



BLOG /// FRIDAY 30 APRIL 2021

‘Stop Infantilising’: reflections on how to ensure meaningful engagement with young people

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Youth leadership and amplifying youth voice are key aims of Changing the Story (CTS), and are issues that I have been keen to focus on, as I believe that young people should be front and centre in decision-making that is about them and their futures. In recent months, CTS has sought further opportunities for young people to engage directly with organisations and decision makers. One of the ways we have been doing so is by engaging in discussions with Non-government Organisations (NGOs) on the topic of meaningful youth engagement and accountability to influence institutional change.

One of the first discussions we engaged in was with the [Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation](#), an NGO, which aims to advance dialogue and policy for sustainable development, in June 2020. The event, “Connecting the missing peace: Youth leadership for Building and Sustaining Peace,” brought together 30 youth peacebuilders, leaders and civil society organisations to discuss what practical actions are needed to ensure youth play a leadership role throughout projects and programmes, and what the international community can do to support efforts to advance youth leadership. This blog post will reflect on key points from the roundtable discussion.

What is youth leadership?

The term ‘youth leadership’ is often used, but we were keen to understand what this term meant to those involved in work around youth peacebuilding and leadership. We asked participants to identify one word summing up what youth leadership meant to them, drawing on their own experiences.

The group used the words **grit, innovation, opportunity, agency and voice**, all of which reflect what I have learnt from [young people at Changing the Story](#) about their own leadership journeys and the role the CTS project has played in building their capacity, skills and networks.

When asked to expand on these words, the group described their experience of youth leadership as navigating multiple, interrelated structural barriers and systems of oppression that seek to silence youth voices, particularly the voices of marginalised youth, and curtail opportunities for youth civic engagement.

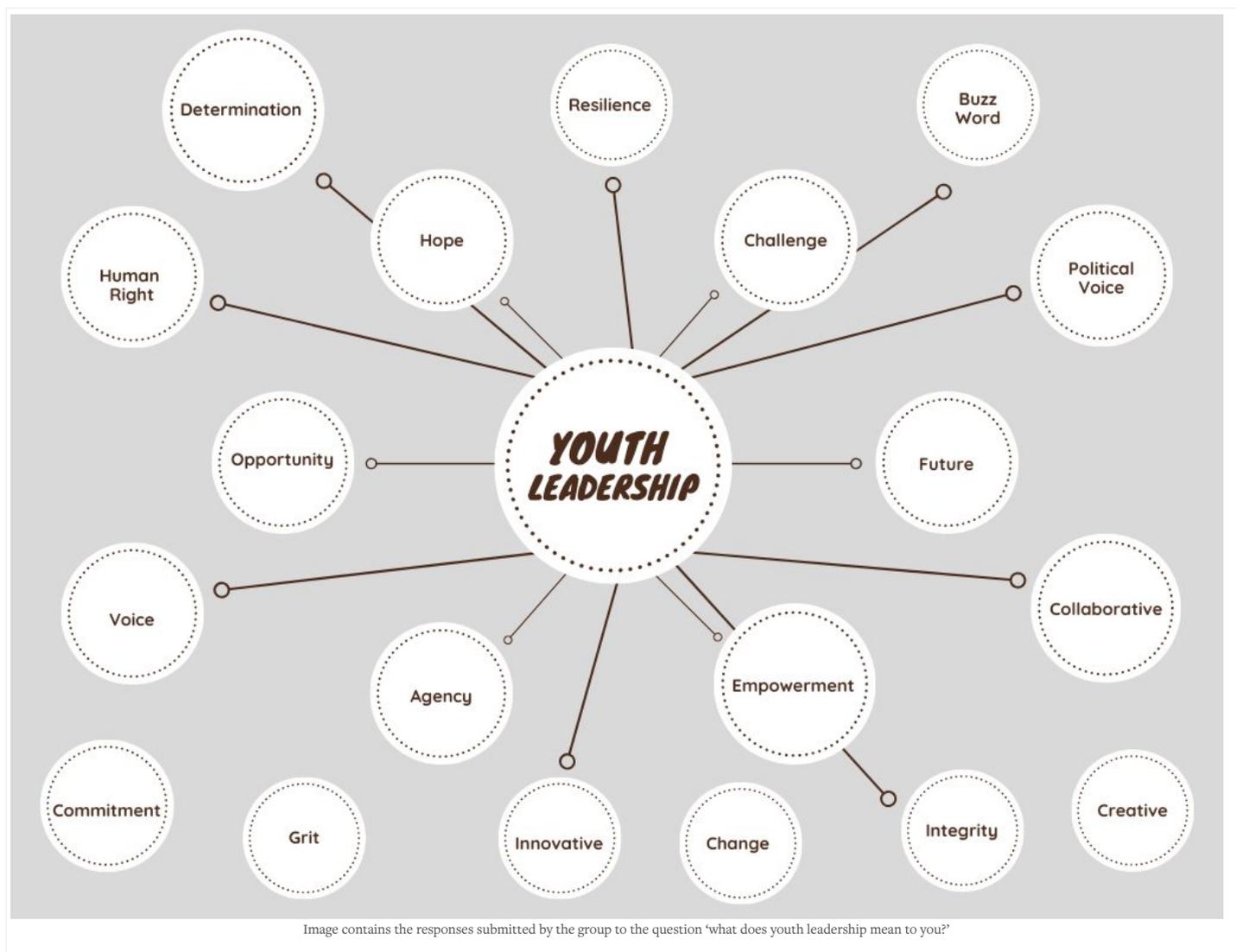
Participants cited major contextual barriers to advancing youth leadership such as underemployment and unemployment, dominant patriarchal structures, human rights violations and polarised political contexts.

For Amal, a young peacebuilder, youth leadership meant **determination and resilience**.

“It is important to stand (firm) on what we believe; it can change more people’s lives”

Expanding on this, Amal shared an experience where she was dismissed from the international community early in her career and told that youth leadership was not a priority. Amal was determined not to give up. Collaborating with her peers, a group of similarly motivated youth leaders, Amal set up her own NGO, which to this day continues to provide mentorship to youth peacebuilders striving for change in their communities.

Amal's story is one of many first-hand examples I heard in the discussion about how young people are demonstrating leadership in their own work.



The importance of collaborative leadership while you handle ad

ers provided countless examples of how they are implementing change at every level, despite some of the obstacles they face, a common thread connecting each of the narratives was that making change alone is difficult.

Instead of operating in isolation, youth leaders, networks and progressive movements – often with horizontally decentralised power structures – are joining forces to share knowledge, build solidarity and drive the change they want to see, but there is more to be done.

It was clear from the conversation that young people demonstrate leadership and often create their own spaces, but that they also want to work with non-youth leaders. It is important to note that this does not mean 'co-option' or 'taking over.'

The youth leaders called for a proactive commitment from influential allies to support and amplify their work as agents of change and to co-build with them. To that end, collaboration and allies were fundamental to the role they see institutions playing in advancing leadership goals.

Allies can add legitimacy to youth leaders' work and safeguard youth leaders through lending their voices and support to the protection of youth leaders. Allies can connect social movements, networks, leaders and institutions, serving as a broker to facilitate knowledge exchange between groups with shared values and interests, something there was a real desire for among the youth participants attending the roundtable discussion. One specific suggestion was that organisations could offer opportunities to shadow those in positions of influence and paid internships to facilitate mutual knowledge exchange and capacity building.

Intergenerational and multi-level exchanges, particularly the involvement of family and community in youth leadership, was also mentioned as a critical way to value and sustain youth leadership.

Finally, it is important to **invest resources in co-production and stop infantilising**. This ultimately means **changing the framework of how your organisation works with youth leaders**, by creating space for youth leaders to pursue the ideas they are interested in, to take ownership of resources and all areas of decision making, from pre-design, design delivery and evaluation of projects and programmes.

“Training can be useful, but how much leverage does it create when you as a single person go back to your community. Leaders have to be supported by allies at different levels”

Acting as a Broker: the digital dilemma

Virtual roundtable discussions, like this one, clearly have value in an increasingly digitalised world by enabling brokers to bring youth leaders together into direct dialogue with each other no matter their geographical location. However, we cannot ignore the limitations to digital accessibility. Changing the Story is attempting to address the digital divide by allocating budget to data and technology support and by approaching the Arts and Humanities Research Council for infrastructure budget allocation. The efforts to address digital inequality will be ongoing as CTS moves into the project’s fourth year, the dissemination phase.

What do these recommendations mean in the context of CTS work?

I’ve been thinking about allyship and what it means in the context of Changing the Story, considering how the term allyship has been criticised by social movements as an expression of solidarity without real action to back it up. Changing the Story is striving to support youth leaders in real and meaningful ways and to keep learning from our network about how best we can do this.

In 2021, Changing the Story will recruit a Youth Research Board to lead a participatory action research project and to raise awareness of what they see as the key issues emerging from the project. We’re creating pathways to policymakers through our ‘Youth, Development and Voice’ project with The British Council and we will continue to engage in discussions with NGOs on the topic of inclusive youth engagement to influence institutional change.

Follow @Changing_Story_ and visit changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk for updates on our youth engagement strand, including the launch of the Youth Research Board, and to find out more about the Changing the Story project.

For updates from Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation visit @DagHammarskjold and www.daghammarskjold.se

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