CHAPTER 36

Final reflections and next steps for policy, programming and research

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> When I was with my friends and started helping families who needed rations, one or two men would call my father and say, "What is your daughter doing, visiting families in the neighbourhood? Control her!" But my father knew and stood by me.
>
> – Samiya Zarif, member of a children's cooperative, aged 18, India

> At first, I lacked support from my family, since they wished I would fight for my own life, especially by working in town, rather than wasting time encouraging people about climate issues.
>
> – James Mhina, youth climate activist, Tanzania

This book has sought to interrogate and nuance existing understandings of young people's 'citizenship' in the Global South. In particular, it has questioned understandings informed by anxieties about the future and by normative assumptions about what young people need and want in relation to civic engagement and political participation. Through case studies reflecting

DOI: 10.4324/9781003341666-41

on research across diverse low- and middle-income country contexts, as well as accounts authored by young people spanning a wide range of social identities, this edited collection has presented young people's diverse lived experiences of exercising voice, agency and participation across institutional, parallel and informal political spaces. These experiences are inextricable from young people's relationships at different scales, with case studies and youth contributions emphasising the role of 'everyday' peer groups, families and communities – as observed in the quotes at the start of this chapter from Samiya Zarif and James Mhina. As Samiya and James also acknowledge, these relationships are themselves shaped by context-specific dynamics of injustice, precarity and deprivation and are sites for the reproduction and negotiation of inequalities connected to social norms around age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, race, class and legal citizenship status (such as being a refugee, internally displaced, migrant or stateless).

METHODOLOGIES

Opening with a discussion about methods allowed us to provide an overview of how research around agency, voice and participation has been undertaken and to address the key knowledge gaps in extant research with adolescents and youth on civic engagement and political participation, as well as to consider why these gaps emerged. This is a fledgling field of study, and better measures of enabling voice and agency are essential. This is underlined by the first two chapters, which call for a robust mixed-methods longitudinal lens on agency and voice (Neumeister et al., Chapter 3), and a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of agency in order to better explore what enables and constrains empowerment and other capacities for young people (Hunersen and Li, Chapter 4).

In the Research Methods section, young people's contributions document participatory approaches and the social transformations in different spheres – starting with one's own subjectivity and sense of agency – that these can instigate. Participatory research can create spaces for young people to have input into programming and policies that seek to improve their quality of life, as in the contributions from Carlos on his involvement in participatory public policy monitoring in Carlos Henrique Lemos (see Chapter 7), and Mesalie Gbenday and Salamatu Tajawai (see Chapter 8), who reflect on their research on adolescent pregnancy in Sierra Leone. Participatory research methods that carefully consider power dynamics and young people's intersecting social identities and positions can also be empowering as a process, as seen in the contributions by 'Sara', on her experiences as a married Syrian refugee youth participatory researcher in Jordan (see Chapter 9), and the

Kolkata Street Champions (Chapter 6), who have been undertaking participatory research on the challenges facing street youth. Through participating in interactive and reflective research processes, adolescents and young people also experience more of a sense of individual and collective agency and ability to effect change in their lives beyond the scope of a research project itself.

Participatory research design is complex and challenging. Adult-centrism impacts the means and methods used to engage with adolescents and young people, which can exclude very young adolescents in particular from opportunities to participate and have input on political matters and processes, as observed by Osorio in their case study on public policy consultation with adolescents in Chile (see Chapter 5). Engaging with all stakeholders and centring participatory methods that address these dynamics, as seen in the contribution by the Kolkata Street Champions, is an essential part of transforming opportunities for participation. The chapters and contributions in the Research Methods section emphasised that an enabling environment that does not end when the research does is key to ensuring that research benefits young people. Moreover, as alluded to in the contribution from Mesalie Gbenday and Salamatu Tajawai, addressing the material and structural constraints on opportunities for adolescents and young people is vital if gains in representation and even policy changes are to translate into transformation of their lived realities.

However, attention should also be paid to the tensions that emerge between participatory action research (which produces visible and quick results in relation to key outcomes and is often deployed as part of programming by non-governmental organisations [NGOs]) and participatory research that is more exploratory of young people's experiences and social worlds, allowing an exploration of the wider dynamics that affect their voice and agency. Ideally, participatory research should be embedded within longitudinal work with young people throughout the transition across the second decade to adulthood, in order to also locate voice and agency temporally. This approach can contribute to more robust measures of voice and agency and the ways in which these evolve over the course of adolescence and early adulthood. However, in reality, the majority of participatory studies are small in scale and short term due to budget constraints and thus do not have the capacity for this kind of evidence generation. This underlines the need for better targeted funding for longitudinal participatory work, akin to the multi-year participatory research with adolescents and youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region by Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) (see Al Heiwidi et al. 2022; Jones et al. 2020), and in West Africa by the Growing Up on the Streets project (see van Blerk et al. 2020).

CONCEPTUALISING VOICE AND AGENCY IN RELATION TO CITIZENSHIP

Reconceptualising what voice and agency mean within the context of citizenship, informed by the experiences of adolescents and young people in the Global South, is a key contribution of the book. Political and legal citizenship rights and the relationship between individuals and the state are central features of work on civic engagement in the Global North – a framing that positions voice and agency as something that is both possessed by and exercised by an individual. Yet there is a central thread that runs through the chapters in the section of the book *Listening to young people: Negotiating gendered perspectives on voice and agency,* which counters that notion – that is, the *relationality* of voice and agency. Voice and agency are exercised in different spaces and at various scales but are always analytically situated within interpersonal and intergenerational dynamics. This is seen clearly in the case studies on Brazil (Chapter 11) and Sierra Leone (Chapter 12) and Bangladesh (Chapter 13) which show the ways that adolescents and young people's civic identities and participation opportunities are shaped by relationships at different scales with family, peers and communities, through which wider power dynamics are constituted.

An intersectional lens draws attention to social identities and how they are connected to young people's opportunities and capacities to participate and mobilise around social, political and economic issues – and in what ways and spaces they do so. The chapters in this Conceptualising Voice and Agency section specifically explored how gender, sexuality, age, socioeconomic status (connected with race) and disability all structure adolescents' and young people's voice, agency and participation. Intergenerational relationships add a further element to these dynamics; in certain spaces, older people remain gatekeepers of participation, underlining that voice and agency are not just about expressing oneself but also being listened to. This underlines, as we note in our reflections on methodologies, the necessity of attending to context, especially when it comes to moving beyond 'having a voice' and towards considering what is necessary for adolescents and young people to participate in transformative change that is meaningful to them.

Young people's other social identities can mean that opportunities for voice, agency and participation vary across different social spheres. Younger adolescents have the fewest opportunities for participation across all spaces, but especially on public matters. Their position in age hierarchies and dependence on family also makes it very difficult for them to contest social norms, as observed by Samonova in in Chapter 12 on how generational hierarchies shape interactions with a 'rights' discourse in Sierra Leone. Young people with disabilities encounter limits both in regard to the spaces that they are

able to access physically and the opportunities that they perceive as available to them due to social attitudes and stigmatisation; these are reinforced by gender norms, as in the case of 'Amal' in Jordan (Chapter 17). Young married women, such as 'Sara' whose account of her involvement in participatory research is included in the earlier section on methodologies, find that norms around gender and age are intertwined with everyday demands on their time as a result of running a household and raising children, limiting their opportunities outside the home.

Adolescents and young people, who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) and are living in countries where homosexuality and gender diversity are stigmatised or even illegal, face severe constraints on what spaces are safe for them to exercise voice and agency, as evidenced in the chapter by Alam and Rashid on lesbian, gay and bisexual young people's experiences of discrimination in Bangladesh (see Chapter 13). However, unlike young people with disabilities or younger adolescents, LGBTQ young people in many countries in the Global South are not protected by national laws and may even be actively persecuted by their own government. Attention to the interpersonal politics of community and care is integrated with a recognition of the role of transnational spaces – such as the internet, liberation movements and global human rights activism – is changing what fundamental features of civic life, such as community and 'belonging', look like in practice for LGBTQ youth.

Linking back to our discussion on participatory research, young people's participation also cannot be treated simply as a means to expand opportunities for voice and agency without addressing these inequalities – or injustice will simply unfold in different spaces. It is also important here to recognise the compounding – rather than simply layered – effects of different social identities and the barriers they create for participation. For example, gender interacts with age norms, such that while younger adolescents in general are less able to access public spaces without parental supervision due to concerns about their appropriateness or safety, younger adolescent girls are often subject to even closer oversight because of added anxieties about gender-based and sexualised violence. And restrictions on girls' mobility – both physical and social – are often even more severe for adolescent girls with disabilities, as the contribution by 'Amal' underscores.

The notion of 'change that is meaningful to adolescents and young people' is also key. Although it is important to support young people to develop skills to exercise voice and agency and to be heard, certain types of activities and expressions of voice and agency are more likely to be condoned by adults, often because they reflect what adults hope to hear from young people. As the contributions by Pooja Singh (see Chapter 15) on her participation in

global forums for gender equality, and by Jason Katya Muhiwa (see Chapter 14) on his participation in children's parliamentary assemblies in the Democratic Republic of Congo in this section allude to, these forums are all too often spaces where young people are only listened to when what they are saying aligns with the perspectives of adults in positions of power. Young people who seek to disrupt dominant discourses and norms are less likely to be accorded a platform to express their viewpoints. This kind of tokenism risks undermining adolescent and youth voice and agency, rather than expanding it.

CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CONTEXTS OF INEQUALITY AND INJUSTICE

A key contribution of this book is in its offer of accounts of adolescent and youth citizenship that are contextualised in relation to the specific histories and politics of countries in the Global South. The chapters in the section *Understanding young people's citizenship: Marginalisation, agency and the political imagination* each show that living in contexts of inequality, deprivation and fragile governance uniquely shapes the relationship of young people to the state, because under these conditions the citizenship 'rights' that form the basis of Western thinking about youth political subjectivities are simply not guaranteed to all. In the Chapter 20 by Dessie, 'alternative citizenships' reflect the fact that many young people remain far from institutional politics, with poverty and marginality key to the formation of their political identities and expectations. In the contribution by Samiya on her experiences of assisting slum populations to access services during the Covid-19 pandemic in India (Chapter 22), and the chapter by Hunter et al. (Chapter 19) on street youth's embodied performance of citizenship during elections in Ghana, being designated as 'unofficial populations' has constitutive effects on political subjectivities.

Here, too, gender and age-related social norms and hierarchies present barriers to penetrating institutional politics, as shown in the contribution by Musa on his experiences as a young political activist in Zambia (Chapter 23). These norms and hierarchies also structure possibilities for participation in informal politics, especially during fleeting windows of opportunity for change, as seen in the chapters by Jones et al. on youth mobilising around ethnic national identities in Ethiopia during a seismic political leadership transition (Chapter 21) and Hunter et al. in the context of youth engaging during a hotly contested national election season. Looking at the Ethiopian political transition and inter-regional violence, and Ghanaian elections respectively, both case studies illustrate how gender inequalities shape the

trajectories available to adolescent girls and young women even at moments when the status quo appears to shift. Moreover, even when young people do engage with formal politics, they are also at risk of co-optation and manipulation by institutional actors to advance wider political interests; this further forecloses the possibilities offered by moments of flux. This temporal dimension is analytically important because it further nuances the contextualisation of young people's citizenship; not only do young people exercise voice and agency within a specific set of socioeconomic and political conditions, but these are also constantly shifting and reformulating in different ways.

Despite these constraints, the chapters in this section also underscore that young people still find multiple ways to be politically active in different spaces. Their civic engagement takes forms that often transgress or are oppositional to institutional politics. They may also not always lead to clear outcomes that improve young people's position; however, acknowledging the ambiguity of the outcomes of voice and agency is an important move away from normative and exclusionary definitions of youth 'citizenship'.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICE, AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION 'BEYOND BORDERS'

Work on 'everyday politics' and 'lived citizenship' challenges the idea of civic engagement as being about a relationship between a recognised citizen and the state. The section on *Young people's voice, agency and participation 'beyond borders'* seeks to unify two different challenges to this norm along the theme of transgressing border politics. In the contribution by Aivazova et al. on young people's participation in climate action in Ireland and Tanzania (Chapter 27), and Mahpara et al.'s chapter on young Bangladeshis' activism online (Chapter 26), young people seek to exercise voice and agency on global issues, attempting to circumvent the state. In the contribution by 'Aous', a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon who is a member of the Palestinian political faction, Fatah (see Chapter 28), and in Abu Hamad's chapter on how structural violence shapes participation in public life in Gaza (see Chapter 25), young Palestinians establish a sense of belonging, identity or security in ways that position political engagement with the state as antagonistic, irrelevant or even a barrier to their actualisation of meaningful political participation.

What emerges clearly in these chapters are the lack of options and opportunities for voice and agency within borders by young non-citizens. Decolonial work has long problematised the construction of borders and premise of citizenship on hegemonic processes of exclusion and inclusion (Ahmed 2014; Benhabib 2005; Mignolo 2000). The case studies on climate action

and online activism further call into question these definitions. As observed in the contribution by Aivazova et al. on young people's climate activism and the chapter by Mahpara et al. on Bangladeshi adolescents' online activism, being able to go 'beyond borders' means that young people can access wider support and global networks of solidarity. However, the extent to which these can help them to enact change in their real-life interpersonal communities where the problems they are seeking to address play out is not always clear. Indeed, more work is needed to better understand how online activism translates into offline activities and tangible changes in adolescents' and young people's lives.

However, as noted in the book's introduction, the extant literature does not make distinctions about who participates in informal expressions of politics such as activism, and this is where the case studies in this book add significant value. Each of the chapters in this section on Young people's voice, agency and participation 'beyond borders' demonstrates how participation is patterned by social identities and structural inequalities. Participation in cross-border activism is not available to everyone; those from better off backgrounds are more able to access online spaces, or develop the technological and language skills and communication style required by global forums. Younger people from more marginalised backgrounds – and particularly girls, due to conservative gender norms that are often used by parents and male relatives to police girls' online presence – tend to have fewer options and opportunities to exercise voice and agency, and any opportunities they do have may be much more localised as a result.

There are also tensions to be noted here around age and gender in relation to the antecedents of political subjectivity. Militarisation and armed mobilisation, whether within national borders or beyond them, still remain a realm dominated by boys and young men. Adolescent boys and young men specifically are more likely to have access to role models and public spaces where they can be privy to wider political discourse. This creates space and opportunity for reimagining what the world could look like and a sense of oneself as a political actor in a way that is much less available to girls in the Global South. For girls, as noted by Aivazova et al. in the context of climate activism in Tanzania and Jones et al. in the context of the Oromo youth or '*qeeroo*' movement in Ethiopia, their everyday lives see them relegated much more often either to ancillary support roles in armed forces and militarised political factions or, more frequently, to the private sphere of home life. While this does not preclude their involvement in 'everyday politics', given pervasive embedded gender inequality, it is difficult to argue that this can lead to wider meaningful participation.

POLICIES AND PROGRAMMING

The final section of the book on *Policies and Programming for Voice, Agency and Civic Participation* grapples with the questions of what kinds of interventions are needed, and what works? Should programmes by government agencies and NGOs focus on expanding individual voice and agency, or should they explicitly emphasise the connections between empowerment at the individual level and collective socio-political change? What policies are effective in engaging with adolescents' and young people's voices, including the voices of the most marginalised young people, and ensuring that these are impactful rather than tokenistic?

The chapters in this section highlight several key messages. First, NGO programming needs to connect building the individual capacities of young people with opportunities for participating in different levels of change if transformations in their expression of voice and agency are to transcend the level of specific interventions. Moreover, in contrast to the often short-term design of such initiatives, a longitudinal approach is essential for creating the kinds of relationships that support young people in developing voice and agency, including as their capacities evolve over the course of the second decade of life and into early adulthood. These elements are especially key for the most marginalised young people who often necessitate additional support and mentoring in order to exercise voice and agency and participate in civic engagement opportunities.

Successful interventions also need to be premised within a contextualised understanding of the myriad intersecting factors that structure opportunities for voice, agency and participation in different spheres of young people's lives. Power dynamics between adults and younger people constrain their meaningful participation in change processes but can, to some extent, be addressed through approaches that explicitly centre adolescent and youth priorities. However, scale is a major issue; although the interventions documented here are effective, they are resource-intensive, and – with exceptions, such as UNICEF's Makani programme in Jordan with young people in refugee and vulnerable host communities (see Chapter 31) – small in scale. Furthermore, interventions focusing on agency, voice and empowerment often overlook or do not engage with the socioeconomic dimensions of adolescent and young people's political orientations in the Global South, which as underlined by Enria in Chapter 18 is deeply connected to their precarity and marginalisation.

At a government and national policy level, efforts to promote citizenship largely fail to engage with adolescent and youth voice and agency. One-off events to celebrate youth and women's days, and top-down implementation

of school-based activities such as youth parliaments, continue to dominate the policy landscape vis-à-vis adolescent participation. Remit for adolescents and young people is also often incorporated into sport ministries, implicitly masculinising 'youth' (given that in many countries, due to discriminatory gender norms, it is only young men who have time to participate in leisure activities or have access to such spaces). Meanwhile, older youth are targeted by policies around employment such as public works initiatives, which are about harnessing youth to be useful rather than supporting their voice, agency and citizenship. These dynamics are connected in some contexts to the way that 'youth' is categorised, especially in Africa, which often refers to people up to 35 years of age. This means that governments are able to work on 'young people' but avoid the needs and experiences of adolescents and the challenges of having to grapple with the issue of legal minority and its implications for citizenship.

WHERE NEXT? IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, PROGRAMMING AND POLICY

Theoretically, there is a need for frameworks that more consistently employ context-sensitive, intersectional, spatial and temporal lenses to understanding young people's voice, agency and citizenship. A central aim of this book has been to illustrate how these dimensions of civic engagement and political participation can be brought into dialogue to generate a more holistic and nuanced picture of young people's 'everyday politics' in the Global South and also the ways in which their priorities and opportunities for engagement evolve over the course of the second decade of life and into early adulthood.

Methodologically, there are major gaps in terms of: quantitative measurement of voice, agency and citizenship; longitudinal mixed methods research, including longitudinal evaluations of policies and programming aimed at fostering young people's voice, agency and participation; and tools and adaptations that ensure the inclusion of diverse young people within these approaches. Without efforts to improve measurement of voice, agency and citizenship, there is a risk that this critical dimension of young people's development and well-being will remain sidelined in policy, programming and related resourcing. We see this in the absence of any attention to adolescent and youth voice and agency in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – not even in the antecedents of targets related to women's political and economic participation. It is therefore essential to invest in the development of validated survey modules and indices.

The literature discussed in the first section of the book shows that there is a growing interest in longitudinal approaches, including longitudinal

qualitative and participatory research. While these are still rare, they are essential for understanding how diverse young people's experiences and exercise of voice, agency and citizenship change over time and in response to macro-level events and shocks such as forced displacement, pandemics or climate change. There is also a critical need for longitudinal mixed-methods evaluations of programming and policies designed to support and enhance adolescent and youth voice, agency and citizenship to better understand what works where, and why, and to strengthen evidence-based calls for expansion of such initiatives.

The examples of participatory research presented in this book evidence the attention this field has received over recent decades, and its vital importance in work on voice and agency. However, the extent to which participation is embedded in research processes remains variable, with consequences for its impact. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for methodological tools and adaptations that improve such research efforts on young people's voice, agency and citizenship by making participation available to a wider range of young people than is currently reflected in the evidence base. Adaptations are especially lacking when it comes to young people with certain types of disabilities, such as intellectual impairments, who face the most serious barriers to meaningful participation because of the resources and expertise required to facilitate it.

The **research agenda** that emerges from what is a fledgling but growing field of study on young people's voice, agency and citizenship in the Global South is one in which there remains scope for vital contributions that will further improve our understanding of these issues.

First, a more nuanced exploration of gender and age is important for advancing understanding of how gender norms shape opportunities for young people's citizenship in diverse contexts, and how these can be factored into change efforts. Adolescence is a stage of the life course in which gender norms first become particularly salient, yet it is also a juncture when young people start exercising their own voice, agency and politicised expressions of participation. Current age groupings may be too broad to capture the diversity of experiences and their implications for gender analysis. The term 'adolescents' covers a period of enormous biological and social change and may be more productively compartmentalised into older and younger adolescents for analytical work on voice and agency, as well as other areas of life. 'Young people' is an even broader descriptive term and used very differently in various spaces. Meanwhile, 'youth' has historically been used as shorthand for young men, with 'youth policies' often remaining oblivious to gender.

Empirical work around masculinities and citizenship, especially in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts, can contribute to this area of study.

Attention must also be paid to the more subversive and disruptive aspects of youth citizenship that are often excluded from work on agency and voice, such as youth political activism (which can also be violent and illegal) – which is generally feared by adults and political leaders but has historically made important changes to the way lives are lived and shaped, from political regime change to the de-stigmatisation of particular social groups and identities. On the other hand, 'positive outlier' case studies can allow an exploration of how some young people forge opportunities even in highly constrained contexts, and what lessons can be learned from these experiences.

A growing body of work explores the relationship between young people's online and offline skills (e.g. Haddon et al. 2020) but less is known about the connections between online mobilisation and activism, and intersections with offline exercise of voice, agency and citizenship. The ways in which these differ by gender, sexuality, disability status, and other social identities, including citizenship status, are particularly important for understanding how structural inequalities in participation unfold in different spaces, and what is needed to address this.

Reflecting on the much-feted Arab Spring over a decade later, another angle that merits further consideration is the continuities and connections among the evolution, peaks and troughs of social movements in which adolescents and young people are key actors and instigators, and adolescents and young people's own rapid psycho-emotional and cognitive development during the second decade of life. These developments and changes will have consequences for young activists who are not yet well understood; many of this volume's contributors underline the impact of age position and generational dynamics, but less attention is paid to how the personal and physiological changes that adolescents and young people experience interact with wider social change.

As this book highlights, young people without access to equitable practice of citizenship rights due to their geolocation or mobility – such as those who are stateless, internally displaced, refugees, migrants, street-living, diaspora or stateless – have unique experiences of voice, agency and political participation. Citizenship studies 'beyond borders' offers an important opportunity to counter normative rhetoric about civic engagement and participation because it so clearly highlights the politics that inhere in the everyday realities and struggles of subaltern adolescents and youth. More studies are needed in different contexts of their lived experiences.

Finally, this research agenda must engage directly with the challenges of policy and programming in different institutional spheres. While there is a robust literature on gender mainstreaming and women's machineries

(coordinated structures within and outside of government that seek to promote gender equality), there is nothing currently equivalent for the representation and monitoring of youth issues, especially outside the Global North. Comparative research into how youth affairs are represented within policy and government structures, and how these institutional spaces and framings shape policy and programming, can help to improve understanding of how adolescents' and young people's voices can be institutionalised.

There are also currently very limited programme evaluations of government, United Nations or NGO initiatives to support expanded and context-tailored adolescents' and young people's voice, agency and participation. Such initiatives include spaces ranging from youth centres, school parliaments, youth councils, to adolescent and youth safe spaces, girls' or 'gender' clubs, and they operate across various structures, including in-school and out-of-school settings, party/political factions, and party youth wings, and to a growing extent also in hybrid or online spaces. The voice and agency dimensions of these programmes in particular need to be addressed, ideally drawing on improved measures of voice and agency as discussed above.

To conclude, we end with a quote from one of the youth contributors to this volume, Leyla, who underscores the intrinsic importance of supporting and valuing adolescent voices, agency and engagement individually and collectively, an overarching goal to which we hope this textbook will contribute:

> 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.
>
> – Leyla, regional coordinator for a children and young people's participation network, aged 17, Peru

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