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**Youth participation in South Africa**

**By Dr Edith Phaswana**

UJ Department of Anthropology & Development Studies

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## *Youth Participation in South Africa: Experiences of settings*

*Edith Phaswana*

*Department of Anthropology and Development Studies,UJ*

*Email: [ephaswana@uj.ac.za](mailto:ephaswana@uj.ac.za)*

### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to present some of the findings of a PhD research carried out in Limpopo Province on youth participation. This research examines youth participation in three selected settings (school councils, youth councils and youth organisations). The objectives of the study were to explore different projects (activities) and approaches (ways of involving youth) taken to participation; and to investigate the influence of approaches and settings (the environment where youth participate) on youths' experiences. In this paper, only the experiences and perceptions of youth leaders are presented. The paper is in three parts: The first part looks into definitions and relevant perspectives on youth. In the second part, some background information and critique on youth participation is discussed. The third and last part of the paper presents a summary of the research findings.

### **Part 1**

#### **Defining youth**

The term 'youth' carries a myriad of meanings in different cultures and societies. There are age-based categories and 'transition-focussed' definitions. The United Nations (2004) defines young people as those in the 15-24 year age group. However, in practice the operational definition varies from country to country. In Italy, for example, the term youth designates (for policy purposes) people aged 14-29 years in the North and 14-32 years in the South (O'Higgins 2001). The African Youth Charter (2006) defines youth as those between the ages 15 and 35 years of age. India's youth policy refers to youth as those aged between 13 and 35 years (MYS 2003).

Today, many sociologists no longer define youth in terms of age-based categories, and attribute this shift to changes in youth transition (Vromen 2003, Roberts 2003). Youth transitions occur at different points in different societies (World Bank 2006). In many Western countries, as Roberts (2003) has argued, a decline in employment opportunities and an increase in tertiary education have challenged traditional transitions. It is thus unrealistic to associate the term 'youth' with any specific age as this varies considerably. Wyn and White (1997) maintain that youth is neither a 'single category' nor a 'homogeneous group' but rather a complex stage. In recent years, many have come to understand that the concept 'youth' is socially constructed, if not, historically and culturally specific (Wyn and White 1997, Vromen 2003, Weller 2007). Considering the different country definitions cited above, it seems that broader age categories are increasingly becoming common, and part of the reasons could be due to these delayed transitions in recent years. South Africa is no exception in this case.

In South Africa, the national youth policy defines youth as those in the age group 15-34 years and this varies between different governments departments. For example, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) defines youth as those between 16 and 30 years of age (NYC 2002a). Correctional Services targets those in the age range between 14 and 25 years, whilst National Youth Health Policy defines youth as those between 10 and 24 years of age (NYC 2002a). It is claimed these subgroups are necessary to ensure appropriate targeting of services for youth.

Some commentators are uncomfortable with this broad age grouping (15-34 years). Iheduru (2004), being one of them, argues against 'lumping 18 year olds with 34 year olds as this muddies the waters for analytical and policy purposes' (p9). He argues that some 34-year olds might be parents of 15-year olds. Whilst this argument makes sense, it may also point out that the discrepancy identified in these inter-generational relationships might be an indication of the challenges South Africa is facing in addressing challenges of the past. Overall, definitions of youth for policy purposes should encompass broad age categories to capture the complex transitional patterns occurring in recent years. However, they should also be able to distinguish between these subgroups by age, to provide clarity and appropriate targeting. Researchers should also be explicit about the age category in their analysis so that readers can understand the population studied.

According to the National Youth Commission (1997), South Africa's broad definition of youth (15-34 years) is formulated considering its historical past. The youth policy document notes that in South Africa, a number of young people faced harsh life circumstances due to repressive and constraining policies promoted by the *apartheid* government (NYC 1997). This has had far-reaching impacts, as many have missed opportunities. It has been hypothesised that for some black South Africans who have not yet completed high school, transition to stable work could take up to 35 years (Sigudhla 2004, SYR 2005). As a result, the broader age category enables the present government to redress the imbalances of the past legacy, because many young people were disadvantaged at that time.

Furthermore, research on youth participation over the years has neglected youth in the South, and more specifically older age categories despite the fact that we know from a variety of sources that in some countries the youth stage is extended. Many studies focus on 10-18 years. Policy recommendations emanating from such studies are of little help to these contexts.

## **Overlapping perspectives on youth**

For most of the twentieth century, public discussion about youth has always been ambiguous: young people were seen as either 'victims' or 'problems' (Hallet and Prout 2003). Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) argue that research on children and adolescents during this time influenced how society viewed young people. It is alleged the dominant psychological approaches of studying children and young people using methods such as observation and experimentation might have also contributed to this negative perception of youth (Checkoway & Richard-Schuster 2003, Pittman & Irby 2000).

The 'youth as victim' perspective viewed young people as 'innocent', 'vulnerable' and 'dependent on adults' (Hallet & Prout 2003). This view has been influential on social policies in many countries. As Catalano et al (1998) argue, since the 1950s the US government set up funding to support 'troubled' youth who were affected by poverty, divorce, single parenthood, family mobility and out-of-wedlock births. In essence, policies focused on protection, either protecting vulnerable children from social threats or protecting society from dangerous children (Calvert et al 2002). In the UK, for example, the plethora of media reports about child neglect, child abuse and other social ills related to children around that time increased protection and control over children, and paranoia in parents (Hallet and Prout 2003). This resulted in young people's movements being widely restricted. In most industrialised countries, parents feel comfortable when children are under adult supervision.

The second perspective is that young people are a 'problem' to society. As others (e.g. Catalano et al 1998) would argue, this perspective emerged as many societies struggled with costs associated with problem behaviours such as juvenile delinquency, early pregnancy, substance abuse and sexual infections among youth. Young people began to be seen as 'problems' that require services to be 'fixed' (Checkoway & Richard-Schuster 2003, Pittman & Irby 2000). New approaches of tackling this problematic group were sought. For example, Catalano et al (1998) state that in the US, intervention and prevention methods were introduced intended to tackle a young person's circumstances such as the family, school, community and peers. The main causes of the above listed social ills were associated with upbringing hence control over children by both parents and society intensified (Catalano et al 1998). These methods were intended to reduce risky behaviours among youth. However, as these authors indicate, problem behaviours continued to escalate despite these efforts because they were targeting a particular (minority) group, in particular 'at-risk youths' and neglecting others.

Hallet and Prout (2003) also note that UK policy assumed that young people are threats to themselves and to society and that there is a need for services that would assist in managing them. This perspective exacerbated the negative social perception towards young people, which is still evident in many societies today. Generally, young people tend to be the most highly restricted citizens. In some public spheres such as market places and shopping malls, they may not be allowed entry because of appearance. In the UK, a two-year old boy was banned from a local shop for putting on a 'hoodie' in a local shop whilst walking with his grandparent, signifying the height of these negative perceptions of young people (Evening Standard 2007). For most part of the twentieth century, writings about youth ran between these two strands of 'victims' and 'problems' (Catalano et al 1998, Calvert et al 2002, World Bank 2003).

In the last two decades, a more affirmative view of youth emerged; young people are seen as 'resources' capable of making valuable contributions to society (Finn and Checkoway 1998, Catalano et al 1998). This perspective was influenced by the notion that emphasis should be put on young people's strengths rather than deficits (Pittman and Irby 2000). Central to the 'youth as resources' perspective is the notion that every young person has the potential to become successful in life including the most marginalized and previously troubled ones (Damon 2004). Research has shown that when given an opportunity to participate, young people can bring in unique contributions (Zeldin et al 2000, McGachie and Smith 2003). This latter perspective has received much attention

recently and is particularly relevant here. The development and understanding of youth participation, the focus of this study, can be positioned within this perspective, as the underlying assumption of young people's participation is that they have a valuable contribution to make in both political and social life. In the US, for example, this paradigm shift was influenced by the increasing attention to the positive youth development (PYD) approach. The PYD approach is based on the assumption that providing young people with the necessary opportunities and support will reduce problem behaviours and promote positive outcomes (Catalano et al 1998). In the UK, the New Social Studies of Childhood that 'recognise children and young people as actors in their own right, shaping and controlling their own life worlds' has also been influential (Weller 2007, p6). This body of knowledge advocates research that values the strengths of youth. Recently, there is a shift in approaches to youth research that align to this new perspective. Edwards and Davis (2004) suggest that contemporary research methods should draw on youth's experiences rather than on representations by others.

In the South African context, the overlapping paradigms in research and thinking about youth are similar. South African literature on youth has been dominated by the 'problem' and 'victim' strand until recently. In the past, they have incurred a wide range of labels that includes 'young lions,' 'young warriors,' 'generation x', 'militants' and 'victims of *apartheid*' (see Everatt 2000). After independence, stereotypes such as 'lost generations' 'born free' and 'market segments' continued to be used (see Everatt 2000). The way society views young people often differs with how they view themselves. For example, some youth structures such as the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) - while not representing mainstream youth - proclaim themselves as an 'army of young revolutionary democrats', a 'reservoir of militants and selfless sacrifice' (ANCYL 2004, p12). This clearly shows that while public perception tended to focus on negativity, it may intentionally or unintentionally influence young people's view of themselves. This can be seen in the way the ANCYL uses extreme labels to describe their positive actions. These connotations are likely to obscure the contribution that young people make in their communities. For some time, both academic and journalistic discourses on South Africa tended to swing between the 'victim' and 'problem' perspective. More recently, the 'resource' strand is beginning to emerge although the overtone is much skewed towards commemoration of the 1976 Soweto Uprising<sup>1</sup>. A critical analysis

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<sup>1</sup> The Soweto uprising is a series of protest between black youth and the South African apartheid government. These riots began on 16 June 1976 in a township called Soweto, South Africa. Today the 16<sup>th</sup> of June is celebrated as a national youth day in South Africa (see also Cooper 1994).

regarding South Africa's current perspective on youth is summarised by Iheduru (2004) in the following manner:

- Young people are seen as 'victims' as their efforts and sacrifices for liberation are less appreciated by the present set up (post-*apartheid*) in that they still experience poverty, joblessness etc.
- Young people are viewed as 'saboteur' because they are viewed as potential threat to national stability and thus need to be completely subdued or incorporated into regime ideology in the sense that they led to the demise of *apartheid*. Thus, they can potentially challenge the present system.
- Young people are perceived as 'national pride'. The argument here is that they were at the front of the liberation struggle and played an instrumental role in dismantling *apartheid*, therefore they require services and interventions for national progress.

Although Iheduru's analysis may be subject to debate, it has been useful in providing a picture of South Africa's perception of youth today. In this analysis, young people are perceived as assets and resources that make constructive contributions to decisions in their communities.

## **Part 2**

### **Understanding youth participation**

Confusions regarding what we mean by 'youth participation' can cause misunderstandings in policy and practice. It should be noted that most writings and debates about youth participation in South Africa focuses on 'political' rather than 'social' participation. We tend to think of 'youth participation' in terms of activities of political wings and this often conceal the voices of millions of young people to be heard. This paper is an attempt to listen to the voices of young people regardless of their political affiliations.

The concept 'youth participation' is multi-dimensional and highly contested. Arguably, this lack of consensus on meaning emanates from the fact that advocates, in attempting to define it, place emphasis on the purpose for involving youth. Where the purpose appears to be political,

participation is described in terms of power relations between adults and youth or citizenship rights. For example, Steve Mokwena (2001) describes youth participation as an 'equalisation of power between adult and youth at an institutional level'. Others speak of 'transformation of (adult) institutions', 'access to or sharing of decision making with youth' and 'promotion of youth citizenship' (see Clark and Percy-Smith 2006, Thomas 2007). In this sense, the focus is on transforming adult-orientated structures. Where the intention for participation is rather social, participation may entail 'taking part in an activity/event', 'building social networks or intergenerational relations'. Here, attention is given to positive development or wellbeing of youth. Thomas (2007) cautions that confusions on meaning cause misunderstanding in policy and practice. The challenge for researchers is which meaning prevails? A response to this question can be daunting; hence, advocates (e.g. Hart 1997, McNeish et al 2002) once recommended that it is important that clarity of purpose for involving youth be articulated from the onset.

The literature also reveals two forms of participation that need clarification: 'individual' and 'collective' participation (Thomas 2006). For some people, participation can be individual, where a young person's view is sought in personal issues such as making crucial health decisions (see Alderson 2002). For others, participation is collective, where young people come together in a forum to make their views heard (see Matthew 2001). Within the context of this paper, the focus is on collective participation at an institutional level. Youth participation is understood as mechanisms that recognise the interests and potentials of youth by giving them an opportunity to be involved in matters that directly affect them at institutional level (The McReary Society 2002). This could be adults engaging youth in projects or programme action, youth-only initiatives, youth representing peers in decision making, or even isolated structures that mimic adult structures.

The purposes of participation have been variously identified. Landsown (2001) contend that it is to strengthen democratic principles among youth and to uphold children's rights. At the core of the literature on youth participation is the supposition that incorporating youth in decision making increases their chance to influence services and policies directed at them (FitzPatrick et al 2000, Borland et al 2001, Sinclair 2004). It is further claimed that through participation young people can benefit by gaining skills that can be put to use in future employment (Gray 2002). Participation also promotes development of young people. Thomas (2007) notes that different assertions will have varied implications in practice.



## **Some background on youth participation**

Since the 1990s youth participation has been at the centre of ongoing debate in settings that are relevant to young people and, in particular, its significance in improving young people's status in society. The United Nation Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), and the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (1995) have been the main international influences, but the most notable precursor is the International Youth Year in 1985 which informed discussions about the ideal of youth participation. Since then, youth participation has gained momentum in both theory and practice. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (1989) is the most significant, and it states:

‘States parties shall assume to the child who is capable of forming his or her own 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.

For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law’ (p5).

As can be noted, the UN Convention does not make it mandatory to have children involved at the actual point of decision-making. It only requires that adults find out what the children's views are and consider them when they make decisions about their welfare. Although the convention is in most cases cited as a point of reference for youth participation, some authors (e.g Ennew 1995) criticised it for equating a ‘Northern’ child with a universal child. In so doing, this author argues that it has a damaging consequence on the context of the ‘South’. Recent literature from the ‘South’ point to challenges and limitations of children's participation (see for example Mniki and Rosa 2007, Naker 2007)

Another important tool that justifies youth participation in the context of developing countries is the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (1995). In 1995, the global situation of youth compelled state governments to identify 10 priorities of action that needs attention. These were identified as education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment,

drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure time's activities, girls and young women and participation (UN 1995). Five more priority areas were later added: globalisation, information and communication technologies, HIV/AIDS, youth and conflict, and intergenerational relationships (UN 2005). It is priority 10, participation, which is pertinent in this study as it calls for meaningful participation of youth in society and decision making. It is noted:

'The capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account. .... Any efforts and proposed actions in the other priority areas considered in this programme are, in a certain way, conditioned by enabling the economic, social and political participation of youth, as a matter of critical importance' (UN 1995, p25).

It appears that the realisation of other priorities rests in society's willingness to consider and act upon the perspectives of youth. The statement above suggests that priority 10 (participation) is key to all other areas. Young people are afforded an opportunity to construct the world they would want to live in. This seems sensible as the decisions that are taken today can inevitably affect their future. Apart from these institutional drives, intellectual influences also played a role in promoting the significance of youth participation. In fact, the past years have witnessed a proliferation of literature on youth participation with Roger Hart's (1992) groundbreaking work on children and youth participation.

Many government departments and non-governmental organisations in both the developed and developing world prioritised youth participation in settings that young people find themselves in, on a daily basis (Landsdown 2001, Kirby and Bryson 2002). The purpose for involving youth varies across countries but all share a common view that participation is a right. In some countries, institutional mechanisms such as youth councils were established to encourage youth participation at a local level (see for example Matthew 2001, Alderson 2000, Kirby and Bryson 2002, Webster 2004b). Young people are elected to serve as advisory and consultative committees at various organisations (see Zeldin et al 2000). Hill et al (2004) contend that these types of structures offer youth an opportunity to learn. Like many countries, South Africa, has also established formal structures.

In 1996, the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, commissioned young people from various organisations around the country to develop a policy for youth (see NYC 1996, Everatt 2000). This resulted in a number of legislative and policy frameworks being initiated: The National Youth Policy (1996), The National Youth Commission Act (1996) and its amendment in 2000, the National Youth Development Policy Framework (2002-2007) and now lately the (NYDA) National Youth Development Agency (2009). These initiatives pioneered the formalisation of youth participation in the country's social and political life. Youth participation became an integral part of the government's development plan (see ANC 1994, NYC 2002a). Following decades of informal youth political participation, formal youth structures such as the National Youth Commission (NYC), South African Youth Council (SAYC) and Umsombovu Youth Fund (UYF) were established. This move was deemed necessary for a country in transformation. The increasing attention towards youth participation was also influenced by South Africa's ratification of international treaties mentioned above including regional conventions such as the African Children's Charter (1999), and more recently the African Youth Charter (2006).

In fact, the past decade has witnessed dramatic changes in how local institutions are managed in South Africa. First, South Africa has broadened the participation of stakeholders at public schools. There has been a shift of power from educational administration authorities to school governing bodies (SGB). The South African Schools Act (1996), Section II (1) states: 'A Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) must be established at every school enrolling learners in the eighth grade and higher'. Accordingly, RCLs have been established at secondary schools. Second, the voluntary sector, in the form of community-based youth organisation, has a long history of youth development in South Africa. During apartheid, this sector played a pivotal role in advocating for improvement of children and young people's circumstances. Many of these organisations are supported by international agencies. There has always been a culture of listening to the voice of young people in some of these organisations. Finally, youth councils have been established at local municipalities to lobby 'youth friendly' decisions. Following the first national conference on youth and local government in May 2002, youth units and councils were established at municipalities to advocate youth matters at a local level. This is despite the fact that in South Africa municipalities have no legal requirement to provide for youth. It was suggested following the conference that young people be integrated into planning at municipalities. Since then successive conferences on youth and local government have been organised every two years to measure progress.

Despite favourable policies, a few years after formalisation of youth structures the theory and practice of youth participation is being widely debated. Mokwena (2001) argues that the 'institutionalisation' and 'centralisation' of formal youth structures such as the NYC and SAYC have rendered them distant from ordinary youth. He further points out that these structures also lack the necessary means to secure resources for developing and implementing youth programmes. It is alleged that SAYC experience ineffective leadership at national and provincial level, lack organisational capacity and strategy to acquire resources from government (ANCYL 2004).

There are questions asked about the NYC as an adequate structure to respond to the challenges faced by youth, as it is allegedly viewed as poorly coordinated (ANCYL 2004). It is further claimed that the NYC lacks a comprehensive strategy for engaging with government departments, and the resources and capacity to initiate programmes both at national and provincial levels. Webster (2004) contend that at national level many government departments lack the will to involve youth in participation as mandated by government and youth policy. Where this has happened, participatory mechanisms are still restricted to consultation rather than involving youth in the whole process including decision making.

Iheduru (2004) analysed youth participation in the post-*apartheid* South Africa and concluded that the current attention on youth is an attempt by the state to 'subjugate or incorporate the youth into regime ideology of non-racial citizenship and moral consciousness'(p29). This idea of moral consciousness can be subjected to debate now lately. This author further alleges that all these programmes are hampered by the politicisation of youth development in SA by benefiting those youth who have ties with the ruling party. He maintained that despite the increase in youth programmes during Mbeki's tenure, formal institutions advocating for youth development appears to support the conviction that the state want to manage the youth. ANCYL (2004) argues that UYF operates in isolation and fails to engage other youth structures such as the NYC and SAYC.

At the community level, strong hierarchies make it hard for young people to participate locally (Action Survey Report 2000 cited in Webster 2004a). Power at municipalities and schools is still in

the hands of adults who control both structures and processes and thus neglecting youth (Webster 2004b). Municipalities, on the other hand, appeared reluctant to involve existing youth councils in planning and delivery of services (NYC 2002b, Webster 2004b). It is alleged that at schools the LRC is still viewed as a disruptive force by the Department of Education, teachers and parents alike (ANCYL 2004). Webster (2004b) further points out that individual factor such as lack of education make young people struggle to 'fit into' the systems of participatory democracy. She argues that participatory process requires skills, knowledge, experience, leadership and managerial capabilities over which many young people currently lack. Richter (2007) concluded that youth participation in the African context is in most cases hampered by corruption within institutions. Seemingly, youth participation in South Africa is fraught with some practical difficulties.

### **Part 3**

## **Perceptions and experiences of youth leaders at a local level**

### **Research locale**

This research took place at Capricorn district, Limpopo. Capricorn District Municipality (CDM) was founded in 2000 in terms of the Municipal Structures Act 1998 (ACT NO.117 of 1998) (CDM 2005). The district is divided into five local municipalities of Aganang, Blouberg, Molemole, Lepelle-Nkumpi and Polokwane. There are about 1.1 million people living in Capricorn district (CDM 2005). Two reasons are cited for the choice of this district. First, Capricorn is a mix of town and rural settlements and thus provides a suitable context to capture the diverse socio-economic conditions that might have an influence on young people's experiences in the unique context of South Africa's spatial distribution. Second, Capricorn contains the provincial capital city of Polokwane, where a number of youth organisations are concentrated. In terms of youth provision, Capricorn has been proactive in the region in terms of developing programmes for youth. For this reason, it was considered appropriate for study to maximise the potential of finding relevant youth initiatives. Capricorn is also the most 'youthful' district, the economic hub of Limpopo, so many young people who struggle to migrate to big cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town, travel to Polokwane city in search for better opportunities.

## **Design and methodology**

The purpose of this research was to capture, analyse, interpret, and understand the experiences of youth leaders using their own statements. Qualitative approach was apt as it acknowledges the use of methods that enable ‘expression of words’ and ‘perceptions’ through conversation (Barber and Naulty 2005). Two types of interviews were used to elicit data presented here: one-to-one, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. The notion that respondents have their own unique way of defining the world is also significant here (Denzin 1970b). Armed with information that there is little information about the experiences of participating youth from countries in the South (UN 2004), it became necessary to provide this alternative knowledge using this approach due to its emphasis on contextual depth and the particularity of each situation. While qualitative studies due to small samples are often criticised for their lack of generalisability, it is argued here that a qualitative approach can be ‘useful in highlighting the existence of certain phenomena’ (Van Maanen 1998 in Kelliher 2005, p123). Hence, the perspective represented here does not represent those of youth leaders in the whole of Capricorn nor the institutions but of those who participated in the study. It is hoped that their experiences could shed some light and inform us about a leaders’ perspective and understanding of participation practices.

A total of 12 institutions (schools, youth organisations, and municipality) were selected using a maximum variation sampling technique (see Appendix 1). The purpose was to enhance the chances of finding a diverse perspective from youth. A total of 42 youth leaders took part in this research. There were more males (n=27) than females (n=15) in all settings. Twenty-three leaders were above 25 years of age, as compared to 19 in the category 15-24 years. Older participants came from the municipal (22-34 years) and organisation (20-29 years) settings, whereas the younger participants (15-21 years) were found at schools. Overall, the mean age of participants was 26.5 years. Information about ethnicity, past leadership position, term of service, training for current role, political affiliation and current activity were also requested from the youth leaders as in Appendix 2. Previous literature highlighted that some of these characteristics have been shown to shape youth’s perceptions and experiences during participation (See Vromen 2003).

## **Findings**

The following are some of the findings drawn from the research with youth leaders in Capricorn district. I present the experiences that cut across all setting and those that were setting-specific.

## **Experiences that cut across all settings**

- **Young people are involved in a variety of projects.** In every institution studied, youth engaged in action, either solely or in conjunction with adults. For instance, leaders from schools mentioned that they used their capacities to make a difference in their schools and communities: they were involved in programmes for strengthening relationships (S4), addressing poverty in their communities (S1), and raising awareness about the environment (S2). Leaders from municipalities reported that they were involved in coordination and governance programmes (M1), capacity building (M4), and educational promotion (M3). Within the youth organisations, young people were engaging fellow youths in addressing some of the collective challenges (.e.g. teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS) they face. Overall, youth had the opportunity to explore possibility for action within their institutions.
- **Four typologies of participation were identified across the sample: youth autonomy, adult-youth partnerships, youth-led collaboration and adult-led collaboration.** In terms of approaches taken to participation, in-depth interviews with staff and youth revealed that certain aspects at individual institutions guided the identification of approaches. For example, youth's courage to resist adult imposition at S4 prompted adults to let youth design their own project (youth autonomy). Shared vision between adult and youth resulted in a working collaboration at S1 (Adult-youth partnerships). Lack of certain competencies among youth in O1 prompted them to approach adults for assistance and guidance (Youth-led collaboration). Outsider intervention at O3 resulted in youth being assigned duties to carry out the project (Adult-led collaboration). This study further added evidence that indeed youth can be a valuable resource that contributes to community life, and thus validate the 'youth as resource' perspective. Approaches such as youth autonomy, youth-led collaboration and adult-youth partnership triggered positive experiences such as learning, reflection, and a sense of independence among youth. Youth autonomy was at the same time perceived as challenging due to minimal response from fellow youths. Adult-led collaborations were associated with negative experiences such as a lack of sense of direction. The study also found that young people who took part in initiation, planning and decision making of a project reported positive learning experiences.

- **There is an opportunity for young people to learn skills that could be useful for both their personal and social development.** Across all settings youth leaders felt they were able to practice leadership, connect with others, gain civic skills, and to consider multiple perspectives. Other learning experiences include conflict management, project management, enhanced confidence, improved patience, prioritisation, working under pressure, drawing budgets.
- **Supportive adults enable participation** – identifying with supportive adults was crucial for influencing decisions. Participants voiced using supportive adults to deal with the challenges they face within these systems. They highlighted that realising the inconsistencies that habitually prevailed, they would informally discuss their concerns with these supportive adults to lobby support in promoting particular issues, prior to formal meetings.
- **Lack of training for both youth leaders and adults** – The majority of staff and youth interviewed revealed that there was no training provided prior to taking the role. All youth leaders reported to have previously participated in a leadership position outside their current position. Seemingly, they were using their previous experience. Some youth leaders pointed that they were not being informed about their rights, duties and responsibilities. They felt powerless as resources were managed by powerful adults who in most cases withhold them from youth.
- **Leaders' authority challenged-** In terms of experiences with peers, participants from schools alleged that the leadership role had some implications, as their authority was often challenged by peers. It was discovered through the interview with participants that in some schools, the school councillors were sometimes expected to assist teachers in enforcing discipline. As a result, peers would attempt to break the rules simply to challenge the leader. The interviews suggested that there were instances where school councillors felt uncomfortable to discipline their friends when breaking rules. While some participants felt embarrassed about reprimanding friends, those who did, reported that on many occasions their friendships were disrupted. Although some participants showed concern about their friendship ties being interrupted, the majority were determined to bear the loss that comes with this role.



- **A change of attitude by adults** – Literature points to the attitude of adults as one of the barriers of youth participation (see Matthew 2003). An important point made by the youth leaders here was that there was a change of attitude on the part of adults. Participants highlighted that their first encounter with adults was characterised by hostility and power struggles. However, through gradual engagement this changed for the better as adults became more accommodative and receptive of youth. What was interesting was that leaders from the municipality seemed suspicious of this change of attitude and linked this to certain events. First, there were concerns that the change in attitude was due to credits received from senior structures of government in terms of youth provision. Second, there were suspicions among youth leaders that the change in attitude was for political gain. Apparently, these youths felt that through their efforts they were able to influence the attitudes of adults. Seemingly, adults become more positive and supportive when they realise the benefits of youth participation.
- **Expectations of deference** - There was a general feeling among youth leaders that in situations where they had to question adults' conduct and practices in the board, they were labelled as 'disrespectful'. Some participants attributed this to clear role expectations between the young and old embedded in their culture. What was remarkable with these participants was the fact that they were able to understand that they have equal status with adults in the board even though this created tensions.

### *Setting-specific experiences*

#### **School**

- **Transformation of behaviour** - Within the school setting, young people reported that there is an opportunity for one's behaviour to be transformed as a result of this participation. A considerable number of male participants indicated that prior to this role, their behaviours were inappropriate; however, through engagement they changed for the better. They suggest this was also motivated by a need to serve as role models for their peers.

- **Preferential treatment** – Youth leaders from schools felt that they were receiving preferential treatment from teachers, and attributed this to their special status. A recurring factor that emerged from the interviews was that teachers preferred leaders in comparison to other learners in the school. This privileged position also enabled them to access spaces other pupils would not be allowed e.g. headmaster’s office. Preferential treatment lies at the heart of teacher-pupil relationships at schools. At schools, some pupils may be favoured because of their academic abilities, social class, or positive behaviour. From the perspectives of these participants, it appears that leadership position would add to these seemingly unfair practices at schools.
- **Exclusion when ‘teacher-related matters’ are discussed** – there were reports that while the LRC would take part in these collective decision making meetings, on many occasions they were excluded when ‘teacher-related’ matters were discussed. The LRCs opinions regarding this exclusion diverged. Some participants from former model C schools preferred to be excluded from ‘teacher-related matters’ as they thought it would be burdensome. Others, who preferred to be excluded, felt it was beyond their remit to discuss teacher’s matters. Participants from township school were against being excluded from teacher-related matters arguing that they have equal rights as all other components of the SGB in discussing matters (except in financial matters<sup>2</sup>). Arguably, this did not seem effective in practice.
- **Competing priorities** – many members of the LRC interviewed here were in Grade 12. They therefore highlighted the challenge of balancing between their school work and participation activities. As curriculum is the core of school activities and often tends to be more demanding during the final year, they often heightened leaders’s anxieties. The LRC cited that a balance is needed between meeting curriculum requirements, satisfying teachers, and preparation for higher education.

## **Municipality**

- **Minimal representation of other youth groups** – It was discovered that the youth councils is dominated by members of ANCYL and YCL, with an overrepresentation of black males from townships. There were no representation of youth from Indian, coloureds and white

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<sup>2</sup> Pupils can only discuss financial matters at schools when they are 21 years old.

communities in the youth council. It is difficult to establish whether these youth groups were marginalised or uninterested. However, what emerged from the interviews was that attempts to attract these young people from these communities into the youth councils were unsuccessful.

- **Vulnerability to manipulation** – Concerns were raised by the youth leaders from various municipalities that some of the practices of local councillors and administrators subject them to manipulation. Most youth leaders at municipalities indicated that on many occasions they were forced to confront adults where there were suspicions of corruption within the municipality. As would be expected, this often created tensions. Some officials would then victimise youth leaders who appear vociferous during these confrontations. However, as the youth leaders claim, there are leaders who join the youth council hoping to secure jobs within the municipalities, and this seemed problematic as many find themselves compelled to defer to authorities, for fear of victimisation. Apparently, adults threatened these ‘uncooperative’ youth leaders that should job opportunities arise, they will never be hired by the municipality. Sadly participants mentioned that, in such cases, they end up ‘buying in’ to authorities. In addition to this, the youth leaders described how local administrators would use members of the youth council to save labour costs. They reported that at times they were expected to perform certain duties without being compensated.
- **Constraint of resources** - the youth council in South Africa is an independent structure affiliated to SAYC, yet, it is reliant on the municipality for resources although the municipality is not legally bound to provide for youth. This was a concern for youth leaders as it rendered them ineffective. The limited resources had a negative effect on the functioning of the youth council, as they struggled to plan and advance programmes. Again, this was more of a challenge for youth councillors from local municipalities. These constraints were attributed to municipal authorities who were seen as deliberately withholding resources in order to incapacitate them. Overall, the role of the municipal authorities as partners in terms of youth provision was heavily criticised by the youth councillors, particularly as it relates to dissemination of information and allocation of space. It also appeared that those in local rural municipalities were the ones mostly affected.

## **Youth organisations**

- **A ‘generation gap’?** – A generation gap exists when there are differences in opinions between an older generation and a younger one. This notion of a generation gap was mentioned by participants and was fairly strong, particularly as it relates to programme choice. A generational gap is probably what these participants could describe as explaining their difference in perspective with adults. This phenomenon tends to be a justifiable excuse for dismissing youth’s inputs as it appears from the perspectives of those interviewed. This widely held assumption of an existing generation gap tended to reinforce imposition by adults. However, in this particular instance, it seems this generation gap was evident in cases where decisions and choices have to be made. Interestingly, participants were keen to acknowledge these differences in perspectives while at the same time recognise the need to cooperate and maintain healthy relationships within the board. The idea of a ‘generational gap’ becomes slippery when some groups are prevented from articulating their opinions simply because of their age. In such cases, it becomes more of an underestimation of youth’s knowledge rather than a generational gap.
- **Feelings of ‘misuse’** - Youth leaders felt that youth organisation managers and donors were using them to advance their agenda while not catering for their need and priorities. It was alleged that their opinions are not sought during programmatic decision making and managers of organisations also tend to change priority areas to suit those of donors. They expressed great frustrations regarding the approach to participation within these setting.
- **Difficulties in sustaining the group** – Participants mentioned that their peers were deserting the organisations due to internal problems such as financial difficulties, simply because young people joined with the hope of making money out of these organisations, and when this did not prove feasible, they left the organisations. Another participant highlighted that sometimes membership was dropping because of the difficulties the organisations was encountering. They complained about youth people being argumentative, particularly in meetings where adult members were not present.

## Conclusion

As the empirical evidence show, youth participation in South Africa is fraught with some practical difficulties. While acknowledging that it is too early to reach conclusion about its impact on youth, I would like to argue that youth participation has the potential to promote social learning, and thus

likely to complement more formal approaches to learning. The youth leaders interviewed here demonstrated an inherent tradition of youth leadership in this country, their capacity to initiate projects, scrutinise authorities' actions, as observed, and demonstrate a continuation of this tradition which is essential for participation. Their observations of, and encounters with, different adults within these settings challenge professionals working with youth to review their practices. Traditional notions of 'being young' in this context are likely to clash with the principle of youth participation. The findings also provide an insight into the setting-specific challenges that need to be taken into account to promote meaningful engagement of youth.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Institutions where youth leaders were selected**

#### **Schools**

**School 1 (S1)** - a black state, secondary school located in a township.

**School 2 (S2)** - a black state secondary school situated in a rural area.

**School 3 (S3)** – a mixed, state secondary school located in an urban area.

**School 4 (S4)** – a mixed, independent secondary school situated in an urban area.

**School 5 (S5)** – a mixed FET college with the main campus located in urban area and two other campuses in township and rural locations

#### **Municipalities**

**Municipal 1 (M1)** – a local municipality located in a township serving both rural and township communities.

**Municipal 2 (M2)** – a local municipality located in a rural municipality serving rural communities.

**Municipal 3 (M3)** – a local municipality located in an urban area serving urban, township and rural communities.

**Municipal 4 (M4)** – a district municipality located in an urban area overseeing all the five local municipalities in Capricorn.

#### **Organisations**

**Organisation 1 (O1)** – a youth-led initiative dealing with arts and culture projects

**Organisation 2 (O2)** – a youth led initiative offering life skills programmes

**Organisation 3 (O3)** – an adult-led initiative offering sexual health programmes

## Appendix 2

### Breakdown of participants' characteristics by setting

<i>Characteristics</i>		<b>School (17)</b>	<b>Municipal (18)</b>	<b>Organisation (7)</b>	<b>Total (42)</b>
<b>Age</b>	<i>Over 25 years</i>	4	15	4	<b>23</b>
	<i>15-24 years</i>	13	3	3	<b>19</b>
<b>Sex</b>	<i>Male</i>	10	13	4	<b>27</b>
	<i>Female</i>	7	5	3	<b>15</b>
<b>Locality</b>	<i>Urban</i>	9	9	2	<b>20</b>
	<i>Rural</i>	4	4	2	<b>10</b>
	<i>Semi urban</i>	4	5	3	<b>12</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<i>Blacks</i>	16	18	7	<b>41</b>
	<i>White</i>	1			<b>1</b>
<b>Past leadership experiences</b>		17	18	7	<b>42</b>
<b>Term of service</b>	<i>1<sup>st</sup> term</i>	8	4	3	<b>15</b>
	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> term</i>	9	14	4	<b>27</b>
<b>Training received</b>	<i>Trained</i>	7	5		<b>12</b>
	<i>Not trained</i>	10	13	7	<b>30</b>
<b>Affiliation to youth structures</b>	<i>Affiliated to ruling party</i>	3	15	4	<b>22</b>
	<i>Affiliated to other structures</i>		3		<b>3</b>
	<i>Not affiliated</i>	14		3	<b>17</b>
<b>Current activity</b>	<i>Paid employment</i>		6	2	<b>8</b>
	<i>unemployed</i>		12	5	<b>17</b>
	<i>In education</i>	17			<b>17</b>