

Amplifying, Engaging, and Supporting Youth Changemakers through Systems

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 power of systems to grow, engage and support youth as agents of change.

Inspired by the possibility of change, youth around the world are mobilizing and taking action to address the inequalities they see. Yet youth today are still largely excluded from subnational, national, and global dialogue and policymaking. As John Rickford, J.E. Wallace Sterling Professor of Linguistics and the Humanities at Stanford University and one of this year’s Bellagio thematic residents, puts it, “Very often, youth are not listened to, or if they are listened to, they are not heard.” While youth may be the largest segment of the global population, the systems that directly affect their lives do not reflect youth perspectives. The Bellagio residents noted that while youth are already acting as agents of change, there is still much that we all —policymakers, practitioners, citizens—can do to amplify, engage with, and support youth voices.

“Very often, youth are not listened to, or if they are listened to, they are not heard.”

John Rickford, J.E. Wallace Sterling Professor of Linguistics and the Humanities, Stanford University

BUILDING A SYSTEM: A NEW EDUCATION PARADIGM FOR AMPLIFYING THE POTENTIAL OF YOUTH CHANGE MAKERS

Today, as residents noted, far too many education models around the globe prioritize repetitive learning, test-based outcomes, and preparing youth for the jobs of today. But the employment landscape is rapidly changing. “My children are in a system that is preparing them for a vocation,” Henry Di Sio, the Global Chair for Framework Change at Ashoka, noted. “But we know that 65% of job types today won’t exist when they graduate—so we need to grow them into change-makers.”

In a rapidly evolving employment landscape, the best way to prepare youth for the roles of tomorrow is by imparting the skills they need to be flexible and to adapt. Residents felt that our societies should be emphasizing critical thinking, empathy, and leadership, so that young people have the capacity to learn in evolving conditions and the confidence to be the agents of change.

Our residents were careful to note that building new systems shouldn’t be yet another top-down process; instead, youth must be at the center of designing this new education paradigm. “Youth want to learn about leadership, human rights, policies, politics,” Anna Penido Monteiro, Director of the Inspirare Institute, remarked. “They want to learn more about the environment. They want to learn about how to be prepared to face the challenges that the 21st century brings to them. They also want to learn in different ways.” Current education models are imposed on youth, and do not reflect their needs, preferences, or experiences. We must engage youth directly to understand what their aspirations and ambitions are. We need to find out what they want to learn, what topics interest and excite them, and how they want to engage with this material. Collectively, the Bellagio residents believe, we can create an education paradigm that reflects the needs and expectations of youth, as well as accounts for the ways in which they learn best.

Today's pressing global challenges will have a disproportionate impact on today's youth. An open, honest, intergenerational dialogue should be a critical part of both formal policymaking and informal civic dialogue. Young people can bring new energy into decision-making and current solutions. "Young people cannot be underestimated," Penido Monteiro pointed out. "They are key collaborators in co-creating solutions to the main challenges that the world is facing."

By definition, intergenerational dialogue is an equal exchange of ideas among generations, not a top-down process of imposition. "I think we, as the older generation, have to learn to let go of thinking we have all the answers," said Princess Laurentien van Oranje-Nassau, the founder and Director of the Missing Chapter Foundation. "The way we have been doing things for decades may not be the [ways] we need now." Similarly, Khary Lazarre-White, Executive Director and Co-Founder of The Brotherhood and Sister Sol, highlighted: "Two things I have seen with young leaders. One is they have profound courage to seek change. It's possible. Older people get inured to these realities. Older people get defeated by realities. Young people have profound confidence and energy and commitment. So often the innovation comes from young leaders."

“Young people have profound confidence and energy and commitment. So often the innovation comes from young leaders.”

Khary Lazarre-White, Executive Director and Co-Founder of The Brotherhood and Sister Sol

For this intergenerational dialogue to be productive, older generations have a responsibility to create a safe space for discussion, to actively ask youth questions, and to incorporate and value young people's viewpoints and experience. "We need to organize systematically to be able to listen to what the younger generation wants, what they are interested in and what they are already doing – and help elevate that", says Sarah Mendelson, Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

**SUPPORT YOUTH IN BUILDING THEIR OWN SYSTEMS:
CO-CREATION OF PEER-TO-PEER PLATFORMS**

platform," said Novuyo Tshuma, author and Ph.D. student at the University of Houston. "When people feel like they are being heard, it changes the way they engage with society, the sense of responsibility, the feeling of being a stakeholder." Platforms that facilitate peer-to-peer networks offer critical support for youth in shaping their own narratives, sharing perspectives and tools, and inspiring each other to take action.

As we incorporate youth into existing systems, we should also support youth in building their own systems. "Youth don't need to be encouraged; they need the structure and

Existing social media platforms already play a significant role in youth engagement, but tailored platforms are still needed to offer youth a safe space for constructive dialogue. Esra'a al Shafei, founder of Majal.org, says the platform has been successful because it gives youth the power, "When we create these platforms, it's never been our voice to others. It's been a place that people come to have a respectful dialogue, but [a] fierce one." Young people should have a part in defining and shaping these platforms, so that the platforms meet their specific needs and provide a sense of ownership. These platforms can allow youth to form a stronger collective voice to engage with decision-makers at the national, regional, or global level.

Ultimately, the residents felt, whether we are talking about amplifying, engaging, or supporting the youth voice, two factors emerge as conditions for success: (1) the need for co-creation of systems and (2) the importance of safe, two-way dialogue (rather than a top down approach). Both of these factors are critical to ensuring that youth perspectives can influence existing systems to meaningfully shift the status quo.