
The unique insight of young people – youth, development, and shifting the power



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The shift the power movement has been one of the major topics of discussion within international development and civil society spaces in recent years. Despite this, certain dimensions of power are much less talked about than others. One of these is the question of age, and the role of young people in processes of change.

In May 2022, INTRAC gathered five civil society practitioners for a discussion about youth, development, and shifting the power. All of them are 35 or under at the time of publication and were involved, at different times and in different roles, with [The Development Alternative](#) (TDA). This dialogue paper recounts the bulk of the discussions, but does not contain everything that was said – primarily, to avoid duplication. A briefer edited extract from these discussions is available as an INTRAC blog, [“How can the shift the power process better reflect the unique insight of young people?”](#)

Contributors



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1) How do young people fit into the shift the power movement? What does it mean to shift the power to young people?



Alastair

Young people fit in the sense that historically they have lacked power. They are not at the forefront, compared to geographical issues. Young people in development have been limited to enthusiastic volunteers or tokenistic roles, or photo opportunities. There's little power at those levels of involvement. Some organisations run counter to this but that's the norm.



Marina

Maybe we should be talking more about "sharing the power". Some young people do have more access to power than others based on class, rural/urban, etc. All of these things have to be considered.



Timothy

In my country Uganda, we have a majority of people who are young and it's sad that the decisions that are made for every aspect of their future, every sphere that affects them is usually made by people who are older. To move forward we need to capture the opinions of young people, but also genuinely involve them in decisions that affect them. Young people know the challenges they experience and have a better way of understanding them.

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Timothy



Willemijn

Many of the issues that are most pressing which strongly affect this young population; more so than those who currently hold power. Therefore, they must be included in decision-making. There are skills that young people have (e.g., technology as well as swift communication styles) which we need to tap into to address global challenges. Marina is right to talk of sharing power and there is also an element of learning. Older generations can also learn from the young; it's not a one-way process.



Lily

I think the obvious point is that people should be the drivers of the process. They should direct the change that needs to happen and should be put in positions of responsibility. Problems arise when shift the power is directed by an organisation that doesn't meaningfully put young people in those positions of power.

2) What is the unique contribution that young people can make to civil society and to development work?



Alastair

When I think about the contribution a few things spring to mind. One is just how many young people there are. Particularly in the South many countries have very youthful populations so it's a mistake to fail to tap into this potential. In my experience working with young people in the UK and in Central America there is an unbridled ambition and creativity that so many young people have which we risk not allowing to flourish. Sometimes young people think in a more creative and positive way and the value of that should be recognised.



Marina

The Internet gives young people a certain specific insight. Particularly in urban areas, people have ideas that are rooted in online communities and exposure to the wider world. In Madagascar, there is an increased interest in social and ecological justice amongst urban middle-class youth partly because they're more exposed to ideas from abroad in a way that other generations may not be.



Willemijn

I think the current younger generations (Y and Z) grew up in a new globalised world and technology is a big part of that. We have a greater sense of being global citizens and are hopefully a bit more open-minded and inclusive and that could benefit the sector – especially in political/economic narratives.



Timothy

The context we live in today: trying to address global challenges, the view on the context is far different to the view our elders have. It's possible that for some of these challenges to be addresses, decision-makers need to have the view that young people have.



Lily

Young people shouldn't be "contributing", but they should be the root of knowledge about the situation. They have a unique insight. Young people can see issues as they are, without needing to have a lot of formal qualifications etc. The sector is liable to overcomplicate issues which young people can sometimes cut through with their direct and simple observations. They can help us get away from jargon.

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Lily



3) What are the barriers preventing greater involvement for young people? In what ways do they lack power?



Alastair

When we think about shifting the power through INGOs based in the North or Southern organisations contracting local consultants, it's rare to see young consultants. That may be exacerbated by Northern INGOs returning to the same people again and again. Expectations are unrealistically high for researchers carrying out work in communities and this shuts out young people starting a career. Young people aren't being excluded on purpose, but organisations need to commit to doing things differently in order to address these barriers to access.



Marina

It is so frustrating seeing the "usual suspects" get all of the roles. In a place like Madagascar, and shown through TDA, there are big cultural barriers to young people's involvement in positions of responsibility. This culture is bought into, to some extent, by all generations. Breaking that down is not impossible but is difficult and slow. A division of power, labour, and responsibility is written into the way people see the world. To some extent, people only have the power that you give them. Often people have simply not questioned the way power is distributed.



Timothy

There are a number of issues or ways that people are blocked. Sometimes people promote a view that the young are incompetent and inexperienced. The lack of money is a barrier that young people face, particularly in politics. There are many connected issues – some structural, political and social or cultural.



Willemijn

Structural, social barriers exist in many countries in the world. What struck me about a TDA study was that (particularly in Madagascar) young people themselves believe quite negative things about their own demographic. There is a powerful sense that only older people can contribute. Even within INTRAC, we've discussed the emphasis we place on structural barriers (education, work experience, variety of contexts worked in). By doing that you exclude from the bottom and even the entry-level criteria are very difficult to meet.

"What struck me about a TDA study was that (particularly in Madagascar) young people themselves believe quite negative things about their own demographic."

Willemijn



Lily

Young people all over don't see themselves as changemakers. It's not about greater engagement because the problem is us – we're not treating it as "how can we get funding and direct that to young people and communities so that they can use it as they see fit". The sector must build trust in local grassroots organisations, and this requires a really flexible mindset.

4) What does the experience of TDA tell us about how young people can be more involved in development programmes (both as practitioners and in communities)?



Marina

The contact between dev actors and young volunteers had an interesting particularity. Young people were intended to keep development actors accountable. For both groups involved it was a novel situation. The groups had to treat each other as equals when they wouldn't normally do that in other contexts.



Alastair

I liked (and this came from Restless) that a lot of trust was given to young people from the outset. Accountability was dynamic and genuinely youth led. The DevCheck app provided a continuous feedback loop between development projects and the people in communities.

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Alastair



Willemijn

Youth tend to focus on learning and growth, they are naturally curious and resourceful. As we try to move away from set structures of M&E, and towards learning, young people can play a strong role.



Timothy

TDA was unique in my experience with young people. It gave a new approach of not just monitoring projects, but finding out the issues that are affecting the programmes through people who are on the outside, and who didn't design the programmes. That's a good thing but it does show that there is a weakness in the system that develops the programmes. TDA exposed challenges in the reporting system of programmes.



Lily

It shows us that cross-consortium working brings different expertise and people together. Local delivery partners (e.g., Restless Uganda YMCA Mad) were more involved and so were young people. A step was removed, those people were in conversations and in the room. Young people can have an opinion which can be acted on quickly- but you have to want to work in this way.

5) What can organisations do to shift the power by increasing the role for young people in their work?



Alastair

Young people need to be given a seat at the table. It needs to be recognised that they do have knowledge and experience, and also that they are the future. That it is a reason to involve them, not a reason to exclude them. The token engagement with young people needs to be shifted away from. To involve young people meaningfully means involving them from the start, in co-creation. Extending support to more informal unregistered organisations could be a real source of potential. Traditional structures may not be good enough to harness the potential.



Marina

Both international and local organisations need to think of the particular context they operate in and what that means for young people. There's no way around the fact that young people in countries like Madagascar may not have the usual expected skills but that's part of a broader, more complex context. People are a product of their system. Organisations can and should invest in young people who have potential even if to begin with they may not tick all the boxes.



Timothy

As Willemijn mentioned the expectations in employment often lock out young people and organisations can review these roles and prerequisites. By doing so they can become more open to young people and acknowledging the unique experiences they have, despite not having years of experience. Also, sometimes organisations are typically made by high-level people (e.g., boards). Some of those spaces should be allocated for young people so that there is a better balance of power.



Willemijn

Things need to be actually, genuinely inclusive. I'm excited that we have a young person on INTRAC's board. Why does SMT always have to be older people? Can't a junior person have a unique perspective in that kind of function? We're far too focused on years of experience and level of seniority. Sometimes being a blank sheet helps. We haven't solved problems in 50 years, maybe we need a new opinion! Let's put commitment in visions, missions, and policies.



Lily

Blind recruitment, not requiring a degree or substantial experience in international development. Different kinds of experience should be valued. Positive discrimination could have a role to play, for example on language or being based locally. This can create connections that you can't otherwise gain. Speaking in the colonial language is not necessarily helpful. Organisations in the North should focus on influencing, and leave the delivery to local orgs as far as possible. The influencing workstream of TDA was good in this respect. We need a much better understanding of the grassroots landscape in the places we work. We have to admit where we don't understand a local context properly, and put people who do in the position of power.