

Youth Voice and Sustainable Public Policy: Rejuvenating Urban Democracy

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Introduction

Young people across the world have borne the brunt of successive global crises and expanding existential threats, including the 2008 financial crash and subsequent cuts in public spending, the adverse effects of climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In many respects, those hardest hit have been young people living in urban areas, which are home to well over half the world's population.² The huge inequalities of wealth and poverty found in cities have been exacerbated by these crises and threats,³ making progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more problematic.

Although the immediate health threat of COVID-19 was greatest for older generations, young people were also affected by the pandemic in ways that would have both immediate and long-term repercussions. The public policy challenges surrounding young people are relatively complex and long-lasting, as strategies need to be developed to address the economic scarring, loss of education, negative effects of isolation on mental health, and other consequences of the recent health crisis.⁴ If public policy is to become more future-oriented and sustainable in the long run, it must begin to focus more clearly and intentionally on the interests and voices of younger generations. The answer lies in better and more inclusive governance.

There is a long way to go to achieve the sort of participatory governance that will generate sustainable public policy. Young people across the world were losing trust in Governments even before the onset of the pandemic⁵ as countries struggled to deliver for future generations while also meeting the needs of the ageing population and dealing with the increasing costs of health care.⁶ The decline in trust in public institutions has accelerated since 2019, and young people feel that their voices are being ignored. In 2022, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) surveyed 151 youth organizations in 71 countries and found that only 15 per cent felt that their Governments had “considered young people's views when adopting lockdown and confinement measures”, and more than half believed young people's views had not been incorporated into support schemes or infrastructure investment responses to the pandemic.⁷

There is mounting evidence that the voices of community residents of all ages—with their local knowledge and long-term, vested interest in improving their neighbourhoods—are essential for rebuilding after the pandemic and securing a

sustainable future. Elinor Ostrom, a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics, contends that “there is no reason to believe that bureaucrats and politicians, no matter how well meaning, are better at solving problems than the people on the spot, who have the strongest incentive to get the solution right”.⁸ A recent OECD publication highlights the importance of “embedding the perspectives of all age groups in [post-pandemic] response and recovery measures”.⁹

How might this work in practice? Are civic authorities willing to dare more democracy—to commit to more messy participatory policymaking processes—on the pathway to sustainable governance? How can they create inclusive structures to facilitate the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

This contribution explores the ways in which young people can reshape public institutions and public policy as the world engages in a green and equitable COVID-19 recovery process that focuses on making cities better places to live. It examines the factors that drive youth participation in urban democracy and explores what cities across the world are doing to engage young people and the common lessons that can be drawn from these efforts.

The argument is that improving the quality of interactions between young people, local authorities and public services through the creation of civic spaces and the nurturing of local knowledge can generate more effective and sustainable public policy. The mechanisms through which this might be achieved include the setting up of civic spaces for deliberation and community research and the institutionalization of youth participation in policymaking.

Pathways to youth voice and engagement: from the ballot box to the town square to the Internet

Over several decades, younger generations have turned away from political party membership and other formal political mechanisms towards less institutionalized types of civic and political engagement that carry more meaning for their everyday lives. As voter turnout has declined in many democracies, youth activism around social movements and causes has proliferated. The pervasive use of new communication technologies and the growing prevalence of “digitally networked action [have] enabled a ‘quickening’ of youth participation” as issues that resonate with younger

generations can emerge and spread with great speed.¹⁰ Two recent examples are the Global Climate Strike (#FridaysForFuture) and Black Lives Matter movements. While COVID-19 containment policies reduced the prevalence of mass demonstrations during the pandemic, they spurred an increase in online participation among young people, as evidenced by the rapid upsurge in the use of web and mobile app platforms by activist networks.¹¹

It is important to draw attention to the promise of urban democracy. Cities offer a number of favourable venues for youth participation in local democratic processes. The close proximity of residents to one another makes community-led action more practicable in urban than in rural spaces. There is also evidence showing that young people from less-well-off backgrounds—those who suffered the greatest losses from the pandemic—are as eager as young people from more prosperous backgrounds to get involved in local democracy. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement found that 46 per cent of 18- to 24-year olds wanted to be more involved in decision-making in their local areas; among youth without a college degree, the proportion was 55 per cent.¹²

Young people are continually reinventing politics through youth-led civic and political activism across continents and different planes of governance, engaging in activities ranging from local urban activism to coordinated international initiatives that can inform and influence public policy.

International programmes can play a key role in supporting and promoting the adoption of good practices at the local level. One example is the Students Reinventing Cities competition launched in 2020 by the C40 global network of mayors working together to tackle the climate crisis. It asked students to “share their vision for transforming city neighbourhoods to deliver a green and just recovery from the Covid-19 crisis” and presented the competition winners with opportunities to participate in live regeneration projects, supported by city authorities. In Bhalswa (Delhi), India, student activists successfully challenged prevailing housing and waste management practices in collaboration with the C40 and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (a C40 member). The students' efforts resulted in the development of youth-led solutions, including a network of eight affordable housing blocks and community facilities such as clinics, shops, a childcare centre and public toilets.¹³

Rejuvenating urban democracy

The process of achieving effective engagement with young people is not always straightforward. Youth may be sceptical about engaging with political institutions for the reasons mentioned previously, and they may not feel equipped with

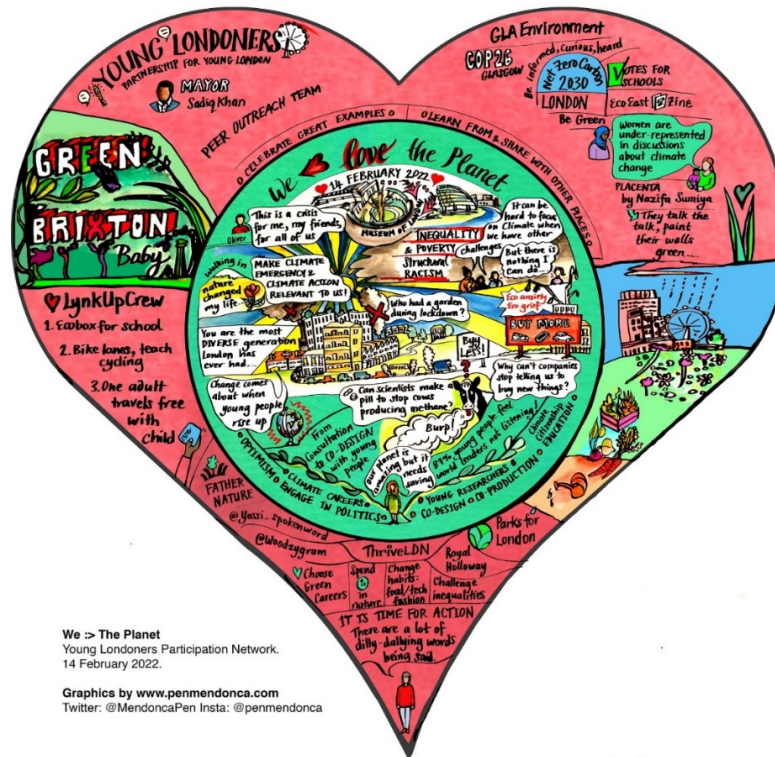
the knowledge or civic skills to participate with older people who have more experience or power. Further, civic authorities and policymakers can often treat young people in a tokenistic manner, encouraging them to come along to meetings (and photo shoots) or participate in discussions without giving them any say in the design and implementation of policy.

Nevertheless, there are good examples of such obstacles being overcome, where city authorities have offered younger residents a chance to learn while becoming civically and politically active and having a say in the policymaking process.

In the United Kingdom, the Greater London Authority has taken the lead in promoting youth voice. The Mayor's Peer Outreach Team is a group of 30 young people recruited to offer policy input and participate in outreach projects addressing issues that affect youth in the city. Among their many activities, the Team helped review applications for funding from the £45 million Young Londoners Fund and contributed (along with other youth groups in the Authority) thoughts and ideas for the city's COVID-19 recovery plan; their input contributed directly to the content of the 2020 London Recovery plan, resulting in A New Deal for Young People that guaranteed the provision of a personal mentor and access to quality local activities for all young Londoners.¹⁴ Young Peer Outreach Workers are regularly engaged in deliberative exercises and participatory research to develop their civic skills and knowledge and to enable meaningful participation in policy discussions and activities, including several projects to map London's Quality of Life indicators against the United Nations SDGs and explore how youth may be best served within this context; the group also investigated young people's ideas on climate change against the backdrop of the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26).¹⁵ The graphic shown below is from the We Love the Planet event designed for and by young London residents, the environment team at the Greater London Authority, and youth activists, and organized with the present author. The Event, which took place in early 2022, was intended to provide research on young people's understandings of climate change and the political dialogue around this issue, and to provide an opportunity to develop recommendations for the Authority.

In the United States of America, Constance Flanagan and her colleagues, drawing on Ostrom's concept of the environmental commons, provide powerful evidence of the effectiveness of “community research” or “civic science” combined with access to local policymakers.¹⁶ Community research involves training citizens (including youth) to undertake research with the dual purpose of upskilling the participants and providing local authorities with informed grass-roots ideas and solutions to address key local issues. In their work with young people from lower-income areas and of predominately ethnic minority backgrounds in south-eastern Michigan, they found that the

Picture from the We Love the Planet event, Museum of London, 14 February 2022



Source: Graphic by www.penmendonda.com @MendoncaPen.

research empowered young participants to raise issues such as air pollution and the supply of clean water with civic authorities and achieve real change.

As the examples above illustrate, it is vital for civic authorities to engage with young people from poorer backgrounds and to ensure that they are not excluded from pandemic recovery plans if progress is to be made towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In all the instances above, authorities have sought to engage with local activist networks and civil society groups to provide outreach to the most disadvantaged communities. This is true for almost all successful examples of inclusive youth engagement. Recent research by the International Institute for Environment and Development has, for example, highlighted the central role civil society groups play in amplifying the voices of young people living in slum settlements in eight African cities.¹⁷ Particular mention is made of Slum Dwellers International, which represents the interests of slum dwellers with urban authorities as well as internationally, including in forums such as COP27. During the pandemic, young people in this organization's youth affiliates documented and shared their experiences, providing a youth perspective for the development of urban recovery strategies.

Conclusion and recommendations

Young people across the world are engaged in political issues and are eager to have their voices heard. The problem is that youth activism is often disconnected from formal politics, so youth participation is less likely to have an impact and can even lead to damaging political and social conflict. This is counterproductive, given the fact that Governments may share the aims of the protestors, as in the case of climate activism. The challenge for policymakers is to harness the energy, optimism and solutions of today's youth by mainstreaming the politics of young people into formal political processes.

When young people do engage with civic authorities, there are two main barriers to effective participation. First, many politicians and officials only pay lip-service to these interactions, so many young people find the experience ineffective and unrewarding. Civic authorities need to develop training for officials for working with children and young people as partners.¹⁸ Second, young people may lack the civic skills and knowledge to overcome power imbalances in their relationships with these officials. It is a well-established fact in political science that people belonging to high socioeconomic groups have far better democratic skills than do those from low socioeconomic groups. Civic education can help close this gap.

In the case of city and other units of local government, the following three innovations are required to achieve sustained, effective engagement:

- To rebuild trust in government, youth participation must be nurtured through initiatives that provide opportunities for deliberation, civic learning and the co-design of public policy.
- Young people's voices need to be institutionalized within civic administrations and embedded into each main policy area, including through representation in policy directorates.
- If cities are to achieve progress towards the SDGs, youth participation must be inclusive of those from poorer and other disadvantaged backgrounds. This can be achieved by reaching out to relevant civil society and youth activist groups.

The pandemic has forced policymakers to reconsider how they generate sustainable public policy, and they are increasingly coming to recognize the importance of empowering young people. However, youth participation remains patchy at best. As part of his closing remarks to the eleventh annual ECOSOC Youth Forum in April 2022, Economic and Social Council President Collen Vixen Kelapile exhorted young people to take what is theirs by right: "a seat at the table when decisions are taken that would impact your own future".¹⁹ However, it is first necessary to persuade policymakers that it is in their own fundamental long-term interests to open new pathways to youth engagement in public policy if this goal is to be realized in the coming decades.

Endnotes

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