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As one of the first higher education institutions open to women in the world, Royal Holloway University is committed to equality of opportunity and strengthening the voices of disadvantaged and marginalized groups through its founding principles. It is proactively working to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals internally and through its sustainability catalyst, which promotes research and impact on theme of sustainable development.

James Sloam is Professor of Politics within the School of Law and Social Sciences. His research focuses on the amplification of the voices of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and turning youth voice into sustainable public policy. This includes a recent contribution to the UN World Public Sector Report 2023 (Chapter 1).

This written input emphasizes the central role youth voice must play in generating sustainable public policy.

Chapeau

Over the last two decades, the world has experienced several waves of crisis – from the 2008 financial crash, to the Covid-19 pandemic, to the gathering crisis of climate change – that have particularly affected younger generations and weakened their trust in political institutions.¹ Policy-making in most countries is dominated by older generations, leading to more reactive and unsustainable responses to these crises. Younger generations must become more central to the governance process, to ensure that public policy is future-oriented and sustainable in the long-run. This aligns with the Summit goal for ‘the meaningful inclusion of young people, with a focus on the theme of Youth and Future Generations articulated in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV. Youth and future generations

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.

¹ Sloam J. (2023). ‘Youth Voice and Sustainable Public Policy: Rejuvenating Urban Democracy’ in United Nations (Desa) *World Public Sector Report*, <https://desapublications.un.org/publications/world-public-sector-report-2023>, pp. 66-70.

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.² When young people do engage with civic and local authorities, there are two main barriers to effective participation. First, many politicians and officials only pay lip-service to these interactions, so young people often find the experience ineffective and unrewarding.³ 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 better democratic skills than those from low socioeconomic groups.⁴ Citizenship education can help close this gap.⁵

The Summit of the Future promotes the 'meaningful inclusion of young people', but we are very far away from achieving this goal in most countries. The proportion of young adults who are present in national parliaments is very low, there is lack of contact between young people (compared to older adults) and politicians and officials, and there are very few opportunities to actually shape public policy. This is especially true for young people from traditionally marginalised groups – including young women and girls, minoritized ethnic groups, and children and young people from the poorest backgrounds. Even when young people are invited to participate e.g., in youth representative forums, the participation is often tokenistic – the important decisions have already been made by older adults. It is vital to allow young people from a variety of backgrounds the opportunity co-create policies at an early stage in the policy-making process, if participation is to be meaningful in any sense and if we are to harness the knowledge and enthusiasm of younger generations.

This contribution offers four key solutions to the lack of effective youth participation in public policy:

1. Working with Children and Young People as Partners: political and civic institutions need to undertake cultural change, in order to interact effectively with young people. All too often, young people are brought into discussions too late in the day or once a decision has already been made. Government officials are wary of giving away power or embarking on non-linear (i.e., messy), co-creation processes. Officials in political institutions should receive mandatory training on how to work with children and young people as partners on joining the institution.
2. Civic Mentoring: civic and political institutions need to take more responsibility for developing the skills and knowledge of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in the policy-making process. In previous research, I have highlighted the work of the Mayor of London's Peer Outreach Team in training young people from traditionally marginalized groups to reach out to other young people and engagement with policy-makers in London.
3. Citizenship Education: departments for education need to take more responsibility for producing curricula that develop civic and political literacy of pupils and students, so that they are confident in understanding the issues facing their communities and societies and in reaching out to politicians and officials to help effect change. Schools and Universities themselves need to provide environments within which good and active citizenship is encouraged.
4. Localized Networks for Youth Participation: countries need to encourage localized networks for youth participation. Today's young people are less interested in participation in political institutions

² Sloam, J. (2020). Young Londoners, sustainability and everyday politics: the framing of environmental issues in a global city. *Sustainable Earth*, 3(1), pp. 1-7.

³ Hart, R.A. (1992). Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship, *Innocenti Essay*, no. 4, International Child Development Centre, Florence.

⁴ Brady, H. E., Verba, S., & Schlozman, K. L. (1995). Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation. *American political science review*, 89(2), pp. 271-294.

⁵ Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. IEA: Amsterdam.

and are more interested in engaging in issues they face in their everyday lives. Even when facing global challenges such as climate change, it is most important to empower young people to solve problems facing their own communities. The United Nations should, therefore, focus on the promotion of youth policy hubs at the local level.

At present there is a large gap in understanding amongst policy-makers about how to engage effectively with young people, and a tendency to interact with young people in ways that have no clear policy outputs. Global networks, such as those provided by the United Nations, are in a position to promote best practice solutions, which enable meaningful participation, and thereby promote a more inclusive and sustainable public policy. As Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize Winner for Economics, wrote:

“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”.

The pandemic and the climate crisis have 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’.⁶ 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.

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Council, “Young people’s meaningful involvement vital for advancing Sustainable Development Goals, speakers stress as Youth Forum concludes”, press release, 20 April 2022 (ECOSOC/7076), available at <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ecosoc7076.doc.htm>