PUNE MODEL UNITED NATIONS

CONFERENCE 2017

Opinion Paper

"Widening the Democratic Space: the role of youth in public decision-making"

Intended for submission to the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law set up pursuant to A/HRC/RES/28/14

Who we are

Pune Model United Nations is a youth advocacy forum, whose main activity involves the hosting of Model United Nations conferences with an aim to provide a platform for youth to understand the processes of diplomacy and public policy-making.

We have been operating since 2014 in the city of Pune, India, and have successfully concluded three conferences. Our proceeds have gone to support United Nations programmes such as the World Food Programme and UNICEF. (Details of our involvement may be found at www.punemodelun.org)

This submission to the OHCHR is relevant to us because we are deeply involved in youth empowerment and youth advocacy. We would like to share our opinions based on our experiences as an organization through all these years, which we feel is relevant to the current theme, as has been set by Resolution 28/14.

Making the case for the inclusion of youth in public decision-making

The Indian youth is defined between the ages of 15 to 29. As can be seen, it is quite a wide band and is five years more than what the UN specifies as constituting 'youth'.

The minimum age required to become a Member of Parliament is 25.As such, the specified age of 25, as the minimum age for youth participating in parliamentary elections, is not a problem by itself. What we need to accept and realize is that politics, especially in a democracy, is a matter of perceptions. In most countries, age and experience seem to drive perceptions of the ideal politician. Political realities also give way to such a trend because representational politics requires a build-up of trust from constituents. Pursuing this trust build-up takes years, and therefore, the age difference is inevitable in politics.

The above stated fact would mean that youth representation in actual decision-making at the executive or legislative level may always remain lacking, unless the fundamental perception of politics changes to prefer youth at the decision-making level. Such a shift is rather unlikely because of the persistence of the belief that experience is most crucial to good decision-making.

The idea of larger numbers of youth at the decision-making level needs to be pursued to achieve a balance between more experienced members of the political class rather than to replace them completely. The enthusiasm, idealism and awareness of the youth needs to supplement the experience that comes from long careers in public service.

In countries like India, cultural norms and values place more deference and respect to elders. This may also have had an impact on how the youth are given opportunities when it comes to decision-making. It is a mutually-reinforcing system, where the youth may defer most authority to their elders and the elders dictate the space where youth may contribute. Unfortunately, when the older members of the political class are under misconceptions that the youth are not capable of taking over the reins of leadership, they find it difficult to cede that space for younger leadership.

The foray of Indian youth into politics is one fraught with a lot of obstacles. Most Indian political parties operate their own youth wings. Unfortunately, these wings may not always provide the most enabling environments for their members to indulge in public service. Most youth wings focus on early mobilization of cadres to support already existing big-wigs of the party or compete in student politics for influence. Youth wings have hardly helped set policy for youth or enable them to provide their inputs. It is usually a more top-down approach from the main party to the youth wing.

Youth around the world these days have shown their capacity to do inspiring things. This can be seen in the new entrepreneurial energies we see, or for that matter, their involvement in political movements. The Arab Spring, which was a movement spearheaded mostly by the youth, in order to solve the problems affecting the youth the most, is an appropriate example.

Often, on account of their enthusiasm and energy, we discount the fact that one of the biggest impacts of global challenges are borne by the youth themselves, including unemployment, lack of education, lack of opportunities, systemic violence and marginalization by the State and such other issues. We can no longer ignore that they bear the brunt of most of these issues by claiming that they have their lives ahead of them. Given that these years are crucial to their lives as the "defining decade", ignoring these problems and counting on the future to somewhere correct the problems is a major risk and a developmental disaster for all States.

The economic miracle that India is turning out to be is propelled by the country's youth through its boundless energy and enthusiasm. They are opening new start-ups, innovating new products, embracing entrepreneurship, and boosting the workforce like none other. They have also been at the forefront of the political and social upheavals of the country, much like their Tunisian, Egyptian or Yemeni counterparts in the Arab Spring. Their involvement in 2011 in a large-scale anti-corruption movement was testimony to this very fact.

They have embraced social media and technology to become vocal change-makers in their own right, running several influential blogs, being part of advocacy groups and platforms, mobilizing support for various initiatives and all other avenues where they feel they can contribute in a meaningful way. All this goes on to show that Indian youth definitely have the potential to influence and analyze policy decisions that affect them and that their opinion should definitely count.

Indian youth, in the truest sense of democracy, are not shy from discussing very controversial topics such as censorship or rights of sexual minorities, some of these subjects being extremely sensitive. Their openness about the issues which need to be talked about, reflects a certain maturity required for a healthy democracy to operate.

In our experience as an organization, where we provide a platform for the youth to express their awareness of public policy and diplomacy, we have had some very surprising insights on how the youth think. Of course, while most of their deliberations come with a certain idealism, their clarity on the details and their foresight into policy for many decades ahead is just a sight to see. On our platform, spanning three years, we have discussed a lot of topics, most of which are actual United Nations agendas, and it is clear that they have a very good idea on how to solve the greatest challenges of our time.

They express their opinions without the cynicism we see in more seasoned politicians and policy-makers. This idealism is often backed with clear-cut goals and plans to go about implementing and achieving them. This is true from what we have seen not only on our platform, but similar platforms throughout the country in the form of other Model United Nations conferences, youth parliaments and the like. Further evidence of this can be seen in the various forms of expression on policies, on blogs or on social media. Thus, we would like to put an end to any perceptions that the youth are not capable to handle the rigors of public life and decision-making.

Recommendations

First of all, the age bracket which constitutes 'youth' needs to be standardized across the globe. We are aware that this is also a matter of debate amongst various academics and experts due to psycho-social contexts that differ across countries. However, it remains important that we have a consistency in the age-range, since the beneficiaries of policies regarding youth have to be defined, for programmes to be successful and to reduce wastage.

Secondly, "Human Rights of Youth" needs to be a proper agenda item discussed by Member State representatives. It needs to be added as a supplement to already existing human rights instruments, and emphasize upon the civil and political rights of the youth and the need for Member States to start incorporating them into more arenas of civil life. There should be a more comprehensive discussion on a charter for youth rights and their scope. Only when the rights are established on paper, will the Member States consider amending their political systems to incorporate youth-friendly policies. It would be most desirable that the Honorable Secretary-General of the United Nations would work towards including "Human Rights of Youth" as an agenda item in the General Assembly when they meet this September.

We need to recognize that youth policies cannot be dictated from a top-down approach where States set policies for the youth and the youth merely follow them. Any policies about the youth need to have inputs from the youth themselves to be effective. The youth understands the current generation the best. Given that the issues faced by the youth now are very different from those faced by the youth in earlier times, it would be wise for the youth themselves to analyze problems and come up with solutions that can be considered by our policy-makers.

Thirdly, while it is not within the direct mandate of any of the bodies of the United Nations to dictate to political parties on their policies, we must recognize that political parties have a large bearing on inclusivity of the political process. Just as how they are coming to recognize the need to have more diversity in terms of gender, they also need to take measures to be more inclusive of the youth. Youth wings must turn from becoming mere instruments of the propagation of the party to a really inclusive forum of decision-making. Youth wing leaders must be made a part of major discussions and decisions that the party takes internally.

Youth members must have certain terms or stints in the party's internal deliberative cells in the form of internships or assignments, so that their views can be incorporated in the larger apparatus. This requires that political parties retrospect their internal democracy and bring in larger reforms for more inclusion and representation. Perhaps, government accountability offices as well as election regulatory authorities could start including a new metric in their reports on political parties that would highlight age disparities, representation of the youth in internal policy-making and the like.

Fourth, States must move to a more evidence-based public policy approach. This requires the input of a lot of data and statistics, which is a tool that favors the youth. Where the structural systems and tools themselves favor the youth, they will stand to benefit and their inputs will be important for their elder counter-parts to consider.

Fifth, Member States as well as intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations need to support and encourage platforms such as Model United Nations clubs, youth parliaments, debating forums, policy think-tanks and all other avenues where the youth are able to express their views and contribute to the grand exercise of discussion and deliberation. When we say support, we do not necessarily mean the provision of financial assistance as it would be rather impractical to do so, but we are talking about the provision of information and such other matters.

To quote an example, the United Nations Information Centre for India and Bhutan has been a partner with us since our inception and has provided us with due recognition as well as advice from time to time. It is moral and informational support like this that has helped a youth advocacy platform like ours to thrive over the years and this has come from an inter-governmental agency.

On this note, we also find it appropriate that the Honorable Secretary-General of the United Nations would make available to the public a report regarding the allocation of funds from the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) to programmes which are specifically directed towards the inculcation of youth in politics.

We would like to highlight certain trends, especially in India, that show that the youth are also being recognized as partners in the political and public-policy making process.

The PRS Legislative Research hosts a fellowship programme called LAMP (Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament) where chosen youth candidates assist the Members of Parliament in their legislative duties. This has been known to be a very successful programme and is highly sought after by a lot of young people. This gives them mentorship and the skills that they can then take forward. This is not to mention the fact that the assistance provided would come a youthful touch, which would benefit public policy immensely.

The State of Haryana has started a programme called the Chief Minister's Good Governance Associates, which appoints young associates to help implement various projects of the Chief Minister in all twenty one districts of Haryana. They would work alongside the state machinery and supplement it to bolster the delivery of the services of the state and deliver upon economic and social development.

Similar trends around the world need to be collated, discussed and provided as a model for Member States and other organizations to follow in order to truly replicate their successes and achieve the true purpose of widening the space for the youth in decision-making.

By our own admission, we would accept that implementing these recommendations require that there be certain pre-existing conditions such as a democratic framework and institutions that safeguard essential processes of democracy. However, recent trends would indicate that the world in increasingly adopting democracy as a form of government with already existing democracies trying to bolster their institutional strength. Any efforts for youth engagement in public decision-making needs to be encouraged as broader efforts of the promotion of democracy which has been the policy of the United Nations since its inception.

In conclusion, Pune Model United Nations has always felt that the essence of democracy lies in inclusivity, and that inclusivity needs to extend to its youth when it comes to decision-making and the framing of policies. It is our hope that these recommendations would be fruitful to any discussion that the OHCHR would indulge in concerning this issue.

This opinion paper was written by Ashwath Komath on behalf of the Secretariat of Pune Model United Nations. For any clarifications, please contact ashwathkomath.pmun@gmail.com or visit us at www.punemodelun.org