



Executive Summary

The World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement, prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), explores young people's participation in economic, political and community life.

UN DESA provides an interface between global policies in the economic, social and environmental spheres and national action. The UN World Youth Report, its biennial publication, offers fresh perspectives and innovative ideas on youth engagement, and is intended to serve as an impetus and tool for dialogue, policy discussion and action between youth and government.

The current Report responds to growing interest in, and an increased policy focus on, youth civic engagement in recent years among governments, young people and researchers. The Report provides thematic insights on economic, political and community engagement, coupled with expert opinion pieces so as to provide robust and varied perspectives into youth engagement.

Youth Engagement in economic, political and community life

The transition from youth to adulthood marks a key period characterized by greater economic independence, political involvement, and participation in community life. Such engagement not only impacts the individual and community, but can act as an enabling force for young women and men's involvement in the development and formulation of youth-related policies.


However, a young person's ability to effectively engage relies heavily on the socioeconomic and political environment in which they live. While access to free and open internet, political demonstrations and peacebuilding initiatives can confer long term benefits to both the individual and community, a lack of decent jobs, limited access to labour rights and social service spending can impose long-term negative consequences on a young person's life-long ability to engage. Such conditions can also impart long term negative consequences on development and social inclusion more broadly.

Economic Engagement

Youth unemployment: an ongoing challenge

Unemployment affects more than 73 million young people around the world.ⁱ In some developed countries, the youth unemployment rate has climbed above 50 per cent.ⁱⁱ In low- and middle-income countries, underemployment in the informal sector is considered the primary employment challenge faced by young people.

As a consequence, for many young people today, economic engagement has become more challenging owing to the lack of decent employment opportunities. In addition, inadequacies in skills and education, the lack of support for entrepreneurship, and diminishing labour rights have profound impacts on youth economic engagement.



To address these challenges, a number of Member States have developed targeted youth employment policies and strategies aimed at enabling youth to create jobs and to strengthen their skills and training. In many cases, actions aimed at combating the youth unemployment and underemployment challenge constitute a central element of Member States' national youth policies, strategies and plans.ⁱⁱⁱ

Internships

Young people have been increasingly turning to internships as a gateway to the labour market. With limited employment opportunities available, internships can provide an excellent opportunity for young people to gain occupational knowledge and skills.

In recent years however, the economic crisis has brought about a shift in the role internships play within the employment framework in many parts of the world. An increasing number of companies and organizations are offering, often full-time and unpaid, internships for recent graduates. In such incidents, the internship is not necessarily linked to specific educational outcomes, and in many cases the work of the young intern is replacing that of regular paid workers.

In addition, it is now not uncommon for young people to undertake numerous back-to-back unpaid or low-paid internships as they struggle to gain a foothold on the career ladder. Far from better preparing young people for economic life, unpaid internships have the potential to leave youth in an economically more vulnerable position than they would be in had they never undertaken the internship in the first place.

In many cases, young unpaid interns are not entitled to the basic benefits and entitlements of regular employees, including health insurance. As such, many young people are calling for stronger regulations and the development of benchmarks for quality internships so that young people struggling to gain a foothold in the labour market can do so without exploitation.


Entrepreneurship

As young people face delayed or fractured entrance to the labour market, governments are focusing on promoting youth entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship has the capacity to provide many young people with real employment possibilities and opportunities. However, a focus on encouraging youth entrepreneurship while failing to stimulate wider employment and job creation through broader and more robust employment strategies is unlikely to achieve its objective. Furthermore, it unfairly shifts much of the responsibility for job creation and labour market performance away from the larger public and private sectors to young people, which can leave many youth vulnerable.

Indeed, though young people are more likely than adults to start their own businesses, they face a host of challenges that vary across countries and regions. Among the particular barriers they face, young people trying to start a business may find it especially difficult to secure credit, loans or other types of financing and often lack the knowledge and skills to use financial services efficiently. Because few financial service institutions adequately cater to the needs of young entrepreneurs in many regions, young people often rely on family and friends to obtain the funding they need for their start-ups.^{iv} Improved access to financial services and a more enabling regulatory environment is critical if youth are to succeed in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Trade Unions

With high youth unemployment and underemployment in many parts of the world, young people are finding it increasingly difficult to secure quality jobs that offer benefits and entitlements. Employers have the advantage of being able to offer young workers contracts that provide little in the way of career security, health-care benefits or pension schemes, knowing that young people



with few other prospects are not in a position to bargain and are poorly aligned to organize into collective bargaining units to try and improve their situation.^v

As a consequence many young people end up in precarious work situations, with a short-term or non-employee contract (or no contract), little or nothing in the way of pension benefits, and no health insurance or unemployment insurance.^{vi} This interferes with a young person's ability to plan for the future and become financially secure. As the number of youth lacking a firm foothold in secure, long-term employment has declined, so has their participation in trade unions. At present, engagement in economic life is occurring largely on the terms of employers and not young employees.

Political Engagement

Globally, youth participation and representation in institutional political processes and policy-making is relatively low. As a group, young people are not adequately represented within formal political structures, as evidenced by the low rates of parliamentary involvement, political party participation and electoral activity among youth worldwide.

Electoral Participation

The past several decades have been marked by declining levels of youth participation in electoral processes. Voter turnout tends to be significantly lower among youth than among the adult population, and young people are less likely to become members of political parties.^{vii}

The lingering impact of the global financial and economic crisis has intensified the feeling among many young people that traditional institutions of governance and electoral participation provide ineffective tools for meaningful political engagement. This feeling of disconnection has led to disengagement from institutionalized processes and widespread apathy among young voters,^{viii} with the result that many have turned to alternative methods of political participation.

The Power of Protest

Through protests and demonstrations, young people have been instrumental in bringing about change and forcing authoritarian regimes from power, and in doing so have successfully challenged existing structures and rule and redefined the role of young people in governance.


Although youth have played a visible and prominent role in demonstrations and protests and have often been instrumental in bringing about changes in governance, the position of young people following political transition remains largely undefined and in many cases youth remain excluded.

There is evidence that failing to purposefully and meaningfully include youth in the building of new political processes and institutions can lead to increased frustration and resentment among young political activists, destabilizing democratization and accelerating conflict dynamics.^{ix}

Sustaining Peace through Involving Youth

Finding a way to facilitate youth engagement through institutionalized processes while also integrating less traditional forms of political engagement is an emerging challenge for governments and policymakers—one which, if left unresolved, may threaten the stability and security of countries. Countries experiencing power vacuums are particularly susceptible to the infiltration of violent groups and extremist elements. Young people can often be coerced or otherwise forced (out of economic necessity, for example) to join groups or organizations that espouse violence.

Online Activism



The availability of ever-growing numbers of online and social media outlets and other web-based tools has played a huge role in bolstering young people’s activism and participation, providing a vehicle for young people to learn about, participate in, and mobilize around political and social issues.

However, the extent to which cyberactivism translates into sustained political engagement over one’s lifetime is unclear. Ongoing research is needed to determine the impact of ICT on political participation, with particular attention given to the extent and long term sustainability of such engagement.

Community Engagement

Over the past few decades, young people have been gradually moving away from engagement in institutionalized structures (such as electoral activities and political parties) towards greater involvement in cause-oriented political activism. At the same time, the rise of social media and advance of new ICTs and mobile technology has provided young people with greater opportunity to engage within their communities in new and innovative ways.

Community engagement for social development

As such, greater attention has been given to youth engagement at all levels within the development agenda. There has been increased recognition of the value of young people’s participation as it pertains to both youth and wider development, as well as formal acknowledgement of the need to actively address the many challenges facing a growing youth population, including unemployment and underemployment, poverty, inequality, political unrest, and social exclusion.

Involving youth—as collaborators, team members, leaders and decision makers—in addressing the day-to-day issues that affect them offers a broad range of benefits to both young people and the community, from greater community connectedness and social awareness of the individual to enhanced participatory decision-making and democratic governance in community institutions. Such involvement also sends youth the message that their participation has intrinsic value.

Although the extent of their participation has varied, young people around the world have always been actively engaged at the community level through volunteerism, peacebuilding efforts and sporting activities. Engagement at the community level often provides young people with their first experience of active participation in a cause or activity, serving as a gateway to further and broader engagement throughout life as well as opportunities for leadership building.

Conclusion

In all three of the areas addressed in the Report, the full engagement of young people in society relies on the active participation and commitment of governments. It is only through meaningful involvement and active partnership, inclusive policies and decision making processes, that solutions to some of the key problems experienced by young people can be developed. To that effect, the respective roles of young people, policy makers, and the institutions through which they work should be clearly defined. While young people need to play a central role in addressing issues that affect them, they cannot tackle the multitude of challenges alone, particularly in the economic and employment area.

ⁱ International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015: Scaling Up Investments in Decent Jobs for Youth* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2015). Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_412015.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Examples include Spain (53.2 per cent) and Greece (52.4 per cent).

ⁱⁱⁱ President of the General Assembly, “Summary of the key messages, initiatives and proposals from the High-Level Event of the United Nations General Assembly to mark the 20th Anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) and to highlight Youth



Priorities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, held in New York on 29 May 2015” (New York, United Nations, 24 June 2015). Available from http://www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/08/240615_Summary-of-key-messages-for-High-Level-Event-to-mark-the-20th-Anniversary-of-the-World-Programme-of-Action-for-Youth.pdf.

^{iv} Approximately three quarters of youth rely primarily on personal sources (family or friends) for funding to start a business in sub-Saharan Africa (77.7 per cent), in Latin America and the Caribbean (75.7 per cent), and in Eastern Asia, Oceania and Southern Asia (73.2 per cent). In the Middle East and North Africa, the figure is almost 70 per cent. See Jacqui Kew and others, *Generation Entrepreneur? The State of Global Youth Entrepreneurship*.

^v See the contribution by Amy F. Huziak in chapter two of the present publication.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} United Nations Development Programme, *Enhancing Youth Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide* (New York, January 2013). Available from http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/ENG_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf.