

Generation 2030: The Strategic Imperative of Youth Civic and Political Engagement

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Abstract

The young are deeply concerned about the world they will inherit, yet trends indicate that youth globally experience barriers to opportunities for civic engagement, lack of participation access, distrust, and voicelessness on the issues they care about most. The youth want to be more engaged in meeting the development needs of their communities and want to help lead democracy and social justice efforts despite contexts that discourage them. The authors argue for a renewed sense of engagement that is meaningful and puts youth at the center, and in the lead, in ways that capture the energy of a new generation.

Keywords

Youth engagement · Global partnerships · Leadership · Decision-making

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1 The State of Youth Engagement

According to a recent poll, young people are deeply concerned about the world they will inherit, want to be more engaged in meeting the development needs of their communities, and are helping to lead democracy or social justice protests in their countries. At the same time, new research (Perry 2021) shows a large decline in trust and admiration for democratic governance. According to Freedom House (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021), for the first time in decades, authoritarian-leaning regimes outnumber democratic-leaning ones, with a majority of the world's population now living in authoritarian-leaning countries.

Engaging “Generation 2030”—the 2.4 billion youth globally—is essential to effectively support our common development priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, while also stemming the tide of global disillusionment. Policies that are fair from an inter-generational standpoint allow people of all ages to meet their needs in a way that does not shortchange or undercut the ability of future

generations to meet their own needs. This “intergenerational fairness” is emerging as a defining theme of our time, yet there is no generally accepted way to measure it. The Framework for Intergenerational Fairness (SOIF 2021) is a promising methodology in development that can be used to assess whether a policy decision might be considered “fair” to different generations, now and into the future. It is an appealing first step in systematically examining the extent to which a public policy can be rated on a scale from “completely unfair” at one end to “clearly fair” at the other. Ultimately, addressing intergenerational fairness will require comprehensive efforts to facilitate sustained and meaningful partnerships with youth.

2 Six Troubling Trends in Youth Engagement

Despite some glimmers of hope from youth engagement at the recent COP26 (Conference of Parties to the United Nations Global Climate Change Conference, UN Framework Convention), and their determination to be heard, there are six troubling trends we see in youth engagement.

2.1 Lost Confidence in Democracy

Recent data show that across the globe, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining not only in absolute terms but also relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life (Fao et al. 2020). Much of the youth discontent stems from the perception of economic exclusion and being left out of decision-making that impacts their future. That perception is shared across emerging democracies, from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, priority regions for USAID and UN development objectives.

2.2 Stepping Back from Political Engagement

According to the recent Global Youth Development Index, which measures progress in 181 countries, youth participation in politics—a key driver in strengthening democracy and civil society—continues to deteriorate (Commonwealth 2021). In addition, an analysis from the Pew Research Center on global attitudes towards the United States and democracy revealed that the most worrisome indicator in their survey was young people’s record low level of confidence in United States democracy (Wike et al. 2019).

2.3 Influences Shifting on Trust and Opinions

USAID’s new survey and dashboard of youth civic engagement in ten countries found that relatives are the most likely source to influence youths’ opinions on civic and political engagement (USAID 2021). It also found trust in government institutions and elections by youth is very low.

2.4 Absent from Decision-Making

A 2017 Global Shapers Annual Survey of almost 25,000 people aged between 18 and 35 from more than 180 countries and territories showed that 55.9 percent of respondents believe their views are not taken seriously into account before important decisions are made (Saouter et al. 2017).

2.5 COVID-19 Makes Matters Worse

Economic uncertainty has risen for almost all age groups as a result of the global pandemic, but today’s youth have been hit especially hard. Data

collected by the OECD (2020) reveals that today's youth have less disposable income than previous youth and are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than their middle-aged counterparts. These economic uncertainties are taking a toll on career prospects, as well as social well-being, and point to the need to accelerate youth engagement.

2.6 Voiceless on Key Issues Like Climate Change

The effects of climate change on future generations are much more debilitating to youth, who will inherit the consequences of decisions made today by older generations (Thiery et al. 2021). Youth are more likely to inherit a hotter, more extreme, and more uncertain and punishing climate. Yet, today's youth feel locked out of the very decisions on climate change that will impact them the most. This has significant implications for youth mental health outcomes, according to a recent 10-country study, which shows a sharp rise in climate anxiety among youth aged 16–25 (Marks et al. 2021).

Some of these concerns may reflect a deeper frustration with political engagement rather than democracy *per se* but neither is a desirable outcome.

At a recent conference with young changemakers from around the world, led by the School of International Futures, local youth from more than 25 countries raised an alarming but familiar set of concerns. They are frustrated that time after time, they feel stranded on the periphery of decision-making that will have profound influences on their future. On the positive ledger, they are already taking on poverty-reducing grass-roots projects in their own communities, anxious to build and expand these projects into regional networks with like-minded youth, and eager to serve as a “Sensing Network” to bring forth issues *well before* they become established trends. These youth changemakers clamor to help shape their future and to improve lives through innovative approaches like strategic foresight (Fig. 32.1).

3 Building a Meaningful Compact with Young People

The pieces for meaningful engagement and partnerships with youth exist but need to be better articulated through comprehensive efforts. Some of these efforts are underway. USAID's new Global LEAD initiative seeks to support one million young changemakers over the next four years through increased investments in educa-

Fig. 32.1 Youth around the world are eager to be changemakers. (Credit: USAID.gov)



tion, civic and political engagement, and leadership development programming across all sectors. Its [YouthLead.org](https://www.youthlead.org) platform now has 14,000 young changemakers sharing resources and conducting peer-to-peer learning. USAID and the State Department's support of young leaders through the Young African Leadership Initiative and other regional programs has strengthened the skills and opportunities of over 25,000 youth in the past 11 years.

USAID is also partnering with UNDP 16x16 and with UNICEF's Generation Unlimited partnership to foster youth civic engagement. The Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge funds youth-led innovations in education, employment, and civic engagement.

These efforts, however, are just a small part of the investment needed to build trust and a real partnership with Generation 2030—a partnership that provides them with the networks, skills, opportunities, and resources to revitalize democracy, tackle climate change, lead pandemic and humanitarian prevention and response efforts in their communities, innovate on skills for entrepreneurship and employment, and much more.

Donors and governments need to create new and invest more in existing models of youth civic and political participation, along with recognizing youth as equal partners in development. That alone will inspire a generation of young leaders to work with other senior leaders to build their communities back better through collective action, public service and advocacy. – Darya Onyshko, a youth democracy leader from Poland who helps support the Community of Democracies #YouthLead effort and the European Youth Democracy Network

As USAID turns 60 years old this year, and as the UN completes 75 years of work, our collective vision for the next decade should align with a new generation of dynamic, diverse, innovative young leaders and citizens who champion democratic values and are motivated and empowered

to organize for a more peaceful and just world. A high-level, coordinated commitment to this new compact with Generation 2030 will be the key to building long-term partners in development and democracy. And, the really good news is that young people in the developing world, according to a recent telephone survey of 21,000 people from across the globe, are the most optimistic age group of all (Cain Miller and Parlapiano 2021).

YouthMappers is a powerful example of global youth who are bucking these trends. They are one model of possible interventions for youth-focused – indeed youth-led programs, creating opportunities for young people in ways that align with the Global LEAD framework of education, civic and political engagement, youth leadership, and youth organizing (Elisberg 2021). Students create and use their own mapping data within efforts with the purpose of development while learning and gaining experience. This model offers a framework that is highly interdisciplinary and highly adaptable, making it possible for youth to plan for a range of development objectives while also increasing civic participation and leadership.

Let's all work together to seize this engagement opportunity.

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