

## Chapter 2

# Deepening Democracy: Meeting the Challenge of Youth Citizenship\*

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Steve Mokwena

### **Youth Participation: a Democratic Gift and an Imperative**

Young people can build a democratic and prosperous world. They can overcome the barriers of the past, build on the strong tradition of co-operation and realise the value of self-reliance and enterprise. They should cultivate the courage to change the present and become partners in shaping a hopeful future.

Picture a society where all citizens, young and old, are informed about and engaged in all major issues that affect their lives. Adults and young people working together; debating, grappling with problems, crafting solutions and jointly deciding on how resources should be generated and allocated – a robust democracy where all people exercise their right to select, and hold accountable, those who speak and act on their behalf, and where all people have an equal opportunity to have a sustainable livelihood. Imagine adults and young people working together to build a thriving society from the ground up – contributing to peace and prosperity from the community level, to the national level, to the global level. This vision is inextricably tied to the values of democracy, liberty, justice and equity that are the fundamental values shared, at least in theory, by the community of nations and articulated in various United Nations Declarations.

These values underpin a collective determination to build strong thriving societies that can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. This is a challenge that can only be met when societies commit themselves to investing in the creation of a competent, creative, caring and contributing citizenry.

Yet today democracy is in grave danger. Many young people are disengaged from civic and political participation. They do not have the confidence in their capacity to be part of the political process in order to effect change.

The concept of youth participation is emerging as a central idea in the youth development discourse. It is a fresh way of engaging young people as central actors in the development equation – architects of their own personal development and in that of their communities and society in general.

Taking on this challenge, Commonwealth Youth Ministers meeting in Kuala

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Lumpur in 1998 made a clear and unprecedented commitment to provide resources and opportunities for young people to play an important role. By endorsing the Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE), 54 Commonwealth governments committed themselves to the ideal of enfranchising young people – working with them and preparing them to assume responsibility for their lives and for the collective destiny of their communities and nations.

Developing this vision further, the World Meeting of Youth Ministers in Portugal largely endorsed these commitments in 2000. We can hope that this is more than a symbolic political gesture. It is a commitment to unleash the resources and creativity of young people – to place young people at the centre of creating solutions to the problems of poverty, social exclusion and the real threat of a dis-integrating social fabric.

***We believe in the liberty of individuals, in the equal rights for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief and in the inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which they live.***

**Harare Declaration, 1991**

## Barriers to Citizenship for Young People

However compelling, the idea of young people as full participating citizens is difficult to realise. This is in part because of the way societies have come to define the role of young people. In many communities young people are seen as deficient and problem-ridden – a group in society that should be controlled, fixed and for the most part seen and not heard. Many accept without question that young people are physically and mentally unsuited to handle the ‘delicate’ and ‘complex’ issues of power. Until recently, such ideas have been buttressed by academic theories that many have come to accept as the truth.

### Young people as adults in waiting

Despite mounting evidence of young people’s energy and contribution in many different aspects of society, ‘youthfulness’ and age are still used as a justification for excluding young people from decision-making. Major social institutions – the family, the school, community organisations, religious institutions and political parties – have yet to fully embrace the idea of young people as capable stake-holders and partners.

After carefully reviewing the theoretical underpinnings of most government policies on youth, Australian social scientists, Watts, Bessant and Sercombe,<sup>1</sup>

conclude that societies and adults resist the participation of young people because it threatens their power. They argue that the abilities of young people are largely ignored as ‘Theoreticians and practitioners [politicians] have yet to deal seriously with the adulthood of young people [the fact that young people are capable of responsibility], and the evidence that their exclusion from participation is a function of power, not innate developmental capacity’.

The widely held notion of youth as ‘adults in waiting’ serves to justify their relegation to a peripheral role in mainstream political processes. This analysis is affirmed eloquently by the sociologist Mike Males in his compelling book, *The Scapegoat Generation*.<sup>2</sup> Males argues that young people can be compared to other disenfranchised groups (women, ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian people) who have been denied a place at the table throughout much of our recent political history. He asserts that in modern society: ‘Young people are the last group we are allowed to systematically exclude.’

## Gender inequality

Notwithstanding Males’s observation about modern *ideals* on categorical exclusions, sexual discrimination is still rife all over the world. This is one of the most formidable barriers to youth participation. Its effects are indirect as well as immediate, impacting as it does on young women’s education, self-confidence and reproductive health – to name but three determinants of social engagement.

## The myth of youth apathy

One of the more frequently used justifications for excluding young people is the entrenched myth of youth apathy – young people are frequently portrayed as lacking motivation to become involved. This myth is captured most aptly in the media hype about ‘Generation X’ syndrome, which describes young people as a socially inert, self-absorbed group with little or no interest in the political process.

***The young should sing, scream, paint their faces, go out into the streets, fill the squares, and demonstrate against lies, deceit, and shamelessness. The young should – while accepting the indispensable limits to freedom, the only way freedom can be real – fight against the abuse of power. ... Defence of freedom and alertness to its betrayal are democratic duties that we cannot neglect whether we are young or not. Moreover, protesting against the ethical slips of morally incompetent authorities is not only a way of studying and learning, but also a way of deepening knowledge and strengthening the roots of democracy.***

**Paulo Freire**

No-one bothers to ask if traditional political processes and institutions are open and accessible enough for young people (or anyone else for that matter) to want to be a part of them.

## Young people as a problem

The most powerful barrier to young people's participation is the problem-based approach that has driven youth policy and programming since the 1960s. Young people were seen as a liability and threat that had to be contained with punitive and controlling social policies. Current efforts to work with young people are sometimes over-burdened as they fail to recognise the potential contributions of young people to social development. Many policy-makers and programmers think that we should first 'fix' young people, then develop them, and maybe then they can have the opportunity to participate.

***Prevailing negative social attitudes of young people in many countries tend to give rise to ideologies that condemn and contain rather than encourage and empower young people. For many adults, allowing children [and young people] greater power is seen as a threat to the power relations between adults and young people.***

**Edna Smith**

Our challenge is to overturn these popular stereotypes about young people. To argue for a stronger link between young people's participation, their development and their capacity to influence positive change. Rather than just containing, controlling or ignoring them, societies have to invest in them – invest in the building of a competent citizenry. Advocates of youth participation face the even bigger challenge of developing a sound knowledge and an evidence base that demonstrates young people's capacities for contribution, rather than making unsubstantiated claims or idealising young people without providing useful tools and strategies.

## Investing in Young People: Building an Effective Citizenry

Over the years, we have seen the emergence of a more developmental and positive approach to working with young people. This approach is motivated by the understanding that human and social capital is not built only when we solve problems – it is a product of careful investment.

As a leading proponent and pioneer of this approach, Karen Pittman,<sup>3</sup> asserts, problem-free is not fully prepared. By stopping young people from getting into trouble it does not follow that we are necessarily investing in their positive potential. Nor does it follow that they are fully prepared to make a successful transition

into adulthood, or to participate fully as citizens. Many societies have made remarkable advances in ensuring that children acquire a basic education and do not die of malnutrition or preventable diseases. However, many have yet to make comparable investments to ensure that young people have the capacities and opportunities to thrive and participate.

## Linking Youth Development to Youth Participation

Even when young people are competent and prepared, they do not automatically participate in changing their communities or influencing the political life of their countries. In many Western countries that have comparatively sound educational and economic opportunities, young people still find themselves excluded and peripheral to the processes and activities that affect them and their communities.

In many developing countries (where young people are in the majority), policies assume that young people cannot participate until they have a good education, jobs, or are free of health problems. In other words young people have to be 'fixed', or social and economic situations have to be 'fixed', before young people can develop and participate.

This is not a viable approach. Young people cannot wait for fundamental changes in the social and economic environment before they take on the important role of contributing as citizens. Young people, especially those from troubled and underserved communities, do not have the luxury of standing on the sidelines; they must become fully engaged in the search for alternatives.

Thankfully we have seen a steady move away from a problem-based and punitive approach. More and more governments have acted to invest in the positive development of our young people. Governments are allocating increasing amounts of resources to provide young people with the skills and opportunities they need to help their nations confront poverty, lack of economic opportunity and HIV/AIDS. Many realise that participation is both a precursor to development and an outcome of development.

## The Costs of Exclusion

Participation and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. When young people are not given the pathways and resources to participate in positive ways they can and often do create alternatives for themselves. UNESCO describes exclusion poignantly as a perverse state that forces young people into a state of marginality where they become mere bystanders to the world of work, education and decision-making. Forced into this state, many young people gravitate towards alternative and often negative sub-cultures where they have a sense of connection with their peers, and opportunities to gain income and social standing, albeit through very dangerous and dubious means.

The exclusion of young people also heightens social problems such as crime, violence, illiteracy and HIV/AIDS. It depletes the capacity of individuals and of societies to rejuvenate themselves.

## But what is Participation?

*Freedom is participation in power.*

Cicero

Is youth participation a new term that describes old practices?

Put simply, youth participation is when young people are actively influencing processes, decisions and activities that affect their lives.<sup>4</sup> This is a broad definition and is often used interchangeably with the term empowerment. Many governments have now defined youth participation as a process or a state where young people can create choices, make informed decisions freely and take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. More importantly 'empowerment is based on the belief that young people are the best architects for promoting their development, and in meeting the challenges and solving the problems faced in today's world and in the new millennium'.

At the heart of this concept is the critical idea that young people are not just victims, they are potential actors who can and *have* made significant contributions to society.

The implications for policy and programming are clear. The role of policy is to deepen the expectation that young people have a right to acquire the skills and resources they need to participate. Policy should also expand the political space for young people to acquire control and share in the exercise of power. Policy should also create a bridge between young people and adults in order to facilitate strong intergenerational relationships that ease the transfer of values and skills.

Working from this definition, it is clear that youth development and youth participation are inseparable.

One should emphasise that participation is a right and not an obligation. Young people should feel free to participate in activities that affirm them and should at no point be coerced to do so. It is also important to understand that all young people are not the same. Thus the capacity and inclination to participate varies from one young person to another. As Rajani points out, youth participation should be sensitive to the evolving capacities of young people. Such capacities are dependent on age and experience. We cannot expect a 10-year-old to do what a 19-year-old can do and vice versa.

## Youth participation is not just about youth programmes

It is important to caution that although the language of youth participation and empowerment has been embraced widely, many think of it purely in terms of youth-based and youth-focused activities and not as broad concept that incorporates full enfranchisement into social, economic and political life. Thus many adult-led institutions are happy to have youth take a lead in very minimal ways. They do not, for example, appreciate that young people can be part of economic development.

***Participation is an essential part of human growth, that is development of self confidence, pride, initiative, creativity, responsibility, co-operation ... this is whereby people learn to take charge of their lives and solve their own problems, is the essence of development.***

**Steve Burkey**

## Balancing political participation and economic enfranchisement

It is also critical to have broader understanding of young people's participation and citizenship. Youth participation is not just about political participation. It is also fundamentally about economic citizenship. Therefore participation is also a process through which young people access the skills and opportunities to have an autonomous and sustainable livelihood. As we know, political participation without economic enfranchisement is a rather hollow ideal. We also have to be careful not to confuse participation with more 'acceptable' modes of civic engagement, traditionally restricted to heeding the law and showing allegiance.

It is also important to note that participation should always have the interests and the rights of young people at heart and not seek to abuse their goodwill. There is ample evidence that young people have been used as tokens and pawns in activities that harm their long-term development.

This notwithstanding, there is growing evidence that young people's participation has very positive outcomes.

## Identifying the Benefits of Youth Participation

There are three main benefits of youth participation. It is critical for the development of skills in young people; it is also critical for the programmes and services that are provided for them; and it is also critical for the development of the communities and societies where the young people live.

**Benefits for youth:** Through participation young people acquire essential skills.

Participation is integral to the development of confidence, character and competence. Participation builds connection to family, peers, significant adults and communities. Skills are at the core of what people need to live fulfilling lives and to navigate their way towards adulthood. Research, notably in the areas of education and reproductive health, has confirmed that young people – especially those in their early to and mid adolescence – learn best by doing. They learn by being engaged in making decisions about things that affect them in the context of organisations and activities that they care about.

***Competence is learned through experience, not magically endowed as a certain time. Maturity and growth are an ongoing process, and are gained through participation. This is a virtuous cycle. The more one participates meaningfully, the more experienced, competent and confident one becomes, which in turn enables more effective participation.***

**Rakesh Rajani**

**Benefits for programmes and services:** When young people are engaged in designing and implementing programmes they improve the capacity of such programmes to reach their goals. Young people provide useful information. They provide resources help the programmes implement relevant and creative strategies. They also make the programmes accessible and attractive to other young people.

For many years it was accepted that social institutions and programmes that are set up for young people, large and small, schools, hospitals, prisons and so on, should do things for young people and not with them. Unfortunately this is even true for many youth development programmes. Adults that are in charge of such programmes tend to treat young people as mere targets and beneficiaries. Thankfully, it is now accepted that young people's active participation is fundamental to the very success of strategies and programmes implemented for them. Much remains to be done to build a coherent body of knowledge that can advance our collective understanding of the centrality of youth participation to youth programmes.

**Participation is also an outcome of the youth development process:** When young people are fully engaged they tend to be more eager and willing to engage in other activities in their families, communities, and broader society. There is evidence that political skill of participation acquired during one's youth is part of a process of identity formation that shapes the individual's relationship to society in later life. Participation begets more participation.

## Youth Can Take Action: Youth-Based Social Movements

The twentieth century saw the emergence of powerful social movements led by young people. Many of these were driven by the ideal of democracy and freedom

for all. As we discuss the need to create spaces for young people to participate in society, we should be reminded that young people have often taken action to change conditions with limited support (and sometimes with no encouragement) from adults.

From the poverty-stricken streets of South Africa to the affluent ambience of Seattle, youth-based movements have demonstrated that young people are able and often ready to carve out political space independently. In this process, participation is not something given to young people – it is something they create.

***With their energy, enthusiasm, strong wills and open minds, young people have been at the heart of many social movements in the past and the present.***

**Premesh Chadran**

Over the years we have seen a proliferation of youth-initiated activities at a local and community level. These are not always large-scale and dramatic, yet they touch the lives of millions of young people everyday. Such participation happens within youth clubs, cultural groups, religious groups, and other institutions. Government polices and conventional youth development programmes sometimes ignore these efforts. For many young people they are the only thing that stands between them and the real abyss of alienation.

These activities often involve the development of critical youth leadership skills. They facilitate processes through which young people acquire the skills they need to be effective such as organising, advocacy, and resource mobilisation and fund-raising. Youth leadership provides a core of skills that is essential to individual development while tapping into the resources of young people to take action.

At the heart of youth-based social movements is the concept of youth activism. Activism allows young people to take on the role of social actors – they identify issues that affect them and take purposeful action to change things. The late twentieth century saw the rise of powerful movements in areas such as the environment, anti-racism, economic and social justice, and gay rights. These remain important movements that will affect the nature of political discourse in many countries for many years to come.

Another key example of independent youth action is youth entrepreneurship. This typically denotes activities that are involved in supporting young people to set up their own businesses or to create jobs. It is important to mention that entrepreneurship is not limited to youth businesses; it is sometimes used to include innovative actions by young people in the area of social development.

Many researchers agree that the significance of youth engagement, be it large-scale

or small scale, explicitly political or not, is that it offers opportunities, motivation and capacity-building.

Grassroots activity led and initiated by young people, or in partnership with caring adults, represents *opportunities* for engagement. Engagement is a stepping-stone into broader community life and a gateway to civic and associational life beyond schools and family.

Second, it provides *motivation* for youth to be engaged in something that benefits people other than themselves. Young people become aware about issues that affect them and their communities – they get to grasp the nature of the complexities and possible solutions.

Third, it provides young people with *skills and capacities* to do more. As a young person gains skills, experience and knowledge, they increase their ability to effect change.

## Examples of good practice

While many governments and social institutions are struggling with the idea of youth participation and other perhaps even questioning its usefulness, there are some good examples of exemplary practice. Below are a few examples of good initiatives that promote youth participation.<sup>5</sup>

### Youth parliamentarians in Uganda

Under the provisions of the National Youth Statute of 1993, and the parliamentary act of 1995, five young people between the ages of 18–30 are elected to the national government in Uganda. The law also states that one of the five young people should be a female representative, representing the interests of young women. This provides a powerful platform for young people to raise their concerns and influence policy at all levels. The young people elected, who come from different regions in the country, have been effective in representing their peers. They organise special sessions where they lobby other parliamentarians. They have also made significant strides in organising young people in different communities and taking their recommendations to decision-makers. Youth representatives have a much deeper connection with their constituencies than most of the adult parliamentarians.

### Co-management in Lithuanian Youth Policy

Lithuania as an emerging democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union has been working on developing policies and systems that facilitate the effective participation of young people in social development. Critical in this process has been the principle of co-management – young people working with government officials to design and implement policies and programmes. This process is facilitated mainly

through the State Council of Youth Affairs (State Council). Through the State Council young people from youth NGOs elect six members who then sit alongside six representatives from different government ministries (these are usually deputy ministers from key ministries). The chairperson of the State Council is a government representative and the deputy chairperson is a representative of the youth NGO sector. Decisions within the State Council are made through a simple majority vote, thereby giving young people equal power to their adult counterparts. The State Council also employs a secretariat staff responsible for implementing its decisions. In 2001, the State Council was responsible for programmes aimed at strengthening youth NGOs, integrating young people into the economy, preventing drug abuse, suicide and crime, and providing leisure opportunities for rural youth. Within this system of co-management, young people are fully involved in making decisions about the design, funding, implementation and evaluation of programmes.

### **Brazil: Engaging underprivileged young people<sup>6</sup>**

In 2000, Brazil celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Statute on the Child and Adolescent. Participants emphasised the importance of youth participation in NGO and government activities and focused, specifically, on encouraging young people's involvement in the Municipal Child and Adolescent Rights Council. Five young persons, aged 15 to 20 years, are now formal members of the sixteen-member Rights Council. These young people are involved in programme planning, implementation and evaluation; they are given a voice in designing public policies that are geared to adolescents and children.

In order to bolster support for youth participation, programme leaders have been working with the media to strengthen the concept of youth empowerment. They have also been promoting the concept among government leaders.

Projects designed to foster wider youth involvement encounter serious constraints. Given the economic conditions in Salvador, many children are forced to focus on earning money for their families. Faced with these demands, they do not set a high priority on participation in discussion groups. In addition many, particularly among the poorer groups, are frustrated with government performance and do not anticipate tangible benefits from participation. Meanwhile middle class youth are largely uninterested. Generally, they consider government policies for youth as destined solely for the poor.

In response, some of the social projects provide young people with scholarships so that they do not have to focus on earning an income. Others provide employment for young people when they are older than 16 years. Additionally, there are continued attempts at stimulating group activities, emphasising situation analysis and encouraging young people to formulate solutions.

## **The Commonwealth Youth Programme's support for national youth policies**

The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) has been critical in supporting Commonwealth member governments to develop a dynamic and compelling vision for young people in decision-making.

Through the Youth Policy 2000 programmes, the CYP has assisted over 40 member governments in developing legislative instruments and policy documents that place young people at the centre of their government's agendas. In addition many have worked to develop national plans of action to implement these policies. The youth policy process is unique in that it provides resources and space for young people to articulate themselves and to work together across ethnic, racial, socio-economic and political lines. This has been a useful process of training and emulating the democratic process itself.

### **Challenges**

Although experiments in youth policy development have been positive in the main, there are some challenges. Here are some challenges to watch out for:

- **The dangers of window dressing**

First, while member governments have accepted the broad principle of youth participation, many do not fully embrace the idea of young people as actors in their own right. Young people are often put forward as window dressing with little decision-making capacity.

- **Arbitrary selection**

Second, some governments do not apply democratic principles in the selection and deployment of young people. Many representatives are not elected; they are hand-picked without any consideration of their ability to represent their peers. Individuals are selected and put forward even when they do not have any substantial connection to youth organisations or track record. Thus they are unable to promote the interests of their peers adequately.

- **Co-option**

Third, once selected, young representatives can become the official spokespersons of the ministry or the department responsible for youth affairs. As they depend on the government for their resources and continuing participation, they often shy away from taking positions that are controversial or contrary to those held by the government – even when these go against the interests of young people. Co-option does not in fact serve governments, as it deprives them of much needed alternative perspectives and insights that can only come from an independent youth voice.

- **Weak structures – crisis of legitimate representation**

Fourth, many of the youth representatives come through the ranks of National Youth Councils, National Youth Forums, National Youth Commissions, etc. These structures claim the legitimacy to put forward representatives on the grounds that they are linked to grass-roots organisations of young people. It is assumed that they have a mandate to consult and engage youth constituencies as and when necessary. However, in some cases, these structures do not have the capacity or inclination for work with young people on the ground. After a while it is unclear who they represent – all young people, organised youth only, or simply themselves.

- **Gender Inequality**

Fifth, without careful planning, youth structures are liable to display the same gender inequalities as other institutions. Young women within them may play a token role, rather than being active and equal members. The causes can lie in adult organisational culture or in young society itself. The consequences are impaired legitimacy and greatly reduced capacity to confront society's most pressing concerns.

- **Gate-keeping and centralisation**

Sixth, structures created to facilitate youth representation in the political process may find themselves in the position where they compete for resources and space with other civil society organisations. Instead of becoming vehicles that galvanise young people into action by injecting resources and by using their governments in strategic ways, they become gatekeepers by centralising the flow of resources and opportunities. This often leads to undemocratic tendencies that make them vulnerable to nepotism and bureaucratisation.

## **Opportunities: Consolidating the Gains**

Fortunately, there is an opportunity to learn from these challenges and build on the strong commitment of youth leaders, governments and civil society organisations. There is a wealth of experience and goodwill that can be built on to improve practice.

***Developing clear democratic criteria and procedures for the selection and deployment of youth delegates:*** It is important for governments to develop and agree on a broad framework for the democratic selection of youth delegates and representatives to international conferences. Chief among selection criteria should be a) the ability of representatives to articulate the aspirations of their peers, and b) their accountability to both their peers and others. Obviously such a framework should be sensitive to local conditions, but it must emphasise accountability and genuine representation. It should also allow for the regular replacement of delegates/representatives.

***Building a strong civil society that supports and promotes youth participation:***

Creating structures for co-ordination and lobbying on behalf of youth is an important part of promoting youth participation. But these are only useful if they can do very specific things. The first is to mobilise grassroots support in a way that advances the ability of youth to be involved in their development and that of their communities. They must also bolster the efforts of NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) by maximising their resources and political prominence. Thirdly and most importantly, they must advance the youth development agenda inside the government without becoming clients of the state and thus limiting the capacity of the political youth movement to lobby effectively for lasting social transformation.

***Creating mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of youth policies:*** Work is underway to create monitoring and documentation mechanisms that will enable governments see the progress that is being made. Attempts at evaluating progress will require the setting up of systems for data gathering and analysis. A direct role for young people in the design and operation of such assessment and evaluation exercises will be essential. This will bring a sense of ownership, commitment and genuine partnership between young people and their national governments.

***Investing in the training and capacity building of youth leaders:*** Resources should be made available to ensure that young people brought into the system have adequate training and support to be able to meet challenges. Such training should emphasise democratic values and practice. It should also familiarise young people not just with the workings, traditions and objectives of their own countries, but also about how things work internationally.

***Supporting research that demonstrates the capacity of young people to effect positive change:*** As noted, much of the resistance to youth participation comes from a misunderstanding of what young people can do, and actually do. Available data and research is understandably focused on problems. This ignores the positive reality of what young people are actually doing on a day-to-day basis. Without neglecting the problems, governments are encouraged to work with civil society bodies to generate research and knowledge on the nature and benefits of youth participation.

***Creating strong adult–youth partnerships:*** Genuine youth participation is not possible or feasible without partnerships with adults. Research has proved over and over again that young people need to work together with adults in a respectful and mutually beneficial way. While young people need to have the space and the autonomy to take independent action they also need the guidance and support of caring and competent adults. Adults provide the invisible infrastructure behind youth action and engagement.<sup>7</sup> The capacity to provide apprenticeships for young people in areas such as political participation and governance is critical for the survival of democracy.

**Promoting diversity and range:** It is also important to support programmes that cover a range of activities and areas. Participation in faith-based organisations, in sports, and in culture is as important as participation in explicitly political activities. Fortunately, many governments are already making sizable investments in these areas. But others sometimes think of such activities as insignificant and not linked to the serious business of building democracy.

**Promoting youth participation as a public idea:** Finally, it is important to promote the idea of young people's participation and citizenship as a public idea. This is a principle that can be embraced by all people, not just by the select few who work with young people. The simple fact that young people can and should be architects of change must be ingrained in all areas of public life. It must be reflected most explicitly in education policy, as well as in all other areas of social planning and development that affect young people.

## Conclusion – Youth Participation and Social Change

Our capacity to promote youth participation is dependent in part on our understanding of the symbiosis between youth development and the development of society in general. Youth development is inextricably tied to young people's capacity and willingness to participate at a micro-level (in programmes) and at a macro-level. The level and nature of young people's participation is in itself a marker for a society's development.

Therefore, the capacity of a society or a community to maximise young people's participation as citizens in social, political and economic life indicates the extent to which that society can flourish. Young people are barometers through which we can measure the level of social cohesion, democratisation or the lack thereof and thus the potential for positive change.

Youth participation presents a radically different and progressive perspective on the role of young people in society. Through participation, young people cease to be passive recipients of services or passive victims of indomitable social and political forces. Within this progressive perspective, young people are seen as stakeholders with distinct and legitimate interests and thus are entitled to share in the exercise of power at all levels.

The bold investments made in pursuit of young people's participation are already yielding visible benefits. Our challenge is to sharpen our tools and consolidate our infrastructure to make sure that young people's participation stays on the agenda of governments, businesses and adult-led civil society organisations.

Youth participation is our greatest hope for lasting social transformation. It lies at the core of our mission to create compassionate, sustainable and equitable societies where all people can thrive.

## Notes

1. Watts, Bessant and Sercombe (1998). *Youth Studies – A Perspective*. Melbourne: Longman.
2. Mike Males (1996). *The Scapegoat Generation*.
3. Karen Pittman and Merita Irby (1996). International Youth Foundation.
4. Rakesh Rajani (1999). *An approach to adolescent participation*. UNICEF.
5. Examples from Uganda by D. Obbo and Lithuania by A. Augastaitis are taken from a report on youth participation in decision-making commissioned by the Carnegie Young People Initiative in the UK and edited by Steve Mokwena.
6. The example from Brazil was taken from 'Adolescent Participation in Situation Assessment and Analysis', a paper by Joy Moncrieffe commissioned by UNICEF and CYP, 2001.
7. Steve Mokwena (2000). *Youth and Social Justice, New Designs*.