

# *Pat Dolan*

## **Introduction**

Whereas Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) respectfully and appropriately highlights the value of participation of young people in society, very often the key issue of ‘youth involvement for what purpose?’ is overlooked. This paper outlines and explores how, through their civic engagement and intergenerational activities, youth can be enabled to be dialogue donors rather than just recipients and afforded real meaning to their involvement and participation in societies around the world.

This paper is one of a series of contributions to the United Nations and Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development international colloquium, held in Qatar in March 2011. Through a pragmatic illustration, it seeks to connect these key issues for young people in a grounded ‘non-jargonised’ real world fashion while still retaining attention to social scientific rigour. Following a brief description of youth civic engagement and action, the associated core benefits of better enlisted social support and capacity for youth to be resilient are highlighted. Three contexts and programme examples are then briefly illustrated. This is then connected to the purpose and process of intergenerational activity, dialogue and youth involvement. Finally and most importantly, we rear youth not just to their benefit or for us as their family memberships. We need to value young people today and not just for tomorrow because of the wider benefits they bring to civic society. This in sum is the core message of the paper.

## **Social Justice, Rights and Wellbeing through Youth Civic Engagement/Action**

Achievement of social justice in civic society requires that the voices of those absent or under-represented are amplified so that their concerns and rights as citizens are taken into account in policies and practices that impact on their quality of life and their ability to achieve their potential. This principle applies equally to youth as to adults. In Ireland and internationally voices of young people are under-represented in public discourse (Dolan, 2010; Flanagan, 2004). Moreover, young people are frequently misrepresented, particularly within media coverage, for example, sometimes being stereotyped as anti-social and a threat to community safety and stability. This is amplified in the case of young people who are marginalised and

therefore have been failed or underserved by systems and society and whose access to opportunity and appropriate supports is limited. This is stated not as a counterbalance to the simple fact that like adults, young people do and should have civic responsibilities.

Many factors contribute to the wellbeing and development of youth. Youth civic action is one of these, and is increasingly recognised as key in that it offers youth positive opportunities for their participation in local communities and wider society. Positive benefits which potentially can accrue from such engagement and action by youth include better resilience, enlisted social support, self-efficacy, confidence and practical skill development. As has been recently stressed “*youth civic engagement programs empower young people to play an active role in their communities’ development, while gaining the experience, knowledge, values and life skills necessary for success in careers, education and community life*” (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010: pg. iii).

In addition, civic action provides young people with opportunities to practice altruism, to develop awareness of their own strengths and potential, and to learn skills including planning and problem solving. To date intergenerational civic activity by youth has generally been untapped, for example, the potential of older people as mentors to youth and conveyors of wisdom and conversely youth as providers of practical help and protectors of their elders. Furthermore, civic engagement of youth enables personal gains for young people and for society in a holistic process including providing personal skill building opportunities for young people to practice civic action in real-time and access to a network of peers (Zaff et al., 2002). This has currency for youth and societies alike within and across countries.

### **Benefits of Civic Action: Social Support and Resilience Building for Youth**

Two key benefits towards cross-generational dialogue and involvement accrue from specific positive civic actions by youth either through altruism (acts of ‘good’ to others’) to meet social need or through a rights-based social justice peaceful quest for the betterment of self and others. Natural social support is key to a positive transition from adolescence to adulthood (acts of ‘justice’ for others). Sources of help in terms of who youth turn to for assistance, the types of practical and emotional assistance on offer and the quality of their networks are essential to young people in this process, and this assists their wellbeing (Coterell, 1996; Dolan, 2010). We all turn to family friends and neighbours as the first natural line of defence and we do so ahead of professionals - youth are no different to adults in this regard (Frydenberg and Lewis, 2000). This being the case, the civic engagement of young people ranging from community based charity work to youth club activity or social justice/cause led

action, enables new friendships and alliances often across the generations with which youth reciprocate social support. This is found internationally and across cultures to lead to better wellbeing and improved mental and physical health (Brugha, 1995).

Similarly and more practically, a capacity to be or become resilient in adolescence is in part founded on having personal protective factors such as strong family ties; reliable and close friendships and success in school or leisure and hobby activities as well as defined purpose and self-efficacy (Ungar, 2008). This said, social or political civic activity by youth can enable these protective factors to be present and positive factors can outweigh personal risk factors. So in sum, youth civic action can enable a connection for youth with family and community as well as bringing better social support and resilience. The following list captures this potential:

**For young people as individuals and their families:**

- Better enlisted social support to and from others which has a known connection to better wellbeing and mental health;
- Increased capacity to be resilient to stress by enabling existing or new protective factors;
- A young person's sense of self-efficacy enhanced and enabling their personal mastery, sense of belonging to others, fostered independence and capacity to be altruistic, focusing away from problems of self to the needs of others.

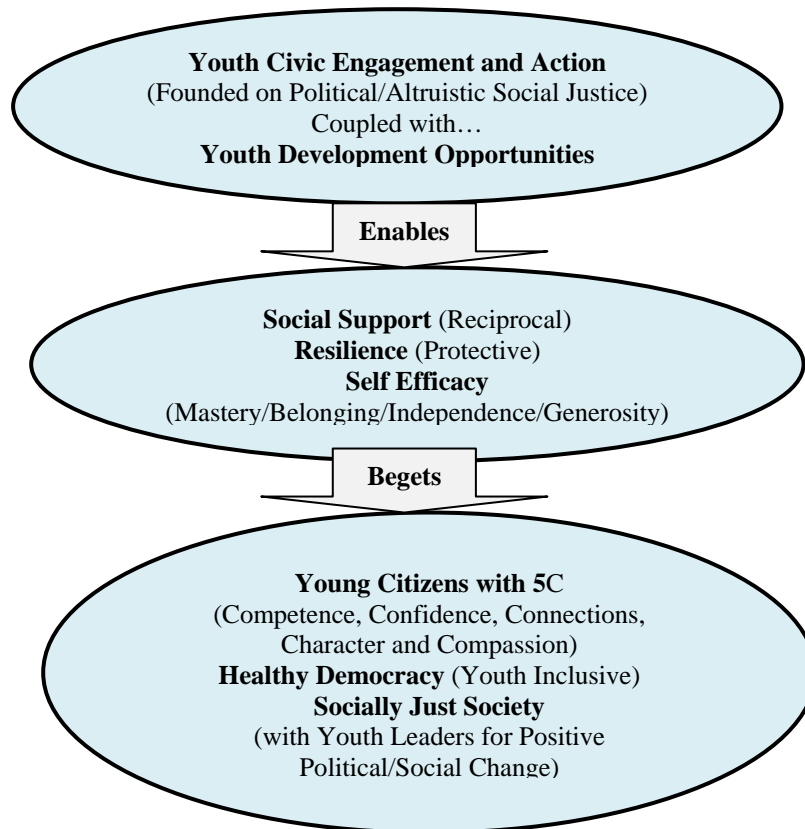
**Benefit for Communities and Civic Society**

Apart from personal benefit to young people, civic action can ultimately lead to benefit democracies in terms of both human and economic social capital, these include:

- Youth who contribute through verbal and action based dialogue to their local community in terms of meeting need;
- Young citizens who are creative, peace enablers, confident and caring helping to enable stronger democracies, which in turn can feed positive policy creation;
- Contributing to an incremental generational build up on positive change in society in part resultant from the inclusivity of youth and based on a model of social justice.

This is presented conceptually as a connect model in figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**



### **Portals Programmes and Evidence Based Criteria**

In order to build such coping capacity in youth and enable contributions from them, their having space to thrive in familial, school and/or community and society settings, are key. Such conditions include everything from connectedness to family, education systems and community organisations, to youth seeing themselves as inclusive and non-patronised members and real participants across generations. Three robust or very promising youth initiatives comprising a range of programmes that attest to this possibility and contain intergenerational components are briefly described as:

#### **1. Youth Mentoring**

Youth mentoring programmes have been in existence for over one hundred years and are well proven as low cost but effective support interventions to young people (Tierney et. al, 1995). Typically they include an adult who lives locally, is safe and reliable befriending a youth who is in need and through joint social or educational activities they exchange support. Programmes are either community or school based, mostly include volunteers from the local community, but can extend to family

mentors for examples aunts or uncles, and often take the form of peer mentoring particularly in school settings. On the basis of connecting generations youth mentoring has strong value and is associated with benefits such as better education outcomes, lower risk taking behaviours among young people and the creation of hopefulness in youth and adults. However, it should be noted that mentoring programmes often seek differing outcomes for youth in different countries which in itself raises questions for policy and practice.

## **2. Youth Leadership Programmes**

Youth leadership programmes, which include service to community and other citizenship initiatives, have been found to have strong resonance for young people and the younger and older generations they connect with (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010). Typically youth leadership include common goals and principles for youth such as engaging them to address crucial social needs, while also providing them with ways to build personal leadership skills, learn how to take better responsibility and make decisions. Furthermore, leadership programmes are associated with guiding youth towards self-management and associated techniques for team-building. Importantly such interventions enable youth to have better negotiation and cooperation skills (Flanagan 2004). From the perspective of intergenerational connectivity, youth leadership programmes are key as they positively expose youth to other generations in their community which are often non-familial contacts and reciprocally enable a more positive and realistic perception of youth and their contribution to other local citizens. It is argued here that youth leadership programmes act as key enablers and ‘lynchpins’ to ensuring youth dialogue and act as a core ‘vehicle’ for their involvement with other generations through the life course in their community and country. Importantly, in many communities youth are having less contact with older familial contacts such as grandparents, and intergenerational youth leadership programmes help retain this important connection for both generations.

## **3. Young Journalists (Youth as Researchers)**

By its nature adolescence is a time of experimentation and inquisitiveness (Coleman and Hendry, 2009) and although sometimes the teenage process contains ‘storm and stress’ for youth themselves and their parents or community, overall this inquisitiveness can and should be harnessed as human social capital with strong potential. Over recent years, the prospect of training and enabling youth as researchers and or as young journalists has been found to be positive not just in terms of having more robust research on youth by youth (Cammarota and Fine, in press) but also as an innovative new form of employment. In terms of enabling dialogue, it ensures that rather than having adults interpret the voice of youth – youth can do so

for and by themselves. Youth researchers uncover best ways to advance youth voice and participation and can from their distinct point of view distil ‘must know’ messages for adults (see for example the work of the Young Foundation in the UK, or Foróige in Ireland).

Such potential goes way beyond dialogue promotion and greater involvement of young people as core citizens. Just as youth have been found to be quick to act and support in a crisis such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Tsunami and the earthquake in Haiti, their potential as researchers and young journalists to offer solutions to global problems for example the world economic recession can be strong if listened to (UNESCO, 2009). The key concern is not their potential to engage in dialogue and participate as young researchers, but the speed of adult society (and sometimes researchers) to support them in doing so (Dolan, in press).

### **Intergenerational Youth Leadership – A Caveat to Consider**

It is not necessary for young people to be part of structured youth programmes to be civically involved in society. Our own research Centre recently undertook research on young carers in Ireland – a young carer being a child or young person under the age of 18 who provides or helps care for a family or household member (Fives et al., 2010). It is considered that 3% of the population aged between 0-17 in Ireland are young carers, which is reflective of the percentage of young carers in the UK, Australia and the United States (Becker, 2010). The percentage of young carers in countries in conflict and post conflict, and in countries with high levels of HIV/Aids is undoubtedly higher. These young people often forgo their time to socialise with their friends, join clubs, to take part in sports and extra curricular activities. At times they also miss periods in school to care for a family or household member with a care need, such as an illness or disability, or to take care of their siblings in a situation where their parents cannot do so. The civic involvement of their caring role is mostly overlooked. Yet their contribution to society is invaluable, albeit at times inappropriate, where the negative impacts on the young carer outweigh the positive. A recent paper by Kennan et al. (in press) examines the ‘hidden and overlooked’ nature of this caring role by youth.

### **Balancing Youth Programmes with Family Support and Cultural Connectivity and the Risks of Proven Models**

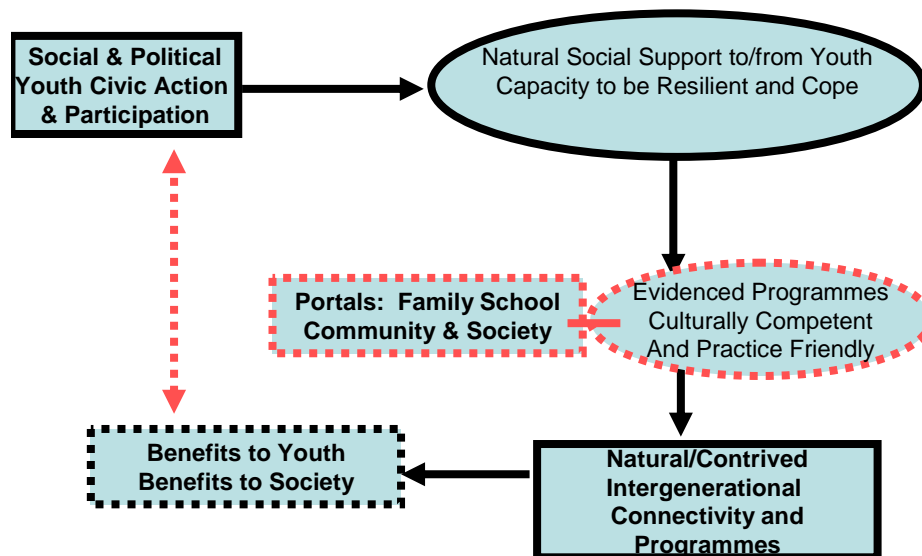
Finally, while the positive potential of youth programmes which enable dialogue and involvement of youth such as intergenerational civic action activities are key, inevitably they need more resourcing. Apart from capacity needs, three clear caveats need to remain in the minds of politicians, policymakers and service deliverers alike.

Firstly, youth civic action programmes have to be culturally competent, what works in one country is not necessarily transferable to another given the cultural nuances and norms which prevail. Secondly, the need to stick to fidelity in programme delivery in order to ensure they are provable needs to be challenged, as well as balanced by the need to remember that relationships between youth themselves across generations and those who work with and for them are key (Canavan et al., 2009). Natural and good organic practices in youth work are the ‘bread and butter’ of successful relationships and go before programmatic menus. Finally, retaining connectedness to the voice of youth in terms of what they hold as key, coupled with core family and community relationships are essential to successful naturally occurring adolescent transitions including aspects of dialogue. Just like a good diet for physical health, these factors need to be retained for emotional health and wellbeing in youth.

**Connecting Concepts and Ten Key Take Home Messages**

Finally, these elements that contribute to the task of enabling dialogue and better understanding and enhancement of youth are connected and presented graphically in Figure 2 below. It should also be stressed that these factors of civic action, social support, resilience through natural occurrence or contrived programmes are not the exhaustive list for assisting youth dialogue and intergenerational involvement, but they are in my view important.

**Figure 2**



## **Ten Key Messages**

1. Civic engagement of youth is key to enabling their dialogue and involvement in civic Society.
2. Youth civic action helps young people to be more resilient and assists them to cope as well as offering greater social support and wellbeing.
3. There are many untapped opportunities for connecting youth across generations, either through natural familial and community contacts or through formal programmes.
4. Regulated programmes for youth dialogue and involvement are plentiful and even for those that are evidence based they need to be counterbalanced to ensure they are young person led and practitioner friendly.
5. Youth Leadership, Mentoring and Youth as Researchers represent three useful portals to enable youth dialogue and participation, but are not the only ones.
6. It is essential that nuances of culture competency and contexts for civic engagement are considered in the internationalisation of methods to enable youth dialogue and involvement.
7. Youth dialogue and involvement across generations needs to be youth led and fit for purpose.
8. Youth are proven civic actors and willing to initiate, thus they can offer solutions to societal problems.
9. Youth dialogue and participation is not just a future investment – young people should be valued in their own right now, not as a prospective investment or as “adults in waiting”.
10. More specific contextualised programmes for intergenerational activities between youth and adults need to be developed, for example post-conflict rebuilding of communities; those that reciprocate wisdom and protection in localities; youth employment, and internships guided by adults with a range of modalities for youth as contributors to political and/or social good.



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