

Youth as actors in the global community

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Introduction

"Participants today not just the leaders tomorrow". This was the final statement to the third committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) of the 2nd Youth Representative to the Permanent Australian Mission to the United Nations.

Today I want to investigate the mechanisms through which young peoples' views can be heard on the international stage and the way in which they are increasingly being represented. I would like to focus on why participation and representation is so vital and the avenues through which this is being achieved.

Why is youth participation important?

Young people are a part of "We the peoples" (UN Charter). Approximately one sixth of the world's population is comprised of youth (UN definition 15-24). Yet throughout government, bureaucracies, and within the international community, young people have been sorely unrepresented. As the Secretary-General described in his 1999 report on youth, "in many parts of the world seniority is valued and younger persons are often excluded from discussions and decision-making that influence their lives" (A/54/59).

Consequentially, many young people have felt alienated even though they wish to contribute. There is an important need for young people to see their faces and views reflected in the bodies and decisions that shape their lives. Thus inter-generational equity is an important motivation for youth participation.

Secondly, it is vital that young people are involved in decisions that impact upon their lives. Moreover, they have the capacity, through participation, to effect real change in the multitude of issues that impact upon them. Take for example young people's involvement in peer-education programs in South Africa and PNG designed to fight against the spread of AIDS. In my experience, it is often young people that are best placed to communicate messages to other young people and indeed the views of youth to the broader community.

Thirdly, an interesting perspective on youth participation was provided by Carrie McDougall, the 2000 Australian Youth Representative to the UNGA. She suggested that "the call by youth for greater participation should not be viewed only as a request, but also as an offer." And indeed this is true. Young people in all countries are a major human resource and key agents of social change, economic development and technological innovation.

Youth participation also brings new perspectives to old issues. (Notably Grameen bank micro economic system - one of its managers - only 25.) Furthermore, participation gives a sense of ownership and gives documents a greater relevancy and accessibility to young people. But most importantly "the involvement of young people in the formulation of the solutions, means that they are more likely to be implemented in the long term." (1999 Australian Youth Rep.)

Another point that is increasingly being stressed, is the right of all individuals to be "freely and fully involved in societies' decision-making processes without discrimination on the basis of age, sex or background" (UNESCO Strategy of Action with and for youth).

Finally, youth are, in many ways, at the forefront of the globalisation of our world. They experience the impact of growing economic interdependence and rationalisation, underdevelopment, disease pandemics

and war. They will be most affected by the evolution of our society in the long term. It is only logical then, that youth should be included in shaping that change.

What has laid the foundation for youth participation?

While the importance of youth was being recognised as early as 1985 with the special session of the UNGA on Youth, the catalyst for a groundswell of youth participation came in 1995 with the conclusion of the World Programme of Action to the Year 2000 and Beyond.

The Programme of Action is a very broad ranging document encompassing a diverse range of youth issues. It was designed as a framework of policy to improve the situations of young people.

In terms of participation, it called for "full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision making". It was also the first document to call upon governments to include youth representatives in their national delegations to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

However, while the program has made an impact at a domestic level and in the case of Europe, at the regional level, progress at an international level has a long way to come.

Moves towards achieving effective international representation for young people were reaffirmed and developed at the 1998 Third World Youth Forum from 2-7 August and World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held at Lisbon from 8-12 August.

The Lisbon declaration went further in calling for youth access to legislative and policy-making bodies and the involvement of youth in the formulation, execution and evaluation of youth programs. However, it appeared to be a condensed version of the World Programme of Action particularly in relation to youth participation.

It was the Braga Youth Action Plan that came out of the 3rd session of the World Youth Forum, which has made the most headway in terms of youth participation. The Braga Youth Action Plan was developed by over 500 young people from over 130 countries in conjunction with actors of the international community and UN Agencies.

What differentiates it from the World Programme of Action and the Lisbon Declaration, is that this document sets out concrete suggestions for increasing youth participation. Most importantly, rather than treating youth participation as an issue independent or isolated from other youth issues, it approaches participation as a cross-sectoral factor to be included in all aspects of the plan, encouraging governments and the UN to incorporate youth issues and participants across all its areas of focus.

What it is lacking though, is a detailed guide on how to implement these ideas. Therefore it is critical that the plan is followed up in the 4th World Youth Forum (WYF) that is to be staged in Dakar, Senegal, this year. The plan for the Dakar forum was to focus on youth and sustainable development. But after considerable pressure from UN Youth Representatives and UN Agencies attempts are being made to ensure that there is a follow up to the plan.

It is hoped that the fourth WYF will aim to:

- identify new opportunities for empowering youth and for implementing the BYAP at local national, regional and international levels;
- define specific projects that could be undertaken at international, national and local levels to facilitate the empowerment of youth and their participation in decision making;
- review progress achieved and obstacles encountered in the implementation of the Braga Youth Action Plan; and

- Assess the progress made by the UN system and Youth NGOs in implementing Braga.

What steps have been taken?

Adopting the measures to effectively implement the Braga Plan will involve a major paradigm shift to the recognition that youth are reliable, serious and important contributors.

While this has been a slow process, there are some encouraging signs.

UNESCO is a great model of how UN agencies can adapt to Braga.

The basis for youth participation in UNESCO stems from its "Strategy of Action With and For Youth developed in 1998 and which is reflective of many aspects of the Braga Youth Action Plan.

As part of its role of implementing this strategy, the UNESCO Youth Coordination Unit or UCJ is tasked with stimulating, encouraging and assisting all services and offices within UNESCO to ensure youth is a priority in all of its programs. This cross-sectoral approach is to be achieved through a dedicated internal priority youth committee and through an advisory Youth Council to the Director General and UCJ established out of the last General Conference.

The Youth Council has already had a major impact on the workings of UNESCO, developing the organisations UNESCO's Mid-term Strategy on Youth for 2002-2008, which would otherwise have been created by non-youth actors within UNESCO.

I was actually fortunate enough to be involved as an NGO representative at the session in which they defined the following priorities for UNESCO:

- formation of strategic alliance with Youth NGOs and their initiatives, other UN bodies and multilateral institutions;
- establish links with national youth structures;
- promote active youth participation in the conception, management and evaluation of UNESCO policies and programs will become a priority in their mid-term strategy;
- promotion through technology best practice youth policies world wide;
- strategic promotion of youth issues within UNESCO through the engagement of young staff and proper consultation of outside youth - include youth in secretariat programs etc;
- the establishment of a youth observatory function to collect, monitor and disseminate reliable data relating to life conditions of youth (would aid policy and strategy formulation); and
- provide policy support to governments in developing relevant youth policies and representative structures and encourage national youth structures.

I believe these initiatives put UNESCO at the forefront of the introduction of youth into the UN system.

Amongst other initiatives, UNICEF is including young people in the preparatory phase of the 2001 Special Session on Children. In consultation with the Australian Youth Representative, UNICEF has also indicated an interest in looking at ways of institutionalising youth participation within the UN system. However, the initiative I want to discuss today is the introduction of youth representatives into members' state delegations to the United Nations General Assembly.

UNGA Youth Representatives

Despite inclusion in a multitude of international documents, member states have been slow to take on the challenge of implementing a youth representative.

In 2000, there were a total of eight delegations that included youth representatives, the average between 22 and 26. Namely - Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, India, Bangladesh, Ecuador and Australia. However, it must be noted that the importance given to each representative by their respective delegations varies greatly. The length of stay varies from eight weeks (as is the case of Australia) to just two days. From the perspective of Australia and the majority of nordic countries, any less than five weeks is an insufficient time to make any impact within the General Assembly.

The levels of involvement also vary greatly from token representation and responsibility, to full security clearance and significant responsibility for determining their member state's position on the issues at hand, developing and amending resolutions in the third committee and addressing the committee on behalf of their delegations.

Due to the diverse nature of youth representatives, I will focus on the activities of the Australian Youth Representative in the Permanent Australian Mission to the United Nations.

In 1997, the United Nations Youth Association of Australia took up the challenge to pursue the implementation of a youth representative. Having conducted consultations with existing youth representatives in New York, the process moved surprisingly quickly. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Minister Downer were quite receptive to the concept and with support from the Permanent Ambassador to the UN and UNYA Patron, Ms Penny Wensley, the first Australian youth representative was sent to New York in 1999.

Australia's youth representative is a fully accredited member of the Australian Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. The successful applicant is selected by a committee under the auspices of the United Nations Youth Association of Australia who administers the position on behalf and with the guidance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This selection is based on a candidate's knowledge of and experiences in youth affairs and international issues, in addition to their personal capabilities.

The essence of the youth representative position is to provide a voice for Australian youth in the most important forum in the international arena. Foremost, this is achieved through the crucial provision of a youth perspective on key issues discussed by the General Assembly to the Australian Delegation. These views aim to be representative and are based on sources such as the United Nations Youth Association's policy platforms which have been developed in consultation with thousands of young Australians.

One of the best demonstrations of the need and effectiveness of the youth representative was the development of the 1999 Youth Resolution within the 3rd Committee of the UNGA (A/53/378).

The first year of the youth representative involved a process of determining the actual role of the position and also an assessment of the value of the position by DFAT. That year's youth rep. Mr Andrew Hudson, then Immediate Past President of UNYA Australia, was able to carve out a productive and responsible role within the mission - his commitment to his many activities ensuring that another representative was sent in 2000.

Turning to the Youth Resolution, Andrew felt that this is where the youth representative was able to have the greatest impact in terms of the drafting and delivery of Australia's statement on the youth agenda and in spearheading Australia's consideration of the 3rd committee's bi-annual youth resolution. This involved negotiation with other member states and development of two amendments.

This resolution reviewed the UN's policies and programs involving youth and had been recommended to the UNGA for adoption by ECOSOC. However, as Andrew suggests in his report, "it was clear that the resolution was weak and a product of considerable compromise." It is very uncharacteristic for the UNGA to open up and amend a text recommended to it by ECOSOC that was clearly the most desirable option from a youth perspective. Andrew defined three amendments that were necessary to strengthen the resolution. A reference taking note of the Braga Youth Action Plan, a paragraph encouraging member states to include youth representatives in their delegation to the UNGA and an amendment seeking to postpone the next world youth forum from 2001 - 2002 to allow more time to prepare and therefore produce a more affective forum.

Although the first was not successful that latter two were accepted. This action was not only "an example of meaningful participation of youth in the work of the delegation, but it also produced a stronger resolution on youth", which without the input of the youth representative, would not have occurred. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it reopened the text on youth policies and brought youth issues to the attention of many members states.

In 2000 Carrie McDougall became the 2nd Australian Youth Representative.

As the Youth Resolution is only considered on a biannual basis, Carrie had the opportunity to be engaged in a variety of new tasks. While she still delivered a statement on behalf of the Australian delegation to the 3rd committee, a large part of her time in New York was devoted to mobilising other youth representatives to advance the cause of youth participation in the UN system and advocate the inclusion of youth representatives in members' state delegations.

This process also meant meeting with UN bodies to discuss the inclusion of youth opinion within their decision-making processes and ways in which projects could be developed to best serve the needs of young people (eg UNDP discussed the possibility of focusing a human development report on youth). Other agencies included UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, the Under Secretary General and the Youth Unit.

This year, the youth representatives also coordinated a Youth Symposium. Opened by the Under-Secretary General Olara Otunnu, the symposium offered a variety of perspectives on youth participation including youth representatives. They apparently received a fantastic response from member states, the symposium turning out to be an invaluable tool for the promotion of the inclusion youth representative positions.

Carrie also pursued funding in order to facilitate the participation of developing countries in the Group of 77 at the next World Youth Forum in Dakar and had talks with the New Zealand Delegation on implementing a youth representative.

So Australia arguably has one of the most effective, and professional representatives that is more involved in the day to day working of the mission and its third committee responsibilities than most of the other representatives. The two Australian youth representatives, due to their background in international affairs and the UN and the fact that they are the only native English speaking youth representatives, has meant that they have already taken a lead role in many instances in the formulation of amendments, speeches and documents and in negotiations. This being said, youth representatives were generally supportive and functioned as a cohesive team to make a real impact in the 55th session of the UNGA.

Clearly Australia is already making its mark as a leader in international youth participation and youth affairs at the United Nations. However, the position is by no means secure. Australia has the only youth representative that is not fully funded by the Government. Nevertheless, some progress has been made with DFAT agreeing to fund accommodation for the youth representative while in New York. While UNYA has been able to gain some external sponsorship, the last youth representative still required about \$5000 US or \$10,000 Australian for general living costs and travel expenses. While the youth representative is an accredited part of the Australian delegation and DFAT, the administration, promotion

and selection of the position is the responsibility of UNYA. Having opened the position up to the broader youth community this year for the first time, it is evident that further support must be given to the promotion of the position by DETYA, DFAT and the Australian community.

We ultimately hope continued professionalism, a sustained and evident impact on the proceedings of the 3rd Committee, a clear mandate and further funding will ensure the maintenance of this position. We also hope that encouraging strategic partners Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom will also work to further increase the effectiveness of the Australian youth representative and act as an incentive for the maintenance of the Australian position.

We (the United Nations Youth Association of Australia) believe in a strong and vital domestic and international youth community and in the ability of young people, through their direct participation, to be instrumental in effecting change within the international community as full and equal actors.

While there is a long way to go before we can truly say that youth are taking on their rightful role in the international community, we can be confident that this issue is now a prominent part of the international agenda as we work towards ensuring that youth are participants today, not just the leaders of tomorrow.

UNYA Australia

It is important to realise that participation is dependent upon an awareness of issues through high quality education, and the provision of opportunities and practical assistance. This is what the United Nations Youth Association of Australia offers Australian youth.

The United Nations Youth Association of Australia or UNYA, is a non-profit organisation dedicated to raising awareness about the United Nations and other international issues amongst school students. UNYA also acts as an important voice for youth on international issues at state, national and international level. UNYA does not receive any funding from government or other sources and all positions are unpaid and voluntary.

First established in South Australia in 1963, UNYA has grown to have divisions in every state and territory of Australia. UNYA Australia was also a catalyst in the recent establishment of a New Zealand Division of UNYA.

As I've suggested, without knowledge it is difficult for young people to be active participants in deliberative and decision-making processes. A background in international issues allows young people to develop informed opinions and make decision based this understanding.

It is the divisions that take on the primary responsibility of educating on international affairs. This is achieved through a variety of means. State conferences are run annually in every state and territory and are the primary means of selection to our national conference.

Another common element amongst divisions are schools programs or education packages where by UNYA volunteers enter schools to run educational programs that range from workshops and discussion groups to mock sessions. But most importantly, their work generates an enthusiasm within the students to further pursue investigation of international affairs.

In addition to these metropolitan based conferences the Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australian Divisions have committed themselves to accessing regional areas.

State Security Council competitions have, for some years now, been allowing students to experience the intrigue, complexities and ongoing frustrations of the maintenance of international peace and security. So while developing their skills in debating, speaking and negotiating they are also being exposed to the primary issues of concern within the international community related to security in what is an engaging and above all exciting environment.

Our national body is involved in an equally diverse range activities. In the last few years it has been amazing to see UNYA evolve from an organisation whose activities were based largely at the grass root level to an organisation highly involved in the international community, with substantial stakes in key areas of international youth practices and policy.

UNYA has the most impact as a voice for youth on international issues at its national level. The activities of our national body are governed by a National Council comprised of the Presidents of each and a national executive which is responsible for the execution of the organisation's national objectives.

At a national level UNYA authors a policy platform on a range of domestic and international issues, lobbies the government regarding their policies and has made submissions to a number of federal inquiries including the recent Defence Review, DFAT's inquiry into Australia's relations with the UN, the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties' inquiry into Australia's relationship with the WTO, and Australia's review of its relationship with UN Human Rights bodies.

UNYA Australia also takes part in the annual human rights consultations with the Attorney General's Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. UNYA also maintains strong communication with the International Organisations section of DFAT and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

UNYA stages an annual United Nations Youth Conference which draws more than 150 students from across Australian and New Zealand to one of Australia's capital cities each year for a week long program, of discussion, debate, speakers and workshop with the conference culminating in a mock general assembly. Again UNYA is not funded for this activity and therefore is reliant on the Australian community to provide delegates with the necessary funds to attend the conference.

This conference plays an important role in both high level education and as a prominent voice for youth on international issues. The youth motions produced at this conference are recirculated to state and Federal Parliament as well as the broader Australian community.

Our international presence is represented by our Patron, Penny Wensley, the Permanent Australian Ambassador to the United Nations.

In 1998 UNYA acted as the Australian youth representatives to the World Youth Forum in Braga contributing to the development of the Braga Youth Action Plan, while in 1999, UNYA sent representatives to the Millennium Young Peoples Conference in Hawaii.

UNYA has also sent representatives to the International Youth Parliament in 2000, and was able have a representative included in the inaugural session of the UNESCO. We additionally send an annual delegation to the Hague International Model United Nations Conference.

One of the major focuses for the organisation in the last two years has been the reform of the UN Youth Unit, with efforts culminating in 2000 when UNYA representatives met with and presented the organisation's reform paper to the Secretary General during his visit to Australia.

Of course the shining star in the crown of the UNYA Australia has been the development and implementation the Australia Youth Representative position in the Australian delegation to the UNGA, which I have already substantially covered.