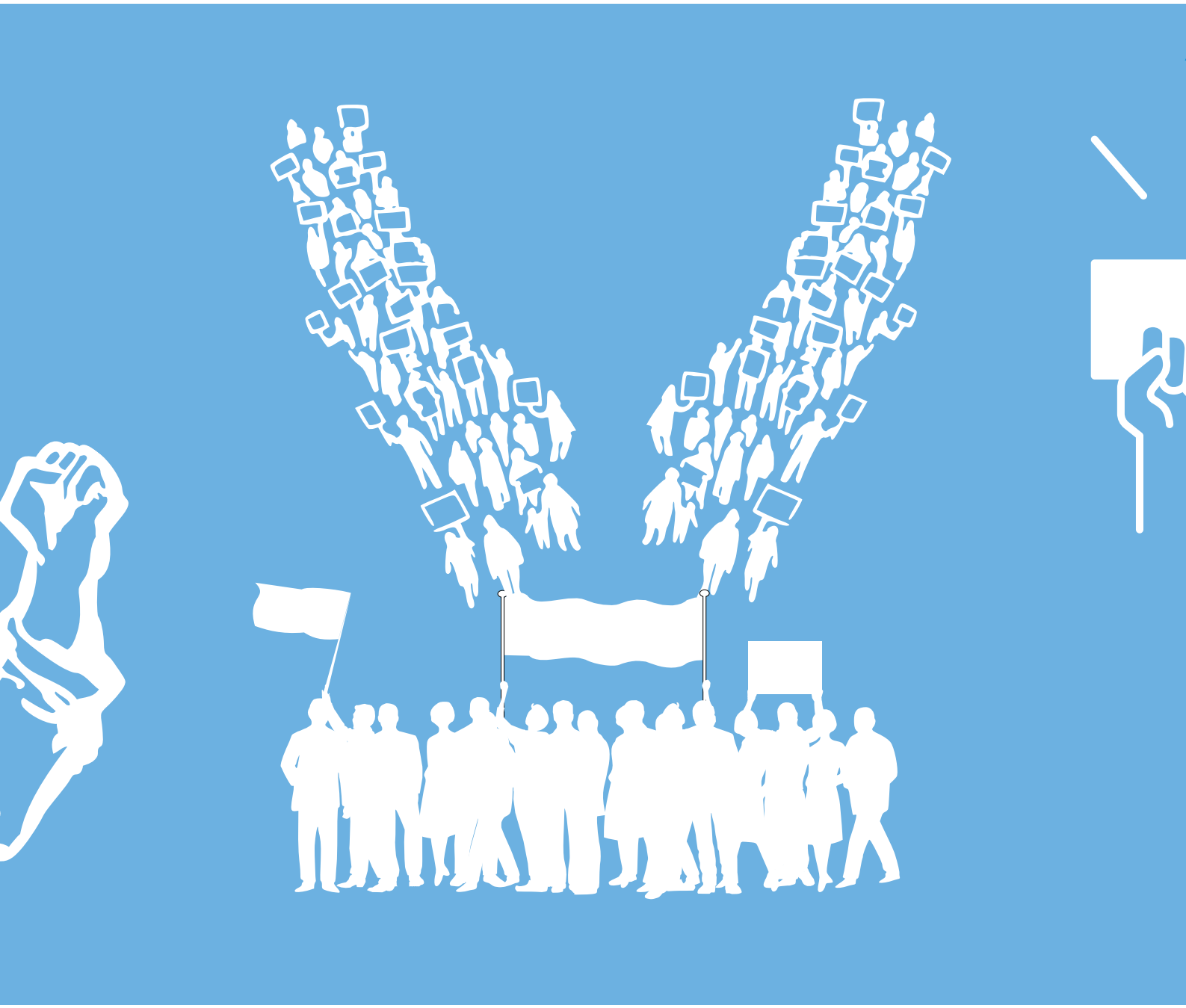
YOUTH TRENDS IN ACTIVISM AND CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION



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CIVICUS YOUTH

INDEX

INTRODUCTION 3

1. YOUTH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CHARACTERISTICS 4

1.1 Communal strength in diversity 4

1.2 Youth movements in the digital world 5

1.3 Paving the way of social change 7

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS INTERNALLY REFLECTING YOUR VALUES 8

2.1 Embodying the values you want in society 8

2.2 However, with challenges 9

2.3 And new possibilities 11

3. VARIETY OF MEDIA TO REACH LARGER AUDIENCES 12

3.1 Traditional channels are expanding 12

3.2 Bypassing the traditional structures 13

3.3 Customised engagement solutions 14

4. NOT TRUSTING INSTITUTIONS BUT RELYING ON THEIR PEERS 12

4.1 Distrust in Institutions 13

4.2 Decrease in formal participation 14

4.3 Peer support, reliance and solidarity 20

5. NEED FOR BELONGING: REASON TO JOIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 20

5.1 Part of something bigger than oneself 21

5.2 Need for belonging 22

5.3 Telling an exciting collective story 24

CONCLUSION 26

REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

The following report results from a desk-research exercise carried out by the CIVICUS Youth Action Team to bring to light the current trends of youth engagement in civic spaces. This paper analyses the physical and digital developments, the strategies used in countries worldwide, and emerging practices used by young activists. These findings highlight possible areas to strengthen young people's role in civic society and help catalyse the construction of healthy and sustainable democracies.

After reviewing +80 journals and documents on this topic, we compiled 5 main trends shaping how young people participate in civic space. Each trend is a vital pillar of the new type of citizens that young people are and how they contribute to the transformation of their countries. These trends are

1. Youth social movements characteristics;
2. Prefigurative Politics - Internally reflecting your values;
3. Variety of media to reach larger audiences;
4. Not trusting institutions but relying on their peers; and
5. Need for belonging: Reason to join social movements.

Together, they paint a compelling picture of the current state of youth civic engagement worldwide, highlighting youth movements' potential and limitations.

Through this report, we want to open up more clearly an area of research that acknowledges the unique contributions of young people to positive civic space transformation. While further work is to be done, highlighting the main trends in this area is an appropriate first step to expanding our understanding of youth in civic space. We suggest recompiling data based on evidence and carrying out a well-documented mapping of youth movements, especially informal ones, and their impacts and sustainability across different nationalities for future research on this topic.

1. YOUTH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CHARACTERISTICS

Social movements, defined as campaigns with some degree of organisation and temporal continuity in support of a social goal, primarily advocating for the implementation or the prevention of a change in society's structure or values, (1) had significantly influenced and intertwined with political institutions (2) and States (3) over the past few decades. Notably, young people have not only been dubbed as the key participants but are also at the vanguard of various progressive social movements in Europe (4) and other parts of the world. Thus, this chapter aims to outline several key characteristics of youth participation and leadership in social movements before critically analysing their institutional influences and impact.

1.1 Communal strength in diversity

Whilst youth's resilience, creativity, and innovative energy are commonly the main contributors to the success of social movements (5); arguably, this can broadly correlate with the diverse nature of youth civil society and social movements. As opposed to most social movements where specific groups/races/communities lead, youth civil society is not homogeneous (6). It comprises a diverse range of formal and informal groups from different racial, economic, geographic and disability backgrounds (7). This diversity could also correspond to the fact that these groups of youths are often the ones who were victims of longstanding oppression and violence.

1. YOUTH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CHARACTERISTICS

However, they also chose not to remain idle/quiet but actively engage in social movements for change. Thus, young people's involvement in social actions has never been easy, and it is arguably essential for members of the society to stand in solidarity with them and for communities to provide strength and a sense of solidarity towards their work/initiative.

For example, in the US, LGBTQ youth of colour have played a key role in many modern social movements and challenged societal issues, including racism and gender inclusivity (8).

Youth involvement in social change has also been an ongoing global trend across social movements where young women, LGBT youths and many more young people from different groups are getting involved to achieve the exact social change (9). These diverse groups of social movement organisations allow for a broader diversity of ideology, strategy, tactic and organisational forms (10). Diversity is present in recent youth social movements, such as The Choose Youth Campaign, Black Lives Matter, and the movement led by FIERCE LGBTQ youth in New York City.

Nonetheless, as highlighted in the first-ever Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space, young people from diverse backgrounds remain vulnerable to threats and harassment. This challenge obstructs youth advocates' participation in social movements, especially those from minority groups, rural areas, and the LGBTQI+ communities (11).

1.2 Youth movements in the digital world

Furthermore, youths' presence and civic identities are increasingly developed creatively via digital tools/spaces, vital to their impact in challenging traditional (and commonly restrictive) civic spaces (12).

1. YOUTH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS CHARACTERISTICS

These diverse groups of social movement organisations allow for a broader diversity of ideology, Such a form of "digital activism" not only makes messaging and organising broader groups of people more straightforward (13), but online activities can also be more spontaneous and require lesser resources to plan, organise, and implement (14).

Moreover, it is arguable that the barriers to gathering participation as opposed to offline activities have been lower since youths can now mobilise large groups of people through simple tools like online petitions, virtual gatherings/calls, or social media postings (15). Youth civil society groups and social movements also have the chance to connect with a broader audience, including some engaging (for the first time) with decision-makers online (16).

Building upon that, youth social movements facilitated by information and communication technologies and social media could arguably correspond with the high participation of youth in autonomous movements (17). The lack of formal organisation and institutional infrastructures meant rapid mobilisation and self-governance through horizontal (non-hierarchical) structures were enabled across numerous youth social movements.

However, whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly shifted most youth social movements and activities online, challenges stemming from online restrictions, privacy issues and surveillance are becoming more significant in defining (and limiting) the space for digital activism and self-organisation (18). The shift also re-emphasised the case of the digital divide originating from the inequity of internet/digital devices access. Its devastating impact on the inclusivity and participation of youth social movements online (19).

1.3 Paving the way of social change

This research has revealed two key characteristics of youth social movements: their unique potential to influence change and their capacity to mobilise actions. More importantly, it is worth noting that young people were often at the forefront of driving change. For example, according to a report by Oxfam, up to 57% of documented initiatives since 2010 and 76% of cases in (local and organisational) policy changes were driven by youth (20).

Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in identifying relevant data encapsulating most of the recent developments of youth social movements - and the attempts to draw correlations or causations between these movements and their broader impact/"success" are relatively immature. Thus, further in-depth research and investigation should take place to identify the wider range of "common" characteristics shared between contemporary youth social movements. There is space to adopt a more comprehensive methodology to measure youths' impact and "success". This evaluation of their social change should be both quantitative and qualitative.

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS – INTERNALLY REFLECTING YOUR VALUES

The youth-led movement's focus has concentrated on helping young people develop political skills to engage in the process of improving their well-being. It has also paid attention to generating societal conditions that are the fertile ground to make changes for a healthy democracy and robust justice system. Youth have been at the forefront of political action and transformation worldwide. Politics is a lifestyle and for young people, it gives them a sense of meaning rather than only generating results. The process, journey and internal organising are a big part of the exercise, instead of only focusing on obtaining a specific outcome. This chapter will examine how youth social movements and their participants aim to 'embody', through their practices, the type of society they want to live in, and their challenges and emerging possibilities.

2.1 Embodying the values you want in society

In activism, transnational coalitions of people leap national boundaries virtually and physically to participate in actions designed to solve social problems conceived as global. The world's young people are playing increasingly central roles in such activism (21). For example, the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) links activists on the ground in Palestine to activists all around the world, ready to spring into action the moment they receive a message, call or email. This type of cooperation highlights how young people started to see their local struggles not only limited to their immediate environment but also as an issue that requires systemic and more extensive collaboration to be waged.

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS – INTERNALLY REFLECTING YOUR VALUES

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, it is becoming more apparent to young people that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. Standing in solidarity beyond one’s most immediate circle seems to be a rising trend for young people.

Similarly, the value that each individual brings to the group is acknowledged and celebrated, showing a value that youth wants to have observed at a larger scale, acknowledging diversity as a force of powerful transformation and that the unique talents that each individual brings matter.

One example is the peer-to-peer learning that extends to the social movement activity and other areas such as digital media literacies, allowing them to build stronger alliances and spaces of collaboration that are more attractive to youth from diverse identities (22). Collective learning is a demonstration of prefigurative politics, whereby the group strives to exemplify internally the future society where they would like to live.

2.2 However, with challenges

Building on this, becoming an effective and skilled activist involves time and support for social and emotional learning (SEL). However, youth organising groups rarely get credit for their cutting-edge work of engaging youth in planning and developing social justice projects through a learning-by-doing approach.

While extensively publicised and receiving considerable media attention, the accomplishments of large protest movements over the past decade have been limited, with #MeToo being one of the few exceptions (23). Others, like the Occupy Movement, Remain Movement and Gillet Jaunes, do not have similar outcomes to boast.

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS – INTERNALLY REFLECTING YOUR VALUES

The focus on several different social causes but at a very superficial level fizzles the energy of movements and creates frustration and a possible sense of failure. Young people being the participants of these groups, experience similar emotions.

This fact goes together with the participation of young people in formal, institutional political processes, which is relatively low compared to older citizens across the globe. Formal system disengagement challenges the political system's representativeness and leads to the disenfranchisement of young people (24). The youth seek other types of spaces of participation, yet those might not generate results so visibly.

As well, activists from countries with high rates of violence are more likely to experience personal risk as a barrier to activism (25). In the face of this type of danger, risk mitigation training was not a priority for them (less than 5% in all countries), but rather learning how to secure funding and write proposals was prioritised (26).

2.3 And new possibilities

Youth movements can best serve instances of deep forms of participation that are impactful, local and targeted, where youth organising typically operates. Youth organising has faced more significant barriers in finding resources to create an infrastructure to build and sustain larger-scale social movements. Networks are critical in this instance because they enable people to jump from their local context to see the broader movement they are part of. This experience is central to social movements—being part of something larger than oneself.

2. PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS – INTERNALLY REFLECTING YOUR VALUES

With modern technology, it is possible for “widely distributed, loosely connected individuals” to work together to solve a problem or create something new, a practice called crowdsourcing. The use of technology is increasingly popular because the costs of building loose networks of contributors and disseminating information digitally are nearly zero. The tech-savvy skills that young people possess allow them to easily and quickly use these resources. This influences the relationships between young people, which tend to be more horizontal and deliberative, representing a shift away from the hierarchical relationships dominant within socialising institutions such as families, schools, or businesses (27). The capacity of young people to align with the potential for horizontality that new technologies provide, helps them to achieve a more significant momentum and size in shorter periods.

3. VARIETY OF MEDIA TO REACH LARGER AUDIENCES

Previous research into how social movements make an impact separates the impact into three different outcomes; cultural, political and biographical. Subsequently, social movements should choose what to target depending on the outcome that fits the movement's goal. Youth-led movements have a diversity of outcomes they wish to influence, and we see this reflected in the ways youth-led movements work and mobilise where they use a variety of media to do this, some of which are unique to youth. This chapter will explore the different media used by youth to communicate their message and influence people and how this, overall, can provide a widespread reach.

3.1 Traditional channels are expanding

A familiar way entities have tried to include a youth voice has been through international youth conferences. The use of conferences to directly reach bodies of power has proved a valuable resource for youth. In recent years, several high-profile youth events have taken place, and the rise in the number of international events has been coupled with a rise in the number of national policies focusing on youth. Of 198 countries, 127 now have a national youth policy - up from 99 countries in January 2013. Additionally, 190 governments have a dedicated authority (ministry, department, or office) responsible for youth (28).

3. VARIETY OF MEDIA TO REACH LARGER AUDIENCES

Nonetheless, while the spaces and structures of participation have increased, this does not necessarily relate to young people's effective, broad and meaningful participation (29). Moreover, several authors consider this infrastructure for participation as a light touch and depoliticised way for governments, organisations and programs to engage the youth – in contrast to more concrete, firm and detailed proposals seen in senior activists' space

3.2 Bypassing the traditional structures

In contrast, young people have found ways to bypass traditional structures and mechanisms of participation. This exercise corresponds to the rising presence of social networks and the possibilities they provide to organise and build international support for local causes. The use of these social media and alternative ways of communication allows youth to connect with a broader audience not reached before with traditional methods. Since 2009, social uprisings and civil unrest have occurred in countries as diverse as Iceland, Brazil, and Tunisia, where young people have been considered to play a key role (30).

3. VARIETY OF MEDIA TO REACH LARGER AUDIENCES

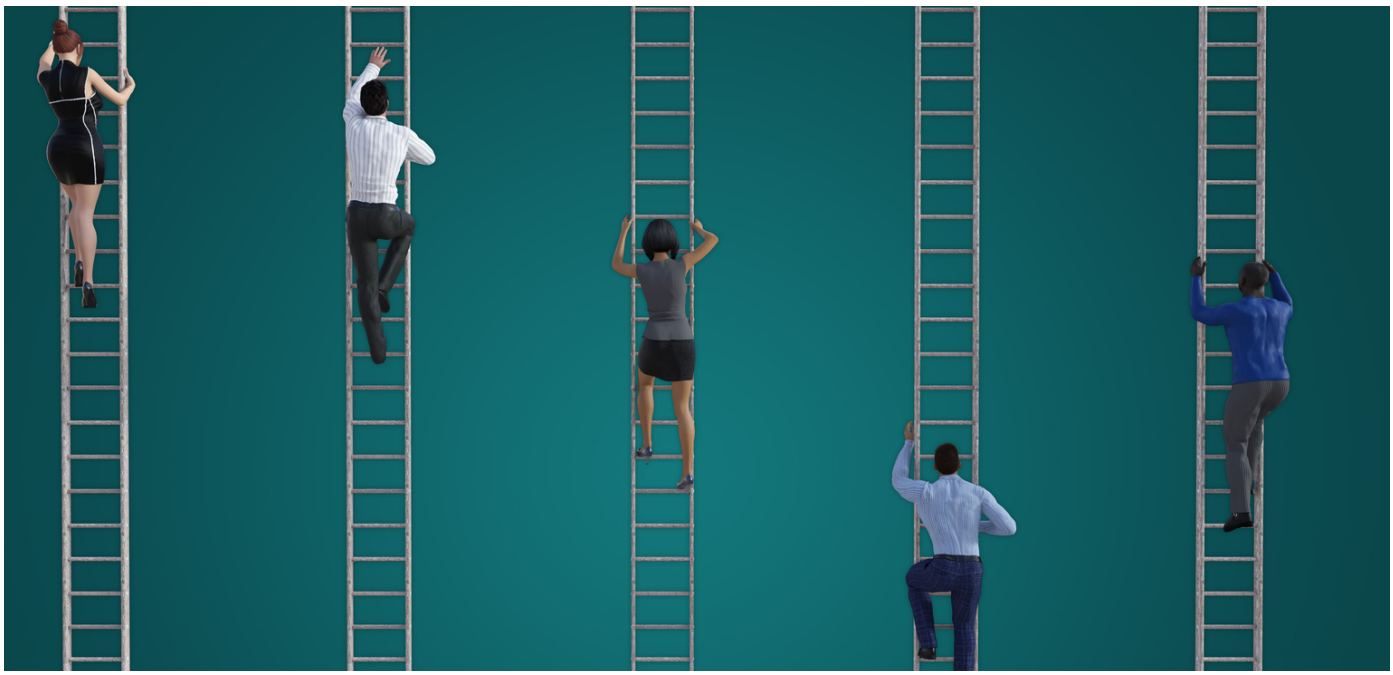
In some people's view, youth activism has become synonymous with online activism and communications, however, this is not the only terrain where it takes place. Many students (50%) consider online activism useful and empowering. Of those, 63.9% think social causes meet their goals by combining online and on-the-street activism. Also, 32.5% of young people considered themselves equally active online and offline (31), highlighting how different types of engagements can be complementary and perhaps necessary. Another finding in this direction is that the e-petitions signing has increased significantly over the last few years. After signing them, 42% of youth are prone to participate in offline activities for the corresponding cause of the e-petition. However, a meagre percentage will donate or contact the promoting organisations (32). Online communications can be seen throughout youth activism as a response to humanitarian crises and forming community-based protection systems (33), thus reaching beyond one's immediate context and grasping a greater understanding of global challenges and opportunities.

3.3 Customised engagement solutions

Oxfam's Empower Youth for Work project identified particularly effective strategic approaches that provide instructive examples for efforts by youth to influence policies. They noted that youth use various strategies to influence policies, ranging from engaging with policymakers to large-scale advocacy to creative grassroots efforts, including several other alternatives. These strategies can be used alone and in combination, allowing to adapt the message and approach to audiences that could otherwise be left behind. One such example is creating a local radio program about sexual and reproductive health, thereby using media to achieve their activism (34) and engaging communities through the channels they are already accustomed to and use more widely.

3. VARIETY OF MEDIA TO REACH LARGER AUDIENCES

Another one is the Not Too Young To Run campaign, in which young activists in Nigeria campaigned to decrease the age to run for office. The UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth adopted it as a global campaign (35), thus highlighting how a local campaign can scale up and adapt to other realities. Other researchers have noted that youth actively use online networks to advocate for policy discussions (36). They are opening up a space usually reserved for the formal system of engagement for youth who are interested in a topic relevant to them yet might not want to go through the traditional ladder of engagement.



Youth has been at the forefront of using different media and non-traditional methods to reach their outcome. They use the channels made available to them effectively, such as conferences, youth councils and consultations. However, they also realise the need to broaden how they send their message to reach more audiences, sometimes stepping out of the traditional channels of participation to engage other relevant stakeholders, having the arts and alternative media as part of their communication toolbox.

4. NOT TRUSTING INSTITUTIONS BUT RELYING ON THEIR PEERS

The World Values Survey asked people of all voting ages from 59 different countries if they consistently, usually, or never voted. The research tabulated that 33% of people between 18 and 25 have never voted compared to 14% of the people over 25 (37). This trend in age and voter turnout is an indicator of youth's distrust in government institutions. This chapter will explore the causes of youth distrust in institutions and some alternatives.

4.1 Distrust in institutions

Not only is there a youth tendency to distrust government institutions, but there is also a decline in participation in formal youth organisations and events. Since the late 1990s, there has been a rise in the number of structures, organisations, policies, and events focusing on young people's participation. Most countries (127 out of 198 by 2016) developed policies focused on youth (38). However, studies conducted during the last decade also show a decline in the participation of youth in those relatively new formal participation structures: "informal networks are increasingly the spaces where young people invest their energies, rather than in formal structures such as youth councils or parliaments" (39), there is also a shift from using formal participation structures to more irregular social networks, protests, and social uprisings (40).

4. NOT TRUSTING INSTITUTIONS BUT RELYING ON THEIR PEERS

Efforts to understand why this is the case point out several explanations. One possible reason is the wearing out of the many unfulfilled promises made to the youth in the formal structures and events. In the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programs, held in 1998, several governments agreed on policies for the youth, most of which are still pending.

Empowerment, strengthening of youth organisations, and building peace are among those promises made more than 20 years ago that are still one of the youth's biggest challenges today (41). At the local level, there seems to be a trend of youth "feeling duped by campaign election promises that were not kept" (42).

Another often-cited reason why young people are fleeing formal spaces is the way these formal spaces approach young people. Governments and institutions often treat youth as consumers instead of as creators. They are viewed as customers of education, training, or services, so the youth structure is not for decision making or enacting change, but rather it is an education for youth to later engage as an adult within the existing status quo (43). DFID–CSO Youth Working Group also approaches this issue of working with youth only "as beneficiaries" instead of "as partners" or "supporting youth as leaders" (44).

4.2 Decrease in formal youth participation

Other studies analyse the decrease in formal youth participation as a combination of several complex factors. The youth well-being index recognises the centrality of youth in citizen participation. It assesses citizen participation through the existence of a youth policy, volunteer frequency, candidacy age, perception of value in society, and feeling of being served by the government.

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Another often-cited reason why young people are fleeing formal spaces is the way these formal spaces approach young people. Governments and institutions often treat youth as consumers instead of as creators. They are viewed as customers of education, training, or services, so the youth structure is not for decision making or enacting change, but rather it is an education for youth to later engage as an adult within the existing status quo (43). Other research approaches formal youth dialogue and representation as the tip of the iceberg of several less visible issues such as capacity-building, youth-adult partnership, youth livelihoods, outreach/community engagement, and enabling economic, legal, and democratic environments (45). One element of this trend is the feeling of an unbalanced cost-benefit analysis.

> "The involvement in formal spaces represents a very high cost for youth that is not comparable with what they obtain in return."

The involvement in formal spaces represents a very high cost for youth that is not comparable with what they obtain in return. In contrast, the entry cost is lower in the more informal networks, and the potential benefits are higher, particularly in personal leadership, resourcefulness and team collaboration.

4.3 Peer support, reliance, and solidarity

Whatever the combination of factors, it is an emerging trend in youth's distrust for institutions and the decrease in participation in formal structures. However, this is not the whole story. Young people are flooding into new organisations and new ways of participating.

4. NOT TRUSTING INSTITUTIONS BUT RELYING ON THEIR PEERS

"This new form of power involves informal, self-organisation, networked governance, a 'do-it-ourselves' approach", and to have "more overall participation" compared to that of "old power". This "do-it-ourselves" attitude, online organising skills and power, inclusivity of physical spaces and personal networks has resulted in social uprisings and civil unrest across many regions and countries in the past five years (46).

"This new form of power involves informal, self-organisation, networked governance, a 'do-it-ourselves' approach", and to have "more overall participation" compared to that of "old power".

Overall, youth are finding their own way of expressing themselves. Rather than lamenting the distrust of formal spaces, young people trust their peers and create and develop informal spaces, giving vibrancy to those new forms of participation. In the rising wave of peer-to-peer leadership, an element that seems to be relevant is how this structure highlights the possibilities of a group working together and valuing the role that each one plays, based on the principles of co-creation, collaboration and complementing each other's skills.

5. NEED FOR BELONGING: REASON TO JOIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Young people are the bearers of the consequences taken by decision-makers. With the rising wave of social problems that impose difficult circumstances for future generations, such as climate change, the need to act together and become a larger collective becomes more present. This chapter will highlight how youth movements rise to the challenge by coming together and working to transform their societies and achieve the change they want to see in the world.

5.1 Part of something bigger than oneself

The role of youth as environmental and sustainable development promoters has been taking a more dominant role in recent years. Young people are the bearers of the consequences of the current environmental policies, patterns of consumption of society and ways of relating with the planet.

Some have started several lifestyle changes more aligned with the world they would like to live in, thus influencing their peers and disseminating potentially behaviour-altering messages concerning the environment. A recent study highlighted that having a vegan diet could be the “single biggest way” to reduce the environmental impact on Earth (47).

5. NEED FOR BELONGING: REASON TO JOIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In line with this, for example, more than 20 per cent of young people in the UK are already vegan or would like to be, according to a new survey (48). Other instances include direct innovations carried out by young social changemakers. ClearPlate is one such example. A youth-led initiative partnering with restaurants, private companies, and the government, with 5 million users who have taken more than 42 million zero food waste actions. This is equivalent to reducing food waste by 1,600 tons and carbon emissions by 6,200 tons (49).

5.2 Need for belonging

As traditional forms of civic participation diminish, joining protests has become more common. This might be an effective way for young people to signal what they stand for. A recent study showed that the higher the Need to Belong (NTB) among young people, the higher the tendency to protest, while this effect is absent among older people (50). A possible explanation is an attitude of self-actualisation more present in the youth. Such findings go in line with the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD). Research shows that significant relations between individuals and the ecological or contextual settings are fundamental for PYD.

Once young people find an atmosphere where they can thrive and feel supported, they are more likely to give back to their community and help others access opportunities

Moreover, interpersonal networks and relationships highly nurture the Five “Cs” of PYD – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. Once a young person shows a high PYD, they will be more likely to add positive value to self, family, community, and civil society. In other words, once young people find an atmosphere where they can thrive and feel supported, they are more likely to give back to their community and help others access opportunities for social development.

5. NEED FOR BELONGING: REASON TO JOIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

As an illustration, adolescents with multiple peer and adult role models engaged in civic participation are more likely to volunteer (96%) in contrast with those lacking friends and adult role models (51%) (51). Youth social movements seem to correspond to this type of space of accessing adult role models and inspiring peers.

Other studies point to these claims. Civic activism and attitudes fostering social cohesion seem to be influenced by one's surroundings. A meta-analysis drawing the connection between engagement in extracurricular activities and participation in civic life as an adult identified a close link between the two (52).

Furthermore, when the extracurricular activities implied cooperation, exposure to other points of view and collective decision-making, it was later translated into political empowerment, building a civic identity and active participation as an adult.

5.3 Telling an exciting collective story

Part of building one's identity as an activist consists of retelling the stories of how society works, the current status quo and what world could blossom. This exercise includes identifying the role that one plays in that new exciting collective story and how to do it by teaming with their peers. In the book Rebel Girls, narrating the stories of different young female activists in the Americas, a significant emphasis is given to storytelling.

5. NEED FOR BELONGING: REASON TO JOIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Furthermore, the author mentions how several interviewees continue to be actively engaged long after the activism actions they were carrying out have ended. This is partly due to the stories they can tell about their joint exercise. In the words of one participant. “The solidarity and the ties that we formed in those six marvellous days, where more than eight hundred students were in charge of the most important high school in Buenos Aires, they continue to inspire me (53).”

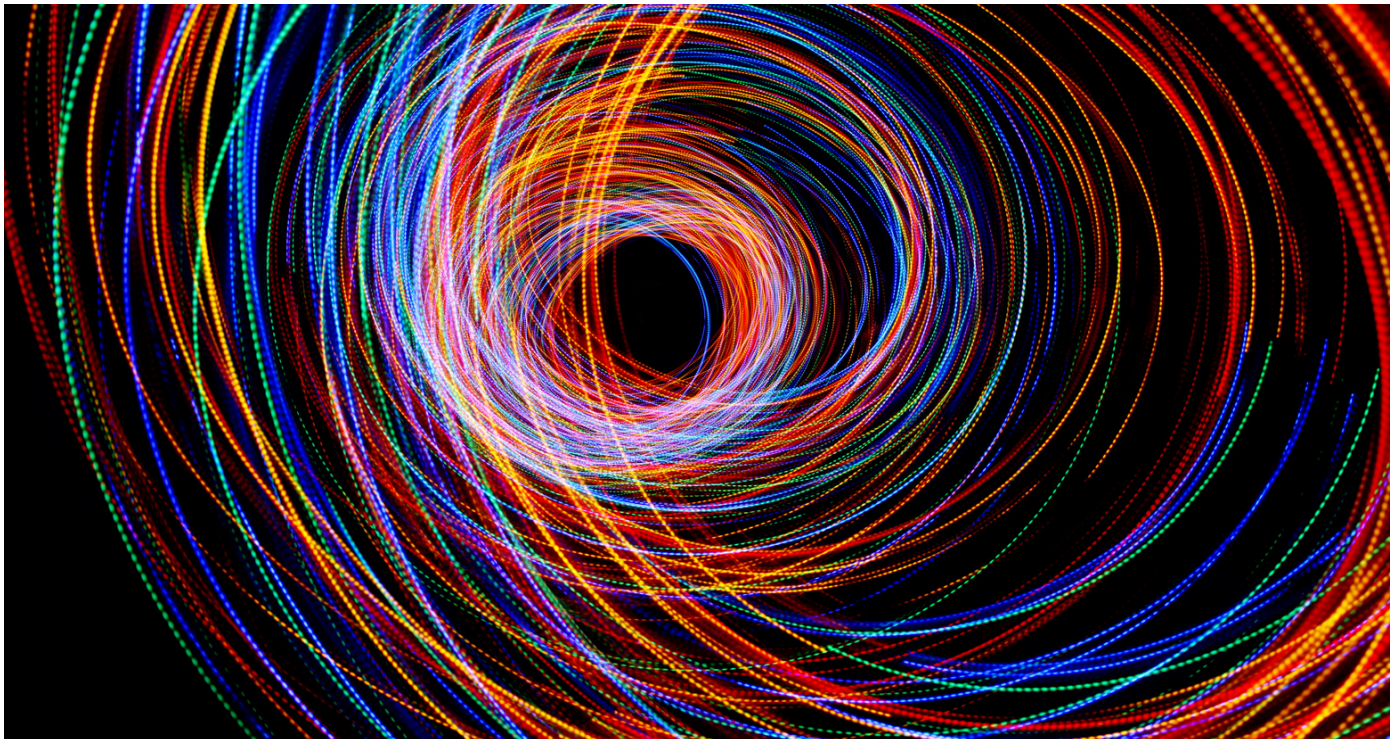
"We took care of each other in a way that I doubt any of us had ever dreamed was possible. The love that we were able to construct (...) is not something you see every day."

What is more, the description of what the young activists experienced illustrates prefigurative politics, another possible world. “We talked day and night, we cooked for ourselves, we laughed, we cried, we sang, we rested, and we took care of each other in a way that I doubt any of us had ever dreamed was possible. The love that we were able to construct inside those giant walls is not something you see every day (54).” The author goes on to emphasise how, by the way they cooperate and define their actions, the activist girls described in the book differ from the traditional model of an empowered girl. “Their vision of empowered girlhood is not based on individual success in a flawed system of inequalities and injustices, but in the belief that they have something to contribute to making the world a better, more just, and more sustainable place (55).”

“Their vision of empowered girlhood is not based on individual success in a flawed system (...) but in the belief that they have something to contribute to making the world a better, more just, and more sustainable place.”

CONCLUSION

Young people have great vitality and power of innovation derived from their capacity to create heterogeneous groups and build bridges across seemingly incompatible stakeholders. Their efforts to find the commonalities in diverse settings allow them to act as a net, grouping a more significant number of constituents. This aspect, combined with being local natives in the digital world, allows for rapid action and generates a big scale of their actions, yet digital security remains a challenge.



Another essential aspect to highlight is how youth movements embody the world they would like to live in. Instead of preaching a political discourse, they expect from the general public, they try to live by the principles they promote, thus showing internally what that new world could look like. This usually comes with movements that are more horizontal, democratic and consensus-based.

CONCLUSION

Complementing this trend, young people distrust traditional structures of participation offered by institutions because they are spaces where they need to conform to certain expectations, rather than being welcomed for their identity and what they can contribute. This system channels young people's vibrancy and alternative proposals in a depoliticised and tokenistic way. Nevertheless, some of the campaigns young people execute are so successful that traditional organisations adopt them, just like the #NotTooYoungToRun movement. Moreover, the unfulfilled promises of traditional politics and the lack of effectiveness of these spaces of participation make young people look for alternatives. They are relying on themselves, finding peer support, fostering 'do-it-ourselves' approaches and more vibrant ways of self-organising, having co-creation as a core principle.

This trend aligns with the need to find a sense of community, and identity and feel connected with peers sharing similar visions of the world. When young people feel that they are in a thriving environment where they belong, they become more engaged and actively participate in improving the conditions of their communities. By acting, they also create stories worth sharing and can start to build new narratives of what a new world could look like and what can be achieved when young people join efforts.

These trends need to be seen in conjunction. They are mutually arising phenomena. To tap into the passion of young people and the buoyancy of their projects and ideas, it is also necessary to understand the ecosystem that generates these attitudes and how it plays a critical role in fostering them (or not).

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