

# YOUTH, VOICE AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY NOTE



(CTS) Tribal education methodology. 2020. Photo Credit: Sreenath Nair.

## The Advancing Tide: A Growing Global Crisis for Young People

Young people matter. They represent over a fifth of the world's population [i] but are too often ignored in decision-making and planning for economies and societies they will inherit. Recent data, including from British Council Next Generation global research [ii] highlights four critical areas of concern for young people across a range of Official Development Assistance (ODA) countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Asia and the Middle East:

**A crisis in education.** Despite an overall rise in school attendance at primary level, young people from ODA countries feel that the quality of education is lacking and does not prepare youth for employment.[iii] In Ethiopia under a third (29%) of Next Generation research participants felt their education prepared them well for work, while only 23% felt it had improved their chances of getting a job.[iv] In Lebanon, only 47% of young people aged 25-29 responded 'yes' to the question: "Do you have an education that enables you to get a job?"[v] This is contributing to rising levels of school drop-out, especially for the poorest households.[vi] Global data from 2020 indicates that, in low-income countries, the primary completion rate is only 34 % for children from the poorest 20 % of households and 79 % for children from the richest 20% of households. Drop-out rates are particularly high for girls in some SSA countries.[vii]

**A crisis in the availability of decent work.** Unemployment is rapidly growing in many ODA countries due to falling rates of economic growth, with young people hardest hit. [viii] For example, in 2016, 66 % of young people surveyed by the British Council in South Africa between the ages of 15 to 24 were unemployed.[ix] Factors that include gender, ethnicity and disability increase the likelihood of unemployment: for example in Kenya 49% of young women surveyed by the British Council fell into the NEET (not in education, employment or training) category, compared with 37% of young men.[x] The situation has worsened considerably largely due to the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the informal sector, which accounts for 77% of young workers globally and 93.4% in SSA. [xi] Migration is one symptom of unemployment in many of the countries surveyed. Mass migration for young people is leading to the problem of 'brain drain' in some countries such as Zimbabwe, where a large number of skilled, educated youth are leaving. [xii]

**The exclusion of young people from voice, agency and leadership.** Young people reported feeling unrepresented by governments in the majority of the countries included in the Next Generation study. They spoke of a deep distrust of politics even in countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa, where there is new-found democracy. For example, in Zimbabwe more than 60% of those surveyed were unwilling to engage in politics and did not think their vote could change things for the better.[xiii] In Ethiopia 36% of the young people participating had experienced political corruption in the past five years.[xiv]

**Young women and girls' exposure to gender-based discrimination and violence.** The British Council research echoes concerns raised by the UN and other development actors that there is a serious growing problem of gender-based violence (GBV) at home, in communities and in schools for young women in particular in many ODA countries. [xv] Pressure on young girls to marry early, often leaving school to do so, also emerged as a key issue in Next Generation research in SSA countries including Kenya and Zimbabwe.[xvi] Emerging evidence indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating these issues. [xvii] However, entrenched social norms, stigma and lack of effective interventions often means little happens to change this situation.

**Without urgent action these negative** outcomes for children and young people will translate into significant longer-term impacts, ranging from economic stress and exploitation and mental health issues to risky and/or violent behaviours. For example, research indicates that a negative educational experience, unemployment and the lack of a sense of belonging or purpose are key drivers of gang membership for young men in particular.[xviii] Evidence from other British Council research shows that these factors, coupled with mistrust of authority and feelings of alienation, also contribute to young people's attraction to violent extremism and membership of fundamentalist groups (see Figure 1) [xix].

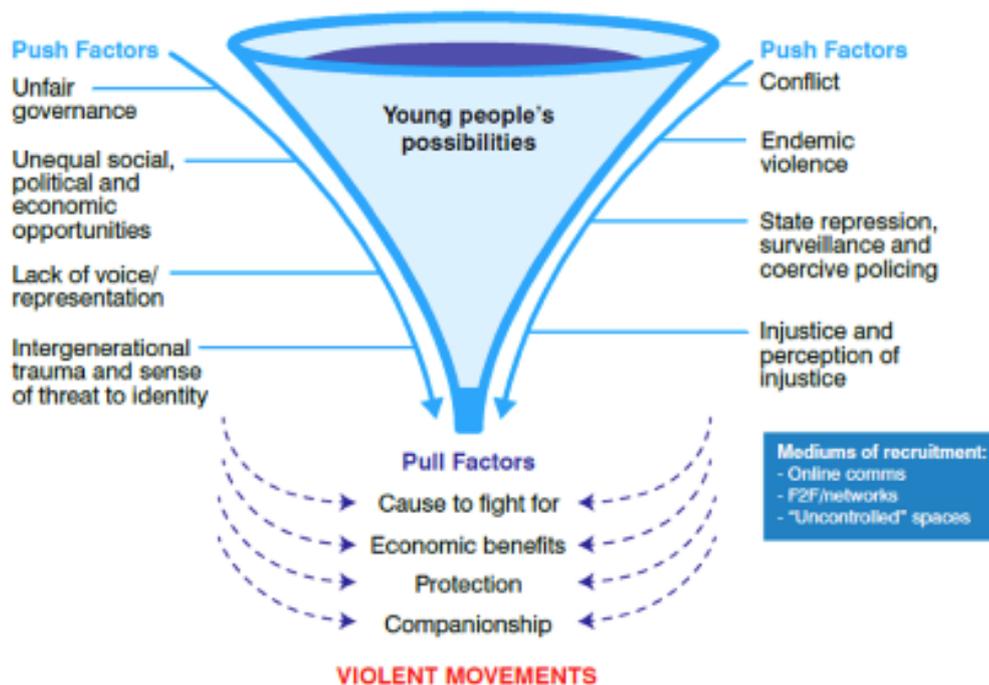


FIGURE 1: PROCESS RESULTING IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM  
(TAKEN FROM BRITISH COUNCIL SR2: RESILIENCE FRAMING APPROACH)

## Stemming the Tide: The Power of Youth-Focused Participatory Approaches

**At this critical moment it is imperative to fund appropriate interventions that address these systemic failures and foster new generations of resilient, empowered youth.** Harnessing the agency of young people in ways that take into account their specific situations and views is a vital part of this process. The UK government has noted that: “without engaging young people seriously” in shaping and monitoring policies and actions towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals [xx] it will “simply not be possible to deliver” on objectives of strengthening global peace, security and governance; strengthening resilience and responses to crises; promoting global prosperity; tackling extreme poverty and helping vulnerable people. [xxi] Effective, targeted and sustainable solutions can only be identified with the full participation of a broad, representative range of young people. Achieving these outcomes means investing time and funds into ‘ground up’ participatory approaches that are generated with and for young people, that respond to their specific contexts and complex situations and take into account their concerns and frustrations as well as their aspirations.

**The youth-focused work of Changing the Story (CTS)[xxii] and the British Council exemplifies these principles of downward accountability and youth participation through creative methodologies that use art, theatre, dance, film and social entrepreneurship as tools that enable young people to navigate and make sense of the complex, environments in which they live.** These approaches are helping young people affected by conflict and other traumatic situations to articulate often difficult, abstract feelings and experiences (including gender-based violence) and to envision and shape their futures. They are also offering practical solutions for economically empowering young people in ways that are socially and environmentally responsible. **As the examples below show, these methodologies are particularly effective for work with young people and are engaging them as key agents of change in some of the most challenging global situations.** Many of them demonstrate the capacity for growth and adaptability to multiple new contexts and challenges.

### Youth-Centred Participatory Approaches in Action

**Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP)** [xxiii] works with young people through music, dance and drama in communities affected by conflict and other traumatic situations and where public services are non-existent or limited. A key focus of these creative projects is addressing the mental health of young people through activities that enable them to express and confront painful experiences – including about GBV – and to articulate often very abstract ideas about the past, self, community and identity. The MAP methodology has also been successfully adapted for over 25 schools across Rwanda as well in Indonesia, Nepal and the Kyrgyz Republic. [xxiv]

**Strengthening Resilience in Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA)** [xxv] The Strengthening Resilience programme in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries aims to build the resilience of young people and their communities – helping them to ‘survive and thrive’ whatever pressures and hazards they confront – and reduce the appeal of violent extremist narratives. Through the programme the British Council is demonstrating how innovative participatory processes can build the resilience of young people to choose more positive pathways.

The **Active Citizens social leadership training Programme** [xxvi], a British Council programme, engages young people from over 70 countries at the local level to be change agents. Trust, confidence and political awareness are built through the mobilisation of participatory approaches, including creative, arts-based initiatives that enable young people to express themselves and connect to others in safe spaces. The approach has been adapted to meet the needs of multiple communities, including those that are marginalised, or conflict affected. An evaluation indicated that Active Citizens contributes to the employability and leadership potential of young people, while also increasing community cohesion and safety and improving access to services.[xxvii]

**'Building inclusive and sustainable civil society in Malaysia and Cambodia: A social entrepreneurship toolkit created by and for young people'** [xxviii] recognises that social enterprises are a platform for young people's agency and creativity but are only as strong as the individuals behind them. The project takes a participatory approach to understanding how young social entrepreneurs cope with challenges in resilient ways and enables them to play an active role as change makers promoting wellbeing through self-help.

## Asks and Recommendations



**Without a clear, targeted focus on young people, government policy and interventions will fail to deliver on the sustainable development goals.**



**It is imperative to fund appropriate interventions that help foster new generations of resilient, empowered youth.** Harnessing the agency of young people in representative ways that take into account their specific situations and views is a vital part of this process.



**This means engaging young people in designing policy and interventions in ways that are truly participatory and demonstrate true downwards accountability.** It means funding innovative creative projects and programmes that amplify the voices of young people and enable them to shape the terms of conversations that are meaningful for them. It also means creating and funding sustainable economic opportunities for young people in ways that will contribute to socially and environmentally responsible national, regional and global communities.



In funding and designing these interventions **particular attention must be paid to inclusivity of groups subjected to discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability and other axes of difference.** Efforts must be made to fund initiatives that promote gender equality and social inclusion, and which address pernicious issues such as GBV and child marriage.



**A realistic level of multi-year funding** must be mobilised to support these youth-focused activities and processes.

## Endnotes

[i] This is based on an estimated 7.7 billion total global population, of which recent figures indicate around 1.2 billion are aged 15-24 (United Nations, 2018, World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNDESA).

[ii] <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/next-generation>

[iii] For example, the key areas for improvement in the Sri Lankan education system identified by the respondents to the British Council survey were: improvement in the quality of teaching, improvements in the curriculum, and improvements to the facilities at educational institutions (British Council 2019a, Next Generation: Sri Lanka, London: British Council).

[iv] British Council, 2019b, Next Generation: Ethiopia, London.

[v] British Council (2020 forthcoming), Next Generation: Lebanon, London.

[vi] According to the Sustainable Development Goals report for 2020, globally educational attainment is close to gender parity at 96.1%. However, rates of drop out for girls are still high in some Sub-Saharan countries, including Kenya, Ethiopia and South Africa (UN, 2020, the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>)

[vii] UN, 2020, the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020,

[viii] UN, 2020, SDG Report.

[ix] British Council (2018a) Next Generation South Africa: Listening to the Voices of Young People, London

[x] British Council (2018) Next Generation Kenya: Listening to the Voices of Young People, London

[xi] International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020, ILO Monitor: Covid-19 and the world of work. Forth Edition. Updated Estimates and Analysis, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_745963.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf)

[xii] British Council (2020a), Next Generation: Zimbabwe, London

[xiii] British Council (2020a)

[xiv] British Council (2019), Next Generation: Ethiopia, London

[xv] The SDG Report 2020 notes: "According to surveys conducted between 2005 and 2017 in 106 countries, 18 per cent of ever-partnered women and girls 15 to 49 years of age experienced such violence by a current or former intimate partner in the 12 months prior to the survey" (UN 2020, SDG Report (page 34). UN Women estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner (UN Women, Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures> (accessed September 2020).

[xvi] According to the SDG report, in 2019 the risk of child marriage was highest in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than one in three women (34.5 per cent) between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18. 5 (UN, SDG 2020 Report).

[xvii] UN, 2020, SDG Report.

[xviii] Higginson, A., Benier, K. et. al. , 2018, 'Factors associated with gang membership in low and middle-income countries: a systematic review', In A Campbell Systematic Review, Vol. 1, Number 1.

[xix] Stewart, S. (2018), Building Resistance to Violent Extremism, UK: British Council

[xx] See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

[xxi] DFID, 2016 (ibid).

[xxii] CTS is an international, multi-disciplinary project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which supports the building of inclusive civil societies. Through innovative participatory arts and heritage-focused approaches CTS asks how young people can and do shape and influence societies of countries affected by conflict and/or undergoing a transition, such as accelerated development.

[xxiii] <https://map.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/>

[xxiv] <https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/2018/03/12/mobile-arts-for-peace-rwanda/>

[xxv] Strengthening Resilience in MENA | British Council

[xxvi] <https://active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/>

[xxvii] British Council, 2018, Active Citizens: Globally Connected, Locally Engaged: 2017-2018 Report.

[xxviii] <https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/building-inclusive-and-sustainable-civil-society-a-social-entrepreneurship-toolkit-created-by-and-for-young-people-cambodia-and-malaysia/>