



# A tale of two Youth Expert Groups (YEGs): Learnings from youth activism in research in India and Brazil

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## Abstract

This paper explores how research advisory groups can be a vehicle for youth activism. It draws on our experiences with young activists, aged 15–26 years, in India and Brazil, who were advisors on a research project focused on youth livelihoods in cities. These young people played a vital role in supporting youth researchers, identifying research themes and developing engagement and advocacy strategies. Through this paper, we explore how the Youth Expert Group advisory model evolved differently in each location and examine how these were shaped by the context, the ‘adult’ research team and the youth activists themselves. A critically reflexive response in intergenerational partnership is essential to support youth activists in research activities.

## KEYWORDS

intergenerational research, research co-production methodology, youth activism, youth advisory groups

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth activists shape discourses across many contexts, including research, pushing for participatory democracy that is representative of young people in society. Participation of young people in decision-making is a move towards the realization of their rights, as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Participatory research with young people, centred on co-production with adults and young people, respects and upholds young people's rights and can become a pathway and vehicle to strengthen youth activism. A recent development within such research, explored in this paper, is the involvement of young people working with (adult) researchers in advisory roles.

This paper draws on the experiences of developing and working with two research advisory Youth Expert Groups (YEG) in the Shaping Youth Futures project, focused on young people's livelihoods in urban India and Brazil. The project, which spanned 2.5 years, built on established research partnerships and community initiatives with young activists in both these countries. While young people were involved in both advisory and co-researcher capacities, we focus in this paper on the vital role they played in advising the research project, identifying research themes and developing engagement and advocacy strategies to take forward into practice and policy. These young people identified themselves as activists, who wanted to make a difference in their communities. This paper contributes to wider debates on research methodologies, reflecting on the processes, considerations and challenges when engaging youth activists as advisors in multi-year, cross-country, research projects, within the context of a global pandemic. Further information about the youth-led research projects that resulted from Shaping Youth Futures can be found in a forthcoming publication, discussing how the projects were presented in ways chosen by the young people who led them.

The project began with a particular youth engagement model in mind, however, the YEGs evolved according to the local geographies and contexts. In this paper, we unpack the evolution of the YEGs, and the fluidities of roles and responsibilities among young people. We also uncover and make explicit the intergenerational dynamics in this project, highlighting how the experiences of working with youth activists informed moments of reflexivity for adult facilitators on the roles all actors play in these partnerships. As this project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, we turn to look at challenges and adaptations of engaging youth activists in times of crisis.

## YOUTH ACTIVISM IN RESEARCH: FROM PARTICIPANTS TO PROTAGONISTS

In recent years, young people's participation in research has involved a wide range of activities, from being research participants, to advisors, to co-researchers. Involving young people in research, especially through advisory capacities, has been evidenced through research topic selection, data collection tools and methods, analysis of findings, dissemination and knowledge exchange activities (Cluver et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2016; Oliveras et al., 2018; Pavarini et al., 2019). Increasingly, we have also seen co-authorship of academic and non-academic publications with young people (Arunkumar et al., 2018; Hawke et al., 2018).

Literature provides us with some excellent examples of young people's involvement in advisory capacities, for example, Cluver et al. (2020) and Heffernan et al. (2017). Cluver et al. (2020)

worked for a decade with children and young people's advisory groups (aged 10–17 years) in South Africa on a project related to HIV response. Young people in this project were advisors, refining research questions, and co-designing adolescent-friendly quantitative and qualitative research tools. They also co-led knowledge exchange and policy development activities, working in close collaboration with the South African government and the South African AIDS Council as young advisors.

Similarly, in Heffernan et al.'s (2017) project, young people in Canada, aged between 12 and 29 years, had an advisory and mentorship role. Most of these young people had lived experiences of mental health challenges and were involved in the design, planning and development of the project. These young people worked together with researchers and mental health providers to inform service planning and policy development. In this case, two of the young people were co-authors of the paper and were also employed as youth engagement facilitators (YEFs). Together with adult facilitators, they co-founded the National Youth Advisory Committee (NYAC), which was a group of young people aged 12–29 years with interests in mental health and substance abuse issues. As part of the role, YEFs guided NYAC members in designing and implementing youth-led mental health projects and conducted their own research project under the mentorship of an adult facilitator. Through this mentorship, YEFs were supported to develop new skills and build relationships, with the opportunity to attend conferences and events together with adult facilitators.

These examples highlight not only the role that young people play in providing advice on methodological learning for research, but also illustrate the opportunities that partnership with young people can open for supporting young people's rights and agency. This resonates with literature on youth protagonism, or *protagonismo* from Brazil and Latin American countries (Costa, 2000; Cussianóvich, 2000), as well as work by Arnot and Swartz (2012), on finding mechanisms to support youth agency and their rights to citizenship. Over the years, the discourse on youth engagement has evolved from a language of participation into protagonism, particularly in Latin America, emphasizing that young people not only have agency and autonomy, but also play an active and important role in shaping their community and the spaces around them (Contreras & Pérez, 2011; Cussianóvich, 2003; Figueroa-Grenett, 2017; Liebel, 2007; Nuggehalli, 2014; Pavelic & Salinas, 2014; Pavez-Soto, 2012).

Protagonism has similarities and differences with activism. Protagonism involves a sense of empowerment and ownership of a situated knowledge of those who can speak for themselves. It entails an emphasis where underrecognized groups move to the forefront, and importantly, relates to the notion of developing and exercising one's citizenship. Drawing from the Latin American mobilization of a protagonist role (*papel protagónico*), the focus is on reshaping citizen participation in non-adult-centric ways. Liebel (2007) references children's protagonism as increasing awareness of young people's capabilities and demands for their independent and influential role in society. Seen in this context, protagonism pushes the boundary on children and young people having more than just a 'voice', and towards the idea that they have the ability to bring about change according to their own ideas and perspectives (Nuggehalli, 2014). As Richards-Schuster (2012, p. 97) notes, it is not about 'adding more chairs to the table', but that 'the ability to add chairs also guarantees that the advice of young people will have influence and will affect the conversations, priorities and decisions made'.

Like protagonism, activism is typically presented as challenging the 'status quo', by addressing power hierarchies and systemic inequalities (e.g. Conner & Rosen, 2016; Taft, 2010). Activism might involve actions that are even more challenging than protagonism: it is not only about becoming part of decision-making 'around the table' but more disruptive protests or transformative

potential (O'Brien et al., 2018). But there is also a strong seam of literature that advocates for recognizing less dramatic forms of 'political work', as Bosco (2010) writes, where everyday activities of children connect their families to the political and thus, are forms of activism (see also Nolas, 2015; Nolas et al., 2017). Part of the attraction of both youth protagonism and youth activism is its upending of generational ordering (Taft, 2011), so that adult control of young people's participation is undone and young people themselves are claiming the spaces for action, deciding on their own priorities and their own solutions.

## Intergenerational partnership in research

Several models have been developed to suggest ways of effective and meaningful engagement of children and young people since Hart's early working adapting Arnstein's (1969) foundational ladder of participation for citizen participation to reflect varying degrees of youth (non)participation. Within research, Moore et al. (2016) and Sellars et al. (2020) observed that there is a spectrum of engagement. On the one end is young people affirming and approving decisions made by researchers, or providing light consultation and comments on materials developed. On the other end, young people take responsibility for the research by developing research questions, leading data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Youth-adult research partnerships have been described as a site of co-reflexive activity (Jones et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2016). Careful deliberation is required as to how young people can be engaged in effective, equal and enabling capacities (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Such engagement unsettles the research process as it invites a critical assessment of the assumptions made in the practice of research, of the contributions that researchers and participants make to the process, and how data are analysed, interpreted and presented. In their rope ladder participation model, Arunkumar et al. (2018) also advocated the importance of having a flexible, responsive approach to address the complex relationships of youth advisory councils and adult-youth partnerships. Recognizing the cultural context of where these models are set, and to account for the young person's everyday life, is vital for successful relationship building. Factors such as the availability of resources, or other commitments in young people's lives, can have a significant influence on the dynamics of their participation. This leads to questions on the kinds of spaces that are being created to foster partnerships between adults and young people within research projects and the self-selecting nature of these councils.

Arunkumar et al. (2018) observe that, while reciprocal adult-youth partnerships in research are idealized and attempted, these are often not achieved in practice, and result in limited decision-making and participation of young people. Levels of involvement do not necessarily translate into *feelings* of involvement, and differences in power and status can arise which require continuous efforts to address these power imbalances. Facilitating the agency of young people may involve, for example, setting ground rules to create safe spaces, or shifting meeting places to familiar locations where youth feel comfortable, rather than in traditionally adult-led spaces (Hawke et al., 2018; Sellars et al., 2020). Other studies also note the need for flexibility, mentorship, authentic decision-making, clearly defined roles and reciprocal learning, where everyone is both a student and a teacher, and which formally acknowledges the contributions of youth (Cluver et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Heffernan et al., 2017; Richards-Schuster, 2012). These partnerships are intended to create meaningful opportunities for active participation, to embrace inclusion and diversity of identities, perspectives and ideas among young people.

Despite the motivation to encourage more active forms of youth engagement, studies also recognize the potential value of training and support to better facilitate the youth-adult partnership. Depending on the nature of the project, this could involve training on research design, developing research tools and methods, holding meeting briefs and pre-briefs and skill development and mentorship throughout the course of the project (Hawke et al., 2018). As Pavarini et al. (2019) note, the aim is not to make young people 'experts' in this area, but rather use training and development to enable meaningful participation and contribution. Equally, (adult) researchers may benefit from training on co-researching and co-production, and how best to engage with children and young people.

The activism literature suggests that much of activism is collective, rather than individual (e.g. Martin, 2007; Taft, 2010), and perhaps even more so for children and young people so that they can act in contexts of intergenerational hierarchies (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2022). However, the activism literature points out that a host of underpinning activities, relationships and resources are often needed for the more overt activism to take place, which Martin (2007, p. 22) names as 'an ecology of activism'. This leads to questions about how research—a particular power and claim to generate and share knowledge (Tisdall, 2021)—can support activism: for example, that young activists can develop more effective, targeted actions through the skills they acquired and a deepened knowledge of the issues which they are addressing. This leads to interesting reflections on first, how research can empower and invigorate activism in different contexts, and second, the dynamics and intergenerational relations in this ecology. In consideration of these ideas, based on an engagement over a 2.5-year research process, our paper explores the complexities of adult-youth relationships in research and the role that training and mentorship play in engaging young activists in advisory capacities.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on our experiences with two YEG in India and Brazil, in the Shaping Youth Futures research project focused on livelihood options in cities and barriers to accessing them. Funded by the British Academy (YF\190041), Shaping Youth Futures was led by researchers from the University of Edinburgh in the UK (School of GeoSciences and Moray House School of Education and Sport) in partnership with the International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), and in India; Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), Fields of View (FOV) and National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA).

The aim of the project was to understand ways of accessing livelihoods in cities for young people and the barriers faced in doing so. Project partners, YUVA in India and CIESPI in Brazil, engaged young people in Mumbai and Volta Rodonda respectively, in research and knowledge co-production, focusing on how rising inequalities in cities are affecting their access to livelihoods. YUVA is a non-profit organization that works with disadvantaged communities in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region on issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability and urban planning issues. Their initiatives include mobilizing city-wide youth collectives that support young people to engage in self-determined and sustained collective action to address their rights and issues which impact them. CIESPI is a university research centre that has strong connections with Youth Forum Sul Fluminense in Action (FJSFA). FJSFA works alongside the Children's Rights Council in Brazil and provides a platform that allows children and young people to discuss issues and policies that influence their rights, lives and environment. They also

support CYP's participation in exchange activities, conferences and lectures at schools to disseminate knowledge on CYP's rights.

The research was conducted through programs called 'City Caravans' held in each location, by YUVA and CIESPI. The Indian City Caravan involved 15 participants, while the Brazilian City Caravan had nine participants. In each City Caravan, participants received training on research methodologies, ethics and topics related to accessing livelihood opportunities in urban areas. The program culminated in the development of youth-led research projects focused on themes that were relevant to the participants themselves.

The overall research project was informed and supported by two YEGs, in Brazil and India. The YEGs collaborated with adult facilitators from CIESPI and YUVA to provide guidance and assistance throughout the project and were tailored to suit the local contexts of their respective regions. They were designed to provide guidance on various aspects, including engaging and recruiting community participants, piloting research tools, disseminating research findings and conducting knowledge exchange activities at both local and international levels. The YEGs aimed to ensure that the research projects and activities were tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the communities involved, while also facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences between different regions on a global scale.

This paper draws on the following sources to look critically at the formation and experiences of the YEGs:

- Observations were documented by adult facilitators at each phase of the project, including recorded content details, reflections, and challenges.
- Notes from discussions with YEG members and adult facilitators at local and international YEG meetings.
- Written responses in the international YEG meetings to online activities, such as Mentimeter exercises, which provided an interactive platform for young people to discuss questions compiled by adult researchers, exploring YEG members' experiences in the project, as well as their views on access to livelihoods and the inclusiveness of their city.
- A survey completed by YEG members at the completion of the project, using Google Forms, comprised of seven questions about establishing a successful YEG, experiences and challenges during the project, as well as how being an advisor could aide professional development.

Members of the YEGs were aged between 15 and 26 years, and all provided written and verbal consent to participate in the project. In India, the YEG members were all above 18 years of age, so only their consent was required. However, in Brazil, some YEG members were under 18 years old, and therefore, the consent of their parent or caregiver was also obtained. The participants were provided with information about the YEG's role, the commitment required for attending meetings and knowledge exchange events, opportunities to contribute to project-related writing such as blogs and papers, as well as details regarding the use and storage of the data generated from their participation. No payments were made to the youth people for participating in the YEGs, and all costs incurred on the project were met by the research grant.

Ethical approval for the YEG, and then the youth-led research projects, was provided by academic institutions: that is, the Ethics Committee of Moray House School of Education & Sport, University of Edinburgh and PUC-Rio. A full range of ethical considerations were attended to, from seeking to ensure informed consent of all young experts and research participants, to confidentiality and anonymity (with exceptions for safeguarding), and secure data management. Of note for this study were the complications for more youth-led activities, where young people had

roles beyond being research participants, and for cross-national research with partners; these issues are discussed in Powell et al. (2023).

The concept of having a distinct YEG group was central to the research process when the project was initially conceptualized. However, as the project was implemented, two distinct youth engagement models emerged in Brazil and India. The following sections delve into the process of selecting YEG members and outline their various responsibilities throughout the project's duration.

## YEG selection process and training

The establishment of the YEGs in Brazil and India followed different processes, primarily due to the local impact of COVID-19. CIESPI in Brazil opted for an online format, while YUVA in India chose to wait for in-person trainings and workshops.

In Brazil, CIESPI began the YEG recruitment process in May 2020 by reaching out to nine young people from the FJSFA. Monthly online meetings were conducted to introduce the Shaping Youth Futures project and discuss the formation of the YEG. In October 2020, the YEG members were selected through a voting process among the young people. The facilitators provided guidance suggesting the inclusion of diversity in terms of gender, age, race and sexual orientation. Five individuals, comprising two males, two females and one transgender person, between the ages of 15 and 26, were elected as YEG members. The selected YEG members also participated as co-researchers, while the remaining four participants from the larger group continued their involvement just as co-researchers within the project.

In India, YUVA implemented a process that involved a 3-day in-person workshop to select YEG members. YUVA invited one representative from each of the 19 youth collectives they had previously collaborated with across the Mumbai Metropolitan Region area to participate. The workshop included young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including scheduled caste and tribal communities, single-parent and migrant families, as well as representation from upper-caste families. The 3-day workshop covered various topics, such as conceptualizing livelihoods, identity, jobs, inclusive cities, the future of work, research methodologies and policy analysis. The suggested criteria for selecting workshop participants as YEG members included their leadership qualities, active engagement in their collectives, exposure to work or livelihood and their ability to commit to the YEG over an extended period. At the end of the workshop, the young people elected six representatives through a voting process among themselves to form the YEG. One of the nominated representatives later withdrew, resulting in a final YEG group of five members, including three females and two males, aged between 21 and 23.

In both cases, the election of YEG members was finalized without direct involvement from the adult facilitators, and the composition of the YEGs reflected a focus on diversity and representation among the chosen participants.

## YEG roles and responsibilities

Following the selection of YEG members in Brazil and India, adult facilitators maintained regular communication and held monthly meetings with their respective YEGs. A WhatsApp group was established in each country to facilitate ongoing work discussions, while emails were utilized for document sharing and setting meeting agendas.

The YEG members collaborated closely with adult facilitators in project-related activities. They contributed to shaping the local scope and focus of the project, provided guidance and advice on youth-led research projects, facilitated training sessions, established and connected with community networks, documented and disseminated findings and actively participated in knowledge exchange events. Topics of the research projects, which were conceptualized and led by the young people themselves, included: Job inclusion for young people in Brazil, education and employment challenges for visually impaired people, challenges which transgender women face, entrepreneurship and its challenges among youth in Dharavi, Mumbai (India), and so on.

In addition to their local engagement, YEG members from both countries participated in cross-country meetings held in April and July 2021. These meetings served as opportunities to discuss, share, learn from each other's experiences and shape future research. Furthermore, an international meeting involving the larger project group, which comprised YEG members, youth co-researchers and adult project team members, took place in November 2021. These meetings were conducted online using the Zoom platform. To facilitate effective communication across multiple languages (Portuguese, Hindi, English, Marathi), predetermined questions were employed to guide the discussions. These questions focused on topics such as barriers to livelihoods and job access, challenges of conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic, personal growth through YEG participation and experiences of collaborating with adult researchers on the project. The aim was to encourage dialogue and reflection on similarities and differences in experiences rather than simply presenting country-specific updates. Mentimeter, an interactive platform, was utilized to gather real-time responses to questions, which were displayed on the screen for everyone to view and comment on.

The subsequent sections delve into the dynamics between adults and youth in youth activism and participatory social research, as well as the experiences of navigating the project amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **KEY LEARNINGS: COMPLEXITIES AND REWARDS OF ENGAGING YOUTH ADVISORS IN RESEARCH**

YEGs were developed in recognition of young people's expertise (Arunkumar et al., 2018; McDonagh & Bateman, 2012; Moore et al., 2016), at the outset of the project. While youth advisory groups can be conceptualized ideally in plan and definition, our experience tells of challenges encountered and constant adaptations needed when translating this into action. In this section, we discuss our learnings from engaging youth advisors in cross-country research.

### **YEGs: Shaped by the youth activists**

The research advisory process within this project was dynamic, involving ongoing discussions and negotiations among the adult facilitators and young people, as well as among the young people themselves. The young people brought their values, experiences in youth activism, political awareness and commitment to equity into the research project, shaping the spaces, interactions and dynamics among different participants. This resulted in a personalized and co-created research space.

The young people involved in the project identified themselves as activists challenging adult-centric norms in society. This awareness prompted the adult facilitators to be critically reflective

and mindful throughout the project. While the project initially had an adult-led initiation and scaffolding, efforts were made to make the process more inclusive by sharing decision-making with the young people and occasionally stepping back. The YEG members in Brazil and India actively engaged in the project planning process, providing recommendations and adjustments to make the language more gender-neutral, youth-friendly and accessible.

As the project progressed, the roles of the young people in India and Brazil differed. In India, the YEG members worked alongside adult facilitators during the in-person City Caravan training, taking on leadership roles, leading activities, coordinating discussions, gathering feedback and mentoring designated City Caravan participants. They served as a bridge between the participants and the adult facilitators, emphasizing respectful listening, accepting differences and active participation to foster mutual respect.

In Brazil, the distinction between YEG members and City Caravan participants was less clear. The YEG in Brazil preferred working together as a larger group, making decisions collectively and organizing responsibilities among themselves. They aimed to maintain an inclusive and open discussion format, with more autonomy in research co-production with adults. The project team respected their choice and adapted the YEG structure accordingly. Leadership roles emerged organically within the group, with the most involved young person taking on significant leadership responsibilities, despite not being originally elected as a YEG member. Furthermore, the young people recognized their varying levels of experience in youth activism and formed pairs or trios consisting of both more and less experienced individuals. Those with more experience supported and created space for those with less experience to participate.

Overall, the research YEG process was shaped by the values, experiences and aspirations of the young people involved, allowing for a particularized and collective approach to the project. We also learnt through YEG surveys that participating in the project as a YEG member enabled the young people to think more about activism, both in their own local and international contexts. Some instances are highlighted below:

By understanding the reality of young people more deeply it allows us to understand strategies and contexts in which youth participation and activism can advance. As well as it allows for identification of limitations and difficulties and then work in ways to overcome them. (Brazil YEG member)

Certainly, youth from Brazil and India face the same social problems and both groups do everything they can to change this reality. (Brazil YEG member)

These examples suggest the fluidity in roles and responsibilities is informed by young people's experiences with activism. This was further evident in the relationships between young people and the adult facilitators.

## **Reflexivity in intergenerational research partnerships**

Intergenerational dynamics in the co-production of research with young people is gaining increasing attention internationally (Cuba & Rizzini, 2019). However, as we discovered through our project, intergenerational dynamics intersect not only with age and generation, but also with understandings and exercise of power.

In this paper, the terms ‘YEG members’, ‘adult facilitators’ and ‘youth participants’ have been used for convenience, but, the distinction between ‘adult’ and ‘youth’ is not always clear-cut. Some of the adult facilitators were only a few years older than the YEG members and participants, blurring the line between age groups and power dynamics. However, the concept of intergenerationality remains relevant due to the age difference and the presence of ageism as a challenge faced by young people in their livelihoods.

The labels used in the project, such as ‘adult facilitators’ and ‘young people’, structured the relationships and dynamics among participants. While some facilitators were close in age to the participants, there was still a significant generational gap. Ageism was acknowledged as an important issue that young people actively addressed in their activism. It was necessary for everyone involved to be sensitive, mindful and critically reflective of their positions to ensure a safe and inclusive research space. Reflecting on these dynamics from an intergenerational perspective is therefore deemed relevant.

In both India and Brazil, adults played a guiding role in the project’s development, encouraging young people to contribute while also fulfilling managerial responsibilities to meet external deadlines and ethical protocols. Balancing transparency and co-creation with the need to meet project objectives could be challenging. Adult facilitators had to consider how to gently remind young people of project commitments and deadlines without intervening too much. In Brazil, the adult facilitators took on increased responsibilities to support the young people, particularly in formal submissions in English. They found that presenting proposals initially drafted by adults and incorporating the opinions of young people was the most efficient approach.

In India, YUVA emphasized co-creation, transparency and shared learning to build trust and relationships. The adult facilitators reinforced that the City Caravan was a joint venture and created opportunities for young people to voice their ideas and feel heard. Adult facilitators participated in icebreaker activities led by the YEG members, further fostering transparency and inclusiveness by sharing their own life stories. While adult facilitators aimed to establish a comfortable relationship with the YEG, they were mindful of maintaining a slight distance to fulfil their managerial role in meeting deadlines and maintaining timelines. They consciously navigated boundaries and distance to strike the right balance.

The complexities of intergenerational dynamics in the project were evident, with adult facilitators guiding and supporting young people while being aware of their own positions of power and the need to create an inclusive and respectful research environment.

From, the young people’s perspective, the adults’ facilitation role included and extended beyond creating space for young people to be heard. When asked how adults can better support young people in youth activism, YEG members in Brazil stated that adults should accept and take into account young people’s opinions and experiences and create spaces for working together. A Brazil YEG member suggested:

Adults need to develop tools, opportunities and spaces for children and youth participation. Therefore, it is up to them to publicize information about the rights of young people, offering them a possibility to become educated citizens, taking into consideration the realities faced by each one and contextualizing their dilemmas. Furthermore, it is up to the adult the role of expanding spaces for participation in the debate and construction of public policies related to youth, especially in the decision-making process, not restricting youth as a bystander. (Brazil YEG member)

The YEG members in India reflected in their feedback at the end of the project that their wide-ranging responsibilities as YEG members helped them build confidence and develop personally. However, there were moments when they felt the need to work harder to be recognized as mentors or advisors by their peers. They acknowledged the importance of adult facilitators in these cases, as they could turn to them for knowledge and validation, allowing them to provide appropriate guidance. The adult facilitators also reminded the young people that, as YEG members, they had their own wealth of experiences, resources and networks to offer to the City Caravan participants.

Throughout the project, the negotiation of roles and relationships between the YEG and adult facilitators led to reflections on how adults can better support young people's capacities and leadership and facilitate research projects in collaboration with young people. The experiences of young people with adult-centrism shaped the nature of youth engagement in the project, prompting ongoing reflection on effective and equitable engagement and partnership. The adult facilitators had to navigate when to take a more active role and when to step back. It was acknowledged that this balancing act is a gradual process that varies in different contexts and comes with many considerations and challenges (Jamieson et al., 2022). Wyness (2013) also notes that the use of intergenerational methodologies does not necessarily equate to a reduction in power imbalances and that such collaborations should be approached mindfully.

Aligned with Martin's attention to the 'ecology of activism', the adult facilitators in this project supported young activists by providing theoretical and analytical tools, as well as spaces for discussion and action. The training and workshops encouraged critical reflection on the structural and intersectional inequalities affecting young people's livelihoods. The YEG members also gained mentoring and leadership opportunities with the guidance of adult facilitators. The collaboration between research and activism was seen as a two-way process, where both youth activists and adult facilitators gained knowledge and insights from the collaborative experiences. The project emphasized co-creation, transparency and shared learning as foundational principles.

In summary, the collaboration between YEG members and adult facilitators involved ongoing reflection, mutual learning and support for young people's capacities and leadership through a 'two-way intergenerational collaboration' (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2022). The project recognized the value of young people's role in knowledge generation and emphasized the importance of equitable and meaningful engagement between generations.

## Engaging youth activists at times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant challenges to the YEG members' participation in the project. As happened across many other contexts, the pandemic necessitated adjustments to the training and project activities. The shift to online platforms required adaptation and understanding of the young people's circumstances and the limitations they faced. In Brazil, the pandemic brought about changes in young people's daily lives, including transitioning to online classes and supporting their families in different ways. The health impacts of the pandemic, both physical and emotional, also affected their ability to engage fully in project activities. As highlighted by one of the YEG members:

One of the challenges was to reconcile daily activities, such as taking care of the home, increased workload and changes in learning methods, added to a complementary activity, but at the same time it was essential for the development of the research on such

an urgent topic, which manifested itself both in young researchers and interviewees. During this process knowing how to be more dynamic, fast and practical was essential to maintain the continuity and constancy of the work with the maximum interaction possible between young people and adults. (Brazil YEG member)

To accommodate the new circumstances, the entire project had to be adapted for online implementation. CIESPI, the Brazilian research team, made methodological adjustments to conduct meetings, monitor field research and carry out interviews and focus groups while adhering to social distancing protocols in Brazil. However, not all YEG members had access to the internet or the necessary technology, leading to absences and instability during meetings. This also posed challenges in conducting interviews and involving young people in focus groups. Many young people relied on smartphones to join online activities, which made it difficult to stay focused during long virtual meetings. As a result, adult facilitators and the young people mutually decided to shorten the meetings to improve engagement and manageability.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced various obstacles that required flexibility and creative solutions to ensure the continuation of the project and the meaningful participation of the YEG members. As summarized by a YEG member from Brazil:

The main challenge related to working remotely were internet connection and fatigue, which in my opinion, is greater in virtual meetings. On the other hand, carrying out tasks individually allowed us to have more meetings since a visit to Volta Redonda by the CIESPI/PUC-Rio team every fortnight would not be viable, in my view. (Brazil YEG member)

In India, similar to Brazil, young people had to adapt to new forms of learning and working during the pandemic. They faced challenges attending to family members who were ill and organizing community support initiatives like food kitchens. While CIESPI adapted their project to an online format, YUVA chose to wait until it was feasible to continue with in-person activities based on local health guidance. This decision was influenced by the importance of in-person training for building relationships and creating a sense of community, especially since the young people were unfamiliar with each other and came from different parts of the city. Additionally, some members lacked access to Wi-Fi or smartphones, making online communication inaccessible for everyone.

Deciding to delay the process (by almost 10 months), the YUVA team adhered to local health guidelines for safety protocols. The move to in-person activities also raised ethical concerns at an institutional level that needed negotiation (Powell et al., 2023). The balance of participation and protection rights, as well as research ethics is inevitably difficult in crises and disasters, yet research points to the value that participation can add for young people at these times (Collins et al., 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2020). In research conducted by Cuevas-Parra (2020), for example, children and young people in seven countries felt that engaging in projects helped them to cope with the isolation during lockdown and improve their self-esteem. Similar observations were made through our project between both partners.

The biggest of all was distance and language barrier, that was eventually Resolved. A key issue may be adequacy to the schedules of both teams. Above all we learnt that challenges and demands are similar, but by working together we can identify common solutions. (Brazil YEG member)

Communicating online itself turned out to be a major challenge sometimes as calls/texts was the only source to communicate with participants, which makes me realize without that, communication would not had been possible at all in first place. (India YEG member)

The challenges of working through the global pandemic on a cross-country project, needed adaptability on many levels, from the adult researchers to the YEG. Our experience here reflects on how we adapted a project conceptualized pre-COVID to one that was hybrid.

## CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

Research can be a vehicle for youth activism. The young people involved in the YEGs (as well as the additional youth researchers in India), identified themselves as activists, challenging adult-centric norms in society and wishing to make a change in their communities. They came to the project with this passion and commitment, key aspects of activism noted by Martin (2007) and they focused it on particular topics made possible through the research. Their activities were more deliberately developed than the 'everyday' activism suggested by Bosco (2010) and Nolas et al. (2017) but less disruptive than school strikes or public protests (see O'Brien et al., 2018). Their actions were to advise the ensuing research and the project overall, which led to applied research and localized impacts.

Our experience aligns with existing literature, demonstrating that engaging young people in research is a complex and non-linear process. Initially, we had predetermined roles for YEG members, youth participants and adult facilitators, but these roles and relationships evolved differently than expected. A reflexive approach underscores the importance of embracing the fluidity of roles, responsibilities and relationships that may deviate from the initially conceived engagement model. Additionally, we emphasize the need to situate this project within the broader contexts of the lives of young people, considering their other commitments, responsibilities and roles and recognizing that young people are not a homogenous group. They have distinct needs, experiences and backgrounds, along with commitments and challenges outside of the project, such as academics, work and personal responsibilities. Understanding the interconnected spheres of young people's lives provides a holistic understanding of their engagement and informs mindful considerations when working in partnership with them.

This project unsettles the distinction between young people and adults, which is very frequently referred to in the literature in relation to youth-led or participatory action research. As rehearsed in more detail in Tisdall (2021), much of this literature presumes that it is the adult researchers who have the knowledge, skills and expertise to then train the young people to research. It does not presume that young people may already have these skills, or that they could learn in different ways. Our project similarly started with such a presumption, but this presumption was disturbed as the project developed and the YEG members requested and required the facilitators to change their approach and question their own ways of doing research. As such, engaging young people in youth-led or participatory action research requires adults to be aware of, monitor, interrogate intergenerational dynamics, including (importantly) power dynamics. It involves being prepared to relinquish power to an extent and accept that the processes that evolve may not match the original attention. It therefore requires flexibility and genuine respect for young people's capacity to fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

As youth-centric research and youth expert/advisory groups gain prominence, it is essential to understand the dilemmas faced by young people and develop strategies and initiatives to address them. Co-designing roles and responsibilities and creating inclusive spaces for discussion and dissent can enable young people's suggestions and inputs to shape the project itself.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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