured in Forbes magazine, many are active in their communities. Alongside leaders, such as the Wijsen sisters, millions of young people are engaging in forms of political and civic action and by doing so are 'making' civic engagement in contemporary societies.

This white paper first explores the current context and forms of youth civic engagement: why it matters and what barriers and challenges exist to realizing participation and increasing the receptivity of communities and institutions to young people. Secondly, by exploring case studies of innovative practice, the paper identifies ways to empower and foster civic engagement among young people and build bridges between practice and policy.

Civic Engagement: An Expanding Concept

There is no singular, agreed definition of civic engagement: it can be understood as individuals and groups 'engaging in community service, collective action, political involvement, or social change'.[4] A broad definition of civic engagement recognises the many diverse ways for people to respond to common concerns and effect change within society:

"Civic engagement is individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy." (Della Carpini (n.d) cited in Adler & Googin, 2005: 239)

Importantly, civic engagement is a dynamic and changing set of practices influenced by the context in which people live, the structures through which they are governed and the broader global system in which all societies operate. Over nearly 20 years, international comparative studies have observed three key trends shaping civic engagement and political participation that are common, but not exclusive, to young people across forms of democracy, diverse cultures and different social and economic contexts.[5]

1   https://time.com/5463721/most-influential-teens-2018/
2   https://www.forbes.com/profile/bye-bye-plastic-bags/?sh=287f212c3ee4
3   World Population Dashboard | United Nations Population Fund (unfpa.org)
4   Adler, R.P & Goggin, J. 2005, What do we mean by "Civic Engagement"? *Journal of transformative Education*, 3(3): 236-253.
5   2003, Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice? Available from: www. pippanorris. com [1 December 2005].

Firstly, studies have identified a shift away from institutionalised – or traditional - forms of political and civic engagement such as joining a political party, participating in elections and volunteering for a religious organisation or charity.[6] In contrast, campaigning and protesting remain popular activities among young people. For example, in East Asia and the Pacific young people have campaigned to lower the voting age in Malaysia and coordinated and participated in large-scale protests in Hong Kong and Bangkok in defence of democracy.

Secondly, the range of repertoires and organisations that young people turn to take part in, lead or influence are diversifying. This is associated with a trend towards more cause or issue-oriented forms of participation.[7] This often includes working with advocacy organisations and services on local issues of concern (like gender-based violence), creating new organisations (including social enterprises) and leading campaigns that target companies, celebrities and other influencers.[8]

Thirdly, digital technologies are now central to how young people access information, organise and take action[9]. However, young people's digital access and use is uneven around the globe and many still have little or no access to reliable internet.[10] Online participation and engagement by different groups of young people is shaped by structural differences especially income and level of education. This impacts which groups in society are able to have – or feel that they have - influence[11]. Furthermore, the use of digital technologies collapses the distinction between online and offline action[12]. So while digital engagement is positively associated with offline civic activities[13], digital technologies most benefits those young people who are already civically and political engaged[14].

These shifts highlight how civic engagement is an expanding concept.

© UNICEF/UN0208744

[6] Norris, P. 2002, Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism, New York, Cambridge University Press; Sloam, J., 2016, Youth Electoral Participation. In United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 2016, Youth Civic Engagement: World Youth Report 2015. United Nations, New York. Available from: https:// www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_engagement.pdf

[7] Norris, 2003; Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. 2010, 'Beyond apathetic or activist youth: 'ordinary' young people and contemporary forms of participation', Young: Nordic journal of youth research, vol. 18, pp. 9-32; Collin, P. 2015, Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

[8] Collin, 2015; Pickard, S. 2019, Politics, Protest and Young People. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[9] Banaji, S and Buckingham, D 2013, The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Loader, BD, Vromen, A and Xenos, MA 2014, 'The networked young citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement', Information, Communication & Society, vol. 17, no. 2, pp.143-150; Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., Kligler-Vilenchik., N & Zimmerman, A. (eds), 2016, By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism, pp 290-308, New York University Press, New York.

[10] United Nations Children's Fund and International Telecommunication Union,2020, How many children and young people have internet access at home? Estimating digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF, New York.

[11] UN DESA, 2016; Cammaerts, B, Bruter, M, Banaji, S, Harrison, S and Anstead, N 2016, Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

[12] Third, A, Collin, P, Black, R, & Walsh, L, 2019, Young People in Digital Society: Control/Shift. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

[13] Boulianne, S and Theocharis, Y 2019, 'Young People, Digital Media and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis of Research', Social Science Computer Review, pp. 1 – 17 (online first).

[14] Banaji, S and Buckingham, D 2013, The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Why Does Civic Engagement Matter for Youth Empowerment?

Youth civic engagement matters because it delivers on basic rights, contributes to positive development of individuals and groups, benefits communities, and is good for democracy - and, increasingly, the planet.

The rights of children and young people to participate in civic and political life is established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[15]. These include rights to association (Article 13), to freedom of expression (Article 15), to non-discrimination (Article 2) and to learning about and expressing their culture (Articles 31 and 32). Importantly these rights are supported by the right of young people to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12). This right has been legislated in some countries in relation to policy. For example, many countries have established a Children's Ombudsman or Commissioner to advocate for children and young people, as well as educate the public on children's rights. The first legislatively established Children's representative was in Norway in 1981, and since then more than 45 countries have created a statutory body to defend children and young people and their interests. Many of these agencies engage directly with children and young people to understand and amplify their voices, advocate for their interests and facilitate youth participation in policy making. They also support diverse organisations to integrate child and youth participation into their practice. However, the ways in which young people can contribute to setting community, organisational, policy and political agendas, proposing responses to social problems, enacting change and contributing to decision making can – and do - extend beyond formal institutional mechanisms. Increasingly, young people are participating in a diverse range of practices that encompass every-day, informal and collective actions in different domains and settings of social life including community, school, local and state government and online.[16]

As an expanding concept, young people's civic engagement is ever more important because it promotes positive outcomes at the level of the individual, community, society and planet[17]. At the individual level, participation can foster new skills and capacities, and protective factors such as social connectedness and self-efficacy.[18] At the community level, participation can promote social inclusion through supportive relationships, involvement in group activities and cohesion[19]. At a societal level, youth participation and civic engagement is a social determinant of health[20] supports recognition and understanding of the perspectives of diverse citizens and strengthens democracy by promoting ongoing generational renewal at the local and national level.[21] At a planetary level, Youth Civic Engagement is increasingly necessary to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[22]. However, young people are rarely mentioned as agents of the SDGs and not at all in Goal 17 'Partnerships for sustainable development'.[23] To recognise their rights, maximise community wellbeing, strengthen democracy and to advance the SDGs, young people's participation is critical. Swist and Collin argue that central to this is prioritizing ways in which future innovations can meaningfully involve young people and their communities – including building on initiatives young people are currently contributing to or have led[24]. To do so requires identifying and addressing the multiple barriers to civic engagement and political participation that many young people face.

[15] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

[16] Collin, 2015; Third et al, 2019; Collin, P. and McCormack, J. 2020 Young People and Democracy: A Review. Sydney: Whitlam Institute.

[17] Baum, F., Bush, R., Modra, C., Murray, C., Cox, E., Alexander, K. & Potter, R. 2000, 'Epidemiology of participation: An Australian community study', Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, v.54, n.6, pp.414-23; Collin, P, Rahilly, K. Stephens-Reicher, J., Blanchard, M., Herrman, H. & Burns, J. (2012) Complex Connections: Individual, service and organisational spheres of youth participation. Youth Studies Australia Supplement. Sydney, Australia; Collin, 2015.

[18] Glover, S., Burns, J., Butler, H. & Patton, G.C. 1998, 'Social environments and the emotional wellbeing of young people', in Issues facing Australian families: Human services respond, ed. W.Q.M. Weeks, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest.

[19] Hayes, A., Gray, M. & Edwards, B. 2008, Social inclusion: Origins, concepts and themes, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra; Herrman, H., Saxena, S. & Moodie, R. 2005, Promoting mental health: Concepts, emerging evidence, practice, World Health Organisation, Geneva.

[20] Herrman et al, 2005;

[21] Pratchett, L. 1999, Introduction: Defining democratic renewal, 25(4): 1-18.

[22] United Nations, 2018, United Nations youth strategy: working with and for young people. Available via https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/ 2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf; Alfvén T, et al., 2019, Placing children and adolescents at the Centre of the sustainable development goals will deliver for current and future generations. Global Health Action 12:1; Swist T., & Collin P. (2021) Innovating Youth Engagement and Partnerships to Progress the SDGs. In: Leal Filho W., Azul A.M., Brandli L., Lange Salvia A., Wall T. (eds) Partnerships for the Goals. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer, Cham.

[23] Bastien S, Holmarsdottir HB (2018) The sustainable development goals and the role of youth-driven innovation for social change. In: Bastien S, Holmarsdottir HB (eds) Youth as architects of social change.

[24] Swist & Collin, 2021.

While many young people today are engaged in civic and political life – even leading movements such as the Global Climate Strikes – children and young people regularly communicate that they feel they have no voice in society. Young people regularly report they do not trust or feel heard by authorities.[25] Furthermore, the forms of civic engagement and political participation that they do participate in are poorly acknowledged or are dismissed outright. Studies that have expanded the scope of activities considered to be forms of civic and political engagement demonstrate that young people are engaged in both traditional and new forms of participation.[26] However, few population or global studies use a broad definition of civic engagement and, thus, data and reporting on youth engagement at the country, region and global level is lacking or only partial.[27]

Relatedly, young people are often portrayed as lacking knowledge or experience, rather than being recognised for the capacities and views that they possess. The dominance of developmental theories of youth means that approaches to fostering youth civic engagement tend to be educational. The assumption underpinning this is that young people are 'becoming citizens' and therefore primarily require education and skill-building.[28] This negates the everyday ways that young people are already taking part, organising and leading responses to social problems. However, whether engaging or not, young people continue to face criticism. When actively participating in civic and political life (for example, by creating new organisations or protesting) young people are often seen as a threat to society.[29] Yet, when they fail to engage they are portrayed as ignorant, irrational or apathetic.[30] This has led to a range of responses to try and remediate young people, make them 'good citizens' and avert a 'crisis of democracy'.[31] However, political scientist, Pippa Norris, has identified that disengagement or apathy may not be the most significant threat to healthy democracies. Rather, the biggest challenge to social stability is the gap between what people care about and their expectations of democracy, and what elected representatives, institutions and other leaders actually do. Norris calls this gap

the 'Democratic Deficit'.[32] According to Norris, democratic deficits 'may arise from complex interactions involving rising democratic hopes, negative political news, and perceptions of failing performance'.[33] The most important question we can ask in relation to youth civic engagement is 'what can we do to address the democratic deficit?'.

This requires tackling challenges and barriers to youth civic engagement - and identifying and amplifying innovations, including those led by young people themselves.

Challenges and Barriers to Youth Civic Engagement

Advocacy for, recognition of and responsiveness to young people's civic and political engagement has advanced significantly in the last two decades. Yet key challenges persist at the macro, meso and micro levels. Among these are complex structural, discursive and technological factors that limit the potential of youth civic engagement.

At the macro level, young people are structurally disadvantaged by age and intersecting forms of inequality.

In most democracies, young people are poorly represented within formal political structures, with low rates of political party participation and parliamentary involvement: barriers include the fact that, for example, many countries only allow individuals aged 25 years and older to run for parliament.[34] Exacerbating the exclusion and under-representation young people face in formal institutions of political and civic life, many experience intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage based on ability, ethnicity, gender and class that affect how they participate – and are heard – in local, state and international contexts.

Globally, gender and education are the two most significant factors that affect young people's civic engagement. Young men, university educated young people and those with income and housing security are more likely to participate in both institutional,

[25] UN DESA, 2016.
[26] Vromen, A 2003, "People try to put us down…": Participatory citizenship of 'Generation X', Australian Journal of Political Science, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 79 – 99.
[27] Marsh, D, O'Toole, T and Jones, S 2007, Young People and Politics in the United Kingdom: apathy or alienation?, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire; Collin, 2015; Pickard, 2019; Collin & McCormack, 2020.
[28] Collin, 2015: 30 – 32.
[29] Third et al, 2019: 189.
[30] Marsh et al. 2007.
[31] Manning 2015; Collin, 2016;
[32] Norris, P., 2011, Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited, Cambridge University Press, New York.
[33] Norris, P., 2011: 8.
[34] UN DESA 2016: 63

adult-led and self-initiated forms of civic and political engagement.[35] Non-electoral forms of participation (offline and online) are structured by educational attainment, employment status and income among other forms of social stratification.[36] In a study of 13 countries, Pew Research Center (2018) found that people with more education are more likely to post their views online, donate money to a social or political organisation and participate in political protests.[37] This is likely to be exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic. The 2017 ASEAN Youth Development Index highlighted that even before the pandemic there was significant variation in terms of gender inequality and socio-economic disadvantage which has since been exacerbated by the COVID10 pandemic.[38] Data gaps relating to how disability, gender, sexuality and intersectionality impact on youth civic engagement inhibit efforts to address these factors and ensure the rights of all young people to civic & political participation.

At the meso level, how youth civic engagement is framed impacts on who acts and how. Different discourses of youth civic engagement produce different aims and outcomes. As noted above, deficit views of youth produce limited approaches that negate young people's own ideas about participation and expectations of democracy. Alternative ways of conceptualising the subjects and goals of youth civic engagement, such as engaged and justice-oriented approaches offer more expansive views that recognises civic and political participation as relational, dynamic and contextual.[39]

Even still, while some approaches to youth civic engagement aim to expand political deliberation and decision-making which can enhance the democratic

value of these spaces for young people, the targets (young people), terminology (active citizenship) and methods (education) of youth participation can structure the activities and the evidence that counts as youth participation.[40] Regardless of hardship or exclusion, young people are expected to meet these expectations or be deemed 'disengaged' or 'failed' citizens even when their non-participation (such as non-enrolment in elections or spoiling a vote) is the result of exclusion, loss of trust or desperation with the 'system'.[41] As such, youth participation mechanisms can sometimes inadvertently 'govern' youth politics when they valorise some 'types' of participants and some forms of participation while delegitimizing and even criminalising others.[42]

Significantly, while young people's rights to association and participation may be recognised and even valued in principle, many organisations, communities and professionals lack skills and tools to enact change to enable participation in their organisations. This is because, at the meso level, the focus too often is on what young people lack or need (to do) and not on what capacities and change is required of institutions, communities and adults to be more open, inclusive and responsive to young citizens.[43] Efforts to promote youth civic engagement must include educating decision makers and establishing systems and processes within organisations and institutions so they hear from and respond to young people's views and expectations.

At the micro level skill building, material resources and technology must be directed to help overcome, not exacerbate the barriers young people face to participation and civic engagement.

[35] Sloam, J. 2016, 'Youth Electoral Participation', in United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Youth Civic Engagement: World Youth Report 2015, pp. 68-81, United Nations, New York. Available from: https:// www.un.org/development/desa/ youth/wp-content/uploads/ sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_ engagement.pdf

[36] Li, Y and Marsh, D 2008, 'New Forms of Political Participation: Searching for Expert Citizens and Everyday Makers', British Journal of Political Science, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 247-272; UN DESA, 2016; Xenos, M, Vromen, A and Loader, BD 2014, 'The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies', Information, Communication & Society, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 151-167.

[37] PEW Research Centre, 2018, Many Around the World Are Disengaged From Politics. Available from: https://www.pewglobal.org/ wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/Pew-Research-Center_- International-Political-Engagement-Report_2018-10-17.pdf

[38] First ASEAN Youth Development Index Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, July 2017

[39] Collin, 2015; Dolan, P. & Brennan, M. 2016, Civic Engagement: An overview. in United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Youth Civic Engagement: World Youth Report 2015, pp. 68-81, United Nations, New York. Available from: https:// www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/ sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_ engagement.pdf; Third

[40] 2010, 'Beyond the blame game: Examining 'the discourse' of youth participation in Australia', Proceedings of the Future of Sociology, Canberra, ACT, 1-4 December 2009.

[41] See Manning, N. 2015, (ed) Political (dis)engagement. The Changing Nature of the 'Political', Policy Press, London.

[42] Harris, A. 2011, 'Citizenship Stories', in N Lesko and S Talburt (eds), Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges, pp. 143-53, Routledge, New York and Oxon; Bessant, J., 2016, 'Democracy denied, youth participation and criminalizing digital dissent', Journal of Youth Studies, vol. 19, no. 7, pp. 921 – 937; Kwon, S-A 2018, 'The politics of global youth participation', Journal of Youth Studies, vol. 22, no. 7, pp. 926 – 940.

[43] Shier, H. (2001) Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. A New Model for Enhancing Children's Participation in Decision-making, in Line with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children and Society 15: 107–117; Collin, P. Lala, G. & Fieldgrass, L. (2018) 'Participation, empowerment and democracy: Engaging with young people's views' in Pam Alldred, Fin Cullen, Kathy Edwards and Dana Fusco, (eds) The SAGE Handbook of Youth Work Practice, Sage: 183 – 196

Young people do need to build skills, access material resources to develop ideas and take action, and tap into networks of influence to have an impact. While mentoring and leadership initiatives can open up new spaces and opportunities for youth participation and capacity building, they can also reproduce forms of elitism and exclusion.[44] Instead, efforts to support and promote youth civic engagement should increasingly prioritise those young people who face the greatest structural disadvantages and barriers by creating widely accessible training and participation opportunities and funding and resources for young people to take part and deliver their own activities.[45]

Similarly, while the internet has lowered the threshold for accessing information, learning, organising and protest[46] it brings with it a range of challenges to youth civic engagement and political participation.[47] While mobile and internet-enabled devices and social media can be used by protest movements to monitor state activities it also allows authorities to monitor young people and their organisations.[48] Young people protesting against companies and governments have been jailed and in some countries, legislation against novel forms of hacking, release of digital documents and digital activism such as Distributed Denial of Service result in young people being criminalised.[49] Moreover,

while young people can be networked online, not all networks are equal. There is both the opportunity - and challenge - to facilitate and join up networks so that young people are safe to take action on issues they care about, that they can positively influence authorities and their collective impact can be realised for social good.

While these macro, meso and micro level issues present real challenges, innovative practices in youth civic engagement show how they can be addressed. Below are four brief case studies of promising practice that respond to the shifts in the norms and modes of civic engagement, while addressing some of the above challenges.

Learning from Innovative Practice: Building Bridges for Youth Civic Engagement

Around the world there are many organisations, initiatives and projects that can inform policies and programs to realise youth civic engagement for all young people. This section presents four brief case studies of innovative initiatives to illustrate how an expanded concept of civic engagement can help realise youth civic engagement in practice and policy.

© UNICEF/UN0338230

---

[44] Harris, 2011; Kwon, S-A 2018, The politics of global youth participation, Journal of Youth Studies, vol. 22, no. 7, pp. 926 – 940.

[45] Cho, A. Byrne, J. & Pelter, Z. 2020. Digital civic engagement by young people. UNICEF, New York.

[46] Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Banaji, S and Buckingham, D 2013, The Civic Web: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Xenos, M, Vromen, A and Loader, BD 2014, 'The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies', Information, Communication & Society, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 151-167.

[47] Graeff, E 2016, 'Youth Digital Activism', in United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Youth Civic Engagement: World Youth Report 2015, pp. 95-107. United Nations, New York. Available from: https:// www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/ sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_ engagement.pdf

[48] Postill, J., Lasa, V. and Zhang, G., 2020, May. Monitory politics, digital surveillance and new protest movements: an analysis of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. In Soziologie des Digitalen-Digitale Soziologie? (pp. 453-466). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

[49] Bessant, 2016;

Case study 1: *Unid18 - Promoting Knowledge Exchange, Learning and Action Through Peer-to-Peer Educative Approaches.*

In 2016, members of the Malaysian Students' Global Alliance started a movement calling for the voting age to be lowered from 21 years of age to 18. Undi18 was officially launched in 2017 and embarked on a campaign involving town halls, forums and other modes of public engagement to raise awareness and support a minimum age of 18 for voters in both federal and state elections.[50] Undi18, is a response to poor representation of young people's issues in Malaysian politics and policy and a desire among young people to promote democracy in Malaysia: 'Undi18 aims to bridge the gap between politicians, policymakers, and youth' (Undi18 2020). In July 2019, with the support of parliamentarian Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman (then 27 years old), Undi18 successfully advocated for a historic Constitutional Amendment to lower the voting age in Malaysia. In a historical first, the amendment received 100% of votes in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament.[51]

Since the lowering of the voting age, Undi18 has focused on educating young people and the general public on matters of public policy and youth civic engagement. Now operating as a social enterprise, the organisation runs programs, campaigns and creates educational content to support young people to understand and respond to issues related to strengthening democracy including transparency and addressing corruption in government, gender representation and climate change.

As a youth-led organisation, Undi18 is underpinned by a peer-based model by which young people educate, train and coordinate with other young people. This peer-to-peer approach generates strategies such as supporting youth-led campaigns for change, multilingual digital content and peer-to-peer civics education incorporating 'experiential learning and simulations'. It is an example of peer-based educative movement building[52] producing grass-roots civic learning in action.

Case study 2: *School Strike for Climate - Amplifying youth movements through resourcing and training young activists and their organisations.*

Since 2018, in solidarity with Greta Thunberg's School Strike for Climate, more than an estimated 18 million people – many of them students as young as 5 years old – have taken part in rallies in 218 countries.[53] The School Strike for Climate events around the world have highlighted young people's willingness to act for the environment and broader issues of climate justice - and show how supportive youth-led and adult organisations can enable decentralised student movements to flourish.

In Australia, the School Strike for Climate began in the regional Victorian city of Castlemaine (southeast Australia), in October 2018. It was autonomously organized by a group of early high school students who used word of mouth to organize eight initial school strikes in the local region. Supported by established youth-led organisations[54] and adult allies, the student organisers created a webpage, developed a campaign strategy, and ran workshops on organizing events and social media. This built capacity for a decentralized model, enabling students anywhere in Australia to organize and coordinate school strikes for climate action.[55] Growth of the network around Australia has been supported by youth, community, social change, trade unions and academic organisations. This support has facilitated knowledge and skills-transfer, network building and communication among young people and their allies as well as other resourcing to grow the network.

Case Study 3. *YouthMappers - Platforms that build young people's capacities to generate and leverage research data for civic engagement.*

In 2016, YouthMappers was created to bring students, scholars and community partners together to use crowd-sourced and open geospatial data to respond to community needs. The types of challenges to be addressed are determined by local chapters of YouthMappers and include extreme poverty, environmental challenges, personal

---

[50] Suan, H. 2020, The Emergence of a New Social Movement in Malaysia: A Case Study of Malaysian Youth Activism, in Zawawi Ibrahim et al. (eds.), Discourses, Agency and Identity in Malaysia, Asia in Transition 13, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4568-3_10

[51] https://undi18.org/about-us

[52] Collin & Hilder, forthcoming

[53] https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/strike-statistics/

[54] Most notably the Australian Youth Climate Coalition

[55] Collin & McCormack, 2019: 493

safety and gender equality and human health. In collaboration with researchers and partner organizations, YouthMappers creates experiential learning environments, particularly for students in majoritarian nations, that lead to positive action.[56] The current network has 295 student-led chapters in countries around the world. Students learn about and contribute to geo-spatial mapping of resilient communities and devise actions to address local challenges.[57] YouthMappers provides training, fellowships, project support and a global network to enable students to leverage open spatial data for understanding and responding to social and ecological problems.[58] The initiative is led by a consortium of North American universities with support from USAID, philanthropy and technology providers and is supported by a broader network of academic, industry and community organisations. It demonstrates how young people's civic engagement can be fostered by focusing on empowering young people to generate and leverage data in local and transnational networks for change.

Case Study 4: EndViolence - Using participatory, intergenerational co-design processes for policy innovation with young people

In 2019, in collaboration with the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (End Violence), the City of Valenzuela in Greater Manila, UNICEF Philippines, the University of the Philippines, the Child Protection Network in the Philippines and the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University piloted a Living Lab – a tested, multi-stakeholder, co-research and co-design process – to develop child-centred indicators for violence prevention in the City of Valenzuela. Using child-centred, participatory research and engagement methods, the initiative brought child and adult stakeholders together in a series of 14 participatory workshops to creatively explore children's experiences and perceptions of violence, map their aspirations for change, ideate strategies for addressing violence in their communities, and develop child-centred indicators against which violence reduction policies and programs can be measured.

The project engaged two primary stakeholder groups: children aged 10–18 living in the City of Valenzuela; and, adult stakeholders representing a range of service providers, practitioners, NGOs, community groups and local government agencies that work with children. The project team first worked separately with children, to gather their insights, then with adults and, finally, in an intergenerational group. Briefing sessions and training in youth participation helped improve adult participant understanding of the role young people can play in research and policy processes. Over four phases the project used informal and stakeholder meetings, site visits, briefing sessions and workshops to engage more than 100 people in an ongoing process of exploration, definition, co-creation and activation of child and youth perceptions of how to prevent violence and promote safety in their communities. Importantly, the project specifically worked with children and young people who are most often excluded from civic engagement initiatives - including those living with disability, who were in the youth justice system or state-care - in safe and supportive ways. The resultant insights, tools and intergenerational network have provided the basis for ongoing work to advance youth participation in violence prevention strategies at the city level and are being used within the EndViolence network and new research initiatives globally. This case study demonstrates how research and policy processes can foster capacities for ongoing engagement with young people in policy processes - among adults and young people alike.

56 https://www.youthmappers.org/
57 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xwt2Cepm0IUpC9Sh07R0uqq3ezsEws4ti3AyCT-IeTk/edit
58 Solis, P. et al 2018, Engaging global youth in participatory spatial data creation for the UN sustainable development goals: the case of open mapping for malaria prevention. Applied Geography, 98: 143-155.

Conclusion

If we want all young people to have opportunities to start a campaign to get rid of plastic bags or create safe play spaces, or to help their community respond better to flooding or end violence, then the challenge is also to work out how we build many bridges across the gap between young people's needs and expectations and the work of decision makers in policy and practice settings. The case studies above demonstrate that youth-led and youth-partnership approaches that leverage the capacities and interests of young people to build knowledge and skills, foster communities and networks for action, generate actionable evidence to support youth efforts to create change, and which bring young people and adults together in new forms of collaboration and partnership offer significant potential.

To realise this potential, this brief paper has highlighted that in order to do this we must:

1. Challenge socio-material barriers by resourcing those young people who are most disadvantaged and excluded;

2. Connect and maximise young people's agency within already existing social and political structures;
3. Transform adult and institutional perceptions of young people through training for adults and collaboration with young people;
4. Move beyond 'projects' to generate new processes and organisational forms that enable greater youth agency, including networking young people's activities and organisations; and,
5. Foster intergenerational partnerships that encourage ongoing collaboration between young people and adults.

Fostering bridges between youth civic engagement practice and policy requires adults and adult-led organizations to meaningfully engage with young people. This involves actively considering the barriers, challenges and enablers to youth civic engagement at the macro, meso and micro levels. The ways young people themselves are responding to these challenges offer insights and ideas for achieving the necessary change.

Valuing the informal in strategies to promote youth civic engagement

Dr. Bernadine Brady
Lecturer at the School of Political Science & Sociology, NUI, Galway
Senior Researcher with the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The concept of citizenship can be interpreted in a narrow (or passive) way to refer to the conferring of membership of a nation state and the rights that are associated with this membership or it can be used more expansively to describe people's status as active participants in their communities and the democratic life of a nation state regardless of their 'legal' citizenship status (Wallace: 2001; Taskforce on Active Citizenship: 2007). Civic engagement is closely related to active citizenship and has been defined as the participation of young people in activities that address the concerns, interests, and common good of a community (be it geographical, social, or cultural) (Barret and Paschi, 2019).

There is considerable research evidence that if young people become engaged with civic and political issues during adolescence, they are more likely to be engaged during adulthood, helping to ensure that democratic processes are renewed over generations (Finlay et al. 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Concerns have been expressed that a decline in youth civic participation would have negative consequences for the future democratic health of nation states (Shaw et al, 2014). In addition to contributing to democratic vitality, civic engagement activities are also seen as a means of facilitating youth development, building the skills, values and capacities of young people (Lerner et al. 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Engagement in civic action can also enhance community connection for young people, helping them form social networks, build social capital and feel a sense of belonging to the collective (Shaw et al, 2014).

There is a broad consensus in the literature that organised efforts are required to promote youth civic engagement, with schools, youth organizations, politicians and policymakers all having a role to play (Barrett and Paschi, 2019; Flanagan, 2015; Silke et al., 2019). Young people are more likely to become engaged when they are in settings such as schools, youth centres and community organisations where they are asked to take part, because their friends are or because they learn about issues that concern them (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Checkoway and Aldana (2013) argue that forms of engagement should change from generation to generation, to reflect the changing and increasingly diverse nature of society.

Following the ratification of the UNCRC in 1989, a number of policy frameworks developed at supra-national (i.e UN, EU) and national levels have identified youth civic and political engagement as important priorities (Chaskin et al, 2018). These policies are concerned with the potential contribution that promoting young people's engagement can make both to the well-being of young people themselves and to society at large. Within these policy frameworks, the strategies emphasized to promote youth civic and political engagement include more informal approaches, such as youth work in addition to more formal, structured approaches, such as dedicated youth parliaments and youth councils (Chaskin et al; 2018; Brady et al, 2020).

A key finding that emerges from research is the importance of grassroots youth work as a foundational strategy for civic and political engagement, particularly among marginalized youth (Brady, Chaskin and McGregor, 2020). Youth work is generally understood as informal education activity that takes place in youth clubs, community centres or on the streets and involves open-ended engagement with young people (de St Croix, 2018). Youth work activities are often the first step for young people in becoming involved in their communities, reflecting on the structural and political forces that shape their lives and developing the skills to promote social change.

> **Youth workers can also play a role in supporting young people to participate effectively in more formalized processes, such as local youth councils and consultation processes (Brady et al, 2020).**

A high-profile strategy that has emerged over recent years to promote youth civic and political engagement is that of youth parliaments, councils and consultations. There has been a proliferation of youth parliaments worldwide, with more than 30 countries having some type of national youth assembly (Wall and Dar, 2011). Local youth councils or forums also give young people the opportunity to have a voice in relation to local services and policies. The broad aim of these structures is to give young

people the right to democratic participation and to have their opinions heard and taken into account. These participatory structures convey to young people that they have a role to play in civic and political issues and offer the potential to nurture the capacity for civic and political engagement in young people. They provide valuable opportunities for young people to influence the provision of policy and services at local and national levels. However, while many respondents recognise the benefits associated with policy innovations such as youth parliaments, the structures have been criticized for being organised by adults based on adult ideas of how young people should participate. Critics argued that the structures have failed to live up to their promise of influencing public decision-making and are not taken seriously by politicians (Collin, 2015; Shephard and Patrikios, 2013). Some believe that that these more structured engagement processes may lack meaning and relevance, particularly for the more disadvantaged young people, as they are not directly relevant to their everyday lives and concerns (Percy-Smith, 2010; Nolas, 2014; Pickard, 2019; Brady et al, 2020).

While formal participation opportunities have an important symbolic value and provide valuable opportunities for some young people, therefore, it is imperative that these approaches are provided in addition to, rather than instead of more informal approaches. There is a need to create spaces for everyday citizenship, giving young people flexibility to engage at times and places of their own choosing (Brady et al, 2020).

> **Grassroots work with young people in communities and schools is often the first step in civic engagement for young people, one which may support them to build their capacity to embrace other opportunities.**

There is a risk that where formalized structures for participation are prioritized, youth engagement and participation occurring in the context of young people's everyday environments and interactions may be devalued or overlooked (Percy-Smith 2010; Nolas, 2014).

References

Barrett, M., Dimitra P.(2019) Youth Civic and Political Engagement. Oxon: Routledge.

Brady, B, Chaskin, R., McGregor, C. (2020) Promoting civic and political engagement among marginalized urban youth in three cities: Strategies and challenges, Children and Youth Services Review. Vol. 116.

Chaskin, R., Brady, B., McGregor, C. (2021) 'Liminal Citizenship: Young People's Perspectives on Civic and Political Engagement in Three European Cities'. Social Service Review, 95 (2):247-277.

Chaskin, R., McGregor, C., Brady, B. (2018) Engaging Urban Youth: Community, Citizenship and Democracy. Research Report. UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, Galway.

Chaskin, R.J., McGregor, C., Brady, B. (2018) Supporting youth civic engagement: Supranational and National Policy Frameworks in Comparative Perspective. UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, Galway.

Checkoway, B., & Aldana, A. (2013). Four forms of youth civic engagement for diverse democracy. Children and Youth Services Review, 35(11), 1894-1899.

Collin, P. (2015) Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society: Addressing the Democratic Disconnect, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

de St Croix, T. (2018) Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: getting paid for numbers?, Journal of Education Policy, 33:3, 414-438.

Eccles, J. & Gootman, J. (2002) Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington: National Academy Press.

Finlay, A., Wray Lake, L., and Flanagan, C. (2010) "Civic engagement during the transition to adulthood: Developmental opportunities and social policies at a critical juncture," Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 277–305.

Flanagan, C.A. (2015) Teenage Citizens: The Political Theories of the Young. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Flanagan, C. and Levine, P. (2010) "Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood," Future of Children, 20(1), 159–79.

Lerner, R.M., Almerigi, J.B., Theokas, C. & Lerner, J.V. (2005) 'Positive Youth Development A View of the Issues', Journal of Early Adolescence, 25 (1), pp. 10-16.

Nolas, S. M. (2014) "Exploring young people's and youth workers' experiences of spaces for 'youth development': Creating cultures of participation." Journal of Youth Studies, 17(1), 26-41.

Percy-Smith, B. (2010) "Councils, consultations and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation." Children's Geographies, 8(2), 107-122.

Pickard, S. (2019) Politics, Protest and Young People: political participation and Dissent in the 21 Century Britain. Palgrave.

Shaw, A., Brady, B., McGrath, B., Brennan, M.A. and Dolan, P. (2014) 'Understanding youth civic engagement: Debates, discourses, and lessons from practice', Community Development, 45(4), 300–16.

Shephard, M., & Patrikios, S. (2013) "Making Democracy Work by Early Formal Engagement? A Comparative Exploration of Youth Parliaments in the EU." Parliamentary Affairs, 66(4), 752-771.

Silke, C., Brady, B., Boylan, C. & Dolan, P. (2019) 'Factors influencing the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour among adolescents: A systematic review'. Children and Youth Services Review. Vol. 94, 421-436.

Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007) A Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship. Dublin: Secretariat of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship.

Wallace, C. (2001) Youth, Citizenship and Empowerment in Helve, H. and Wallace, C. (eds.) Youth, Citizenship and Empowerment. Aldershot: Ashgate.

For more information visit
www.unicef.org/eap