

# POLICY BRIEF: BEYOND TOKENISM

Empowering Young People through Arts-based Approaches



Image taken from 'Supporting Young People to Become Youth Leaders in South Africa'

## YOUNG PEOPLE GLOBALLY ARE FEELING PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THEIR FUTURES

They are being directly and dis-proportionately affected by systemic issues that include inadequate access to decent work; education systems that are far from fit for purpose; the failure of governments to represent youth voices or needs; and the exposure of young women and girls to multiple forms of discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV). These **negative outcomes are risk multipliers**, translating into longer-term impacts, ranging from economic stress and exploitation and mental health issues to participation in risky or violent behaviours. It is not only the seriousness of these issues that is concerning but the scale: young people between the ages of 10-24 account for around a fifth of the world's population.

It is therefore imperative to **fund appropriate interventions that help foster new generations of resilient, empowered youth**. This means engaging young people in designing policy and interventions in ways that are truly participatory and demonstrate true downwards accountability. Harnessing the agency of young people in representative ways that reflect their specific situations and views is a vital part of this process.

Arts-based research approaches have enormous value for engaging young people and promoting youth voices in ways that go beyond tokenism, enabling positive change where current youth-focused policies and interventions often fail. They amplify the voices of young people, enabling them to shape the terms of conversations that are meaningful for them.

A realistic level of multi-year **funding should therefore be mobilised to support art-based youth-focused activities and processes**.

## MULTIPLE CRISES PERSIST FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

'Youth' has been a buzzword in policy, practice and research since the early 2000s, exemplified by the 2007 World Bank's World Development Report. However, nearly two decades later, available data indicates that efforts to respond to young people's needs and capture their perspectives seem to have achieved little on aggregate.

There is still a crisis in education: inadequate infrastructure, poorly equipped teachers and gender discrimination are among the problems faced in education, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. There is a crisis in political representation, reflected in low voter turnout figures among aged under 30 and low representation of younger constituents in political party members. Increasingly young people are turning to informal forms of politics, but in some cases lack of productive civic engagement can contribute to violent forms of behaviour. GBV is also a growing problem for women and girls globally. However, entrenched social norms, stigma and lack of effective interventions often means that little happens to change these situations.

## POLICY PROCESSES REMAIN 'YOUTH- BLIND'

Since the early 2000s multiple opportunities have been created to capture and respond to youth concerns and there is a recognition that youth engagement is critical to the success of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, there are still glaring blind spots in policy when it comes to young people.

- **Young people are being instrumentalised**, too often viewed as 'human capital' that can fuel economic growth rather than as complex, creative beings with psycho-social needs and rights.
- **Opportunities to target and track positive change among younger populations are stymied by poor data collection**. For example, even though 90 of the 232 indicators developed to measure progress against the SDGs have relevance for young people, there is a paucity of age-disaggregated data and a failure to mainstream youth as a concern across the SDGs. The **participation of young people in policy processes often remains tokenistic**, with no guarantees that their specific perspectives will be heard and taken into account. Notably, they are usually not included at the table when the 'real' decision-making takes place.
- Current processes therefore **fail to create real downward accountability**, missing opportunities to actively involve young people in enabling the kinds of radical systemic changes and paradigmatic shifts that are needed to improve their lives and opportunities.



## WHY FUND ARTS-BASED PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES?

Multiple youth-focused projects under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) illustrate the enormous value of arts-based participatory approaches that engage and empower young people. As the examples below illustrate, these processes contribute to personal shifts in thinking, behaviours and attitudes, creating wider ripples of change for young people, communities and policymaking in some cases. In many cases they also equip them with practical skills, confidence and resilience.

- **Case Study One:** Arts-based approaches (music, dance and drama) are mobilised by **'Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP): Informing the National Curriculum and Youth Policy for Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda, Indonesia and Nepal'** to foster critical reflection skills among young people, empowering them to speak out about issues that affect them directly, such as conflict and personal security, and to contribute to solutions at local and regional levels.
- **Case Study Two:** **'Supporting Young People to Become Youth Leaders in South Africa: Shaping the Future of the Isibindi Safe Park Model Nationally'** supports young people to collectively produce short films on issues concerning them. These films have been used by the young people involved to generate debate on topics including xenophobia, child trafficking and GBV in townships around Johannesburg. The programme has also been used to help develop a national youth leadership programme.
- **Case Study Three:** Addressing the root causes of GBV is critical for change to happen. **'None in Three: Development, Application, Research and Evaluation of Prosocial Games for the Prevention of Gender-based Violence'** has taken the unique approach of developing culturally relevant, interactive digital games that are used in schools as part of programmes to sensitively tackle issues of child sexual abuse and GBV. The games have engaged children in an immersive way, opening spaces for discussion about these very complex, difficult, and personal issues. Participating young people have gained more awareness of what violence is and have improved levels of empathy as well as increased knowledge about where to go for help and how to report it.

## EVIDENCE BASE

This policy brief is based on an analysis of 61 youth-focused Global Challenges Research Projects and Newton Projects, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, operating in Official Development Assistance (ODA) countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

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