

# YOUTH INFLUENCE

## in Decision Making Processes



Half of the world's population is composed of young people, and the numbers are growing. Strong shifts in global populations are already visible. The population in the global north is growing older and older, with young people making up less and less of the total population. Meanwhile the situation is the opposite in the global south. This has created many challenges, challenges that no longer can be referred to as new. What we need to find out is if the world will be up to the task of taking on these challenges.

According to the International Labour Organization, youth unemployment rates have never before reached such high levels. The recent economic recession has hit young people hardest. No longer are they being prioritized in many aspects of policy making, instead being relegated to bottom of the list of priority groups. We see cuts in school funding; less money spent on young people's health; and fewer efforts to get young people working. This may be a useful strategy for securing the annual budget for the current year, but it will have many serious long-term repercussions around the world.

Sweden has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe, despite being one of the strongest economies in the region. It is bucking the trend of many economies around Europe and returning to economic growth. This can be traced back to a crisis a number of years ago: a crisis that many people of my age do not even remember in the early 1990s. The Swedish economy was in a dire situation and many municipalities were forced to cut funding to public schools and other programmes for young people. As a result of these cuts, performance rates among Swedish students are still decreasing, with the loss of Sweden's high status in international education rankings. Youth unemployment rates continue to soar. These decisions which were considered necessary for short term stability in the early nineties will continue to affect Sweden for many decades to come. This problem sheds new light on the economic recession and on its long-term consequences for young people all over the world, and in turn for the world in general. There are other problems in the world which we need to address as well. We see a rise in islamophobic tendencies and a greater gap between ideologies. Racism is rising within Europe and in other parts of the world as well, and many countries seem to have forgotten the consequences of the intolerance that has played its part in policy making over the last century.

Studies have shown that groups that are discriminated against and excluded from labor markets and health care systems will pay an additional toll in terms of their mental and physical health. This further compromises their ability to participate in society and with it the likelihood of them becoming productive citizens. This is a serious issue, concerning these individuals' most basic human rights to fair and equal treatment.

Discrimination on any grounds, generates and strengthens stigmas within our societies especially when absorbed by the young. Young people need to be allowed the freedom to develop their own judgements and opinions when it comes to issues such as sexuality, gender, religion or other such matters relating to a young person's identity, rather than inheriting ideas and norms from older generations. This burden often prevents young people from being themselves, and encourages the spread of intolerance and discrimination.

We need to find the solutions to all these challenges and implement them on a global scale. In this aspect, the young civil society is a crucial actor. It is within the young civil society of the world that the groups of young people who feel discriminated against can become actors for change; the confrontations between different ideologies and religions can take place in a constructive manner and difficulties can become opportunities. I am the president of the national youth organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth; RFSL Ungdom is its Swedish name. We coordinate young people across the entire country, and we work together because we face challenges related to our sexual orientation and gender identity. We work for ourselves as individuals, strengthening each other in our everyday lives. But our work is also broader: we work to create spaces for everyone in society to be themselves and to be able to explore their identities and dreams.

Creating opportunities for young people can help to change their lives and gives them tools to tackle discrimination in their societies. Through a young civil society, young people facing challenges because of their faith, ethnicity, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender or gender expression, can take full part in their society.

In October, I participated in the negotiations of the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. I was part of the youth delegate programme, which makes it possible for young people from all over the world to be included in decision making and to have real influence in making sure that the decisions made in important forums of the United Nations reach out to the young population of the world. It is, of course, a great responsibility to take on, attempting to be the link between young people and the global decision making process, but the action of a limited number of youth delegates is not enough if we want young people to achieve real influence on the global stage. However, this is a first step in the right direction and more countries should start their own youth delegate programs to enhance youth participation. Bringing a young person to the United Nations will not only improve the dialogue between the civil society and the United Nations, but also bring new perspectives to the discussion and introduce some qualities that the national delegates may be lacking.

It is time to move past the exclusion of young people from decision making. The decision making processes at local, national, regional and international level need to be opened up to allow young people to have real influence throughout all parts of the process – it is not enough to let young people in for an hour, or to let them in without providing sufficient background information or access to relevant documents. Providing young people with the necessary information and then letting them take part in the decisions would make the process, the decision itself and – of course – the result more relevant, effective and legitimate.

Just as when it comes to establishing inclusiveness, young civil society is a key actor for ensuring that young people can influence global policy making. There is, however, one precondition: decision makers will need to move past the very common platitude: youth are the future. This is not true. Young people are already active participants, leaders, initiators, and actors for change. Young people are already changing the world. Youth organizations already create forums for young people to influence their surroundings and the rest of the world around them.

Given that they make-up half of the world's population, not including young people is not only an inefficient way of working; it also undermines the true essence of democracy. With the challenges the world faces today – unemployment, social exclusion, intolerant attitudes, climate change and poverty – can we really afford to wait?

Young people struggle to be part of the solution but are left being a part of the problem. We need this to stop.

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