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The Power of Youth Participation in Times of Crisis

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This article draws on the findings of a collaboration between



Theatre Workshop. Credit: Sreenath Nair.

we at the British Council and [Changing the Story \(CTS\)](#). Through this collaboration, we have been sharing knowledge about innovative approaches for working with young people in complex situations in developing countries and have examined the impact of COVID-19.

Young people matter.

They **represent** over a fifth of the world's population but are too often ignored in decision-making and planning for economies and societies they will inherit.

Recent data, from British Council [Next Generation global research](#) highlights four critical areas of shared concern for young people across a range of countries that qualify for Official Development Assistance (ODA):

- **a crisis in education:** despite an overall rise in school attendance at primary level, young people from ODA countries feel that the quality of education **is lacking** and does not prepare youth for employment. In Ethiopia only 23 per cent of 2,332 young Ethiopians aged 15-29 **surveyed** felt their education had improved their chances of getting a job.

- **a crisis in the availability of decent work:** unemployment is rapidly growing in many developing economies, with young people often hardest hit. For example, 66 per cent of 1,474 young South Africans aged 15-34 surveyed for the British Council were unemployed. The situation has worsened considerably in 2020 largely due to the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the informal sector, which accounts for 77 per cent of young workers globally and 93 per cent in Sub-Saharan-Africa.
- **the exclusion of young people from having voice, agency and leadership in their societies:** they feel unrepresented by governments and spoke of a deep distrust of political processes. In Zimbabwe more than 60 per cent of 1,067 young Zimbabweans aged 18-35 surveyed were unwilling to engage in politics and did not think their vote could change things for the better.
- **young women's and girls' exposure to gender-based discrimination and violence:** a serious growing problem was reported of gender-based violence at home, in communities and in schools for young women. For example in Kenya, young women said they often felt pressured by men into performing sexual acts, and that the threat of violence made them afraid to refuse. They reported feeling at risk in their communities, homes, social spaces, schools and workplaces. The indicated that shame and stigma prevented them from reporting sexual abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic is compounding these problems globally.

Without urgent action these negative outcomes for children and young people will translate into significant longer-term impacts, ranging from economic stress, exploitation and mental health issues, to risky and/or violent behaviours.

A targeted focus on young people is therefore essential for the achievement of the UK government's objectives of strengthening global peace, security and governance; strengthening resilience and responses to crises; promoting global prosperity; tackling extreme poverty and helping vulnerable people.

The power of participatory approaches centred on young people

To be successful in addressing these serious systemic failures, it is imperative to support appropriate interventions and strive to foster new generations of resilient, empowered young people.

Given the feelings of exclusion and disaffection felt by young people, harnessing their agency through participatory creative projects and programmes is a vital part of this process.

The youth-focused work of CTS and the British Council puts participation and creativity front and centre and we believe there are important lessons that can be learnt from this approach and the potential for wider application.

MAP works with young people through music, dance and drama in communities affected by conflict and other traumatic situations and where public services are non-existent or limited. A key focus of these creative projects is addressing the mental health of young people through activities that enable them to express and confront painful experiences and to articulate often very abstract ideas about the past, self, community and identity. The MAP methodology has also been successfully adapted for over 25 schools across Rwanda as well in Indonesia, Nepal and the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Strengthening Resilience in Middle Eastern and North African countries programme aims to build the resilience of young people and their communities – helping them to ‘survive and thrive’ whatever pressures and hazards they confront – and reduce the appeal of violent extremist narratives. Through the programme the British Council is demonstrating how innovative participatory processes can build the resilience of young people to choose more positive pathways.

The Active Citizens social leadership training programme engages young people from over 70 countries at the local level to be change agents. Trust and confidence are built through the mobilisation of participatory approaches, including creative, arts-based initiatives that enable young people to express themselves and connect to others in safe spaces, and promote political empowerment. The approach has been adapted to meet the needs of multiple communities, including those that are marginalised, or conflict affected.

An evaluation indicated that Active Citizens contributes to the employability and leadership potential of young people, while also increasing community cohesion and safety and improving access to services.

Additional projects are economically empowering young people in socially and environmentally responsible ways.

The CTS project '[building inclusive and sustainable civil society in Malaysia and Cambodia: A social entrepreneurship toolkit created by and for young people](#)' recognises that social enterprises are a platform for young people's agency and creativity but are only as strong as the individuals behind them. The project takes a participatory approach to understanding how young social entrepreneurs cope with challenges in resilient ways, enabling them to play an active role as change makers in promoting wellbeing through self-help.

The Next Generation research reveals that young people are increasingly facing precarious situations, with little economic or political power and intensified pressures in the face of COVID-19. It has never been more important to understand what young people want and need.

“Ignoring these issues amounts to failing current and future generations and has wider implications for the achievement of UK national and international policy goals.”

We argue for the positive power of creative, participatory approaches that embrace young people as agents with valuable insights, knowledge and capacity. These approaches are enabling them to generate alternative stories that resonate with their specific situations and help them envisage meaningful futures for themselves and their communities.

A report will be published on the CTS website, which we will provide a link to here in due course. This blog was originally posted on the British Council website and can be found [here](#).

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