

## CHAPTER 36. ARE YOU LISTENING? YOUTH VOICES IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Young people constitute an important and significant part of the global population – over half are under the age of 25 – yet this is not reflected in their level of involvement and inclusion in decision-making processes and public debates. Many governments are focusing their efforts on addressing the special needs and opportunities of youth, all the while tackling global issues such as climate change that young people view as pressing and urgent. In a time with ever-increasing technological process and greater access to information, the traditional impression of apathetic youth is being shattered. The question that needs to be asked is: how can we ensure that young people are engaged in public policy and addressing global issues?

### **E-Consultations with young people**

Between May and June 2008, TakingITGlobal conducted two separate e-consultations on behalf of the OECD.<sup>1</sup> Each e-consultation ran for three weeks and presented a number of thematic questions for young people to consider. Are youth able to participate in shaping public policies and services? What do they think of their governments' response to climate change? Over 350 participants from over 75 countries participated in the e-consultations and their voices and opinions were enlightening, eye-opening and honest.

#### ***1. Building citizen centred policies and services***

“[Politicians] need to listen to the views of the people who elect them - not only when they protest or complain but overall.”

#### *Voices and choices: designing public policy with youth*

Most participants strongly agreed that young people are not sufficiently included in designing public policy, and many felt that policies are created for them without consulting them. Young people expressed that barriers to participation exist within cultures, within governments, and within young people themselves. Young people feel that governments and the rest of society do not consider them ready to contribute constructively to the design of policies. The stereotype of youth as apathetic and lazy still prevails among many adults, and there are few genuine opportunities for participation. Relevant information about designing public policies seldom reaches young people. Governments do not use the appropriate channels where young people can be reached, and the language and content of the communication is often in a form that young people do not respond to.

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<sup>1</sup> The full report was presented at the OECD's International Workshop on Building Citizen Centred Policies and Services in Ljubljana, Slovenia (26 and 27 June 2008) and can be downloaded from: [www.takingitglobal.org/resources/toolkits/view.html?ToolkitID=1633](http://www.takingitglobal.org/resources/toolkits/view.html?ToolkitID=1633)

Still, by supporting the creation of institutionalised national youth platforms and encouraging leadership development, governments can take a proactive step towards involving young people. They want a common platform where they can meet, discuss and advocate their views, making it easier for governments to consult with a large and representative number of young people. Training and skill-building opportunities ensure that youth are aware and able to participate in shaping policy. Governments can also hire more young people as civil servants as a way to increase their understanding and input into policy-making.

### *Creating and using public services: experience and role of young people*

Most participants agreed that public services do not reflect the needs and wishes of young citizens, although some also acknowledged that governments are trying, to the best of their ability, to respond to young people. Almost all participants agreed that governments need to simply listen to their citizens and put people in the centre of policies and services. Furthermore, some also noted that the quality and accountability of civil servants need to improve.

Lack of resources, priorities and youth friendly access to public services were raised by participants. For instance, there are difficulties for youth organisations to access public funds, due to bureaucratic requirements and the need to demonstrate a track record, which many may not have. At a very basic level, there is a need for more information and instructions in how to access and utilize public services.

If governments set more realistic policies and targets for public services, participants believed that this could lead to more citizen action and civic engagement in the political process. Many participants expressed frustration with the gap between official policies and the services that are actually offered. Realistic policies based on available resources means avoiding unrealistic and unmet expectations from citizens.

### *YouGov: how do youth want to use technology to interact with government?*

New technologies give governments an unprecedented opportunity to make information about public policies and services available for their citizens. One-stop websites of available benefits and services are simple and cost-effective ways for citizens to access information. Participants were mostly optimistic about having a closer dialogue with governments, and expressed that as a very first step governments should facilitate young people's access to Internet and other communication technologies.

Many participants observed that governments tend to view technology as a one-way channel to reach out to new voters and to campaign for elections, rather than having a dialogue with young people about policies and services. Where governments have started to open up new communication channels with young people, more accountability and transparency is needed in how their suggestions and opinions are acted upon.

Young people understand and communicate with other young people, and should be involved in the planning and implementation of new technologies, particularly with the use of relevant media and channels. Websites like YouTube and Facebook create spaces that allow for free and safe expression of opinions and ideas. Governments cannot just ask for young people's opinions and then leave the dialogue. Active dialogue between governments and youth will result in serious engagement with youth.

## Key recommendations

- Build the capacity of young people

Young people call for training and skill-building opportunities that prepare them for active participation in decision-making processes. Governments should support and facilitate a discussion with youth-led national youth platforms, and hire more young people as civil servants. Training and exposure to the work of the government will increase young people's knowledge and capacity, and therefore their ability and interest in engage themselves and their peers in the political process.

- Involve young people in planning and implementation

When governments try to reach out to young people with information and opportunities, it is imperative that young people themselves are included from the initial brain-storming sessions until the delivery of messages. Young people know which communication channels should be used and how to phrase the communication and information in a way that young people can relate and respond to. Young people should also be consulted on how public services are made available – as they often have unique needs and challenges in accessing them.

- Demonstrate that young voices matter

It is very important for governments to go beyond tokenism and show that that youth opinions are taken into account; failure to do so can further disengage young people from the political process. Social networking websites give elected officials and civil servants an unprecedented opportunity to communicate with young people, and this can be used to have a fruitful, constructive two-way dialogue where both parties benefit. Finally, there needs to be transparency and accountability in how suggestions from young people are implemented, allowing young people to monitor and evaluate the process.

## 2. Climate change

“What can we do? If this continues for the next ten years, what do you think will happen?”

*Adaptation: how have young people and governments responded?*

All respondents observed that climate change is already impacting their communities in negative ways. Participants shared examples of how communities on every continent are already feeling tangible impacts from climate change. Whether slow and steady (desertification), or sudden and violent (extreme weather), these current consequences of climate change are being felt in very different ways. A connection was made between the urgent need to tackle climate change and poverty in a comprehensive manner. Though the impacts reported often differed in each region, the common need for adaptation to minimise negative effects on societies and economies was well understood by all participants.

When it came to policies around climate change adaptation, a large majority of respondents indicated that actions taken to date have been very reactive in nature. In other words, policies have been crafted after the fact in order to *react* to impacts already being felt. Given the current focus on ad hoc reactive approaches, it is not surprising the majority of respondents did not believe their governments had sufficient plans in place to adapt to climate change. Several countries have undertaken public education campaigns, but respondents also noted their impact has mostly been in urban centres and more efforts need to be made to spread their message to the provinces. Comprehensive, forward-looking plans for all effected sectors of the economy will help everyone cope better. The importance of ensuring these plans are implemented and enforced was also stressed.

### *Mitigation: the role youth can play*

All participants agreed that mitigation *should be* a priority of all governments, but many observed that industrialised countries bear a greater responsibility and ability to reduce emissions than do developing countries. Responses on whether or not participants' governments *did* take mitigation as a priority were more mixed and ranged the spectrum of addressing climate change seriously to more hands-off approaches. One issue that arose during the consultation centered on the difference between *talking* and *acting*. Many mitigation initiatives have not been well followed up, and in some countries policies to slow emissions have given major polluting industries a free pass. This illustrated the challenges that governments can have in dealing with emissions from important sectors of the national economy, such as forestry or agriculture.

Another important point raised was that there is often a difference in action between the different levels of government *within* a country. In other words, there could be a lot of action from a municipal or state/provincial government but low interest at the national level or vice versa. This is certainly the case in North America, where a lack of action from federal governments in Canada and the US has led to many cities, states and provinces moving forward on their own.

### *International co-operation: youth perspectives on the global effort*

Climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution, and international co-operation is vital if we are to overcome this challenge. Co-operation leads to the sharing of best practices and the transferring of technology and resources. Not only will governments benefit, but individuals and civil society will share experiences and approaches on advocacy, community organising and positive action. It also allows for the gradual emergence of a global consciousness on this issue.

It was clear that respondents, no matter where they are from, expect their country to play an important part in forging a new global agreement post-Kyoto. Industrialised countries should pursue aggressive and binding emissions reduction targets for themselves. Rapidly industrialising countries could choose to adopt voluntary national targets or firmer commitments on a sectoral basis.

Respondents also made clear that youth can play the role of international leaders and network-builders themselves. Countless examples (regional youth networks, youth-led conferences, engaging workshops) that have been built by the initiative of young people demonstrate the potential of reaching across borders, motivating other young people to take action. Whether through technology like the Internet, the creation of safe discussion spaces, or the use of art, music and public demonstration, young people have the drive and creativity to reach a broader audience.

### *The role of youth in climate action*

It was abundantly clear that young people around the world are ready to claim their voice as key stakeholders in the fight against climate change and are ready to work hard for positive change.

As ***messengers and catalysts for community action***, youth can raise awareness, educate and promote positive change amongst peers, communities, and society as a whole. The call for environmental education and young "eco-citizenship" was overwhelming. Greater integration of environmental issues into education systems will lay the foundation empowered youth to reach out and educate the public, especially their peers.

As ***engaged advocates for policy change***, youth must both engage with policy processes to create change from within and drive them from the outside by building public support bold for policy visions. In cases where opportunities for discourse do not yet exist, stronger youth organisations linked together through international networks were seen as a key way to facilitate this.

As *enablers of practical project-level action*, youth could play a very important role in suggesting, planning and implementing community-based adaptation projects and long-term adaptation plans. The same was equally true for mitigation projects and longer term community planning. In both cases, the need for greater training and capacity-building was identified, along with the need to create more space and support for youth involvement.

### **Key recommendations**

- Increase resources for education and outreach

Inadequate resources for young people on climate change issues prevent their ability to share knowledge and solutions with their peers and communities. The creation and dissemination of widely-accessible, compelling and understandable resources for youth, as well as the integration of environmental issues and sustainability into both urban and rural school programs were just a couple of suggestions offered by respondents.

- Provide training, capacity-building and financial support

Government programmes provide youth with opportunities to gain experience and contribute their creativity, knowledge and passion. Training programmes empower youth to be involved in community adaptation planning, disaster response or mitigation projects and policies – particularly those directed towards public education. Financial support in the form of small grants is also needed for youth projects and new youth organizations, as is *recognition* for the importance and successes of youth-led initiatives.

- Engage youth in the policy process

Youth must be recognised as major stakeholders and need a platform where their voices can be heard within government on issues that directly concern them. Token gestures from politicians are not enough and do not support the high potential of youth to contribute. Young people need to be engaged with climate policy at all levels – from its development and delivery – in a genuine way. Inclusion in policy making creates ownership and in few policy fields this ownership will be as vital as it is with climate change for successful policy delivery.

Globally, youth hold a tremendous amount of energy, passion and creativity, all of which are needed to envision and implement positive solutions to large issues like climate change, or national public policies. Participants in both e-consultations demonstrated a strong and genuine interest in being able to influence the shaping of public policies and services.

Governments must realise that young people are equal citizens, and it is imperative that they are involved at all steps of the public policy process. When it comes to the larger international challenge of climate change, their collective voice is a powerful catalyst. Successful governments will be the ones that embrace the means and channels for communication and dialogue, include youth in the development of policies, and actively implement solutions that benefit all their citizens.

When it comes to using technology, governments need to understand the tools for engaging young people already exist. Innovative governments will be the ones that use Web 2.0 tools and social networks while embodying the spirit of transparency and accountability.

Young people around the world are making a difference already, but their potential to make a larger impact can be activated with support from the government. This e-consultation demonstrates that youth have vibrant ideas and innovative suggestions that need to be seriously examined and implemented into the public policy process.