



GENDER POLICY BRIEF SERIES

Fostering Adolescent and Youth Participation for Social Change in East Asia and Pacific

Summary

Adolescents and youth represent a powerful force for social change in East Asia and Pacific, yet millions face restricted civic spaces that limit their ability to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives. Grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation is not only a right, it also strengthens personal growth and is a driver of social cohesion, democracy, and institutional legitimacy. Meaningful youth and adolescent engagement requires providing them space and audience, supporting their voice and influence, and also challenging social and cultural norms that undermine their role in civic life.

Across the region, governments and civil society have created mechanisms to promote adolescent and youth participation. While these can be powerful, their impact is often constrained by underfunding, tokenism, adult gatekeeping, exclusion of marginalized groups, and limited capacity and skills among both youth and adults.

This brief calls for institutionalizing adolescent and youth participation at all governance levels, and increasing more deliberate investment in growing youth skills, promoting youth-led initiatives, and leveraging safe digital tools and platforms to expand meaningful engagement. By addressing both barriers and areas for growth, the region can unlock the transformative potential of its young people to shape more inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking societies.

Key Elements for Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Participation

There are approximately one billion young people¹ aged 10-24 years in Asia-Pacific. Accounting for 60 per cent of the world's adolescents and young people, their potential to drive positive change and shape the region's future is immense. Yet, 138 million adolescents, or about 44 per cent of the region's youth, live in countries where civic spaces are closed, narrow, or repressed, severely limiting their ability to speak out, lead or participate in civic life.²

Children's right to participation is a fundamental human right. Articles 12 to 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) enshrine the right of children and adolescents to express their views on matters that affect them, and to have those views taken seriously. Meaningful and inclusive adolescent and youth participation not only strengthens personal growth and agency, it also strengthens social cohesion, enhances democracy, and contributes to more inclusive, resilient and forward-looking societies.^{3,4}

The United Nations Secretary-General has affirmed that young people are a driving force for societal transformation through social mobilization.⁵ Research has shown that children and youth involved in decision-making early in life are more likely to become civically-engaged adults.⁶ Direct participation fosters trust in democratic institutions and long-term civic commitment, especially when grounded in youths' lived realities. For example,⁷ youth participation enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions – schools, community organizations, and public bodies that engage children and adolescents meaningfully are more responsive and trusted. When young people co-create services and policies, those interventions tend to be more relevant and effective.⁸

Yet meaningful adolescent and youth participation still faces resistance in many societies, particularly due to conservative perspectives that question children's cognitive maturity or decision-making capacity. Such viewpoints, which typically derive from rigid social and cultural norms, argue that only adults or experts should make complex decisions and that children and adolescents should not speak openly, especially in the presence of adults.⁹ It is a view increasingly disproven by evidence and practice however.¹⁰ Instead of asking whether youth should participate, the focus should be on understanding the impact of their participation on their development and well-being, as well as on socio-economic systems, and on society as a whole.

Creating an enabling environment for adolescent participation requires more than legal frameworks therefore; it demands active efforts to shift such social and cultural norms. To move beyond tokenism, and ensure their voices are genuinely heard and respected, awareness of adolescent and youth rights is essential, and adults across all settings—home, school, religious spaces, and community planning forums—must be willing and equipped with skills and the capacity to support participation.

The four key elements of meaningful participation, associated with the key domains of such participation – civic engagement, empowerment and shared decision-making – include:

- Space (opportunities to participate),
- Voice (freedom to express views),
- Audience (listeners who value those views), and
- Influence (impact on decisions).



Figure 1: Features of meaningful participation. (Source: Lundy 2007, diagram UNICEF, 2019)

Opportunities and Challenges for Adolescents' and Young People's Participation in East Asia and Pacific

This section introduces the five main strategies and key interventions for promoting adolescent and youth participation and civic engagement, as well as the potential challenges that need to be overcome.



Laws, Policies, Practices and Budgets

Governments across the Asia-Pacific region are supporting adolescent and youth civic engagement to varying degrees through national policies, programmes, and institutional structures. The effectiveness, inclusivity, and level of youth empowerment achieved through these mechanisms can vary widely across contexts. Complicating this somewhat are differing age-range definitions of 'youth' in some countries which insert dynamics that require vastly different considerations especially related to the low and high ends of the age-range. For example, In Lao PDR and Timor-Leste, the age-range defined as youth is 15-24 years (same as the United Nations definition), while in **Cambodia** it is 15-30 years, and in **Mongolia** it is 15-34 years.

Common government approaches to youth participation include National Youth Policies, National Youth Councils, school-based civic education and community service initiatives, youth advisory boards, and youth volunteerism programmes.¹¹ These platforms are intended to provide young people with a voice in governance, public affairs, and decision-making processes. For instance, **Fiji** and **the Philippines** have youth councils embedded in national governance structures. Many such participation channels and platforms, while well-intentioned, have several shortcomings affecting their overall effectiveness and impact.

In **the Philippines**, the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) and the National Youth Commission are particularly notable for enabling youth to influence policy and lead initiatives. A key feature is SK's financial autonomy,

allowing youth leaders to implement programmes tailored to local needs. However, a recent performance assessment identified some persistent challenges including resource limitations, capacity gaps, declining youth engagement, and systemic barriers.¹²

In **Indonesia**, the Forum Anak serves as a national child and youth participation platform, mandated under the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. It is backed by policy but varies significantly in capacity and influence at village and district level, facing challenges in ensuring representation from marginalized groups, and addressing concerns about adult dominance and tokenism.¹³

In the Pacific Islands, government-affiliated National Youth Councils, such as in **Vanuatu** and **Fiji**, provide channels for youth input at national and provincial levels. Yet, these structures can suffer from underfunding, irregular activity, and limited influence on policymaking. Youth representatives are sometimes appointed rather than elected, diluting legitimacy and autonomy. Similarly, in **Papua New Guinea**, the government has enacted a National Youth Policy and established a National Youth Commission, along with provincial and local youth councils. However, implementation of these platforms has been hindered by limited financial and human resources, weak institutional coordination, and capacity gaps at subnational levels.¹⁴ Elsewhere, a 2022 Youth Policy Survey by Transparency International **Cambodia** revealed that despite formal youth engagement mechanisms, there remains low awareness and limited participation among **Cambodian** youth in policy-making

overall, related to lacking political will and financial resources to support it.

Such findings underscore that having policies in place, without political will or allocated budgets, does not automatically translate into meaningful or widespread youth empowerment.¹⁵ Across the region, the tendency appears to be that youth-related legal frameworks and youth policies are not effectively resourced, implemented, or monitored. Furthermore, youth participation is still a relatively unfamiliar concept among the public and among government officials, resulting in limited uptake and integration of youth perspectives in formal processes.¹⁶ Additional challenges include unclear and inconsistent definitions of "youth"; ageism that undervalues the legitimacy of young people's contributions, and elitist selection processes that often limit participation to a narrow group of youth representatives. The result often is exclusion of younger adolescents (particularly girls), those with disabilities, LGBTIQ+, indigenous youth, girl brides, and other marginalized groups, from meaningful engagement.

The lack of rigorous research and evaluation on the long-term impact of engagement and participation programmes further hampers evidence-based policy adjustments and investments. Addressing these challenges will require not only stronger cross-sectoral coordination and sustainable financing, but also efforts to raise awareness of adolescents' right to participate—and duty bearers' awareness and skills to support their participation—while also fostering supportive socio-cultural norms that value young people's voice and agency.

Sustainability of Adolescent and Youth Participation Platforms

Outside government frameworks, several NGO-run and youth-led initiatives have emerged as potentially powerful spaces for adolescent voice and action. These have the potential to offer sustainable, meaningful participation by engaging youth using 'bottom-up' approaches that embrace diversity and inclusivity, and that focus on issues that are considered most pressing by young people. For instance, the Dreamcast social enterprise in the **Solomon Islands** and the Pacific Students Fighting Climate Change initiative are independently organized platforms where adolescents and youth mobilize around issues like climate justice and gender equality. Take The Lead Tonga, hosts **Tonga's** only networking event that connects leaders in various

fields with young people using the traditional method of *talanoa*, the process of safe and respectful discussion.

These platforms offer more autonomy and flexibility but often lack sustained funding,¹⁷ policy-level linkages, and feedback loops to show how young people's inputs are utilized, all of which affects their sustainability and efficacy. Similar to government-led platforms, they also contend with infrastructure challenges and adult gatekeeping driven by harmful social norms and power dynamics – this directly impacts outreach to and engagement with girls, young people with disabilities, young people from ethnic minorities, those who are out-of-school, and those who live in rural or remote areas. In **Thailand**, for example, schools and student councils provide opportunities for students to make an impact at school-level, and sometimes within the wider community. Adolescents engage on relevant issues through school-based clubs, youth networks, and online platforms – many supported by NGOs or CSOs. While promising, actual effectiveness is hampered by digital divide challenges, especially in rural areas, and adult gatekeeping which prevents adolescents from speaking up.¹⁸

Capacity Building of Adults

Building the capacity of adults—such as government officials, teachers, community leaders, and parents—is essential for creating a supportive environment where adolescent and youth participation is not only accepted but actively encouraged.

In the **Solomon Islands**, for instance, where the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs carries out workshops for young people on good governance and leadership, sessions are not just targeted at young people but also engage community leaders. This helps to bridge traditional governance norms with participatory approaches.¹⁹

In many settings across the region, adult attitudes based on social and cultural norms limit the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives that promote adolescent and youth participation. In **Cambodia**, adolescents reported not having much support or agency in their homes and communities and recommended building their parents' capacity to listen to them.²⁰ Similarly, in **Palau** and **Tonga**, youth reported that adults became irritated or dismissive with them when they voiced strong opinions in community meetings, reflecting a lack of understanding among adults of meaningful participation principles.²¹ Related to this is a clear gap in technical

support and formal training for educators and youth officers²² to help bridge understanding, respect and trust between youth and the adults they interact with.

Most capacity-building initiatives in the region are not implemented at scale or sufficiently institutionalized across sectors. Indeed, what is needed are more systematically applied capacity development frameworks for adults, which, through mentoring, policy guidance, and dedicated resources, can help shift norms and attitudes about the value and impact of adolescent engagement. Without this, even well-intentioned youth participation efforts risk being undermined by entrenched social hierarchies and ageism.

Building the Capacity of Adolescents and Young People

Growing the skills of adolescents and young people is critical for their meaningful participation. This refers to equipping them with the knowledge, confidence, and tools to express themselves, use critical thinking, understand group dynamics, engage with decision-makers, and take leadership in their communities. It requires sustained investment in developing skills around civic engagement, public speaking, leadership, digital literacy, and advocacy.

In the Pacific, for example, there are promising initiatives such as in **Tonga**, where Take the Lead **Tonga** introduced the first civic education programme to educate young people across the country on Tonga's government and parliament and their responsibilities and rights as citizens. In the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, youth-led groups have developed their own climate resilience projects and community safety initiatives after undergoing skills training, demonstrating how this can translate into tangible community action.²³ In **Thailand**, growing recognition of the need to prepare adolescents and young people for active, informed participation in both civic and online spaces has led to efforts to enhance digital competencies and critical thinking in school curricula. Schools and community centres are working to integrate digital literacy, media awareness, and critical thinking into formal learning environments, helping youth evaluate online information, avoid misinformation, and navigate digital spaces safely.²⁴

Overall, however, sustained investment in adolescent and youth capacity-building in the region is lacking. This negatively impacts the efficacy and sustainability of initiatives which often fail to reach marginalized

adolescents—such as girls, youth with disabilities, and those living in rural or remote areas. Young people across the region highlight the absence of systematic and long-term training efforts (for both adults and young people), with many initiatives being short-term or ad hoc, rather than part of a broader strategy for civic engagement. Initiatives also tend to be consistently hamstrung by biased social and cultural norms, and infrastructure and logistical constraints.

Promoting Positive Social Norms

Entrenched and discriminatory social norms and cultural beliefs—particularly around age, gender, and hierarchy—strongly influence whether adolescents and young people are perceived as capable of contributing to decision-making, how valued their contributions are, and whether/how they are allowed to participate. Without intentional efforts to shift these norms, adolescent and youth participation will be largely symbolic or tokenistic.

An important approach to start shifting age-based hierarchies is to promote intergenerational dialogue and collaboration to foster mutual respect and shared decision-making. This would help challenge prevailing social norms that frown on and discourage young people from 'talking back' or questioning elders.

Notable examples from the Pacific reflect early-stage efforts that are beginning to change attitudes and encourage more participatory civic cultures. In **Vanuatu**, youth representatives regularly engage in structured village meetings with traditional leaders. While these meetings are still often dominated by elder decision-makers, the presence of elected youth representatives, supported by national and provincial youth councils, reflects emergence of a new norm of formalized youth consultation within community governance systems.

Additionally, in **Tonga**, the Red Cross leads a programme where youth groups proposed community-based climate resilience actions, including through community dialogues with church boards and elders. Though often mediated by gatekeeping structures, such as chief and community leaders, these interactions were an opportunity for youth to present evidence-based proposals and negotiate support, illustrating the beginnings of trust-based intergenerational dialogue in a traditionally hierarchical setting.

Recommendations for Advancing Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Participation

The following recommendations are offered in support of creating an enabling environment where adolescent and youth participation is not only accepted but actively fostered. They are informed by UNICEF's *Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement (Engaged and Heard)* and are based on country-level landscape analyses from *Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand*, and the *Pacific Islands*.

- **Institutionalize youth participation mechanisms at all levels** by establishing or strengthening legally mandated and adequately resourced youth-focused structures (e.g. National Youth Councils, Village Youth Forums, Child Parliaments).
- **Ensure youth representation in national, subnational, and local governance bodies** with clear roles, selection criteria, and accountability frameworks.
- **Build an evidence-base** on the impact of youth and adolescent participation and civic engagement on programmes and policies, on their own development and wellbeing, and on driving positive change within their communities and society as a whole.
- **Ensure inclusion of marginalized adolescents and youth**, especially girls, youth with disabilities, youth from indigenous and rural communities, LGBTQIA+ youth, and migrants/refugees. Include and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups through targeted platforms; accessible participation spaces—physical (e.g. ramps in schools), digital (e.g. sign-language video content), and social (e.g. community trust-building); and safe and inclusive community-based groups, where they can speak freely and organize peer-led action.
- **Invest in youth capacity and adult support systems** by developing systematic training programmes for young people in civic education, leadership, public speaking, digital literacy, and advocacy, while also training adults in facilitation skills, respectful engagement, and understanding the importance of meaningful participation for adolescents' transition to adulthood.
- **Promote youth-led and youth-initiated engagement** by funding youth-led innovations, campaigns, and social enterprises (e.g. on issues such as climate action, sexual and reproductive health and rights, digital literacy), especially those with community benefit and mentorship linkages. In connection, peer-to-peer learning and mentorship, including regional exchanges and storytelling platforms, should be supported to enhance engagement.
- **Leverage digital tools for participation** by expanding digital skills opportunities and the use of digital engagement platforms (polling apps, social media forums, SMS surveys) that allow young people to contribute safely and frequently. This will not only require investment in building young people's and facilitators' digital literacy, but also ensuring safeguarding for equitable and safe online participation. The caveat with this approach is that large portions of countries in the region have little or no connectivity, thus excluding young people outside of capital cities/major urban centres. In addition, without the necessary conditions, this can further widen the existing gender digital gap, excluding girls and young women from new and innovative opportunities.

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