

Chapter 2

Why Youth Mainstreaming?

This section helps us understand:

- youth disengagement
- intergenerational inequity
- how these social inequities result in tangible unequal outcomes for young people
- why mainstreaming benefits all of society.

2.1 Young people need to feel engaged

Young people constitute one quarter of the world's population, and one third of the population in developing nations.¹ They have led drives for equality and justice through youth social movements throughout the world. They have been at the forefront of political action, as in the Middle East and Africa in the recent past, and in the anti-corruption movement in India.²

On the part of decision-makers, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of young people's place in development, and increasing efforts to bring young people to the table in development planning.³

Yet, despite their active participation in development, and meaningful efforts on the parts of governments, youth still have less access than adults to formal decision-making processes, and to influencing policy. Translating good intentions into practical action has often been hindered by capacity and political constraints. This has resulted in a poor reflection of young people's rights and interests in planning.

Coupled with this is the intentional disengagement of young people from mainstream political and administrative processes, because of disillusionment with these processes. Young people's favoured modes of self-expression through youth social movements have often resulted in tensions between youth and policy-makers.

Youth mainstreaming is partially about bridging this gap in engagement, and creating youth-friendly spaces within policy domains for their greater participation.

2.2 Intergenerational equity and justice is lacking

Just as gender mainstreaming was built around a lobby for equal male–female relations, youth mainstreaming advocacy is built around equitable intergenerational relationships and the fostering of mutual respect between adults, young people and other age cohorts. There are no purely technocratic solutions for bridging generational gaps, but solutions that are built on positive attitudes towards, and respect for, young people that translate into policy domains.

Intergenerational equity suggests addressing the multiple ways in which young people can be discriminated against by virtue of their age in both the private and public domains. Non-discrimination policies often clearly prohibit discrimination based on age, and the SDGs unequivocally call for an end to age-based discrimination. However, clear evidence of the manifestations of this discrimination within these domains is evident.

These may be explicit discrimination, or implicit discrimination – where a practice, policy or programme does not consider a specific factor affecting youth. Of course, some cultures and contexts will have clearly positive dispositions towards youth. In terms of institutions, attitudinal factors will affect provision (service delivery) and outcomes for young people.

Let's look at some domains in which young people interact and how intergenerational inequity is evident, including examples of legal/policy measures that either reinforce, or counteract, these inequities:

1. Society: Young people may be marginalised in communities in specific ways by virtue of attitudes towards them, labelling and stereotyping them as being irresponsible, lazy, rebellious, 'angry', and so on.
2. Family settings: Parental authority may undermine young people's concerns and interests. For example, in the public sphere, parental consent laws may affect a young person's ability to access healthcare and health-related information. Often, ensuring young

- people's – particularly younger youth and girls' – rights to services has been written into law; for example, by providing adolescents with the ability to make independent decisions around healthcare access.
3. Educational institutions: Imbalances of power between students and education authorities are often reflected through limitations placed on student organisations, curbing of students' freedom of expression and sidelining student views on learning/teaching and educational governance, both in schools and universities. Similarly, young people's right to accessible education is often undermined by laws and policies that challenge affordable education provision. At the same time, positive legal provisions may dictate that young people have a formal place in educational governance and access to education as a right.
 4. Workplaces: Junior staff at institutions may be marginalised in decision-making because of the perception that their views are immature and not based on 'experience'. As entrants to employment, they may in fact have difficulties entering the work force itself, despite possessing skills. In an era when young people are increasingly employed in informal economies, contracts that do not stipulate minimum work hours ('zero-hour' contracts) and extended probation periods affect young people's economic security further.
 5. Public institutions: Young people may be discriminated against as receivers of services and benefits in public institutions, where a lack of responsive design of services for youth results in inadequate delivery. For example, moves taken in one country to withdraw housing benefits from youth aged 18–21 as a means of reducing welfare spending (the assumption being they can live with their parents) are an indication of how young people are the first to lose out in cuts to public expenditure. On a positive note, these challenges are often explicitly addressed through laws. For example, in prison systems in some countries young people aged 18–25 are given better protection and care than adults, although not to the same extent as children (aged under 18). They may be housed

separately from adults in prisons, in recognition of their specific developmental stage as youth.

6. Party-political domains: Young people, while being an age cohort who actively contribute to the life of a community and nation in more informal ways, are less well represented in formal structures such as local government and parliament. In some countries, eligibility to enter politics is at age 25, and there is rarely anyone below 35 in political leadership positions. This considerably affects ways in which young people's interests in all the above settings receive formal political mandates. From a voter perspective, some countries are pushing for the voting age to be moved down to 16 instead of 18, so that very young people's interests are adequately represented in party political domains.

Such social norms that affect youth are multiplied by their identities of class, caste, gender, disability and so on.

Research into youth unemployment, for example, has highlighted the institutional and political discourses that reflect intergenerational inequity and negative perceptions of poor, unemployed young people; these are based on a deficit view of unemployed youth, who are accused of 'languishing on benefits' (often an argument put forward to rationalise defunding social benefit systems). This is the perspective of an elite, according to the research, who are out of touch with reality. Young people want to work, rather than exploit social welfare:

Almost all young people would choose work over the dole – almost any work. You have to be completely out of touch not to know this.⁴

Similarly, a poor young woman accessing a healthcare facility can potentially face many forms of discrimination due to her gender (gender discrimination) – for example, specific and often complex issues in reproductive healthcare; her poverty (entrenched attitudes about the poor); and her age (being perceived as young and irresponsible). Box 2.1 articulates a real-life example.

A poor young man in the criminal justice system will face similar challenges, particularly when they are treated the same as adults in conflict with the law, which overlooks their

Box 2.1 Young people's voice on health services

The first thing the nurse asked me was my age, and I said I am 17. She questioned if at this age I am sexually active because in her culture, girls who are 17 are still virgins. The fact that she questioned why I had come for contraceptives at such a young age, that is totally unacceptable. That means she is promoting teenage pregnancy. And after that I told myself I will never go back to the clinic for contraception.

(Note: In this country, all young people can legally access reproductive healthcare, including contraception, after the age of 12.)

– Young woman from a Commonwealth member country

Box 2.2 Young people's voice on the justice system

They need to just work with people and then that will help stop it if they actually do something about it rather than just go to prison, even for three months or a year or whatever it is. They ain't doing nothing. What you're doing, you're going into prison full of criminals and learning more stuff in there. So you're going to come out without anything and be back to square one, you'll just do the same thing, it gets you nowhere.

– Young male offender

specific developmental stage or their future potential. Box 2.2 exemplifies this.

Challenging this intergenerational inequity requires concerted efforts at dialogue and respect across generations,⁵ including exploring new youth-centric policy directions. An example is provided in Box 2.3.

2.3 Intergenerational inequities result in inequalities for youth

The intergenerational inequities discussed above in relation to social norms and service provision lead to tangible inequalities for youth in terms of inequitable income, unequal employment opportunities, unequal health outcomes, challenges to functioning as full citizens and inequality across generations.

Reducing social inequalities is one of the core goals of the SDGs. Recent research indicating the extent of this inequity (62 individuals have the same wealth as 3.6 billion people⁷),

Box 2.3 The Intergenerational Foundation's Parents Against Student Debt Initiative

The Intergenerational Foundation (IF) in the United Kingdom researches fairness between generations and enhances positive relationships between all age cohorts, including youth and adults. Its initiatives contribute to collaborative intergenerational dialogue between youth and adults. The work of the IF has focused significantly on issues for young people in the UK, including youth and housing and student debt.

The IF's Parents Against Student Debt Initiative⁶ brings parents together with young people in a common intergenerational call for a fair financial deal for students entering university. Initiatives have included a march by students and parents that helps bonding and adult understanding of the aspirations, challenges and frustrations faced by young people in the face of challenges in accessing affordable education.

The campaign builds a common bond between parents and students on issues such as fee hikes and increased interest in student loans, which are causing middle-class, but particularly poor, students to face a precarious financial future or decide to opt out of higher education altogether.

The IF's campaign calls on parents to show their solidarity with student by marching alongside them, writing to Members of Parliament (MPs) to stop further fee hikes and student accommodation fee increases, to reflect on student policies and becoming student-friendly voters for political parties offering fair deals, and generally working with students for fairer loan deals. Projects such as this can significantly enhance intergenerational understanding, respect and common causes.

and evidence of the failure of dominant economic paradigms to deliver for the most marginalised,⁸ all indicate a need to look not just at economic growth, but at distributional equality⁹ of financial wealth and other resources – including across age groups, as indicated in the SDG targets. This inequality affects young people in specific ways (see Box 2.4).

Box 2.4 Inequality increases youth poverty

Inequalities fuel poverty, undermining the impact of economic growth on poverty reduction. Age itself is a vector of inequality, excluding millions of young women and men from access to financial resources, work opportunities, social welfare mechanisms and decision-making spaces, despite their right to all of these.

– The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) 2013

Despite these goals and observations, in the global north, young people today are reported to be poorer than their parents¹⁰. In the global south, while abject poverty has decreased, the

dividends of economic growth have not reached poor young people whose actual numbers are increasing¹¹. In employment, for example, young people, especially young women, are globally the most affected by high unemployment rates, with youth unemployment rates nearly three times higher than those for adults¹².

Research examining youth unemployment in the context of institutional employment practices in the United Kingdom notes:

*Unemployment is highest among the young simply because they are the most vulnerable when the job market shrinks. You can keep a firm or a branch of the civil service going for some time using only older employees. Rather than sack people or deny those at the top the pay rises to which they feel entitled, you just refrain from hiring new staff when people leave or retire, and expect those remaining to take on extra work – often for no extra pay.*¹³

These crises, according to the research, are exacerbated by

- social inequality that results in wealth accumulation, which reduces investment in job creation and therefore increases youth unemployment; and
- the removal of welfare rights at a time when youth unemployment is rising, which affects youth wellbeing even more.

This is the case in a developed country. The circumstances of young people in poorer countries, with fewer welfare safety nets, are probably even more compounded.

Young people are also disadvantaged in terms of access to housing,¹⁴ credit and finance,¹⁵ and are differentially impacted by health, justice, migration and other mechanisms and processes by their specific generational location as youth.¹⁶

There are also disparities of outcomes for different *cohorts* of young people. Outcomes for youth are intersected by their experiences and realities, as influenced by identities of class, sex, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, geographical location, disability and so on.

For example, despite important gains in education among young women, three out of five illiterate young persons are female, with some countries showing female literacy rates as low as 15 per cent as opposed to male literacy rates of 35

per cent.¹⁷ Globally, in 2010, 56.3 per cent of young males participated in the labour force, against 40.8 per cent of young females. Where young women do participate in the labour market, they generally confront greater challenges in accessing jobs, i.e. they face higher unemployment than their male counterparts. When employed, they are also more likely to be in traditionally female occupations and unstable, part-time and lower-paid jobs.¹⁸

Agenda 2030 (UN 2015) explicitly noted that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were off-track on maternal and reproductive health, among several other things, which significantly affect both young men and women, but young women more so. This is a call to look at youth mainstreaming through the lens of diverse youth groups, and to provide opportunities for them to participate in framing decisions that affect their lives.

Despite these observations, most development programmes have yet to fully explore solutions for the differential impacts policies can have on different groups, including diverse youth groups, resulting in greater fallouts from the development process and cycles of deepening inequalities.

2.4 Youth interests are the interests of a just and prosperous society

Advocating for young people's interests means that we firmly situate youth rights and youth interests¹⁹ in democratic governance frameworks and their components, including broader participatory structures. Otherwise, we would merely be trying to right a wrong within the existing paradigms of power.

The development frameworks we advocate need to identify non-discrimination, not just for young people but for everyone, and to ensure gender equality and be free from class, racial, ethnic, sexual, disability, caste and other biases. This involves challenging the current climate of global restructuring, and challenging the erosion of rights entitlements that have already been fought for and won.²⁰

Continuing inequality for youth means entrenching broader poverty, debilitating social and economic growth, and creating social conflict, all of which work against reaching the SDGs.

There are clear long-term benefits that go beyond the benefits for young people in working towards equality for them. Given the above observation then, youth mainstreaming is important not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because it can:

- **catalyse long-term change for everyone** – as sound development outcomes for young people benefit society as a whole across generations;
- **create efficiency and growth** – as responsive planning and consultation enable efficient resource allocation and create value for money;
- **reduce poverty** – as overall development outcomes lead to the reduction of poverty;²¹ and
- **enhance social cohesion**²² – as a content youth cohort creates collaborative, positive relations with communities and the nation.

(See Table 3.1, the Equality Matrix for Youth, in Chapter 3, for an elaboration of these broader benefits.)

The link between equitable programming and institutional efficiency has been recorded across sectors where research capacities have existed to create robust evidence, as in the case outlined in Box 2.5.²³

Box 2.5 Investing in youth is investing in society

Investments for the [youth] age cohort is an effective development strategy because it generates changes that will last throughout their life-time, with higher absolute returns than investment in older adults.

The benefits to countries in terms of human, social and economic development include increased productivity, lower health costs, enhanced social capital, and greater individual and community resilience to cope with shocks. Investments in mechanisms for youth participation at every level can improve policy and programming, promote civic engagement and encourage good governance. Investment in young people is, in short, an effective way to meet development priorities amid the global contraction of development assistance.

– ODI 2013

Given all this, it becomes logical and inevitable for governments to focus on equality for youth, a significant cohort of the population in many developing Commonwealth member countries. It is the right thing to do. But also, the success of national development outcomes is premised on positive outcomes for young people.

2.5 Conclusions and reflections

This chapter rationalised youth mainstreaming as a means of establishing intergenerational equity and justice, including reiterating the importance of ‘leaving no one behind’ in development planning: in our case, youth groups, particularly marginalised groups. Rising global inequality affects young people in specific ways, and entrenches poverty and inequality, creating challenges to social cohesion and peace. This is exacerbated by young people’s lack of engagement with decision-making processes. Comprehensive youth mainstreaming processes will be built around an analysis of how these trends affect young people in your own countries.



Box 2.6 Reflections on Chapter 2: Why Youth Mainstreaming?

- How do young people express themselves to government and other decision-makers in your context? Are these collaborative approaches, or is there tension between governments, stakeholders and youth? If there is tension, how can this be resolved?
- Is intergenerational equity and justice a subject that is discussed in your context?
- How does intergenerational inequality intersect with other forms of inequality such as class, caste, gender, disability and so on?
- What are the key manifestations of inequality for youth and beyond in your context?
- How does inadequate youth mainstreaming limit sustainable development in your context?
- How does this result in unequal development outcomes for youth?

Notes

- 1 The Global Youth Development Index and Report 2016 (Commonwealth Secretariat 2016b) highlights that three-quarters of the world’s 1.8 billion young people aged 15–29 live in countries where youth development is categorised as ‘low’ or ‘medium’.
- 2 Patel et al. 2013, 2.
- 3 Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth 2016.
- 4 Dorling 2015, 66.
- 5 See Nuggehalli 2014, which talks of the protagonism of young people and adult roles in enhancing this capacity.
- 6 Intergenerational Foundation (N.D.)
- 7 Oxfam 2016, 2.
- 8 Ostry et al. 2016.
- 9 Ibid., 41: ‘The evidence of the economic damage from inequality suggests that policymakers should be more open to redistribution than they are. Of course, apart from redistribution, policies could be designed to mitigate

- some of the impacts in advance – for instance, through increased spending on education and training, which expands equality of opportunity.
- 10 See, for example, Crawford R et al 2015 and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/social/OECD2014-Income-Inequality-Update.pdf>. Accessed February 2017.
 - 11 The World Bank, 2016.
 - 12 International Labour Organization (ILO) 2015. ‘World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2015’, quoted in Oxfam 2015.
 - 13 Dorling 2015, 66.
 - 14 See, for example, Clapham et al. 2012.
 - 15 See, for example, Clapham et al. 2012. Also United Nations Capital Development Fund and Mastercard Foundation N.D.
 - 16 See full case studies in Part 3 of this publication.
 - 17 Commonwealth Secretariat 2016a, 3.
 - 18 United Nations 2015, 1.
 - 19 ‘Youth interests’ should always be locally identified. Having said this, the My World Survey has received more than 5 million votes from 16 to 30-year-olds internationally. This age group identified the following as their top youth issues/interests affecting their lives: a better education; healthcare, better jobs; and an honest and responsive government. See United Nations 2015.
 - 20 Rai 2003, 25.
 - 21 Moore 2005, 21: ‘Not only can poverty experienced in youth have implications across the life course of the young person, it can hinder the capacity of a young person to bounce back from deprivation suffered in childhood, and affect the long-term life changes of any dependents, including and especially the young person’s own children’.
 - 22 ODI 2009, 7.
 - 23 An example of increased efficiency and cost effectiveness, as they relate to restorative justice for young people (which indicates youth-mainstreamed approaches within the justice system), can be found in a seven-year study by Matrix Evidence 2009, as reported by the UK Restorative Justice Council. This study explores the costs and benefits of alternative interventions for young non-violent offenders, with a focus on restorative justice. Research in this case projected that pre-court schemes save society almost £275 million, with the cost of the scheme being recovered within the first year and savings over ten years being more than £1 billion. Further studies such as this, examining benefits of youth-centric approaches within social and economic sectors, need to be commissioned to obtain evidence for youth-centric planning.

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