

# **Youth Participation in Latin-America and the Caribbean**

**A Socio-political discourse**

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## **YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN : A SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

### **Introduction**

There are 1.8 billion young people alive in the world today. From a deficit discourse perspective, this reported youth bulge may be ‘improperly’ considered a significant development challenge or liability (UNFPA, 2014). However, from a positive youth development perspective it is ‘properly’ considered a potent force for social transformation and sustainable development (UNFPA, 2014). Yet for the youth demographic to fulfil its socio-economic and socio-political obligations and optimize its impact as a transformative force it must be organized, conscientized, connected and engaged. It must be re-emphasized that contrary to deficit discourse perspectives the majority of young people are positive, law abiding and productive members of their community and society. Perhaps it is the inequitable socio-economic policies and deformed socio-political systems which,

contributes to and accentuates perceived risky and undesirable behaviours

Though historically the youth demographic has had a potent impact on mass political struggles in support of peace, democracy and social justice active youth participation is still perceived as predominantly a youth development issue. Perhaps this would have provided some comfort, except a preponderance of these youth participation initiatives remain ad-hoc and tokenistic in nature.

The complexity and pervasive impact of the current global development ethos has necessitated a rethink of traditional notions of governance and development. Active youth participation has therefore emerged as a central theme of the global development discourse. Other pertinent factors are a more educated youth demographic; the increasing awareness among young people of their socio-economic and socio-political rights; their growing dissatisfaction with prevailing political and governance paradigms and the proliferation of non-

traditional, primarily youth-centric media . Young people across the world have sounded the clarion. It is now for Governments and other development stakeholders to duly recognize the economic and political rights of the youth demographic and mutually re-negotiate the prevailing power relationships and structures. Undoubtedly a complex task, yet history has taught the failure to co-exist contributes to social and political upheaval frequently escalating to the use of non-peaceful means by one or more aggrieved party to claim their political space and assert their sectoral or demographic interests.

Much of the literature speak to normative concepts of youth participation, primarily focussing on State sponsored processes and models of youth participation(DFID/Maguire, S. 2007; Hart, 1992). Important questions that arise are about the nature and quality of the participation. Further, even when contextualized within a youth empowerment paradigm much of the discourse also treats the concept as a youth development issue. Yet the notion of active youth

participation transcends youth development. It is a socio-economic and socio-political construct (Charles & Jameson-Charles, n.d).

### **The global development context**

Charles and Jameson-Charles (in press) transformational theory of youth development postulates that young people's inherent restlessness, propensity for risk-taking, spirit of innovativeness and creative capacity are vital drivers of social change and transformation. These are all critical ingredients for the emerging post 2015 global development agenda. Indeed history is replete with powerful examples to remind us of the 'power of youth' and their capacity to transcend even the most impermeable of barriers. Their leadership and active participation has ensured the success of many a renaissance movement, as has been very evident in global struggles for peace, social justice, democracy and sustainable development. Lest we forget, during the transitional period between battlefield hostilities of the second World War and the Paris Peace Conference of 1947, young people were among the very first to define the post war global agenda. Staar (1991) observed that young people of allied countries had during the war formed a World Youth Council to fight against fascism . On November 10,

1945 the World Youth Council convened a historic conference in London, which brought together for the first time in the history of the international youth movement representatives of more than 30 million young people of different political ideologies and religious beliefs from 63 nations. The conference adopted a pledge for peace but most importantly articulated a profound agenda for global development:

“We pledge that we shall remember this unity, forged in this month, November 1945 not only today, not only this week, this year, but always until we have built the world we have dreamed of and fought for. We pledge ourselves to build the unity of youth of the world all races, all colours, all nationalities, all beliefs. To eliminate all traces of fascism from the earth; to build a deep and sincere international friendship among the peoples of the world; to keep a just lasting peace; to eliminate want, frustration and enforced idleness. We have come to confirm the unity of all youth salute our comrades who have died-and pledge our word that skilful hands, keen brains and young enthusiasm shall never more be wasted in war <sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wfdy.org/constitution/>

This profound statement “We hold that the democratic and progressive traditions of the WFDY strengthen our determination to continue to strive for a better world in which humankind will fully emancipate itself. In this collective effort the youth will be the vanguard, will remain at the forefront, for as long as it takes, in order to materialize our vision<sup>2</sup>, affirmed the role of young people as catalysts for peaceful co-existence, democracy and development. In the nearly seven decades since the historic London Conference the youth demographic has played vanguard roles in national liberation, de-colonization, civil rights, peace, democracy and environmental movements. A notable feature is the diversity of philosophical perspectives which, have influenced their engagement in these processes.

### The LAC experience

Youth participation in LAC remains a very complex construct in need of thorough investigation and profound analysis. However from my experience, young people have contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of LAC. Youth and student movements have played significant roles in extra-parliamentary mass political and social action in support of decolonization, social justice, democratic governance and human rights. Significant numbers of young people have actively

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wfdy.org/history/>

participated in the major socio-political/socio-cultural/socio-historic movements which have emerged since the World Youth Conference in 1945. I contend that young people have not benefitted proportionate to their investment in these social and political movements. A similar occurrence in the post Arab Spring political and governance formations has emphasized the limited presence and influence of the youth demographic at the leadership levels of those political formations that have assumed management of the mass political movements and emerging governance frameworks. UNDP (2013) cautions that in such circumstances the exclusion of youth can “destablize democratization and accelerate conflict dynamics<sup>3</sup>.”

Equally vexing is the youth demographic’s limited presence within the leadership of traditional political parties and in elected and non-elected state and local government offices, relative to their demographic size. There are suggestions that this phenomena maybe a consequence of the apparent voluntary dis-connect from representative deomocracy processes, on the part of young people. However, it is my view that the tokenization and even marginalization of young people within formal power and governance structures

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP: Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: a good Practice guide



has contributed to this dis-trust of and dis-connectedness from the representative governance processes. Indeed, the majority of mainstream political parties have yet to strategically address the issue of the youth deficit within their leadership framework, policy formulation and decision-making processes. I further contend that even the youth auxiliaries of most of those parties are treated merely as cheerleaders for an increasingly decrepit, dysfunctional and irrelevant political ethos. Rebeca Grynspan (2013) opined “ Political parties should be injected with fresh blood which would then lead to enhanced participation.” Indeed FLACSO Chile (2013) has articulated a compelling case for a comprehensive investigation and profound analysis of youth participation in LAC representative democracy process. The relevance of the propose study transcends youth development. It is critical to inclusive governance , an emerging pillar of the post 2015 global development agenda.

Even within a youth development context, embracing the youth demographic as strategic partners is not habitual. Perhaps a consequence of the prevailing deficit discourse youth development culture in which , young people, are considered to have a finite number of de-linked needs to be addressed. The ethos is of youth participation strategies designed as mainly lightweight and tokenistic, ad-hoc and subject to the vagaries of prevailing economic policies and political expediency.

Even in circumstances where more enabling dispositions exist, the models of engagement and participation fail to reach a critical mass of young people. This may be due to the inappropriateness of some participation strategies, programs and funding frameworks to cater for diversity among young people. Similarly, the motivation for involving young people in the process is sometimes not clearly articulated and young people's contributions are often times undervalued and underappreciated.

Finally, if the youth development agenda is to remain relevant and foster positive youth development, as often proclaimed then active youth participation must be treated as a fundamental right, not a concession (**Inter-American Development Bank, 2009**).

### Defining Active Youth Participation

“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.” — **Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-general of the United Nations**

This poignant characterization of the youth demographic's relationship to human civilization contextualizes a popular perception of active youth participation. Youth participation is not simply about ensuring youth involvement in youth related activities, though imperative. Youth participation is a socio-political concept. It is about young people asserting their political rights and effectively utilizing their political space. It is about the youth demographic claiming, asserting, negotiating and positioning their demographic interests within the dynamics of power relationships in their respective existence. It speaks to participation within the family, at the community, national, regional and international levels. It also speaks to participation in every facet of society, including economic, social, political, cultural and spiritual realms. It is a gender sensitive concept, inclusive and diverse in nature, to facilitate the inclusion of young people irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic, physical and mental abilities, geographic location, religious or political philosophy. Active youth participation is a rights-based concept and re-affirms the rights of young people to act in their demographic interest or collaboratively, as strategic partners in development (WPAY;UNESCO;UNDP). Consequently frameworks to facilitate active youth participation must be dynamic, ethical and transparent to ensure development agendas and processes benefit from the totality of the youth demographic's

creative, emotional and social capital. I further contend that youth participation is a central plank of democracy and therefore any failure to facilitate active youth participation in governance and development processes represents a a disturbing departure from the fundamental principles of democratic governance and exacerbates the democratic deficit.

A plethora of international protocols, declarations and policy statements support normative concepts of active youth participation. These include, the World Plan of Action for Youth 2000 and beyond (WPAY), The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE 2008-2015) and within recent times, 'Youth Participation in Development: A guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers' (2010) published by the DFID-CSO Youth working group. The question arises, whether these frameworks adequately reflect the socio-political character of youth participation.

The post 2015 global development discourse has re-energized the discourse on active youth participation and has also accentuated the critical role young people should play in promoting the principles of accountable, transparent and inclusive governance. The emerging discourse must therefore desist from treating the issue

in its normative context and instead embrace a socio-political construct of youth participation.

Perhaps the World Youth Conference (Colombo, 2014) sounded the clarion for this socio-political approach to youth participation in its call to enhance the integration of youth into democratic political processes, recognize youth movements as stakeholders and the crucial role they should play in decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup>

The Baku Commitment on Youth Policies (2014) has strategically positioned youth participation issues within the youth policy development agenda and framework. The UNDP Youth Strategy (2014-2017) has succinctly captured some of the youth participation issues under the broad thematic areas of economic inclusion, Active Citizenship and sustainable communities.

Many of those assertions in support of active youth are informed by an extensive body of literature and theoretical perspectives. (Friere 1970; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Flanagan & Faison 2001; Hart 1992 & 1993; Howard et al. 2002; Luken 2002; Winters, Leitten, Wagner & O'leary Tevyaw 2007; Charles & Jameson – Charles 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> World Youth Conference Colombo Declaration (2014)

## **Towards a Socio-political Framework for Youth Participation**

'A system cannot fail those it was not meant to protect' - W.E.B. Du Bois

Youth participation transcends youth development. It represents an investment in sustainable development, and must therefore be treated holistically and afforded an enabling environment to flourish. Firstly, the proposed strategy recommends initiatives to enhance the youth development policy environment. Secondly, it addresses recommendations to support active youth participation in political, governance and development processes.

**1. Assessing Youth Participation in LAC:** While there is general agreement existing youth participation models are inadequate and mainly tokenistic. Such conclusions are usually drawn from anecdotal information. It is therefore recommended as a matter of great urgency that an assessment of youth participation models

and practice in LAC be commissioned. The assessment report can be used as an advocacy tool.

**2. An Enabling Policy & Legislation Environment:** A supportive policy and legislative environment is critical to facilitate active youth participation. The youth movement must therefore advocate for the removal of legislation, policies and systems which inhibit active participation and for their replacement with those that enable active participation.

**3. Treating Youth Participation as a Human Rights and Democracy issue:** Active youth participation is a rights-based concept and a central plank of democratic governance. Consequently active youth participation should feature as a prominent indicator in frameworks used by the Organization of American States and

other relevant hemispheric entities to promote democracy, good governance and human rights in the LAC.

#### **4. Assessing the significance and impact of Youth Movements in**

**LAC:** History and impact of the youth movement in LAC must be researched, published and properly integrated into the development discourse and feature more prominently in the socio-historic content of academic curricula.

#### **5. Strengthening /modernizing Youth Networks and Platforms:**

Youth networks and platforms in LAC have significantly impacted social , cultural and political movements. Many of these have played vanguard roles in the struggle for peace, democracy, independence, social justice, economic inclusion and sustainable development. Within recent times, leadership and resource challenges have negatively impacted their effectiveness and even



relevance. There is a need for a frank dialogue on and objective assessment of these networks and platforms. The results of these two processes should inform a strategic action plan to re-invigorate, modernize and re-position the youth movement.

**6. Assessing Relevance of Electoral Processes:** There are concerns regarding increasing apathy among the youth demographic regarding their participation in electoral processes. In many instances young people have expressed disenchantment with the existing formal political and governance processes. Perhaps the time is opportune to commission a comprehensive study on youth participation in formal and informal political processes and use the results to formulate youth-driven strategy to reform existing electoral processes.

**7. Reforming Political Parties:** Most mainstream political parties have not adequately facilitated the participation of youth

members in their leadership, policy and decision-making structures and processes. Young people must be supported through, research, advocacy and capacity building to enhance their political status within community, national and regional political and power structures.

**8. Solidarity among LAC Youth Movement:** A programme of youth exchanges, youth festivals and related activities must be encouraged to build and strengthen solidarity among young people and within youth movements in LAC.

The exhortations in this paper do not represent an expedition in search of the illusive 'Fountain of Youth.' Rather it is an acknowledgement of socio-economic and socio-political rights of young people and the wisdom of treating with them as strategic partners in development. It is a clarion to embrace our shared responsibility to promote global peace, democracy, economic prosperity and social progress. The youth

demographic has persistently demonstrated the capacity to be effective agents of societal renewal and renaissance.

Let us answer this clarion to action with - **Purpose-driven, Bold, Imaginative and strategic** initiatives. Let us consider a **Decade (2015-2025)** of unprecedented **investment** in youth empowerment. Note, I propose **investment** and not **expenditure**. There is a difference!

**Investment** engender perceptions of hope; benefits to be derived therefrom and is asset-based in context. **Expenditure** on the other hand connotes that which has gone irretrievably and is deficit -based in context.

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