
Children, young people and participation

Youth Policy Working Paper
July 2016

3

This chapter was produced as part of the “Case for Space” global research and advocacy initiative to better understand and strengthen the environment for child and youth development. It was a project of three global youth organisations, Restless Development, War Child UK, and Youth Business International, funded by the UK Department for International Development and delivered by Youth Policy Labs. The full research report, “From Rhetoric to Action: Towards an enabling environment for child and youth development in the Sustainable Development Goals”, is available here:

www.fromrhetorictoaction.org.



Abstract

“Youth” is everywhere right now. With the massive growth in the number of structures, policies and focus on youth, alongside street protests in cities across the world, young people’s participation and activism is in the spotlight.

This paper explores academic literature and recent publications and considers the relevance of traditional participation models and theories at a time where young people have the ability to be heard and realise change in a way that bypasses formal organisations. Particular attention is given to the instigators of young people’s participation and their aims: principally this paper finds it is adults seeking individual character change at a time when young people seek radical social change.

Finally, the paper explores the absence of power in formal processes. The wave of social uprisings and civil unrest has demonstrated young people’s willingness to confront powerful regimes and institutions — even against the threat of police brutality, sexual abuse, and violence. Their precarious activism sits uncomfortably alongside the rhetoric of youth participation through events, structures and processes.

Contents

1	How is participation defined?	1
<hr style="border-top: 1px solid #000;"/>		
2	Key aspects of participation	2
<hr style="border-top: 1px solid #000;"/>		
3	The relevance of participation	4
<hr style="border-top: 1px solid #000;"/>		
4	Programming on participation	5
4.1	On whose terms?	5
4.2	To what end?	6
4.3	Youth participation as political action	8
	Author	12



1 How is participation defined?

Participation is defined in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was agreed by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989 and is “the most rapidly and widely ratified international human rights treaty in history”¹ with 194 State Parties (including observer states of Palestine and the Holy See) signing up to the Convention². The Government of Somalia recently announced their intention to sign the convention, leaving only the United States of America and South Sudan as non-ratifying countries³.

The UNCRC covers 42 rights for children, and Article 12 is one of the principle drivers for youth participation⁴. Article 12 of the convention states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”⁵

Article 12 has dominated the academic and practitioner discourse on children and young people’s participation⁶ and articulates the responsibility of governments to realise children’s right to be involved in the decision making processes that affect their lives. Furthermore, the right to participation can be seen as a prerequisite for the realisation of

all rights for children and young people, such as in health, education or protection (Gaventa, 2004).⁷ The UNCRC is regularly reported on by Member States, with civil society reports and UN country staff-produced alternative reports to ensure oversight and accountability.

Article 12 of the UNCRC has not escaped controversy and debate, particularly around the inclusion of capabilities and age-based weighting, but also in that it notes only the expression of “views” rather than more comprehensive “participation”, resulting in the institutional and societal change and improved outcomes of young people that many practitioners, academics and young people seek to achieve.⁸

Though the UNCRC is, in the legal sense, focused on child participation, other United Nations frameworks advocate for young people’s participation, including the World Programme of Action for Youth (1995)⁹, the System Wide Action Plan on Youth (2014)¹⁰, and the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹¹. Numerous regional and institutional conventions and frameworks support the participation of young people. The African Youth Charter provides young people with “the right to participate in all spheres of society”¹², the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment¹³ has the promotion of youth participation as a specific goal, the Iberoamerica Convention

1 United Nations, 2015, UN Treaty Collection: Convention of the Rights of the Child, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en

2 Ibid.

3 United Nations, 2015, January 20, *UN lauds Somalia as country ratifies landmark children’s rights treaty*, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49845#.VRIZKZPF920>

4 Children’s Rights Alliance England, 2009, *Beyond Article 12 – The Local Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in England*.

5 United Nations, 2015.

6 Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N., 2010, *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*, Routledge.

7 Gaventa, J., 2004, *Towards participatory governance: assessing the transformative possibilities*. In Hickey, S., and Mohan, G., 2004, *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?*, Zed Books: London.

8 Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N., 2010.

9 United Nations, 1995, *World Programme of Action for Youth*, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf>

10 United Nations, 2014, *System-Wide Action Plan on Youth*, http://unyouthswap.org/system/refinery/resources/2014/10/15/20_42_35_106_UN_Youth_SWAP_Report_2014.pdf

11 United Nations, 1948, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

12 African Union, 2006, *African Youth Charter*, http://www.youthpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2006_African_Youth_Charter_Eng.pdf

13 Commonwealth Secretariat, 2006, *The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) 2006-2015*, http://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2006_Commonwealth_PAYE_Eng.pdf

on Youth Rights (2005)¹⁴ has an article on participation and is embedded throughout other articles, and in Europe, participation is ensured through the Council of Europe's Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life¹⁵ and the European Commission's Youth Strategy (2010-2018)¹⁶. Furthermore, young people's participation in decision-making often forms a core part of national youth policies, as well as youth policies of development agencies, such as USAID (2012)¹⁷, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011)¹⁸, and the Canadian International Development Agency (2009)¹⁹ and international agencies including UNDP (2014)²⁰, OECD (2013)²¹, UNFPA (2009)²², and UNAIDS (2012).²³

-
- 14 Iberoamerican Young Organisation, 2005, *Iberoamerican Convention on Rights of Youth*, http://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2005_Ibero-American-Convention-on-Young-Peoples_Rights_ENG.pdf
 - 15 Council of Europe, 2012, *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Coe_youth/Participation/COE_charter_participation_2013_en.pdf
 - 16 European Commission, 2009, *EU Strategy for Youth*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009DCo200&from=EN>
 - 17 USAID, 2012, *Youth in Development – Realizing the demographic opportunity*, http://www.youthpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2012_Youth_Development_Demographic_Opportunity_Eng.pdf
 - 18 Government of Germany, 2011, *Young people in German development policy – a contribution to the implementation of the rights of children and youth*, http://www.bmz.de/en/publications/type_of_publication/strategies/Strategiepapier312_12_2011.pdf
 - 19 Government of Canada, 2009, *Securing the future of children and youth – CIDA's Children and Youth Strategy*, <http://www.international.gc.ca/development-developpement/assets/pdfs/children-youth-strategy-e.pdf>
 - 20 United Nations Development Programme, 2014, *UNDP Youth Strategy 2014-2017*, http://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2014_UNDP_Youth_Strategy_Eng.pdf
 - 21 OCED, 2013, *The OECD Action Plan for Youth*, <http://www.oecd.org/els/emp/Youth-Action-Plan.pdf>
 - 22 UNFPA, 2009, *UNFPA Strategy on Adolescents and Youth*, <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20Adolescents%20and%20Youth%20Strategy.pdf>
 - 23 UNAIDS, 2012, *Crowd Out Aids – Strategy recommendations for collaborating with a new generation of leaders for the AIDS response*, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2338_CrowdOutAIDS_en_o.pdf

While recent conventions, strategies and policies have championed youth participation, the concept is far from new, with numerous philosophers throughout history theorising on citizens' interaction with state machinery and instruments of power.²⁴ It is therefore useful to review this context in relation to youth participation by looking at the broader participation agenda.

2 Key aspects of participation

For youth, participation originally focused on “young people being represented in political processes and decision-making”²⁵, including single-issue campaigns, involvement in youth wings of political parties, international student union organisations, and the trade union movement. Youth participation is most frequently – and most commonly – associated with the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes²⁶ such as within government, organisations, public services, judicial proceedings, and at multiple levels of governance from the local to the global arenas. Percy-Smith & Thomas (2010) note a range of requirements that are needed to support genuine participation: legal frameworks; information provision; cultural and attitudinal change amongst adults and decision-makers; mechanisms for youth involvement in formal policy, service or organisational processes; and opportunities for complaints, such as through a Children's Commissioner or independent child rights committee.²⁷

-
- 24 Fleming, J., 2013, Young People's Participation – Where next?, *Children & Society*, 27, 484-495.
 - 25 Lentin, A., Ohana, Y., 2008, All different – never equal? On the intolerance of Tolerance, in *Born in Flensburg, Europe: Journeys with Peter Lauritzen*, Demokratie & Dialog e.V.
 - 26 Fleming, J., 2013.
 - 27 Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N., 2010.

Brodie et al (2009)²⁸ define three classifications of participation: public, social, and individual. Using this typology, a number of activities, structures and processes have been identified:

Sphere	Description	Examples
Public	Structures within existing decision-making structures and processes	Youth councils; Youth parliaments; School councils; Youth advisory panels; Members and leaders of youth organisations or groups; Voting; standing for election or official; Organisational or institutional panel or committee; Formal consultations.
Social	Formal/informal structures that are created outside of formal political or organisational structures	Involvement in civil society organisations; Social or cultural groups; Community development; Local service or project delivery; Social movements; Grassroots campaigns; Housing associations; Faith groups; Informal networks; Identity or interest groups
Individual	Individual choices, decisions and interaction with the world	Involvement in decisions that directly impact the individuals such as judicial proceedings (e.g. divorcing parents); Educational and healthcare matters; Choices, decisions and behaviours as part of every day life; Personal morals, values or principles; Religious beliefs; Consumer choices

To help navigate the field of youth participation, a considerable number of models, frameworks, analogies and metaphors have been created to support organisations, social actors, and young people conceptualise the spaces, degrees, and types of participation. The collection of participation models by Karsten (2012)²⁹ covers forty years of models (though predominately from 2000 onwards) from a range of institutions (UNICEF, OECD, DfID CSO Youth Working Group, NCVO), academics and practitioners. It includes participation models developed for different spheres, such as citizen engagement, community organising, international development, the policy cycle, online spaces, volunteering, and rights-based approaches.

One of the popular models of youth participation, Roger Hart's (1992)³⁰ "Ladder of Participation", builds on Arnstein's (1969)³¹ model that originates from the urban planning literature. Arnstein's model positioned citizen participation in relation to power, "arguing that participation cannot be had without sharing and re-distributing power".³² Hart's adapted model continued the metaphor of a ladder, with the eight rungs depicting differing degrees of participation, from manipulation, decoration and tokenism (deemed as non-participatory), and from youth-informed to youth-initiated decisions in the five participatory stages. The model was developed with UNICEF, and has become a well-known and often-referred to explanation of the differing levels in which young people may be involved in decision making processes.

²⁸ Brodie, E., Cowling, E., Nissen, N., et al., 2009, Understanding participation: a literature review, *Pathways through Participation*.

²⁹ Karsten, A., 2012, *Participation Models – Citizens, youth, online*, http://nonformality.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Participation_Models_20121118.pdf

³⁰ Hart, R., 1992, Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship. *Essay for UNICEF (Innocenti Essay No 4)*.

³¹ Arnstein, S., 1969, A ladder of citizen participation, *Journal of American Planning*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-224.

³² Karsten, 2012.

3 The relevance of participation

At a time of “dramatic decline in the political involvement of younger generations”³³, the past twenty years has seen a rise in the number of structures, organisations, policies, and events focusing on young people’s participation and the promotion of youth as a specific social category.³⁴

At the United Nations, since the publication of the World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995, the following changes have taken place: International Youth Day became an annually celebrated event; The Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development was established; Ahmad Alhendawi was appointed as the first UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth; The System-Wide Action Plan on Youth was adopted; and UN Youth Delegates have been permitted to participate in high-level negotiations. Additionally, the forthcoming Global Initiative on Youth Policies will be launched in 2015, furthering the biennial UN-hosted Global Forum on Youth Policies. As noted previously, a number of UN agencies have adopted specific policies and strategies for working with youth, including UNDP (2014), UNFPA (2009), and UNAIDS (2012). Within global processes, opportunities for young people have been created across a number of thematic areas, including education, environment, sustainability, biodiversity, urban development, climate change, and youth philanthropy.³⁵ Young people have been actively consulted and engaged in a number of high-level processes, particularly the Post-2015 Development Agenda, through the Major Group for Children and Youth. The International Co-ordinating Meeting of Youth Organisations (ICMYO) has established a more formal process of membership and is increasingly active in international fora and events.

33 Forbirg, J., 2005, Introduction: democratic politics, legitimacy, and youth participation, in *Revisiting youth political participation*, Council of Europe.

34 Sukarieh, M. and Tannock, S., 2015, *Youth Rising? The politics of youth in the global economy*, Routledge.

35 Youthpolicy.org., 2015, *Structures, spaces and places*, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/structures/>

In recent years, a number of high profile youth events have taken place, including the Y20 (Puebla, 2012), Youth 21 (Nairobi, 2012), World Urban Youth Assembly (Naples, 2012), CIVICUS Youth Assembly (Montreal, 2012), ECOSOC Youth Forum (2012; 2013; 2014; 2015), Global Youth Forum (Bali, 2012), Commonwealth Youth Forum (Hambantota, 2013), UNESCO Youth Forum (2013), World Bank Youth Summit (2013; 2014), World Youth Conference (Mexico, 2010; Colombo, 2014), and the First Global Forum on Youth Policy (Baku, 2014).

The rise in the number of international events has been coupled with a rise in the number of national policies focusing on youth, and of 198 countries, 127 countries now have a national youth policy - up from 99 countries in January 2013.³⁶ Additionally, 190 governments have a dedicated authority (ministry, department, or office) that is responsible for youth.³⁷ The First Global Forum on Youth Policies brought together over 115 governments, with over 70 ministers responsible for youth attending – the biggest since the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth in Lisbon in 1998.³⁸

In addition to events and processes, there has been a focus on creating structures, such as young mayors, youth parliaments, youth advisory boards, youth forums and youth networks.³⁹ This has also spurred the promotion of young people’s participation in the delivery of public services – both in the spheres of governments, organisations and institutions and particularly at local, community levels⁴⁰. Of 198 countries, 131 countries (66.2%) have a national youth organisation / association that are recognised as the representative structure

36 Youthpolicy.org, 2014, *The state of youth policy in 2014*, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/2014/05/state-of-youth-policy-2014/>

37 Ibid.

38 Youthpolicy.org, 2014a, November 27, *First Global Forum on Youth Policies: Putting our commitments to the community on the table*, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/youth-policy-symposia/our-commitments/>

39 Sukarieh, M. and Tannock, S., 2015, *Youth Rising? The politics of youth in the global economy*, Routledge.

40 Badham B. and Wade H., 2010, Hear by Right: Standards Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People. *The National Youth Agency*. Latest edition.

for young people by governments.⁴¹ At a global level, the most recent – and now the largest – formal participation structure is the Commonwealth Youth Council, which was launched in 2013 as “the recognised voice of more than 1.2 billion young people of the Commonwealth”.⁴² The Commonwealth is an inter-governmental organisation comprised of 53 countries, representing 2.2 billion citizens, with a membership that includes some of the “largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries”.⁴³

Though the global level opportunities for youth participation have received considerable coverage within the youth sector, the academic literature mostly focuses on young people’s involvement in decision-making processes at a local level. The participation of children and young people in decisions and processes that directly affect their lives is seen as fostering a democratic environment, improving services and outcomes and further a “social justice” agenda (Brodie et al, 2009). As explored in Brodie et al’s (2009) three-fold typology explored previously, public and social participation was often focused on the community level, such as school or area youth councils, grassroots campaigns, faith projects, housing associations and local service delivery.

To strengthen the connection between global issues and the local and personal realities of young people, non-formal educational techniques have been developed (Adams, 2010)⁴⁴. Commonly known as “global youth work”, this practice encourages young people’s participation in campaigning for change at a local level in order to achieve greater levels of equity and justice at the global level. Research by De Montfort University (2013)⁴⁵ concluded that “global youth work” was an effective method in supporting young people to take action on global

development issues, particularly socially excluded youth groups.

4 Programming on participation

4.1 On whose terms?

Despite this rise in child and youth participation structures and spaces, Forbrig (2005) notes that, “few would claim that these opportunities have resulted in the wide-spread and effective participation of young people.”⁴⁶ Tisdall (2008)⁴⁷ argues that such structures are merely a depoliticised, ‘friendly’ way for governments, services and organisations to involve children and young people – in contrast to more political agendas, campaigns, or demands seen in the “adult” space.⁴⁸

Participation has been seen in mostly positive terms, as something to be promoted and advocate for⁴⁹, but only at the behest, invitation or “goodwill of adults”, (such as through government consultations, public services events, or development project delivery), rather than through direct empowerment and agency of young people (Lansdown, 2010)⁵⁰. Sukaireh & Tannock (2015) suggest that the youth “narrative” is changeable depending on the situation, with young people simultaneously cast as positive revolutionaries, visionaries and demanders of social change (such as in overthrowing longstanding oppressive regimes) as well as negative threats to society that are radicalised and dan-

⁴¹ Youthpolicy.org, 2014.

⁴² Commonwealth Youth Council, 2015, *Homepage*, <http://commonwealthyouthcouncil.org/>

⁴³ Commonwealth Secretariat, <http://thecommonwealth.org/member-countries>

⁴⁴ Adams, P., (2010), *A mapping of Global Youth Work*, Cass School of Education.

⁴⁵ Sallah, M., (2003), *Evaluation of the Global Youth Work in Action Project (2010-2013)*, De Montfort University & Y Care International.

⁴⁶ Forbrig, 2005.

⁴⁷ Tisdall, K., 2008, “Is the honeymoon over? Children and young people’s participation in public decision-making”, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, Vol. 16(3).

⁴⁸ Tisdall, 2008.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lansdown, G., 2010, The realisation of children’s participation rights: critical reflections. In Percy-Smith, B., Thomas, N., 2010, *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*, Routledge.

gerous.⁵¹ This fluidity in sentiment towards young people is noted by Tisdall (2008) in the assertion that youth participation is only seen as positive when it fits „comfortably into the agendas of the organising adults.”⁵² That said, adult-initiated activity is included under the “degrees of participation” section of Hart’s (1992) ladder, and Checkoway & Gutierrez (2006) note that the initiating actor is less important than the “actual effect” of young people’s participation.⁵³

Contrastingly, in the context of global social movements, young people have been effective at bypassing traditional structures and mechanisms through the rise of social networks and the ability to connect, organise and support social change agendas across geographies, demographics and legal landscapes.⁵⁴ Since 2009, a number of social uprisings and civil unrests have taken place in the United States, Iceland, United Kingdom, Brazil, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Though the role of young people within these movements is debatable⁵⁵, Castells (2013) notes that these social campaigns – some violent and fatal for those involved – have led to “tangible political transformations.”⁵⁶

As with many participation opportunities, such as those outlined by Brodie et al (2009), the number of young people that can realistically participate is likely to be low.⁵⁷ Given the global nature of many of the recent events and structures, young people attending or participating adopt a representational role of the larger youth demographic – either through formal processes (i.e. as elected national representatives) or informal generalisations on the part of individuals and organisers. Though representation may be one aspect of the broader participation agenda, it risks becoming a demonstrative

and tokenistic form of inclusion, rather than a genuine process of dialogue and power-sharing within decision-making processes, challenging structures in society.⁵⁸ Representation, such as through project consultation events or advisory groups, often involves a small number of people who have the specific resources (time, education and finances) to participate, with their individual opinions generalised to the broader youth demographic.⁵⁹ Furthermore, such groups may be more “malleable” than those consulted through a more directly democratic process⁶⁰, and therefore more appealing to adult decision-makers.

Formal structures can be supported by legislation that permits and ensure the inclusion of certain groups and organisations in participation processes, but can also have the effect of restricting and disenfranchising others – such as less structured, marginalised and disadvantaged societal groups.⁶¹ Examples of this could include the European Youth Forum’s unique place within the European Commission and the Council of Europe Youth Partnership, the Major Group for Children and Youth’s role within the UN system, or that of national youth councils within youth policy formation, where specific organisations are identified as the representative body for youth within larger, formal processes. These organisations may have their own agendas, ways of working and participatory processes that inhibit the participation of individuals, either objectively (e.g. working only with specific youth groups, not financing expenses, holding meetings in working hours), or subjectively (e.g. young people perceive that the organisation isn’t for them, that they don’t have the experience or knowledge).

51 Sukaireh & Tannock, 2015.

52 Tisdall, 2008.

53 Checkoway, B., Gutierrez, L., 2006, *Youth Participation and Community Change*, The Haworth Press: New York.

54 Mason, P., 2013, *Why it’s still kicking off everywhere: The new global revolutions*, Verso: London.

55 See Mason, P., 2013 and Sukaireh & Tannock, 2015.

56 Castells, M., 2012, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social movements in the Internet age*, Polity Press.

57 Checkoway, B., Gutierrez, L., 2006.

58 Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010.

59 Hickey, S., and Mohan, G., 2004, *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?*, Zed Books: London.

60 Barczak, M., 2001, ‘Representation by consultation? The Rise of Direct Democracy in Latin America’, *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 37-59.

61 Hickey & Mohan, 2004.

4.2 To what end?

The range of activities covered by the “umbrella” of youth participation is extensive, multi-faceted, multi-agency and multi-level.⁶² From across the literature (Fleming, 2013; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Brodie et al, 2009; Tisdall, Davis, Hill & Prout, 2006; Hickey & Mohan, 2004), numerous reasons for participation can be drawn: Strengthening democracy and state governance; Political participation; Public service accountability; Community development and cohesion; Reforming public services or institutions; Creating more responsive services; Character development of individuals (leadership skills, confidence, public speaking, etc); Social change and justice; Political influence and decisions; Organisational development; Participatory research; Realising active citizenship. The impact of participation, particularly on the personal outcomes for individuals and the community, remains contested.⁶³ Brodie et al (2009) postulate that participation does not need to lead to better outcomes for young people, whereas others strongly link such processes with influence, impact and social change (Badham & Wade, 2010; Participation Works, 2008; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Middleton, 2006). Percy-Smith & Thomas (2010) describe youth participation in terms of its possible “transformational” impact on young people and their communities, despite highlighting severe limitations in the current practice.⁶⁴

The current literature debate is less around the potential benefits of participation, as described previously, but more on the real impact that the “proliferation” of participation mechanisms is achieving for young people.⁶⁵ Sinclair (2004) notes that while the case for youth participation has largely been made, it has failed to produce meaningful results for young people. Crucially, the author postulates that youth engagement in participation mechanisms is not, in itself, the end goal, but rather it should be “a means to the end of affecting lasting change.”⁶⁶ Tisdall & Davis (2004) have raised the issue of effectiveness and impact of youth participation mech-

anisms, particularly the role of structures and the subsequent change in policy or decision-making. Participation structures have been described as “having little impact on public decision making” (Kirby & Bryson, 2002)⁶⁷, with few diverse young people involved, little feedback provided, and a failure to devise or support structures that provide real opportunities for child and youth-led decision making (Davis, 2002)⁶⁸.

Badham & Wade (2010), in their organisational participation standards framework, include case studies from organisations, governmental departments and young people on “what’s changed” as a result of young people’s involvement, with outcomes for young people central to that. The DFID CSO Youth Working Group’s participation guide (2010)⁶⁹ provides numerous case study examples of where youth participation in the development context has provided better programme delivery, and the Investing in Youth Development report by the Overseas Development Institute⁷⁰ positions youth participation as a pre-requisite for higher levels of adult participation, which it notes is correlated to higher levels of education and employment conditions. The paper concludes that youth participation “can have important individual and social dividends” and should be further promoted by governments, particularly through the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the range of regional and international frameworks and conventions that advocate for youth participation often promote a clear link between young people’s inclusion in

⁶² Tisdall, 2008.

⁶³ Fleming, 2013.

⁶⁴ Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010.

⁶⁵ Sukarieh, M. and Tannock, S., 2015.

⁶⁶ Sinclair, 2004.

⁶⁷ Kirby, P., Bryson S., 2002, *Measuring the Magic? Evaluating Young People’s Participation in Public Decision-Making*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, London.

⁶⁸ Davis, J., 2002, *Reconstructing ‘Health Promotion’ with Children and Young People: Practical Examples of Enabling Children and Young People to Change Policies and Services in Canada, England, Scotland and Australia*. European Conference: reducing Social Inequalities in Health among Children and Young People, Ministry of the Interior and Health, Copenhagen, December

⁶⁹ DFID-CSO Youth Working Group, 2010, *Youth Participation in Development: A guide for development agencies and policy makers*.

⁷⁰ Pereznieto, P. and Hamilton Harding, J., 2013, *Investing in Youth in International Development Policy: Making the Case*, *Overseas Development Institute*.

decision-making and outcomes at a personal, societal, and institutional level.⁷¹

In this area, there are limitations within the academic literature and the available evidence and knowledge base around youth participation. From the Global South, particularly within the youth participation in development sphere, many of the reports and reviews provide case studies of participation, based on limited evaluation frameworks, rather than an in-depth critique and analysis of the conceptualisation of participation, the approach and the wider outcomes. Though evaluation frameworks, particularly those that are donor related, require an assessment of the outcomes at varying levels, this is often focused on individual character traits, such as youth leadership and empowerment, rather than structural and policy change.⁷² An example of this can be seen in the context of development agencies, who tend to characterise young people as important actors within the design, implementation and evaluation of project or service delivery, with their role conceptualised as beneficiaries, partners, and leaders.⁷³ However, to capitalise on young people's potential role, the conception of participation needs to move beyond inclusion as a component of project delivery, and instead encompass a complex, transformational process across multiple levels of governance.⁷⁴

Literature originating from the Global North, such as from the United Kingdom, United States and Europe, remains small-scale and theory driven, rather than based on experimental research, but does appear to take a more critiqued and nuanced look at participation – both conceptually and in practice. Additionally, there is a noticeable divide between the academic literature, which is often critical about young people's participation and its

impact on decision-making, and the narratives promoted by national governments, UN agencies and youth-focused organisations, which are more positive about the role of youth and the effectiveness of structures and mechanisms.

Participation has the potential to change the relationship between individuals and state institutions (and other organisations, services and agencies) and the structures of power. Gaventa (2004) notes that participation only becomes effective at the moment it tackles “issues of institutional change” and without that, will fail to have a “transformational” impact on people's lives.

4.3 Youth participation as political action

Lentin & Ohana (2008) note that youth participation began with a focus on young people's involvement in political institutions, trade unions, and issue campaigns, however Sukaireh & Tannock (2015) argue that the rise of formal participation structures has now stemmed young people's activism, with mechanisms operating within “spaces of social control and containment.”⁷⁵ They postulate that the focus on individual character benefits rather than the institutional, societal or governance change creates,

“a façade of engagement with radical, oppositional, grassroots politics that in the end works toward little more than fostering a generic and benign set of youth skills, competencies and character traits.”⁷⁶

The focus on participation at a local and individual level, rather than in challenging structural obstacles and barriers,⁷⁷ as well as the limited understanding and appreciation of how power operates, diminishes the possibilities of citizen action and agency.⁷⁸ Castells (2012) presents power as

⁷¹ Badham & Wade, 2010.

⁷² Sukaireh & Tannock, 2015.

⁷³ DFID-CSO Youth Working Group, 2010.

⁷⁴ See Carmen, R., 1996, *Autonomous Development*, Zed Books, London; Cleaver, F., 1999, ‘Paradoxes of Participation: Questioning Participatory Approaches to Development’, *Journal of International Development*; Rahman, M. D. A., 1995, ‘Participatory Development: Towards Liberation and Co-optation?’ in G. Craig and M. Mayo (eds), *Community Empowerment: A Reader in Participation and Development*, Zed Books, London.

⁷⁵ Sukarieh, M. and Tannock, S., 2015, *Youth Rising? The politics of youth in the global economy*, Routledge.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Mohan & Stokke, 2000.

⁷⁸ Mosse, D., 1994, “Authority, Gender and Knowledge: Theoretical Reflections on the Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal”, *Development and Change*, Vol. 25(3).

“embedded in the institutions of society” by the actors with the interest in maintaining their own position and values, be that through coercion and violence, or legitimate institutions such as state education, political processes or public services.⁷⁹ In addition to societal institutions, the perception of power in the minds of individuals is equally dominant, meaning that social change arises not only from a “counter-power” to formal institutions, but also as a mindset change in that of individuals.⁸⁰ Mason (2013) gives the example of the mass protests in Egypt in 2011, where protesters not only physically gathered in large numbers to occupy Tahrir Square in opposition to the long-standing Mubarak regime, but that the removal of fear in the mind of activists (against a regime accused or corruption, torture, police brutality, state violence and secret police) changed the mood and zeitgeist, enabling people to feel that they could achieve radical change.⁸¹ This has led to questions about the effectiveness and relevance of formal participatory structures, particularly that of youth councils and youth organisations⁸².

Much has been celebrated about the role of online spaces in social movements, with President Obama declaring that Egyptian protesters had used “their creativity, talent and technology to call for a government that represented their hopes and not their fears.”⁸³ In a rigorous analysis of the role played by networks – particularly those online – Castells (2012) concludes that social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter allowed a free space for individuals to reflect on a shared experience and emotionally connect enough for this to influence their behaviours in the physical world – on the streets.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Castells, M., 2012, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social movements in the Internet age*, Polity Press.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mason, P., 2013, *Why it's still kicking off everywhere: The new global revolutions*, Verso: London.

⁸² Farrow, A., 2015, Participation in 2015: A positive explosion of youth or a struggle to stay relevant?, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/participation-global-governance/participation-struggling-to-stay-relevant/>

⁸³ Gaudin, S., 2011 February 11, Social networks credited with role in toppling Egypt's Mubarak, *Computer World*, <http://www.computerworld.com/article/2513142/web-apps/social-networks-credited-with-role-in-toppling-egypt-s-mubarak.html>

⁸⁴ Castells, 2012.

Social media is therefore positioned as an enabler of social action, by both a space for “reflective participation”⁸⁵ – a self-realisation and recognition of one’s own oppression and situation – and as an organising tool for activist communication, broadening support, and in immediately self-publishing content without restrictions or mediation through traditional news outlets⁸⁶.

While much participation focuses on the public sphere described by Brodie et al (2009), (e.g. formal structures, civic engagement, involvement in institutional and organisational decision-making processes) the social is rarely explored in the academic literature and often stands outside of formal settings – even those that are youth-led or youth-focused organisations.⁸⁷ Young people’s activism exists through social movements, grassroots campaigns, online and digital media, and informal networks, as well as through cultural, faith or identity groups, community projects and housing associations. Young people’s action and activism aligns with the “new power”.⁸⁸ As explored by Heimans & Timms (2014)⁸⁹,

*New power models are enabled by peer coordination and the agency of the crowd—without participation, they are just empty vessels. Old power is enabled by what people or organizations own, know, or control that nobody else does—once old power models lose that, they lose their advantage.*⁹⁰

This new form of power is based on informal, self-organisation, networked governance, a “do-it-ourselves” approach, and with the aim to have “more overall participation” compared to that of “old power”⁹¹. This “do-it-ourselves” attitude, online organising skills and power, and inclusivity

⁸⁵ Freire, P., 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin.

⁸⁶ Castells, 2012; Mason, 2013.

⁸⁷ Brodie et al., 2009.

⁸⁸ Heimans, J., Timms, H., 2014, Understanding “New Power”, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2014/12/understanding-new-power>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

of physical spaces and personal networks⁹², has resulted in social uprisings and civil unrest across many regions and countries in the past 5 years, including in Bahrain, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Greece, Iceland, Iran, Israel, Libya, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the United States. This has seen the occupation of public buildings and spaces (most notable through the global Occupy Movement⁹³), mass protests (such as against austerity and cost of higher education in Brazil, Canada, Greece, and Spain), online blogging (such as pro-democracy protests in Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia), civil unrest and rioting (in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and even armed conflicts and civil wars in Libya and Syria. In recent years there have been an increasing number of digital activism sites, such as Avaaz⁹⁴, 38 Degrees⁹⁵, and Sumofus.org⁹⁶ that have adopted a strong online presence with physical offline actions.

In many cases, youth activism has focused on issues of citizenship – the “legal rights and responsibilities conferred by the state” – with citizenship suggested by a number of authors as linking together participation and governance.⁹⁷ This seeks to “bridge the gap between citizen and the state”⁹⁸ and promote the active involvement of individuals in multiple levels of decision-making and challenge more directly the power structures in society. Numerous global programmes have focused on citizenship, such as the British Council’s Active Citizens programme, which has supported the youth activism of almost 100,000 young people since 2009, in over 40 countries, with over 400 independent social action projects developed – mostly small-scale, community driven, and with few resources⁹⁹. Young people’s action and activism is often at a

local, community level¹⁰⁰ and often focuses on the immediate issues of relevance to them, such as cost of transport, leisure activities, employment opportunities and youth services.

A focus on governance has been a key youth issue emerging as part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda¹⁰¹, with “*an honest and responsive government*” ranking 4th in the priority list in the age bracket of 16-30 year olds on the My World 2015 survey¹⁰², and “*good governance and effective institutions*” being the top primary recommendation of young people in an analysis of 17 of the biggest youth consultations¹⁰³. A focus on citizen participation has been extended to young people, most recently through the Youth Wellbeing Index¹⁰⁴, which „recognized the centrality of citizen participation to youth development and wellbeing”¹⁰⁵. The YWI assesses citizen participation in the context of youth wellbeing through existence of a youth policy, volunteer frequency, candidacy age, perception of value in society and feeling of being served by government. Though Goldin (2014) notes that countries that have seen recent protests and civil unrests, such as Spain (26th), Turkey (27th) and Egypt (29th), rank low in this domain with high levels of youth dissatisfaction, unrest has also been seen in higher ranking countries such as the United Kingdom (10th), Sweden (12th), and Brazil (14th).¹⁰⁶

Participation, therefore, has the potential to change the relationship between individuals and state institutions (and other organisations, servic-

⁹² Castells, 2012.

⁹³ <http://www.occupytogether.org/>

⁹⁴ <http://www.avaaz.org/>

⁹⁵ <http://www.38degrees.org.uk/>

⁹⁶ <http://www.sumofus.org>

⁹⁷ Hickey & Mohan, 2004.

⁹⁸ Gaventa, 2014.

⁹⁹ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/active-citizens>

¹⁰⁰ Badham, B., 2003, *Act by Right: Skills for the active involvement of children and young people in making change happen*, National Youth Agency.

¹⁰¹ <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/mdg.shtml>

¹⁰² Accessed from <http://data.myworld2015.org/> on 21/04/2015.

¹⁰³ Farrow, A., Muir, J., 2013, *Youth in the Post-2015 High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons Report: The Signal from the Noise*, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/participation-global-governance/post-2015-the-signal-from-the-noise/>

¹⁰⁴ Youth Wellbeing Index, 2013, <http://www.youthindex.org>

¹⁰⁵ Goldin, N., 2014, *Citizen Participation in the Global Youth Wellbeing Index: Interesting trends and findings*, <http://www.youthpolicy.org/blog/justice/citizen-participation-global-youth-wellbeing-index/>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

es and agencies) and the individual construction of power. Gaventa (2004) notes that participation only becomes effective at the moment it tackles “issues of institutional change” and without that will fail to have a “transformational” impact on people’s lives.¹⁰⁷ The United Kingdom’s youth participation standards, *Hear by Right*¹⁰⁸, is a tool adopted by a majority of local authorities in the country, presenting youth participation as organisational change – basing the framework on the 7S model of organisational change.¹⁰⁹ A number of examples exist where participation has directly challenged civic and societal structures, including Boal’s (1998) process of local legislation through participatory theatre¹¹⁰, Iceland’s crowd-sourced (though stalled) constitutional reform¹¹¹, and the Paris authorities participatory budgeting, which gives control of €426 million between 2014-2020 to local residents¹¹².

¹⁰⁷ Gaventa, 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Badham, B., Wade, H., 2010, *Hear by Right: Standards Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People*. The National Youth Agency.

¹⁰⁹ Peters, T., Waterman, R., 1982, *In Search of Excellence*, Profile Business Classics.

¹¹⁰ Boal, A., 1998, *Legislative theatre: Using performance to make politics*. Routledge.

¹¹¹ Landemore, H., 2014, July 21, We, All of the People: Five lessons from Iceland’s failed experiment in creating a crowdsourced constitution, *Slate*, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2014/07/five_lessons_from_iceland_s_failed_crowdsourced_constitution_experiment.html

¹¹² Plesse Harrison, R., 2014, October 8, Parisians have their say on city’s first €20m ‘participatory budget’, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/08/parisians-have-say-city-first-20m-participatory-budget>

Author

Alex Farrow



is the Consultancy Lead for Youth Policy Labs. He works at the intersection of research, policy and journalism, attempting to improve the lives of young people through knowledge, training and expression. At Youth Policy Labs, Alex leads on consultancy projects, supporting national governments and UN agencies to design, implement and evaluate national youth policies through research, training and events. He is a contributing writer and editor for the site, as well as researcher into youth and public policies. Alex received his MSc in Organizational Behaviour from Birkbeck College, University of London, with a research project that explores the career expectations and narratives of the millennial generation in today's workforce.



Youth Policy Working Papers present research findings on youth and public policy from around the world for discussion and critical comment. They are available on www.youthpolicy.org.

Copyright © 2016 by Youth Policy Press
www.youthpolicypress.com

ISSN 2366-9616

This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>



Youth Policy Press, Scharnhorststraße 28/29, D-10115 Berlin
Tel +49 30 3087 8451-0, hello@youthpolicypress.com