

Chapter 4

Pathways to Personal Empowerment

Charlotte Barran

Contributors to this chapter are from different generations, different continents and very different backgrounds. The one thing they have in common is that they are all active participants in civil society. And more than that, they all began to participate in civil society as young people. In spite of their varied backgrounds, there are common factors that led all of them to participate. There is no magic formula for youth activism, but as this chapter demonstrates, there are magic ingredients.

Youth participation does not require a certain level of education, or a certain level of wealth or status. The nature of youth participation means that it can happen in any economic, political or social environment. Youth participation does not rely on money or democracy. The key components of youth participation are more fundamental than that: a basic recognition of the need to participate in society; positive relationships with adults and peers; and a supportive and enabling physical environment.

In attempting to understand the critical factors which ensure effective and genuine youth participation, we draw on the life experiences of eight individuals from around the world. We have arranged these profiles in chronological order, starting with an activist in her eighties and ending with a teenager. These stories are inspirational and instructive.

80+: Paula Pelaez Gomez, Chile

Paula Pelaez Gomez is an Educationalist based in Chile. She has been an active member of the Asociación de Guías y Scouts de Chile throughout her life. Paula has written several books and publications on adolescents.

I am 89 years old and I work in two Youth Centres.

Even though my childhood was a happy one, my teenage years were sad. I was only 14 when my mother died unexpectedly. As I was finishing my secondary education, I once again met with the unexpected – a friend and schoolmate of mine committed suicide.

I wanted to study medicine, but my father, who until then had been 'my love' was stubbornly opposed since at the time (1930) girls who attempted this had to be 'rather mad'. Some felt it was immoral for girls to be face to face with naked dead bodies in front of male colleagues.

I studied civil engineering for a year at the Universidad de Chile until I managed to convince my father to accept my enrolment in the School of Medicine. He imposed conditions on me whereby he did not allow me to go to parties. But I was happy in medicine.

My vital youthful energy was probably strengthened by the love which my parents gave to six children in difficult times. They taught us to face up to difficulties from an early age. We had to be brave and firm. After suffering a setback we had to give thanks that we had overcome it, that we had weathered the storm. Personally, I had in my favour my faith which made me follow Father Alberto Hurtado, for whose 'poor people' I worked ever since the time when I was studying medicine. I learned about the solidarity of those who have little, but who help their fellow men.

Over the years I have seen teenagers moved by the certainty that there is someone out there to whom they matter.

40+: Catherine Bertini, Executive Director, United Nations World Food Programme, USA

Catherine Bertini is the Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), the largest global food aid agency. In 1992 she became the first American woman to head a UN organisation and the first woman to lead WFP. In March 2000, she was named the Secretary-General's special envoy to the Horn of Africa. As a teenager, Catherine Bertini had a favourite quotation by Edmund Burke. 'The only thing required for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to do nothing.' Ms Bertini's experiences as a young woman, which included volunteering at a shelter for homeless women, helped her to steer WFP into new policy areas. Ms Bertini believes that women are the key to resolving hunger and that the international community must work to strengthen their ability to cope effectively in crises.

My first interest in public policy was generated by my father's civic involvement. He ran for city councillor when I was 13, and I organised other young teenagers to distribute his campaign literature. After he was elected I went to city council meetings to watch him work, and from then on I was interested in government.

Suggestions from adults made a difference as well. Women Air Force Officers based in South Vietnam told me of citizens' needs there and I organised a campaign to raise resources for them. My father's political party ran a week-long seminar for high school students. Finally, my social studies and geography teachers were brilliant.

All this had an impact, and then there was the Girl Scouts. I recall proudly serving as Mayor for a Day through the Girl Scouts programme!

Girl Scouting had a big influence on me as a young woman. My leaders encouraged me to set goals and work to achieve them.

As a young woman I remember reading a biography of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first American woman to become a medical doctor. Her story inspired me to follow my own dream. I believe that young girls and women should dare to follow their dream, whatever it may be, and let no obstacles stand in their way.

30s: Alphonsine Kabagabo, Regional Executive for Africa, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS)

In 1994 Alphonsine fled Rwanda with her 6-month-old daughter because of the civil war. Alphonsine has been WAGGGS Regional Executive for Africa since March 1998. She is responsible for helping the region to implement quality Guiding programmes to meet the needs of young women in Africa. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts consists of five regions, with 140 member organisations and 10 million individual members.

I have been active in youth movements since the age of 12 when I began to take on responsibilities in the Guide Association based at my school.

I wanted to join a youth organisation because I wanted to do something within my community to contribute towards the improvement of people's lives, to make a change, and also because I was convinced that by pooling our strengths the impact would be greater.

My role model is without doubt my father. Ever since I was very young I saw that he took an interest in social issues and I saw him get involved in community activities. He always encouraged me to join youth movements so that I might be exposed to the outside world and play a role in the community, and therefore gain skills other than academic ones.

I was 16 years old when I became active. I was in charge of the Guide Association at my school and I also represented the school in national youth organisations and at the Ministry of Youth and Ministry of Education. This gave me the opportunity to take part in organising many meetings and demonstrations where the grievances of young people were expressed.

At the age of 22, I became one of the National Leaders of the Guides of Rwanda and I was responsible for public and international relations. I was also a member of the National Council for Youth.

I am convinced that this active participation has really broadened my mind, has given me a sense of responsibility, of teamwork, of respect for my fellow human beings and has empowered me for life.

Active participation in youth movements has allowed me and other young women to deal with the ethnic divisions which are tearing Rwandan society apart, and to take more of an interest in the development of society in general.

However, our participation in Rwanda's civil society was limited by the fact that

politicians wanted to use us to achieve their goal, which limited what we did and the impact of it.

I am currently the Executive for the Africa Region at WAGGGS. In this role I work with thousands of young women in Africa and I am absolutely convinced that their participation allows them to grow up with confidence, an open mind, and a desire to contribute to positive changes within society. They grow into more responsible adults who will make a difference, however small that might be.

Finally, I am sure that my active participation in youth movements has given me skills and the ability to carry out the work I do today, perhaps even more than my studies at university.

Africa is a continent where the majority of the population is young. However, participation in youth movements is very limited. If only there were more young people who had the opportunity to become active and to obtain skills which would allow them to become good citizens, there would be more positive changes, perhaps even less violence and less hatred.

Ashok Pillai, President, Indian Network for People living with HIV

The Indian Network for People living with HIV/AIDS (INP+) aims to give a voice to people living with HIV/AIDS, especially women and children, and to counter the fear, ignorance and prejudice surrounding the problem.

I am Ashok Pillai, a young man 32 years old. I come from a village in Uttar Pradesh. In 1987, at the age of 19, I joined the Indian Navy ready to take on the world. Things took a new turn when I tested positive for HIV in 1989.

In 1992 I left the Navy as I had contracted tuberculosis. I went back to my home town. I was living life the way I wanted, because according to my doctors I had only three or four years to live. So I spent all my savings and withstood the pressure from my father to complete my graduation. Lacking any information on HIV or positive living, I was in the prime of my life, left with nothing to do, living life by the day.

I realised that my family – four sisters and my elderly parents – would be hurt if I died suddenly without telling them about me. Eventually, when they wanted me to get married, I told my father about my HIV status and slowly I told the rest of my family. They took it in their stride. They supported me morally, and they never once asked how I got HIV. Their belief in me, and their support, has given me the strength to go on.

My life's most remarkable experience came in 1996 in the form an invitation to a meeting in Pune, which was for people living with HIV. There I met young people who, like me, were HIV-positive, but were facing discrimination from family, friends and society. There was an urge among the participants of the meeting to form a network of people living with HIV, our own network to raise our issues.

I volunteered to do everything that would make this dream a reality. In 1997, together with 11 others, I formed INP+. I finally found a purpose in my life. From the need felt by people living with HIV there grew a movement for change. We now have around a thousand members all over India; most of us are in the 30–35 age group.

As the President of a national network of people living with HIV, I am an activist, an advocate, a speaker, a strategist, a negotiator, an administrator, a trainer and more. Above all, I am a treatment activist; the main focus for me is access to treatment for people living with HIV. I know by personal experience that young people with HIV die because they are born in this country and have no way to access treatment. I have seen how the antiretroviral drugs have changed the life of people in a positive way and I want that for my fellow people. I am also worried about the vulnerability of young people to HIV, as I became positive at a very young age.

I am very open about my status. An HIV-positive speaker can build confidence in people who have not yet come out due to fear of discrimination. Telling a person who has tested positive that I have been living with HIV for 12 years makes a difference to how they look at their future. Together with other members, I have tried to be the voice of millions living with HIV.

Living with HIV and being young has provided me with challenges and dreams that I never dared confront before. Life itself has been the best classroom. I have developed strategies to address the issues of people living with HIV and I have improvised and fine-tuned my skills as I went along.

Young people are very easy to work with. If they are entrusted with responsibility they are less likely to let you down. Young people should be involved in planning and follow through to decision-making. INP+ is a movement of young people and is the response of young people living with HIV to this epidemic. I always tell my fellow people living with HIV that participation is when you give yourself completely in to what you do, so that you become one with it and I think that it holds good for youth participation too.

20s: Henry Zakumumpa, Head of the Radio Division, Straight Talk, Uganda

Straight Talk is a local Ugandan Health Communications NGO targeting adolescents as part of the prevention of HIV/AIDS among young people. It spreads adolescent sexual and reproductive health messages through the radio, newspapers and its Outreach to Schools Programme.

My activism as a youth, as far as I remember, began early on in school. At 15, I became the Chairman of the Junior Debating Club at Mbarara High School. I vividly remember leading my dormitory to winning the 1992 inter-house debating

competitions and sweeping the coveted prize, the Oxford English Dictionary. I had chanced upon the autobiographies of Nelson Mandela and John F. Kennedy in the school library and felt inspired to lead a distinguished life.

At high school, I elected to pursue liberal arts education and moved to Makerere College School in Kampala, where my former school was regarded as 'nondescript'. I strove to excel academically to prove myself and to win the attention of the girls! I was particularly 'loud' in the history class and was always a persistent contributor in inter-school seminars.

By the age of 18, I had come to form part of a circle of like-minded friends from several schools who belonged to the Pan-African Youth Movement, a vibrant youth organisation emphasising pride in traditional heritage.

I was deputy editor of the 'Macorean' – a school magazine and leading student mouth piece against student government excesses. By 1995, I belonged to a network of idealistic, progressive minded young people.

Makerere College School was a very diverse community and in order to preserve our activism we formed the Nakawa Students Association, of which I was elected Secretary-General. We were a community volunteer group penetrating local communities with our message of 'household savings mobilisation'. We initiated contact with civic bodies and with our area MP who was also a Local Government Minister.

Negotiating for a greater student role in the community was a key interest which we campaigned for. I remember that several of my peers and I served as Presiding Officers in the 1996 Uganda presidential polls. Others chose partisan politics and went on to get elected to the statutory youth councils.

In June 1998 many of us completed university, feeling prepared to launch ourselves into the blue yonder world. I remember sitting in the cafeteria with four other friends after our last exam paper and deciding on the next course after school. Development work was the most obvious choice for most of us. I took a particular interest in HIV/AIDS because I considered it to be our country's gravest challenge. At the end of 1998 I joined the Straight Talk Foundation.

At Straight Talk, I have been given an enabling environment and have been welcomed by people with a firm belief in what young people have to offer. In October 1999 I was the youngest organisation representative to sit on a Ugandan Government 'National Anti-AIDS Strategic Policy Framework' Committee. I have had to work hard (perhaps twice as hard as more senior colleagues) to prove worthy of the trust I have been given as a young person.

Although young people have been given the huge responsibility of running Straight Talk, there is still 'inaccessible' territory. No young person sits on the Foundation Board, which is the highest policy making part of the organisation. This makes the young people feel like their participation is 'sphered'.

There has to be a start though ... I am in full control of the radio station – I write the scripts, develop the concepts, manage older staff, conduct interviews, manage the budget, and design the half hour programmes, as well as help in monitoring and evaluation. I am an equal participant in the weekly Monday policy making meetings.

I am 25 now. Next year I plan to go to Graduate School. I hope to move on and allow space for other young blood. ...

Mulako Mwanamwalye, Pan-Commonwealth Youth Caucus Chairperson

The Pan-Commonwealth Youth Caucus is a network of youth leaders who serve as a voice for young people across the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth. It is a consultative mechanism of the Commonwealth Youth Programme.

My name is Mulako Mwanamwalye, a Zambian national born in 1973. I am currently serving as the Pan-Commonwealth Youth Caucus Chairperson (2000–2003) and working full time for the National Youth Council of Zambia as Research and Development Co-ordinator.

Growing up as a girl child in Africa really was the beginning of the struggle to achieve meaningful participation. I have grown up in an environment where a young person should only be seen, not heard, and where adults decide what roles young people should take. In my culture, a young person is not expected to stand in front of adults to speak, except at their request.

It was not until my days at university in the early 1990s, when I joined an association for students of political and administrative studies, that I began to actively participate in youth activities. During that time, my country was undergoing a political transition from a one party state to multi-party democracy. The socio-economic situation was deteriorating at a fast rate and the general population was seeking change. As students we played a significant role in agitating for change and facilitating a smooth transition to a new government. It was then that it occurred to me that young people can and should play an important role in a nation's development process. But now, when I look back, I see how young people are often used to bring about positive change and then dumped.

Working as a Research and Development Co-ordinator for a National Youth Council and serving as a Pan-Commonwealth Youth Caucus Chairperson has given me opportunities to mingle with young people from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and religions. I have had opportunities to organise a variety of youth fora at national, regional and international levels and see how young people from civil society work with governments, donors, international NGOs and inter-governmental organisations. More importantly, I have also seen how young people interact among themselves.

In all this, I have come to realise that young people all over the world face the same challenge – not being accepted as equal partners in the development process. I have experienced lack of acceptance in my various positions as a young person from both fellow young people who questioned my legitimacy to lead them and the adults who believe that young people do not have the necessary experience.

Having served as Regional Youth Co-ordinator for the Commonwealth Africa Region, I have come to realise that effective youth participation is possible only when the relevant structures are put in place and the required resources are made available. The transfer of skills to young people in all areas that affect their lives is critical in order to bridge the generation gap. These are the lessons to be learned by organisations committed to ensure real participation for young people.

Personally, participation has empowered me to be able to take decisions on my own behalf, and not at the direction of others, in all areas of my life.

My message to the young people out there is that youth participation is not about the next person but about you. Do not allow yourself to be manipulated. Many of us fall prey to tokenism where young people are represented as being involved but have no decision-making power. True participation occurs when young people are involved in all stages of programme development. Don't accept the digital divide. Sharpen your IT skills because access to information is a key ingredient to participation.

Despite the number of barriers that inhibit youth participation, I am very optimistic about the future. I will continue being involved and active in the youth movement.

Edward Registe, Regional Co-ordinator, Commonwealth Youth Caucus

I am 29-year-old Edward Registe. I have been involved in youth work from a very early age. Having been raised in the Catholic faith, I was given many opportunities to interact with my peers from when I was 9-years-old at Sunday School. Sunday School and summer school programmes run by the Youth Development Division in Dominica enabled me to go on several field trips, where I met many new people and made many friends around the island at a very early age.

By the time I was 10, I had secured a government scholarship, which gave me access to secondary education. Since I lived in a rural community where there was no secondary school, I had to commute nine miles daily to school. In those days very few people were given that opportunity and so those of us who got the chance to obtain a secondary education were automatically looked upon as leaders among our peers in our communities. By the age of 16 I was elected president of my church youth organisation and my social youth club.

At school I was an average student and never took up leadership in student

activities except my participation in many arguments about issues in the school concerning students.

On leaving formal education, I was part of a team of old school boys who were brought together by the Youth Development Division to look into the feasibility of forming a National Youth Council for Dominica. I was elected to head the steering committee mandated to carry out the feasibility study. It entailed a lot of personal sacrifice and struggle to create a voice for youth in a country that saw its youth as a liability except at election time when they became useful pawns in the political game.

The committee persevered for more than two years until 1996 when we finally established a National Youth Council with strong government backing. I was once again called upon to rise to the challenge of leadership when I was elected as the first President of the Council, a post I held for four years. During that time I and my colleagues learned a lot about youth rights and responsibilities. We were able to motivate Dominican youth to take positive action and we found some success in changing society's negative image of its youth.

Today I still serve as Vice-President of the Caribbean Federation of Youth and I am also the Regional Co-ordinator of the Commonwealth Youth Programme Regional Youth Forum. I am still very involved in other youth organisations.

Youth work has had a very great impact on my life. I have gained many friends and felt very proud that I was able to make a significant contribution towards national and regional development at a very early age, something that many of my young Caribbean contemporaries do not get to do. It has earned me a tremendous amount of respect in my country and I am actually listened to and consulted on many issues. It has been an uphill struggle to change perceptions of young people, enabling them to become important stakeholders in the developmental thrust in my country but I have never regretted a moment of it.

I hope that more resources will be allocated by the governments of the world and international institutions towards youth development programmes. I truly believe that the youth of the world are its most valuable resource and that efforts must be urgently made to genuinely embrace youth participation at all levels in the global community. Only when we have accomplished this will our young people be better motivated to desire a secure and productive future.

Kuh Abigail Pasion, Girl Scouts, Philippines

Kuh Abigail is a Cadet Girl Scout with the Girl Scouts of the Philippines, which is the largest organisation for girls and young women in the Philippines with over a million members. Kuh is in her third year of college at the University of the Philippines.

I was brought up to be responsible for my actions. As long as I can remember, I have been involved in activities that I believed in. My father used to joke about it

as youthful exuberance, but he and my family have always been supportive of my actions. My siblings and I grew up in an atmosphere that demanded responsible participation and a genuine desire for truth and change. Of course when you are just about knee high and eating lollipops while trying to point out to your elders what you think is right, you can't expect people to treat you seriously. But this never deterred me, it only made me more persistent.

Even when I was young I have always refrained from being an innocent bystander if I could do something to address an issue. In high school my participation grew as I took on socio-civic responsibilities. I became an officer of our student body organisation, elected to the supreme student council and the editor of our newspaper. I was involved in activities that extended beyond school. I attended the first National Youth Summit where thousands of young people joined forces to address issues affecting youth. I also experienced being part of the local government when I took office as the Junior Mayor of Laoag City. During the time that I was Junior Mayor, we worked with young people involved in drugs and street fighting through our programme, Dance against Drugs. I know that what we did barely scratched the surface, but it was a beginning.

Just before I left for college, I attempted to further my participation in society. I took part in a project against dengue fever as part of the Chief Girl Scout Medal Scheme.

I have to admit that even though I had participated in decision-making, social issues and school activities, my definition of participation had always been a conventional one. In 1999, at the World CIVICUS Assembly, I became more aware of what is happening and I saw how narrow my understanding of rights and participation had been. I had always taken it for granted that the opportunities we enjoy are universally accepted. The stories of discrimination, of women removed from the political and social spectrum because of gender, of young people whose idealism is quashed by tradition, made me realise how greatly we are still deprived of the most basic thing – the right to be heard.

I learned a lot at the CIVICUS conference. And importantly, I began to act on that lesson. When you face the crisis of political instability, when those who should be the protectors of our sovereignty threaten to take it away, when the very institution that should ensure social justice and truth breaks down, young people are left with a great responsibility to take a stand. If participation and empowerment means doing what your conscience and your ideals dictate, and never wavering in your quest for freedom from all kinds of oppression, then indeed I can proudly say that I've experienced it.

But that is not to say that participation is all smooth sailing. We are often hindered by obstacles like being put down because of our age or our limited resources. In the case of the recent uprisings in the Philippines, I endured along with many others the criticism of our families, our peers and the media.

I know that I still have a lot to learn and experience. But I never hesitate to contribute what I can when it is needed. I am currently involved in several student bodies as a volunteer.

Perhaps when the time comes that I can finally say that I really did something is when I see other young people participating. Only then can I finally say that my own participation has made a difference.

10–15-year-olds: Renata Andrade Garcia, Girl Guide, Brazil

The Federação de Bandeirantes do Brasil was founded in 1919 and acts today as one of the most important Brazilian institutions working on non-formal education, ensuring active citizenship for children and young people. Renata Andrade is a Girl Guide, belonging to the São Bernardo do Campo in the São Paulo District.

What can I say? It was worth it.

I don't really know how it happened. I got into Girl Scouting without even knowing exactly what it was about, what they did or what made people do it! Maybe I was after new challenges and as the saying goes: when you don't know where you want to go, any place will do.

My attitude to life was that I didn't really care and I certainly didn't work very hard.

But then, there was a day ... it was time to rotate the team posts and it was my turn to co-ordinate the team. Me, the ever irresponsible me!

And it was then, at age 13, that I woke up. I didn't have a special someone to look up to. I just set my goals and went after them. I didn't know if I would get there, but I kept going.

I like decision-making. Now I am 13 and I still have a long way to go, I'm thinking of new objectives. I have learned that people don't have the time to think any more, the value of true friendship.

To send young people a message? 'Follow your dreams! Reach for your goals without looking backwards, that means what it is, back, past. Think of the future. Don't let things stop you. Think of the joy of having reached there. And most of all, BE HAPPY.

Critical factors

What are the critical factors which ensure effective and genuine youth participation?

- **A personal commitment**

No-one can force a young person to participate in any real sense. Anyone who recalls his or her schooldays will also recall that the pupil who was made to do

something did it reluctantly and half-heartedly. Youth participation can be encouraged but it is ultimately up to the young person themselves to embrace activism.

Ashok spent four years living life exactly how he wanted, ignoring his father's pleas for him to graduate. Instead he lived recklessly, spending all his money. Ashok had to come to the decision himself to invest his time and energy in improving the quality of people living with HIV/AIDS. Ashok chose to participate, and as soon as he did, he finally found the purpose of his life.

All of the authors of the personal pathways made the conscious and voluntary decision to participate.

- **The influence of adults**

Young people may make the decision to participate themselves, but this decision is not reached without key outside influences.

The relationship that young people have with adults can positively or negatively influence the decisions that young people make. Influential adults may be teachers, parents, or community leaders who take on a mentoring role. Adults may influence from a distance – famous figures may provide inspiration.

A parent, often a father, plays a key role in a young person's development. Catherine Bertini organised other young people to participate in her father's political campaign. Equally, a young person can have a profound effect on his or her parents. A young person can challenge the beliefs and values which adults themselves may have established in their youth. A young person can help an adult to recognise that society changes, as do the issues affecting that society. Paula's father had the courage to counter his own wishes for his daughter and allow her to follow her own path – albeit with some provisos.

- **The influence of peers**

Sometimes, adults may seem to be too remote or out of touch, or they may not always be available as more and more young people move away from home to study or to work. Peers play an increasingly crucial role in determining a young person's value system.

Young people are unlikely to be active participants in isolation. Young people need the support and the friendship of peers who are like-minded and who are driven by the same goals. It was when they met as a group that Ashok and other young people living with HIV felt inspired to form a network. Henry met like-minded young people through the Pan-African Youth Movement who became friends and who also influenced each other's career choices. Youth activism enables young people to make friends and strengthen their networks. Edward has gained many friends through his youth work.

All the contributors to this chapter talk about friends who have shared in their activities and their goals.

- **A space to belong**

Even if young people enjoy friendship with like-minded people or with inspiring adults, they cannot become active participants in civil society without a space or an arena in which to develop. A key feature of personal empowerment, as shown in this chapter, is the power of a youth organisation to give confidence and security, and to provide for the development of skills that are not necessarily practised in the home or at school.

Renata and Kuh belong to the Girl Guides or the Girl Scouts. Edward belongs to several youth organisations which have enabled him to develop his own skills as well as lobby on behalf of a significant group. Organised youth activism gives young people a powerful voice with which to lobby governments and impact upon civil society; the National Youth Council of Dominica made a significant impact on the lives of young people in the country. All the personal accounts talk of joining an organisation or a movement in order to achieve personal goals.

Religion also plays a role in providing a space for the development of young people. Both Paula and Edward were involved in church activities. His involvement in Sunday School introduced Edward to peer group learning at a young age. Paula's Catholic faith encouraged her to participate in civil society.

- **A need for change**

It might be AIDS, or poverty, or it might be the Vietnam War, or it might be young people and drugs. Young people participate primarily because they see that there is a need. They recognise that something must be done, and they get up and do it. Participation brings about change.

Young people approach problems or issues with fresh eyes, and come up with simple solutions. Kuh's involvement in the Dance against Drugs is an example of an innovative approach to the issue of young people and drugs.

Young people may see things more clearly than adults may. Youth organisations in Rwanda tried to counteract the destruction of the civil war. The group of young people living with HIV who met in India in 1996 wanted to improve the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS. From the recognition of this need, there grew a powerful movement for change – the Indian Network for People Living with HIV.

- **A political will**

Young participants in civil society are not only socially aware, but they also enter into the political arena, recognising the power of politics to bring about change in civil society. Youth participation may mean opposition to or collaboration with government to bring about change.

Henry's school magazine spoke out against student government excesses. Later on Henry worked with the government, joining a national committee on Anti-AIDS

Strategy. Alphonsine represented young people at the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Education. Later, the youth organisations that Alphonsine belonged to tried to resolve ethnic divisions and civil war.

Even if a government is using young people in its own power struggle, young people are sometimes able to use this to their advantage. Edward recognised that the Dominican government invested in young people in the lead up to the election because they were a useful vote winner. Whatever the reasons behind the government's call for a National Youth Council, Edward assisted with its development because he recognised that the body had the potential to achieve young people's goals.

- **A lifetime commitment**

Perhaps the most important aspect of youth participation evident throughout these personal testimonies, is that the skills and the experience gained through youth participation last a lifetime. A person who is an active citizen at a young age is likely to remain an active citizen. The earlier a person develops decision making and participatory skills, the longer he or she has to develop those skills in the years following.

The recognition of a need for change lasts well beyond a person's youth. When a young person recognises that he or she has the power to change, that person will go on to change and influence society. Catherine Bertini's experiences as a young woman have directly impacted on her focus and on her priorities as an adult. It has no doubt influenced her career choices and her progress to becoming the Executive Director of a major UN agency.

All the youth activists featured in this chapter have acted as role models for new generations of young people. Ashok can inspire young people who have just discovered that they are HIV positive. Alphonsine's personal experiences give her more credibility and a greater identity with Girl Guides and Girl Scouts growing up in Africa today.

- **A voluntary commitment**

Youth participation is not financially rewarding. Indeed, more often than not a young person actually gives time and money to his or her activism. Youth participation has to therefore be a voluntary and altruistic commitment. All of the activists who have shared their personal pathways in this chapter have participated in civil society as volunteers. This has strengthened their motivation and had a positive impact on the shaping of their character.

Mainstreaming youth participation

Except in a few cases, youth participation always occurs within a youth-based environment, where the young person has joined a youth movement, or has established a youth organisation themselves.

In most cases, young people are not allowed to be part of a decision-making body, unless that body is part of a youth-based organisation. Even then, young people do not often get the chance to determine policy. Straight Talk is a young person's radio station. And so young people run it. But what about the policy-making body, the Straight Talk Foundation? The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is very good at including young people at all levels of decision-making, but it is a youth-based organisation.

Real youth participation beyond youth organisations or beyond youth-led movements is a rare thing and certainly does not feature in the case studies in this chapter. Mainstream politics or the corporate sector rarely make a commitment to it.

Changing attitudes

Just like any activism, youth participation can sometimes be met with distrust and even persecution. Young people who rely on others for economic support may particularly feel this disapproval. Young people who join political debates, particularly those opposing the government, may face criticism from their families or from society. Young people like Kuh, who joined the recent demonstrations against the President, may be ostracised by their families.

Conclusion

These stories are all personal accounts written by exceptional people who actively chose to participate because they saw a need and because they had the right supportive and enabling environments. The key components of youth participation, identified as common threads through all of these personal pathways to empowerment, are:

- A personal commitment
- The influence of adults
- The influence of peers
- A need for change
- A political will
- A lifetime commitment
- A voluntary commitment