

# Young people and the social contract

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## Introduction

### Fraying social contracts

The global upheavals of recent years have intensified discussions around how societies should manage risks and work towards common goals. At their heart has been the concept of the social contract.

Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke thought of the social contract as an agreement for governments to provide citizens with security, well-being and freedom in return for acceptance of their authority, payment of taxes and obedience to laws. Recently it has been defined more broadly, as “the partnership between individuals, businesses, civil society and the state to contribute to a system in which there are collective benefits.”<sup>1</sup> Social contracts are negotiated implicitly or explicitly between societal groups and states, evolving over time to become more or less responsive to different groups’ needs.

Global crises have exposed weaknesses in social contracts. Government responses to the 2008 financial crisis favoured some population groups over others, and the latter have in many instances turned in their frustration to populist leaders whose social contracts exclude minority communities. Measures to tackle COVID-19 have taken a heavy toll on the disadvantaged, while some sections of society have demonstrated their rejection of social contracts by disregarding virus containment measures.<sup>2</sup> The climate crisis, meanwhile, is fraying the contract between generations, as the young people who will bear its brunt struggle to persuade their elders to undo the damage they are causing.

Recognition has grown that the social contract must be renewed if the world is to “build back better” following this period of turmoil. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called for a new social contract “based on equal rights and opportunities for all”. At the 2021 World Economic Forum, world and business leaders argued that the failure of existing arrangements to provide an adequate safety net for the vulnerable meant a reinvigorated social contract was urgently needed.

Little of this discussion has focused on or involved those whose lives will be most affected by whatever new agreements emerge – young people. The Enlightenment philosophers did not mention young people specifically but did argue that because children are not fully rational and lack the capacity to reach reasoned decisions, they could not be viewed as contracting partners to social contracts. More recent social contract theorists such as John Rawls have argued that as fully rational adults, heads of households must act as contract holders on behalf of children. Social norms across many cultures also promote highly paternalistic attitudes which deny young people a voice in deliberations or processes.



#### NOTE

For the purposes of this briefing, we define children as those aged 0–18, youth as those aged 15–24, and young people as those aged 10–24 years. The briefing covers those aged 10–24.

Their exclusion from decision-making becomes increasingly vexing to young people as they near adulthood. This is a time when many seek to become more engaged in their communities, schools or places of employment, or in social and political movements or activities. Frequently, however, they do not feel that they are listened to or respected during processes of policy formulation, planning or priority setting.



*Why would the government care what I think? I am a young girl and I do not have a job.*

Next Generation survey respondent, Ethiopia<sup>6</sup>

The disproportionate impact on young people of global crises, moreover (crises brought about at least in part by the bad decision-making of their elders), means that neglecting their interests is no longer sustainable. Their prospects risk being permanently impaired by the pandemic and by climate change, and many are frustrated by what they see as discriminatory treatment.

This briefing first discusses the exclusion of young people from efforts to rebuild societies. It then looks at how they believe social contracts should include them, before drawing on their ideas as well as examples of effective practice to make recommendations for reform.

## The problem

### Leaving young people behind

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of young people were at risk of being unable to fulfil their potential.

Worldwide, the poverty rate among those below the age of 18 is more than double that among adults.<sup>7</sup> The mental health of young people has deteriorated in recent decades,<sup>8</sup> while every year more than one billion people below the age of 18 experience violence.<sup>9</sup>

Education systems are failing to equip young people with the skills they need. More than half will not be able to read or write by 2030.<sup>10</sup> In G20 countries, 44 per cent of 18–24-year-olds fear that their skills will not be in demand in the future.<sup>11</sup> Average public expenditure on education in OECD countries as a share of GDP equates to just half of public expenditure on pensions.<sup>12</sup> Worldwide, nine in ten students had their education severely disrupted by COVID-19, with the lifetime cost to them of pandemic-related education interruptions estimated at \$10 trillion.<sup>13</sup>

Societies are also failing to provide young people with employment opportunities. Youth unemployment rates were triple those among older workers before the pandemic, and unemployment has grown more steeply among youth since the virus struck.<sup>15</sup> In low-income and many middle-income countries, most young people who have jobs work in the informal sector, with little job security and low incomes.<sup>16</sup> In advanced economies, employment is also becoming increasingly unstable and many parents believe their children's generation will be worse off than theirs.<sup>17</sup> The 1.3 billion school-aged students who have no access to the internet at home, meanwhile, risk long-term exclusion from both educational and economic opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

### Why it matters

Young people make a large contribution to their societies. They care for relatives and perform domestic chores. They help communities via voluntary work.<sup>20</sup> During the pandemic, they have sacrificed education and freedom in order to protect older people.

Despite this, they are not trusted to participate in the processes through which social contracts are developed. Two in three countries do not consult young people when preparing national development plans.<sup>21</sup> Only in a handful of the world's democracies can those below the age of 18 vote, and none extends the franchise to those below the age of 16.<sup>22</sup> Just 2.6 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide are below the age of 30.<sup>23</sup> And while some countries have established local or national youth councils and youth parliaments, the UN Secretary-General has noted that "these solutions have not always avoided tokenism, often remaining peripheral to core political processes."<sup>24</sup>

Young people are becoming alienated from state institutions. Their trust in governments has declined since the 2008 financial crisis, while their participation in political processes is significantly lower than



*We study without interest because we do not find work, and if we find work, we will need 20 years in order to return what we paid on university tuition fees.*

Next Generation survey respondent, Lebanon<sup>14</sup>

*Italy is an old country. Once there were people who retired at 40, and today we are paying the price. Things were too easy before and are too difficult now.*

Next Generation survey respondent, Italy<sup>19</sup>

that of older generations.<sup>25</sup> In Africa, only 47 per cent of those aged 18–25 feel respected by public officials and only 38 per cent feel their governments address youth needs.<sup>26</sup> In a 15-country survey, only 30 per cent of 12–15-year-olds agreed that political leaders cared about people like them.<sup>27</sup>



*There is a hierarchical political and social system that oppresses the opinion of youth. It's very difficult for the sentiments of people below the age of 40 to be heard. Youth are seen as a separate group, not an integral part of national issues or the policy process. Very few young people are involved in decision-making.*

Next Generation survey respondent, Nigeria<sup>31</sup>

ways for their society to be governed.<sup>33</sup> In Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring demonstrations – triggered in large part by the erosion of social contracts<sup>34</sup> – young people used body art, theatre and social media among more traditional protest methods to help bring down dictatorships.<sup>35</sup> #FridaysForFuture, which began as a strike by schoolchildren to demand that the Swedish government act to stop climate change, has spread to 200 countries and engaged millions of young people.<sup>36</sup> Crowdfunding has been used by youth activists to support indigenous people to stay out of prison,<sup>37</sup> mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis,<sup>38</sup> and provide public services that governments have failed to deliver.<sup>39</sup>

Not all the methods resorted to by young people are constructive or peaceful. One-quarter of youth in a European survey said it was acceptable to give a bribe in return for accessing a public service – a much higher proportion than among older adults.<sup>40</sup> In Kenya and Tanzania, 40 per cent of young people would only vote for an election candidate who bribed them.<sup>41</sup> In a number of countries, protests that began

Young people are also increasingly disillusioned with democracy itself. In Europe, 45 per cent of people aged 15–24 believe bribes and other abuses of power for personal gain are widespread among politicians.<sup>28</sup> Most of those born between 1981 and 1996 are dissatisfied with democracy in their countries, having been largely satisfied until the early 2000s.<sup>29</sup> Only half of youth in Latin America and in Europe say that democracy is their preferred form of government.<sup>30</sup>

Young people are responding to their exclusion from social contracts by finding innovative ways to achieve their goals.<sup>32</sup> Sudan's youth-led neighbourhood resistance committees have mobilized millions to protest peacefully against military rule and develop new

peacefully have turned violent or been infiltrated by violent groups.<sup>42</sup> In some, young people have been enticed or coerced into gangs, vigilante justice groups or extremist groups in the absence of legitimate employment opportunities or functioning state security services.<sup>43</sup>

## What young people want

### Inclusion

Young people have clear ideas for how social contracts should include them. The British Council's Next Generation research series has surveyed thousands of youth aged 15–24 in 17 high- and low-income countries.<sup>44</sup> The series asks them about their aspirations and seeks their recommendations for overcoming the obstacles to achieving their goals.<sup>45</sup>

Survey respondents demand engagement at multiple levels. In communities, they call for safe spaces for debate and platforms to feed the results into decision-making, and for non-political intergenerational dialogue mechanisms to help narrow the generational divide. To bridge the gulf with policymakers, they recommend youth advisory panels that guide strategy and ensure it benefits their age group. Institutions, they suggest, should create offline and online communication channels that “meet youth where they are” rather than addressing them from the lofty heights of power.

Building the capacity of youth to participate is also regarded as important. This first requires governments to stop hindering effective participation. Laws that prevent youth from voting or running for election reinforce generational imbalances. Violence against young activists, internet shutdowns, digital exclusion and restrictions on freedom of speech or assembly render genuine youth engagement elusive. For those with disabilities, physical exclusion from public spaces hinders participation.

Schools, universities and civil society organizations can help build young people's capacity. Survey respondents argue that education to strengthen their knowledge of politics and their rights should be combined with training in debating, negotiation, organizational and leadership skills. They call for more support in evaluating the validity of information, and in developing the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that will equip them for decision-making.



*We, the Kachin people, have been left far behind any other ethnic group in Myanmar. I want to help my people to become developed.*

Next Generation survey respondent, Myanmar<sup>46</sup>

Capacity-building is also important for youth-led civil society organizations. Respondents call for greater financial support to such groups from governments and donors, and for training to help them address fundraising and management challenges. They call, too, for governments to protect the rights of young activists and protesters.

## What has been tried

A number of countries have sought to give young people greater representation in decision-making, with mixed results.

Youth councils have been used as a means to increase participation in local decision-making. The few studies that have researched these initiatives have found that they tend to engage only privileged youth. The impact on community decisions, moreover, has been limited, often because of negative adult attitudes to youth inputs.<sup>47</sup>

The political scientist David Runciman has called for the voting age to be lowered to the age of six in order to rebalance electorates distorted by over-representation of the elderly.<sup>48</sup> While no country has taken such a radical step, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Malta and Nicaragua have in recent years extended the franchise to 16-year-olds.<sup>49</sup> Many countries have reduced the age at which citizens can run for public office, and there is evidence that this leads to greater youth representation.<sup>50</sup>

Youth parliaments are among the few political engagement mechanisms that include children below the age of 15. Established at both national and local levels, these have been found generally to be educational in nature, their aim being to prepare children to participate when they reach adulthood. As a consequence, their impact on policy has been minimal.<sup>51</sup>

Youth quotas are another approach that has been used to increase youth representation in political processes. Uganda allocates five seats in parliament to youth elected by a national youth council. Political parties in Croatia and Sweden adopt youth quotas for candidate lists.<sup>52</sup> A review of evidence found that quotas helped increase both youth participation and the attention given by parliaments to their priorities.<sup>53</sup>

National youth policies are the foundation of many countries' efforts to tackle youth issues. An analysis of such initiatives in five countries, however, found that they had no impact on youth engagement or

on policy, primarily due to a lack of political will to support them.<sup>54</sup> The study's conclusion is a wake-up call for all efforts to increase youth engagement: *"When governments produce youth-oriented... policy strategy documents they have little incentive to commit scarce resources to implement them because politically disengaged youth cannot credibly threaten to vote them out of office... This lack of follow-through deepens youth distrust of, and disengagement from, political processes."*

## Recommendations

In his *Our Common Agenda* report, the UN Secretary-General has listed three foundations for a "social contract fit for the twenty-first century." These are: measuring and valuing what matters most to people and the planet; inclusion, protection and participation; and trust.<sup>55</sup> This framework is discussed in terms of populations as a whole, but examining how it applies to young people will be critical if further deterioration of the relationship between the generations and between states and young people is to be prevented. Action is needed in each of the three areas.

### Measuring and valuing what matters

Efforts to renew the social contract should respond to weaknesses identified in it by young people themselves. Asking how they wish to engage in policy discussions and what those discussions should cover will demonstrate to them that their opinions are valued.

Measuring the contributions made by young people may enhance their standing in society. Paid and unpaid labour, caring and volunteering all have economic and social value, and policymakers may stop disregarding young people if they have a better understanding of their full social worth.

Measuring progress in achieving objectives that matter to young people is also important. This requires time-bound commitments and accountability mechanisms. For example, Korea's "New Deal" includes government commitments in core areas of the social contract such as job creation and social safety nets that are backed by specific investment pledges and targets against which progress can be assessed.<sup>56</sup>

### Inclusion, protection and participation

The engagement of young people in societal decision-making is often viewed by their elders as a concession. Meaningful engagement requires

acknowledgement by the powerful that no group has a monopoly on knowledge or ideas and that a diversity of inputs is more likely to forge resilient societies. Civil society organizations that work with young people can help bolster their profile among policymakers.

Outreach will be needed to include the most marginalized young people in social contracts. Digital exclusion, which bars so many from meaningful participation, should be addressed by prioritising access and building digital literacy. Training in participation and civic engagement skills can help build the confidence of young people to negotiate on a more equal footing with their elders, while efforts can also be made to enhance the capacity of adults to listen, negotiate and build consensus.

With a lack of employment repeatedly cited as one of the biggest concerns for young people, the idea of social protection has gained ground in discussions of how to support them. Many countries provide no social protection for youth,<sup>57</sup> but cash transfers or tax credits could help them to gain new skills, set up small businesses or top up low incomes, thereby providing a platform for their full participation in economies and societies.<sup>58</sup>

## Trust

Restoring young people's trust in institutions requires delivering the public goods and services they want. Finding a means to ensure equitable allocation of public expenditure across generations will be

important if young people are to be treated fairly. Responding to their concerns via measures such as skills building, which is crucial to employment and livelihood opportunities for young people, incorporating civic participation and critical-thinking skills into school curricula, or making public spaces accessible to young people with and without disabilities will show them that their needs are being taken seriously.

Eliminating actions that destroy trust is critical. A continued failure to address the corruption, abuses by state institutions and repression of young voices that are turning young people away from negotiating relations with other societal groups will exacerbate their alienation.<sup>59</sup> Policies perceived as unfairly disadvantaging younger generations should be reviewed with input from a broad spectrum of young people.

Finally, those in power would benefit from placing more trust in young people. Lowering voting ages would increase inter-generational fairness and promote youth participation, but young people have more to offer than their votes. Deliberative mechanisms that facilitate sustained negotiation with decision-makers can improve policies while building trust.<sup>60</sup> Tokenistic engagement should be replaced by transparent follow-through on agreed outputs. A serious social contract which is inclusive of young people requires not lip service, but viewing them as valuable partners in change.

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