

Child Participation: The voices of youth in the last decade

A report by KidsRights

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ABOUT KIDSRIGHTS

KidsRights is an international non-governmental organization that promotes the well-being of vulnerable children across the world and advocates for the realization of their rights. In addition, we as an organization strive for a world where all children have access to their rights and are empowered to realize the great potential they carry within them. Children are changemakers who have the power to move the world. KidsRights goal is to aid these changemakers in voicing their opinions and in taking action to bring about change. We ensure that we support children by commanding global attention for the realization of children's rights and acting as a catalyst to ignite change, together with children and youth. To achieve our united goal, our advocacy is supported with research and action. In addition to research, The foundation finances local projects aimed at directly improving the rights of vulnerable children and stimulating child participation and change-making by youths.

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INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) [1] brought about a new era. The CRC showed that children, too, are holders of rights. Today, there is a growing acknowledgment of children as rights holders, and of the importance of enabling children to participate. When the CRC was adopted in 1989 the right of children to participate was viewed as a fundamental aspect of the Convention. [2] However, how that participation was once envisioned in 1989 is no longer how child participation is viewed today. As society evolved, so has the concept of child participation. The surge of the digital age has forever changed how children can participate in the world.

This report focuses exclusively on the evolution of child participation in the last decade. It explores the concept and importance of child participation (section 2). Section 3 will delve into the evolution of child participation, this section will be further broken down into three sub-sections, firstly, it will briefly examine the development of youth envoys as a means of child participation, secondly, it will explore child participation in the digital age focusing on the use internet and technology, and thirdly, it will discuss child led movements. Lastly, section 4 of the report identifies the biggest challenges with child participation in the digital age.

CHILD PARTICIPATION

What is Child Participation

Participation is increasingly acknowledged as one of the essential components of a democratic society. Thus, it can be said that child participation is critical to the development of a progressive society. KidsRights defines child participation as a right for 'children [to] discuss and co-decide on all matters that affect them, like family, school, community matters, government policies, legal policies.'^[3] Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines the concept of child participation as follows: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'^[4] It should be noted that the definitions of child participation may vary according to certain aspects of the context. ^[5]

To ensure effective participation, all stakeholders need to guarantee that children are empowered and that relationships between children, adults, and communities are nurtured. ^[6] It is paramount that children's opinions should be taken into account, as well as a clear explanation of how their views will be incorporated into the decision making process. The notion of participation of child participation was further elaborated on in General Comments 12 further elaborated on the concept of child participation as an 'ongoing process, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.'^[7] As Children's Peace Prize winner, Rena Kawasaki poignantly stated, '[l]isten to us. Listen to the youth around you. Have you listened intently and with respect to your students, your children, your grandchildren? We complete the narrative, we will help solve the pressing issues of today.'^[8] Giving youth the platform for participation is not only beneficial to the youth, but to all parties. Youth participation ensures that there is a myriad of new solutions to issues that world leaders are failing to solve independently.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILD PARTICIPATION IN THE LAST DECADE

Youth Envoys

According to Humanium, there are currently 2.2 billion young people between the ages of 10 to 24. ^[11] More than 90 percent of the 2.2 billion young people are living in developing countries. ^[12] With the substantial

number of youth, which is expected to only increase, it is apparent that to achieve sustainable development, stakeholders have to implement measures which allow for meaningful engagement and involvement of youth.

In eagerness for implementing measures to engage youth, the United Nations in 2013 appointed Ahmad Alhendawi as the UN Secretary–General's Envoy of Youth. The main objective of the Envoy of youth was to bring the United Nation closer to young people, as well as promote mechanisms for youth participation.[13] The development of the Youth Envoys was the beginning of a new era and a catalyst for many more organizations to develop an envoy of youth. KidsRights is one of the many organizations which acknowledged the importance of having a youth envoy to ensure meaningful participation amongst young people. In 2019, KidsRights developed a Youth Board as part of the State of Youth, intending to highlight diverse young perspectives. As we know, currently climate change has become one of the most pressing issues in the world, and youth have been quite vocal in this arena. Leehi Yona, *et al*, reiterated this stating that 'youth are at the forefront of climate activism today, but their perspectives have been overlooked in prior analyses of climate negotiations.' [14] To remedy the lack of voices of youth in climate negotiations, ahead of COP 27, Omnia El Omrani was appointed as a youth envoy to guarantee that youth perspectives were given due recognition at COP.[15]

Having mechanisms in place such as youth envoys, are not just vital for providing a platform for youth participation, but it is fundamental in changing the perspective that world leaders have regarding youth. As a result of the increase of child participation at the UN level, and governmental level there has been a rise in the number of international events which has been coupled with a rise in the number of national policies focusing on youth, and of 198 countries, 127 countries now have a national youth policy. [16] In addition, of 198 countries, 131 countries (66.2%) have a national youth organization that is recognized as the representative structure. [17] It is evident that since 2013 there has been a shift in society from merely recognizing that children have the right to participate, to moving forward to creating concrete measures to allow for meaningful participation. Youth envoys have been influential in changing the narrative about youth participation, and how to avoid tokenism participation.

Child participation and technology

With the advancements of technology the concept of child participation has been revolutionized. [18] In a recent study done by Khalil, he held that there is the potential of technology with youth in the area of participation. [19] The inclusion of technology affords children with more opportunities to participate in settings that they would not necessary has a voice. In Sweden, three different hospitals at four pediatric care

centers were included in the implementation of Sisom. [20] Sisom is an animated interactive assessment and communication tool. Sisom aims to provide children aged between 6 and 12 years with a voice in their health care. [21] The implementation and adaption of technology in hospitals not only allows children to participate but also has the potential of restructuring how children and professionals work together in the health setting. This sentiment has been reiterated by Save the Children Sweden which held that policymakers see potential in technological devices to promote children's participation. [22]

Furthermore, a generational shift in civic engagement is evident around the globe. It has become apparent that amongst young people there is an increasing detachment from the traditional means of participation.[23] Thus, technology can be used as a tool to provide out-of-the-box ideas to engage youth. In 2020, Rena Kwasaki developed the idea of using the platform Zoom as a mechanism to have Japanese youth engage with politicians. This was helpful as youth in Japan feel quite removed from politics in their country. The Zoom platform presented the opportunity for youth to be able to voice their concerns, and ideas with politicians in live time, which in turn gave youth the confidence that they were being heard. In addition to using the Zoom platform, Rena used technology in a different setting as well. She developed a QR code that was placed around the city of Niihama, Japan. The QR code was used as a participation tool as it allowed youth to partake in decision-making with the click of a button. Technology should not be underestimated but seen rather as an instrument in narrowing the gaps to meet children's needs and giving effects to the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

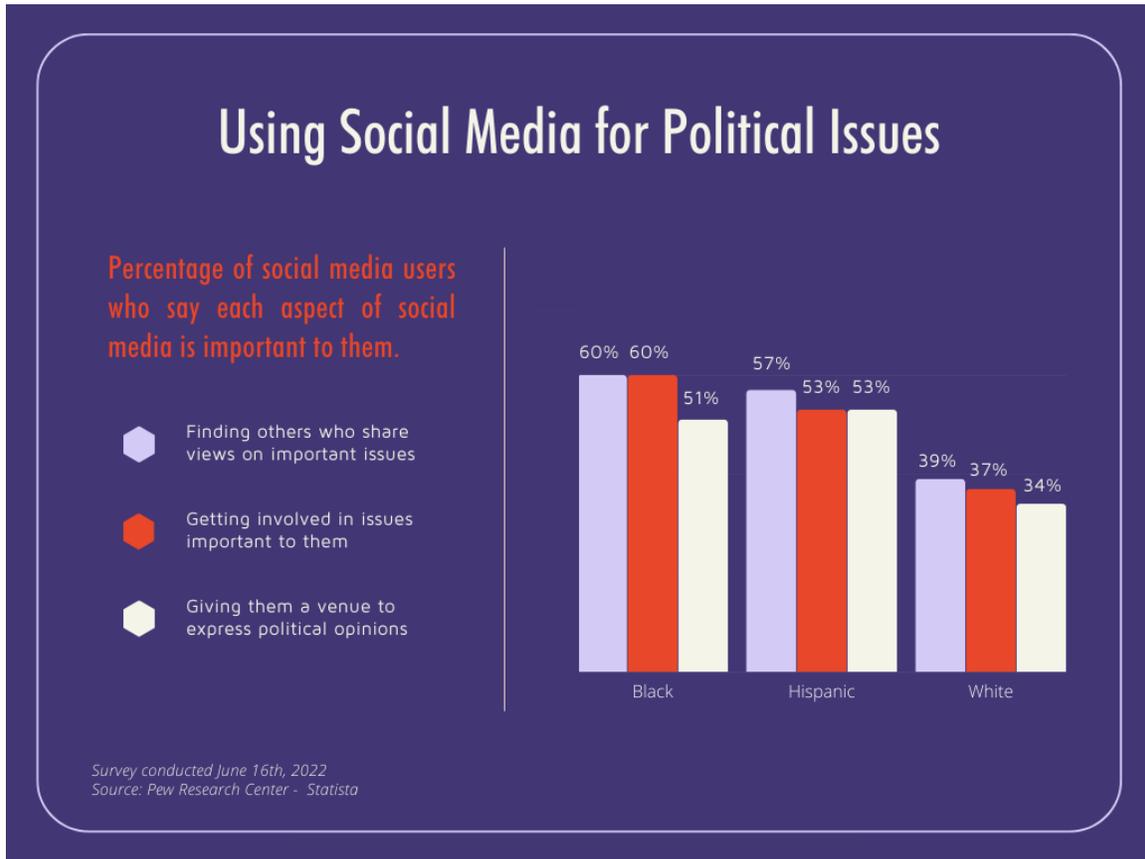
Technology has not only changed child participation in the ordinary sense. It has also provided an opportunity for children who were not able to communicate and participate the chance to engage as well. Shivansh Kulshrestha, a finalist of the International Children's Peace Prize, noticed that at the peak of the pandemic that deaf children in India were unable to participate in schooling as Zoom platforms did not provide live translations for Indian languages. He develop an app that allowed for live translations, the app was implemented in schools which ensured that deaf children in India were able to access inclusive education. Furthermore, in Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF has been working with partners to pilot technology that helps children with complex communication challenges. The development of this technology helps children by promoting interaction, developing language, addressing speech impairments, and encouraging successful participation in learning and social activities. [25] It is available in over 30 languages and accesses the global symbols database of over 20,000 symbols. [26] Since November 2019, UNICEF has piloted Cboard in Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, where 12,000 young children need augmentative and alternative communication solutions. To date, this technology has been able to assist 1,500 children. [27]

Child participation and the internet

Today's younger generation holds the title of being the largest generation ever, as well as being the most connected generation, as a result of the internet. [28] The internet has afforded children and youth the chance of making their voices heard through a multitude of platforms. For instance, KidsRights developed a podcast called YouthTalks which allows youth to engage with each other regarding issues they believe need attention. They recognize the potential of digital tools to help them access information and seek solutions to problems affecting their communities. [29]

The internet has also successfully ensured that youth are more aware than prior generations of the rapidly changing world they are growing up in. [30] Even though, the internet has disadvantages, it is a tool that has opened up an entirely new way in which children participate not only in social settings but also in civic engagement. Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are the few social media platforms that are safe spaces for young people to voice their concerns, but also to initiate campaigns. [31] The Black Lives Matter movement garnered so much attention as a result of social media, and became one of the biggest movements of our time. Social media activism is gaining more and more traction as an effective tool to connect with like-minded peers. Due to the wide reach of social media it can be interpreted as a threat by governments who do not want activists to disseminate information. This was seen in Egypt when President Mubarak shut down the internet after it became apparent that social media aided the spread of protests in the region. [32] This illustrates how vital the internet and social media has become for engaging masses of people to effect change.

According to Leni Alvarez, a member of the Global fund for Children's Youth Leadership Council '[t]he pandemic has shown us alternatives as to how we can show our voices.' [33] The accessibility of information on social media makes it easier for youth and others to educate themselves regarding the most pressing issues. In addition to educational purposes, it aids in the amplification of marginalized voices in society which often goes unnoticed. [34] The internet has played an important role in bringing corruption, discrimination, and injustice to the forefront of people's attention, which has aided in fostering allies in advocating for change. [35] Autumn Peltier is a prime example of using the internet to raise awareness regarding discrimination. Autumn developed a petition to demand clean drinking water for indigenous people in Canada. The petition was circulated all over social media and garnered over 100 000 signatures, which was later handed in at Parliament Hill in Canada. This is just one of the many ways in which the digital age has changed child participation in society, but in addition to that, bringing attention to issues that people around the world would not have known about.

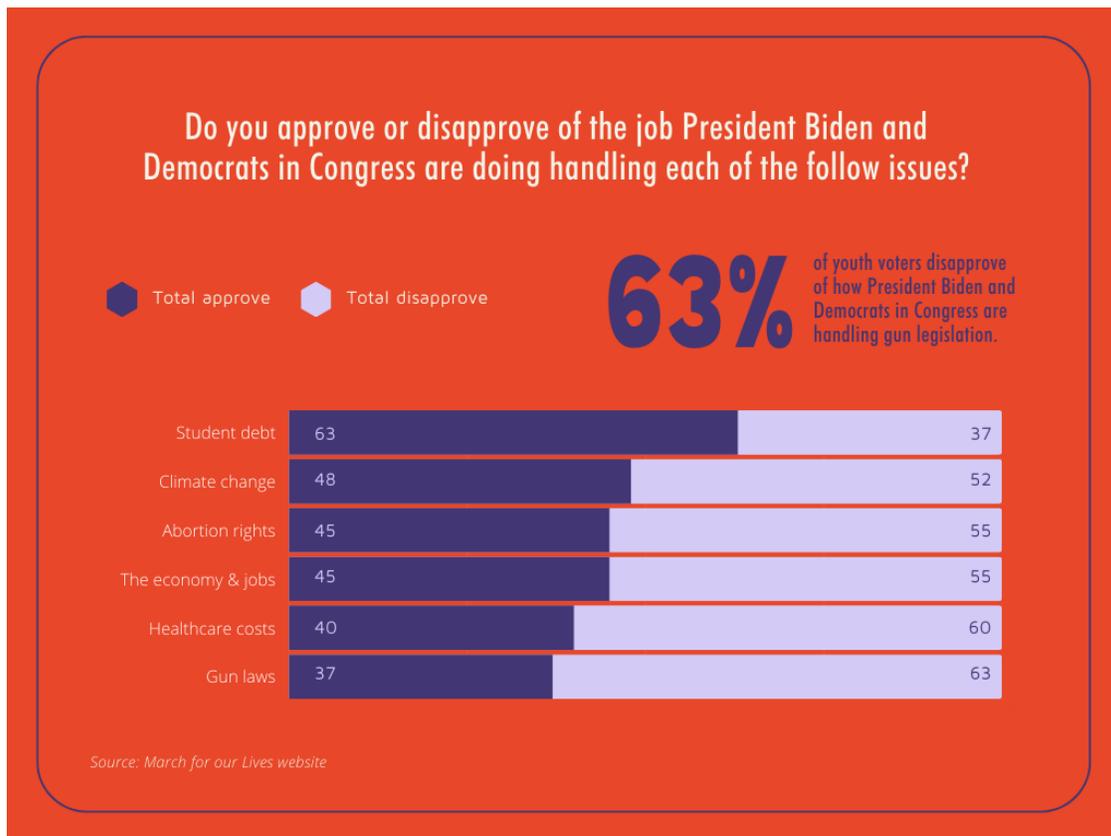


Child-Led Movements

Youth activism has always been part of our history. A great example is the Soweto uprising in South Africa which occurred in 1976. The Soweto uprising was a protest led by black school children in South Africa. Students from various schools began to protest in the streets of Soweto in response to the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in black schools. It is estimated that 20,000 students took part in the protests.

Even though our history is filled with children taking a stand, in recent times it has become more widely accepted to have children lead their movements. Youth activism is on the rise around the world, and adults should be paying more attention[36], youth are no longer waiting to be involved, but they are taking action themselves, and demanding that world leaders listen. In 2018 the March for our Lives (MFOL) movement took the world by storm in response to the 288 school shootings that had taken place between 2009 to 2018. The March for our Lives movement was thus created by X González, Cameron Kasky, David Hogg, Jaclyn Corin, and more, to demand stricter gun-control legislation.

In 2018, 1.4 million to 2.2 million people marched at 763 locations according to the Washington Post analysis. [37] It was further estimated that 200 000 people attended the March of Our Lives in D.C. alone, comparative at the time to the 2017 Women's March, with a crowd size of 440 000 people. [38] In addition to the massive march in Washington, an estimated 800 other marches were held across the country. MFOL was held to be one of the biggest youth protests in the world. [39] Even though MFOL is a youth-led movement, it has shown persistence and continued growth, as of 2022 they have chapters all over the country, and the movement is still active. For instance, they marched in 450+ locations worldwide in 2022, leading to 20+ state laws being passed and the first federal legislation on gun violence prevention in the past 30 years. [40]



March for our Lives is not the only youth-led movement that has gained attention. Greta Thunberg is the initiator of an international climate movement called *Fridays for Future*. *Fridays for Future* is a youth-led global climate strike movement that started in August 2018. On March 15th, 2019, it was estimated that 1.4 million/1.6 million students across 120 countries joined her call in the strike and left school in protest of adults' inaction against climate change.[41] Greta's approach was criticized by people, but it was regarded as the largest global climate action to have ever been taken. *Friday's for Future* has been a catalyst for change and has propelled the debate about climate change further up the agenda more than any adult has been able to do in the last decade. Greta, Autumn, MFOL, Rena, and Shivansh are all proof that to achieve sustainable

future world leaders need to listen to the younger generations. Their movements are what will bring change just as their predecessors have done in the past.

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The internet and social media might have changed the face of child participation forever, however, it is not without its pitfalls. There are four main challenges that youth participation in the digital age presents, they are as follows:

Cyberbullying

The internet and social media as stated above have connected youth all over the world, it has allowed for easier dissemination of information, which has been instrumental for civic engagement. However, on the other side of the spectrum, it has also enabled new channels of connectivity for cyberbullying.[42] Marginalised groups advocating for change on social media platforms have become even greater targets of bullying than in person. As a result of cyberbullying marginalized groups might feel more inclined to not participate online. This creates, yet again a space where marginalized groups might feel silenced in advocating for equal rights leading to ineffective youth participation. Stakeholders need to tackle cyberbullying, and a step in doing that is to identify and close the gaps, in what children know about protecting themselves online.

Inequality in access to technology

Digital technology offers greater access to learning, however, there are millions of children who do not have access, or their access is substandard quality – and they are most often the most vulnerable children in society. This lack of access are obstacles for the larger groups of youth to engage civically online. [43] To combat this inequality in access to technology, participation should not just be online, but should be offline as well. Furthermore, there should be an increase in access to funding for youth actors including for digital activism.[44]

Slacktivism

A topic of contention that was discussed by the Global Fund for Children team was online engagement facilitating "slacktivism," a term that is described as supporting a political or social cause solely through social media or online petitions, without exerting much physical effort. Social media makes it easy for people to

believe they are actively supporting a cause, however, they are not engaging in the issue and generating tangible change. [45]

Social media should not be used only in isolation to effect change. This has been reiterated by Youth4Peace where it was held that "[u]p to 82% of survey respondents stated that online activity needs to be paired up with face-to-face work, while 46% stated that digital civic engagement alone is not efficient enough to produce results." [46] If social media is used as the only means for child participation, it could lead to tokenism and venture into the avenue of ineffective participation. State of Youth(SOY) which is part of KidsRights is a great example of coupling online activism with offline activism. SOY was started in 2019 as an online state to give a voice to young people between the ages of 13 and 24. However, it has grown into a movement that is active both online and offline. In more than 200 local chapters in 30 different countries small initiatives are accomplished by young people which has a direct impact on children's rights in their communities.

Thus, children, organizations, and governments have to couple it with youth envoys or national youth representatives, these two forms of participation used in tandem could be more effective than using it in isolation.

Intergenerational gap

An intergenerational gap can be a huge barrier to effective digital activism as young civic actors are not able to fully interact with decision and policymakers or public institutions via online platforms. [47] Thus, ideas such as Rena's to engage politicians on zooms is extremely innovative and is a step forward in attempting to close the intergenerational gap.

CONCLUSION

There are more than 2.2 billion children in the world, with each child having the right to participate in decisions that affects their lives. Thus, the evolution of child participation in the last decade should be received with enthusiasm. More and more opportunities are being created around the concept of child participation. This is in part thanks to the surge of digital technology and the internet. The digital age has change child participation, but more so, it has empowered youth to be more vocal about the change they want to see. Social media has given youth the platform to call for action, but also to drive their own initiatives to take action into their own hands. This has forced global leaders to listen to youth. Youth envoys, social media and youth led movements are the future of child participation, However, these methods of child

participation are best used in tandem and not in isolation. Social media and technology can be effective tools to further spread the message, but it should not replace in person child participation completely.

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