

CHALLENGE PAPER

Youth Volunteering and Activism:

**Exploring Pathways to
Enact Change**

A Challenge Paper for IAVE by Dr. Chris Millora

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IAVE's mission is to create a more just and sustainable world by enabling the leaders, organizations, and environments that empower volunteers. This work includes a special focus on supporting our global network of volunteer leadership organizations (GNVL) across 67 countries and our Global Corporate Volunteer Council (GCVC) which brings together some 50 global companies to help strengthen, expand and advocate for volunteer efforts.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Challenges of Youth Volunteering & Activism

During 2022 IAVE gave renewed focus to raising awareness and understanding of how the corporate sector can influence and support volunteering for sustained systemic change to help young people enhance their employability. A briefing or 'Challenge Paper' was commissioned by IAVE to frame and set out the issues which was then used to inform a series of global dialogues involving participants from some 100 organisations across 75 countries. The captured discussions informed a final '**Insights Paper**' (published in early 2023) that provides evidence of what actions need to be taken to facilitate and support young people through their volunteering journey to develop their skills, knowledge and attitudes towards enhancing their livelihoods, employability and/or entrepreneurship.

IAVE has a strategic interest in youth volunteering and the key issues challenging young people today and decided to further commission two challenge papers focused on youth volunteering. These topics, youth well-being and youth activism, were greatly influenced by experiences recorded during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clear evidence of an emerging crisis in young people's well-being, particularly their mental health. There is also strong evidence of their increased interest in unstructured volunteer involvement that is organised and led through informal youth networks.

This paper considers **The Challenge of Youth Volunteering and Activism**, and recognises that in many communities worldwide, young people play a vital role in the journey towards social justice. It explores youth activism, its scale, relevance and the relationship between activism/volunteerism and youth empowerment/leadership, giving voice and taking action to make an impact and affect change.

Introduction



We can no longer let people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not ‘blah blah blah.’ Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action. And hope always comes from the people.
Youth climate activist, Greta Thunberg

Delivered in a speech during the Pre-COP26 Youth Summit, Greta Thunberg’s quote above is symbolic of the power of many youth activists and volunteers around the world who are taking matters into their own hands and responding to critical global issues. Young people’s activism is characterised by radical, unconventional and creative efforts, using both ‘traditional’ and new media to express their voices and acts of dissent. According to the 2023 Civil Society report¹, much of the radical energy of today’s civil society comes from mass mobilisation and organising outside formal NGOs, with young people at the forefront. Young people have emerged as leaders of today, responding to different critical social issues through youth-led solutions.

This paper focuses on the role of volunteering and activism as pathways for young people to shape and enact change in their communities. Embedded in this discussion is a focus on how young people challenge and restructure power inequalities in spaces that tend to be adult-dominated – such as in policy-making and global sustainable development agendas. This paper builds on ongoing debates on the links between volunteering and social activism – two forms of social action that have developed into separate research areas despite their many overlaps^{2,3,4}. This paper demonstrates that young people’s social action can increase our understanding of how activism and volunteering complement each other.

This Challenge Paper is part of a series of think-pieces commissioned by the International Association for Volunteer Effort to explore how youth volunteering facilitates social change. The aim of this series is to spark conversations among actors committed to youth participation through volunteering on topics such as employability, well-being and activism. This paper, *Youth Volunteering and Activism*, seeks to explore the context and understanding of what constitutes youth activism, the current evidence about youth-led activist movements, their scale and relevance. The paper will also investigate the relationship between activism and volunteerism; and youth empowerment and leadership giving voice and taking action to make an impact and affect change.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. Following this introduction, Section 2 discusses the changing dynamics of youth social action, reflecting on the perceived divide between volunteering and activism. Section 3 presents evidence on the various spaces associated with young people's activism focusing on student movements, online activism and young people's fight towards climate justice. This section also reviews the punitive responses to young people's voices and acts of dissent by state and non-state actors. Section 4 brings together evidence on young people's volunteering and activism towards shaping change in their communities. The paper ends with a brief conclusion, bringing together key insights as well as critical questions for further conversations.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Young people have emerged as leaders of today**, responding to different critical social issues through youth-led solutions.
- ▶ This paper demonstrates that **young people's social action can increase our understanding of how activism and volunteering complement each other.**

SECTION 2:

‘Dutiful’ and ‘dissenting’ citizenship: changing activities of social action among young people

Researchers have pointed out that ‘to a considerable degree the study of volunteerism has developed independently of the study of social activism’⁵. The assumed ‘divide’ between these two concepts is encapsulated in this quote: ‘while volunteering is a concept devoid of power, there is an explicit or implicit orientation toward power and social change in activism’⁶. Volunteering is seen as activities outside the realm of politics while activism is about challenging dominant political norms⁷. This ‘traditional’ divide presents an incomplete story. A paper by UN Volunteers, CIVICUS and IAVE⁸, for instance, presented evidence that both volunteering and activism are contributory to sustainable development. Many social activists are themselves volunteers and many social movements depend on volunteer labour to get established and remain sustainable. In typologies of volunteering, it has been identified that campaigning, advocacy building and participating in decision-making processes are all categories and types of volunteering. This paper builds on these ideas by looking specifically at how young people’s social action can increase our understanding of the relationship and connection between volunteering and activism.

Concerns have emerged over the crisis of youth participation characterised by a ‘dip’ in young people’s political participation, declining voting turn-out and youth’s non-participation in party politics⁹. However, researchers have contended that these criticisms often stem from a narrow perspective that equates youth participation solely with traditional forms of political engagement – or what has been described as ‘duty-based citizenship’ or dutiful citizenship – such as voting or membership in political parties¹⁰. On the contrary, other scholars argue that it is not withdrawal from democratic life that we are witnessing, but the ‘emergence of different modes or norms of political participation, particularly among young people’¹¹. For instance, others have described young people’s social action as being ‘dutiful dissent’ whereby young people work within existing systems to express their discontent with business as usual and to promote alternative responses...¹². This could include volunteering to participate in local councils or advisory boards to critique but also help develop local policies on youth

participation. In addition, scholars have also written about ‘dissenting’ citizenship where young people organise, protest and volunteer to make state institutions more accountable and challenge the elite and the powerful¹³. Under this view, being a ‘good’ citizen is not only doing one’s civic duty such as voting but also challenging power relationships in increasingly unequal societies.

Young individuals’ range of social actions (beyond voting) is progressively broadening and has been described elsewhere as ‘engaged citizenship’ which manifests through volunteering, establishing local groups to tackle local issues, and integrating politics into everyday routines¹⁴. Many of these social actions are informal in nature and bottom-up. An example is what has been described as ‘Do-it-Yourself’ politics which are unconventional, informal, everyday activities through which young people express their political activism. This includes veganism, cycling, recycling, ‘boycotting,’ avoiding plastics¹⁵ and volunteering for local causes that are important to them¹⁶. Elsewhere, it has been observed that choices to participate in volunteer work are increasingly ‘reflexive’ whereby individuals’ motivations to volunteer are becoming more attached to issues and causes that they care about rather than to specific groups or organisations¹⁷.

The plurality and diversity of young people’s action highlight that contrary to the ‘traditional divide,’ volunteering and activism can be complementary and understood as both part of the wider repertoires of social action that young people enact within various spaces. Experts who study social movements say that activists decide on the type of protest they engage in based on what they want to achieve¹⁸ – whether it is to ‘change’ the system from the inside or taking issues to the streets to put pressure on decision makers. Whatever form activism takes, young people’s volunteering and activism are both change-oriented and can challenge inequalities and claim power in an adult-dominated world.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Many **social activists** are themselves **volunteers** and many **social movements depend on volunteer labour** to get established and remain sustainable.
- ▶ Others have **described young people's social action as being 'dutiful dissent'** whereby young people **'work within existing systems to express their discontent** with business as usual and to promote alternative responses...'
- ▶ **Young individuals' range of social actions (beyond voting) is progressively broadening** and has been described elsewhere as 'engaged citizenship' which manifests through volunteering, establishing local groups to tackle local issues, and integrating politics into everyday routines .
- ▶ The plurality and diversity of young people's action highlight that **contrary to the 'traditional divide,' volunteering and activism can be complementary and understood as part of social action** enacted within various spaces.

SECTION 3:

Young people's activism: spaces and responses

Young people have been at the forefront of significant social action in many communities around the world. These youth-led movements can be found in various places (in local communities, schools, universities and in online spaces) and are advocating for a variety of issues (e.g., responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis). This section presents a few of these contexts and issues that inspire youth and student action as well as outlining some of the backlash and punitive responses they face from various actors.

Student Activism: young people's social action in schools and universities

A context where young people challenge power relationships is found within schools and universities. Students, often on a voluntary basis, organise around critical issues within educational institutions. Tuition fee increases and privatisation have spurred student movements all over the world¹⁹. Universities' failure to address the colonial legacies (manifested in curriculum) and racist practices inspired student-led movements such as Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa and student campaigns such as *Why is My Curriculum White?* in the United Kingdom. In many communities, universities remain as sites of struggles²⁰. Educational institutions are touted as spaces where academic freedom is alive and critical thinking is encouraged, yet neoliberal policies also shrink spaces for students' activism due to oppressive policies and rules²¹. Previous scholars proposed two forms of students' political participation: representation and activism²². Representation is when students partake in formal governing processes in higher education such as being part of student councils, being invited as student representatives on the university's governing boards or working in task forces and ad hoc committees. In contrast, activism is seen as 'claim-making outside of formal decision-making structures' such as organizing around contentious issues and conducting wider awareness raising and campaigning. Students are also leaders in student clubs and student governments, and volunteer to help with university open days, graduation activities as well as in university-led community projects. Student volunteering is also often seen as a learning experience framed within the university's service-learning programmes²³ where young people acquire skills and knowledge, formally and informally through volunteering.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ A context where **young people challenge power relationships** is found **within schools and universities**.
- ▶ Previous scholars proposed **two forms of students' political participation: representation and activism**. **Representation is when students partake in formal governing processes in higher education** such as being part of student councils, being invited as student representatives on the university's governing boards or working in task forces and ad hoc committees. In contrast, **activism is seen as 'claim-making outside of formal decision-making structures'** such as organizing around contentious issues and conducting wider awareness raising and campaigning.

Online Activism

Technology and digital media have changed the dynamics of social activism in recent years. Digitally-aided movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and Rhodes Must Fall use digital media as essential elements in organising protests online and in-person – rallying support across and beyond national borders^{24,25}. Social media platforms have been important vehicles in young people's activism and volunteer work. They allow young people a wider platform for debate on prominent issues and provide an opportunity to share their advocacies and campaign to a much larger audience. Online volunteering includes a range of activities – from supporting services to leading and amplifying political campaigns on hot button issues. The short-video platform TikTok, for instance, have been found to be a 'valuable space for youth activism, enabling young people to experiment with their political voice in richly creative ways'²⁶. Comprising close to 80% of creators in the platform²⁷, young people use TikTok to talk about and advocate for issues they care about, using their own words and styles²⁸. Voluntary action online has also aimed to pool resources to support activists. For example, a young organiser in Thailand mobilised a Twitter fan page for Girls Generation (a K-Pop group) to raise 780,000 Bhat (250,000 USD) from K-Pop fans to purchase protective equipment such as goggles and helmets for protesters attacked by police water cannon²⁹. The interconnectivity facilitated by social media allows for cross-border collaboration across youth social movements from various contexts leading to global solidarity on key issues³⁰.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Social media platforms are important to young people's activism and volunteer work** allowing for wider platforms of debate on prominent issues and **provide an opportunity to share advocacy and campaign to a much larger audience.**

Young people's activism and the climate crisis

Young people are directly impacted by the climate crisis: growing up in a world where environmental degradation, disasters and extreme weather events are increasingly common, often affecting the most marginalised communities. In the paper, *Youth volunteering and well-being*, as part of this IAVE series, it was emphasised that young people experience 'climate anxiety' – feeling a sense of dread over the multiple and complex impacts of the climate emergency to their lives and affecting their mental health and well-being. Young people's activism has led to significant political outcomes in this space by changing the public discourse and consolidating media attention to the issue of climate change³¹. Many youth climate activists emphasise the need to make governments accountable for policies that ignore the urgent need for a climate response. As one youth climate activist said 'the older generation has failed, and it is the young who will pay in full – with their very futures'³². Young people also organise towards climate justice a critical component of the movement that recognises that 'climate change can have differing social, economic, public health, and other adverse impacts on underprivileged populations'³³ particularly in Global South contexts. According to Plan International, for instance, 12.5 million young girls may be unable to complete their schooling each year because of climate change³⁴.

As a response, young people organise in a variety of ways. Inspired by Swedish youth climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, the Fridays for Future movement has seen more than one million young people in more than 100 countries protest and urge their governments to urgently act upon the climate crisis³⁵. Indigenous youth climate activists have also been significant actors in this fight although their experiences remain marginalised in current literature on youth climate activism³⁶. A study, for instance, documented the national and international work of Te Ara Whatu, a Māori and Pacific Islands *rangatahi* (youth) collective in Aotearoa who are campaigning both for climate justice and Indigenous rights³⁷. Their work includes lobbying the New Zealand government 'to include Māori perspectives in climate change legislation

and policies' as well as participating in peaceful protests in international convenings such as during COP 25³⁸. These examples demonstrate that young people have been at the forefront of struggles towards socio-ecological justice in many local communities and globally.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Young people are directly impacted by the climate crisis:** growing up in a world where environmental degradation, disasters and extreme weather events are increasingly common, **often affecting the most marginalised communities.**
- ▶ **Many youth climate activists emphasise the need to make governments accountable** for policies that ignore the urgent need for a climate response.
- ▶ **Young people have been at the forefront of struggles towards socio-ecological justice** in many local communities and globally.

Responses to young people's activist work: criminalisation, policing and surveillance

Young people and students face responses that stifle, manage or mute their acts and voices of dissent³⁹. It has been observed that young people seem to be one of the most intensely regulated groups whereby their 'activism' is seen as a distraction from their productive transition into adulthood⁴⁰. Repression of youth and student activism includes a number of tactics: from simply ignoring their voices to more punitive actions such as university/school expulsion, policing and criminalisation^{41,42}. In a recent report, it was found that in 2022, there were 391 documented attacks on higher education spaces, 40% of which were directed towards student protestors and activists^{43,44}. Another common tactic is what has been described as 'lawfare' or weaponising laws and government-sanctioned policies to directly control youth protest and student movements^{45,46}. During the height of the pandemic restrictions, it was found that many governments used COVID-19 rules as justification to stop youth and students from peaceful organising^{47,48}. As an example, in Cambodia, breaking quarantine rules as stipulated in the COVID-19 prevention law can result in hefty fines and extended prison sentences. This measure has been used as a means to suppress activists who voice out opposition to the government's handling of the pandemic⁴⁹. In the Philippines, a group of young people distributing food packets were wrongfully arrested and red-tagged as members of the armed New People's

also transform – using new technologies to surveil, control and harass young people online^{51,52}. While the list is not exhaustive, this section provides an idea of the diversity and power of youth and student activism. It is noted that both volunteering and activism can happen in formal (e.g., through organised youth groups, clubs or activist organisations) and informal ways (e.g., through social media organising or online protests). While many recognise the importance of youth activism in social change, it is not always celebrated and supported. Many youths and students face dangerous and violent tactics from state and non-state actors because of their activist work.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Young people face responses that **stifle, manage or mute their acts and voices of dissent**.
- ▶ During the height of the pandemic restrictions, it was found that **many governments used COVID-19 rules as justification to stop youth** and students from **peaceful organising**.
- ▶ While many recognise the importance of **youth activism** in social change, it is not always celebrated and supported. Many youth **face dangerous and violent tactics from state and non-state actors** because of their activist work.

SECTION 4:

Youth volunteering and activism: exploring the links

This section will discuss how young people's volunteer and activist work complement and support each other. It will focus, particularly, on how these forms of social action allow young people to challenge dominant (and often unequal) political and social norms. In doing so, it is hoped that volunteer-involving organisations will better understand and take stock of the opportunities that young people bring in facilitating social change and achieving social justice.

Youth activism and volunteering as pathways for young people to claim their seat in adult-dominated spaces

Both volunteering and activism are mechanisms by which young people are able to amplify their roles and contributions in political and social spaces that are often dominated by adults. In communities around the world, many volunteers, including young people, devote their time and expertise to participate in deliberative governance processes with the goal of helping shape sustainable development^{53,54}. Participation has been recognised as one of the categories of volunteering which involves the 'involvement on a voluntary basis in the political or decision-making process at any level, from participation in a users' forum to holding honorary office in a voluntary and community sector organisation'⁵⁵. In the education sector, for instance, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) have convened a youth action group of 15 youth and student activists from countries such as South Africa, Honduras, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Sri Lanka to enable inclusive and co-creative planning with young people on issues that are important to them. The organisation has also included two youth representatives on its board, further integrating young people in decision-making. More recently, the United Nations have formed a Youth Advisory Group, composed of seven (7) youth climate leaders 'to bring youth perspectives and solutions directly to the [UN] Secretary-General, and to major climate moments and decision-making fora'⁵⁶. Through volunteering in decision-making spaces, young people can shape the kind of change they want – especially on issues that affect them, further galvanizing their role in development.

In contrast, there are also situations where young people's voices are cordoned off from important decision-making processes. In these cases, young people themselves create their own spaces to be heard, often through various forms of actions such as protests, petitions, occupations and other campaigns. Many student movements, for instance, are a response to shrinking spaces for students' participation in decision-making – even though they are argued to be the biggest stakeholders in education⁵⁷. For example, austerity measures saw 300,000 students protest in Quebec in Canada, the largest and longest standing student protest in the country's history⁵⁸. It is also important to note that many student protests target wider political issues. In Egypt for instance, universities were a springboard for students to organise around other issues in the country – with students protesting about human rights issues, freedom of speech and political freedom⁵⁹.

Box 1 Girl activists empowering through art in Kyrgyzstan

Girl Activists of Kyrgyzstan is a creative arts group for girls founded by then a 17-year-old activist, Dariya Kasmamytova and started with around 24 girl members. Their organisation uses art and humour to advocate for issues important to young girls in Kyrgyzstan. They screen movies focusing on girls' rights and draw cartoons of superheroes together. As many of their members are interested in art, one of their projects is to address gender inequality in school textbooks. Dariya explains: 'We have an idea to change schoolbooks for math, geography, biology, and other subjects. I do not see even one-woman scientist. The books say 'he,' not 'she,' even if you are reading about a girl. We want to take a schoolbook and make it into handmade art. There will be corrections, marginal notes, stickers, new pictures. Maybe we will give our book to the Minister of Education. We will say, 'You must make books gender sensitive. Here are our recommendations for all the schoolbooks.' For Dariya, it is important for them to tackle issues in ways that they enjoy: 'creative girls doing things we know how to do and want to do,' and this includes humour, art, videos and comics.

Sources: CIVICUS, 2018; Global Fund for Women, 2017; Gianturco and Sangster 2017

Earlier, it has been discussed that volunteering is often associated with non-political forms of social action such as charities, soup kitchens, neighbourhood groups, choirs and other leisure-based activities⁶⁰. Looking into the diversity of young people's social action highlights that there are many voluntary actions aimed towards political and social issues. For example, the *Girl Activists of Kyrgyzstan* (see Box 1) is an interest-based organisation that brings together girls who are interested in art and other creative activities. Such groups may be considered leisure-based organisations often associated with volunteering. However, the organisation was able to channel these interests – what Dariya describes as '*things they are good at and enjoy doing*' – into advocacy building and policy lobbying activities in education. Box 1 illustrates how they use art to claim spaces for girls' experiences and aspirations in textbooks.

There are also situations where volunteer activities are politicised. At the height of the pandemic, community pantries arose in many Philippine villages, many of which were put together by youth volunteers⁶¹. These pantries sprang up in numerous communities, fuelled by volunteer action and provided much needed food, groceries and medicines for individuals who were unable to work because of lockdowns. With the tagline *'Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha batay sa pangangailangan'* (Give what you can, take what you need), community pantries are mutual aid and self-help groups in response to a shared problem. However, many of these groups also faced red-tagging, intimidation and harassment from the police, inaccurately portraying them as 'communists' who are organising against the government⁶². Some decided to close the community pantries fearing further actions by the police, who would at times, come to their activities carrying rifles. In shrinking civil society spaces and authoritarian style governance, the act of delivering services through volunteering could be considered as an activists' political act of taking space; showcasing how volunteering and activism can be synonymous with each other.

To claim their seat at decision-making tables, young people draw on their volunteer and activist work in two ways: (1) they volunteer to participate in decision-making processes designed by governments and institutions; and (2) in circumstances when they are cordoned off from the discussion, young people often push back and create their own alternative spaces to make their concerns and opinions known. Young people's volunteering can also be political in nature, and, in some cases, their work is being politicised by authoritarian style governments.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Volunteering and activism** allow **young people to amplify their roles** and contributions in political and social spaces often dominated by adults.
- ▶ **Through volunteering** in decision-making spaces, **young people can shape the kind of change they want – especially on issues that affect them**, further galvanizing their role in development.
- ▶ There are situations where **young people's voices are cordoned off from important decision-making** processes.
- ▶ **To claim their seat** at decision-making tables, **young people volunteer to participate in decision-making processes** designed by governments and institutions; and **when they are cordoned off** from the discussion, **they often push back and create their own alternative spaces** to make their concerns and opinions known.

Activists and volunteers pushing back against inaccurate representations

Related to the act of ‘taking space’ above, volunteering becomes a pathway for young people to signal their shifting role within society. Generally, young people, especially those coming from marginalised groups are labelled negatively: they are called ‘risky’ or ‘suspect’ individuals that then need to be regulated⁶³. Some experts have also noticed that young people are portrayed in negative ways, focusing on their shortcomings, such as lack of interest, disappointment, and loss of hope⁶⁴. During the pandemic, for instance, young people were stereotyped as averse to getting vaccinated or too stubborn to follow COVID-19 rules⁶⁵. In some cases, young people have been excluded from participating in crucial policy discussions due to inaccurate assumptions that they have insufficient experience and limited resources⁶⁶. These labels carry power: the way institutions label them impacts the way young people are treated and engaged in various spaces of decision-making^{67,68}. Therefore, challenging these labels is an attempt to disrupt power inequalities – an effort that can also be facilitated when young people volunteer and not only when they protest.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Generally, **young people, especially those coming from marginalised groups are labelled negatively**: they are called ‘risky’ or ‘suspect’ individuals that then need to be regulated.
- ▶ In some cases, **young people have been excluded from participating in crucial policy discussions** due to inaccurate assumptions that they have insufficient experience and limited resources.
- ▶ Both **activism and volunteering allow young people to reposition themselves within their societies and reject the negative labels** attached to them and their work.

Both activism and volunteering allow young people to reposition themselves within their societies and reject the negative labels attached to them and their work. Many young people, for instance, were at the forefront of positive responses to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 – tackling issues such as vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, mental and physical health, education disruption, loss of employment and gender-based violence⁶⁹. In the field of education, youth and students play a significant role in shaping the global education agenda by participating in

global dialogues in education⁷⁰. Through volunteering, young people are able to reframe their positions in the society from being seen as ‘recipients’ of programmes to being ‘active actors’ that help make development and change happen.

Box 2 Dangerous representations of student activists in Colombia and the Philippines

Research commissioned by the students ‘and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH in Norway) show how student activists face negative labelling by powerful actors to delegitimise their work. A Colombian student activist said in an interview that the government used to call them (activists) as stones in people’s shoes who make walking towards development more difficult. According to a report, some Colombian media label students as ‘hooligans,’ ‘vandals,’ ‘guerrillas’ or ‘terrorists. In the Philippines, a student activist shared: ‘They say, *‘estudyante sa umaga, rebelde sa gabi’* (students in the morning and rebels in the evening). That form of attack...we are rebranded as enemies of the people and enemies of the state...our demands are immediately being discredited because we are being branded as enemies, but we try to propose solutions. Of course, we want government programmes to work! These labels form part of the rationale behind criminalising student dissent.

Sources: *Millora and Karunungan 2021*

Negative framing of young people persists especially for youth and student activists. An analysis of media representation of youth activists in the UK has also shown how young people were framed as ‘dangerous subjects’ or enemies of the state: ‘long criticized by the media for being politically ‘apathetic,’ they were now demonized for becoming the opposite’⁷¹. The experiences of student activists in Colombia and the Philippines (see Box 2) show how activists are often labelled negatively as people who disrupt development rather than supporting progress. The quote from the youth activist in the Philippines shows how counterproductive these labels are especially as young people want to partner with governments and stakeholders when given the right mechanisms and opportunities.

This section has shown how young people constantly battle with negative assumptions and identities attached to them by institutions who want to delegitimise their work. Through their actions and advocacy, they can reposition themselves in the eyes of their peers and community members and redefine themselves as influential leaders for change. By challenging existing power structures and promoting progressive values, these young people are working to create a more just and equitable world for all.

Young people as leaders and change makers through volunteering and activism

Both volunteering and activism can be change-oriented, providing pathways for young people to shape and realise sustainable development. In many of these initiatives, young people take matters into their own hands – emerging as influential leaders in their communities and globally. According to the UN Secretary General, for instance, young people are leading the global movement towards socio-ecological justice. The high currency attached to youth leadership is also reflected in youth engagement strategies in youth-involving international organisations. The Global Campaign for Education and the Global Youth Mobilization for instance, have launched youth-led grant making programmes where young people themselves assess and award financial grants to support existing youth-led programmes in various countries. These approaches seem to be founded on respect towards youth leadership and the importance of recognising young people's existing efforts. From Malala Yousufzai (Pakistan) for girls' education to Greta Thunberg (Sweden) and Vanessa Nakate (Uganda) for socio-ecological justice, young people become inspiring leaders of critical global movements.

The rise of social media and digital platforms as spaces for organising (see earlier section) gave rise to what has been described as 'leaderless' movements. Some youth-led mobilisations are not centred on a single individual or group but are more dispersed, less hierarchical, unstructured and more horizontal. The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong for instance, avoided government crackdown by dispersing efforts via social media, with many smaller youth groups orchestrating uncoordinated action in various areas⁷². Because there is no single person



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Both volunteering and activism** can be change-oriented, **providing pathways for young people to shape and realise sustainable development.**
- ▶ **Some youth-led mobilisations are not centred on a single individual or group** but are more dispersed, less hierarchical, unstructured and more horizontal.
- ▶ **By actively engaging in volunteering and activism, young people can become influential leaders** not only within their local communities but also on a global scale.

on top, it can make movements difficult to repress⁷³. The hashtag #FreeYouth became a rallying message that spurred one of the largest social movements in contemporary Thailand inspiring other pro-democracy movements such as Free Monks, Free Taxi Drives and Parents of Free Youth⁷⁴. These examples do not only show the changing dynamics of youth activism but also the changing face of youth leadership in orchestrating social action for change.

Box 3 Youth volunteers fighting for change in reproductive health and rights in Malawi

Art and Global Health Center (ArtGlo) Africa is a youth-led volunteer organisation in Zomba, Malawi that works, among others, on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including HIV/AIDS awareness. ArtGlo mobilise a number of local volunteers to deliver services to Malawi youth, providing information through community education classes and art-based and creative methods. They also facilitate discussion between local government employees, health workers and young people through poetry, art, song and theatre. Using theatre as a medium, youth volunteers were able to facilitate discussion with key government actors which have led to change in perspectives. For instance, health workers commented: "Through the role play, I realized I didn't take time to listen to key populations that came to the hospital. I also did not respect their privacy but now I am ready to change." Another shared, "I will do my part to be welcoming to key populations in my health care centre. I want them all to know they are welcome and will be treated with dignity."

Source: UNV 2022

Indeed, there are several examples that demonstrate that young people's social action can lead to some form of social and political change or transformation in their societies. The work of youth volunteers in Malawi (see Box 3) provides unique insight into how volunteering and campaigning could facilitate social change by changing people's views, ideas and perspectives on important issues such as reproductive health and the needs of young people with HIV/AIDS. This demonstrates the power of volunteering to enact change at an individual and community level. Elsewhere, young people's volunteering and social activism have also triggered changes in policy. Student movements in Chile in 2006 and in 2011, for instance, saw university and high school students on the streets and occupying their universities to protest against neoliberal policies in Chilean education that only favour the elite furthering the educational access divide between rich and poor. Scholars have pointed to how these movements caused considerable changes in educational policies in Chile, including the restructuring of public funding to increase the number of scholarships and reduce interest on student loans⁷⁵.

Volunteering and activism offer young people meaningful opportunities to contribute creating positive change. By actively engaging in volunteering and activism, young people can become influential leaders not only within their local communities but also on a global scale. They have the ability to create a ripple effect of positive change, inspiring others to act and contributing to the development of more sustainable and equitable societies.

SECTION 5:

Conclusion and challenge questions

Young people are increasingly turning to volunteering and activism as a means of driving positive change and shaping sustainable development. Through these pursuits, they are able to claim their seat at decision-making tables, challenging existing power structures and promoting progressive values. While young people may face negative assumptions and stereotypes, they are also able to reposition themselves as influential leaders for change through their actions and advocacy. Taken together, this challenge paper proposes the following links between volunteering and activism, through the lens of young people's involvement.

First, volunteering and activism are both pathways for young people to shape the change they desire, especially on issues that impact them. This may be by volunteering to participate in decision-making spaces created by others or orchestrating spaces of their own through protests and mass actions. Challenge Questions:



- ▶ **How can volunteer-involving organizations better integrate youth volunteers and activists in decision-making processes, particularly on issues that they care about?**
- ▶ **What kind of support and resources can be provided to young volunteers and activists to enable their effective participation in decision-making processes?**

Second, young people build on both volunteer and activist work to redefine their social positions, pushback against negative representations and amplify their important contribution to society. Volunteering can be political and young people's volunteering could be increasingly politicised especially in shrinking civil society spaces. Challenge Questions:



- ▶ **How can volunteer-involving organisations and civil society organizations encourage governments to better recognise and support (instead of opposing) the skills and power of young people to affect change?**
- ▶ **To what extent can young people actually shape employability and volunteering programs of the corporate sector, or will they remain as passive recipients of initiatives developed for them by someone else?**

Third and lastly, young people, through their volunteer work and activism, emerge as influential leaders in local and global arenas. By leveraging their passion and energy, they can effect meaningful change in areas such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Challenge Questions:

- ▶ **How can we ensure that young people's leadership contribution through their voluntary action is acknowledged and valued by decision-makers and other stakeholders at the local, national, and global levels?**
- ▶ **How can we create opportunities for young volunteers and activists to collaborate with other stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations, and the private sector, to amplify their impact?**



Overall, this paper demonstrates that youth activism is a powerful force for positive change, with young people taking a leading role in shaping the future of their communities and the world. By combining activism with volunteering, young people are able to amplify their impact and make an even greater difference – empowering themselves and their peers to take ownership of their communities. Young volunteers and activists are changemakers of today (and not tomorrow), they are sources of hope, and they take matters into their own hands – inspiring others by their passion and determination and their commitment to social justice and equity.



SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **Volunteering and activism** are both **pathways for young people to shape the change they desire**, especially on issues that impact them.
- ▶ **Young people redefine their social positions**, pushback against negative representations and amplify their important contribution to society **through volunteer and activist work**.
- ▶ **Young people's volunteering could be increasingly politicised** especially in shrinking civil society spaces.
- ▶ **By leveraging their passion and energy** within their volunteer work and activism, **young people can effect meaningful change in** areas such as **human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice**.

ENDNOTES:

¹CIVICUS 2023

² Musick and Wilson 2007

³ Henriksen and Svedberg 2010

⁴ Anheier and Schere 2015

⁵ Musick and Wilson 2007

⁶ Henriksen and Svedberg 2010

⁷ See discussion in Anheier and Schere 2015

⁸ International Association for Volunteer Effort, UN Volunteers and CIVICUS (2015)⁹ Haski-Leventhal, Meijjs and Hustinx 2010

⁹ O'toole 2016

¹⁰ Dalton 2008

¹¹ See also O'Toole 2016

¹² O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward 2018, p. 42

¹³ O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2013

¹⁴ Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2016

¹⁵ Pickard 2019

¹⁶ O'Toole 2016

¹⁷ Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003

¹⁸ Della porta and Diani 2019

¹⁹ della Porta, Cini and Guzmán-Concha 2020

²⁰ This term is in reference to Ndulvo-Gastheni's analysis of South African higher education

²¹ della Porta 2019 p. 1411

²² Klemenčič and Park 2018

²³ Furco and Norvell 2019

²⁴ Gismondi and Osteen 2017

²⁵ Bosch 2016

²⁶ Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2022

²⁷ Almost 80% of Tiktok content creators are under the age of 25, see: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1257721/tiktok-creators-by-age-worldwide/>

²⁸ See also Lee and Abidijin 2022

²⁹ Tanakasempipat, 2020

³⁰ Millora 2022

³¹ Han and Anh 2020

³² See UN Youth in Action: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action>

³³ What is climate justice? See Yale Climate Connections: <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/07/what-is-climate-justice/>

³⁴ Plan International: Climate Change Activism: <https://plan-international.org/youth-empowerment/climate-change-activism/>

³⁵ Champions of the Earth, n.d. <https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2019/fridays-future-movement>

³⁵ Champions of the Earth, n.d. <https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2019/fridays-future-movement>

days-future-movement

³⁶ See for instance review by Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022

³⁷ Ritchie 2021

³⁸ Ritchie 2021 page 10

³⁹ Millora and Karunungan 2020

⁴⁰ Bessant and Grasso 2018

⁴¹ Millora and Karunungan 2021

⁴² Kapit 2023

⁴³ Scholars at Risk Network: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2022/>

⁴⁴ See <https://www.movedemocracy.org/youth-fear-cases-young-political-prisoners>

⁴⁵ Millora and Karunungan (upcoming)

⁴⁶ BKapit 2022

⁴⁷ See CIVICUS Monitor: <https://monitor.civicus.org>

⁴⁸ See report by Perera here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55362461>

⁴⁹ Business and Human Rights Resource Center 2020: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-rights-group-concerns-over-arrests-harassment-of-activists-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-measures/>

⁵⁰ Dressler 2021

⁵¹ Millora and Karunugan (upcoming)

⁵² Earl, Maher, and Pan (2022)

⁵³ UN Volunteers 2021

⁵⁴ See also <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-political-participation.pdf>

⁵⁵ Rochester 2006, p. 7

⁵⁶ United Nations: <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2023/03/youth-advisory-group-2023/>

⁵⁷ Della porta 2019

⁵⁸ Bégin-Caouette and Jones 2014

⁵⁹ Millora and Karunungan 2021

⁶⁰ Anheier and Schere 2015

⁶¹ See: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1137655>

⁶² Lo 2021

⁶³ Deakin and Pilkington 2023

⁶⁴ See the exploration of della Porta 2019

⁶⁵ Simpson and Altiok 2020

⁶⁶ ILO 2020

⁶⁷ Escobar 1991 discussed the power of labels in development

⁶⁸ See also Deakin and Pilkington 2023

⁶⁹ See examples from a number of countries in the Global Youth Mobilization Report here: <https://globalyouthmobilization.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GYM-Final-Report-2023.pdf>

⁷⁰ Millora 2022

⁷¹ Power 2012

⁷² Lai and Sing 2020

⁷³ Serhan 2019

⁷⁴ Sinpeng 2021

⁷⁵ Bellei and Cabalin 2013

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