

Seeing like a young citizen: youth and participatory governance in Africa

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by ROSEMARY McGEE and JESSICA GREENHALF



A tight circle of adults surrounds a girl, propelling her from one to the other, from pillar to post. She rebounds around the circle, looking increasingly dizzy and confused. Her mouth is sealed with masking tape...



A girl and boy lounge against a wall, their stares vacant, and their faces etched with boredom. Nails are filed, trainer laces played with, gum chewed. In the background, one adult types madly at a desk without ever looking up and another strides around, looking busy and efficient, but never looking in their direction...



An adult puppet-mistress pulls the strings of a young girl puppet, walking her up a conference hall to the stage. There the puppet curtsies and hands over a rolled-up speech to an adult dignitary, who pats her on the head before she is puppeted away...



Photo: Holly Ashley

Writeshop participants spent an afternoon presenting their articles to each other. The discussion helped to generate a better shared understanding of the issues.

The scenes shown in the cartoons were created by contributors to this special issue of *Participatory Learning and Action* on youth and participatory governance in Africa. At a writeshop held in Nairobi, the contributors were asked to show how young people commonly view governance processes and their scope for engagement in them. The scenes they presented spoke eloquently of the experiences of young people: being treated as a 'token' young person, condescended to by adults and not treated with respect; the frustration of being present but not being heard and having no real influence on decisions. It is these patterns of engagement that the contributors to this issue are working to change.

This issue is the result of a collaboration between Plan UK, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). From 2006–2011 Plan UK coordinated a DfID-funded youth and governance programme supporting projects in 16 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the UK.¹ During a learn-

ing event held in early 2010, staff expressed an interest in sharing their experiences more widely and learning from the experiences of others. They also highlighted a number of challenges that often prevented them from generating good project documentation which could be shared for learning purposes. These included a lack of time and, for some, limited self-confidence in writing for an external audience.

Prompted by these discussions, in mid-2010 Plan UK proposed to the *PLA* team at IIED an issue focusing on the rapidly growing field of youth and participatory governance. Building on previous collaboration, Plan UK also approached the Participation, Power and Social Change team at IDS. The process of developing the issue included a week-long writeshop in Nairobi, Kenya, which gave contributors the opportunity to develop and share ideas and build writing confidence (see Box 1 and later in this article for details of how the issue was developed).

This overview article is written by the two guest editors/co-facilitators of the writing and publication process. From our

¹ The UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID).

Photo: Holly Ashley



An intensive afternoon spent working on articles. From left to right: Sallieu Kamara and behind him, Abdul Swaray (Sierra Leone), Bedo Traore (Mali), translator Sophie Bide (UK) and Rosemary McGee (UK).

particular perspectives as a British IDS-based 'scholar-activist' (Rosie) and a British Plan UK-based programme officer (Jessica), we have each been engaged for some time with youth and participatory governance work, including previous work together. Our NGO programme experience

spurred us to support shared learning amongst practitioners. Our academic training and experience provided us with some tools and outlets through which our practitioner peers could analyse critically and share insights from their own practice.

To set the scene, we begin by introduc-

Box 1: Developing this special issue of *PLA*

A call for submissions generated 90 abstracts. Eighteen were selected, 13 as full-length articles and five as shorter, 'tips for trainers' articles. We took into account:

- the quality, originality and transformative potential of the initiative discussed;
- the sex, age and origins of the author(s) to ensure a mixture of male and female, younger and older, southern and northern perspectives;
- the sectors and issues covered, to capture as far as possible a representative spread of contemporary governance and accountability work.

We gave preference to practitioner contributors and to practitioner-scholar collaborative work, and encouraged some shortlisted contributors to co-author their contributions with young participants or other actors involved in the design, funding or implementation of the initiative. The selected articles describe work carried out in Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Somalia and Somaliland. They cover transparency, accountability and anti-corruption in service delivery; local planning and budgeting; political and social empowerment of youth and especially girls and young women; HIV/AIDS; pastoralism; and the application of participatory video and information and communication technologies (ICTs) to address governance challenges.

The issue's content was developed in three stages:

- Starting in December 2010, each contributor developed an outline and two successive drafts, with support from the guest editors.
 - All main article contributors, guest editors and IIED *PLA* co-editor Holly Ashley participated in a week-long writeshop in Nairobi in March 2011, at which contributors refined their second drafts.
 - Contributors then finalised their articles in response to feedback from the IIED editorial board.
- Some details of the writeshop process are included in this overview – see particularly the section 'Reflecting critically on our experience'.



Photo: Holly Ashley

A crucial early stage in the writeshop was getting to know one another and the work that participants are involved in.

ing the idea of participatory governance – what it is and why it is needed. We then explain why we have chosen to focus on youth and participatory governance in sub-Saharan Africa. After this, we present a framework for thinking about citizen engagement in governance, and comment on this from the particular perspectives of young citizens. At the writeshop, contributors used this framework to explore the initiatives they were writing about. Four broad themes emerged, all familiar ones in participatory governance and citizen engagement. However, here we tease out their particular implications and dimensions for young people’s participation in governance. We then reflect briefly on the process of producing this publication. We end not with a conclusion but with an opening into the substance of the special issue.

What is participatory governance and why is it needed?

It is increasingly evident today that states are not built nor run through institutions alone. Organised citizens play vital roles by articulating concerns, mobilising pressure for change and monitoring government

Box 2: Formal and social accountability approaches

Formal accountability: formal, established institutions e.g. electoral systems, state commissions, ombudsmen’s offices. In many parts of the world these institutions are under-resourced, suffer from poorly defined roles and weak mandates, and are not accessible to those groups who need them most.

Social accountability: ‘Social accountability can be defined as an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability. Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often they are demand-driven and operate from the bottom-up’ (Malena *et al.*, 2004). Examples include participatory budgeting, monitoring electoral processes using online and mobile technology and citizen evaluation of public services.

fulfilment and performance of services (Gaventa and McGee, 2010). All over the world we are seeing experiments in ‘participatory governance’. People and organisations are grasping the opportunities provided by decentralisation and other reform processes and demanding more of a say in public policy and budget processes.

Citizens have begun to demand and enforce accountability from those in power. As existing, formal institutions of accountability often fail them, a growing range of citizen-led mobilisation, activism and demands, known as social accountability, is developing (see Box 2). These forms of citizen engagement and social accountability are particularly promising for those whose voices are not easily heard in formal policy and governance processes, including young people.

Why focus on youth in Africa?

Exciting as these new social accountability approaches are, we need to look harder at them. Experience so far suggests that some voices, including those of young people, often get left out, just as they do from formal, electoral, political representation processes. We need to know more about why this is and how it can be overcome.

In sub-Saharan Africa, as in other parts of the world, shortcomings in formal accountability mechanisms have generated a range of social accountability responses (Claasen and Alpin-Lardiés, 2010; McNeil and Malena, 2010). However, there is limited analysis of these innovations, except for the two works just cited. Hardly any documentation focuses on young people's perspectives and roles in relation to accountability. Yet, in Africa, as in many southern countries, youth constitute more than half of the population (see Box 3 for definitions of 'youth').²

Established channels of political accountability are not felt to be an effective way to engage, as demonstrated by Afrobarometer's analysis of young people's mistrust of formal politics (Chikwanha and Masunungure, 2007). Young people in Africa are more likely to belong to a youth organisation, school council, neighbourhood association or social movement than to a political party or organisation. They

Box 3: Definitions of 'youth'

Definitions of who is considered a 'youth' in Africa vary historically and culturally, as well as from one context to another and even within contexts (Chigunta, 2006; United Nations, 2003). In Africa, some countries have adopted the United Nation's definition of youth of 15 to 24 years. Others use the Commonwealth definition of 15 to 29 years. For policy purposes, the age range can be even wider. For many, 'youth' is better defined as a period of transition from dependence (childhood) to independence (adulthood), the nature and length of which varies from one individual or society to another (Curtain, 2003). In compiling this special issue we have broadly adopted this transition model, in recognition of the varied national contexts discussed in the articles.

have often found their emerging interest in electoral and party politics manipulated to serve the interests of (often elder) others. Young people consider African states to have done little for them and to owe them much. Social accountability offers them new openings. There is much to learn from the ways that young people are challenging norms and structures that exclude them, engaging with the state and demanding accountability. The articles in this issue capture some of these experiences.

Understanding citizen engagement in governance: a framework

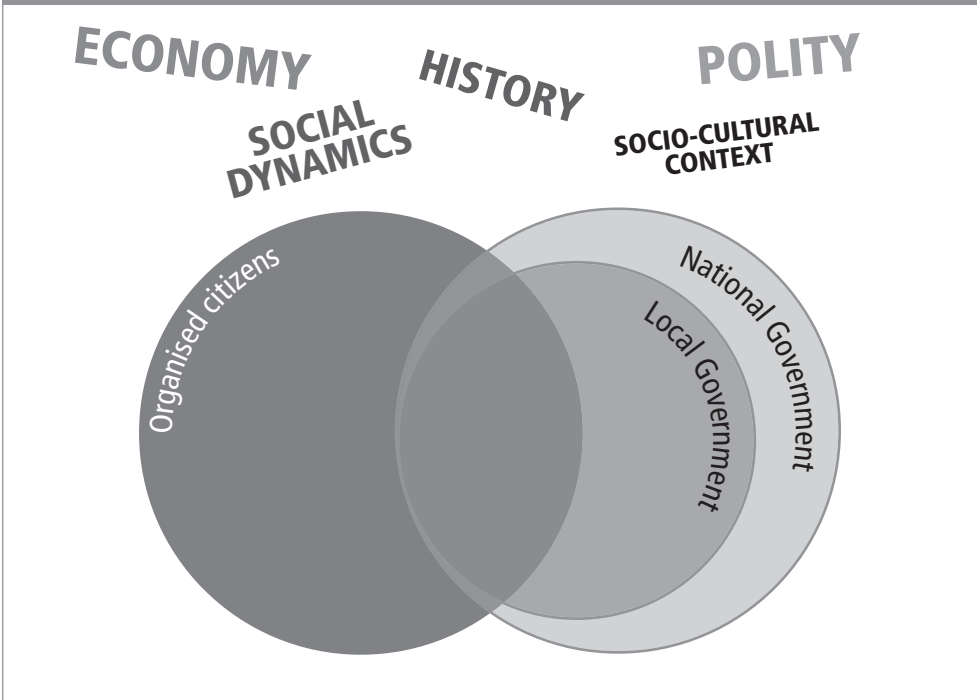
Governance can be thought of as the processes by which a state exercises power and the nature of relations between the state and its citizens (see Box 4 for definitions of 'citizen', 'citizenship' and 'organised citizens'). Visually, we can represent the connections between the state and organised citizens, as in Figure 1. The figure shows organised citizens interacting with the state at the local and national levels. These interactions are affected by the social, cultural, economic and political context within which they take place, as well as by the history of the country concerned.

² The 2007 World Development Report *Development and the next generation* puts figures to this 'youth bulge': '1.5 billion people are aged 12–24 worldwide, 1.3 billion of them in developing countries, the most ever in history' (World Bank, 2007).

Box 4: Citizens, citizenship and organised citizens

How to define 'citizens' and 'citizenship' is the subject of much intellectual and legal debate. We define it here not in terms of voting rights, birthplace or country of residence, but as people with rights – all those covered in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ensuing treaties and conventions. These universal rights extend from global North to South; from local to global; from cradle to grave; from individual and private to collective, public and institutional.³

We prefer the term '**organised citizens**' to the more common '**civil society**' since the latter, like so many development terms and concepts, has become such a buzzword that it tends to obscure understandings of this sphere rather than elucidating them (see Chandhoke, 2007).

Figure 1: Understanding governance

Source: adapted from McGee *et al.* (2003).

Young citizens and their organisations, or those working with them, fall within the organised citizens' circle. They are increasingly significant as populations become younger. As we have noted, youth is a transitional stage in the life-cycle. As young people move from childhood to adulthood, their places and roles undergo re-definition and re-negotiation. This has implications for the ways young people's needs and interests are represented and pursued. It also affects the opportunities they have to exercise citizenship and realise their rights.

As advocates and practitioners of participation in governance, we are interested in the interfaces (meeting points) between citizens and government in local and national governance processes. These are represented in Figure 1 by the area where the organised citizen and government circles overlap. We are also interested in what goes on in the organised citizens' circle because activities there often help people to move into, or use more effectively, the interfaces they have with government.

The context – historical, political,

³ See www.drc-citizenship.org for more discussion.

Photo: George Cobbimah Yorke



A session exploring the nature of relationships between the state and its citizens in governance work – often messy, complicated, unpredictable and in flux. For youth and governance work, what goes on within these overlapping spheres – and how can we use these interfaces in a constructive way?

economic, societal, cultural factors and so on (shown outside the circles in Figure 1) – shapes how citizens and government interact. For example, if civil conflict has occurred and relationships between government and citizens have broken down, the governance prospects are not good. On the other hand, in a situation where NGOs and social movements have helped to oust a military dictator and many of their members have taken up roles in a new democratically elected government, the prospects might be much better.

Besides ‘external’ context, the interactions between organised citizens and government are also shaped by the composition of the different groups interacting, and the relationships between people within each group (these are the ‘social dynamics’ referred to in Figure 1).

Promoting young people’s participation in governance – seeing like a young citizen

The question that really interests advocates of participatory governance is: how can interfaces between citizens and the state be fostered and deepened? Three types of

strategies are often suggested:

- Increase citizen representation in the government arena – enhancing citizen voice and influence.
- Bring more government representatives, or higher-level representatives, into contact with citizens, enhancing government responsiveness.
- Focus on what actually happens at the interfaces that are created between citizens and government when they interact, and work out how to support and facilitate productive and high-quality engagement.

Recent research offers insights into how we can understand and exploit the scope for fostering and deepening the interfaces. It shows the importance of complementing our considerable contemporary knowledge of the state and its workings, by ‘seeing like a citizen’ (our emphasis) (Eyben and Ladbury, 2006; DRCCPA, 2011) or taking an ‘upside-down view of governance’ (Centre for the Future State, 2010).

Seeing like a citizen helps shed light on the obstacles, flaws, disincentives and complications that adults must overcome if they are to engage effectively with governance processes that affect their lives.



Contributors to this issue take this one step further. Children and young people, despite their demographic weight, are traditionally, culturally, legally and structurally marginalised from decision-making processes. Seeing like a **young** citizen is therefore crucial to our task as advocates of young people's participation in governance. This is what we were aiming to do at the beginning of our writeshop in Nairobi when we asked contributors to act out scenes of youth engagement in governance processes, and how young people felt about them.

Using the governance framework

At the writeshop we used the governance framework shown in Figure 1 to help contributors analyse their work. We laid out the two-circles governance diagram on the floor using ropes, and invited contributors to position themselves according to the initiative they were writing about.

Some contributors placed themselves in the citizens' circle. They are working to construct citizenship among youth and enhance young citizens' voice and influence

so that they can engage with the state. For example, confidence-building activities carried out with specific groups of young citizens who are marginalised and disempowered, such as girls in northern Ghana (Akapire *et al.*, this issue).

One contributor, a local government officer, placed himself in the government circle close to the interface. He is working to increase government responsiveness to youth concerns and trying to take colleagues with him. He spoke of the loneliness of championing youth engagement within a government where the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and relationships are lacking (see Ochieng and Anyango, this issue).

Many contributors placed themselves in the overlap between citizens and government. They are building or adapting the spaces where young people engage with state actors, thickening and deepening what goes on there. Some are even challenging the power relations that shape these interactions. They talked about the devices and processes they are using to get youth voices better heard in these spaces,

Photo: Holly Ashley



Writeshop participants during a snowball exercise to discuss the key messages and objectives for this special issue. Left to right: Fadekemi Akinfaderin-Agarau (Nigeria), Anderson Miamen (Liberia), Lipotso Musi (Lesotho), Linda Raftree (Cameroon), Edward Akapire, (Ghana) and George Cobbinah Yorke (Ghana).

including changing the nature of the spaces and the behaviour or range of the government actors in them.

From this exercise and others used for mutual learning at the writeshop, and from the articles themselves, four broad themes emerged:

- From youth presence, voice and visibility to youth influence and rights
- Rejuvenating spaces for engagement
- Learning citizenship young
- Power to young people

We use these as our four organising themes to introduce the issue's content here, and in the issue itself. The themes are interlinked and not all the 13 main articles and five 'tips for trainers' articles fit perfectly into one or another. We have placed each under the heading most related to its focus and key messages.

From youth presence, voice and visibility to youth influence and rights

Even when approached from the least political, most technocratic angle, there is a strong argument for involving young people in governance. If policies, plans and

budgets are to be relevant to youth, they need to be informed by their realities, priorities and perspectives. However, many initiatives designed to involve young people have increased young voices in governance spaces, but not young people's **influence** over decision-making – so their participation may be tokenistic. The article by **the young people from Louga with Fall**, based on Plan Senegal's governance work, is a refreshing antidote to this tendency. There we read young people's own perceptions of their journey from being 'little helpers' to being partners in local development planning.

Voices can be carried away by the breeze, with no one held accountable for what has been demanded and promised. Images are different. Video has public appeal where television ownership is not widespread and it is also easily accessible online, e.g. via YouTube. It can amplify (make louder) and spread the voices of young people, as well as being an accountability tool. Used to make young people's concerns visible and hold local authorities to account, it can activate and empower

marginalised youth (**Miamen and Jaitner; Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola**), even to the point where they step into formal local political roles (**Kamara and Swar-ray**). Digital and social media are new avenues, but are not by definition channels of progressive social change. Spreading like wildfire and appealing particularly to younger generations, they can end up as little more than gimmicks, with no impact on development or governance. Like all social change tools, they are as transformative as the actors using them and the processes in which they are used. **Raftree and Nkie**'s account of digital mapping in Cameroon provides a healthy corrective to 'silver bullet' zeal, while also offering evidence of the transformative potential of such approaches.

Social categories and norms frequently stifle young people's voices or prevent them from having influence. In Africa, young people are often expected to offer their elders unquestioning respect and deference. Furthermore, 'youth' often means 'male youths' – entrenched gender inequality hinders young female citizens from even gaining access, let alone having influence, in public spaces. Contributors describe different approaches to countering negative opinions of youth (**Ndebele and Billing; Akapire et al.; Kamara and Swar-ray**) and to addressing the poor self-esteem or low expectations of youth in general and girls and young women in particular. **Mabala and Orowe** tell how negative stereotypes of Kenyan youth as originators of electoral violence were successfully challenged and overturned. One article (**Ndebele and Billing**) makes the point that not only young Zimbabwean women but also young Zimbabwean men face barriers to participation because of their sex.

However, contributions also show that age may combine with other characteristics typically associated with exclusion, such as disability or gender, to create unexpected advantages and interesting hybrids.

Nomdo and Henry highlight how public sector support for disability access in South Africa accidentally trumped longstanding exclusion. Pastoralist communities, typically so little engaged in governance processes, have been afforded some visibility and legitimacy in Somaliland and Puntland through the commitment of pastoralist youth (**Kesa**). The stigma and denial of rights associated with HIV and AIDS in Nigeria have been exposed and translated into successful advocacy initiatives through youth-led university campus tours and other initiatives (**Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola**).

For voice to turn into influence, questioning the nature and quality of 'participation' or 'engagement' is key. One contributor (**Tang**) is concerned with how this is being assessed and by whom. Participation needs to be conceived of not as an end in itself but as a means to further, more concrete ends that constitute sustainable, progressive changes. Some of the articles cite increased youth access to government structures – such as through youth parliaments – as a sign of success (**Musi and Ntlama; Traore; Akapire et al.**). Getting a foot in the door of a governance space can undoubtedly be a very significant achievement for young people in some of the contexts we are working in. But do these advances bring influence, or realise rights? Will they reshape governance spaces and government responses to address young people's concerns? For how long will they be sustained? **Ochieng and Anyango**'s reflections on the Jipange Youth Organisation in Nairobi offer room for optimism, although the future is uncertain now that external support is ending. Other activities, too, seem to have sown long-term transformative seeds. **Mvurya Mgala and Shutt** critically examine young people's participation via grounded power analysis. **Maita Mwawashe** (pers. comm.) describes self-critical exploration of what makes a youth group accountable and transparent to its own members as well as other stakeholders.

Rejuvenating spaces for engagement

This takes us to a more focused discussion of the spaces in which young people's engagement in governance happens. Various typologies of policy or governance spaces are on offer (e.g. Brock *et al.*, 2001; Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2006), focusing on who creates the space and who can enter and act in it – see Box 5 for one example.

Applying such a typology to young people's participation requires attention to what or who gave rise to the space, as described in Box 5. But we also need to look at how the status of adults and young citizen actors within it differ, as well as differences in status between young citizens of different ages. Seeing like a young citizen reveals that there are some governance and accountability spaces that youth tend to be 'naturally' shut out of. In others they have little interest in participating. Then there are youth spaces, where older people are rare visitors, but which lack 'teeth' or influence. The question is: what kind of space is most promising for young people's participation? (see McGee, forthcoming). Should adult spaces be replicated, as with children's parliaments? Should parallel spaces be created, as with school councils? Or should efforts be focused on modifying existing spaces and state-citizen interfaces?

In many contributions to this issue, new structures or platforms have been established: in Ghana a Young Female Parliament (YFP) (**Akapiro *et al.***); in Lesotho a Shadow Children's Parliament (SCP) sitting, in Zimbabwe Youth Village Assemblies (**Ndebele and Billing**), in Mali a Children's Parliament (**Traore**), in Liberia local Poverty Watch Councils (**Miamen and Jaitner**). Meanwhile, the Kenya initiative described by **Ochieng and Anyango** sought to strengthen existing government structures for youth.

If a new youth structure is established, how is it to be linked effectively to the adult structure? In Ghana, efforts to link the YFP to district authorities have failed so far. In

Box 5: Types of governance spaces

Closed spaces: many decision-making spaces are closed. Elites (be they bureaucrats, experts or elected representatives) make decisions and provide services to 'the people', without the need for broader consultation or involvement. Many civil society efforts focus on opening up such spaces through greater public involvement, transparency or accountability.

Invited spaces: as efforts are made to widen participation, to move from closed spaces to more 'open' ones, new spaces are created which may be referred to as 'invited' spaces, i.e. those into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities (Cornwall, 2002). Invited spaces may be ongoing, or one-off forms of consultation. Increasingly, with the rise of participatory approaches to governance, these spaces are seen at every level, from local government, to national policy and even in global policy forums.

Claimed/created spaces: these are spaces claimed by less powerful actors from power holders. They emerge out of sets of common concerns or identifications and include spaces created by social movements and community associations, as well as spaces where people gather to debate, discuss and resist outside of 'official' spaces.

Whatever the terminology, what is critical is who creates the space – those who create it are more likely to have power within it to make it serve their interests and to determine the terms of engagement.

Adapted from Gaventa, J. (2006) 'Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis.' *IDS Bulletin* 37: 6.

Mali, **Traore** poses the dilemma of independence versus integration and influence. On the relative merits of creating parallel structures or integrating youth into existing ones, the debate clearly rumbles on.

What goes on outside these spaces is also important. The existence of legal and policy frameworks for citizen engagement and young people's rights, for example, are useful, but are insufficient on their own, as recognised and illustrated by **Traore, Musi and Ntlama, Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola and Tang**. The social, political, economic, cultural and historical context of a given country will also shape the strength of civil society and its relationship with the state.

If context shapes and complicates the spaces for interaction between states and citizens, it complicates further still the interfaces where young citizens can engage with the state. Even where there is no history of civil war or youth violence, a prevalent set of assumptions about youth as immature, unproductive and ignorant shapes public decision-making spaces and constrains youth's access to them. Where government officials have direct experience of working with young people, this often seems to alter their views, making them more open to involving young people in decision-making spaces (**Ochieng and Anyango; Musi and Ntlama; Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola**). This is important because young people have less scope for creating or claiming spaces than adults. They generally need to be invited into these spaces.

The power difference between citizens and state actors is recognised in 'space' typologies (e.g. Box 5 above) and power analysis frameworks, for example the power cube discussed in **Mvurya Mgala and Shutt**, which analyses the levels, spaces and forms of power and their inter-relationships.⁴ But power differences between young people and adults also need to be considered. Youthfulness – unlike, for example, gender – will always shift and evolve, from child to adolescent to young adult, and this adds yet another dimension to the analysis.

Recent research suggests that to make social accountability work better we need to know more about what goes on at state-citizen interfaces and how to foster and facilitate constructive interaction, to make social accountability work better (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). The same applies to interactions between young citizens and state actors – some of them youth themselves by local definitions. For instance, young service users will have perspectives and insights on the provision of those serv-

ices. The concept and practice of transparency and freedom of information present particular issues when viewed through the lens of child-friendliness. As some contributions here remind us, the safety and protection of young people must be assessed when establishing and facilitating interfaces between children and their elders, and child protection codes followed.

We do not attempt an exhaustive exploration of the complexities and intricacies of youth-state interfaces here. However, the issue does make some contribution to exploring which methods of communication, appraisal, monitoring and research can be used by and with youth to support their engagement in governance processes. Similarly, it points to ways of reaching state actors disinclined to interact with young people. It also illustrates that self-critical attention to process and a sharp analysis of power relations are vital aspects of the 'citizenship learning' that these spaces can offer.

Learning citizenship young

The construction of citizenship is an important outcome of most experiences of citizen engagement, although it is often not the main intended outcome (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010). Policy and governance spaces are learning spaces. In them young people can acquire a set of expectations about their right to participate and their power to bring about change by doing so. They can also acquire the skills and experience required to operate effectively in these spaces, ensuring they are better placed to participate as adult citizens in the future.

Many of the experiences documented here are cases of 'learning by doing'. Groups of young people experiment with ways of engaging in and influencing decision making, and more formal or adult-dominated organisations support them and learn alongside them. While young people

⁴ See also Gaventa (2006) and www.powercube.net

often need training to engage successfully, they also need to build confidence. Successful engagement can embolden them to engage further, as many of the articles show. Capacity strengthening must be carefully structured. For example, **Bani-Afudego *et al.*** refer to household budgets to explain government budgets. With these inputs, youth are capable of influencing what are often highly technical processes such as local and national budgeting (**Bani-Afudego *et al.*** in Ghana, **the young people from Louga with Fall** in Senegal, **Nomdo and Henry** in South Africa) and government procurement (**the young people from Louga with Fall; Ochieng and Anyango**).

It is not only young people who need to acquire new knowledge and skills. Many government officials lack the skills needed to engage citizens in governance. They also need to learn specifically how to engage young citizens and contribute to constructing their citizenship. While this is not a specific objective of any of the initiatives discussed in this issue, it is documented in some of the contributions (**Bani-Afudego *et al.*; the young people from Louga with Fall**).

There are ripple effects from youth participation in governance and policy processes. The changes realised through their engagement might only occur years after, in a totally different institutional or geographical setting. But, generally, changes in power relations come about through these kinds of gradual changes in people, in their attitudes and behaviours. As children and young people are at such a formative stage in their lives, there is rich potential for their early engagements with governance processes to shape and ensure continued participation as committed and active adult citizens in the future.

Power – to young people?

'If voice is about capacity for self-representation and self-expression', according to Jonathan Fox (2007), 'then power is about

who listens'. Listening implies not only hearing but acting on what is heard. Fox's phrase is all the more poignant if we recall how often efforts to promote young people's participation entirely neglect the question of power, including failing to ensure that anyone is listening. The results of this neglect are evoked in the scenarios described at the beginning of this article.

All contributors here agree that social accountability is inherently political because it seeks to redress power imbalances. Even making services more accessible and their providers more accountable means a re-negotiation of power relations, which is a political act. However, the political context often poses serious challenges for social accountability work. One Kenyan participant in our writeshop, relating this issue to recent youth participation in electoral violence in his country, noted soberly, 'Some things you just can't control'. In the politically charged environments in much of Africa today, youth are continually co-opted by the politically powerful. It is a constant struggle to prevent governance work from becoming politicised in the party-political sense.

The processes of social activism and citizen engagement described by our contributors seem to suffer from political cycles, and particularly elections. The initiatives written about by **Musi and Ntlama** in Lesotho and by **Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola** in Nigeria came under great time pressure to secure legal and policy changes before impending elections. In other articles too, elections actually serve as **obstacles** to democracy, if democracy is understood as democratic practices of citizenship at the local, everyday level. This includes actions by young people, only some of whom are voters anyway.

Elections in Africa often seem to cause violence and distract attention from real political struggles, yet rarely deepen democracy, enhance development or strengthen citizenship. We hope that this



Photo: Holly Ashley

Cynthia Ochola Anyango and Charlotte Bani-Afudego giving peer review feedback on each other's articles. To us, this image captures an important element of the writeshop: here, two young women are working together to provide horizontal, non-threatening and respectful feedback on each other's work.

negative impression might be partly explained by our interest in contributions about social accountability initiatives, rather than initiatives that introduced young people to electoral politics. The latter would surely have revealed some more positive reflections on the learning of responsible political citizenship among youth in Africa.

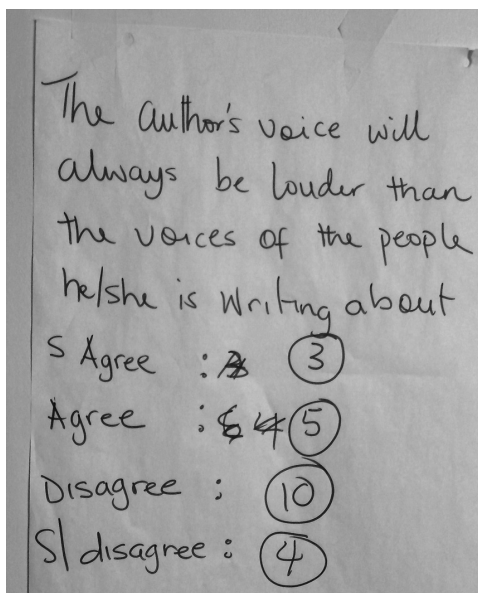
As already touched on above, particular power issues shape young people's ability to participate in society, politics and governance. Some articles (**Ndebele and Billing; Mvurya Mgala and Shutt**) describe approaches which help unpack 'power'. This analysis helps to re-shape and re-orient initiatives that otherwise may not challenge existing power relations.

Power dynamics operate between young citizens as well as between them and state actors. Youth groups and movements are not necessarily egalitarian or democratic, nor will democratic representation flow of its own accord. Socio-economic differences works against internal democ-

racy and equitable representation: the poorest are harder to reach and rarely engaged in initiatives such as these. Social accountability initiatives might make information accessible or routes to service improvement visible. Yet for these to be transformative, demand – **effective** demand, not just demand in principle – has to exist and be exercised. That requires the time of the time-poor.

Also, power corrupts. Once elected, youth leaders can forget their constituency. What checks and balances can be put in place? How to ensure local to national representative structures? Some of the contributions grapple directly with these questions, either in their substance (**Tang; Traore**) or in the participatory way they have been written (**the young people from Louga with Fall**). Other authors recognise a failure fully to address or overcome power issues in the processes they are documenting (**Raftree and Nkie; Musi and Ntlama; Ndebele and Billing**).

Photos: Holly Ashley

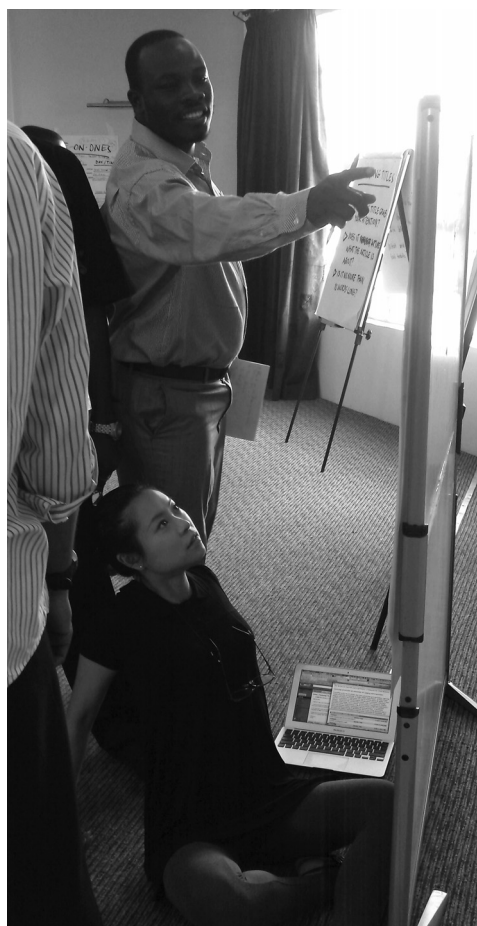


Is the author's voice always louder than the voices of the people s/he is writing about? Are we being representative and inclusive when we document issues affecting youth, whose voices are more often marginalised? The results show how complex these issues are and developed our shared critical thinking.

Reflecting critically on our experience

As co-editors, we were struck by the difficulty of supporting contributors to reflect critically on the experiences they were writing about. Since *PLA* gives high priority to critical reflection, we all worked hard on this. The writeshop programme included exercises such as structured reflections on how we react to criticism and what kind of feedback, delivered in what way, we find most helpful. It also included one-to-one in-depth peer review of each others' articles after several days together. We tried to create 'safe spaces' for pairs of participants working together, matching them carefully in terms of their backgrounds, first languages, nationalities, thematic focus of their contributions and other factors. Some contributors' final evaluations of the writeshop highlighted a new appreciation of critical reflection on practice as the single most important achievement.

We were also spurred to reflect self-critically on our own facilitation and practice at various points. For instance, ironically



Participants Edwine Ochieng and Jennifer Tang discussing dissemination routes and audiences. Our key audiences include practitioners working with youth, youth groups and communities and duty bearers such as governments and community leaders, as well as donors, international NGOs, researchers and policy makers.

given the topic of this issue, we did not even think about age when matching the peer review pairs. It was impressed upon us after the exercise that this meant some of the younger participants had to provide in-depth critique to their elders, violating cultural norms. Likewise, we were brought up short by the youngest participant when she admitted at the end of the writeshop that at one point she would have liked to voice her views, but had not felt able to do so. The challenge of developing and practising self-critical awareness is clearly continuous.

Box 6: Capturing and reflecting the perspectives of young people**Serigne Malick Fall, Senegal**

First of all, we visited the field to tell the young people about the writing project and to identify with them the exact experience to be reported on. Once this was done, I wrote the abstract that was submitted to the editors through the 'call for submissions'. When our 'paper' was accepted, we went back to see the young people and agreed with them on how the article would be produced.

Afterwards, I was able to set out 11 questions which would help the young people to write – this was the plan which was then sent to the editors. We held two writing workshops, one in each community, and filmed them. During these workshops, young people each chose the question that they wanted to respond to; worked individually to reply to their chosen question; worked in small groups, depending on the question; and reproduced, in plenary, their group work. Their writing was then aggregated into two documents by 'youth champions' acting on their behalf.

Using these two documents as a base, I produced the first draft which was sent to the editors. The first draft was also sent to the young people, and I will gather their reactions soon after the writeshop.

Leila Billing and Talita Ndebele, Zimbabwe

Parts of the article draw on the baseline and annual review, both mentioned in the article, which were both participatory processes. Before starting writing, we held a consultation with the youth groups, telling them about the topic of the article and asking what they wanted included. The young people selected some images that they wanted us to use and we made the final selection from their shortlist. We produced a first draft and had it translated into Ndebele.⁵ We took it to the community youth group and held a focus group discussion about it at which they gave their reactions. Now that we've finished an almost-final draft, we'll have it translated again and take it to them for their sign-off.

Fadekemi Akinfaderin-Agarau and Temitope Fashola, Nigeria

The writers of this article are both young people. We base this on the Nigeria national youth policy and the Africa youth charter which states that young people are people between ages 18 and 35. In addition, the Youth Advocacy Group (YAG) members also contributed to the article by reviewing the second draft prior to submission. They also provided feedback based on the comments made by the editors for the third drafts. They suggested all the quotes used in the article.

The other major challenge we faced as co-editors and contributors was how to adequately and faithfully reflect and represent youth perspectives. Having deliberately ensured in advance that the writeshop group included some youth, we were surprised to find once there that over half those present were 'youth', when defined according to the loose category of under-30 years old. But these 'youthful' contributors, because of their social and organisational positions, had experiences of seeing and engaging like young citizens which were substantially more positive than those of most young people written about in their articles. So the challenge remained.

A range of approaches were adopted by contributors to developing and writing their articles in order to capture and reflect the perspectives of the young people about

whom they were writing (Box 6). Enabling participation and co-generation in the production of knowledge and the analysis of experience is time- and resource-intensive, much more so than non-participatory exercises or papers produced by solitary academics or practitioners. Yet they are essential to our claim to represent youth and participatory governance initiatives. How worthwhile these painstaking efforts have been can only be judged later, on the basis of how widely this issue is disseminated, read, and its contents taken up and used.

Concluding the introduction, opening the issue

Participating in governance and policy processes is re-shaping the way young people perceive and exercise citizenship in powerful ways. This includes how youth

⁵ Ndebele is a Nguni language of southern Africa spoken in Zimbabwe.

relate to other youth, and to government. In the ActionAid Zimbabwe initiative, youth from different political parties are recognising common interests (**Ndebele and Billing**). In the Senegal case children are beginning to ‘feel like citizens’ (**the young people from Louga with Fall**). Jipange youth in Kenya are increasingly viewing government not as an oppressor but a partner (**Ochieng and Anyango**). In Nigeria, youth have made links with their senators and demanded that they support the HIV/AIDS anti-stigma bill. Through this, they are beginning to recognise their power as citizens (**Akinfaderin-Agarau and Fashola**). The way young people relate to – and are related to – by ‘their’ international and local NGOs is also changing, as young people become participants and stakeholders in development processes rather than just beneficiaries.

A sad aspect of the writeshop was to hear repeatedly from practitioners across Africa how youth (implicitly, male youth) are seen as, and see themselves as, a ‘lost generation’. They appear disaffected and bored, corruptible and corrupted, often drawn unwillingly into the power struggles of their elders. While youth are certainly ill-served by tokenism, these forms of co-option are infinitely worse. They add urgency to efforts across the continent to explore and support young people’s political and social agency. Lack of gainful employment, particularly in contexts of post-conflict economic and social unrest, is seen by many to underpin youth disaffection and marginalisation. While we are committed to presenting a different

perspective on young people in Africa than this pessimistic ‘lost generation’ discourse, we are also anxious to avoid editing out unsavoury realities.

The upside, revealed strongly in this collection of articles, is the vibrancy, energy, persistence, passion and enthusiasm of youth. This can drive change in creative and unexpected ways. It is particularly valuable in governance work, where the context is often rapidly evolving. Opportunities can open up and/or close without warning; alert young people can be well-positioned to respond quickly and innovatively. This energy and passion can of course also be used for less constructive means. At the time of writing, events in the Middle East are leaving no doubt that the gerontocracies and autocracies of the region have for decades – even generations – been ignoring and silencing youth at their peril.⁶⁷

A leading text on citizenship aims to deal with ‘the different mechanics of exclusion which consign certain groups within a society to the status of lesser citizens or of non-citizens, and on the struggles by such groups to redefine, extend and transform “given” ideas about rights, duties and citizenship’ (Kabeer, 2005). We hope this issue will fulfil a similar purpose, focusing on young citizens in Africa and their struggles. We hope also that participatory practitioners – both young and old – can learn from the experiences shared here, and that this helps them in their own efforts to ensure young people’s voices are heard and are influential in governance and policy processes across the world.

⁶ Gerontocracies are governments by old people.

⁷ An autocracy is government by one person holding all the power.

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NOTES

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During the design, planning and implementation of the *PLA* workshop Jessica was a member of Plan UK’s governance team overseeing Plan UK’s DfID-funded youth and governance programme. The programme supported participatory governance initiatives involving youth in 16 countries around the world. Jessica has since moved to Jinja, Uganda to work with Restless Development Uganda, a youth-led development NGO focusing on civic participation, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health.

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