CHAPTER 6

TIME TO SHARE THE POWER: FRAMEWORK FOR AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH COUNCILS

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Abstract

At a time of rapid change in the political involvement of young people, the creation of structures to facilitate their participation in decision-making processes has been on the rise globally. In academic literature as well as in political discourse, youth participation is mostly associated with the involvement of young people in decision-making processes at various levels of governance and within organisations. Youth councils are often created with the aim of representing the interests of young people in the community through advocacy, lobbying and provision of advice to decision-making bodies. At the same time the landscape of youth councils, particularly at a local government level, is varied and often lacking evidence of best practice, an enabling environment and coordination. This chapter provides an overview of the findings from a mixed-methods comparative case study of local-level youth councils – the experiences of former and current members of youth councils and the professionals who support their work – in the Australian state of Victoria and in Estonia. Semi-structured interviews and an online survey across the two countries and in two languages were employed to map the experiences and identify youth councils' successes, gaps and potential for improvement. The results reveal that local-level youth councils in Victoria and Estonia share many similarities, particularly in their aims, commonly undertaken activities and aspirations; however, there are also noticeable differences, which can largely be attributed to the relevant legislative framework, policies, coordination mechanisms and resourcing for youth councils that exist in Estonia but not in Victoria. As a result of the research, a framework for an enabling environment for youth councils is identified and conceptualised using the Enabling Environment Index (EEI) developed by CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, as a guide. This framework, which uses the three dimensions from the EEI and introduces nine new sub-dimensions, is presented and discussed in this chapter

Youth participation: What are we actually talking about?

In academic literature as well as in political discourse, youth participation is mostly associated with the involvement of young people in decision-making processes at various levels of governance and within organisations. The original focus of the concept was on young people having representation in political processes and decision-making (Fleming 2013; Lentin & Ohana 2008). Farthing (2012:73) defines youth participation as 'a process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them'. This definition links participation with democratic society and the concept and desire of young people to be 'active citizens'. It also outlines three important conditions which need to be met in youth participation processes – the opportunities for young people to take part in a process, to have their views heard and also to have some level of power (or a desire to have it) over decisions that are made.

It is widely agreed that young people are powerless compared to adults and that this stems from their social, economic and political marginalisation – most young people are disenfranchised from mainstream society and are not treated equally by virtue of their age (Corney 2014). Farrow (2018) notes that youth participation in decision-

making is always about the sharing and distribution of power – from and between those who typically control the process towards those they seek to engage; however, these elements are frequently absent from both research and practice (Manning & Edwards 2014). A process where no power (such as the power to make or influence decisions) is being sought, transferred or shared should not be labelled 'youth participation'.

In recent decades, definitions of youth participation that emphasise the process of participation and the importance of structures have dominated the academic literature (Corney et al. 2020). However, the tendency to interpret youth participation as the involvement of young people through a structured and formalised mechanism has also been met with some criticism, for example, as being seen to privilege a relatively small group of well-educated, already empowered young people and often overlooking the needs of disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people, and replicating failed adult structures of representative politics (Cairns 2006; Comrie 2010; Yamashita & Davies, cited in Percy-Smith & Thomas 2010).

The concept of youth participation is closely linked with the principles of democratic governance. In his seminal essay, Hart (1992) notes that a nation is democratic to the extent that its citizens are involved, particularly at the community level, and for this reason there should be gradually increasing opportunities for children and young people to participate in any aspiring democracy, particularly in nations already convinced that they are democratic. Yakovlev (2003) widens the discourse somewhat and argues that the treatment of its children is a litmus test of any government, however it may describe itself.

The importance of including young people in political process has also been demonstrated to the world through examples such as the #MarchForOurLives movement, which 'responded to a wave of events and outrage in the USA over high school shootings' (Farrow 2018:20), the Indignados Movement in Spain, the #BlackLivesMatter in the USA (Farrow 2018) and the #SchoolStrikeforClimate around the world, as well as through the 2011–2012 Arab states' popular uprisings and various Occupy movements. Bruter and Harrison (2014) agree that the participation of young people can also be identified as a distinct characteristic of many demonstrations and movements such as the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions in the early years of the 21st century and even the demonstrations leading to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989–1990.

At the global level, a number of high-profile youth events have taken place in the last decade and formal participation structures such as the Commonwealth Youth Council have been created (Farrow 2015). Nevertheless, it is the involvement of young people in decision-making processes at a local level that tends to dominate the academic debate, predominantly because this is seen as improving service delivery and outcomes, contributing to a 'social justice' agenda and fostering a democratic environment (Brodie et al. 2009; Farrow 2015).

On the local level, student councils and youth councils are prominent structured mechanisms for participation (Perry-Hazan & Nir 2016). They are seen as essential to providing opportunities for young people to get involved in public decision-making.

Local youth council models of operation can vary significantly, as they depend on regulatory frameworks, institutional and organisational structures, and demography, politics and local traditions (Collins et al., cited in Perry-Hazan & Nir 2016).

While traditional youth participatory structures that replicate adult structures, such as youth and student councils, have been in existence for decades, there are a number of trends that influence youth participation today, for example, the increasingly loud calls for youth participatory structures and processes to be more inclusive of all young people, not just a selected few, the use and influence of technology which demands greater importance and emphasis to be given to online participation, as well as the rising popularity of methods such as co-management and co-design.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach as a comparative case study (Yin 2003) in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used (Stake 1995, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). The core assumption of this type of enquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of the research problem than either approach alone. The research process involved data collection through first conducting semi-structured interviews in order to inform the design of the survey. The qualitative data collection aimed to capture the voices of all stakeholders – young people as members or former members of youth councils and adults who had been connected with a youth council in a professional capacity.

An opportunistic approach was used to determine the number and availability of youth council participants, and semi-structured interviews were held with a total of 15 participants associated with the work of three local-level youth councils – two youth councils from Estonia and one from Australia. The aim of the interviews was to examine the local context and environment for the key people associated with these youth councils, as well as the organisational structures, activities, challenges and other factors impacting on their outcomes, in detail so as to produce case studies.

The quantitative data collection was done through a de-identified anonymous online survey which was conducted in order to identify the environments in which local-level youth councils operate in the Australian state of Victoria and in Estonia. The total sample size for the survey was 114 participants, of whom 62 were from Estonia and 52 from Australia. In total, 28 youth councils/local government areas from Estonia were represented in the survey and 23 from Australia (all from the state of Victoria).

In analysing the data, sequential mixed data analysis, which includes two separate processes – analysis of qualitative data using thematic analysis and analysis of quantitative data using descriptive statistics (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2009) – was employed. The results from qualitative and quantitative data were combined through comparing in-depth interviews with the results of the survey to determine where the data supported, challenged or expanded understandings about the environments in which youth councils are enacted.

Differences and similarities between youth councils in Estonia and Australia

The data collected enabled in-depth insight into various aspects of the work of local-level youth councils in Estonia and Australia. This data in combination with a review of the literature provided a basis for the development of a youth council–specific framework for an enabling environment which is presented later in this chapter.

The findings from both the Estonian and Australian data reveal relatively small differences in aims, objectives, activities and challenges – particularly in aims and objectives, which appear to be very similar in both countries. The most notable differences between the data from Australia and from Estonia in this category relate to Estonian respondents identifying activities and events that aimed to achieve policy change and tangible results resulting in long-term change – this was generally not present in the Australian data.

In the category of governance of youth councils, respondents across both countries employed similar processes for recruiting members and had similar key partners. Australian participants identified their main three partners as internal to the council, whereas for Estonian respondents the top three partners were all external to local government. Estonian respondents were also more likely than their Australian counterparts to have involvement in or control over the work of the youth council and the recruitment process of new members, as well as acknowledging the existence of a democratic process for the selection of new members.

In the realm of outputs, outcomes and aspirations of youth councils, respondents across the two countries identified lack of funding and funding security as the common challenges for the work of their youth councils. In comparison with the Australian data, in Estonia there was more importance placed on developing youth councils as structures, as well as influencing political processes. In Australia, connecting with the community appeared to be more important than in Estonia.

Table 1: Similarities and differences between Australian and Estonian data in the category of aims, objectives, activities and challenges of youth councils

Domain	Similarities	Differences	
1. Aims, objectives, activities and challenges		Australia	Estonia
Aims and objectives	Representing young people's views and concerns to the local council was seen as the primary purpose of youth councils in both countries. The role of youth councils was viewed as provision of advice to decision-makers, particularly local councillors.	Australian youth councils emphasised more philosophical aims, such as 'getting the youth voice heard' and 'making young people more visible in the community'.	Estonian youth councils emphasised the importance of achieving tangible outcomes resulting in long-term change (e.g. new infrastructure, services or policies).
Commonly undertaken activities	Organising events was the most common category of activities undertaken, followed by representing young people in dealings with government and other organisations. Participating in committees of the local council or other organisations was the least popular category in both countries.	Events and activities organised by the youth council in Australia tended to be more focused on campaigning/ raising awareness for a particular social issue (e.g. bullying, domestic violence, mental health, the environment).	Events organised by youth councils in Estonia were more diverse and ranged from world cafés with politicians to celebration of cultural traditions. They also often had a theme or a specific purpose such as fundraising.
Challenges	The main challenge that was common across the two countries was making the youth council more visible in the community. Lack of rights and the relationship between the youth council and elected council were other challenges at similar levels in both countries.	Insufficient funding and getting youth initiatives supported by local councils were considerably more prevalent in Australia than in Estonia.	Finding new members and motivating and retaining existing members were among the most common challenges in Estonia – much more so than in Australia.

Table 2: Similarities and differences between Australian and Estonian data in the category of governance of youth councils

Domain	Similarities	Differences	
2. Governance of youth councils		Australia	Estonia
Recruitment of members	The most popular method of recruiting new members for youth councils in both countries involved submitting an expression of interest or application. The decision-making/ selection process most commonly involved the existing/outgoing members and youth worker working together.	More than one-third of respondents indicated that a youth worker alone chose the members of the youth council. Very few youth councils in Australia had a democratic process in place for recruiting new members.	A majority of Estonian respondents indicated that their youth council had a democratic process in place for recruiting new members. Young people were always involved in the decision-making process relating to new members of youth councils.
Level of youth participation in governance of youth councils	Most respondents from both countries disagreed with the statement that an adult/ youth worker alone drove the work of the youth council. The vast majority of participants indicated the frequency of youth council meetings to be at least monthly.	Half of the respondents indicated that the membership of their youth council consisted of young people and adults who were not young people. Nearly a third of respondents indicated that the meetings of their youth councils were chaired by an adult.	Most respondents in Estonia indicated that their youth councils had only young people as members. Almost all respondents agreed that meetings of their youth council were chaired by a young person. Estonians were also more likely to claim that the full control of the work of the council lay in young people.
Main partners for youth councils	Schools, youth workers, elected councils, council departments and youth organisations were among the main partners of youth councils in both countries. State/county/ national governments were among the least important.	The three most important key partners identified were all internal: elected councillors, youth workers and other council departments.	An overwhelming majority of respondents identified the three key partners for their youth council to be external (as opposed to partners connected to local government apparatus). The most important key partner in Estonia's case was the peak body for youth councils; such a body does not exist in Australia.

Table 3: Similarities and differences between Australian and Estonian data in the category of outputs, outcomes and aspirations of youth councils

Domain	Similarities	Differences	
3. Outputs, outcomes and aspirations of youth councils		Australia	Estonia
Connecting with the community	An overwhelming majority of respondents in both countries outlined some event that the youth council had organised either on its own or in partnership with other organisations as its main achievement. Events with a recreational focus such as award ceremonies, movie nights, festivals, youth weeks etc. appeared to be the most prevalent category of events.	Among Australian respondents, the importance of a youth council's connectedness to the community was stressed more frequently.	Estonian respondents mentioned specific reasons for organising community events such as fundraising and celebration of cultural traditions which were not prevalent among Australian participants.
Influencing decision-making and political processes	In both countries, this category emerged in the discussion of outcomes and outputs of youth councils.	Achievements in this category of outcomes were less prevalent in Australian respondents' answers compared to Estonian respondents. Examples included influencing and consequently changing public transport timetables, concessions or route planning, development of a youth charter and providing input to the youth strategic plan.	Among Estonian respondents, this category was very prevalent. Some participants indicated that holding events such as a 'participation café' where young people and leaders of the council, community and sometimes members of parliament come together has become a tradition. Others outlined specific achievements related to successful advocacy: a youth councillor being successfully elected to the local council; and having a representative on the regional or national youth council.

Development of skills and youth councils as a structure	In both countries, this category emerged in the responses.	Strengthening of the relationship between the youth council and elected councillors emerged as a theme, but was not mentioned frequently. This suggests that it is not very important to emphasise youth councils as an independent and standalone structure in Australia.	Achievements related to the development of youth councils as a structure were frequently highlighted by respondents. In Estonia, there is considerable emphasis on youth councils as independent structures and on how they operate and organise their work.
Additional resources youth councils need to be effective in their work	Funding was the main category identified in both countries as currently being insufficient and requiring additional resources. In addition, funding security and having an independent budget emerged as important themes across both countries.	A number of respondents from rural municipalities indicated the lack of public transport or the distance between different parts of a municipality as a resource that was currently lacking. There was also the importance of having greater recognition and clearer expectations from the elected council.	Members, and in particular motivated members, emerged as a dominant category of resources that youth councils currently lacked in Estonia.
Dreams and aspirations	Respondents in both countries identified dreams and aspirations that related to improving/ strengthening the role, work or status of youth councils in the community and within the local council itself.	Some Australian respondents highlighted ambitious changes in society as their dreams, such as to eradicate bullying.	Almost all Estonian respondents were focused on developing and strengthening youth councils as structures, including specific propositions such as for the youth council to give opinions on every draft council motion and by-law, and to be represented on all official council committees.

A framework for an enabling environment for youth councils

The use of the term 'enabling environment' has gained momentum in multiple fields and sectors. Whereas there are numerous definitions of what constitutes an enabling environment in different fields, there is little research into enabling environments in the context of youth participation and particularly youth participatory structures.

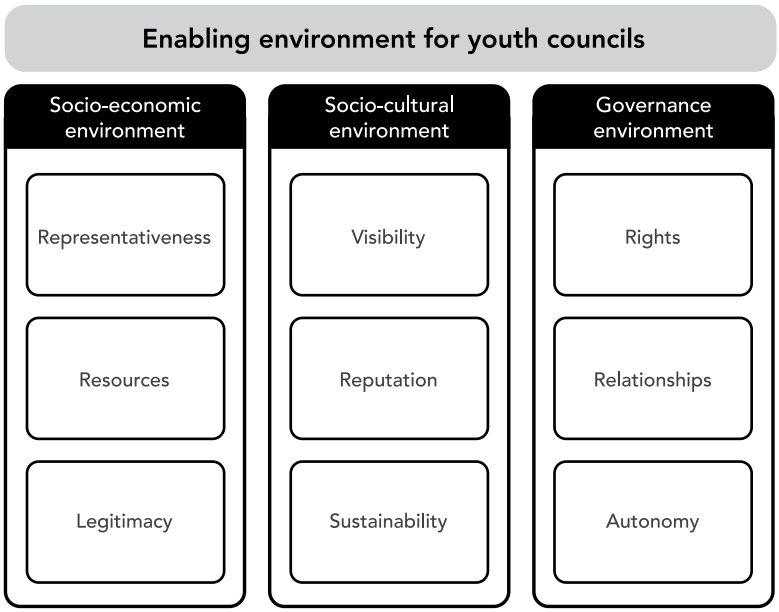
Youth participatory structures, such as youth councils, share many similarities with civil society organisations: they are usually based on voluntary participation; they aim to empower a group in society through better advocacy and representation in decision-making processes; they usually follow the principles of democracy in their work and in determining their membership; and they encourage and rely on the concept of active citizenship – that is, the will of members to contribute for the betterment of others.

There are, however, also some notable differences between independent civil society organisations and local-level youth councils, which in most cases are affiliated with or incorporated into the structures of local government authorities. This usually means that they are not fully independent bodies, unlike civil society organisations. CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation – a global alliance of civil society organisations – in 2013 developed and launched an Enabling Environment Index (EEI) which aims to assess the key conditions that shape the way civil society operates. The EEI is made up of three domains and 17 sub-dimensions that together describe the aspects of an enabling environment in the context of civil society.

There have been numerous attempts to define and identify enabling environments in various disciplines, but only a few documented cases in areas relating to children or youth participation. In order to better contextualise the enabling environment for youth councils, the following working definition has been constructed by the author: *an enabling environment for youth councils means the fulfilment of a set of conditions that allow them to be independent, youth-led and participatory structures so that they can represent the interests of young people through advocacy and give advice to decision-makers on matters impacting on young people.*

Based on the example of the EEI, a framework for an enabling environment for youth councils is here proposed. This framework can be broadly categorised into three domains: socio-economic, socio-cultural and governance. Under these dimensions, the framework has nine sub-dimensions that each represent a set of conditions required in order to create an enabling environment for local-level youth councils.

The proposed framework does not offer any weighting of the three domains or individual sub-dimensions – each sub-dimension needs to be equally present in the enabling environment for youth councils. The framework is intended as a guide in the creation process for new youth councils and in evaluating and reorganising the work of existing youth councils. It can also be used as a reference point in creating policies, programs, regulations and rights affirming legislative frameworks for youth councils. It is not intended as a tool for guiding the operational aspects and everyday decisions of individual youth councils.



Framework for an enabling environment for youth councils

First dimension: Socio-economic environment for youth councils

The CIVICUS EEI describes the socio-economic environment dimension as one that 'provides a series of assessments of factors such as education, equity, gender equality and, quite importantly to support civic participation in the age of the digital revolution, the development of communication technologies' (Fioramonti & Kononykhina 2013:5). The following new sub-dimensions emerged from the interview and survey data across Australia and Estonia.

Representativeness: having a diverse membership of the youth council. Diversity in this context can encompass equal or near-equal representation of all genders, various cultural backgrounds, subcultures and identities, age brackets, geographical coverage of the municipality and schools.

Resourcing: stability, sufficiency and independence of funding. Resourcing encompasses the availability and guarantees of: financial resources such as a dedicated youth council budget; human resources, often in the form of training, administrative or mentoring support through administrative assistants, youth workers, lawyers and other advisers; free access to facilities such as rooms to hold meetings or events in; equipment such as computers, phones and access to databases and the internet; and transportation needed for fulfilment of the aims and tasks of the youth council.

Legitimacy: having a mandate to represent other young people. A mandate in this context is to be approached very broadly: in the simplest terms, it means having a democratic and open process in place to select members for the youth council. Democratic can mean organised elections where young people vote for their representatives, but most often it means either an open application process where all

young people have the right to express their interest and apply to become a member and the process of selection is transparent and youth-led, or a process through which youth organisations or student councils delegate their representatives to become members of youth councils, or a combination of all of the above.

Second dimension: Socio-cultural environment for youth councils

The CIVICUS EEI describes the socio-cultural environment as one that 'examines cultural factors reinforcing the capacity of citizens to get involved in the civil society arena, such as inter-personal trust and tolerance, inclination to join collective action and solidarity' (Fioramonti & Kononykhina 2013:5). The following new sub-dimensions emerged when combining the interview and survey data across both countries with the literature.

Visibility: of the work of the youth council in the community. Visibility in this context means the provision of resources and mediums such as official websites, social media and local newspapers, but also events and advertising channels through which the work of the youth council can be made visible to the entire community.

Reputation: supportive attitudes of adults and young people towards the youth council that understand and acknowledge the role of the youth council as equally important to that of any other committee or advisory council of a similar purpose comprised of adults.

Sustainability: motivating new and existing members of the youth council. Sustainability means ensuring that members are motivated and that there is sufficient interest generated and maintained within the youth population of the local community so more candidates are interested in becoming members of the youth council than there are places. Competition also strengthens the representativeness and legitimacy of a youth council.

Third dimension: Governance environment for youth councils

The CIVICUS EEI describes the governance environment as one that:

> includes fundamental capabilities that create the minimum preconditions, or lack thereof, for social and political engagement. These include the overall state effectiveness, rule of law, policy dialogue, corruption, associational rights and political liberties. It also covers a series of personal rights, guarantees against unduly interference from state agencies or private actors, freedom of speech, media freedom and, importantly, it assesses the regulatory frameworks for NGOs (Fioramonti & Kononykhina 2013:5).

The following sub-dimensions emerged as a result of combining the interview and survey data across both countries with the literature.

Rights: having an official status and rights that are enshrined in statutes. Rights in this context relate to rights endorsed in legislation, constitutions, and terms of reference or equivalent documents of official standing. These rights can relate to the right to self-govern and for young people to be able to drive the work of the youth council, to be provided with sufficient resources, support and information, to be represented on other bodies that make decisions impacting on young people, and to give advice and make suggestions.

Relationships: with the elected council and council departments. Relationships mean ongoing, professional, equal and mutually respectful relationships that enable the youth council to seek information, gain support and regularly communicate with elected councillors and council departments and officials in order to best fulfil the aims of the youth council.

Autonomy: to drive and lead the work of the youth council. Autonomy means having a mandate and measures to reduce the inherent power imbalance that exists between young people and adults, for example, through the transfer of some adult power to young people in order for the youth council to be youth-led, fully self-governing and empowered to drive its own work and take responsibility for its actions.

Conclusion

The traditional methods, structures and processes for implementing youth participation are changing, with advancements in technology and young people's disappointment with traditional democratic structures and old power values providing the greatest impetus. Having a voice is not an end in itself but, rather, a tool for achieving change in policy, processes, service delivery and even attitudes. It means shifting the power imbalance from those who have power (usually institutions and adults) in favour of those who do not (in this instance, young people). While young people are not a homogenous group with identical needs and aspirations, they do share many things in common due to their position and status in society and also their similar experiences and circumstances.

Youth councils, being representative and participatory, are seen as structures that bring forward the opinions of young people, but they also need to be wary of not monopolising youth voices. Adults and the power structures (e.g. local councils) they operate within need to address the question of power and how much they are willing to share with or delegate to young people if they are serious about empowerment and creating an enabling environment for youth councils.

Many existing models and frameworks for youth participation lack a focus on established structures and instead concentrate on the roles of individuals or groups of young people in the participation process. The framework presented in this chapter focuses on the importance of youth councils as structures and emphasises dimensions that are particularly relevant in the context of youth councils. It can serve as a guide to understand and evaluate the work and needs of youth councils as collective structures – whether to strengthen an existing or create a new youth council, or to plan, develop or evaluate policy measures that can better support the work of these structures.

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