

20 Affecting change in different contexts

Children's participation in social and public policy dialogues in Brazil, Canada and South Africa

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) brought great advancements in commitments to children's rights including participation, influencing policy and administrative processes (e.g. Collins, 2019; Mauras, 2011). Social and public policy forums and other dedicated spaces (sometimes called councils or committees) have been created by adults for young people to express themselves in policy and social dialogues globally (e.g. Rizzini, 2019). These forums do not preclude individuals or groups of young people who are creating their own movements and spaces where they can have greater control and autonomy. While child- and youth-led initiatives and dedicated spaces are important for young people to participate without the adult gaze and control, these spaces have very limited real influence on public dialogues and public policies. However, there is increasing acknowledgement of the importance of young people and adults engaging together in relationships of mutual reciprocity and participatory social learning (Percy-Smith, 2021, see also Pinto et al., this volume). In this chapter we argue that adults, children, and youth can engage and learn from their intergenerational collaborations with each other in social and public policy dialogues.

This chapter focuses on how adults can learn from, as well as support, their collaborations with young people and vice versa in public policy fora. These spaces are important for legitimizing and supporting children's participation and provide political and social pathways and opportunities as active citizens. The chapter contributes to practice by highlighting the potential value of establishing formal public policy spaces open to children's participation.

We have drawn from our research with the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP), which explored the connections between children's rights to participation and protection. As young people and adults, we have come together as co-authors to reflect on our experiences of public policy fora to offer some lessons learned for other social and public dialogues elsewhere involving young people. Specifically, the following discussion draws from three empirical cases conducted in

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Brazil, Canada, and South Africa, where we used participatory, play-based methods to explore the activities and processes in several spaces where adults influence public decision-making. Brief stories of these experiences are provided before our discussion highlights what worked well, some key tensions encountered, and lessons learned.

Enabling youth participation in public policy in Brazil

The Youth Forum in Action was created in the city of Volta Redonda in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2012 by a group of young people who consider themselves a social movement. One young person said that since the forum's creation:

We thought that we would be able to have a voice in public policy. Gradually we developed the notion of our protagonism and our place in debates. To think about guidelines for childhood and adolescence in a real-world context is a form of resistance.

This same year the Municipal Child Rights Council instituted the participation of adolescents (12- to 18-year-olds) as part of the body of councillors.¹

With the opening of a space for discussing public policies by young people, a new paradigm emerged in relation to power, which up until then had been reserved exclusively for adults. But the young people encountered resistance even though it was a council devoted to themes about children's rights. In this space, adults were unhappy with the arrival of young people; some adults argued against the change and rejected the ideas and open thoughts of the young protagonists.

Nonetheless, as a result of moves to involve young people in public policy fora, adults began to appreciate that it was more than a struggle for good public policies; it also encouraged the development of young people. The support of the then president of the council and the president of the nonprofit organisation Casa da Criança e do Adolescente the House of the Child and the Adolescent, was important in opening up opportunities and support for gaining access to the council's closed and rigid environment. It was ironic that these adults were needed to penetrate this environment since the council was supposed to be a space dedicated to the amplification of the democratic process in public decision-making.

As for the youth themselves it is a simple story: through the process of diving into and participating in political debates, there was a greater level of individual and collective development as active citizens. The development of active citizenship permeates the sense of belonging and involvement in the public sphere and enables young people to feel part of the people and the life of society. In turn, the forum gained greater visibility, credibility, and relevance locally and nationally.

When asked whether his participation had made a difference, one of the young councillors replied:

It was an important victory because one could see that a young person could indeed contribute to the construction of public policies. To be able to add to public policies with our voice while still a young person is a very important matter. One had a reaffirmation that we could be a part, that we could succeed. It is a huge empowerment for young people to understand the capacity we have and the responsibility. It is really great.

Finally, participation in policy debates by young protagonists, such as Lucas, is striking in a variety of ways:

Since I started my journey as an activist when I was eleven, I could not imagine that today I would be so engaged and involved such that once I graduated from college, I would take another path in pursuit of this passion and love for the world of rights. I have an active role in sectorial public policy councils being a youth councillor and delegate on the government committee for participatory budget making. My enrollment in the MBA program in public administration expresses the impact this activism can have on the life and formation of a child or a young person because they have a voice and their opinion has a vote.²

Responding to resistance to youth participation in Canada

The Youth Voice Committee of the Canadian province of New Brunswick was established in August 2017 to ensure children's rights to participate in the creation and implementation of the provincial government's harm reduction strategy and supported by the provincial Office of Child and Youth Advocate. Ten young people from across the province were recruited and engaged in one-on-one discussions, roundtables, and committee meetings to help inform policy. The process was valuable including for example opportunities to network for the young members. Sam described their experiences as follows: "I had no experience in networking or public speaking, but throughout the experience and even now afterwards, I lead workshops on topics like Queerness, and child's rights for a variety of ages. I've presented to people all the way from grade 5 students, up through to high school and university staff teams".

While it is commonly understood that children and youth require preparations to support their participation and collaboration with adults, it remains uncommon for adults to receive this preparation, which may be very much needed. For example, while most of the young people involved in the beginning of the committee were 15–16 years old, adult stakeholders who were often much older and unused to engaging with young people. Further, the gap in adults' preparations is also evident in placing one young person to represent all "youth perspectives" in an adult group. For example, Sam was responsible early on with sitting at a table full of adults to discuss sexual harm against children and youth without any peers. Adults' knowledge and experience are important, but they need provision to better understand and facilitate child and youth participation including making more spaces to better respect young people's knowledge and experience.

There was good intention to include children and youth in decisions through the Youth Voice Committee and in the strategy's creation; however, the process was limited and did not seem to take young people's contributions or experiences seriously. If the process had been more consistent with more opportunities for children and youth to engage with adult stakeholders beyond the strictly designated strategy days and specific check-ins, it would have been a much richer and more youth-centred experience. The youth wanted follow-ups on their participation and needed to have tangible proof of their words making a difference in policies and/or with other youth, which were not provided. When the harm reduction strategy was released, the content did not correspond with what committee members had experienced in their own schools and no strategy or action items resulted from their contributions. So their participation

was not tangibly taken into account during the process of creating change. Some adult stakeholders were informed and involved with the young people but not necessarily consistently unless they were in the same room as the young people, while other adults stayed distant. Adults were not necessarily trained or prepared to work with them.

It should not be unusual to bring adults and young people together in the same room and to go through the same processes together. But the research process revealed this to be the case for some participants, hindering the commitment to participation and its practice. Further intergenerational efforts are needed to respect child and youth participation in Canadian public dialogues and policymaking.

Young people's experience of being part of policy making in South Africa

The National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCCW) Youth Forums provide a platform for young people to identify challenges within their communities and to form partnerships to find innovative solutions to these problems. In 2005, when Parliament was debating the Children's Bill, youth from the forums persuaded Parliament to ban forced marriage – including the local custom of *Ukuthwala*.³ Most recently, children and youth made submissions to Parliament on the *Children's Amendment Bill [B8 of 2020]*.

ICCRP research showed that adults saw child and youth forum participation as a developmental opportunity to learn how democracy works, whereas young people want their voices to make a difference and to influence outcomes (Jamieson et al., 2022). Being part of the policy dialogue meant a lot to them; it provided them with the opportunity to “engage on their [sic] laws that govern them”. Many young people who participate in these fora come from a background of multiple marginalised identities, which detrimentally affects their confidence, ability to communicate, and form relationships. Traditionally, elders make decisions and young people follow; it was important to have supportive adults helping youth to have their say.

The Children's Institute in Cape Town organised workshops for children and youth to understand parliamentary procedures and the content of the Children's Act, which aims to provide social services and alternative care. They concluded that the lack of transitional support for children leaving child and youth care centres or foster care was a serious gap. Young people from three different organisations developed a campaign called #MustNotMay, which was the first time that the NACCCW youth had worked with youth from other organisations. They felt that working together strengthened their message but it was difficult to coordinate. Although they had the space to identify and discuss their demands, they needed approval from adult executives and directors to attach their organisational logos to their submissions.

When Parliament announced the dates for the oral contributions, there was a call for a dedicated parliamentary session for young people who had made written submissions. The resulting dialogue focused on how to make the space safe and comfortable, without losing the sense of occasion that the young people wanted. Parliament agreed to hold a private session that was not published in Hansard (the official record of debates in South Africa's Parliament), to protect the young people's identities. Young people's preparations included watching an open session with the adults, where they found the language difficult to understand, boring, and repetitive. So they asked to use poetry, rap, photovoice, and other creative formats for their submissions. Parliament

agreed but asked that each group conclude with short recommendations for the Members of Parliament (MPs).

“For me to be able to go to Parliament is something big, because it’s usually done by the top people, by honourable what what’s” (17-year-old female).

During the hearings the chair of the committee left his elevated podium and joined MPs sitting on the same level as the children. He reflected back what the young people said, summarising the key points, and the children and youth were deeply appreciative, saying not only that they were heard but ‘held’. Yet, law reform processes can take years, and months elapse between the different stages. Traditional monitoring platforms provided by Parliament and civil society are incomprehensible to most young people. Summarised feedback on WhatsApp from supportive adults was critical to sustaining momentum and sharing the news from Parliament in an accessible way.

Almost a year after the public hearings, Parliament received responses from the Department of Social Development to the submissions; the document was over 400 pages and too big to download. So, most children and youth did not even know that they had changed the law! Co-author Danielle suggested a written summary of their recommendations with parliamentary sign off, with abridged government feedback to support accessibility.

Discussion

Having child- and youth-designated spaces – such as children’s clubs, children’s parliaments, and councils – are important for young people to prepare their discussions with adult stakeholders and to support their learning, training, and developing their positions. But the commitment to child and youth participation should not end there. Young people’s spaces should not exist in isolation, relegated away from adult spaces where the power and decision-making takes place on public policies and dialogues. Intergenerational spaces are valuable albeit challenging to advance public dialogues and policy.

Adults and young people need to have spaces together to contribute to and inform public dialogues and policies to share learning, experiences, and knowledge. There should be regular intergenerational spaces for engagement in Canada, but they are all too rare. In Brazil, Volta Redonda Children’s Rights Council remains unique in recognising children and youth as decision-makers in public policy. It shows how important it is to have a regular space to interact where young people are recognised as decision-makers in a policy making body so that they are elevated from influencers to decision-makers. In the Canadian and Brazilian examples, the lack of or delayed feedback to the young people about their participation and impact was problematic for them. There needs to be tangible evidence resulting from their participation in decisions to show that their efforts and perspectives are valued and viewed as equal to the adults.

Children and youth are growing their advocacy skills but generally need adult support to help guide, teach, and mentor them to function in these more formal regulated adult spaces. Adults should engage with young people every step of the way; there should not be just one youth as messenger for the rest, as often occurred in Canada. Support must come from some adults that the young people trust.

While Canada’s Youth Voice Committee was underutilised, the Brazilian young people had to deal with adult resistance or felt invisible and the adults had to be reminded that the young people were there. These difficulties are often a matter of

adults' lack of experience and practice, often reflecting the all-too-common division or siloing of activities and engagement between young people and adults. Adults need greater awareness of what is involved and practical experience and the willingness to engage with young people. In the South African example, the several preparatory sessions with parliamentary staff were helpful to advance awareness raising, preparation, and dialogue. Before engaging directly with young people, adults often need preparatory meetings and discussions to set expectations for how they will engage with the youth and on how the youth expect to engage with them. Adults should be equipped with sensitivity training to interact with young people and devise a set of rules that everyone is familiar with; youth should also be involved in these conversations. It is essential that adults fully appreciate, without needing reminders, that they need to respect in practice young people's views and knowledge, which are grounded in their lived experiences, and should be valued just as much as the knowledge of the adult professionals. Children and youth's freedom to express themselves "regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media" should be supported so they can share their opinions, views, and experiences in ways that are most meaningful to them according to CRC article 13(1) (UN, 1989). The South African young people observed that the MPs seemed to enjoy their presentations more than the adults, appreciating not just different perspectives but different voices.

Child and youth participation is not difficult, but it does not come naturally for many adults, yet in reality it is not that different from engaging with other adults. Adults need to have the drive and willingness to create and SUSTAIN relationships with youth. It should not be a common practice for adults and young people to never speak unless they see each other in person. Adults should follow through, including when a young person emails to engage because young people should be respected and not feel inferior or unworthy of responses. Adults generally need to keep relationships going over time with those who are genuinely interested in supporting young people. Adults and young people should work together to continue building trust and continue engagement over time, not just at a specific event, conference, or meeting. The intergenerational space then becomes a laboratory for learning and practicing those interactions.

In sum, these three countries show valuable lessons and the potential of such intergenerational spaces for public dialogue and policymaking for other countries. These intergenerational spaces are challenging and interactions often ambiguous. Both adults and young people have mutual responsibility to engage to share experiences, knowledge, and inform efforts, recognising that there are power imbalances. It is important to have legitimate spaces for public dialogues that make it possible for young people to work with adults and vice versa.

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Notes

- 1 Volta Redonda Children's Rights Council is according to federal law a deliberative body half of whose members are appointed government officials and half elected, unpaid community representatives including young people. The Youth Forum in Action is led by young people from Volta Redonda.
- 2 The young councillors do have a vote except on financial decisions.
- 3 Ukuthwala is a customary practice prevalent in rural communities in South Africa. Traditionally, it was a collusive strategy used by willing lovers to secure or speed up marriage negotiations. However, more violent forms include the kidnapping, assault, and rape of young girls by older men, forcing them into customary marriages.

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