

Chapter 5

The Challenge of Youth Citizenship: From the Margins to the Centre

Kumi Naidoo

Introduction

As you read these words, several young people around the world will lose their lives – to AIDS, gun violence, the impact of environmental neglect or to landmines. Many will suffer, as social support systems and the criminal justice system fail young people. Others will suffer as a result of the failure of the so-called war on drugs, or will simply perish in various internal conflicts in countries around the world. Are young people, then, simply a problem that adults have to find solutions for?

On the contrary, despite all the challenges that young people face, it is they who provide the greatest innovation, have the greatest courage and put forth an amazing amount of voluntary energy and effort. Young people do not need to inhabit the fringes of public life, but can easily be in the centre. They are already beginning to occupy the centre in creative ways, even if it is to express their frustration or anger with their circumstances.

This book has made the argument that young people are not simply leaders of tomorrow, as is often said, but in very real ways are leaders of today. The experiences of individual youth leaders, as captured by Charlotte Baran in Chapter 3, and the examples of the efforts of youth organisations, as captured by Laila Duggan and Indira Ravindran in Chapter 4, suggest strongly that youth are on the move – with far greater skill, strategy and sense of purpose than ever before. Young people around the world are saying that they are not willing to be mere spectators on the sidelines, but that they want to be central players at different levels in the public sphere.

The participation of young people is nothing short of a demographic imperative. It has often been noted that young people, particularly in developing countries, are in the numeric majority. In some countries in Africa, for example, this is a growing tendency as the decimation caused by HIV/AIDS is reshaping the contours of the demographic map. The challenge faced by young people, as well as adult leaders of civil society organisations and their counterparts in business and government, is to create ways in which young people are treated as fully-fledged citizens. Young citizens have the right to be heard not only on the policy issues that confront various countries, but also policy choices facing global institutions such

as the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations and its agencies. In short, advancing the agenda of youth participation may be no longer longer a nice thing to do, but it is a critical thing to achieve. In order to better explain this statement, I would like to disaggregate youth participation into three levels.

Levels of youth participation: macro, meso and micro

Macro: Young people want to address the fundamentals of governance, at the national and global levels.

Over the past few years, young people have increasingly begun to question the very essence of the public institutions that govern them. We are familiar with the phenomenon of students and youth activists taking to the streets in protest at unfair international trade agreements or corrupt, authoritarian governments. At a national level, even in long-standing democracies, young people are voicing their dissatisfaction as public institutions appear increasingly impotent, unpopular and unaccountable. Merely holding elections does not guarantee democratic participation and decision-making, and certainly does not enhance the role of young people in society. At a global level, young people have joined forces with experienced activists to raise fundamental questions about the governance of powerful global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and to propose alternatives. They are challenging inequitable political and economic structures, for example, the dangers of wealthier countries having disproportionate influence over international financial institutions. Another example is their questioning of the one dollar one vote system of the World Bank and the IMF at a time when world leaders have acknowledged that we need a new financial architecture that delivers greater equity and social justice.

Unconstrained by the 'that's just the way the world is' mentality, young people have the ability to pose questions in fresh ways that open the door to possibilities of fundamental institutional reform at the national and global levels.

Clearly, then, one important aspect of youth participation is the opening up of debates and exploration of alternatives to the institutional arrangements that the adult world takes as absolute and 'given', and beyond fundamental change and fundamental reform. Young people have inspired several adults to think with greater courage and vision in order to make substantive change that deals with issues of governance and power, and not just small administrative reforms. This does not negate the fact that many young people in urban and semi-urban areas around the world can often be apathetic, self-absorbed and with caught up with individualistic pursuits?

Meso: Young people want to engage with ongoing policy processes, and to influence outcomes to ensure that positive social and economic change continues.

Many young people, understandably, have reservations about the various flaws in the policy-making processes and the shape and form of public institutions at a national and global level. All the same, a significant number is committed to working for positive change within current constraints such as the youth-unfriendly governance of these institutions, youth voices not being taken seriously, and the gaps in accountability or 'democratic deficits' within institutions. At the national and provincial/statewide level young people, like many other socially excluded groups, find that the while the rules of participation is not in their favour. They find that it is critical to participate and try to influence the outcomes. Sometimes this is done to limit damage to policy positions, sometimes it is to advance a particular policy, and sometimes young people participate simply to better understand the rules of the institutions and processes with the view of developing a long-term strategy to change and challenge these rules. Given our working definition of young people as age thirty and under, we find that they are often present in a range of national policy processes where there are options for input and engagement by civil society organisations. On the down side, we find that often to be accepted in these processes they cannot advance a youth agenda too forcefully but have to subordinate this to other broader and more generic goals.

At a global level, young people are engaged to varying degrees and in a variety of ways with the diverse array of intergovernmental organisations and international processes. A growing number of international conferences have specific opportunities for young people to meet and develop their own positions on a range of issues. The work of a range of visionary thinkers in institutions such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat who have consciously opened spaces for youth involvement, is salutary indeed. While some might say this is too little too late, it is still an important foundation that can be built upon and consolidated in coming years. Seeing young people as active and positive social agents, and not as victims, is not only the right thing to do but clearly the smart thing to do.

However, overall, there is a growing despondency in the ranks of many civil society leaders around the world as to whether engagement through dialogue with international institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO and so on, does actually yield substantive benefits. This despondency also rears its head within some youth organisations. Yet, many young leaders conclude that despite the limitations of these consultative processes, it is critical that they stay engaged with the current institutional framework to make the best of what is available .

Micro: Young people want to do real things for real people through a range of innovative programmatic interventions.

The number of young people participating directly in civil and political life via a diverse set of indigenous local and national youth organisations, is awe-inspiring.

The programmatic output of national and local youth organisations adds immense value to the overall social fabric in communities around the world. For example,

the Chinese National Youth Foundation, is engaged in, amongst other things, youth leadership training as well as helping build schools in rural China. In Africa, various youth organisations are doing inspiring work around the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Importantly, many youth-driven initiatives do not necessarily manifest themselves in formal youth organisations. Helping Hands Youth Organisation in Durban, South Africa, has been operating as a non-registered informal voluntary organisation since 1980, engaged in such diverse activities as civic and political education classes, education tuition in subjects such as Mathematics and Physics, coaching in swimming and athletics, and adopting various institutions offering care to abandoned children and those living with disabilities. In addition, gender awareness programmes and racial justice programmes also helped share information, develop skills, and build leadership. I was privileged to have been part of the leadership of Helping Hands. When I reflect on the work that I now do with CIVICUS and its affiliates, in promoting citizen participation and strengthening civil society, I have little doubt that most of what I know was learned in my years as a young activist.

Global youth movements and organisations such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), the International Youth Foundation (IYF), the World Organisation of the Scout Movement, the International Alliance of the YMCAs and YWCAs all offer great opportunities to youth to realise their potential. Chapter Three provides great personal examples of young people benefiting from such youth movements. Right now, many of these institutions are grappling with how to engage young people in the governance of their institutions, believing that including young people more effectively in decision-making can only enhance performance. The efforts of inter-governmental organisations such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UN also demonstrate healthy trends of youth participation in a range of initiatives around the world.

While issues of governance and management might still be at stake in many of these institutions, their global reach, the ability to develop inspiring leadership skills and build a community spiritedness, all combine to broaden and deepen youth participation.

Having examined the various levels of actual and potential youth participation in civil and political society, we must now consider the particular challenges and opportunities for youth participation. Here again, we must disaggregate our understanding of familiar concepts, including the most basic category of 'youth', so we may better understand the challenges and opportunities for youth participation.

Mapping out the Challenges and Opportunities for Youth Participation

Disaggregating youth: Guarding against homogenisation and respecting diversity

It is vital that in pursuing the objective of strengthening youth participation we do not treat young people as a monolith. Failure to understand the prevailing diversities could have disastrous consequences. What, then, are some of the key distinctions that need to be kept in mind? The first, and perhaps most important, is gender. Second, we have the distinctions that different age cohorts raise. Third, we need to be mindful of occupational locations: primary school, high or secondary schools, unemployed young people, professional young people, tertiary education and young workers. Fourth, cultural background and religion play identity-defining roles. Fifth, issues of race and ethnicity also need to be dealt with sensitively.

These diversities are not being brought up to suggest that young people cannot rise above such differences. In fact, young people are often better able to establish connections and unite across these boundaries, and have the ability to lead the way, for example, in fostering greater racial and ethnic justice and greater religious acceptance and tolerance. Failure to respect this diversity, on the other hand, could lead to programme failure and fail to harness the full potential of all young people.

Young people and globalisation

It is untrue that globalisation is fundamentally a new trend. The quest to connect across geographical divides predates the nation-state system as we know it today. Yet the scale of interaction is far greater today due to advances in the field of communications. Today, we find that young people have connected across national boundaries in creative ways, and that the flow of information has, in fact, fostered a virtual youth community that manifests itself in different ways across the world.

At the same time, we are confronted with the challenge of what Demos, a policy think tank in New York, has labelled 'economic apartheid'. Economic apartheid is also recognised as an important issue by UN ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), and the organisation's focus on 'equity, citizenship and development' is particularly refreshing.

Economic apartheid often has a distinct youth dimension, even though a small percentage of young people have benefited as a result of the Information Technology revolution. The sad reality, though, is that while some speed off on the information super-highway, millions more are left behind, stuck in their potholes, further debilitated by their lack of technical knowledge or the availability of infrastructure. As indicated in Chapter 4, the dominance of English on the internet

also means that many other language groups are excluded.

On the positive side, information technology has played a pivotal role in broadening access to participation, while the sharing of experience has promoted cross-cultural learning and dialogue and has had an impact on how young people interact with each other and society as a whole. Notwithstanding the inequity in access to information and communications technology, known commonly as the 'digital divide', young people can be said to be participating, learning and leading in more creative, and often invisible ways. Just because you cannot see them does not mean they are not participating. The coming decades should see a greater intensification for those people who have technological access. This, unfortunately, means that those without access will be less involved in national or global processes, a challenge that we can only hope and work for, so that there is more equitable access, and more equitable and effective participation.

Young people and the social exclusion debate

In the coming decades, it would be a remarkable achievement indeed if humanity could judge itself not simply on the success of a few, but on the overall progress of everybody. In particular, humanity needs to rise to the challenge of addressing in creative, dynamic and courageous ways those who have been historically, and who continue to be, excluded from the mainstream of public life. In societies around the world, young people have been 'marginalised', seen as the 'lost generation' or 'Generation X' in search of self-identity, and as victims in need of salvation. Young people's alienation from public life is, in itself, a form of social exclusion that needs to be addressed. In a sense, this is the argument of all the preceding chapters in this book.

But more than that we also need to pose the question: how can young people, notwithstanding their own feelings of social exclusion, contribute to supporting the struggles for justice of other socially excluded groups? Being sensitive to questions of social exclusion also opens a powerful window into the work of other constituencies striving to create a more just world. This means that youth participation can be brought together with a poor community battling against environmental injustice, or finding the connections with many of the other socially excluded groups. The one caution here is that young people must ensure that when they interact with other constituencies, they work as partners, listen well, guard against framing people as victims, beneficiaries, recipients, clients or charity cases. It is critical that youth maintain the integrity of the people they seek to serve. In Africa, we have a proverb, 'I am because you are'. This is a powerful statement, which says that if you did not exist I would not exist. We acquire our identity, our sense of community, our meaning and purpose through our interaction with the other people in our lives. Therefore, when working with socially excluded groups, we need to be mindful that those of us who are 'serving' are in fact serving ourselves, since we often get so much more in return.

Young people and the challenge of leadership

Young people, as all the previous chapters have shown, are assuming important leadership roles all over the world. Young people's visibility in leadership is growing, not declining, and this needs to be consolidated, celebrated and expanded. The challenge however, is to recognise the multifaceted nature of youth leadership and ensure that there is always a conscious commitment to ensuring that leadership development is part of our work. Leadership development is a term that is frequently used in broad, sweeping terms, whereas in reality, it is very much context determined. From my position as a civil society practitioner, I see at least three distinct patterns of leadership development that are required in NGOs and other civil society organisations.

First, we have youth organisations constituted and led entirely by young people. Here, incumbent leaders need to ensure that they do not allow their own leadership, however inspiring and excellent, to prevent the rise of new leadership.

Second, we have the situation of young people working in youth organisations governed entirely, or mostly, by adults. In such organisations, there have been some positive movements in the right direction over the last ten years. Increasingly, young people are being brought into the governance structures of these institutions. For example, there has been a moderate rise in the number of young people being nominated to governing Boards of Directors. There is also a greater push to employ young people in the ranks of the administrative and programming staff of these organisations. These trends need to be strengthened.

Third, we have youth involvement in civil society organisations which do not focus exclusively on youth issues. Here again, the challenges are somewhat different. In fact, it is more difficult to develop youth leadership in these settings, since it is often suggested that the vision and mission, say of an economic or social justice movement, is so pressing that there is neither the time nor the resources to worry about youth leadership or other 'distracting' factors. Yet these organisations often rely on young people as their 'shock troops', 'foot soldiers' or 'work force'. These organisations must think deeply about how they relate to their youth constituency, and how they can ensure that their leadership role is not stunted, but is encouraged. Ultimately, the future vibrancy of many organisations depends on doing this effectively.

Youth organisations, and indeed all citizens' organisations, need to think constantly about nourishing youth leadership and fresh, innovative ideas. Therefore, youth organisations have to make investments in leadership development that are smart, courageous, innovative and cost-effective. This entails an investment in time and locally available resources, as well as the creation of conscious learning opportunities for young people, that take into account a full range of leadership skills. Fortunately, many innovative leadership programmes already exist; Chapter 4 features great examples. Such programmes need to be built upon, and incorporated as a natural part of the day-to-day life of these organisations.

Young people and the challenge of gender equality

The disproportionately low representation of young women in public life is truly scandalous. One must acknowledge the contributions of the women's movement around the world, which has opened up more spaces for active young women's leadership and has led to remarkable improvements in our approach to social issues over the past few decades. The UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 provided impetus to these developments, and several young women were inspired by the pre- and post-Beijing processes. Unfortunately, many youth organisations remain firmly dominated by young men and a range of societal norms hinder the participation of young women. The fact that young women carry a greater burden of responsibility for domestic work, for example, reduces the amount of time available for participation in public life, and in many societies young women are actively discouraged from seeking any avenues for public engagement.

Gender equality needs to be tackled at two levels by young people who believe that full democracy will never be achieved unless men and women share equitably in the democratic and economic process of their societies. The struggles for gender equality within youth organisations and in society as a whole have to be tackled simultaneously. Thankfully, more and more people, including a growing number of men, are saying that gender equality is central to creating a world that is environmentally sustainable, and in which social and economic justice reigns supreme. Given that even in long-standing democracies women still play a largely token part in establishment institutions, people need to ask themselves why are they willing to deprive societies of the vast experience, wisdom, sensitivity and creativity of more than half the world's population.

Young people, democracy and governance

Increasingly today, citizens around the world are arguing strongly that they want a greater involvement in public life than simply voting once every four or five years. The stale and old idea of 'governance being what government does' is being vigorously contested. Governance is being redefined as how policy decisions are made and what government and its citizens do, together and apart, to meet the needs of their societies. Many enlightened governments and international bodies increasingly seek out the voices of citizens' organisations and try to draw more people into the policy-making process. This is important at a time when, in fact, democracy is in a crisis. Fewer and fewer people are voting and electoral systems are becoming less and less accessible to ordinary people. There is diminishing internal democracy, transparency and openness within powerful political parties, even in countries with long-standing histories of party politics. There is a growing sense that national governments in poor countries are powerless in the face of influential global institutions. We see that formal electoral democracy is unable to deliver economic justice in many parts of the world. All these realities have combined to create a huge distance between elected officials and their citizens.

What, then, are the specific challenges for young people? The most important challenge is to ensure that young people do not slide into cynicism, but continue to remain critically engaged with democratic institutions, however flawed. Young people of voting age should vote, even if it is only to 'spoil' or invalidate their ballots if there are no candidates worth voting for, as a sign of protest at the choices available to them. Apathy should be challenged. The time has also come for a serious reconsideration of the voting age. Today, young people often have as much or more access to information as their parents do. Young people have important responsibilities and, hence, they should be more involved in democratic processes and public life. For some time now, some of us have been calling for the voting age limit to be reduced to 16. It is worth bearing in mind that President Nelson Mandela, in acknowledgement of the role young school students played in the struggle against apartheid, once called for 14-year-olds to be given the vote.

As suggested by Steve Mokwena in Chapter 2, young people have a big role to play in addressing the democratic deficit at various formal and informal institutional levels. Young people have played a central role historically in struggles for democracy around the world and this continues today. There are many youth heroes who have given their lives to see democracy prevail. In meeting the challenges for greater democracy in the world, young people need to operate at three levels. At the macro level, we need to be looking at what substantive changes need to be made in the rules, procedures and laws that guide our lives at a local, national and global level. Perhaps it is going to take the imagination and the creativity of young people to think more courageously and innovatively about what changes need to be made so that our public institutions are the best they can be to meet all of humanity's needs.

At a meso level, while recognising that institutional change is a marathon and not a sprint, we still need to ensure that we try to make the current processes work as well as possible. How can we get more young people running for public office, voting, campaigning and shaping the election agenda? At a global level, how can we ensure, for example, that the forthcoming UN conferences, such as the conference on the environment and sustainable development (Earth Summit 2002), to be held in Johannesburg, has a strong youth voice and presence? Young people and those not yet born are, perhaps, the most important stakeholders in the environment.

At a micro level, young people should be engaged in specific projects around voter education, civic education, promoting adult literacy and so on. All three levels of participation are important and it is incumbent upon young people to establish links between these levels.

Youth participation in developing a new world vision

We should resist the idea that the world is largely fine and there are a few minor problems that need to be addressed. Indeed we should celebrate humanity's considerable achievements but we should not allow complacency to set in or allow

a very low threshold of expectations about what our world could be. Surely, when there is so much affluence and wealth in the world but we are unable to prevent homelessness, hunger, starvation, disease and conflict, then something is not working and we must believe that there is a solution to be pursued and found. Young people have the advantage that they are not overly burdened by too much of the cynicism and practices of the adult world. They are probably better able to imagine a world where there is no homelessness or war, and one in which justice prevails. So one of the roles that young people should engage in is visionary scenario planning. Getting young people to think about the future and about what new paradigms might work is an important avenue to pursue. But this need not just be a long-term, romantic enterprise. Young people can and should be looking at creative and new ways for organisations to operate and rethink their strategies.

I can provide two examples of novel ways in which young people have 'broken the mould'. Rather than view the relationship between corporations and civil society organisations as primarily adversarial or merely a one-time flirtation captured by a donation or grant, young people have participated in encouraging civil society organisations and businesses to creatively seek common ground, and work out ways of channelling the considerable resources of the latter towards social development. For many civil society organisations, this approach of exploring common ground with business required them to 'think out of the box'. Of course, finding the appropriate terms of these inter-relationships is always difficult, but there is evidence that more people in need can be reached and supported by such partnerships. CIVICUS has published a pioneering study called 'Promoting Corporate Citizenship: Opportunities for Business and Civil Society Engagement' outlining the challenges, possibilities and opportunities to move the relationship between NGOs and the business community beyond donations and funding grants to harnessing business's full resources.

Another example of 'breaking the mould' has to do with how we think about issues of gender equality generally, and an issue like violence against women and children in particular. In the past, violence against women was treated as a woman's issue, to be taken up by women's organisations. In reality, as some men have repeatedly pointed out, this is fundamentally a men's issue. It is men who are the perpetrators and the problem is rooted in how masculinity is constructed and understood. So education and outreach efforts should target men as well as women. Rethinking some of our fundamental conceptual frames and some of the ways in which we work, and linking that to more substantive issues can create a more just and equitable world. In meeting this challenge, young people have an indispensable role.

From mazes to GRACES: integrating youth work with broader social and economic change

Sometimes, the youth participation agenda is unable to move forward and is trapped in a maze of intrigue because it does not actively intersect with the range

of other social interventions that are underway. We can move out of this maze of isolation if we embrace the intersectionality of youth participation and youth citizenship with some key areas of voluntary action for positive social and economic change. Inspired by those women activists who have refused to be parochial in vision and have made common cause with other citizen movements that work for social and economic change, I propose GRACES* as a simpler way to talk about the challenge of intersectionality. GRACES: G stands for full gender equality and raises the question of what special actions are needed to ensure the full participation of young women in public life. R raises the question of how we can work for racial justice and religious tolerance. A deals with age and ability, C deals with class, community and caste, E deals with ethnicity and S covers those that are otherwise socially excluded, such as people living with HIV/AIDS or other illnesses and disabilities, indigenous people and those who face discrimination because of their sexual orientation.

Conclusion

Advancing the agenda of active youth citizenship will, of course, not be served by romanticising youth participation. While we look at the abundant benefits, opportunities and energies that can be harnessed to breathe new energy into what has become stale, moribund and tired public life, we need also to note the limitations that understandably hold back youth participation. However, in examining such limitations, adult public figures, especially, should recognise that each generation brings with it certain objective limitations. These limitations should not be read as something that should limit our exploration of making youth citizenship real and active, but should be understood just as another general challenge that needs to be met with creativity and realism.

Any agenda to harness the full participation of youth in public life should take as its starting point the need to develop and build appropriate generational linkages. This is a matter of priority, considering that the growing sense of alienation experienced by young people is linked to serious generational cleavages that fail to make use of inter-generational synergy. The need for this sort of prioritisation is illustrated by the work of the Global Meeting of Generations, a civil society organisation which seeks to bring together the wisdom of multiple generations in framing a new approach to sustainable development.

Young people need to feel enabled to take initiatives to deal with the challenges that they face. Just as importantly, youth leaders and adults should encourage young people to be major societal stakeholders; stakeholders who have the ability to offer creative contributions to the challenges facing humanity as a whole. Failure to do so will squander the great potential that active youth participation can offer to the world.

*'GRACES' was inspired by comments made by participants at the founding meeting of the 'Gender at Work Collaborative' convened by UNIFEM, CIVICUS, Women's Learning Partnership and the Association for Women's Rights in Development in June 2001.