

## USAID YouthPower2 Symposium (November 9-10, 2021)

### SESSION NOTES

# Increasing the Representation of Youth in Development

## Track 3: Social Movements and the Opportunity to Increase Youth Participation in Long-Term Collective Action

**Wednesday, November 10, 2021 – DAY TWO**  
**10:05 – 10:55 AM**  
**Breakout Session**

#### Session Participants

---

Moderator:

Neetha Tangirala, Senior Advisor for Youth, Civic Education and Activism, USAID

Presenters:

Jennifer Earl, Professor of Sociology and (by courtesy) Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona

Audrey Lin, Campaign Manager, Sunrise Movement

Precious Nomzamo Ndlovu

#### Session Overview

---

Help USAID and partners worldwide reflect on how to help civil society increase and encourage youth civic participation, not just as protestors but as active members in collective action efforts in their community. A key priority under the Agency's four-year Global Youth LEAD initiative aimed at advancing a generation of civically active and engaged citizens.

#### Proposed Learning

*Attendees explore activities and approaches to help civil society effectively encourage youth active in social movements to engage in collective action and policy reform.*

#### Session Notes

---

***Main Topic: The session focused on an examination of youth participation in politics and democracy. It reviewed the rigid democratic and cultural practices that result in the exclusion of youth in the collective and coalition-building spaces.***

**Dr. Jennifer Earl, University of Arizona**

Why is collective action critical to formal and informal participation in political processes?

Protest is an important lever that is more accessible than the formal political process, particularly for young people. Social movements are not always welcoming to young people, but youth continue to be active in them. More inclusive social movements could create spaces for youth to access the political process even before voting age.

There is evidence that involvement in social movements and protests increases youth participation in formal politics. When young people are disengaged from electoral processes, older people criticize them, ignoring the systematic, social, and cultural obstacles they face in participation. Young people hear that adults don't think politics are for them and criticize adults when they are not interested in politics. When youth participate in protests, they are also criticized for "doing it wrong."

Some best practices for engaging young people are recognizing that youth have distinct political interests that differ from adults. We can also explicitly and frequently challenge the youth deficit model. Being in true allyship and partnership with youth means empowering youth to pursue their ideas.

Research shows youth are better at identifying misinformation than adults. Instead of funding programs for k-12 media literacy, we should be targeting older adults. It's the experience, not the age, that matters.

Youth are sometimes forced to participate outside of political systems because formal political institutions are closed to them. Youth are excluded from political life either through voting age, cultural norms, generational attitudes. Increased voting by youth has been attributed to participation in social movements. Movements are sometimes more accessible even though they may not be very welcoming spaces to young people.

Toxic political culture, failure to welcome youth, or blaming youth for their lack of engagement. Movements can sometimes treat young people as labor or just simply doing the movement "wrong." The most significant barriers to youth engagement in the political arena are adults' attitudes towards youth and systemic ageism. Politics needs to be more inclusive in terms of age. Recognize young people's specific interests.

**Audrey Lin, The Sunrise Movement**

How is the Sunrise Movement engaging youth as active organizers in the long term? What is the goal and theory of change? Sunrise created a vision of the world that young people can see themselves in. Youth are disillusioned by a political system that they see as failing them. They envision a society and government that genuinely cares for them and works to address the climate crisis. With Sunrise, young people can organize wherever they are by creating "hubs" to receive leadership training and encourage other young organizers to join. Actively building the leadership capacity of organizers helps keep them involved long term. It's important to build autonomy, especially for young people.

Sunrise is fighting to create a Green New Deal, clean jobs, and increase investment in communities on the frontlines of pollution and poverty.

Sunrise's theory of change involves three key things: people power, policy expertise, and collaboration with other organizations working for change. Remember that organizing is not young peoples' full-time job - they will have different bandwidths for taking phone calls and checking emails.

How is the Sunrise Movement engaging youth as active organizers in the long term? What is the goal and theory of change? An open group in the US - youth organize in situ, and there are 400 clubs in the country now (Nov 2021)

Actively build leadership capacity in the group by providing ongoing training & recruiting young people

When Sunrise is successful, we will see

- a just and equitable society transitioned away from fossil fuel economy
- engagement and collaboration around a national climate corps

### **Precious Nomzano Ndlovu, Youth in Progress Trust**

How do young people in Zimbabwe view collective action? Are they more interested in short-term protests or long-term efforts?

Young people in Zimbabwe are carrying years of economic mismanagement, human rights abuses, high levels of unemployment, and divisions along tribal lines. Interest in collective action dies down once specific items are achieved because powerful people use young people to accomplish their agenda and then not mobilize again. There is not much momentum for collective action as a movement.

- There is a lack of unity and purpose among youth to mobilize.
- Zimbabwe defines “youth” as someone 18-25 years old.
- Social movements should work with people when they are young and cultivate a culture of owning a movement. They should know it is about them. Only they can shape the future and the generation that they want.

How do young people in Zimbabwe view collective action? Are they more interested in short-term protests or long-term efforts?

The trifecta of tribalism, economic challenges, and national mismanagement is bearing down most on the youth in Zimbabwe

Social movements sometimes collapse, or interest in the movement dwindles when the leaders pursue other interests or become incapacitated for different reasons. Young people are currently joining forces to fight for human rights, but tribal & political differences are pervasive barriers around collective action. Targeting school-aged children 14/15 - for mentorship, attend community meetings to shadow leadership and view what they are tracking towards in terms of responsibility.

How to encourage young people to vote - nominate champions who will fight for the cause—inspiring and exciting candidates who inspire youth to participate.

Cultivate the culture of owning the movement and include collective action content in the school curriculum. Young people can be jealous and critical of other young people in power, so creating a culture of support and solidarity instead of one that breaks others down is vital.

Organizational culture is essential because the work of organizing social movements is difficult. The Sunrise Movement has been successful because they build a culture of caring and support that enables organizers to stay in the fight for the long term. It reflects the world that Sunrise is trying to develop one that cares about its neighbors and communities.

Disengagement happens in reaction to experiencing ageism in social movements. Young people want to be active but don't feel welcome. When you see demobilization, look for the cultural and organizational causes instead of blaming young people and their “lack of political interest.”

- Diverse Coalition building is imperative for long-lasting collective action
- Lots of innovation within youth demographic - value and celebrate it
- The existing political system disillusion youth.
- Be flexible when working with youth leaders as they face barriers at home or time & financial constraints that adult organizers already have the experience to navigate.
- Young people are a viable voting block and are invested in politics just as much as adults are.
- Sharing beyond the cause enhances the networking and connections
- Troubleshoot disengagement by looking at the reason; organizational and systemic barriers are an excellent place to start.
- Dismantle negative models of influence.

### **Takeaways for USAID:**

Welcome public comments and feedback on the recently released Climate Strategy. Embrace Allyship Model of youth engagement in the political arena. Cultivate a culture that reverses deficit model messaging around youth. Amplify the value of youth engagement and their voices as well, and fund adults' media literacy

### **Takeaways for Donors, Partners, and Implementers:**

- Adopt allyship model
- Include young people widely
- Invite young people specifically
- Your organizational culture should reflect the world that your movement/agency is trying to build.

### **Takeaways for Youth:**

- Own the movement
- Show up and take charge now
- Support each other and celebrate each others' wins

---

### **Session Quotes:**

“The biggest barriers young people face right now in getting involved in political arenas are adults and systemic ageism.”

- **Jennifer Earl**, Professor of Sociology and (by courtesy) Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona

---

“What is really important to engaging young people is having a vision that is exciting to them and that they can see themselves in.”

- **Audrey Lin**, Campaign Manager, Sunrise Movement

---

“People say young people are the leaders of tomorrow - they are the leaders of today!”

- **Precious Nomzano Ndlovu**

---

“I now know that I can do it on my own. That's how DREAMS empowered me.”

- **Emily Muyeye**, Namibia ACHIEVE Community Care Worker, Jhpiego

### **Resources**

[Precarity of Power: Reflections on Women and Youth in Nonviolent Action Report](#)

[10 Questions for Youth Changemakers](#)

[Mobilizing Ideas – Informing Activist Video Series](#)