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This is the published version of a paper presented at *28th Annual Conference, International Sustainable Development Research Society#(ISDRS), Stockholm, June 14-17, 2022..*

Citation for the original published paper:

Kjellqvist, T., Rodela, R., Mutvei, A. (2022)

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In: Dobers, P.; Gawell, M.; Gärde, J.; Silverskiöld, S. (ed.), *PROCEEDINGS of the 28th Annual Conference, International Sustainable Development Research Society#(ISDRS) 2022: Sustainable Development and Courage: Culture, Art and Human Rights* (pp. 1160-1169). Stockholm: Södertörns högskola

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Articulating Voices of the Young: How to bring youth into contemporary planning and governance?

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Abstract

The youth movement “Fridays for Future” has spurred new interest from the research community about the way in which young people engage in politics and governance of social and physical environment. The recent wave of youth activism originated from school strikes concerning the failure of the adults to take any serious measures against climate change. Over the past two years, there is a growing research interest to study how youth articulate their concerns about the present and the future, and how adults pay attention to these, and act on these demands in practical terms e.g., if, and how these translate into current social and political affairs. Youth research trending in the last decades has investigated why youth political organizations fail to attract young people. Researchers have investigated the ways in which young people engage politically e.g. via social media, rather than being loyal to traditional political parties. Much of this literature is research done *on* the young, but more recently a new strand of research has been emerging where researchers work *with* the young, in order to gain a better understanding of how social and political engagement can be articulated.

Keywords: Youth, Participation, Planning, Citizen Science

1. Introduction

In the view of increasing interest for the role of young people in politics and in the governance of the social and physical environment, it is important to consider what are the ways that can best allow them to be engaged (Rodela and Norss, 2022; Severcan, 2015). In fact, there are multiple ways how this can occur and researchers at Södertörn University are active in studying the different ways that youth can be engaged in contemporary social and environmental challenges. In this essay submitted to the ISDRS 2022 conference we take stock of work done on two large research projects that are each focused on municipalities in the South of the Stockholm Region and focus on the methods used to engage representative groups of young in the transdisciplinary research in the context of spatial planning and local politics. The two projects are:

Project 1: *YouCount*, is an EU-funded project that engages Young Citizen Social Scientists (YCSS) (14-22 years) to explore issues that may mobilize latent engagement and participation to improve conditions for young people in their municipality.

Project 2: *Planning with Youth* is a project funded by FORMAS where we seek to test and compare alternative participatory tools for the engagement of young people (13-18 years) in sustainable spatial planning with the aim to develop an intergenerational framework for planning.

The two projects focus on current issues related to how, and to what degree, the social and physical environments are accessible to the young. Both projects also take into consideration the institutional context by acknowledging already existing methods for dialogue and participation in planning processes and have an interest for young people's concerns for the future, and the eagerness of the participating youngsters to learn how they can influence and explore the pathways to sustainability. Both projects are now in their half-time period which allows us to consider preliminary findings and to compare and contrast the types of problems identified by the young people engaged on these, in relation to their living environments /neighbourhoods.

In this essay we are particularly looking at the following Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, and targets; 16.7, 11.3, 12.8, and 10.2. We contribute to the track 8c on Just transition by demonstrating methods that show promise to facilitate “a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon society” and to design processes for “Inclusive and citizen-centric governance”.

2. Methods

In this section we briefly summarize the two projects and give information about the research methods that each one has used and what young people are engaged in. A core methodological aspect that we emphasize here in this essay that guides the two projects is the role given to young people as these are given a more central place to the research inquiry. This includes youth having a say on the specific questions to be addressed during the research process, and youth having a role in data collection.

YouCount

The overarching objective of YouCount is to generate new knowledge and innovations to increase the social inclusion of youth at risk of exclusion across Europe through co-creative youth citizen social science (Butkevičienė et al., 2021). Overall, YouCount targets two strands of inquiry: 1) knowledge about social inclusion and how to create social change through the involvement of young citizen scientists and 2)

contributing to the scientific knowledge base for Young Citizen Social scientists for scaling-up interventions. The program focusses on three main domains of social inclusion: a) social participation (e.g., work, education, and social life); b) connectedness and social belonging; and c) citizenship and rights.

YouCount adopts a broad understanding of Citizen Science, CS, based on the definition from Holdren (2015), where CS is understood as the public voluntarily participation in the scientific process, addressing real-world problems from formulating research questions to collecting and analysing data, interpreting results, developing technologies and applications, and solving complex problems.

Each case will establish local living labs (LLs) with multiple stakeholders in the wider community, which will use the data provided by the participating young citizen scientists to cocreate policymaking and innovations in terms of new ideas, products, or methods to create social change.

In the Swedish case, Södertörn University (BYC), where young citizens between 13–22 years, can partake in local policymaking to influence social, political, and environmental decisions affecting the community of young people. The members of BYC are elected by their peers in schools, sports clubs, associations, and at youth centres. As elected, they represent their peers towards the municipality and other organizers of youth activities. With 20 years of experience, BYC sees civil-society engagement as a crucial factor for social inclusion among young Botkyrka citizens. At the same time, they are aware that many young people experience challenges against such engagement.

In Botkyrka, the young, elected members of the BYC voluntarily participate in the research team throughout the whole research process. This core group of citizen scientists (R-YCS) are the main dialogue partners and given space to design the research process with methodological support from the Södertörn researchers. One of the main research questions defined by the citizen scientists is to investigate how engagement in BYC can lead to other forms of social inclusion, such as work, education, social life. To find out, focus group interviews will be organized with former members of the BYC to discuss issues and questions formulated by the current members. The core group citizen scientist has been trained to identify themes of inclusion and engagement through exercises where they imagined their own possible futures and which pathways that could take them to desirable positions in society. In one of the exercise they were also reflecting on what and how their current engagement in BYC would contribute to their selection of pathways and opportunities to enter. Based on this exercise they formulated themes and questions to ask within the focus group dialogue. (The focus group interview will be conducted in fall 2022)

For the BYC, the most important research question is how more young people in Botkyrka can engage with activities organized by the BYC? To find answers, a larger group of youths will serve as community citizen scientists (C-YCS) by contributing data from their daily experiences on an online platform and

identifying targeted solutions through participating in local dialogue forums. The respondents or community citizen scientists will be recruited when the BYC members do their outreach activities to schools, sports clubs and youth centres.

To prepare the on-line survey, the core group of citizen scientists have engaged in exercises together with the researchers to explore the issues and questions to ask for on the on-line platform. The first steps of these exercises were conducted in video-meetings during the pandemic, which partly limited the scope of the discussions. Using “Jamboard”, the core citizen scientists were divided into smaller groups to brainstorm on the questions they wanted to ask. In a plenary session, they then discussed how recipients might react or respond to the questions, thereby filtering out questions that were too vague, intrusive or offensive. The researchers contributed with perspectives on integrity, relevance and validity. When a set of questions were agreed upon, the citizen scientist got the task to interview at least two friends each in a pilot study. One set of the questions related to the respondent’s personal data such as age and gender. Another set concerned the knowledge about the BYC, and the third category were questions related to perceived needs for change in Botkyrka and the opportunities to perform change activities.

The results of the pilot study were first compiled on a jamboard during an on-line session and then discussed and analysed in the first physical meeting at Södertörn University. The analysis was done by printing the jamboard notes (post-it) and turn them into a card game. The core group worked by sorting cards in themes, thereby getting a view on topics that were of concern to their peers. Topics raised were sorted into broad categories related to the situation in school, leisure time activities, meeting places, transport and mobility, and security.

In the analysis, the core group also identified responses relating to disillusionment about the possibilities to influence. There were three types of answers, either the respondents did not think they had the ability and knowledge to influence, some did not think they would be listened to, and others yet were disappointed by previous experiences where much had been said and little done. These observations could then be connected to a discussion about theories on youth engagement, where previous studies (Amnå et al 2016) have shown that although some young are disappointed, some are indifferent, the bulk of the young do have a latent interest to become engaged if the issues are relevant to them. The BYC coordinator could then contribute with examples where the youth council had been able to raise such latent engagement. In coming workshops, emphasis will be put on formulating more precise questions to integrate in the on-line app that may pin-point issues that could raise latent engagement.

The results of the studies will be presented in Dialogue Forums with adults engaged in youth matters through the municipal organization, sports clubs and other associations and employers of young people. We are anticipating that the responses we get through the discussions with the BYC and through app will show

gaps in activities currently organised by the stakeholders mentioned. Based on the dialogue, Living Lab activities will be organized to try out some possible gap fillers (Karlsen, J., & Larrea, M. (2016).

Planning for Youth

The overarching objective of *Planning with Youth* is to study when and how different participatory tools (serious gaming, participatory mapping, workshopping creative methods, etc.) enables meaningful activities for young people on questions related to spatial planning. Over the course of four years, we are testing a series of different methods across different age groups with the intent to gather in depth inside about the tools being tested, but also about youth experiences. The project focusses on: a) how are the different methods/tools allowing youth voice to emerge, or maybe not; b) if and when are the different methods/tools allowing for a meaningful participatory experience, and c) how that plays out across different age groups. The aim is to extract insight to advance academic inquiry as well as to inform current policy and practice.

The empirical element of this project is done in close collaboration with local associations and municipalities with whom we collaborated closely. For instance, in collaboration with the Office of Youth Affairs of the Huddinge municipality we have collaborated with two groups of youth who joined our team to study three different tools/methods. A first group of nine youth aged about 15 years helped us over a period of three months in testing two methods i) participatory mapping and ii) photovoice, while a second group of youth aged about 19 years helped us in testing iii) computer games used to discuss aspects of urban governance.

This activity was drafted so that youth joined the project in a role as “researchers” in the processes of testing the methods in close collaboration with the project team. All youth joined to this initiative on the basis of an open call announced by the municipality which took the form of an internship which had also elements of reciprocity – this in terms of offering them and opportunity to learn about project management and about the tools. The internships also foresaw a monetary compensation subsidized by the municipality.

For both groups we have worked in stages over the course of three months. During the first period we sought to build a relationship and have listened closely to what their interests and expectation from this collaboration where. We have offered dedicated training of the method to be tested and other aspect of interests and in this have paid attention to the different needs these youth had. In the second stage we began working on tasks seeing their feedback at dedicated times. In the last stage we brought the work done together and hold discussions to gather feedback on the process and on their engagement as well.

At present we continue with our work on testing different participatory methods and tools for use in

planning and urban governance and aim to develop tick descriptions as to how when and how these can support practitioners and planners in their engagement with young people on questions of planning and urban governance.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section we bring together preliminary insight from these projects and discuss that with attention to the context, but also with attention to transferability of the insight. Namely, while our work is located in Sweden, a country that embraces high standards in terms of democratic values and institutional structures meant to put these into practice (e.g. Act on youth engagement in planning), we also take note of the on-going international trends leading to the consolidation of youth growing a political voice (e.g. y 2022 marks as the European year of the youth). In the view of this growing wave, it becomes very important to reflect on ways researchers can engage with youth that are not extractive, but rather allow for youth agency and meaningful participation. Both projects are ongoing, and the research processes are in the stages of preparations for coming activities. The young people who are participating are stepping in as researchers and as such both projects foster mutual learning processes. In the following we summarize core lessons learned to this point across the two projects:

Diversity of Youth and why it Matters

Youth studies researchers have long been discussing the need to acknowledge that youth is not a homogeneous social category, rather it is a diverse group of individuals and this diversity needs to be understood and acted upon in concrete ways (Özlemnur et al, 2019). Both projects took this assumption on board and worked in ways to allow these differences to be acknowledged and accommodated. In the recruitment of participants, we have allowed for a certain representativity, at least by allowing young people with different backgrounds into the project. In the training activities we have been aware of the different ways voices can be expressed and what they express. Despite the diversity, through patience, we made our way towards consensus or formulations that all participants could accept.

One facet of this diversity is gender and for instance lack of meaningful leisure activities along gender lines has been brought up in the YouCount project. One traditional remedy from the adult world is to start youth centers, but when brought up by the researchers there was a unison response from the girls participating to YouCount that youth centers were only for the boys. When asked to clarify, they said that boys constantly comment on girls' appearance and for the girls this meant that they had to spend hours preparing the right apparel before visiting the youth center. To further explore the gender aspect on leisure time activities to spur engagement is one of the challenges brought up by diversity. It also relates to the desires of the young to define their own ways of meeting and relating to each other.

Another aspect of diversity relates to the socio-cultural background of youth which in Sweden often takes the form of urban segregation in both the municipalities. There is a clear distinction between urban areas as it comes to socio-economy class and ethnical belonging, which in turn form their lived experiences. For some, criminality and drugs are an obvious part of their surroundings while others in the BYC rarely meet such phenomena in their neighborhoods. This was expressed in the discussions about the most important questions to ask their peers through the app, where some thought it to be necessary to ask about criminality as a phenomenon, while others were reluctant.

However, we also see diversity as an asset. For the young participants to our projects, coming from different backgrounds and with different experiences, the opportunity to meet with others and formulate a common agenda is an opportunity to learn about other perspectives. It is also important to see that the young participants come with experiences that can be harnessed within the research project. They have gained experience from school, from associations, and from informal, colloquial gatherings with peers. It has been obvious that such experiences have contributed not only to the discussions and selection of topics, but also to the formation of the research methods.

The Place of Youth in Society and Decision-Making

Activities of this type are demanding and best done in close collaboration with local organizations who know local conditions well and can help in shaping up processes that are context sensitive. Working with the relevant offices within the municipal organizations has proved to be fruitful. We can see opportunities for impact in that we can add a third learning process which is the learning done by the municipal officers engaged in the project. In YouCount we can clearly see that working with the youth council means that the participants already have a joint task, despite their different backgrounds, and they have been exposed to a culture of collaboration within the BYC activities.

Also, from the work done for the project Planning with Youth we can report on the important role that the institutional framework with guidelines as to what role participatory processes shall have has an important role. It allows building alliances across different organizations who are supporting municipalities in delivering participatory activities centered on youth engagement. For instance, close collaboration with municipality offices also allowed the project Planning with Youth to better understand local needs and conditions where youth is situated which was information we used to inform our project activities

Youth participatory research benefits when the way youth contribute is acknowledged within and outside the group involved. Within, as the work in progress was totally dependent on the participants discussions and questions about ways forward, and where they learned to listen to and appreciate different arguments. Outside the group, the YouCount participants have understood that their contributions are not only for

other young people in Botkyrka, but also for youth all over Europe.

One difficulty found in the YouCount project is that the BYC is a moving target, where people leave the organization and others enter on an annual basis. The young participate in YouCount as representatives of the organization, not in their personal capacity. This has led to a core group of persistent participants, while others have shown up occasionally at the meetings. For each meeting the researchers and the BYC coordinator have had to reiterate the progress made in previous workshops which makes the progress slower than with a consistent group. To mitigate this problem, the participants suggested making a short video presenting the project and its objectives so that new members can come to workshops with a good idea of what they are about to experience. In a similar vein, each workshop will be concluded by a short video recording presenting the progress made.

Youth Participatory Research and How we Work with it in our Projects

We can deduce some preliminary responses from the ways that the projects are organized and from the lessons learned. In both cases, the close link with the municipal offices paves the way for young voices to be represented in the administration. To what extent this leads forward into the planning processes is a matter of how well the municipal officers can make their voices heard in relation to other departments within the municipality. In the case of BYC in Botkyrka there is a formalized route that provides opportunities, although there are no guarantees that the suggestions from the young will be taken into consideration.

The research methods can make a difference in various respects. As ideas expressed by the young have been formulated in co-development with researchers could give them a greater weight in the administrative considerations within the municipality. In Planning for Youth this is further emphasized using professional visual and gaming tools to express the perspectives and ideas of the young. In YouCount and in Planning for Youth, the activities conducted have similarities to what the young participants do in their leisure time. They get opportunities to talk about their experiences and concerns to researchers that listen with curiosity and respect, and who can respond by questioning and with constructive critique from a non-defensive position. Further, the researchers can provide tools to validate positions and perspectives and to articulate viable formulations.

In both cases, we will expose the findings and makings of the young to the decision makers. This latter group is to a large extent responsible for the environment in which the young find themselves situated. Such meetings will need both preparation and moderation to set the tone for mutual respect between the generations. Through the various workshops conducted with the young we have heard the young articulate their perspectives in a trustworthy way. One challenge is to what extent it will be possible to

conduct workshops or dialogues with decision makers in a similar trustful climate that we built between the researchers and the young collaborators. If we can induce an atmosphere of collaboration between the parties, there would be possibilities for a constructive dialogue.

4. Conclusions

The outcomes of the work reported above suggest that undertaking research with close involvement of young people has value, but it is not a straightforward process. Working together within the mode of co-development is challenging to us as researchers, it is constantly bringing in unforeseen features to the scene. Researchers get insight into the lived experience of young people, how they see different ways of knowing, and opportunities for themselves. This allows us to develop in-depth understanding of the circumstances that shape youth access to planning and governance and ways in which we could make these more inclusive and meaningful for young people. As Sweden puts its ambitions for more inclusive and participatory spatial planning and governance into law, asking local administration to include young people in planning, there are questions as to which tools and methods are best suited to the task (Cele and van der Burgt 2015; Rodela and Norss 2021). In recognizing that youth is a diverse group this is then a question we shall collectively explore by continued collaboration with young people which shall also help us to sharpen and expand our knowledge about participatory planning and governance.

Acknowledgements

The work reported here has been done in the context of the research project “Planning with Youth” project number 2019-01887, funded by Formas and “YouCount” project number 101005931 funded by EU Horizon 2020.

We thank all of the participating youth for their time and for sharing important insight into current contemporary matters.

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