

Building the Future in the Present

Yeshey Dema

A nation cannot fool herself into thinking of a bright future when she has not invested wisely in her children.

-His Majesty The King

Youths constitute a unique group within our society and represent a positive force with enormous potential to contribute to development. More than 41% of the population of Bhutan are young people under the age of 24 years, of which more than 42% are adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Youths are considered the future of the country and, thus, a lot of emphasis is placed on building the capacity of the youth and their social inclusion for active engagement.

With the emerging times, there are increased efforts by the government and various organisations to include youths in the decision-making process, initiating programmes to enhance their participation. Initiatives such as the increased involvement of young people for the reformation of youth policy in 2020,¹ Bhutan Children's Parliament, youth summits and dialogues concerning areas of climate change, mental health, and sexual and reproductive health, amongst others, have allowed young people the platform to raise their concerns.

However, the question is are we ensuring a meaningful participation of young people in decision-making? Are there enough platforms and safe spaces for young people to share thoughts freely? Or, more importantly, are our young voices valued?

Participation often refers to taking part in and being part of an activity, a process, a human community, or an ecosystem. Sometimes, participation refers only to taking part in a decision-making process with responsibility, power, and a recognised role in influencing local communities or societies. Participation may refer to a process whereby youths can engage and influence. It may also refer to an outcome where young people have

1 UNICEF, "Young People Lead Research to Inform the National Youth Policy in Bhutan" Case Study Series: Experiences in Adolescent & Youth Engagement. 2020.

a chance to contribute to a process.² Youth participation is also a right provided under the Convention on Rights of Children, which emphasises giving young people the chance to speak their minds, and that it is not simply enough to hear, but opinions should also be given due weight.

Despite ongoing efforts, youth participation, particularly in decision-making, remains minimal in our country. This can be attributed to various social, cultural, political and economic factors, but one major cultural barrier is the stereotyping of young people as being immature and ignorant, rendering them incapable of making sound decisions.

This mindset stems from the belief that adults know best, and the paternalistic roles they assume. While the issues directly affect youth, it is often adults who dominate decision-making processes. It can range from a simple decision-making autonomy in the family to a greater extent of decision-making at a national level that impacts everyone. For instance, not many have the privilege to choose their own career paths and it is often the adults who decide for who they consider as their immature child.

Additionally, in terms of social issues concerning young people, such as mental health, drug abuse, climate change, youth policies - amongst other things - oftentimes the young people sit as recipients and the adults decide what should be done and how it is managed.

Adulthood manifests in various ways but its ultimate consequence is the restriction of youth participation and inclusion. Research indicates that this stereotyping by adults limits young people's potential.³ In the Bhutanese context, it can be observed that the views of young people are often disregarded as being very inexperienced, or if somebody speaks in opposition to what adults have decided, then it is disrespectful. This way, many young people's ideas get shoved under the carpet.

Young people repeatedly recount their experiences of not feeling confident or supported by the older generation, from parents and colleagues to senior

2 Kiilakoski, Tomi., "Perspectives on Youth Participation", https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/59895423/Kiilakoski_Participation_Analytical_Paper_final%25252005-05.pdf/b7b77c27-5bc3-5a90-594b-a18d253b7e67

3 Tariffa, Todd & et al., "Factors Affecting Youth Voice in Decision-Making Processes within Youth Development Programs" *Journal of Youth Development* 4, no. 4 (2009).

government officials who tend to underestimate young people's ideas.⁴ Numerous attempts to engage with decision-makers or authorities usually end with them not being taken seriously, as "immature youth talking nonsense".⁵

This issue is not unique to Bhutan but is a trend in other parts of the world. Studies indicate that adults are hesitant about youth and the role of youth in the decision-making process within society.⁶ However, we must recognise the consequences of such practices and shift our attitude towards appreciating that young people understand their needs and are capable of making rational decisions. Youths must be allowed to take ownership of the issues centred around them and given the opportunity to be a part of the solution. To enable this, it is crucial to break the stereotypes adults often hold about youth—that they are immature, ignorant, incapable or problematic.

Another critical scrutiny in light of the continued efforts of the government and various agencies involving young people is to determine whether the participation of young people is achieved in its truest sense. Roger Hart's model of the participation ladder provides a good distinction between what is called manipulative participation, and genuine or effective participation.⁷ Hart's model is a powerful tool to scrutinise the ways in which participation is carried out.

Many things may be done on the pretext of participation but are not in fact participation. The eight-rung ladder model provides levels of participation, where the lowest and most concerning is manipulation, in which youths are merely used by adults for a cause, pretending it is inspired by youth. Manipulation happens when young people are unaware of their role and impact. Hart gives the example of pre-school children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies on children. If the children have no understanding of the issues and hence their actions, then it is manipulation.⁸ Similarly, when youths are included in a discussion of which

4 Suhonen, Riikka., "I Didn't Know What I Was Capable of: The Voice of a Bhutanese Youth", *The Druk Journal* 2, no.2 (2016).

5 Suhonen, "I Didn't Know What I Was Capable of: The Voice of a Bhutanese Youth" (2016).

6 Tariffa et al., *Factors Affecting Youth Voice in Decision-Making Processes within Youth Development Programs* (2009).

7 Hart, Roger., "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship" *Innocent Essay* 4, (1992).

8 Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, (1992).

they have no idea or are not aware of the outcome of the consultation but rather put to checkmark the youth representation, then that is also what Hart calls manipulation.

The next is that of decoration, where young people are used to help or “bolster” a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth. Then comes tokenism, in which young people appear to be given a voice but do not have the choice of what they do or participate in.

Genuine participation includes five rungs, of which the first is assigned but informed, where youth are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. As the ladder moves upward, the level of participation of the youth is increased and young people are not merely seen as recipients but equal stakeholders in the decision-making process.

The highest level of participation is child-led shared decisions, which incorporate adults in child-developed projects. It also projects a healthy dynamic between the adults and the young people, whereby the adults do not decide for the young but rather play more of a supporter and facilitator role to empower young people to initiate and innovate solutions. A good example of child-led shared decisions with adults can be witnessed in the work of organisations like Y PEER, YVIA (Youth Volunteers in Action), and DAISAN (Youth Adolescents Initiative for Sexual Awareness Network). These youth-led initiatives are at the forefront of educating young people about sexual and reproductive health rights, gender-based violence and mental health, demonstrating the profound influence youth can have when they are given the opportunity to lead.

It is crucial to understand these levels of participation, to recognise where we stand in terms of youth participation. For most of our youth, consultation or participation in the decision-making process, the highest ladder of participation that would have been achieved, would be at the fifth rung of the Hart’s participation ladder, where youths are consulted, yet the decisions are ultimately taken by the adults. At most, it would be on the sixth rung, where the decision-making is initiated by the adults and shared with young people.

Our ultimate goal should be to have participation at the highest level. Hence, it becomes crucial for the members conducting any consultation or youth inclusion activities to gain clarity on youth participation, and also for youths to be in the position to make the best use of the seat provided. The current practice or the process of youth involvement must be fundamentally rethought.

Furthermore, a key to ensuring meaningful participation is to build the capacity of young people, which equips them to have full information to be able to participate actively. For instance, for political participation of young people in Bhutan, the voting patterns have revealed that fewer than 30% of the total voting population are young voters and, in every election, their participation is found to be decreasing. It has been found that youths are apathetic to political processes and, to engage them at the front of decision-making, it is important to create favourable conditions, through the establishment of platforms from all stakeholders responsible for strengthening democracy.⁹

While the political participation of the young people in democracy is not only limited to voting, it is important to observe the underlying need for the young people to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be able to take part in participatory democracy. Likewise, for any other participatory programme for youths, it is equally important for them to be given the capacity to empower them to take an equal part in the decision-making.

Young people must be provided with resources that are crucial for them to form independent views about the issues concerning them. For example, to encourage young people to take part in voting, it is not enough to force them to come to the polling station; what is more important is to build up their knowledge about what democracy means, the process and how it impacts the nation. It then ultimately makes young people keen to participate. Hence, prior to any discussions, it is important to invest in building the capacity of the young people to equip them with all the information that is necessary to express their views.

The participation of youth in decision-making is critical for a young democracy like ours. Engaging youth in current decision-making processes

9 Tenzin, Dawa. "Inclusion of the young and future voters in Bhutan." Voice.Net. 2016. <https://voicen-et.in/Bhutan.htm>.

will help cultivate responsible and active citizens for the future. If we expect young people to lead tomorrow, they must have the opportunity to be involved in shaping the decisions today. We must recognise the potential of our young people and encourage partnerships. We must break down adults' hesitation to give equal power to young people in making decisions that are the realities of tomorrow. Merely involving young people for the sake of doing so is not enough and efforts must be restructured to make the participation truly meaningful.

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