

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE INFLUENCE POLICY: A LITERATURE REVIEW POLICY BRIEF

Youth around the world are working to improve their communities by influencing the formulation of new policies or the implementation of existing policies at the local level and beyond. They are engaging with policy- and decision-makers alone and with the support of development organizations.

Alongside the breadth of actions taken by youth this literature review identified some recent trends through the analysis of 37 cases from developing countries and 36 reviews and theoretical papers. These trends can inform development practitioners and youth themselves on how to more effectively encourage and support young people's engagement in policy making and implementation at all levels. The review included cases of young people influencing the public policies of governments and the policies and strategies of entire organizations.

YOUNG PEOPLE LEADING INITIATIVES

There is increasing documentation of how young people are taking action to influence policies directly and autonomously. The literature now is much more likely to document young people initiating and leading their own efforts to influence policies at all levels as individuals, informal groups, and youth-led organizations.

In cases after 2010, young people were driving the agenda and effort in 57% of the documented initiatives, while adult led

organizations were only driving the process in 35%. This is in stark contrast to the first half of papers, closer to the turn of the millennium, in which 63% of cases were driven by adult-led development organizations.

There is strong tentative evidence that youth-led efforts are more effective as they accounted for 70% of the cases with stronger policy impacts. Youth-led efforts have impacted government policies at the local and national level. Young people have also directed the policies and strategies of large youth associations and organizations.

YOUNG PEOPLE FOCUSING LOCALLY

In recent years, the literature has increasingly highlighted the efforts of young people to influence changes in policies at the local level. The older half of identified cases were more likely to focus on national policies (53%), while the more recent half of cases were mainly related to youth influencing local and organizational policies (76%).

Policy researches have long noted the importance of judiciously targeting specific policy-making venues when advocates are seeking to change policies.¹ In the cases identified, there is preliminary evidence that youth are more immediately effective at influencing policies when they target local venues. This is especially true for youth who are influencing policy implementation. The increased impact and salience of such local

¹ Baumgartner and Jones, "Agenda Dynamics and Policy Subsystems," *The Journal of Politics* 53, no. 4 (1991).

changes can further motivate young people to advocate for change, thus creating a virtuous circle.

This increased focus on the local level has the added advantage of aligning with broader trends to decentralize decision making processes to make them more accessible and representative.² This is particularly important for enabling all youth to take part, even those who might lack the time, resources, language skills, or access needed to engage with national levels of decision making.

YOUTH POLICY INFLUENCING STRATEGIES

Youth use a range of different strategies to influence policies, ranging from being a policy maker, to large-scale advocacy, to creative grassroots efforts. These strategies are used alone and in combination. Through the cases, this review identified six particularly effective strategic approaches that provide instructive examples for efforts by youth to influence policies. These notable groups of strategies were:

1. **Direct Governance:** e.g. leading a co-operative or being elected to local decision making bodies.
2. **Protests and Industrial Action:** e.g. public protests for regime change or striking for better working conditions.
3. **Model Parliaments / Advisory Boards:** e.g. conducting a mock

parliamentary debate on a stalled welfare bill to provide input and exert pressure on law-makers.

4. **Audits and Research:** e.g. conducting a social audit to identify local polices that are not fulfilled and applying pressure to remedy the situation.
5. **Prefigurative Politics:**³ e.g. starting to build an incomplete road to pressure local decision makers into completing it.
6. **Media, Art, and ICT:** e.g. creating a local radio program to shift public opinion on sexual and reproductive health.

SUPPORTING YOUTH INITIATIVES

Development organizations have the potential to provide support to existing youth initiatives and youth-led associations by linking them to policy-makers and each other, providing capacity building, and facilitating the access of under-represented young women and men to the existing youth initiatives. However, they should be careful to avoid 1) unduly pressuring youth to formalize their efforts too early on; 2) shifting the thematic focus of their influencing efforts due to power imbalances between the development organization and the youth; and 3) amplifying the power of particular youth leading to the detriment of the equity and comradery among the initial group of young people.

Young people are active citizens. They are working to challenge power structures and policies around the globe. Development organizations should partner and work together with them as they seek to claim their rights to better living conditions.

² Kauzya, "Political Decentralization in Africa: Experiences of Uganda, Rwanda and South Africa," Decentralizing governance: emerging concepts and practices. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC (2007).

³ The idea of "embodying in the present one's vision of the future" to be an exemplar of a policy change. See Jeffrey and Dyson, "Now: Prefigurative Politics through a North Indian Lens," *Economy and Society* 45, no. 1 (2016). *Economy and Society* 45, no. 1 (2016).

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