Chapter 10.

YOUTH participation in DECISION MAKING

The case for securing a more firmly established commitment to greater participation for young people is explored in this chapter, which further examines progress made over the past decade, and identifies some of the key challenges that lie ahead. The focus is primarily, though not exclusively, on 15- to 18-year-olds, partly because it is this younger group among youth that is more seriously disenfranchised and denied a voice, and partly because the earlier young people are provided with opportunities to participate, the greater the benefit is to both themselves and the wider society. Respecting the right of this younger group to be heard represents an enormous challenge to traditional attitudes in most societies.

EMERGING RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION

"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death." — *Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations*

The World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond recognizes that the active engagement of young people themselves is central to its successful implementation and, accordingly, affirms the full and effective participation of youth in society and decision-making as one of its 10 priority areas for action. Implicit in this commitment is an acknowledgement that young people are part of the solution to the difficulties they face, not merely a problem to be resolved by others. An even earlier catalyst for change in attitudes towards young people was the 1989 adoption and subsequent near-universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention introduced a new philosophy with regard to children and young people, recognizing their importance as individuals whose dignity must be respected. It promotes the principle that youth are entitled to express their views on all matters that affect them and to have those views taken seriously. Article 12 of the Convention makes it clear that participation is a substantive right of all children and young people. As with adults, however, democratic participation is not an end in itself; as a procedural right, it represents the means through which they may take part in and influence processes, decisions and activities in order to achieve justice, influence outcomes, expose abuses of power and realize their rights.

These global developments have begun to affect young people's lives. In every region of the world there are now initiatives, projects and programmes in which young people are participating in decision-making. Many are beginning to shape the world around them, influencing politicians, policy makers, professionals and the media with their own unique perspectives. Organizations and networks of young people have emerged at the local, national, regional and global levels, demonstrating their capacity for advocacy, communication and negotiation, and their commitment to challenging injustice.

The demand for recognition of the right of young people to be heard, to have their views given serious consideration, and to play an active role in promoting their own best interests is far from universally respected, however. This demand represents a profound challenge to traditional attitudes towards young people in most societies throughout the world. It implies a radical change in youth-adult relationships in all spheres of life including the family, schools, local communities, programmes, social services, and local, regional and national government. A commitment to respecting the participatory rights of young people is incompatible with the age-old propensity of adults to take decisions concerning young people in their absence. Those who have been accustomed to authority are being forced to acknowledge young people as protagonists in the exercise of rights—as active agents in their own lives rather than mere recipients of adult protection. Accepting the necessity of their participation does not mean that adults no longer have a responsibility towards youth. On the contrary, young people cannot independently undertake the advocacy necessary to secure their rights. Structural problems such as poverty, discrimination and injustice cannot be dealt with through participation alone. Adults need to learn to work more closely in collaboration with youth to help them articulate their needs and develop strategies to enhance their well-being.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION

Many politicians, community leaders and others are far from convinced that harnessing the active involvement of youth represents an effective strategy for achieving better outcomes. The present section addresses this ambivalence by spelling out both the benefits of respecting young people's right to participation and the negative consequences of failing to do so.

The consequences of failing to give young people a voice

Analysis of the global experience of children and young people over many years reveals the extent to which the absence of their perspectives in policy-making at all levels has consistently militated against their best interests. Young people lack access to most of the processes through which adults can articulate their concerns. In very few countries are youth under the age of 18 given the right to vote. They lack the power of the large commercial lobbies to wield influence on Governments. They lack access to media and the courts. They are rarely members of trade unions or professional associations that could negotiate on their behalf. The Committee on the Rights of the Child observes that while most States Parties to the Convention attest to the priority and value attached to children and young people within their respective cultures, they generally do not "undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures … to the maximum extent of their available resources" to ensure that the rights of the younger members of society are realized.[1] Evidence does not support the presumption that adults within both the public and private spheres will ensure adequate representation of young people's best interests in law, policy and practice.

Adults can abuse their power over children and young people. Adults in positions of authority over children and young people can and do abuse their power. The cultural assumption that young people must not challenge their elders or express their views, even when their rights are being violated, has increased their vulnerability to dangers such as economic exploitation, military recruitment and forced participation in the sex trade. It is now well documented that many millions of children and young people in countries around the globe are both physically and sexually abused within their own families.[2] Girls, in particular, are exposed to frequent sexual assaults by their teachers in some parts of the world. In the 1980s and 1990s the extent to which young people in residential institutions were subjected to systematic abuse by the very adults charged with their care received widespread exposure. The most notorious and well-publicized examples came from Eastern Europe, but young people have been equally vulnerable in wealthier countries. These practices are allowed to continue, at least in part, because the views and concerns of young people are neither heard nor valued. Because young people have no outlet through which they might share their experiences they are effectively silenced, which allows adults to behave, with relative impunity, in ways entirely contrary to their welfare.

Adults do not always act in young people's best interests. Actions detrimental to the well-being of young people occur not only through deliberate abuse or neglect. Adults across the professional spectrum have been responsible for decisions, policies and actions that have been inappropriate and sometimes actively harmful to young people, even when the underlying intention has been to promote their welfare. These actions are characterized by a consistent failure to consult or involve young people themselves. Evidence is not hard to come by; it is not uncommon to find cases in which young people are placed in large institutions that give insufficient attention to their emotional and psychological well-being, children from different communities are segregated into different schools, fathers or mothers are automatically granted custody of their children following a divorce irrespective of the circumstances, and young people are institutionalized in attempts to remove them from the streets. There is growing recognition that young people are more harmed than helped by these practices, which have all been, and in many instances continue to be, justified by adults, while the views of young people themselves have gone unheard. If young people are not involved in the development of the laws, policies and programmes that affect them, even well-intentioned actions on the part of adults will often fail to protect their best interests.

Parents' rights have priority over those of children and young people. Public policy often gives precedence to the rights and interests of parents over those of children and young people, even when the consequences of doing so are detrimental to their welfare. Parents, as adults and voters, have a more powerful influence on and greater access to public officials and the decision-making process than do young people. For example, the physical punishment of children and young people remains a legally sanctioned practice in most countries throughout the world, even though the Committee on the Rights of the Child has clearly stated that it represents a violation of human rights.[3] Parents defend its use by citing the need to impose effective discipline, but it is rare that young people's views on corporal punishment are solicited or factored into policy development.

Young people's interests are often disregarded in public policy. Young people's interests are frequently overlooked in the public policy sphere in favour of those of more powerful interest groups. It is not necessarily the case that the welfare of youth is deliberately disregarded, but because their voices are not heard and the impact of public policy on their lives is not discussed in decision-making forums, their concerns never reach the top of the political agenda. In very few countries in the world is there any real analysis of public expenditure to assess whether the proportion spent on children and young people and their well-being reflects either their levels of need or their representation within the community. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child entitles children to a standard of living adequate for their "physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development". However, the resolution by heads of State and Government within the framework of the United Nations Millennium Declaration to reduce the number of people living in poverty by half by 2015 does not extend the definition of poverty beyond the basic provision of material needs. In practice, in the context of the broader understanding of child poverty embodied in the Convention, young people's opportunities for development may decrease as the family income increases, as the incidence of neglect rises with the added stresses and time constraints deriving from expanded work commitments and longer working hours among parents or guardians.[4] Some young people who have been invited to express their views deem the consequent lack of emotional support and guidance even more harmful than inadequate nutrition.[5]

In many cities throughout the world, there is a growing intolerance of young people in the public arena. They are widely viewed as undesirable in the streets and shops, particularly when they are in groups. Public spaces are seen to be "owned" by adults, with young people's presence representing an unwanted intrusion. Little or no thought is given to developing towns and cities that are designed with children and young people in mind.

The benefits of participation

The frequent and widespread failure of the adult world to act effectively to promote the welfare of young people points to the need for a change in approach. A powerful case can be made for listening to young people as part, though by no means all, of a strategy for strengthening participative democracy and furthering the realization of their human rights.

Youth participation leads to better decisions and outcomes. Many of the profound difficulties faced by young people around the globe—illiteracy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, discrimination and forced engagement in armed conflict—are subjects of widespread concern at the national and international levels. In all regions of the world, young people are having to deal with increased unemployment and insecurity at work, greater family instability, and reductions in social welfare programmes. Youth is often characterized by uncertainty and risk.[6] Effective strategies are needed to resolve these concerns. Young people have a body of experience unique to their situation, and they have views and ideas that derive from this experience. They are social actors with skills and capacities to bring about constructive resolutions to their own problems. Too often, though, there is a failure or even a refusal to recognize

the legitimacy of young people's contributions to programmes, policies and decision-making. Much of government policy has a direct or indirect impact on young people, yet it is developed and delivered largely in ignorance of how it will affect their day-to-day lives or their present and future well-being.

One example of the disconnection between policy adoption and application relates to education. Most Governments are concerned about improving young people's educational experience, yet very few take any measures to find out from students themselves which teaching methods work, whether the curriculum is relevant, what factors contribute to school dropout rates and truancy, how to improve attendance rates, what is needed to promote better inclusion of girls, or how to enhance good behaviour and promote effective discipline. The Committee on the Rights of the Child consistently asks Governments to explain how participation is being implemented in their school systems, but progress remains extremely slow.[7] Evidence shows that schools in which democratic environments are introduced are likely to have a more harmonious atmosphere, better staff-student relationships and a more effective learning environment.[8] If the devastating student dropout rates in so many countries in the world are to be reduced, educational administrators and policy makers need to learn from children and young people how learning institutions can become places where they want to be. If they are to have a sense of ownership of and commitment to school, they need opportunities to be involved in the decisions, policies and structures that affect them on a daily basis.

National and international campaigns to end child labour have too often failed to take the views and experiences of working children and young people into account, and sometimes their situations have actually worsened as a result. In Bangladesh, for example, when children were laid off from garment industry jobs following an American campaign to end the employment of children under 15, many of them were compelled to engage in work that was less appropriate and more hazardous than the jobs they had been forced to leave. Similarly, many programmes designed to protect young people from the streets by providing them with institutionalized accommodations and education have failed because they have not sought the input of the young people themselves. The programmes that have been effective are those committed to empowering young people by working with them to allow their own experience to inform the development of appropriate interventions and services.

As youth lifestyles become more divergent and the rate of change increases, and as populations grow more diverse through immigration and mobility, it becomes ever more difficult for those in authority to adequately understand youth. Consulting young people and drawing on their perceptions, knowledge and ideas are essential to both the development of effective public policy and the achievement of positive outcomes.

Participation promotes the well-being and development of young people. It is by questioning, expressing their views and having their opinions taken seriously that young people develop skills, build competencies, acquire confidence and form aspirations. It is a virtuous circle. The more opportunities a young person has for meaningful participation, the more experienced and competent he or she becomes. This allows more effective participation, which in turn enhances development.[10] There is a

considerable body of evidence demonstrating that young people who are afforded opportunities for meaningful participation within their families and communities are more likely to achieve healthy development.[11] Participation is also a means to achieve development in its broader sense. Amartya Sen has argued that development is "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy".[12] Strictly speaking, development involves realizing particular goals in the areas of health, education and economic growth; however, the final objective is to enable people to choose and live the lives they want. A developed community is therefore one that allows all its members to participate.

Action taken within the public school system in Philadelphia offers evidence of the virtuous-circle effect. The schools in the area were once characterized by poverty, material decay, disaffection, high dropout rates and racial tension. A young person committed to principles of human rights and a belief in the effectiveness of peer counselling founded the Philadelphia Student Union to create opportunities for young people to make a difference. Specific objectives included involving students in decision-making, ending their mistreatment, promoting multicultural education, and developing an interactive and engaging curriculum. After five years, the Union had mobilized more than 500 members. Among its many accomplishments, it lobbied for a new school funding system and was successful in having a proposed funding cut converted into a transfer of $15 million into the school district; it has produced a commitment to improved instruction in schools by persuading teachers to lobby for redesigned professional development; and it has successfully pressed for building inspections in schools, which has resulted in needed repairs. Most importantly, it has enabled the adult world to recognize that students learn better when they are trusted to help shape the environment in which they live.[13]

Participation strengthens a commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy. In both well-established and newly formed democracies, there is a need for young people to experience the implications of democratic decision-making and respect for human rights. In those countries facing internal conflict and tensions that threaten democracy, such experience takes on even greater significance. Young people need opportunities to learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others, and how their actions can affect the rights of others. They need opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making processes within schools and local communities, and to learn to abide by subsequent decisions that are made.

According to article 29(d) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, education should be geared towards the "preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples". In a recent survey by the European Commission of young people's priorities for the EU, 77 per cent of young women and 70 per cent of young men said they considered democratic rights and values a very important issue for discussion in the development of a European Convention.[14] However, these values cannot be transmitted in a repressive environment in which young people themselves are not respected. Only by experiencing respect for their views and discovering the importance of respecting the views of others will youth acquire the capacity and willingness to listen and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy. This was recognized at the International Conference on Education in 1994, where delegates affirmed their commitment to "take suitable steps to establish in educational institutions an atmosphere contributing to the success of education for international understanding, so that they become ideal places for the exercise of tolerance, respect for human rights, the practice of democracy and learning about the diversity and wealth of cultural identities".[15] For most young people today, these words reflect little more than pious aspirations. Democracy is often taught in schools through simulation activities such as mock formal elections and model United Nations exercises, with no reference to the day-to-day arbitrary exercise of power at the school level. What is needed is the development of participatory processes in all institutional settings with young people in order to promote their understanding of what practical democracy is all about.

Too many young people feel that their views do not matter, that they cannot influence outcomes, and that democracy does not work for them. At a formal level, most citizens are not given the right to vote in elections until they reach the age of 18. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, Cuba, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Serbia, Montenegro and Slovenia are the only countries that have reduced the voting age below 18 years. However, democracy can be understood in much broader terms as participation in civil society. Many groups that have traditionally occupied a disadvantaged position in society, including women and disabled people, have increasingly entered into dialogue with politicians at local and national levels to promote and press for greater recognition of their concerns, as the instruments of parliamentary democracy have not proved sufficient to answer their needs. Without the right to vote, young people have an even stronger claim for comparable political participation.

Participation protects young people. The conventional approach to child protection is predicated on the belief that adults must provide that protection, and that if young people are given the information they need to make informed choices, they will make decisions and act in ways that place them at risk. Accordingly, a considerable number of youth are denied access to information vital to their well-being. In a survey of young people undertaken by UNICEF in East Asia and the Pacific, many of the respondents claimed total ignorance with regard to sexual relationships (55 per cent), HIV/AIDS (43 per cent) and illegal drugs (42 per cent).[16] In a similar UNICEF survey covering the transition economies in Central Asia and Europe, it was found

that 53 per cent had apparently been given little or no information about HIV/AIDS, and 83 per cent in the Caucasus, 64 per cent in Central Asia, and 60 per cent in South-East Europe said they had received little or no information about preventing drug abuse.[17]

These findings reflect the widespread view that perpetuating ignorance among youth keeps them out of harm's way. It is believed, for example, that withholding information from young people about sex will prevent them from becoming sexually active. There is increasing evidence, however, that access to sensitively presented, non-judgemental information on sexual and reproductive health is essential for the protection of young people and does not lead to earlier sexual activity. Particularly in the context of the acute risks associated with HIV/AIDS, denying young people access to such information can lead to "loss of life, illness, cessation of educational and employment opportunities, and other serious infringements of human rights".[18] When young people are engaged in the development of strategies to promote sexual health, their unique understanding of youth perspectives can be incorporated to help achieve more innovative approaches and effective outcomes.

The silence that accompanies sexual abuse within families serves to protect only the abuser. In contexts in which young people are entitled to challenge what is happening to them and have access to established mechanisms through which to do so, such violations of their rights are far more easily exposed. Conversely, young people who are denied the right to express their views and are taught to be submissive and acquiescent are more pliable and vulnerable to adult abuse. Violence against young people in prisons, abuse in foster homes, racism in schools, and misrepresentation of young people in the media can only be tackled effectively if young people have a voice and can enlist the support of adults with the authority to take appropriate action. In other words, young people need to become protagonists in securing the implementation of their rights.

Young people want to participate. There is considerable evidence that young people are becoming increasingly disaffected in many European countries, with apathy towards the formal political process evidenced by low registration and voting figures for this group.[19] However, cynicism and the lack of active engagement in existing political structures do not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in political issues. When given the opportunity, young people consistently assert their desire for wider recognition of their right to participate. This appeal was expressed powerfully by young people participating in the 2001 World Youth Forum: in the Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy, Governments, the United Nations system and civil society organizations are called upon to "support young people in their endeavours to obtain the resources for extensive and comprehensive youth empowerment programmes". Young people taking part in a meeting on youth policy in Europe in 2000 also indicated a strong interest in seeing participation extend to all levels of society, but noted that existing mechanisms were "inadequate, inaccessible or purely symbolic".[20] They identified participation as the first of five key targets for political action and within this context elaborated a number of expectations including better access to information, improved citizenship education, systematic consultation by Governments and EU institutions, and regular opportunities for European meetings.

According to a survey conducted by Euronet,[21] young people feel their views are consistently disregarded by the adult world; they would like to be given the opportunity to be heard and taken more seriously, and believe they have an important contribution to make.[22] A similar vision is communicated in *A World Fit for Us*, a statement produced by the Children's Forum and delivered to the General Assembly at the United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002. The message stresses the importance of "raised awareness and respect among people of all ages about every child's right to full and meaningful participation ... (and for children to be) ... actively involved in decision-making at all levels and in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all matters affecting the rights of the child".

Participation is a fundamental human right. All people, including the young, have a right to express their views on decisions directly affecting their lives. Whether it is an issue relating to rules imposed at school, legislation on the minimum age for full-time work, representation of young people in the media, or priorities in public expenditure, youth are entitled to articulate their concerns, participate in the development of policy and have their opinions given serious consideration. Participation represents a means for young people to advocate for themselves and transform their situations. Since the International Youth Year in 1985, the General Assembly has defined youth participation as comprising four components: economic participation, relating to work and development; political participation, relating to decision-making processes; social participation, relating to community involvement; and cultural participation, relating to the arts, cultural values and expression. All four elements are reaffirmed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are central to the creation of a culture of respect for children and young people.

MODELS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Over the past 10 to 15 years, the concept of child and youth participation has gradually taken hold in every region of the world. Some of the highest-profile initiatives have emerged through young people's involvement in international conferences. However, the vast majority of participative projects and programmes are being implemented at the local or national level, where young people have demonstrated the capacity to contribute significantly to decisions and actions normally undertaken exclusively by adults on behalf of—though too often without any consideration for—young people. Their involvement can take place in any environment of relevance to young people including schools, residential homes, the juvenile justice system, media, youth services, workplaces, health services, local and national government, and international systems and networks. Alternatively, youth may be engaged in developing their own organizations in the form of clubs, unions, networks, committees and parliaments. They can participate at all levels, from the family and local community to the international arena. However, if their participation is to be meaningful, it is imperative that their engagement be directly linked to first-hand experience and that the key areas of concern be identified by young people themselves.

Young people have become active in processes as varied as the following:

- Research. Many examples exist of young people being provided with training as researchers and then undertaking independent investigations focusing on issues of direct concern to them.
- Programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Young people share their views and experiences to help design and implement programmes that target their specific needs; by playing a key role in monitoring and evaluation, youth are able to help the programme meet its objectives and adjust to changing circumstances as necessary.
- Peer support, representation and advocacy. Young people are increasingly being provided with opportunities to elect or be elected by their own peers to serve as advocates, working with adult institutions to lobby for greater respect for their rights.
- Policy analysis and development. Many initiatives involve young people in reviewing existing legislation and policies from the perspective of their own experience.
- Campaigning and lobbying. Once young people are afforded the chance to come together and articulate their experiences and concerns, many are able to develop campaigns for the realization of their rights, lobbying for the necessary changes from grass-roots to international levels.
- Development and management of their own organizations. Within a growing number of youth-led organizations throughout the world, young people are defining their own structures, policies and priorities for action.
- Participation in and use of the media. Young people have traditionally been excluded from active participation in the media, but in many countries they are receiving training as youth journalists, running their own radio programmes, developing video tools for the promotion of rights, and publishing journals and newsletters.
- Conference participation. Young people have participated in local, national and international conferences as organizers, speakers, delegates and rapporteurs, often with significant impact on the outcomes of such events.
- Youth councils and parliaments. In a number of countries, young people have participated in the development of democratic political structures that parallel those of the adult world and provide opportunities to inform and influence key economic, social and political agendas.

All of these activities offer opportunities for empowering young people to take action to influence or change aspects of their lives for the better. However, several different models and structures are employed to achieve specific objectives. These may be conceptualized in terms of the degree to which control and power are actually transferred to young people in practice.

Adult-led processes

Many initiatives are developed by adults in positions of authority to elicit young people's views and perspectives or to offer them opportunities for social or cultural engagement. They reflect the recognition that young people have something useful to say and that there is a need to institutionalize structures that will allow their voices to be heard. Their value derives from the fact that, at best, laws, policies, programmes and practices can be influenced by the input of young people. Adults may invite young people to speak at conferences and share their experiences and views, or to participate in research, interactive web sites, informal consultations, youth councils or parliaments. The initiatives might involve the creation of projects or organizations run for young people but not by them. Such processes do not, in and of themselves, achieve youth empowerment; the decision to involve young people, the commitment to consult them, the issues on which they are consulted, the methodology employed and the weight given to the findings all continue to rest with those in authority. Adult-led initiatives are not without merit. They can play an important part in building a youth perspective, but they are essentially about consultation rather than participation.

Adult-initiated processes

Projects, programmes or organizational structures can be initiated by adults but subsequently developed to allow youth participation.[23] For example, a Government or NGO may identify the need to provide better information to young people about drug misuse or HIV/AIDS and decide to develop an awareness-raising programme. Those in charge of implementing the initiative could make it participative, rather than purely educational, if they sought to train youth to become peer educators, developed the content in collaboration with young people themselves, established a joint youth-adult team with responsibility for the programme, or engaged young people in the process of creating indicators for effective outcomes, monitoring and evaluation. Equally empowering are adult-initiated youth councils/parliaments or youth organizations in which young people are able to elect their own representatives, determine priorities and manage their own agendas. Young people invited to speak at or attend an adult conference can participate more effectively if they are fully informed about its aims, adequately prepared, consulted in its planning and organization, respected as equal partners, and encouraged to provide an evaluation of the event. In other words, meaningful participation necessarily involves young people having some control over an initiative's inputs and outcomes. In this way, they contribute unique perspectives that help to shape an adult agenda.

Youth-initiated and youth-led processes

Real empowerment is achieved when young people are able to identify those issues of primary concern to them and to develop strategies, activities, networks, organizations or campaigns through which to pursue their objectives. Many such initiatives throughout the world are supported and resourced by sympathetic adults, through NGOs or Governments. Youth-initiated processes often evolve out of earlier projects started by adult organizations. As young people acquire greater skills, confidence and knowledge, they also develop the capacity to work more independently and to assert their own agendas.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

The practice of creating meaningful opportunities for young people to participate as active agents in decisions affecting them is relatively new in most countries, and in most arenas of young people's lives. This is a rapidly growing and evolving field in which there is little history or prior experience to draw on and much experimental and innovative work being developed. There has been a steep learning curve both for adults struggling to create such opportunities for youth and for young people themselves as they grapple with the construction of new forms of negotiation and dialogue with adults.

The past decade has been witness to a multitude of developments and efforts aimed at securing greater respect for young people's participatory rights; however, much more needs to be done before the commitments to participation embodied in the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond are translated into practice for the majority for young people. Presumptions of young people's incompetence and lack of legitimacy in arenas traditionally occupied exclusively by adults continue to prevail. Respect for young people as social actors, as citizens or as active participants in decisions and processes affecting their own lives is far from universal. The rights of many young people continue to be violated with relative impunity throughout the world, while the opportunities they have to challenge those violations remain limited. There is a need to undertake a critical analysis not only of the progress made to date, but also of the continuing barriers that must be addressed if commitments to youth participation are to be universally fulfilled.[24]

Moving from consultation to participation and empowerment

It is not enough to have youth policies and national bodies representing youth. While consultations can be of some value, young people are increasingly demanding that they also be involved in decision-making processes at all levels.[25] One-time consultations or opinion polls are not adequate means of engaging them as active citizens. They want recognition as partners and as significant contributors to public policy. They want their own organizations and networks through which to articulate their concerns. The active involvement of young people must be embedded in political processes at the local, national, regional and global levels so that they may become the subjects, not objects, of policies that affect their lives. Governments need to lend their support to and be willing to engage in dialogue with youth-led organizations.

Facilitating access to information

Information of relevance to youth must be widely disseminated and made more accessible and user-friendly to enable young people to play a greater and more effective role in political processes. Youth themselves should be involved in the development of such information in order to ensure its appropriateness for a young audience. Information is needed at all levels. It is not possible for young people to make informed, meaningful contributions or to engage in effective dialogue if they are isolated from the debates taking place, the policies being developed, the processes through which decisions are made, or politicians in key positions of power.

Promoting a broader inclusion of young people

The past decade has witnessed the gradual inclusion of a broader range of children and young people in participatory initiatives. Efforts to create more democratic schools, programmes involving young people living with HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and sexual exploitation, work with young people from rural communities, and initiatives at the local authority level have all brought in a wider constituency. However, there are still significant limitations. For example, disabled young people too often remain marginalized and excluded from participatory activities. Greater investment and effort are needed both to incorporate them in mainstream programmes and to establish forums that allow them to share their particular experiences and priorities. Too often youth movements can be dominated by the most articulate and socially engaged young people, while the more marginalized groups are excluded. In addition, there is a danger that youth movements may replicate the approach of many adult organizations in working for disadvantaged young people rather than empowering those groups to articulate their own concerns.

Developing principles, not blueprints

It has become increasingly clear that there are no blueprints for developing participatory practice, nor should there be. The imposition of predefined methodologies denies young people the opportunity to develop approaches best suited to their unique situations and concerns. What is vital is a commitment to working on the basis of shared principles, rooted in respect for young people's capacities as agents of change, and a willingness to recognize them as partners. It is important that young people are not pushed into replicating traditional adult models for democratic participation but are equipped to create new collaborative approaches. It is also important that youth-led organizations observe the principles of transparency, accountability, non-discrimination and mutual respect.

Challenging adult control of projects and agendas

Many projects continue to be initiated and controlled by adults. Some youth parliaments that have been established by Governments, for example, are merely showcases and offer no real opportunity for the articulation of concerns. The participants are often chosen by adults and do not represent any constituency of young people; adults assume that youth lack the capacity to choose appropriate delegates. However, as Governments and NGOS place more emphasis on building the self-organizing capacities of child and youth groups, it is possible that these practices will be more effectively challenged. Adults, when confronted with the levels of competence young people display, will often acknowledge the legitimacy of their involvement in decision-making and completely relinquish control. As young people themselves gain confidence and experience in participation, they will increasingly demand more of a say in their own representation.

Working with adults as well as young people to promote participatory rights

Adults remain a major barrier to the effective participation of children and young people. It is easier for youth to learn the skills necessary to engage in active participation than for adults to "unlearn" attitudes and assumptions built deep within their cultures. While there are significant benefits for adults in opening up opportunities for young people to participate, it is often the immediately perceived threats of doing so that inform their attitudes; for young people the benefits are more evident and immediate.

Many factors contribute to the failure or refusal of adults to recognize the value of a more democratic relationship with young people; presumptions of their incompetence and the insignificance of their experience, traditions of adult power over youth, the fear of losing status or control, and the belief that young people will lose respect for adults and refuse their protection can all play a part. It is also hard for adults who have never felt empowered themselves to accept the importance of empowering young people. However, there is a growing body of evidence indicating that when adults are exposed to effective participatory practice, they invariably recognize that many of their concerns are based on misconceptions.[26] It is therefore vital to invest time in working with adults as well as young people to overcome these barriers.

Institutionalizing participation

Youth participation has become "fashionable" in many national and international arenas, but it will not necessarily remain so, and even where action is being taken, it remains far from comprehensive. An analysis undertaken by the Office of the Children's Ombudsman in Sweden during the 1990s showed that while over half of local municipalities had some form of participation for young people, only one-fifth were working with them on a systematic and strategic basis.[27] In a survey of youth participation in Scotland, a large number of organizations reported involving young people in decision-making, but few had undertaken any evaluation of their participation or had developed guidelines for good practice.[28] In some regions of the world, the rise of fundamentalist regimes is serving to restrict the participation of young people. There is a need to institutionalize democratic systems for youth if the gains made over the past few years are not to be lost. In some cases this might be achieved by adopting legal reforms that, for example, give young people the right to develop democratic structures in their schools, or by introducing formal mechanisms for political dialogue between youth and officials at all levels of government. There is also a powerful case for lowering the voting age to 16 to extend formal political rights to young people. A strong lead from the United Nations emphasizing the importance of youth movements and enhanced participation by young people is essential.

Promoting cultural change and respect for human rights

There is a need for attitudes to change on the ground if young people are to feel empowered to make a real contribution as citizens within their communities. It is important for Governments to take the lead in promoting cultural change by actively engaging in dialogue with children and young people and using their platform to promote respect for them as social actors with a role to play in society and in the exercise of rights.

As more young people begin to take an active part in sustained engagement in their own organizations, programmes and communities, they will experience a deeper understanding of human rights and the concept of citizenship. Child and youth organizations have proved to be excellent settings for learning participation skills and practising non-discrimination, and as such offer an opportunity for young people to learn about rights in the most effective way possible—by putting them into practice in everyday situations. Increasingly, human rights constitute core organizational principles and are applied practically in the establishment and maintenance of these participatory bodies. The idea that rights and citizenship apply to all children and young people is learned through their own discussions of membership, organization and external representation. The best way to learn about gender discrimination is to confront it in the daily running of an organization. The same is true for issues of race, class, caste and disability. It is important that these lessons are retained as young people grow older, so that they can pass them on to younger people following behind them.

Developing systematic evaluations of participation

To date, there has been too little independent evaluation of youth participation and its direct impact on the young people themselves and on other elements of society including legal and policy reforms, public awareness of children's and young people's rights, community improvements, and services for young people. Nor has there been any real assessment of its effect on gender discrimination, or any comparative studies undertaken to measure the levels and nature of the participation of young men and young women. Little work has been carried out in collaboration with youth to develop indicators against which participatory methods and programmes can be evaluated. One obvious improvement would be to build monitoring into all youth participation programmes, and evaluation schemes that build upon these internal monitoring practices could be designed. There is a need to encourage the academic community to collaborate with Governments and youth-led NGOs in developing indicators and tools for evaluation, given the limited capacities of the latter groups in this area. Scepticism about the efficacy and viability of youth participation remains widespread. Concerns have also been raised about the costs associated with youth participation. Evaluation is important, not only to provide demonstrable evidence of its positive outcomes for those advocating greater participation, but also to learn more about both effective and ineffective practices so that programmes may be strengthened and streamlined.

Sharing experiences

Although many regional and global youth networks have been established, little sharing of practical experience between organizations working in the field of youth participation has taken place. Many of the large international NGOs such as Save the Children have developed a sophisticated range of tools and methodologies that could be applied in this context and collectively possess an invaluable body of practical experience from which those working in the youth field could benefit. A number of national NGOs have begun to elaborate participatory processes that reflect their particular cultural environment and sensitivities, as they have recognized that while the right to participate is a universal principle, its application must reflect the context in which young people are living if real change is to occur. There are now many different models of adults and young people working collaboratively, models of youth-led organizations, and examples of effective political dialogue between young people and adults. All of these experiences need to be documented and shared in order to build on the lessons learned. Many new initiatives have to reinvent the wheel because they lack access to others' experiences. Even where there is no hostility, in principle, to promoting young people's active participation, the lack of skills and confidence in developing effective models can lead to a failure to take action. There is considerable scope for national youth organizations to develop networks for exchanging and sharing good practice and effective strategies.

Involving young people directly in the running of NGOs

Although an increasing number of NGOs are developing initiatives to promote children's and young people's participation, it is relatively rare for those organizations to modify their structures to the extent that the priorities identified by young people themselves are reflected in their planning and programming. As argued earlier, even well-intentioned and well-informed adults do not necessarily have sufficient insight and awareness of children's and young people's experiences to make appropriate decisions or develop suitable strategies. Involving young people as apprentices or interns, allowing them to serve on management boards, inviting them to participate in consultative workshops, and creating advisory forums are just some of the mechanisms that might be used to democratize organizations.

Promoting participation skills as well as leadership skills

Initiatives throughout the world demonstrate clearly that young people can emerge as leaders at a young age, and it is important that they have the opportunity to do so. Children and young people need their own leaders with the skills to advocate on behalf of those they represent. Too often, however, "leadership" is the primary focus of training programmes. Leadership training is representative of an older model of democracy than, for example, the one the Convention on the Rights of the Child inspires in so many young people. There is often a strong emphasis on young people learning to speak out rather than learning to "speak in" and communicate more effectively with their peers. Youth organizations should focus on the promotion

of participatory skills for all, not just leadership skills for the few. Leaders will always emerge, but all children and young people need the chance to learn the multiple skills of listening and collaborating in groups if they are to discover that they can play very different roles in building communities and achieving change.

CONCLUSIONS

As demonstrated in this chapter, the value of youth participation is now recognized at levels ranging from the local community to the international arena. However, recognition is not the same as action, and progress in the area of practical implementation has been slow. Even in those countries that have achieved the most, participation remains piecemeal and insufficiently integrated into all areas of young people's lives. Many organizations are still unconvinced that youth can play a leading or supportive role in helping them achieve their programme goals. Initiatives may be limited to seeking the views of young people on particular issues; their involvement in decision-making is rarely sought. Young people therefore remain marginal to most democratic processes. Token participation is meaningless, as it does not empower young people to influence outcomes and achieve real change.

The frequent and widespread failure of the adult world to act in ways that promote the welfare of young people is well documented. Efforts must be made to listen to youth and engage them in the process of strengthening participatory democracy. Their involvement can lead to better decisions and outcomes. Participation promotes the well-being and development of young people, strengthens their commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy, and provides them a form of protection; it also allows them to take part in decision-making processes.

Youth participation is an essential strategy for ensuring young people's optimal development—and for achieving wider development goals for society. The progress made to date in promoting participation should be sustained and enhanced. Youth participation must become an integral component of, local, national and international policies for youth, and should provide the framework for decisions and actions that affect the daily lives of children and young people. Only then will the traditional approaches towards youth begin to evolve and the oft-stated commitment to their participation begin to have meaning. The approach must promote respect for them as social actors, as agents in their own lives, and as citizens of their own societies. ■

[1] See R. Hodgkin and P. Newell, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (New York, UNICEF, 1998), article 4.

[2] See, for example, commissions of inquiry into violence in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

[3] Committee on the Rights of the Child, "Report on the seventh session (Geneva, 26 September – 14 October 1994)", (CRC/C/34), annex IV, p. 63.

[4] C. Harper and R. Marcus, "Child poverty in sub-Saharan Africa" (London, Save the Children UK, 1999).

[5] Ghana National Commission on Children, "Ghana's children: country report" (Accra, 1997).

[6] See chapter 2 of the present publication.

[7] T. Hammarberg, "A school for children with rights" (Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre/International Child Development Centre, 1998).

[8] See, for example, M. Fielding and M. Prieto, "Student voice and democratic renewal in Chile", in *Learning Democracy and Citizenship*, M. Schweisfurth, L. Davies and C. Harber, eds. (Oxford, Symposium Books, 2002); and L. Davies and G. Kirkpatrick, "The EURIDEM project: a review of pupil democracy in Europe" (London, Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2000).

[9] UNICEF, *In Children's Words* (Dhaka, 1997).

[10] R. Rajani, "Discussion paper for partners on promoting strategic adolescent participation" (New York, UNICEF, 2000).

[11] Ibid.

[12] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

[13] J. Tolman and K. Pittman, with B. Cervone and others, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Impacts*, Community and Youth Development Series, vol. 7 (Takoma Park, Maryland, Forum for Youth Investment, 2001).

[14] European Commission, *Young People on the Threshold of the Year 2000: A Eurobarometer Survey* (Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1997).

[15] Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy: Declaration of the 44th Session of the International Conference on Education, Geneva, 3-8 October 1994, article 2.

[16] UNICEF, *Speaking Out! Voices of Children and Adolescents in East Asia and the Pacific: A Regional Opinion Survey* (Bangkok, 2001).

[17] UNICEF, *Young Voices: Opinion Survey of Children and Young People in Europe and Central Asia* (Geneva, 2001).

[18] Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy and Child and Law Foundation, *State of Denial: Adolescent Reproductive Rights in Zimbabwe* (New York, 2002).

[19] See, for example, MORI, "General election: first-time voters" (London, 1997); and H. Wilkinson and G. Mulgan, "Freedom's children: work, relationships and politics for 18-34 year olds in Britain today", Demos Paper No. 17 (London, Demos, 1995).

[20] From the principal recommendations of the European Youth Gathering, held in Paris in October 2000, in preparation for the development of a European youth policy.

[21] The European Children's Network (Eurochet) is a coalition of networks and organizations campaigning for the interests and rights of children (all those under 18 years of age).

[22] G. Lansdown, *Challenging Discrimination against Children in the EU: A Policy Proposal by Eurochet* (Brussels, 2000).

[23] See, for example, B. Butler and D. Wharton-Fields, with T. Ferber and K. Pittman, *Finding Common Agendas: How Young People Are Being Engaged in Community Change Efforts* (Takoma Park, Maryland, Forum for Youth Investment, 1999).

[24] This section draws heavily on an article by G. Lansdown and R. Hart in the *CRIN Newsletter* (September 2002).

[25] European Commission, *European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth* (Brussels, 21 November 2001) (COM(2001)681 final).

[26] See examples cited in G. Lansdown, *Promoting Children's Democratic Participation in Decision Making* (Florence, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001); and N. Reddy and K. Ratna, *A Journey in Children's Participation* (Bangalore, India, The Concerned for Working Children, 2002).

[27] Office of the Children's Ombudsman in Sweden, "Children as participants: Swedish experience of participation by children and young people in urban planning as a tool for giving effect to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child" (Stockholm, 2000).

[28] Carnegie Young People Initiative and Children in Scotland, *Taking the Initiative: Promoting Young People's Participation in Public Decision-Making in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000).

[29] Some studies have been undertaken to assess outcomes of youth participation; see, for example, J. Tolman and K. Pittman, with B. Cervone and others, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Impacts... .*