

AGORA Brief – April 2013

PARLIAMENTS AND YOUTH

One in five people today are between the ages of 15 and 25. This number is predicted to increase further, as many developing countries in particular will see steady rises in their younger population groups. Successfully including this growing group of youths in democratic processes poses great challenges, but also great opportunities. To date, however, young people often find themselves on the fringes of the political process, with poor representation in virtually all parliaments. This brief will explore why it has proven difficult for them to enter politics – and parliaments - and how can they be better supported.

While young people are often the ones to call for social and political change, too often they are left at the door once formal processes are launched and important decisions are made. To an extent, this is due to institutional rules that limit full access to the political stage through age requirements and other restrictions. It is also due, in part, to a lack of action on the part of those in politics to engage and seek out young people's ideas, advice and needs.

Finally, many young people feel that 'formal' politics is simply beyond them – even those with bright ideas and big dreams often do not know quite where to start, or do not wish to join a party or political institution that they feel has failed them. Voter turnout among 18-25 year olds continues to be lower than other age groups, and youth continue to be less likely than others to join political parties. Politically engaged as they may be, they are not keen to make it 'official'.

Parliaments and Youth in the Arab States

The Arab region has been experiencing a massive youth bulge, with more than half of most countries' populations under the age of 25. Young men and women in the Arab region today are the most educated; thus they hold the potential to make a considerable contribution to the development of the region.

In the wake of the mass protests of the Arab Spring, Arab States are increasingly acknowledging the need to engage with youth. Parliaments, international organizations and activist groups have launched a range of initiatives with a view to making representative institutions more transparent and more inclusive of young people.

Young people in the Arab world are thus standing at the crossroads of major changes in their countries. The current generation of young Arab men and women is the most and possibly also the best-educated ever. Yet, many face enormous challenges in finding decent employment and in participating in democratic decision-making processes.

AGORA's March 2014 Arab Digest digs into the details and brings you updates on the different projects and programmes that are being undertaken in the Arab States parliaments. The Digest includes examples from Iraq, Tunisia, Lebanon, Yemen and Somalia, among others.

To read the full Digest, please visit the following link: <http://www.agora-parl.org/resources/library/arab-digest-april-2014-parliaments-youth>.

Why youth?

Because young people often feel that the regular 'routes' into politics are beyond their reach, they tend to turn to untraditional avenues of civic engagement:

"Young people may be more dissatisfied with the performance of democracy, but they seem to be more interested in politics than their elders. Their political activism is often being channeled towards "street democracy" – authorised demonstrations, unauthorised demonstrations, blocking traffic.

Engagement in politics is not always or primarily expressed institutionally, and this is reflected in the levels of electoral participation. The unanswered question is whether today's 15 year old street activists will become tomorrow's 30 year old voters."

International IDEA: *Tuning In To Democracy: Challenges of Young People's Participation* <http://www.agora-parl.org/node/361>

Scottish youth parliament launches young voter engagement project

On February 5th, National Voter Registration Day, the Scottish Youth Parliament launched its young voter engagement project, "Aye, Naw, Mibbe: a little about politics, a lot about you".

This project will help ensure that young people have access to impartial information, such as how to register to vote, and will be able to keep up to date with opportunities to engage in the debate with upcoming events.

In addition, the project will also be a source of information to practitioners and those who work with young people by offering advice and resources about how to discuss the referendum in an impartial and safe manner.

Source: Scottish Youth Parliament: <http://www.agora-parl.org/news/scottish-youth-parliament-launched-young-voter-engagement-project>

That young people's voices need to be included in political processes has been demonstrated by the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements and countless uprisings around the globe. Enabling and convincing youth to voice their concerns through representative institutions will go a long way towards improving the transparency, effectiveness and public standing of parliaments.

Zunaid Ahmed Palak, the youngest person to be elected to the Parliament of Bangladesh, explains why young people should be empowered to run for office, especially in countries that face great challenges or that are seeking change:

“If our young people, the brilliant, honest, the hard-working potential leaders will not join politics, the posts will go to the wrong people. If you want to do better for your country and for your generation, you have to be active in politics. If you think politics is not good because you’re not in it, you have to clean it – and to clean it, you have to live it. You have to be in it.”

Zunaid Ahmed Palak, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh

VIDEO: To watch the full interview with Mr Palak, please click [here](#)

Mr Palak’s comments go beyond the need for generational change and ‘fresh’ leadership. They refer also to some of today’s most pressing political questions, which should not be addressed without the sustained input and support of young people. Youth unemployment - at 12,6% globally in 2013 - continues to cripple economies in many parts of the world. A lack of progress in shaping solutions should spur on sustained political engagement with youth, but so far new initiatives remain rather small scaled. Climate change, too, would benefit from an increased engagement with young people, as they stand to bear the brunt of poor decision-making on this issue and tend to be more open to longer term, sustainable solutions.

Younger parliaments?

To become truly inclusive and representative, parliaments should make every effort to open up their institution so that the ideas and needs of young people are channeled in a democratic manner. Looking at parliaments today, much remains to be done. In the vast majority of countries, parliaments are not ‘young’ institutions. Globally, the average age of a parliamentarian is 53; women parliamentarians are slightly younger at 50. Africa has the youngest parliaments, but here too, the institutions fail to reflect the demographic realities of their respective states.

Why do parliaments continue to be such sanctuaries for older generations? Why is it proving so hard for young people, who make up a growing group of the population (and therefore of eligible candidates and voters), to break into these institutions?

UNDP Launches Youth Strategy

Recognising the need to better include young people in youth empowerment issues around the world, UNDP is taking action. On April 4th, Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth Ahmad Alhendawi launched the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) first global Youth Strategy (2014-2017) [“Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future”](#).

The youth strategy focuses on three main themes: strengthening sustainable development through increased economic empowerment of youth; increasing youth civic engagement and participation in politics; and reinforcing youth engagement in disaster preparedness, crisis response, and resilience building in crisis and/or conflict contexts.

“I may be sounding too optimistic, but my message to the youth of Tunisia and the rest of the world is to learn the renewal of hope,” began Alhendawi his remarks to mark the launch of the global youth strategy. “But,” he added, “to be able to move beyond the stage of frustration, there can be no substitute for strong youth participation.”

For more information on UNDP’s Youth Strategy and the launch in Tunis, take a look at our blog post at <http://www.agora-parl.org/interact/blog/undp-youth-envoy-launches-youth-strategy-tunis>.

As mentioned above, many countries continue to set age requirements for candidates looking to run for parliament. The average age of eligibility for running for parliament is set at just over 22, but in some states it runs as high as 35. These age requirements stem from the belief that a certain level of knowledge and maturity is required to successfully meet the many demands placed upon a parliamentarian. Representing others, shaping the legal framework of your country and overseeing the work of the government, or so the argument goes, would pose considerable challenges to someone who has yet to benefit from work experience or higher education.

Pakistan: youth participation termed vital for sustainability of institutions

Excitement and ambition were palpable as the fifth batch of the Youth Parliament Pakistan (YPP) ended its session last September in the federal capital. “We had no idea how effective this exercise was going to be when we started,” said Hira Mumtaz, a YPP member from Lahore. “It is only after we got here that we realised the importance youth can play in Pakistan’s future politics.”

The YPP, an initiative of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), is modeled after the National Assembly. Mumtaz and her fellow youth parliamentarians said through meetings with legislators, guest speakers and their own deliberations they learned the complexities of policymaking and governance. They said that sustainability of Pakistan’s democratic institutions was not possible without the active involvement of the youth.

The 60-member youth parliament, with unequal representation from across Pakistan, engages in parliamentary business including debate and mock legislation in a two-party set-up. The members are selected by a rigorous selection process, Mumtaz said, which consists of submitting a grueling application and subsequent interviews by a steering committee. The committee, headed by Senator SM Zafar, includes former deputy speaker of the National Assembly Faisal Karim Kundi and Minister of State for Privatisation Khurram Dastgir Khan.

Mumtaz, 22, who is thinking of pursuing further studies in public policy, said if young Pakistanis commit to entering politics the process was not so difficult after all. “There were 60 of us here and we met with legislators and policymakers, so these connections will be extremely valuable for us if we decided to start our political career.”

Source: The Express Tribune: <http://www.agora-parl.org/news/youth-parliament-youth-participation-termed-vital-sustainability-institutions>

What this argument fails to grasp is that neither work experience nor higher education necessarily make for a good parliamentarian. Lawmaking goes beyond the technical aspects of balancing budgets, reviewing bills and proposing amendments. Rather, it is about identifying the key issues and needs that society faces, and shaping – with the expert support of parliamentary staff, advisers and others – legal tools and provisions to address them. At the heart of the parliamentarian’s task lies the challenge to listen, listen and then listen some more, so that they may represent the views and concerns that have been expressed to them to the best of their abilities.

Having a law degree, running a business or having a couple of decades of experience will certainly prove useful to those in office. Today, however, it is just as valuable – if not more so – to have first-hand experience of the social and economic realities young people are facing: unemployment, discrimination, barriers to education and generally poor prospects in most parts of the world. Girls and young women in particular make up extremely vulnerable groups in developing countries. Faced with such challenges, parliaments should go above and beyond to reach out to youth. Age requirements and other restrictions should make way for regulations that ensure all voices have equal representation in parliament.

"Youth should be given a chance to take an active part in the decision-making of local, national and global levels."

Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General

HOW TO GET IN

If you want to get into politics but you're not sure where to start, take a look at the following options:

- Does your country or state have a **YOUTH PARLIAMENT**?
If so, this is a great place to start – it will give you first-hand experience of political life and will allow you to get familiar with the work of parliament. Beyond the knowledge and skills you get to develop, being a youth parliamentarian will also help you build a political network. Even if you don't end up in politics, this is a unique experience you will not regret.
- Join a **POLITICAL PARTY**.
Even if the political parties in your country or area don't seem to live up to your expectations, they often have **YOUTH WINGS**. These youth wings play an important role in providing fresh ideas and feedback to the party members and leadership, and – naturally – pay great attention to issues related to youth. Take a look, and see what they have to offer.
- Become an **ACTIVIST**
You don't need to be a politician to be in politics. Many civil society organizations, NGOs and activists achieve impressive goals by promoting their issues, networking and lobbying. Find out what groups are active in your region, and get involved.
- **LEARN**
Take the opportunity to learn about politics and political institutions: look for internships or work placements that can give you some insight into what it's all about, and find out whether or not it's for you. Many parliaments and political parties are open to young people who want to invest a couple of weeks or months of their time – make the most of it.

Reaching out

“I don't think that there is enough done to engage young people with parliaments and parliamentary democracy. With a system which is defined by its historical traditions, more efforts need to be made to make the process relevant to young people - to 'mainstream' parliament. This is achieved in a small way through youth parliament initiatives, but these are not widely available and do not do enough to engage young people who have not previously shown an interest in parliament and politics.”

Zoe Conn

Fundraising and Communications Manager, Student Hubs

There are many ways for parliaments to open up their institution and political processes to young people. An increasing number of them are creating 'youth parliaments'. Youth parliaments tend to mirror the set-up and activities of national parliaments: they are composed of youth representatives who debate policy and legislation, question government members and launch initiatives. The key aim of most youth parliaments is to give young people a chance to experience parliamentary life, and to get a feel for the job of an MP.

Niger gets youth parliament

Last December, the Speaker of the Niger National Assembly, Hama Amadou, inaugurated the country's youth legislature. Made up of 113 MPs, the youth parliament is a body tasked with supporting the National Assembly on issues related to the youth.

The junior MPs, including 54 girls, were chosen based on their performances at school to represent Nigerien youth at the National Assembly.

The new youth legislature is scheduled to hold conferences and visit some national and international institutions with a view to improving youth well-being and better take care of their concerns in government policies.

The young MPs have a two-year term.

Source: Afrique Jet, December 2013: <http://www.agora-parl.org/news/niger-gets-youth-parliament>

Increasingly, youth parliaments are also called upon to support national parliaments in their work on youth-related issues. This does not only lend a greater sense of importance to the youth parliament, it also leads to important legislative action and change. As the many case studies in this brief highlight, youth parliaments can play an important role in engaging young people in the long run, and therefore merit more attention and resources.

Next to setting up a youth parliament, cross-party work – whether through a caucus, working group or committee – can be instrumental in placing youth issues on the parliamentary agenda. Young MPs from different groups can take the lead by advocating for a more open and inclusive institution, and by pushing for youth engagement across party lines. Such ‘champions’ should be supported by their political party and by the parliamentary secretariat, and should be given access to the necessary resources and materials where possible.

Kenya: MPs push for youth agenda

Eleven youthful MPs have said they will champion for youth agenda across the country. The MPs said they ensure the youth access Uwezo Funds for economic empowerment.

They said they have revived the Kenya Young Parliamentarians Association at last week's two-day workshop at Leisure Lodge Resort in Diani, South Coast. Nominated MP Johnson Sakaja told the press on Saturday that the group has no political inclination. "Many youths were elected and nominated to Parliament. We need to find a way through which we can champion issues and the rights of young people because we represent the youth of this country, who are the majority," Sakaja said.

ODM's Zulekha Hassan said the caucus has 47 members from the Senate and National Assembly. She said it seeks to find a common ground on legislative proposals that touch on the youth. "We will soon be opening up a secretariat that will act as a centre for communication to coordinate activities of all youth across the country," she said.

Source: AllAfrica, September 2014: <http://www.agora-parl.org/news/kenya-mps-push-youth-agenda>

Finally, parliaments can reach out to youth and solicit their inputs by embracing ICT and social media. 45% of the world's Internet users are below the age of 25, and SMS is now one of the most popular types of mobile phone usage. Unprecedented access to information and communication technologies is providing youth with new means to express their aspirations and concerns more freely, to mobilize in large numbers, and to connect with others to debate the problems that concern them. Investing in modern communication technologies (an updated website, a social media strategy, information campaigns by SMS and so on) is an important step in drawing in young people.

Beyond parliament, political parties play an important role in providing young people with the platform and opportunity to get their political feet wet. Political parties have much to gain from bringing in young people: they offer fresh perspectives and ideas, and they are more appealing to a growing group of eligible young voters. To tap into this potential, political parties should strengthen their outreach efforts: they can organize consultations and debates with a focus on youth, strengthen their social media presence, promote youth priorities in parliament and so on. They should also (re)shape their internal party structures to embrace potential young talent. If political parties are serious about engaging youth, they should employ strategies that foster results both within their own organization and in parliament. Young people need to be heard, not just listened to – putting their face on a campaign poster will not do.

Taking Parliamentary Action

Parliamentarians and parliamentary secretariats have many tools at their disposal to improve their youth engagement. While much depends on the resources and budgets available, making youth a priority is first and foremost a political choice. The case studies in this brief have highlighted some best practices and provide much food for thought. To provide further inspiration, the parliamentary action points below offer some concrete suggestions as to how parliaments and individual parliamentarians can take this issue forward within their institution.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION POINTS

ASKING QUESTIONS

To understand what strategies are in place with regards to the political participation of youth, parliamentarians can ask parliamentary questions. Some of the suggestions below may need to be contextualized to suit a particular national context, but they should prove useful as ‘model questions’:

- What is the parliament currently doing to engage young people? Is there a strategy in place to seek out their ideas and advice?
- To what extent are young people being included in parliamentary processes? Have they been invited to speak at committee hearings, and have they been consulted on relevant legislation?
- In the past year, what pieces of legislation have been passed on youth related issues? Are there pending issues that should be taken up urgently?
- What percentage of the budget is dedicated to youth initiatives? Can this be further increased?
- Does the parliament have a social media strategy? If so, is this strategy sufficiently tailored to reach young people?
- What kind of voter education activities are being carried out, and to what extent do they focus on youth? How are schools, universities, societies and so on being targeted?

GETTING ANSWERS

Addressing the issues that are relevant to youth today often requires information, knowledge and technical expertise that is not readily available to most parliamentarians. Soliciting the right kind of information is crucial in designing sound solutions. Parliamentarians can do this in a number of ways:

- **ENGAGING YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS.** Connecting with young people and organizations who work on these issues on a daily basis can bring a wealth of information and potential solutions to the parliamentary table. Through their own research and advocacy, youth groups and experts have often already done a lot of legwork. You could take on their suggestions with regard to pilot projects, and to build public support for new initiatives.

- **COMMISSIONING RESEARCH AND IMPACT STUDIES:** Research and impact studies can go a long way towards convincing your fellow parliamentarians, and relevant government officials, of the need for youth engagement. Such studies should always be gender-sensitive and should carefully assess the impact on vulnerable groups such as minorities, indigenous peoples and refugees.
- **SUPPORTING YOUNG MPs:** Supporting young MPs and the initiatives they take with regard to youth is pivotal in mainstreaming youth priorities in parliament. Parliament and parliamentarians can support young MPs by launching mentoring schemes, offering training and induction programmes, and giving them the opportunity to take the floor in committee and plenary sessions.

BUILDING CROSS-PARTY NETWORKS

Parliamentarians are likely to be more successful if other MPs support their views. Cross-party collaboration can be very effective where youth is concerned, and can take many forms:

- **COMMITTEES AND PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS:** Working with a parliamentary committee or parliamentary group to gather broad-based support for draft laws or new initiatives will amplify their impact and increase chances of success.
- **CROSS-PARTY NETWORKS OR MULTI-PARTY CAUCUSES:** A cross-party group (or caucus) includes like-minded MPs from different political parties who agree on one issue or policy. Such a group could champion youth issues and ensure that youth is placed at the top of the parliamentary agenda. Beyond this, support from across the political spectrum means initiatives are less likely to be altered following a change of ruling party, thus ensuring continuity.

MAINSTREAMING YOUTH POLICIES

Promoting youth policies is most effective when there is a streamlined, consolidated strategy or initiative in place – haphazard policies and a lack of coordination are much less likely to obtain good results. To mainstream youth as a policy priority, parliaments can:

- Develop a **NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY**. This policy should set some key priorities, outline some longer term targets, and ensure that the necessary budgets will be earmarked. For examples of national strategies, please visit Youth Policy at <http://www.youthpolicy.org/>.
- Build a **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT** strategy. Engagement efforts range from arranging open days and school visits to inviting youth to committee hearings and plenary sessions, or consult them on the implementation of youth initiatives.
- Invest in **VOTER EDUCATION INITIATIVES**, focusing on youth.
- **FIND CHAMPIONS** – celebrities who connect with youth and encourage them to join the ‘formal’ conversation on issues that are important to them.
- **REACH OUT:** organise national and sub-national consultations, and engage with youth at the constituency level.

Morocco pins high hopes on young MPs

As the Moroccan parliament celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, calls are mounting for young people and women to have bigger roles in the legislative body. King Mohammed VI on November 25th described the semi-centennial of parliament as an "historic moment" for the political evolution of Morocco.

An "old and male" way of thinking had long barred women and young people from the political arena, political analyst Jamal Farhane says. In 2002, 30 women obtained seats in parliament, thanks to a positive discrimination system.

But young MPs had to wait until the 2011 poll for their numbers to receive a boost. And this was only because pressure from young people during the Arab Spring spurred parties to put youth and women on their national lists, Farhane says.

Young MPs have been trying to prove their capabilities over the past two years, but few of them have been able to distinguish themselves within the legislature and in the media, sociologist Samira Kassimi argues. "We would have liked to see the young MPs coming to the fore, but sadly only a handful of them have stood out," she says.

The fault for the situation, she says, is shared by political leaders who do not give young MPs enough opportunities to gain experience and by political parties' attitudes toward nominating young people as candidates.

"Unfortunately, cronyism and clientelism are still common practices when candidates are co-opted for elections. They are not chosen solely based on merit and competence. This means that a large number of young people are prevented from getting into parliament," she says.

Samira Katiri, a teacher, says the Moroccan parliament needs to set a new trend and change the negative image that has been formed in people's minds over time. "There are a lot of dynamic young people in Morocco who follow developments in the political arena closely but do not participate in politics. Political parties must attract them in order to boost politics," she says.

Saad Bekali, a student, says young MPs have a big responsibility to assert their ideas and reflect the aspirations of young Moroccans. "Although political leaders want to marginalise them, young MPs have a duty to express their point of view and ask questions of interest to citizens within their age group," he says.

SOURCE: Magharebia, December 2013: <http://www.agora-parl.org/news/morocco-pins-high-hopes-young-mps>

Want to learn more?

The AGORA Portal (www.agora-parl.org) features regular updates on parliaments and youth, sharing the latest on new initiatives, youth policies, youth parliaments and more. Our Interact 'Parliaments & Youth' group, to be launched in May, will collect the latest updates and invites you to share comments and best practices, or send us your questions. You can also visit our [resource section](#) or keep an eye on our [news feed](#) for the latest info.

AGORA is at the disposal of parliaments, parliamentarians and youth parliaments globally. For questions or suggestions, please get in touch at info@agora-parl.org or find us on facebook (www.facebook.com/AgoraParl) or twitter ([@AgoraParl](https://twitter.com/AgoraParl)).