



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION  
122<sup>nd</sup> Assembly and related meetings  
Bangkok (Thailand), 27<sup>th</sup> March - 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010



Third Standing Committee  
Democracy and Human Rights

C-III/122/R-rev  
18 December 2009

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

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*"No-one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy.  
Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime.  
Young people must be included from birth.  
A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline;  
it is condemned to bleed to death."  
Kofi Annan*

### DEFINING YOUTH

1. We are living in a youthful world with almost half of the current global population under the age of 25 according to the UN World Youth Report 2007. Eighty-five per cent of these young people live in developing countries.
2. Youth, as a concept, varies from culture to culture and from one society to another. The theory of lifetime transitions is a viable mechanism through which the nature of contemporary youth and the process of becoming an adult can be understood and described. Even though some people argue that youth is a state of mind, from an economic and social perspective, youth is a special period of life between childhood and adulthood.
3. According to the United Nations, young people fall into the age-group of between 15 and 24 years. These boundaries are not static and in many cases this distinction is too narrow. In some countries, for example, the male transition to adulthood, in terms of achieving economic and social stability with steady employment, may extend into the late twenties. For some men in developed countries who have not completed secondary school, the transition to stable work can take up to roughly the age of 35. The category of youth is heterogeneous. Generalizations about young people should be avoided, given the diversity of their ideas and experiences across different geographical regions and within societies across the lines of class, education, gender, race and ethnicity. Sociologists have long argued that "youth" is a social construct rather than a biologically determined period.

4. For these reasons, the definition of youth as the period of transition from dependence to independence is relevant to all societies and can serve as one of the fundamental principles of the global agenda concerning youth. The second fundamental principle is a young person's self-confidence and trust in society. Young people need solid structures – a societal skeleton – to cling on to and build upon for their growth and stability.<sup>5</sup> The transitional perspective articulates the issue of when and how young people achieve the status of becoming fully operational members of society – and thereby acquire citizenship in all of its dimensions. The concept of participation then becomes relevant; embedded in the theme of transition is a link between participation and gaining independence.

## **PARTICIPATION**

6. The direct relevance of human rights instruments to global youth policy is noteworthy. The general prohibition of discrimination applies to many issues of concern to young people around the world. The principle of non-discrimination is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

7. Like all other social groups, young people have a legitimate voice and an important role to play in society, but that voice is not heard adequately and their contribution to the society is not always universally recognized.

8. Young people are a group that is traditionally constructed and perceived as being incapable of making decisions on their own. This has led to a situation of underrepresentation of youth in decision-making processes, which today is viewed as a real threat to the future of participatory democracy. Moreover, human rights and political rights are guaranteed to all citizens, not just some. Young people face real obstacles to fully exercising their rights.

9. In comparison to women and ethnic minorities, young people perceive their own generation as the group which is the most politically disadvantaged. In modern society, age-based discrimination or ageism has yet to become a political issue to the extent that gender discrimination has, but it is logical to assume that inequalities based on age will gain more importance following the more frequent articulation of demands for changing the current situation.

10. Regarding the optimal integration of youth in society, which includes a number of aspects of everyday life – from socialization in the family, education and employment to political activity – the political participation of youth seems to be especially problematic.

11. Youth participation means involving youth in responsible, challenging actions that meet genuine needs and giving them the opportunity to participate in planning and/or decision-making. Their participation in decision-making is especially important because it:

- leads to better decisions, actions and outcomes since young people have, as social actors, experiences unique to their situation;
- promotes the well-being of young people and the development of their skills: learning, questioning, expressing views, participating in the implementation of specific projects, etc;
- strengthens the commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy;
- empowers and protects young people; well-informed and knowledgeable youth engaged in peer-to-peer activities are more useful than adult-only activities with youth.

12. The dimension of youth participation in decision-making processes is also recognized by the United Nations. The UN World Programme of Action for Youth, along with the ensuing implementation reports emphasized the importance of ensuring the formal circumstances to enable young people to participate locally, regionally, nationally and internationally in decision-making processes, through their organizations at the highest levels of government. The United Nations also recommends that more governments adopt national politics for youth and allocate funding from national budgets.

13. However, political apathy and a lack of interest in joining traditional organizations seem to characterize the younger generation in many countries. To many young people, the world of politics seems far removed from their daily realities. Low voter turnout and dwindling membership in political parties (especially in the western countries) should not lead to the conclusion that young people are disinterested in the political future of their societies. It should be noted that a substantial number of young people are still involved in traditional politics and political youth organizations. These young people should be recognized for their contribution to democracy.

14. The concept of participation can easily become little more than a rhetorical device based on the "feel good" factor. Indeed, a major criticism by young people is that participatory structures, where they do exist, are tokenistic, a rubber-stamping experience for decisions which have already been made. This may be one of the reasons why they have "tuned out".

15. Youth participation is more than just a political engagement. It includes the empowerment of young people through capacity-building and increased access to human development opportunities. It represents a situation in which young people are no longer seen as passive recipients of resources or as the cause of society's ills, but rather as vital contributors to their national development – contributors whose efforts are acknowledged and whose involvement is encouraged.

#### **EMPOWERMENT AND CAPACITY-BUILDING**

16. An institutional criterion entails, among other things, points of entry into society for youth as equal participants in decision-making and in influencing social development, from participation in various civic activities, programmes and initiatives as individuals and members, to participation in political and party life at all levels in all spheres of society.

17. Development of human potential as the second criterion for full participation implies the availability and accessibility of education and the acquisition of the knowledge and expertise required for the full and active and involvement of young people in society.

18. Gaining of knowledge and expertise required for full and meaningful participation in societal development begins early, already during the phase of formal education. According to numerous studies, as well as examples in many countries, the introduction of "education and training for democracy and active citizenship" as a required course in schools has been validated as the first major step forward in acquiring knowledge and a more solidified picture of the status of each individual in society. In addition to curriculum adjustments over the course of formal education, greater emphasis has been placed on the influence of student councils in schools, and on carrying out various educational projects and programmes through which students acquire valuable first-hand experience in decision-making. Such participation represents a good starting point for youth to become full-fledged members of society in the future.

19. Of equal import is non-formal education which, although entailing no certificates, nonetheless hones abilities and expertise through targeted practice. Depending on the level of development of institutional criteria, non-formal education can be further expanded through various volunteer programmes and internships in government agencies and organizations, non-governmental organizations and other places where young people can become better acquainted with democratic processes and begin to prepare for a more active and equal role in society.

20. For the purpose of enhancing participation and capacity-building, young people need to become much more directly involved in different institutional structures through internships and volunteering in executive bodies, advisory workshops and consultative forums.

21. In all regions of the world, the ever increasing involvement of youth as volunteers in various organizations attests to the desire of young people to become actively involved in social processes. It is incumbent upon States, and indeed it is their responsibility, to marshal this immense potential for societal development by creating the conditions for the full participation of young people.

22. However, it is not sufficient to foster and promote youth issues and rights, in a more or less declaratory fashion, to satisfy the criteria for youth participation in democratic processes. Many organizations and institutions make a similar mistake when they deem the set of youth problems as encompassing a narrow field of themes important to youth, such as drugs, alcohol, violence, teenage pregnancy, and even the age-limit for voting in parliamentary elections. In this manner, young people are relegated and limited to the small democracy playground. By doing so, one neglects the basic tenet of full youth participation in society: where young people are equal partners, and all themes and problems faced by society are their problems as well. Therefore, they must participate in problem-solving.

#### **THE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION - THE DIGITAL GENERATION**

23. Access to information is equally relevant for the best possible involvement of young people in political processes in society and is extremely vital to full youth participation. In order to facilitate the most suitable and comprehensible information, young people should be involved in the creation of this information through practical education and participatory programmes in various institutionalized projects. Without complete access to information on all social problems, policies being formulated and considered, and on the political actors involved in decision-making, young people would not be able to genuinely and substantially participate in any decision-making processes.

24. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are therefore a very significant factor today which influences the political, economic and social spheres. The rapid development of ICTs creates many opportunities such as on-line education, but also poses challenges to the fuller involvement of young people in society. Through the Internet and other technologies, young people today may participate in a multitude of civic activities, using ever more available information and thereby becoming better acquainted with current national, regional and global issues and even the negative impact of globalization. Thus they can enjoy all the positive effects of globalization that are also supported by rapid ICT development.

25. However, there is also the increasing negative effect of globalization reflected in growing unemployment, increased market-only philosophy, irresponsible corporate giants, a weakening public sector and the creation of imbalances between private and public interests. Over

200 million young people earn less than a dollar a day, while 515 million earn two dollars or less per day.

26. For young people the impacts of globalization go even further beyond economic consequences, affecting expressions of their participation in society and civic activism in general. For young people, globalization has fomented the expansion of the arena of activism from the national to international level, thereby creating something of a paradox. In a desire to actively participate in current processes and themes, young people are facing global questions, and using the Internet to join various initiatives and organizations, and they are very active and, in some instances, quite passionate about anti-capitalist protests, environmental protection and animal welfare, etc.

27. In parallel to extensive activity at the global level, young people are exhibiting passivity at the national level, because they have no faith in the effectiveness of national social mechanisms. For many, including youth, the reason lies in the repercussions of global development, which has moved today's initial drivers of political processes from States to global compacts such as international commercial agreements between multinational corporations and the world's most highly developed economies. Even though the aforementioned agreements were concluded beyond the realm of national spheres, their effects on the lives of young people are felt at the level of wages, employment, etc. Although voter apathy in individual countries is not solely the fault of young people, thanks to the accessibility and inescapable use of ICTs, young people focus on matters which, they believe, they can influence only at the global level.

#### **INSTITUTIONALIZING PARTICIPATION - FROM THE DEMOCRATIC PLAYGROUND TO FULL PARTICIPATION**

28. In the creation of institutional frameworks for youth activity, three models of participation can be discerned which are simultaneous models for intergenerational relations.

29. The first model is the participation of youth in adult-led processes. This model does not meet the criteria of full youth participation. In most cases, youth participation under this model is reduced to young people being speakers at various conferences for consultative purposes (event-based participation). The selection of topics and adoption of recommendations or criticism are beyond the influence of young people.

30. Adult-initiated processes constitute a move toward the youth participation approach. These are projects and programmes or organizations initiated by elder authorities, with their development and direction left to youth. Examples of such a process are youth councils or youth parliaments, where young people elect their representatives and determine their priorities. Even so, it should be noted that there are cases in which youth parliaments or councils serve as a guise for meeting formal democratic standards, while not actually representing youth or dealing with their genuine problems. Such traditional forms of association are often reflections of the current political structures of adults, on which they are financially dependent, while young people join them for careerist rather than idealistic motives.

31. This is precisely the source of youth disdain for such associations, as their functioning makes them feel more excluded rather than encouraged to participate, exchange ideas and promote their own reality and everyday needs. Thus, the view that young people are apathetic

toward politics and civic engagement is actually superficial: the interest exists, but for an entirely different form of expression and participation.

32. Genuine empowerment is best manifested in youth-initiated and youth-led processes, such as initiatives, campaigns, strategies and even organizations. Such processes frequently gain the support of governments and non-governmental organizations due to the enthusiasm and potential they engender, although they are often not perceived as very serious.

33. A broader and more comprehensive approach to distributing participation at levels (the so-called "participatory ladder") defines the lowest level of youth participation as an activity without significant participation in programmes and institutions. The second level is consultation of youth on programme implementation, but without participation in decision-making. This is followed by the level at which youth are empowered to influence decision-making in enabling programmes, although not included at the institutional decision-making level, and the level of youth empowerment in enabling programmes and consultation in institutional decision-making. The fifth level foresees management and decision-making by young people at the institutional level, while the last and highest form of participation is management of institutions by young people.

34. A paradox is frequently encountered when analysing international and national reports and documents pertaining to youth. Namely, youth participation is presented as a virtually fashionable element on the political scene, and many countries have an established legal framework for participation in the form of strategies, plans, policies, etc. However, research over a longer period has shown a dramatic decline of youth interest in participating in any form of political and social activity. This, however, has been shown as only partially accurate: the lack of interest by young people pertains primarily to traditional forms of social organization.

35. Today's experiences show that the young population is ready to engage in very specific community and youth issues through public debate, signing of petitions, membership in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and participation in demonstrations, provided that there is no pre-determined rigid, formal organization, structure and hierarchy. This form of youth participation relies on the use of ICTs, thus enhancing the opportunities for participation by the widest possible circle of participants and the most equal possible relationship between them.

36. The problem remains, however, that although this dimension of participation satisfies, empowers and inspires young people, it does not increase their competence and leaves no room for concrete and relevant decision-making. Therefore, until youth ideas and needs are channelled into targeted and feasible activities, with measurable outcomes, all of the aforementioned types of youth engagement will remain a "playground" or "valve" for releasing social tensions, potential dissatisfaction with current affairs or demands for social change. It would therefore appear that a lesser challenge would be to encourage young people to engage in social activity, rather than attempting to establish channels for direct involvement in decision-making based on the "here and now" principle.

37. While involving young people in the decisions that affect society is beneficial from both the policy-making and youth development perspectives, it is not always effectively practised. The nature of youth engagement ranges from manipulation and tokenism to the assumption of full responsibility for the design and implementation of programmatic responses.

38. One should be aware that the decision-making system is largely in the hands of the "older, mature generation". This is why the support of adults is necessary. This means authentic intergenerational cooperation in the establishment of a cooperative relationship with young people/youth associations. Such a relationship would generate mutual benefits and satisfaction, not only in the social context, but also at the personal level.

39. One-off interventions or isolated structures that support youth participation are not sustainable; there must be broader, synergistic feedback mechanisms that include input from and dialogue between young people, their families, local councils and other community institutions, national governments, and the international community.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE IN PARLIAMENTS**

40. Parliaments can play a decisive role in facilitating and advancing youth participation. This role of the parliament, although not always recognized, is nevertheless important for a well-functioning democracy. Being the most visible actors in democratic societies, parliaments must ensure that within their different structures and procedures all parts of society are represented and all voices are heard.

41. Although there is no official systematic data on young parliamentarians in national parliaments, numerous estimates indicate that only between 0 and 2 per cent of parliamentarians are below the age of 30. Many parliament study-cases on this issue lead to same conclusion of very significant under-representation of young people in parliaments.

42. There are two main reasons for this under-representation of youth. The first one is widespread opinion that young people are not capable of making decisions and are not mature enough for such an "important job". That is why, in many countries, minimum voting age is not the same as minimum age of eligibility to run for office. As a result, even if young people wanted to run for elections, by law they are not allowed to.

43. The second reason lies in the lack of will of political parties. Regarding the political participation of youth, political parties are the main recruiters of the political elite. Although political parties within their structures have some form of youth organization or wings and nominally support their younger members, senior members of political parties very rarely choose to hand over power to new and young people.

44. Many parliaments around the world organize different forms of participation of young people. By so doing, parliaments are overstating the fact that the voices of young people are not heard enough in parliament and its deliberations.

45. Although they can be seen merely as "democracy playgrounds", youth parliaments provide valuable opportunities for young people to develop their political literacy, demonstrate their knowledge and understanding about social and political issues, practise their discussion/debating skills and represent a point of view on behalf of others. Youth parliaments can provide a space where young people, in some cases elected by their peers, can represent the views of others and see those views acted upon.

46. In addition, parliamentarians also can promote youth participation by helping to create a safe, protective and non-manipulative environment. In some parliaments youth voices are part of the legislative and parliamentary process by means of young people's participation in

committee work or parliamentary hearings. Many parliamentarians meet on regular basis with young people and others should be encouraged to do so.

47. Youth participation (as elected MPs or through consultative processes) within parliamentary processes can lead to better outcomes, i.e. better laws and policies from a youth perspective, more effective oversight of government and budgets that have more robust allocations to areas of concern to youth.

#### **GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**

48. The universally accepted principles of human rights have set the standard for equality between women and men. This concept extends to the recognition that girls and young women are unique individuals with rights and responsibilities similar to those of boys and young men.

49. There are some specific circumstances that distinguish the lives of young women from those of young men: many young women are relegated to the home and unpaid labour, in some societies young women are viewed mainly as "reproductive labourers", they have fewer rights to political and economic participation than boys and young men, and they still live mostly in the private sphere, as the public sphere remains largely a male domain. In each of these spheres, some girls and young woman are far more vulnerable than others due to the structural lack of resources, primarily in terms of education, vocational training, health care and housing.

50. Stereotyping and discrimination prevent girls and young women from participating fully in society. In order to practise equality, young people should be aware of the harmful impact of gender barriers imposed by cultural beliefs, role perceptions and traditional practices in different cultures and societies.

51. Efforts should be undertaken to build the capacity of young women so that they can overcome the social, cultural and economic barriers to full participation in society. Young men need gender-sensitive orientation to nurture their gender-consciousness.

52. In spite of this, however, there are new levels of individualization requiring young women to resolve the conflict between the often irreconcilable goals of occupational competitiveness and motherhood; however, they are well aware that they have more options and opportunities than their mothers did and do not wish to turn back the clock.

#### **CITIZENS OF TODAY - LEADERS OF TOMORROW**

53. The effective engagement of youth as equal partners requires recognition of the rights of all young people to participate at all levels of decision-making and to make productive use of their knowledge, perspectives and experience.

54. Youth are not a passive group waiting for resources and opportunities to be handed to them. In all regions, they want to make a better life for themselves. However, lack of adequate investment in youth, challenges related to globalization and other changes in the world economy, as well as social and cultural constraints, are contributing to the currently unfavourable context for youth development and participation. An enabling environment for youth development and participation is urgently needed if youth are to attain their full potential and contribute to national development.

55. Effective youth participation requires fundamental changes in the way society perceives young people. In order to introduce such changes, it is necessary to provide adequate funding, introduce innovative ways of spreading information, provide training to facilitate intergenerational collaboration and create organizational structures that welcome new voices. Strategies for youth participation must move away from ad hoc, activity-based approaches and focus instead on making youth input a central component of social structures, institutions and processes.

56. While the importance of participation and its role in a young person's life has not diminished, its nature has changed. Youth participation today tends to be issue-specific and service-oriented. Increasingly reluctant to join formal organizations or councils, many young people prefer to take advantage of open opportunities created by communities and institutions to become involved in addressing the issues that concern them. In line with this trend, new participatory structures have evolved and they tend to be based on collaborative networks and common interests. To ensure that effective participation is an option for all young people, concrete efforts must be made to address obstacles such as cultural norms that favour hierarchical relationships, economic circumstances that preclude participation in anything other than income-generating activities, and the lack of access to the information and skills necessary for active political involvement.

57. What young people need is an enabling environment that provides opportunities for them to be seen and heard. Giving youth greater visibility and a role in the development process strengthens their resolve to contribute to the advancement of a world in which they are equal stakeholders – a world for which they will be responsible for many decades to come.

58. Very often, youth are principally regarded as "adults in the making"; the emphasis being on "becoming" rather than "being". But, young men and women are not just our future; they are also our present.