

What Drives Youth to Action as Agents of Transformative Change?

In 2017, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center brought together 14 academics, policy makers, practitioners, artists and activists for a thematic residency to explore the potential for “Youth as Agents of Transformative Change.” The residency provided time and space for independent work, as well as an exchange of perspectives in formal and informal discussions.

The following article highlights emerging insights from the residency on the forces that move today’s youth to action as agents of transformative change.

If there’s cause for optimism in addressing global challenges, it’s this: today’s youth are both hopeful about the future and pointedly critical of the status quo within their societies. Youth around the world care deeply about making the world a better place; have high expectations for the resolution of long-standing social issues; and are aware, motivated and engaged. “There is tremendous hope and possibility about youth of today. Youth are trying to set up the rest of their lives. There is cognitive dissonance about this idealism and hope for the future, and then the harsh realities they find themselves. They are trying to make sense of that, trying to push and make changes,” said Monisha Bajaj, Professor of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco.

“We shouldn’t stop youth from being angry and frustrated. We should take that energy and give it direction.”

Aya Chebbi, Founder and Chair of the Afrika Youth Movement

For youth, the gulf between the world they want and the world they see is often what moves them from awareness to action. “When you live amongst injustices, you feel responsible,” Esra’a al Shafei, founder of Majal.org, explains. “Not only should I not have to live in a society that treats me and other people that way, but it becomes about wanting something better for you and future generations.” Al Shafei knows she’s not alone among her peers in wanting “a life where social justice is the norm, not punishing diversity or differences.” This gulf between the ideal and reality can spark anger and frustration. At their best, such emotions serve as catalysts for social change; at their worst, they can lead to disillusionment or violence and extremism. “We shouldn’t stop youth from being angry and frustrated,” Aya Chebbi, Founder and Chair of the Afrika Youth Movement, explains. “We should take that energy and give it direction.” Anger and frustration have been engines of recent social movements globally – from

the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement - which have forced society-wide dialogues about pervasive inequalities. So what moves youth towards positive expressions of anger and frustration, rather than violence and extremism?

Residents discussed best practices to reinforce positive channels for the expression of frustration, taking advantage of Bellagio's unique cohort of diverse residents to engage in a cross-disciplinary and intergenerational dialogue. For Monisha, schools, civil society efforts, and movement spaces “need to think about how do you not extinguish that hope and that movement and that excitement such that you create a disaffected, cynical, and disconnected group of individuals.” For Princess Laurentien van Oranje, we all play a role to “help [youth] channel that anger they have and sense of justice. We can't take their sense of disappointment or anger away, but we can channel it.”

“..give [youth] a seat at the table, because they've worked hard and they might have a fresh insight or a new perspective.”

Joshua Marquez, Composer and Activist

Throughout the residency, we heard repeatedly that youth agency is one key to channeling outrage into positive outcomes. Youth anger and frustration cannot simply be eliminated or minimized – nor should it. Instead, youth must have the opportunity to establish their voice, define their own narrative, and push towards a new paradigm – and see the results of this action to feel truly heard and valued. According to Joshua Marquez, we should “give [youth] a seat at the table, because they've worked hard and they might have a fresh insight or a new perspective.” A composer in his 20s, Marquez says that, “All the young people I have talked to—we are ready. We are just not able to overcome that first barrier.”

As residents made clear in group discussions, we can all support youth in developing this agency, which requires confidence, mastery of skills like leadership and critical thinking, and empathy—all of which can be fostered through social systems that make greater efforts to engage young people at every

step. As Ana Penido Monteiro, the Director of the Inspirare Institute, says, “If we broaden their horizon, develop their critical thinking and empathy, if we have them connect to their roots, to their peers and unleash their potential, if we help them find a purpose – [youth] engage and promote unbelievable change.”

“If we broaden their horizon, develop their critical thinking and empathy, if we have them connect to their roots, to their peers and unleash their potential, if we help them find a purpose – [youth] engage and promote unbelievable change.”

Ana Penido Monteiro, Director of the Inspirare Institute
