

Youth Participation in Hong Kong: Ensuring Sustainability

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1985 was designated by the United Nations General Assembly as International Youth Year, with a special focus on Participation, Development and Peace. Ten years later, the General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond as a framework for nations to increase their capacities to address youth needs and issues. These are extremely laudable initiatives, which show that for nearly 20 years, there has been a great cognizance of the importance of encouraging young people to participate and become involved in societal affairs. In reality however, how are these initiatives given a practical voice? Until we are clear by exactly what we mean by “youth participation”, we cannot discuss how to make this type of participation sustainable.

Definitions of Youth Participation

The literature on youth participation is vast, yet the definitions on the subject maintain a common ground. In a 1999 document, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) defined youth participation as "a process through which youth influence and share control over initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them." That in effect, youth should be considered "as full and equal citizens, as serious and reliable partners in the conception, planning and implementation of policies and programmes in their community and society."¹

¹ UNESCAP, Health and Development in Asia and the Pacific, Youth Participation at <http://www.unescap.org/hds/youth/part.htm>

The McCreary Centre Society, a small non-profit organization concerned with the health of young people in British Columbia, Canada, states, "meaningful youth participation involves recognizing and nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels."²

The International Youth Foundation believes that only "through opportunities to become engaged, youth come to think of themselves as partners and stakeholders in society, acquiring a sense of responsibility for the common good and positive attitude toward active citizenship."³

And as the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services argues, youth participation "refers specially to the involvement in the process of identifying needs, exploring solutions, making decisions and planning action within communities and organizations that seek to support civil society."⁴

Where all these explanations coalesce is on the fundamental understanding that youth participation functions on the underlying premises a) that youth must be given opportunities to participate; b) that for society to progress, the contribution of youth must be included; c) that youth need to be aware of their own rights and responsibilities as citizens.

² The McCreary Centre Society, Youth Action, The Basics of Youth Participation at http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_base.htm

³ International Youth Foundation, Youth Participation at <http://www.iyfnet.org/section.cfm/5/26>

⁴ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Youth Participation, "What is Youth Participation" at <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/docs/youth/whatisyouthparticipation.html>

The reality of the matter is that, while there is a broad consensus in defining youth participation and acknowledging its importance and necessity, the measures taken to ensure its full implementation is very often haphazard at best, peripheral at worst. What remains unresolved is how seriously we the community, whether in Hong Kong or elsewhere, are willing to take this issue of youth participation, seriously and sincerely.

The Challenges of Youth Participation

According to the United Nations definition, youth fall into the age group between 15 and 24. According to the International Labour Organisation, more than 1 billion people today fall in this age range and nearly 40 per cent of the world's population is below the age of 20.⁵ Within the Asia-Pacific region, youth make up nearly one fifth of the total population.⁶ These figures add urgency to the issue of youth participation, particularly if, as policy analysts, government bureaucrats or social activists, we constantly and consistently argue, that youth are our future.

What then are the challenges of youth participation? This paper identifies six that have particular resonance in Hong Kong. These challenges are not exclusive, nor exhaustive. They acknowledge that at some level there is participation of young people, but that this is not sufficient. This paper argues for the constraints that hinder full, active and equitable participation at decision making levels, be removed.

⁵ International Labour Organization, Youth Employment Network, The Global Challenge at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/yen/challeng/index.htm>

⁶ UNESCAP, Health and Development in Asia and the Pacific, Youth Participation Manual at <http://www.unescap.org/esid/hds/youth/part-manual.htm>

The first identifiable challenge, it can be argued, is on the concept of time. Are youth the ‘future’? Or, given their numbers, are they actually part of the ‘present’? If answered in the affirmative, it becomes imperative that youth are involved today in their own development, over such issues as education, employment, recreation, health care or even personal safety.⁷ If answered in the negative, it remains equally important for young people to get involved today, because the problems that they will face in the future, have already planted their seeds: limited resources, inequities in social, economic and political conditions, gender discrimination, youth unemployment, armed conflict, environmental degradation, increasing incidence of disease or hunger, changing roles of the family and reduced opportunities for education and training.⁸ The challenge, therefore, is making place now for young people to participate fully, with real opportunities for them to become involved in decisions that affect both their immediate individual needs, as well as their long-term systemic development.

The second challenge is how youth participation is conceptualised. What is required is more than superficial ‘tokenism’, that is the ensuring that one young person sits on a particular committee, without any real capacity to influence decisions.⁹

The third challenge completely ignores tokenism and sees a young person as a problem in need of solutions, rather than a demographic that has anything to contribute. This is a challenge based on attitude, where whether as a result of our Confucian ethic of hierarchy and filial duty and responsibility, young people are not seriously considered able to make a valid contribution. Youth

⁷ The McCreary Centre Society, Youth Action at http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_base.htm

⁸ Youth Unit, Division of Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, quoted in <http://www.unescap.org/hds/youth/part-manual.htm>

⁹ The McCreary Centre Society, Youth Participation – What is it about? t http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_base.htm

continue to be stereotyped as alienated adolescents who prefer to indulge in risk taking or maladaptive social behaviour.¹⁰

Another challenge is that of the attitude of young people themselves. Hong Kong youth, it has been argued, believe that they should be the recipients of public largesse. This is not quite a 'nanny state' mentality, but an understanding that the development of society is less the responsibility of their own participation, and more a consequence of collaborative adults from the government, business and social welfare sectors providing for their needs.

The fifth challenge is one of results. Very often, when young people are provided the space and opportunity for participation, whether in decision making at the highest level as partners, or at a lower level of passive involvement, there is pressure to show results. Somehow we are asked to 'prove' that youth participation has made a tangible difference in the way that solutions are arrived at, or that young people have proved their leadership skills in a quantifiable manner. This challenge has very little room for 'learning through mistakes' as it were. It does not have the flexibility or broad mindedness to see that participation is not one of wrong or right, but rather that it is a gradual process of empowerment, education and training.

In Hong Kong we also face the challenge of limited representation. Unpalatable as it may sound, very often youth participation focuses on elite young people, those who are seen as being the leaders of tomorrow, those who have already demonstrated outstanding abilities and talents. If this position is adopted, it negates the potential contribution that can be made by the larger youth population. Youth participation should only be based on the perceived abilities of those who attend

¹⁰ *ibid.*

the best schools, but rather on recognizing and creating opportunities for all young people to participate, particularly the more marginalised.

Ensuring Sustainability

Given these challenges, how do we envisage the sustainability of social participation among young people in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong is rich in its human resources across the age and affluence spectrum. This is a fact that has not really been fully acknowledged, and therefore not acted upon to its fullest possibility. According to the Human Development Indicators of 2003, Hong Kong has a literacy rate, among young people between the ages of 15 and 24, of 99.4 per cent.¹¹ This very high statistic is something that we should take advantage of, for it suggests that youth have the capabilities to be analytical and make a meaningful contribution. They do need, however, certain openings to assist them in this endeavour.

These spaces can be listed as follows:

First, disputing the notion that youth are the future and not the present, young people must be given the respect and recognition that they have both a right and a duty to participate in the development of Hong Kong today. This, it can be argued, is the first step to ensure the sustainability of youth participation. Only then can the opportunities provided for decision making – at whatever level – have any value.

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Reports 2003, Human Development Indicators 2003, Literacy and Enrolment at http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic_92_1_1.html

Second, we must avoid token representation simply for appearance sake. Tokenism and quotas are negative and do not in the long term have any sustainable benefit. Simply by having one youth on a committee, be it a government, business or third sector initiative, affects our understanding of young people. We see them as not having anything to offer and not having anything to learn. Tokenism breeds a certain arrogance in ‘adults’ who then feel that they are best placed to make decisions, especially decisions that affect the lives of young people.

Third, to ensure sustainability in youth participation, we as adults need to change our attitude towards young people. This can only be achieved – honestly and emphatically – if we believe that the participation of young people has merit. We need to see that projects that include youth participation “not only empower young people, but also enable them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.”¹²

Fourth, it has been demonstrated in numerous studies that when young people are given the opportunity to participate fully, their mental health improves, their self-esteem is bolstered, and that they have a greater commitment to the community. Therefore, to make youth participation sustainable, while tackling the attitude of young people themselves, it is important to take the time to illustrate the vast potential that lies before them. To this must be added the genuine offering of opportunities, mechanisms and structures that provide them training in the skills of communication, negotiation and decision making.

¹² The McCreary Centre Society, Youth Participation, Degrees of Involvement, The Ladder of Participation at http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_ladd.htm

Another way to ensure that participation can be sustainable requires us to move away from results based qualifications of success and failure. Hong Kong is an economically driven society, where the bottom line very often takes precedence over indicators of progress. This is fine if limited to an economic context, but socially, this method of analysis is inadequate. Participation, particularly for youth, is a learning experience. There will be occasions when the results of full participation may not be fully apparent. There will be other occasions when there is a dramatic shift in the attitude and behaviour of young people. According to one ground-breaking study, for example, carried out at the University of Minnesota Division of General Paediatrics and Adolescent Health, it was shown that “involvement with a social environment of family, parents, school and community ... [had]... an influence on promoting health and protecting youth from risky behaviour... [including] drinking and driving, violence, early and unprotected sex and drug use.”¹³ Youth are a human resource, not always a mathematical statistic with quantifiable values.

Finally, in facing the challenge of representation to ensure the sustainability of youth participation, spaces must be provided for those youth not often acknowledged as potential contributors to the development of society. Yet we know that everyone, including the marginalised, can benefit from social participation. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, in its more than four decades of service provision for young people, has seen this phenomena first hand. Take, for example, a programme for youth-at-risk. Uninterested, uninvolved and self-centred, when provided with opportunities to volunteer, the marked turn around is nothing short of marvellous. To ensure sustainability, therefore, all doors must be open, to all sections of the youth population.

¹³ *ibid.* Why is Youth Participation Important? at http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_why.htm

Conclusion

At the start of the 21st century, it is almost blasphemous to assume that young people have nothing to contribute to the development of society, and this includes Hong Kong. Youth participation is a legitimate form of duty, responsibility and citizenship and those in power or in leadership positions must appreciate and admit this fact. We may not have all the answers on how to ensure sustainability of youth participation, but we should never give up trying. We need to learn from the experiences of others, both here in Hong Kong, as well as from in-depth analyses and action plans formulated by International Non Government Organisations, such as the United Nations.

In 1998, 400 young people representing youth organisations from 150 countries came together in Braga, Portugal, for the World Youth Forum. They put forth the Braga Youth Action Plan¹⁴ as part of their advocacy for Youth Participation for Human Development. The document is comprehensive and specific, setting out goals and actions to be taken on youth policies and participation. This document is well worth considering a guide to implementing sustainable participation among young people.

In Hong Kong too we have had a proactive approach by young people to how they can best be involved in partnership. Called the Youth Development Goals¹⁵, and addressed to the community at large, these ten goals included, narrowing the gap between rich and poor; providing opportunities for productive employment, the promotion of equal opportunities and instilling in young people a respect and consciousness to the Rule of Law. Also included, were a commitment to life long learning and the promotion of healthy living. They indicated their desire to be included in defining

¹⁴ World Youth Forum, Braga Youth Action Plan at <http://www.un.org/events/youth98/yforum98/bragayap.htm>

¹⁵ See The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, Leadership 21 at <http://www.leadership21.org>

issues on sustainable development. They also wanted to strengthen their national identity, while enhancing their talents and skills to be global citizens. Finally, and most fittingly, young people saw the need to increase their own participation in public affairs and community actions.

We need to ensure that this very positive initiative is taken seriously, for it very clearly challenges adults that youth participation is vital for our process as a society. Sustainability is not an abstract conception. With specific proposals and measures, it can be implemented, not only for the benefit of young people, but also for society at large.