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HOW YOUNG PEOPLE INFLUENCE POLICY:

A Practitioners' Review

EMPOWER
YOUTH
FOR WORK



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OXFAM

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1. Introduction

“Much participation, little transformation” can sum up the state of youth participation around the world right now. While some formal spaces have been carved out for young people, they still experience relatively little decision-making power and influence over national or local priorities. Some young people have even less access to decision-making platforms, thinking about groups such as young women and girls, rural youth, LGTBQ, youth with disabilities, and young refugees.

Yet, concrete efforts are made by development actors and youth to ensure young people can effectively influence public policy. This paper aims to support practitioners and young people alike to understand how, where and why these efforts have effectively supported young people to successfully impact public policy. More and more development actors believe that working with young people as drivers of inclusive, sustainable development, is the key to creating positive, equitable and sustainable change.

The following research questions are answered in this paper:

- What are the latest frameworks and approaches used by the development community to support young people influencing public policy?
- What are the change strategies employed by young people to influence public policy and why have they been adopted?
- What are notable examples of youth initiatives that aim to influence policy, and how have they contributed to change?
- How have the frameworks and approaches used by the development community supported or hampered youth initiatives to influence public policy?

In investigating and answering these questions, we take a practitioners’ focus.¹

We start with some critical reflections on the strategies and frameworks used by key global donors, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations in international development.²

Then, we look at five “notable” youth-led initiatives from the Global South, how they have succeeded in influencing public policy, and what we can learn from them.

We end with an overview of the practical implications for young people and those working with them to influence public policy.

2. A critical reflection on practitioner approaches to youth participation

Reflection 1: Youth as partners and leaders in change and accountability

A key consensus that can be found in the various practitioners’ frameworks is that youth should be *partners and leaders* in development, and not simply beneficiaries. Justifications for youth participation are numerous. Young people in society are marginalised, and participation gives them greater power and autonomy, supporting their equality. Participation helps to improve efficiency in policies and programmes designed for young people, as they are the best experts on their lives. Participation also encourages positive youth development, developing their skills and building their confidence. Young people are full, rights-holding citizens and therefore have the right to participate in the decisions that affect them and to hold duty-bearers to account.³

Accountability is not only about power holders being accountable to young people, but young people being accountable to each other.⁴ Restless Development, for example, works with young people to design their own advocacy strategies to hold governments accountable to their SDG pledges. Vitally, they review, critique and change these strategies over time.

Promoting accountability among young people not only improves the strategies they design, but promotes a culture of accountability among young people themselves.

“Advocacy is like a cycle. [Youth leaders] look at the change that the advocacy has done, they review it, and they think about how to enhance the work that has been done. In this way, the young advocates are reflecting upon their own impact and designing strategies based on their perception of what has worked and what hasn't.”

- Jack McQuibban, Advocacy & Networks Coordinator, Restless Development

Reflection 2: When youth influence organisational policies it can build immediately their skills and experience to influence public policies

Not all practitioners focus directly on young people influencing public policies. Rather, they provide opportunities for participation within the organisation. This can build the foundational skills for young people to seek change outside the organisation in the larger society.

The most common way organisations do this is through youth advisory councils or panels. For example, Plan International has Youth Advisory Panels (YAP) in 41 countries to influence strategic decision-

making about organisational policies at the national level. Young people help to decide organisational priorities for Plan, and advise on programme design. In doing so, they become empowered – building skills in advocacy, negotiation, and public speaking, as well as building self-esteem and confidence. Similarly, through their experience on Oxfam’s *My Rights, My Voice* Youth Advisory Board (YAB) in Mali, young members were inspired and eager to continue their work more broadly in the community, and have established an independent youth association with other Malian youth.

“What youth advisory councils aim to do is empower young people to learn about the issues, gain skills in communications, and building networks. In return, young people have those capabilities with them and go on to create change externally.”

- Jo Dempster, Child and Youth Engagement Officer at Plan International

Reflection 3: Ensuring internal empowerment and an enabling environment

Yet, internal empowerment is only one part of the full picture. Oxfam, for example, stresses the importance of not only focusing on the capacities of young people themselves, but also on power holders and other stakeholders that act as the gatekeepers to power. *My Rights, My Voice*, a five-year programme engaging marginalised children and youth in their rights to health and education, has sought to empower young people as rights-holders in combination with more direct engagement with duty-bearers. It is necessary to build sufficient support and openness among allies, stakeholders, and

the wider community at every stage, to ensure that youth mobilisation has an impact.

It is important to create an *enabling environment* to ensure that opportunities for young people to participate or be included in decision-making exist, and that spaces created at a minimum allow, but also encourage, their participation. Laws, regulations and policies, as well as social norms and beliefs on the role of young people in decision-making, shape these spaces.

“We have to involve the whole ecosystem, including the power holders. Young people can have a voice, but that voice needs to be listened to.”

- Olloriak Sawade, Program Lead Youth, Oxfam Novib

Reflection 4: Connecting with each other, exchanging ideas, and working collaboratively in networks allows different stakeholders to find innovative solutions to shared problems

Development actors and human rights organisations can play a key role in building and growing networks of young people influencing public policy, supporting their collective action locally, nationally, or even transnationally.

We can think of Amnesty International, which stresses as human rights organisation its key role in connecting young human rights defenders and groups, and amplifying their influence. Amnesty virtually brings together its activists from all around the world and provides access to their international network. For example, in the campaign against the arrest of student leader Phyo Aung in Myanmar in 2015⁵, Amnesty’s Myanmar partners provided up-to-date research and local

knowledge on the political situation on the ground, which was then used to inform the advocacy messages by activists in different countries. Phyo Aung was successfully released in 2016. Connecting young activists and providing them with access to a global network allows them to amplify their voice, influence, and reach.

Reflection 5: Supporting both individual and collective youth action

Few frameworks and strategies focus on what needs to be done to support the collective action of already organised young people. This means that most strategies approach participation at the level of the individual young person, for example, by focusing on how they can become more active within the channels already provided by the organisation. However, this neglects to recognise that many young people are already empowered and organised in their own youth-led groups.

A twin approach that supports both individuals, non-associated youth, and collective organised youth groups and movements, would best address the various ways in which young people can participate. This approach is particularly important to also reach marginalised and vulnerable youth, who are less likely to be organised and part of existing youth groups. It should be noted however, that individual youth and existing youth groups, will likely have different needs and will need to be supported in ways that address those needs.

Oxfam’s Youth Participation and Leadership Theory of Change, for example, recognises the importance of youth groups, movements and other forms of collective initiatives, alongside individual youth participation in communities and institutions.⁶ To ensure sustainability, youth movements need defined roles and

responsibilities, as well as strategic and operational plans, to sustain their collective action, which are different to what individual youth might need.

“Young people are at the forefront of the movements around the world, but they are not as supported as organisations from previous generations. They are not necessarily recognised for the work that they do. It’s key for INGOs to find spaces to support youth-led organisations, and to really take a role in profiling what is being done by young human rights defenders and young activists.”

– Sara Vida Coumans, International Youth Coordinator, Amnesty International

Reflection 6: The challenge of informality

In a global survey conducted in 2014, child and youth organisations and movements identified resourcing as their biggest challenge.⁷ Yet, few institutions provide direct funding of youth-led groups. For youth, lack of control over funding means lack of control over their decisions and agenda.

Why are there so few organisations that provide direct funding to youth-led groups? One reason is the stringent auditing requirements of donors. As many youth movements are informal, lack structures or established procedures, it often proves difficult to meet official donor requirements. Training for youth groups that focuses specifically on financial management, for example, could go a long way in closing this capacity gap, as well as seeking out more innovative and intrepid donors who may be willing to take more risks in order to support youth mobilisation. However, the push towards formality by donors is not without

its costs. Many youth organisations benefit from the flexibility that informality gives them – something that could be lost when formalising for donor’s sake.

“[Young people] should be the ones telling us where funding, resources and priorities should be. Power has shifted from the global to the local level, and young people are on the ground and in their communities. We need more of these frameworks that allocate real responsibility to the local level.”

- Jack McQuibban, Advocacy and Networks Coordinator, Restless Development

Reflection 7: Ensuring representation of young people in all their heterogeneity

The issue of representation remains a persistent challenge for youth participation within development organisations. Poorer youth may have no time or may prefer to spend time on income-generating activities. Other marginalised groups include young women and girls, rural youth, refugee youth, disabled youth, minority groups and indigenous youth – all of these groups are less likely to participate due to various unique and overlapping barriers, let alone enter positions of leadership. Therefore, while opportunities can exist for participation, we see that those young people who take them up often come from more privileged, educated, and urban backgrounds.

While representation remains a persistent challenge, Oxfam’s My Rights, My Voice programme found several instances where better educated youth were able to effectively liaise with and reach out to more marginalised young women and men.⁸

Many practitioner frameworks still lack explicit methods for targeting marginalised

groups. New and innovative ideas are needed in this area, to make participation opportunities available to all young people.

Reflection 8: Understanding and measuring the impacts of youth participation

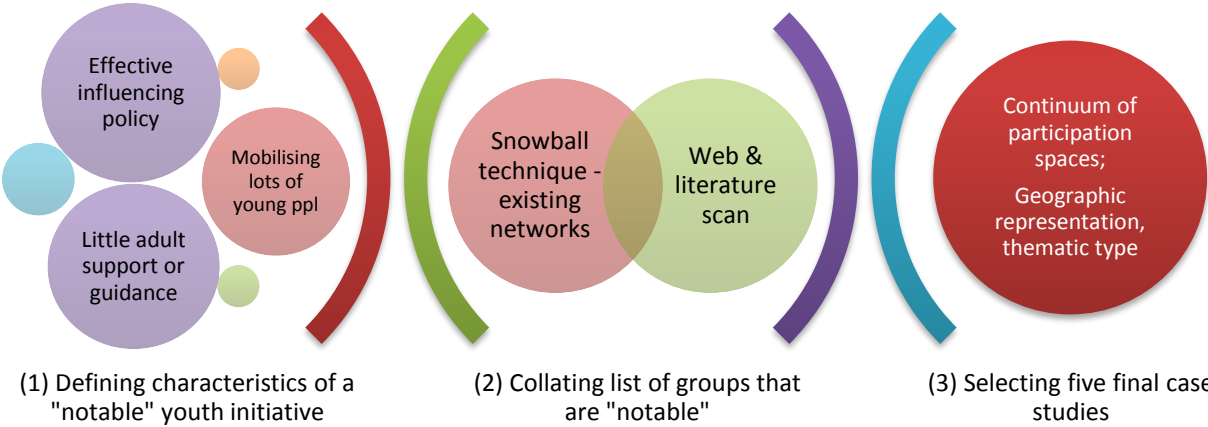
Reliable measurement of the contributions of youth are important to show the added value of youth participation, and to track how well practitioners and organisations are supporting youth participation and policy influencing. Key development actors are involved in understanding how best to measure youth participation, yet this work is still in progress.⁹

Understanding the specific changes that can be attributed to of youth-led influencing in relation to other factors influencing policy impact is still a challenge from a methodological point of view, however

there is some research that can be built upon, particularly from the health sector. For the individual young person, youth participation strengthens self- and collective efficacy, stronger group bonding, which leads to improved mental health and school performance.¹⁰ For the organisation or community, participation improves adult-youth interactions, changes in attitudes of community leaders towards youth credibility and competence, and greater recognition of the importance of youth issues.¹¹ At the societal level, youth participation leads to better protection, empowering young people to be active and effective advocates for the realisation of their own rights, to speak out against violations; promotes active citizenship, democracy and a culture of peace where decision-making is undertaken through negotiation rather than conflict; and builds accountability and good governance.¹²

3. Five “notable” youth-led initiatives

3.1 Methodology



As a first step, an electronic survey was held among Oxfam staff and partners to define what they would consider characteristics of a “notable” youth-led initiative. The highest scoring characteristic is “they seem to be effective in influencing policy & politics”, followed by “they are very large, mobilising lots of young people” and “it is very youth-led, with little adult support or guidance”. Using these criteria, the researchers have used a snowball technique, where they have asked key youth practitioners in their network (including Oxfam staff and partners) to identify youth-led initiatives that they thought are “notable”, known from their own networks of youth. This was supplemented by a web and literature scan for youth initiatives that have met the above criteria. The search was limited to initiatives in the Global South.

The group was narrowed to five, one for each of Pearce and Vela’s (2005) ¹³ continuum of participation spaces¹⁴:

- Formal by invitation (participation is officially offered in some way);
- Formal by right (participation is mandated or legislated);
- Created by non-state institutions (e.g. by church, parties, donors);
- Created by civil society organisations (CSOs) (e.g. by NGOs or grassroots organisations); and
- Collective transitory action (such as street protests or land occupations).

Additional consideration was made to even geographical distribution and thematic type (with special attention to rural youth, gender, and use of ICT). Emphasis was placed on youth-led initiatives that had the most successful examples of policy influencing, as per the criteria above.

3.2 Profiles of notable youth-led initiatives influencing public policy

Notable youth-led initiatives influencing public policy are listed below. While not by any means a definitive list of the best or exemplary youth-led initiatives that exist, this selection is a snapshot of a spectrum of the innovative ways in which young people are taking a lead in shaping their communities, and the world around them today.

Formal by invitation (participation is officially offered in some way)

BARGAD

As informal youth movements grow in size and gain influence, they may be faced with the dilemma of formalising – turning into an organisation with structure, processes, and policies. BARGAD illustrates how formalising, while sometimes necessary, doesn't have to mean fully giving up the benefits of informality that include participatory decision-making and a flat structure.

(a) What is the change they seek to achieve & examples of success stories?

BARGAD is a youth-led organisation that seeks to improve youth development in Pakistan. It started out as a grassroots students' movement promoting democracy, freedom, equality and peace. Over time, BARGAD formalised and became the umbrella organisation for youth-led groups in the country. Its successes include being invited by the government to help develop the youth policy in Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, in 2012. This enabled them to have a direct influence on how the policy was formulated.

(b) What are the strategies they use to achieve change, and in what ways might these strategies be effective, or limiting?

BARGAD's strategies include pushing for the inclusion of young people in formal decision-making spaces, such as high-level meetings with government officials, where young people negotiate and lobby for policy shifts. This strategy is effective in having direct access to the levers of power that many young people do not have, but is limiting as it relies on the invitation and good will of the government. It can also mean operating in ways that are seen as legitimate for the government: more

formalised processes, more professionalised messaging, and more structure, losing some of what makes an informal group special, such as flexibility, energy, and creativity.

(c) Main lessons for other youth seeking to influence public policy

Even though BARGAD has formalised from a youth movement to an organisation over the years, it tries to keep true to its community and informal spirit by having relatively flat decision-making structures. Everyone in the organisation is involved in making all the decisions, from the point that someone thinks of an idea, to designing a programme, to implementing it in communities. Even as a movement grows in size and influence, it can still stay true to its roots by being less formal in the way it works with each other.

"Once we start working on a new project, we do strategy planning meetings where the entire office is involved, as well as a core group of volunteers, advisors and councils. We do strategy workshops with everyone, and we map out [what we'll do next]."

- Selma Butt, Research Consultant and former Joint Director for BARGAD

Formal by right (participation is mandated or legislated)

The National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCOM)

Youth councils are contested centres of power. They mandate the representation of young people in government, but also call into question how independent those young people can be from the government. NYCOM demonstrates how policy change can happen when young advocates exist both inside and outside formal institutions.

(a) What is the change they seek to achieve & examples of success stories?

NYCOM is the statutory national youth council in Malawi that seeks to put youth issues on the political agenda, and have more youth participation in policy-making. NYCOM has pushed for the co-creation of by-laws in various districts across Malawi, and its members were significantly involved in the process to ban child marriage under the age of 18, which was just recently approved by the parliament and will go to the president for final approval.

(b) What are the strategies they use to achieve change, and in what ways might these strategies be effective, or limiting?

NYCOM's strategies focus on engaging the role and function of a youth council by connecting its members with district councilors and pushing for co-creation of by-laws and policies. By law, NYCOM is the permanent representative for youth in the government, and therefore occupies a privileged space to advocate on behalf of youth. While there is high potential for them to have influence, they recognise that their position in government means that they cannot as easily advocate on certain controversial issues like civil society organisations can. However they provide

training and support to a network of over 200 civil society youth organisations.

(c) Main lessons for other youth seeking to influence public policy

Policy change needs youth advocates working both inside and outside formal centres of power. While NYCOM is constrained in its ability to publicly advocate on certain issues, it can work behind closed doors to quietly push for policy change. In the meantime, it provides support to those civil society youth organisations that have the ability to speak openly and take more challenging positions. Working on both fronts – pushing from the “inside” and the “outside” – is their main tactic.

“There are some issues we cannot advocate on, but we can continue to support our member organisations to advocate for their own priorities.”

- Asharn Kossam, NYCOM's Sexual and Reproductive Health officer

*Created by non-state institutions
(e.g. by church, parties, donors)*

FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund

The enabling environment for youth participation may not always be supportive of marginalised groups. FRIDA demonstrates that the enabling environment deserves as much attention as youth action itself, and that solutions to transforming the enabling environment might lie within marginalised groups themselves.

(a) What is the change they seek to achieve & examples of success stories?

FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund was founded by young women and is the only youth-led fund specifically for young feminists in the world. It seeks to advance women's human rights and social justice by mobilising resources for groups and initiatives led by young feminists. Its successes include a clear increase in the amount of money being directed towards young feminists groups, resulting from its own resource mobilisation and grant making, but also from its lobbying of other donors. Among FRIDA grantees, recent success was achieved by Girls United for Human Rights, which lobbied Pakistani religious leaders and policy makers on child marriage, leading to a child marriage bill currently under review in the country.

(b) What are the strategies they use to achieve change, and in what ways might these strategies be effective, or limiting?

FRIDA's strategies focus primarily on funding for young feminists groups. The idea for the fund came from young feminists themselves in 2008, against the backdrop of growing young feminist activism around the world, and the funding gap felt by young feminist organisations. Focusing on funding

addresses a key obstacle in the enabling environment for youth influencing policy. Action by youth-led groups in general cannot be sustained without funding, and funding was identified as one of their biggest challenges¹⁵. At the same time, a focus on funding is limiting as it is difficult to see what impact FRIDA has on gender justice directly. FRIDA also makes a point of not specifying grant-making priorities, to ensure that their grantees have full flexibility to focus on what they want, making measuring impact more difficult.

(c) Main lessons for other youth seeking to influence public policy

The young feminists who started FRIDA did not wait for donors to support young feminist groups. Instead, they mobilised the resources to do it themselves, and even involve other young feminists in the grantee selection. Transforming the enabling environment, to make it more supportive of marginalised groups, takes innovation and courage, which can originate from within marginalised groups themselves.

"People are really supportive of young feminists in theory but then they don't have specific policies or strategies for including or supporting them."

- Devi O'Leiper-Malley, Co-Director, FRIDA

Created by civil society organisations (CSOs) (e.g. by NGOs or grassroots organisations)

Restless Development's Accountability Advocates Programme

Youth-led advocacy means that young people are pushing for the change that they want to see in the world, but it doesn't mean that they have to do it alone. Accountability Advocates show how youth-led action can be even more effective with the support of CSOs to amplify their messages.

(a) What is the change they seek to achieve & examples of success stories?

Accountability Advocates was a programme in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, UK and Zambia, where young people seek to hold their governments accountable for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 20 young people were trained and mentored by Restless Development, which describes itself as a "youth-led development agency", to design and implement a national monitoring and accountability framework. Its successes cannot be marked by policy change in the short-term, as the aim is to develop a long-term accountability framework over the span of the SDGs (15 years). However, some advances have been made towards developing this framework, where young people built a national network of partners for accountability in Zambia, and forming a partnership with UNDP in Uganda.

(b) What are the strategies they use to achieve change, and in what ways might these strategies be effective, or limiting?

Accountability Advocates strategies focus on youth conducting research, data

collection, and analysis on SDGs implementation, to develop a "national accountability framework"¹⁶, which includes young people designing and implementing their own advocacy based on their research. This strategy is effective in promoting evidence-based advocacy, increasing a young person's ability to more effectively influence policy. However, the strategy is limiting primarily because the scope of its target – the SDGs – is an ambitious framework itself. To see the impact of policy influencing is more difficult given the crosscutting nature of many targets, and its long timeframe (15 years).

(c) Main lessons for other youth seeking to influence public policy

Youth-led advocacy can be boosted with the help of organisations, who can add legitimacy and weight to advocacy messages. Restless Development provided the training to young people in research and advocacy, but participants implemented their advocacy plans by themselves. While the aim was to support youth-led advocacy, participants wished to still be attached to Restless, to add more legitimacy and weight to their advocacy messages and make them more effective.¹⁷

"We had our challenges, people trying to ride us off, constraints with bureaucracy and dealing with government's officials. Despite these challenges, one thing was clear during this whole process; where there is consistent support and capacity building for young people, challenges become an opportunity to become better and to work more efficiently."

- **Anonymous young participant, Accountability Advocates**

Collective transitory action (such as street protests or land occupations)

Meu Rio

Digital tools may seem like the quick fix to engaging young people in political action, but they need to be rooted in grassroots and community action to be effective. Meu Rio harnesses the power of online digital tools to amplify and support traditional offline activism.

(a) What is the change they seek to achieve & examples of success stories?

Meu Rio (My Rio) is a youth-led organisation in Brazil that works to engage citizens to participate in the political process using digital tools and push municipal institutions to be more transparent, accountable, and responsive. While it is led by young people, youth are not their primary target but all citizens. Its successes include an online campaign, where forty thousand people signed a petition in 24 hours against a controversial bill granting municipal politicians two retirement funds instead of one. They also started an online campaign supporting teachers and students who were protesting on the lot of a school that was targeted for demolition for the World Cup. In both cases, Meu Rio's efforts successfully stopped the bill from passing, and saved the school.

(b) What are the strategies they use to achieve change, and in what ways might these strategies be effective, or limiting?

Meu Rio's uses digital tools as their principle strategy, to amplify and multiply citizen voices, and draw attention from the media through viral messaging. This strategy is effective in harnessing young people's familiarity and creativity with digital tools, engaging them in an alternative form of participation. Digital

tools also allow citizens to mobilise and respond in quickly changing political environments with targeted action. Digital tools can be also be limiting, as engaging with political issues online takes little time and effort. Signing a petition online or reposting a political message can be reduced to superficial "clicktivism", yielding no real engagement or commitment to a cause.

(c) Main lessons for other youth seeking to influence public policy

Online methods of activism need to be complimented by offline traditional methods. While Meu Rio focuses on digital tools, they emphasise that they have not abandoned more traditional strategies that have been successful in the past, such as street protests, sit ins, and staging performances. Digital tools are useful in amplifying these strategies, but are not a replacement for in-person, grassroots action rooted in community concerns.

"I love working somewhere where all of my ideas, opinions are taken seriously and quickly turn into action. I don't know any other organisation [in Brazil] that is having as much impact as we are."

- Laura Alfonso Molinari, Meu Rio

4. Overarching findings and relevance for young people & those who work with them

In thinking about how *frameworks and approaches used by the development community support or hamper youth initiatives to influence public policy*, it is useful to draw on the five youth-led examples and how they relate to the reflections on practitioner approaches at the beginning of this paper:

- Youth acting as **partners and leaders** does not occur in a vacuum, but in spaces that are shaped by powerful actors – which can be both limiting and supportive. In the case of NYCOM, formal status with the government ensures their access to power, but limits their ability to advocate on controversial issues. In the case of Accountability Advocates, support by Restless Development provided them with skills and knowledge, and could have gone further in boosting their advocacy messages.
- Young people who are already in youth organisations, or who are part of existing youth movements, are already **internally empowered**, having the skills, confidence and experience to influence public policy. What they really need is a supportive **enabling environment** to succeed. Young feminist action was occurring all over the globe, but what they lacked was funding in order to carry out their work, which is where FRIDA comes in. The Accountability Advocates programme successfully trained their young participants in developing advocacy messaging, but where they struggled was having governments take them seriously. In Malawi, the government is mandated to have youth representation in the form of a youth council, and yet

youth council members cannot always address each issue to the same extent. They rely on members outside of the council to advocate for stronger and more challenging positions. Donors, governments, and other power holders need to be engaged to ensure that young people's voices have an influence.

- However it is also important to note that many youth – especially those who are marginalised and vulnerable – are not sufficiently empowered to influence public policy, individual or collectively. While the example of FRIDA shows that marginalised groups (in this case – young women) can take action to change their enabling environment, FRIDA remains the exception, not the rule.
- While youth-led initiatives should have young people in the lead in all respects, that does not mean that development actors must use a hands-off approach to supporting them. In the case of Accountability Advocates, participants were given the freedom to design their own advocacy projects, but wished they could've attached their name to Restless Development to give their advocacy more exposure and legitimacy. Development actors have **platforms and networks** that many young people do not, which could go a long way in amplifying their voices.
- While individual youth action is important, public policy is influenced most by **collective youth action**. A network approach (online and offline) supports and amplifies collective action and young people are good at it. This is seen in the case of Meu Rio, which utilises digital tools to engage individual citizens, but recognises that their actions are most impactful when tied to

the community and paired with traditional, offline methods of protest. BARGAD operates as an umbrella organisation for youth organisations in Pakistan, allowing youth to speak with one voice to the government, which adds more weight to their concerns.

- Oxfam's theory of change recognises that youth movements need some structure – defined roles and responsibilities, strategic and operational plans – in order to be sustainable. **Informality** is also a persistent obstacle to funding, making some degree of formalising necessary. However, in supporting youth movements, development actors need to ensure that they don't lose the advantages associated with informality – energy, flexibility, democratic and open modes of decision-making. BARGAD demonstrates how they can keep the advantages of informality in their ways of working, even as a formal CSO.
- **Representation** of marginalised groups is a persistent challenge, and sometimes the best and most creative solutions come from members of the marginalised group itself. Young feminists from FRIDA recognised that their work was not receiving the attention or support from many large donors, and decided to start a fund for themselves. Rather than waiting for the enabling environment to change, they took matters into their own hands and changed it themselves.
- **Understanding and measuring the impacts of youth participation** remains a challenge for all five youth-led initiatives. To isolate youth

participation as the main factor of policy change – contribution not attribution – among many factors is tricky, though a few reflections can be made. Focused action targeting specific policies, such as Meu Rio's campaign against the passage of a law or a school demolition, are easier to see the impact of advocacy than larger, more complex targets, such as the SDGs. While it is important to also target changes to the enabling environment (ex. funding for civil society groups), this becomes more difficult in measuring the eventual impact on policy.

Reflecting on the remaining research questions and **the latest frameworks and approaches used by the development community, change strategies employed by young people, and how youth initiatives have contributed to change**, the analysis above makes clear that youth participation cannot be an end in and of itself, where youth active citizenship is the only goal. Rather, youth participation is a means to achieve social change. The development community too often focuses on youth empowerment alone, and not on how they can help to support the societal change that young people seek. The five examples of youth-led initiatives influencing public policy demonstrate that young people who are already empowered – notably those who are part of existing youth organisations and movements – need support from the development community to make their action achieve impact. Bolstering existing collective youth action, while continuing to focus on empowering individual youth (with an emphasis on those who are vulnerable and marginalised), is the twin approach that is needed for practitioners to effectively support youth participation.

5. References

¹ This paper is part of a longer learning trajectory implemented by Oxfam. An academic perspective on the matter can be found in the following [Literature Review Report](#), implemented as part of the same learning trajectory.

² The following strategy documents relating to youth participation were reviewed: Amnesty International (2016 – forthcoming) *Youth, Power, Action! International Youth Strategy*; The Commonwealth (2006) *Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment 2007-2015*; The Commonwealth (2006) *Commonwealth Youth Programme Strategic Plan 2006-2008*; DFID CSO Working Group (2010) *Youth Participation in Development: A Guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers*; Oxfam Australia (2015) *Theory of Change Resource: Youth participation and leadership*; Plan International (2015) *Impact Area Overview: The right to participate as citizens*; Restless Development (2016) *Unleashing the power of youth to change our world: A new vision for 2030*; UNDP (2014) *Youth Strategy 2014-2017*; Plan International (2017) *Global Strategy 2017-2022*; UNFPA (2013) *Strategy on Adolescents and Youth*; UNICEF (2009) *The participation of children and young people in UNICEF country programme and national committee activities*; USAID (2012) *Youth Engagement in Development: Effective Approaches and Action-Oriented Recommendations for the Field*.

³ Farthing, R. (2012) “Why Youth Participation? Some Justifications and Critiques of Youth Participation Using New Labour’s Youth Policies as a Case Study”, *Youth & Policy* No. 109, September 2012: p. 71-29.

⁴ Oxfam (2015) Youth Participation and Leadership – Theory of Change Resource.

⁵ Amnesty International, 11 April 2016, *Myanmar: Student leader finally free!*, accessed 29 March 2017 from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/04/myanmar-phyoe-phyoe-aung-student-leader-free/>

⁶ Oxfam (2015) Youth Participation and Leadership – Theory of Change Resource.

⁷ Youth Policy Labs (2015) “From Rhetoric to Action: Towards an Enabling Environment in the Sustainable Development Goals”, *The Case for Space Initiative*. Berlin: Youth Policy Press.

⁸ Van Esbroek, D., Chelladurai, S. and Verhofstadt, E. (2016) *Evaluation of the ‘My Rights My Voice’ Programme: Synthesis Report*

⁹ See UNICEF (2017) *Adolescent Country Tracker (ACT)* and UNDP (2017) *Critical Agents of Change in the 2030 Agenda: Youth-inclusive governance indicators for national-level monitoring* for examples of youth participation indicator development in the UN.

¹⁰ Wallerstein, N. (2006). “What is the evidence on effectiveness of empowerment to improve health?” *Health Evidence Network report*. WHO Regional Office for Europe: Copenhagen.

¹¹ Vatsia, U. (2007). “Child and Youth Participation in Programming for Children Affected by HIV/AIDS: A Review of the Evidence”. *Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS (JLICA)/Christian Children’s Fund*.

¹² Lansdown, G. and O’Kane, C. (2014). “A toolkit for monitoring and evaluating children’s participation: Introduction”. *Save the Children: London*.

¹³ Pearce, J. and Vela, G. (2005) ‘Colombia Country Report for the Dutch CFA Programme Evaluation’, *Assessing Civil Society Participation as Supported In-Country by Cordaid, Hivos, Novib*

and Plan Netherlands 1999-2004, in Gaventa, J. (2006) 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis', IDS Bulletin Volume 37 Number 6: November 2006.

¹⁴ Participation spaces are “opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests.” This continuum of spaces recognises that youth participation does not take place in a vacuum, nor is any space neutral, in recognition of dynamics of power relations that shape it. It is also within the scope of this paper, which looks at the interaction of development actors with youth-led initiatives, that necessitates a look at participation spaces beyond what might commonly be associated with youth-led initiatives (i.e. collective transitory action).

¹⁵ Youth Policy Labs (2015).

¹⁶ “A national accountability framework is a multi-stakeholder action plan for monitoring, reviewing and seeking accountability for the implementation of the SDGs in your country.” Restless Development (2015) *Accountability in action: A practical guide for young people tracking the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 4.

¹⁷ O'Flynn, M. (2016) *Accountability Advocates Project, Restless Development: External Evaluation*.

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