Preparing adolescents for adulthood and citizenship

An active role for adolescents in decision-making in families, communities and societies

As they mature and develop, adolescents and young people seek to more actively shape their environment, their society and the world they live in and will inherit. Preparing adolescents for adulthood, and particularly for their citizenship responsibilities, is the key task for families, communities and governments during this stage of their development. For adolescents to be active and empowered citizens, they must be aware of their rights and have opportunities for civic engagement through a variety of institutions that encourage basic civic values such as fairness, mutual respect and understanding, justice, tolerance and accountability for one’s actions.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child broke new ground by establishing children’s right to be heard (Article 12), giving children and adolescents the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them – especially within the family, school and community – and to have those opinions duly taken into account. This and the other ‘participation rights’ enumerated in the Convention enable adolescents to exercise progressively more control over decisions that concern them, in line with their evolving capacities. Participation thus stands alongside the principles of universality, the best interests of the child, and child survival and development as one of the cornerstones of the Convention.

In addition to being a fundamental right, participation stimulates the full development of the child’s personality and capacities. Young people learn best when they have real choices and are actively involved in dealing with their circumstances. Participation boosts confidence, builds skills and empowers children to protect their own rights. It allows adolescents to step out of the passive roles to which they were relegated as young children and gives them opportunities to create knowledge rather than merely receive it. It empowers adolescents to plan and implement their own projects, to lead and, accordingly, to be accountable for their actions. Mounting evidence shows that active adolescents have fewer problems than their peers, are more skilled and tend to develop a greater sense of social responsibility. Involvement in social organizations also opens the door to economic opportunities, making it especially valuable for adolescents from previously excluded groups.

Encouraging participation not only empowers adolescents, it also has numerous benefits for the societies in which they live. Investment in well-informed and empowered citizens can lead to healthier populations, stronger economic growth and more cohesive communities. When young people are involved in broader peer and community initiatives, they bring into play fresh perspectives and a strong sense of commitment that can result in innovative solutions, especially in the midst of complex crises. Youth engagement can enhance collective action, increasing pressure on governments to provide good public services and driving social, economic and political change.

Finally, evidence shows that participation is one of the best ways of informing children of their rights, especially their right to protection from violence, harm and abuse. This knowledge, in turn, is crucial to ensuring that these rights are respected. Enabling adolescents to access a broad spectrum of information – on topics such as family planning, accident prevention and substance abuse – is a very cost-effective way for states to promote health and development.

Despite the benefits of enabling children to exercise their participation rights, and despite the formal commitment of governments to do so, the principle is not yet being implemented effectively or consistently. Many longstanding practices and attitudes, as well as political and economic barriers, continue to impede adolescents’ right to be heard – especially for those who may have difficulties expressing themselves, including adolescents with disabilities and minority, indigenous and migrant children.

Engagement in youth service and public policy initiatives

Over the past two decades, and particularly during the past 10 years, many countries have adopted innovative and successful initiatives to encourage adolescent and youth participation. Several have gone on to form youth councils or parliaments to foster dialogue about relevant issues while offering youth leaders a formal, consultative relationship with the government. A survey of 22 youth councils in industrialized and developing countries reveals that the top three priorities for most such bodies are increased youth participation, international cooperation and greater engagement in the direction of youth policy.

While national youth councils do not have the power to dictate a country’s youth policy, they can successfully influence decision-making. In Lithuania, for instance, young people form half of the Council of Youth Affairs, which formally advises the Department of Youth Affairs as it prepares and implements national youth policies. In South Africa, adolescents contributed to a ‘Children’s Charter of South Africa’ and provided substantial inputs to the drafting of the 2005 Children’s Act, which includes child participation as one of its founding principles.

Children should be encouraged to create their own, child-led organizations, through which they can carve out a space for meaningful participation and representation. An excellent example of such an organization is the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AMWCY), which in 2008 had associations in 196 cities and villages in 22 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with a membership of over 260,000 working girls and boys. Strengthened by the active participation of children who have experience of the issues it
seeks to address, AMWCY is uniquely able to reach out to the most marginalized children, including child migrants, for whom it offers a variety of services and support.

The growing number of organizations created and led by young people serves as a testament to young people’s activism and also to the fact that existing adult-led organizations fall short in addressing their needs. Networking among youth-led organizations offers excellent opportunities for sharing best practices and creating a shared platform for advocacy.

Adolescent involvement in political action has also received a boost from new communications technologies, which have great potential to broaden and lend momentum and geographical breadth to child-led activism. Over time, more children will have access to information, leading to heightened awareness of their own rights and linking new members to existing networks and associations that represent their views. Enabling all children to voice their opinions via a common platform could potentially level inequalities and overcome discrimination, especially for adolescents with disabilities, girls and those living in rural areas where youth associations may not exist. For example, in 2005 UNICEF created a Rural Voices of Youth (RVOY) platform, which connects ‘offline’ young people with their ‘online’ peers, giving them the opportunity to engage in dialogue on child rights and participation issues.

Used appropriately, the Internet, social networking and related technologies can be powerful tools that enable adolescents to speak out on matters that are important to them. Rather than seeking formal representative participation in local government, the youth of this century are increasingly turning to online or interactive activism, creating relevant and agile networks on the Web. The old model of ‘dutiful citizenship’, in which people respond to mass media and are mobilized by government or civil society initiatives, is being replaced by a form of ‘self-actualizing citizenship’. Politicians, policymakers and educators should resist the temptation to dismiss young people as uninterested or apathetic and instead focus on tapping into the power of new and different forms of engagement that are expressed in a different ‘language’.

Myriad legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers impede adolescents’ participation in making decisions that affect their lives. Dismantling these barriers is a challenge that requires a willingness to re-examine assumptions about adolescents’ potential and to create environments in which they can truly thrive, building their capacities in the process.

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free education. SFAI researches and analyses past country experiences and uses that knowledge to guide and support countries in their efforts to remove school fees. Families and communities must also have a voice and urge their governments to abolish fees.

The third key action is to promote equitable access to post-primary education. Extending education to those currently excluded will be a particular challenge in the current decade; if it can be achieved, however, it has the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of adolescent poverty.

Attendance and completion of secondary school is still largely beyond the reach of the poorest and most marginalized groups and communities in many countries. Girls, adolescents with disabilities and those from minority groups are especially disadvantaged. While most countries have reached gender parity in primary school, fewer have approached this goal for secondary education. The 2010 United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report looked at secondary-school-aged girls in 42 countries and found that twice as many girls from the poorest 60 percent of households were out of school, compared with girls from the wealthiest 40 per cent of households (50 per cent compared with 24 per cent). The disparities were similar for boys of secondary school age. Extending quality compulsory education and abolishing school fees will help reduce these gender gaps.

Additional efforts to reach indigenous, disabled and other marginalized children must also be made. Recent reforms in Bolivia, for example, aim to reach minorities and indigenous groups through intercultural and bilingual education. In South Africa, including disabled children in mainstream schooling – rather than sending them to special schools – has led to increased school enrolment of disabled children and support for specialized teaching practices.

Another group needing special support are teenage mothers who are forced to leave school. In Namibia, 1 in 7 young women aged 15–19 have already begun childbearing. Young motherhood is more common in rural areas than in urban areas, and young women with no education are more than 10 times more likely to have started childbearing by the age of 19 than those who have completed secondary school (58 per cent versus 6 per cent). Although primary school enrolment is over 90 per cent, the prevalence of girls among those who make the transition to secondary school is still very low, and many drop out due to teenage pregnancy. In 2008,