Ollscoil na Gaillimhe
University of Galway

unesco Chair

Shifting Power: New Frontiers in Youth Participation

Conference Key Messages Statement



In response to a call from UNESCO (2023) asking member States to, "[t]ake existing youth arrangements to the next level, create new opportunities and arrangements where they do not yet exist and ensure that youth participation is effectively resourced"[1], the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in University of Galway hosted its 12th biennial conference on June 11th and 12th, 2026. The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, practitioners and young people with an interest and expertise in youth participation to capture their insights on the conference theme.

To collaboratively develop a conference key messages statement, all delegates were invited to contribute to an online discussion forum throughout the two-day event hosted on the Padlet platform. Key messages were also recorded from each plenary and parallel session. The initial messages generated through these sources were synthesised and presented to the conference delegates in a closing interactive session and to the conference youth panel where they were further discussed and refined. Following the conference, a comprehensive analysis of all data was undertaken to develop this final Conference Key Messages Statement.

1 United Nations (2023) *Our Common Agenda policy brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes.* New York: United Nations, p. 17.

Message 1: Tackle Adultism and Power Imbalances

Adultism, the systematic privileging of adults over children and youth resulting in their voices, experiences, and capacities being undervalued, remains a significant and often overlooked barrier to meaningful youth participation.

Power imbalances between adults and young people are embedded within organisational cultures, policies, procedures and everyday practices. These imbalances are often reinforced through assumptions, sometimes hidden, about young people's competence, credibility and capacity to contribute. As a result, young people's priorities can be diluted or co-opted by adult agendas, limiting their ability to influence decisions that affect their lives. Meaningful participation requires recognising children and young people as experts in their own lives and valuing their knowledge alongside professional and academic forms of expertise.

Practitioners and policymakers must be prepared to share decision-making power.

> ***[F]or adults to share power and decision making with young people means they must be willing to give up some control about how the work will turn out*** **(anon, Padlet input).**

They must also be willing to embrace uncertainty. Participation is not a linear process, and organisations must be willing to navigate complexity, *"get comfortable with discomfort" (anon, Padlet input)* and encourage experimentation, learning and adaptation.

To address adultism and rebalance power, organisations should critically examine the policies, procedures and cultures that reinforce adult authority. This includes: creating adaptable systems across procurement, finance, ethics and otherwise; embedding participation requirements within governance, planning and funding mechanisms; supporting participation champions who can drive change from within organisations; and creating structures to document, report and share learning.

Actions for Policy and Practice

1. Recognise adultism as a form of discrimination that undermines children's rights and participation.
2. Review organisational policies, procedures and decision-making structures to identify and address overt and hidden power imbalances.
3. Value diverse forms of knowledge and expertise, including lived experience.
4. Foster organisational cultures that embrace experimentation, reflection and continuous improvement in participation practice.
5. Embed participation requirements within funding, commissioning and service agreements.
6. Support participation champions at organisational and system levels to lead organisational cultural change.
7. Create mechanisms to share learning, challenges and good practice in youth participation.

Message 2: Invest in Relationships, Time and Safe Spaces

Genuine power sharing requires sustained investment in time, relationships and organisational change. Building trust, developing participation cultures and safe spaces are long-term processes that must be recognised and resourced accordingly.

> ***[Y]outh participation is a process and a practice rather than an end result or tick box*** **(anon, Padlet input).**

> ***Stop being complicit in the silencing of certain voices by not raising concerns when you are given short deadlines*** **(academic, Padlet input).**

Safe spaces must be physically, emotionally and culturally safe. Organisations should continually ask whose voices are being heard, "who is missing from the table" *(researcher, Padlet input)* and *"if young people can't come to the table can the table be brought to them"* (*youth participant, plenary session*). Participation processes must be responsive to local contexts and inclusive of diverse lived experiences. This requires clear communication, accessible information and flexible approaches informed by universal design for learning principles to create equal opportunities for all.

Trusted relationships are the foundation of safe and effective participation. Practitioners need the time and support to build these relationships, while organisations must recognise the critical role of adult allies in enabling participation. Adult allies can challenge resistance, create opportunities for engagement and help ensure that young people's views influence decisions and lead to meaningful action.

Actions for Policy and Practice

1. Invest in participation as an ongoing process, not a one-off consultation or engagement activity.
2. Create physically, emotionally and culturally safe spaces that enable all young people to participate confidently.
3. Regularly examine inclusion and representation by asking whose voices are being heard and whose are missing.
4. Design participation opportunities that are flexible, accessible and responsive to local contexts and diverse lived experiences.
5. Prioritise relationship-building as a core component of participation practice, recognising trust as the foundation of effective engagement.
6. Recognise and value the role of adult allies within organisations and participation structures.

Message 3: Strive for Authentic Participation

Authentic participation means involving children and young people early, consistently and meaningfully in shaping agendas, designing solutions and evaluating outcomes on issues that affect their lives.

Youth participation "needs to get political" (researcher, Padlet input). It must become a routine, embedded feature of decision-making at all levels where young people are recognised as partners in decision-making, not simply tokenistic respondents to adult-led processes. Co-creation and co-production approaches should be embedded as a "*'must do' not an add on if there is time/budget*" (*researcher, Padlet input)*. Young people's expertise and lived experience should be valued through appropriate recognition and, where appropriate, fair remuneration.

Professionals are accountable for providing feedback on how young people's contributions have informed decisions and for managing expectations on what can be achieved. Strong alliances between young people, practitioners and policymakers at the international and national level are essential for turning participation into meaningful change.

> ***[B]uild alliances with the policy world, the practitioner's world, the international world, the national world, because ultimately, this is how impact would be achieved*** **(anon, interactive session).**



Action Points for Practitioners and Policymakers

1. Move from one-off consultation exercises towards co-design and co-production approaches that share decision-making power.
2. Embed youth participation early on as a standard requirement in decision-making structures.
3. Establish feedback mechanisms that clearly demonstrate how young people's views influenced outcomes.
4. Be transparent about the scope, limitations and expected impact of participation processes.
5. Build partnerships among youth, policymakers and practitioners at the national and international level to strengthen influence and impact.
6. Value young people's expertise through recognition and fair remuneration where appropriate.

Message 4: Build Evidence and Accountability

Youth participation is a fundamental right, but rights-based approaches must be complemented by stronger evidence about what works, for whom, in what contexts and with what outcomes.

> ***We can't keep leaning on children's rights as the core argument; we need evidence that youth voice leads to effective and efficient governance…Measuring the impact of youth engagement requires defining the intervention clearly. With that foundation, we can generate the quantitative evidence that policymakers are looking for*** **(researcher, Padlet input).**

Building an evidence base is essential to improving practice, demonstrating impact and ensuring that participation contributes to meaningful change in the lives of children and young people.

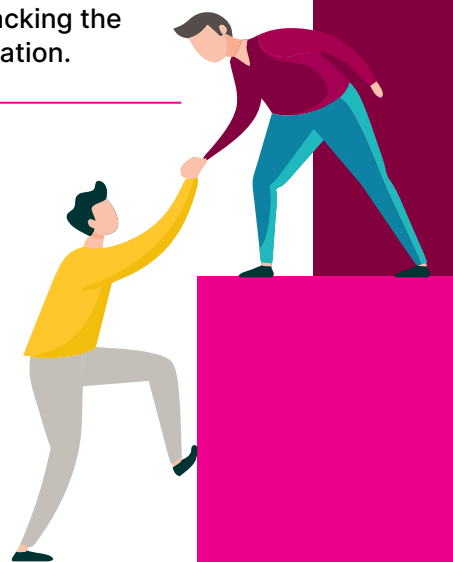
Developing a stronger evidence base requires clearly defined interventions while being sensitive to different contexts and considering different types of evidence.

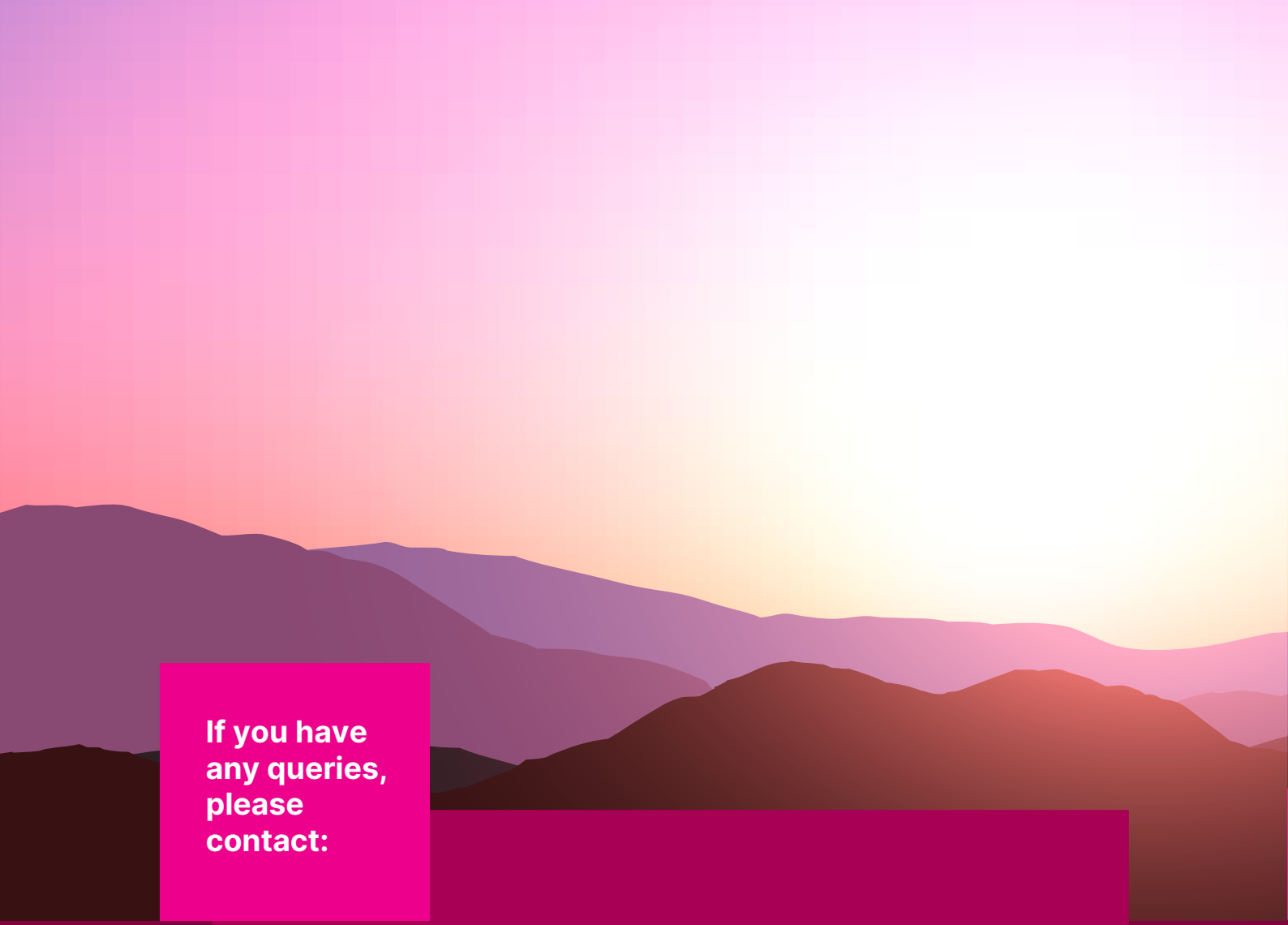
> ***Do we need to think about RCTs and other research which demonstrates the impact of youth participation, alongside research on economic benefits (e.g. social return on investment)?*** **(academic, Padlet input)**

Evidence should not be limited to quantitative measures alone, a plurality of evidence, including lived experience and qualitative insights, are important for understanding the full value of youth participation. Young people must be active partners in generating evidence. They are well positioned to identify which dimensions of participation matter most, what outcomes should be measured and how success should be defined. Fundamentally, there is a need to build an epistemic community that advances evidence-informed participation practice.

Action Points for Practitioners and Policymakers

1. Invest in research and evaluation that examines both the processes and outcomes of youth participation.
2. Recognise and utilise multiple forms of evidence, including quantitative data, qualitative insights and lived experience.
3. Involve young people as co-researchers and partners in designing, conducting and interpreting research and evaluation.
4. Build an epistemic community that facilitates shared learning and the development of an international evidence base tracking the impact of participation.





If you have any queries, please contact:

Gillian Browne,
UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, School of Political Science and Sociology, Institute for Lifecourse and Society, University of Galway, Ireland.

Email: Gillian.browne@universityofgalway.ie

Tel: +353 (0)91 49 5398

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