

Youth contribution

Youth citizenship and advocacy: Perspectives and challenges facing Peruvian youth leaders

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In Peru, despite comprising approximately 25% of the population, adolescents and young people (aged 10–24 years) face multiple barriers to realising their rights. These barriers include inadequate and inequitable access to health and education services, a lack of decent work opportunities and exposure to various forms of violence. Geographic location, ethnicity, gender identity and socioeconomic status combine to limit their potential.

Youth movements and youth-led advocacy are growing across Latin America, particularly in Peru, though there remain challenges to young people's active citizenship, including stereotypes about youth, constrained access to public policy spaces, and meaningful engagement and feedback. The Positive Youth Development approach requires adult practitioners and policy makers to shift their perspective from viewing young people as a problem to seeing them as valuable human beings who can contribute to their

own development as well as that of their peers, families and communities. Engagement interventions can build on young people's assets and strengths, develop their skills and invest in their leadership capabilities.

Peru has made some progress in advancing gender equality and girls' and women's rights in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, intersecting forms of discrimination experienced by women/girls from indigenous, Afro-Peruvian, disabled, rural and LGBTQ+ communities perpetuate social and economic exclusion and prevent all girls and women from claiming their rights. The National Alliance for Transformational Leaders (ANALIT), supported by World Vision Peru since 2010, is a national network of children's and adolescents' groups that promotes young people's active participation in their community and country. The network supports young people's right to participate in public policy spaces and advocates for better services and policies at all levels. ANALIT works through seven regional networks, representing 50 groups that involve 700 children and adolescents.

For this piece, three ANALIT leaders (two former and one current) met to discuss youth civic engagement in Peru. Leyla is a 16-year-old student and the network's sub-coordinator, Keiko is a 27-year-old student and elected municipal councillor and Maykon is a 22-year-old student and community organiser. We have used their own words to convey their perspectives and challenges.

PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZENSHIP

Leyla: ... the difficulties are the stereotypes, because many times, adolescents are seen as a group that does not have the skills to participate, and if they do, people think we talk nonsense. They do not give us value, and say that to be a citizen one must be 18 years old. But we are doing things now to improve the future and we should be considered as citizens, because we consider ourselves citizens.

One of the opportunities [for Peruvian young people to become active citizens] is to increase spaces for adolescents' participation at various levels. One difficulty is that parents do not give much importance to these spaces. Many adolescents say their parents do not want to give them permission to travel or participate in activities. There are opportunities in networks like ANALIT, but these spaces should be promoted in a more dynamic way, so that adolescents can be helped to express themselves. As agents of change, we have great ideas that can be applied in public policy, but candidates only listen and do not reflect what we say in their proposals.

Maykon: I remember here, in Yauli, the authorities did not give us room in consultations because, according to them, the destiny of our communities is built. So... there is no opening for young people to raise their voices, to empower themselves, to grow in public life to be active citizens.

Keiko: I have seen this in many municipalities. Participation spaces are active only for elections but then they are not followed up... I noticed that the authorities are not prepared and do not have the will to develop citizenship and empowerment among adolescents. They say it is important to listen to adolescents' voice, but then do not take into account what young people contribute. The spaces for participation have greatly reduced in the past few years, with decreased budgets and fewer local youth councils.

Investing in adolescent networks has impact because we start to not only think about oneself but also to think collectively, about what we can do together.

LEADERSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Maykon: ANALIT has prepared us for our current political and community work. This is a lifelong preparation – it happens along the way. Already as a leader [in ANALIT] you contribute to different spaces – for example, in the participatory budget, the spaces of local consultation. One begins to contribute to the different spaces in order to build a better space or district. The other thing – as we learned in ANALIT – is that from these spaces we are proposing alternative solutions. When I was in ANALIT, we talked about being agents of change. That is constant. We are preparing ourselves in a constant way every day.

Leyla: The ANALIT network formed me as a leader – not a leader who commands others, but guides others. I led some activities in my school and now am trying to lead a group for the school municipalities. ANALIT helped me to develop my skills and to be able to use them in community work or to carry out projects.

Keiko: I think it [ANALIT] has given me all kinds of tools I can use and contribute – for example, in the political work I am involved in this year. Something that I value and admire about ANALIT is grassroots work – the work that is done from the local level, moving up to the regional level, and articulating at the national level. ANALIT helped me to do political work in my district,

and in turn to work as a team, to articulate different ideas that can lead us to [achieve] a particular goal.

Each organisational process has its political aspects. For example, when we organise ourselves and carry out activities, we are doing politics there, because acting in politics is not only being in the municipality. When we are concerned about our peers, we are already doing political life. Now, as young people, we are in the process of being able to formalise an association of young people, a little more structured, and thus contribute to other young people's development. It would not make sense to talk about so many rights if we do not address politics in our proposal./

Leyla: Many people think that it is difficult to empower adolescents and that adolescents do not have values. Adolescents can be strengthened but in a friendly way. They can be taught [leadership skills] through workshops and social media. We must change the archaic thinking of our parents and grandparents. Adolescents are not only the future, we are the present, and we can make changes now.

Keiko: First of all, strengthening the spaces we have for children and adolescents [would strengthen their leadership and empowerment], making them more active, not just calling them to fulfill someone else's plan. Giving them the tools so that they can contribute and work from their own point of view and experiences, from their ideas and proposals. Participation spaces should not only continue to be viewed from a single ministry and a single NGO [non-governmental organization], but should also be decentralised, and should be more open. Participation must be diversified.

Maykon: It starts in ourselves. To strengthen ourselves as leaders, we must ourselves be willing, take advantage of the different spaces that our family, work, social and political environment give us. We must have a single goal of empowering and strengthening the values of young people.

GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Keiko: When we talk about gender, we see gaps between men and women. For adolescent girls, we see gaps in education and employment, because people are still telling girls how they should act. This influences their future... I have not had any

difficulty with gender discrimination, because I have always been able to participate. World Vision has always given boys and girls equal opportunities.

Leyla: Many adolescents and young people were raised with the mindset of there being activities that are exclusively for boys or girls. I think young people are trying to change this... I have not suffered any type of gender discrimination. ANALIT helped me, because it opened my eyes and taught me that men and women can do the same things and have the same capabilities and achieve what they set out to do.

Maykon: I think there should be more information and more discussions on gender, as long as... different views are respected, especially the perspectives of adolescents and young people. Most of our authorities are men. Many community members say that it is better to have men, not women, in leadership roles. This makes us see that we still have machismo. I think these prejudices and stereotypes weaken the effort to be a woman leader. That is precisely why this type of space [ANALIT] should be developed. In this network, women and men have always had the same capacity. For example, currently, all ANALIT board members are young women. I think this space has helped us change our view, [to understand] that men and women are equal and should have the same opportunities... But beyond the ANALIT network and the spaces where we have grown up, gender stereotypes hinder and limit the development of women's leadership. We should have alternative spaces, where these stereotypes are cleared and actions taken to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes.

Keiko: [My identity] has been an opportunity to develop myself, and it has helped me to fulfill my dreams and my ideas. Perhaps I have perceived some stigma because of the place where I live [My Peru, a small district in Callao]. It is an area with a lot of delinquency and that is how young people are seen. Sometimes the ethnic, cultural, social and gender issues result in stigma towards young people.

Leyla: [In terms of any aspects of my identity that have hindered me] I have perceived some kind of discrimination because of the area where I live. There are people who think that because we are from Ayacucho, we do not have the necessary skills to succeed in life. But in the network, I learned to live with diverse types of people, from various places.

Maykon: Maybe, the fact of being from Huancavelica helped or did not help [my participation in various activities]. At least in my experience, I have always had difficulties. But these spaces of the ANALIT network have helped me a lot, to be able to strengthen and solve those difficulties.

When we think about how citizenship will develop in Peru in future, we have to change the definition [of citizenship], because it has been demonstrated that adolescents can already perform citizen actions – it is seen in our contributions.... If we do not change this way of perceiving citizenship [as being adults only], then I do not think that this will change much for children and adolescents in the future.

We imagine an active citizenship, where the voices of children, adolescents and young people are heard and where they can also have leading roles, give their opinion and make proposals for change. That is a more inclusive citizenship in Peru.