

The Future is Now: Supporting Children and Youth as Changemakers for Sustainable Cities

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Abstract

This article advocates recognizing and catalyzing children's participation in advancing sustainable development. This is not only because young people's actions for improving their communities are rarely taken seriously, but also because their status as minors makes their participation different from that of adults. The analysis is based on the experience of ANIA – a Peru-based civil society organization – and the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima in implementing institutional changes to engage children and youth as changemakers. This is to help them build a sustainable city, as well as to support their contributions and making them visible. This case demonstrates that participatory processes need to be adapted to target audiences. For young people, this means changing the mindset of public servants to overcome their bias and be open to diverse views. This includes designing processes that enable them to express their views in unique ways, while allowing adults to translate responses into policy implications, as well as defining clear pathways for action. Considering that which is accessible to children is likely accessible to everyone else, the article ultimately proposes that young people's participation and quality of life can be used as a powerful indicator of sustainable development.

Introduction

The youth tend to be perceived as 'the future', strongly implying that they are not full persons yet. From their position of perceived superiority, adults value young people for their potential and the adults they will become, rather than for who they already are. This negates the contributions that they already make to the world.

By the same token, children and young people's actions for the environment are not acknowledged as contributions to sustainable development. Their efforts are labeled as educational—a preparation for making 'real' impact when they grow up. Therefore, their civic engagement is rarely taken seriously. While there are many initiatives promoting young people's participation, they often do it in a paternalistic way, like practice or simulation to shape the 'leaders of the future' instead of engaging them as leaders of today. Others engage them superficially to tick the representation box, without actually incorporating their perspectives into policy development.

As a result, governments continue to see the (male) breadwinner adult as the standard citizen and design policies to meet their needsⁱ. This bias can also be identified in urban development as public spaces in cities are built around working adults' interests. These spaces are typically unsuitable for children to use or occupy without supervision and can sometimes even be harmful for their development. For example, prioritizing cars spaces significantly reduces children's mobilityⁱⁱ and increases air pollution. Both of these implications are more likely to cause health conditions in childrenⁱⁱⁱ.

A new approach is required to allow children and youth to become protagonists in public processes for sustainable development, and further be acknowledged as such. This entails empowering them to participate in policymaking while also recognizing the contributions they are already making. In other words, it is the adults' turn to sit at the children's table and start listening.

Engaging Children and Adolescents as Changemakers for the Sustainable Development of Their City

Joaquín Leguía, [Ashoka Fellow](#) and founder of [ANIA](#) (Association for Children and their Environment), a civil society organization based in Peru, has promoted this paradigm shift since 1995. Joaquín and his team developed methodologies to foster the meaningful participation of youth within their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. This could unleash their changemaking power through environmental conservation projects.

As a part of their efforts, ANIA partnered with Mayor Jorge Muñoz Wells of the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima and his team in 2020. The team was led by Luis Antonio Villanueva Gamarra, coordinator of the Citizen Participation program. Together, they enacted an ordinance that officially recognized contributions to environmental conservation and the district's wellbeing by children and youth. This ordinance approved in 2021. It established a commitment to ensuring that children and youth's interests are accounted for in participatory processes for sustainable development.

The initiative was built upon ANIA's prior experience implementing a similar ordinance with the municipal government of Alto Larán in 2016. This provided continuity to the work that Muñoz promoted during his eight years as Mayor of the Miraflores District. In 2011, his administration committed to the mission of "La Ciudad de los Niños" (The Children's City), an organization founded by Francesco Tonucci, a pedagogist and [Ashoka Senior Fellow](#).

They implemented structural changes to move away from adult-centric urban policy and management. This included a training program for public servants, representatives of key institutions, and the first Council for Children and Youth. Now, Muñoz and his team are working with ANIA and the young citizens of Lima to reform the province.

Designing Meaningful Surveys for Children and Youth

The process to implement the ordinance began with raising awareness amongst public servants. They were committed to listening to young people's perspective with open mindedness and incorporating them in their decisions. To this end, the government created Municipal Survey Councils to connect young people with officials and channel their requests to relevant departments.

Building on the enriching conversations that these spaces enabled, the government launched a public survey to understand children and youth's needs and contributions in different dimensions: social, educational, cultural, familial, environmental, and urban. The insights drawn from the survey will allow decision-makers to create concrete and relevant proposals to put the ordinance into action. The government is already reviewing the products and services it offers to children and youth so that once the survey ends, they can readily identify what can be leveraged or changed to address the needs that emerge.

The language for the survey was chosen carefully. This was because adults in the government need to be able to translate children's responses into policies. To that effect, the questions of the survey and the multiple-choice answers to these questions were co-designed with Children and Youth Committees established to advise and support the implementation of the ordinance. For instance, one of the questions was "How can adults help you?". Instead of adding response options pre-defined by an adult, the question was asked to the Committees and the options were generalized based on what young people said. This example illustrates the importance of adapting participation channels and mechanisms to the specific needs of target groups to effectively capture their perspective.

Through this effort, ANIA and the local government seek to understand what needs to be done to support children and young people in their changemaking. This expands into what the local government can do, and how they should involve younger stakeholders. To this effect, they plan to convene a broader, cross-sector group to discuss and analyze the results of the survey. They are also considering the creation of an advisory network to design and support the implementation plan for the ordinance. This advisory group would include schools, civil society organizations, leaders from the Ministry of Education, and other relevant parties, and could ensure continuity of the plan beyond the current municipal administration.

Another crucial aspect of the implementation plan for the ordinance is that related policies establish clear pathways to action. For example, as an organization committed to environmental conservation, ANIA emphasizes that any policies that seek to promote children and youth's agency in sustainability efforts (such as recycling) must ensure there is a specific process in place (e.g., an adapted waste collection process), so that their work leads to tangible results. Therefore, an important task for teams will be to interpret the responses of young people in terms of their policy implications. If the indicators show that very few children are recycling, this result will have to be contextualized to avoid misrepresenting the problem—rather than concluding that they need more environmental education (implying

that the responsibility lies squarely on them), it may be that children are missing adequate infrastructure and processes.

ANIA and the government plan to use the results from the survey to develop a tool to count young citizen's contributions towards their sustainable development targets. Continuing with the recycling example, whenever the government issues data on how much waste was recycled in Lima, they can show what proportion of that was done by young people.

While the project initially stemmed from Mayor Muñoz's political will and has been limited to one municipality, spearheading this new approach in the capital city creates a blueprint for other local governments across the country. ANIA's vision is that the national government establishes a nation-wide target for children and youth participation. The indicators they plan to develop will help authorities track and communicate progress transparently, while also enabling citizens to hold authorities accountable. This data can also be used to generate insights and best practices to replicate the experience in other countries.

Principles

ANIA's collaboration with the Municipality of Lima offers a good example of how to promote diversity in participatory governance. This is because it acknowledges children and adolescents as competent citizens who are capable of analyzing and voicing their needs to inform policies, as well as participate in their development to improve the city.

The following principles can be drawn from their work:

- 1) **Measure children and youth's participation as an indicator for quality of life in cities.** If a city's public spaces are accessible for children, it is highly likely that they will be accessible for everyone else. Therefore, how far children are able to engage in public life can be a powerful indicator to evaluate sustainable development.
- 2) **Cultivate empathy as a powerful strategy to embrace diversity.** Guaranteeing equal rights for all involves on one hand, changing social norms, and on the other, raising awareness within government institutions. Public servants need to be ready to understand and show solidarity for the feelings, experiences, and needs of vulnerable groups (such as children and youth) in order to effectively incorporate them into policy proposals and enforcement.
- 3) **Adapt participatory methodologies to the target audience.** People's different experiences mean that participatory methodologies cannot be the same for all. In the case of children and youth, it is essential to 'translate' processes to adapt to their ways of communicating and acting. This starts with designing questions that are appropriate to their level of comprehension, as well as being ready to accept responses that, although 'simple', convey the truth of their needs. The work then involves finding ways to turn this information into concrete policies.

- 4) **Create pathways for action.** Adults must create the necessary conditions for children and youth to exercise their citizenship and power as changemakers. If policies do not include clear pathways to implementation, they will remain empty words and lead to frustration. Failing to realize the democratic participation of young people would constitute a violation of the Convention for the Rights of Children ratified by most states; something Tonucci calls “living in illegality”.

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ⁱ Tonucci, Francesco, and Mario Merlino. 2004. *La Ciudad De Los Niños*. Madrid: Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez.

ⁱⁱ Tonucci, Francesco, and Antonella Rissotto. 2001. "Why Do We Need Children's Participation? The Importance Of Children's Participation In Changing The City". *Journal Of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 11 (6): 407-419. doi:10.1002/casp.641.

ⁱⁱⁱ Environmental Research Group. 2021. *London Health Burden of Current Air Pollution and Future Health Benefits of Mayoral Air Quality Policies*. London: Imperial College London. Accessed November 4, 2021. http://erg.ic.ac.uk/research/home/resources/ERG_ImperialCollegeLondon_HIA_AQ_LDN_11012021.pdf