Series: The Person in Five Circles

From the Stage to the Table: Youth Participation in Decision-Making

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Introduction

Young people are often invited onto the stage: to give a speech at a conference opening, appear in a group photo with officials or present a segment at a ceremony. The more important question is whether they sit at the table where decisions are made. This article distinguishes token participation from genuine participation, reviews the main international references and the tools the UAE has built, and proposes simple indicators any institution can use to test how real its youth engagement is.

Who are "youth"?

For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as people aged 15 to 24, without prejudice to national definitions, which vary from country to country. At its core this is a stage of transition from dependence to independence: from study to work, and from the family home to founding a new one. That is why young people are affected by public decisions more than most, and live with the consequences longer.

International references

- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966):** it creates no youth-specific rights, but guarantees young people what it guarantees everyone: freedom of expression (Art. 19), peaceful assembly (Art. 21), association (Art. 22) and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs (Art. 25). This is the legal ground for any discussion of youth participation.
- **World Programme of Action for Youth (1995):** the first comprehensive UN framework for youth policy, which made full and effective participation in society and decision-making one of its priority areas.
- **Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015):** the Council's first resolution on youth, peace and security, built on five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and

disengagement and reintegration. It urged Member States to increase youth representation in decision-making at all levels. Its significance lies in shifting the view of young people from a "security problem" to "partners in peacebuilding".

- **UN Youth Strategy "Youth2030" (2018):** asks the UN system to work with and for young people, not merely talk about them.

The UAE experience: tools in place

The UAE established the Federal Youth Authority to promote youth empowerment and involvement in vital sectors and to coordinate youth councils across the country. Youth councils now operate inside federal government bodies, for example at the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Sports, to involve young employees in improving the workplace and proposing initiatives. These efforts sit within the National Youth Agenda 2031.

These are valuable tools, but their worth depends on how they are run. Is the council consulted before a decision or informed after it? Do its members see their proposals make a difference?

The ladder of participation: from decoration to partnership

In 1992 the researcher Roger Hart, in an essay published by UNICEF's Innocenti Centre, proposed what became known as the "ladder of participation". Its lowest rungs are not real participation at all: **manipulation** (using young people to support a cause they do not understand), **decoration** (using their presence to improve the picture) and **tokenism** (a voice with no effect). Real participation begins with being assigned but informed, then consulted, and rises to initiatives that young people start themselves and share decisions on with adults. The model was designed for children and adolescents, but it is widely used to assess youth participation as well.

Five indicators of genuine participation

1. **Information:** do young people receive the same information as decision-makers, in good time?
2. **Timing:** are they consulted before a decision is drafted, not after it is adopted?
3. **Impact:** can you point to one decision that changed because of their input?
4. **Feedback:** are they told which proposals were taken up, which were not, and why?
5. **Diversity:** do participants reflect different groups of young people, not just the most visible?

What young people owe in return

Participation is not only a right that is granted; it is a responsibility that is exercised. A young person who wants a seat at the table has to prepare: understand the file, offer a workable proposal

rather than a general complaint, and accept that some proposals will not be adopted. Organised volunteering, membership of youth councils and careful writing on public affairs are all ways to build that capacity. Volunteering and community work complement economic opportunity, however; they do not replace it. Each has its own value and purpose.

Conclusion

The difference between the stage and the table is the difference between young people being seen and being heard. The stage gives them a few minutes of visibility; the table gives them lasting influence. An institution that wants to know where it stands need only ask itself honestly: when did we last change a decision because a young person convinced us?

Sources

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6. UAE Cabinet: establishment of the Federal Youth Authority; National Youth Agenda 2031.
7. Emirates News Agency (WAM) and ministry websites: formation of youth councils at the Ministries of Education (2025), Sports (2025) and Foreign Affairs (2025).

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