

Policy Insights

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Youth Perspectives on South Africa's Governance Challenges

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Global insights

Executive summary

South Africa joined the APRM, Africa's voluntary self-assessment tool for promoting good governance, in 2003 and has remained committed to the ideals of the continental instrument since undergoing its first country review in 2007. However, young people, a demographic who are key stakeholders and who form a significant proportion of the country's population – as is the case across the continent – have so far been inadequately engaged and involved in APRM processes. In attempting to bridge this gap and include youth voices in the country's second generation APRM review, SAIIA partnered with Johannesburg-based Jasoro Consulting to facilitate the collection and compilation of ideas from young South Africans on the key governance challenges facing the country. This policy insight identifies lessons from the process, championing an approach to meaningful youth participation that sees youth as partners in development.

Introduction

The APRM offers African countries the opportunity to improve efforts towards governance reform by creating the space for civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens to engage and participate in decision-making. Established as an autonomous agency of the AU in 2003, the APRM has since become the leading instrument for evaluating and promoting good governance on the African continent. It emerged from growing acknowledgment among African leaders that the continent's developmental challenges are largely a consequence of governance failures. The APRM was designed as a tool for participating AU member states to evaluate their own and one another's governance successes and failures, and develop National Programmes of Action to address shortcomings.¹ Together with government and the private sector, CSOs are meant to evaluate governance outcomes and develop appropriate interventions. As of March 2021, 41 African countries had voluntarily joined the APRM.² All sectors of society – including government, CSOs, religious institutions, labour unions and business groups – are expected to contribute answers to questions on a wide range of governance issues, such as human rights, health care, the state of the economy, judicial processes and corporate conduct.

The APRM process provides a unique opportunity for a countrywide assessment of governance and accountability successes and challenges. Accordingly, a country's future can be positively affected by the APRM process and its recommendations. This forward-thinking aspect of the APRM makes youth participation necessary and useful. In South Africa, more than 65% of the population is below the age of 35 years.³ Youth are not only a

1 New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), *African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM): Base Document, AHG/235 (XXXVIII)*, Annex II (Durban: AU, 2002), 1.

2 APRM, 'Continental Presence', <https://www.aprm-au.org/map-areas/>.

3 Statistics South Africa, 'SA population reaches 58,8 million', <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12362>.

majority of the population but are also a vulnerable group, disproportionately affected by the country's successes and failures. As custodians of the future, youth have a vested interest in catalysing change since their livelihoods, and those of generations to follow, are in their hands. It is for this reason that SALLA worked with the APRM to develop written submissions from youth and CSOs for South Africa's second review process, following the first review that took place in 2007. Every generation has a role to play and it is incumbent on each to find and fulfil their mission or to betray it.⁴ This report outlines the key lessons learned from bringing young people together and facilitating the collection and documentation of their views. It can be useful to government, CSOs and other development actors seeking to adopt participatory and comprehensively youth-focused approaches in policy processes.

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Hart's ladder approach

The process to develop a youth submission for South Africa's APRM review was intentional in its attempts to make youth participation meaningful. Using Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' model, the method was designed as a shift away from participation by young people based on manipulation, tokenism and decoration, where youth feel like they are present to meet quotas or to posture in politically correct ways, toward more meaningful impact.⁵ In generating this youth submission, young people were not engaged as an afterthought or to merely comment on what others had said – their voices determined and directed the actions taken. Following the Hart's Ladder approach, it was crucial to ensure that the young participants were listened to and supported in expressing their views,

Following the Hart's Ladder approach, it was crucial to ensure that the young participants were listened to and supported in expressing their views, which were always taken into account, and they always shared power and decision-making responsibilities

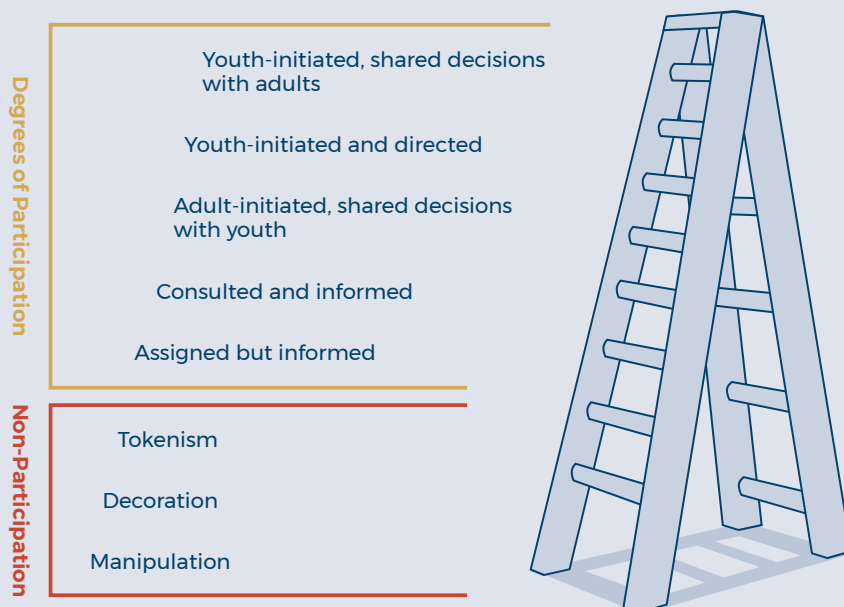
4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

5 Robert Hart, *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre, 1992).

which were always taken into account, and they always shared power and decision-making responsibilities. South Africa's youth 'must be viewed not only as a voting bloc but as a group of citizens who can influence decision-making and policy beyond the election cycle.'⁶

Importantly, in trying to gather perspectives from youth for the submission to the APRM, young people were not only engaged in conversation with one another. Throughout the consultation, policymakers, activists and government officials were present at relevant intervals to engage with the young people as equal partners, working towards the success of South Africa's country self-assessment process. This is the highest form of participation suggested in Hart's ladder, where youth and adults lead together and contribute equally to decision-making and solutions.⁷

Figure 1 Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation



Source: Robert Hart, *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre, 1992), 8

Five principles enhanced the quality of youth participation in the APRM South Africa Youth Consultation:

- 1 Youth were engaged as experts in their experiences of South Africa and as young people from various backgrounds.

⁶ Youth Submission to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in South Africa 2020.

⁷ Hart, *Children's Participation*.

- 2 The process was geographically, educationally and socio-economically inclusive. Young people from all nine provinces participated.
- 3 The youth were engaged in decision-making throughout the process – they helped to define the issues, decide on the methodology and assist with basic administration, remuneration and information dissemination.
- 4 Youth were able to present the issues they collectively defined in a validation workshop to various stakeholders, including government and continental APRM structures, making their views and voices better represented and accentuated.
- 5 The youth had the final say on how their positions were documented.

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A participatory methodology

In September 2020, a call was put out to various formal and informal youth networks in communities, universities, schools and on social media platforms, to participate in a consultative APRM process to develop a youth-focused written submission. The call saw almost 200 young people nationwide engage at various stages. COVID-19 meant the entire process was held online, allowing for cost-effective and easy participation by young people beyond the borders of Johannesburg.

A sensitisation workshop was held in October 2020, attended by various youth groups, organisations and individuals eager to form working groups. For many of the attendees, this was their first introduction to the APRM – a process not often popularised and explained – and the first time they were able to engage directly with APRM and government officials responsible for creating the upcoming APRM South Africa Country Self-Assessment Report for the country's second-generation review. One of the important success factors was the assurance offered to the youth that their inputs would be directly taken on by decision-makers. This was actioned by direct engagements with representatives from the APRM and the South African APRM National General Council presenting the preliminary report

during the validation phase and at the official launch of the final report. This is a small but meaningful first step toward having youth voices influence the report. Having direct engagements with other stakeholders in which their perspectives are heard, acknowledged and validated helps to assure young people that their inputs are valid and valued. Youth will now have a measurable way to track whether their inputs used in the final report and have access to the NGC to hold them accountable if this does not happen.

An online workshop was held in October 2020 in which the nine issues for the youth submission were agreed on and workshopped. Although facilitated by SAIIA and Jasoro Consulting, the process was mostly driven by the participants, who collaboratively identified and outlined the issues. They were given a subsequent opportunity to offer feedback, and to finalise the thematic areas, after which they were divided into nine working groups, based on their specific areas of interest. The different groups were encouraged to collectively write and endorse evidence-based submissions, outlining the most important governance issues and providing recommendations. Intermittent writing sessions were also held, with appointed group leaders organising the different submissions. A youth participant was also commissioned to develop a background paper giving a basic summary of the issues from a youth perspective. An integrated draft of the group submissions and background paper was then circulated to the working groups prior to a validation workshop held on 24 February 2021, with comments incorporated into a final draft. The final report was launched in May 2021.

Five lessons from the South African experience

The five lessons listed below may provide practical guidelines for more meaningful youth engagement in development and policy processes.

Consult young people as early as possible

Often, when policy and development processes and initiatives aimed at young people are being discussed or designed, the organisers, who are rarely youth, determine the whole design before engaging with young people. The absence of youth voices in the initial discussions can lead to blind spots in the process. When the nuances and complexities of the youth experience are missed or not taken into account, young people feel alienated and excluded. In the SAIIA APRM Youth Consultation, another online meeting convened was a working session in which a broad roadmap of activities was presented, with suggestions solicited on what the most practical ways of working would be. The youth participants determined the structure of groups, the role of group leaders, platforms for engagement and how the budget would be spent. This approach helped to foster a sense of ownership of the process by the youth, allowing them to present solutions to obstacles that ordinarily exclude them from consultative work.

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Youth are experts on their own experience

When seeking youth inputs into policy and development activities or programmes, the goal is to gain unique insights that only young people can offer, given their diverse and specific viewpoints. Heterogenous and with different backgrounds, every cohort of young people brings perspectives that are fresh and distinct from the youth before them, as well as older or younger members of society.⁸ Thus, it is important to not make assumptions about what young people will offer. The SAIIA APRM Youth Consultation participants raised issues about land rights and ownership, climate change, institutional planning and inclusion in ways that reflect their local concerns and interests. Through their articulation of the issues, they demonstrated a recognition that all issues can be understood as youth issues, challenging existing stereotypes about youth concerns, such as issues limited to unemployment and risky behaviours, such as violence or drug abuse.

Representation matters

Youth are by no means a homogenous grouping.⁹ As such, it is important to remember that a single young person cannot represent the views of all young people. Youth experiences vary by age, race, geography, class and gender. Oftentimes, youth representation is a function of convenience sampling, where the youth who participate are able to do so based on social capital such as education, networks and language.¹⁰ Events that engage youth have an urban bias or, as was the case during COVID-19 lockdowns, a bias towards youth with access to data and connectivity. Convening youth with greater representation requires intentionality and responsiveness. The SAIIA APRM Youth Consultation tapped into various networks, including community groups, social media and governmental structures. The aim was to connect with youth from all provinces, to find youth across age groups and to ensure that youth who may ordinarily lack access to digital platforms were empowered with data and connected to accessible platforms, such as WhatsApp, for participation.

8 Febe Potgieter-Gqubule and Nokululeko Ngcobo, "The State of Youth in South Africa: Social Dynamics" (Youth Population Scenarios Project, Human Research Science Council, 2009), <https://www.gtac.gov.za/Researchdocs/The%20State%20of%20Youth%20in%20South%20Africa%20%20Social%20Dynamics.pdf>.

9 Potgieter-Gqubule and Ngcobo, "The State of Youth".

10 Ilker Etikan, 'Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling,' *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (author to add date):1.

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Centre the voices of youth

It is important to create spaces in which youth voices and experiences can emerge organically, where young people can not only set the agenda on their own terms but also articulate the issues in languages they choose and on the platforms they prioritise. Even when a young person's perspective is controversial or goes against normative views, while it is important to be robust in engaging those views, it is also crucial that non-youth stakeholders do not substitute their own judgement for those of the youth participants. This approach relies on an understanding that youth are not only experts on their own experiences but also bring to policy processes a range of content expertise and skills that should be recognised by decision-makers and other stakeholders.

Provide opportunities for learning

Truly valuing youth contributions will help to avoid tokenism and manipulation in consultative processes with young people. Youth participation is often seen as something that benefits youth alone, even though they bring valuable insights and input into engagements and often gain little to no direct benefits from these interactions. Youth in the SAIIA APRM Youth Consultation process made specific requests for dedicated skills development, formal public acknowledgment of their participation and tracking of the submission's impact over time, as a way to ensure that their contributions have value. Youth participants were also encouraged to participate in the dissemination of information in youth-led informal settings. Participating youth were provided with a small grant to conceptualise and convene interactions with young people who did not participate in the consultation.

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Conclusion

Youth participation in policy, politics and development in Africa can no longer be optional. The need to harness the demographic dividend of the 'youth bulge' is about more than making youth economically active, it must include relevant youth participation in decision-making that will affect their futures and those of generations to come. The caveat is that youth participation must be meaningful for it to be effective, and this requires a rethinking of young people's participation beyond side events and tokenism, toward youth as partners and leaders in decision-making – for today and for the future. The SAIIA APRM Youth Consultation journey demonstrates that when supported correctly, youth are capable of delivering high quality input into policy processes and bring fresh and wide-ranging expertise to decision-making that Africa can benefit from.

Youth participation must be meaningful for it to be effective, and this requires a rethinking of young people's participation beyond side events and tokenism, toward youth as partners and leaders in decision-making – for today and for the future

For more on the South African APRM Popular Sensitisation Project, see here: <https://saiaa.org.za/project/south-africa-aprm-popular-sensitisation-project/>

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About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's policy insights are situation analysis papers intended for policymakers, whether in government or business. They are designed to bridge the space between policy briefings and occasional papers.

Cover image

Group Portrait of young adult Zambians (SCShutter)

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