



## Report

# “Our Future is Where the Heart is”: How Futures Literacy Can Enhance Youth Voice and the Case of Youth Policy Development in Laos

Shermon Cruz<sup>1</sup>, Adam Sharpe<sup>2</sup>, David Young<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chair, Association of Professional Futurists; Co-Founder, Philippine Futures Thinking Society

<sup>2</sup> Founder, Futurely

<sup>3</sup> Youth Specialist, UNESCO Bangkok

## Abstract

*Young people all over the world have the tremendous potential (and desire) for enacting positive and sustainable changes in their communities. Nowhere is this truer than in the Asia Pacific region, where over 60% of the global youth population resides (ESCAP, 2015). Within this region, national youth policies and programs have the potential of providing spaces and opportunities for the region’s young people to contribute to decisions that will ultimately impact them. In theory, those that are both inclusive and participatory allow for youth groups from all backgrounds to meaningfully engage with leaders at local and national levels. Despite their large numbers, however, youth are often excluded from any meaningful involvement in the development of such policies. While lack of political will amongst policymakers can be cited as a reason for this challenge, it is also the case that many leaders believe that youth are without the knowledge and skills needed to effectively contribute to any major decision-making processes. Futures literacy, the discipline that develops the ability of individuals and groups to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do, is one potential way of addressing this issue. Using the case study example of a UNESCO-supported youth policy development workshop in Laos in 2018, this article explores how futures methods and tools can help facilitate youth participation in decision-making processes, while effectively enhancing their skills and abilities to do so more effectively. At the same time, this article provides recommendations for refining and enhancing these tools for future applications in youth development contexts in Southeast Asia.*

## Keywords

Youth, futures literacy, youth policy, Laos, participation

## Participatory & Inclusive Youth Policy: Opportunities and Challenges

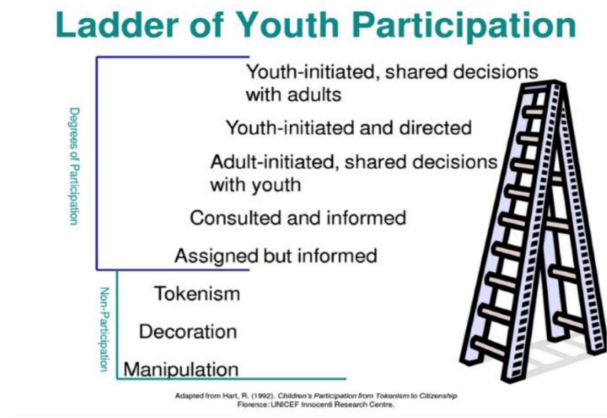
Youth policies, whether they are a country’s framework for addressing the concerns of young people (typically ages 15-30), or a specific organization’s policy for their work relating to youth, can provide excellent opportunities for youth to meaningfully engage with decision-makers and address issues impacting themselves and others like them. If done inclusively, youth policies can also provide young people from traditionally marginalized backgrounds (e.g. LGBTQI, disabled, indigenous, out-of-school) with the chance to make their voices heard ([American Youth Policy Form, 2022](#)) ([Baku Commitment, 2014](#)) ([M. Amin, 2011](#)).

Despite their potential for positive change, however, it is very common for governments to develop a youth policy without any significant consultation or involvement with youth. In August 2014, UNDP released a report entitled *Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and Southeast Asia*, which highlighted the general attitudes felt by youth throughout the Asia Pacific towards civic engagement and participation. Despite the fact that youth are the leaders of the future and will surely be impacted by the policies made by government officials today, the report revealed that throughout the region, youth have yet to become equal participants in political processes compared to older generations and have yet to fully realize their potential role as democratic citizens (UNDP, 2014).

Involving youth in the development of youth policies (and any youth program, for that matter) is critical for its  
E-mail: [da.young@unesco.org](mailto:da.young@unesco.org) (D. Young); [adam@futurely.online](mailto:adam@futurely.online) (A. Sharpe); [shermon@engagedforesight.net](mailto:shermon@engagedforesight.net) (S. Cruz)

success. It should come as no surprise that youth have the strongest understanding of their needs and concerns. If given a platform, they will provide valuable knowledge and ideas that will strengthen a policy that is for them. Furthermore, if they have knowledge about the policy, as well as ownership, they will more actively work to implement it.

These ideas have been captured by various theoretical participation models, most notably *Hart's Ladder of Participation* (see Figure 1). In this model, youth actively working together with adults to make decisions is seen as *meaningful participation*, whereas consultation with youth without seriously considering their inputs is referred to as *tokenism*.



**Fig. 1:** Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992)

While numerous policymakers and organizations working on youth issues are certainly aware of participatory models such as *Hart's Ladder*, many have failed to move beyond tokenism and achieve meaningful youth engagement. One reason for this is certainly political will. Governments all over Southeast Asia and beyond have restrictive spaces for civic engagement and dialogue. The lack of trust by young people towards their governments and traditional electoral processes found in UNDP's 2014 *Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and Southeast Asia* provide further evidence of this phenomenon.

Another reason, and one that will be explored more in this article, is that because of their age and perceived lack of experience, youth do not have the knowledge or capabilities to influence or make decisions. A 2012 article published by Rhys Farthing in the journal *Youth and Policy* describes this "conservative critique" of youth participation. "The conservative critique suggests that if young people are limited in what they can know or understand, it is not appropriate to seek their input in decisions that affect them before they are old enough . . . Rather it is more appropriate to seek expert knowledge to guide these decisions until such time as young people grow into rational, fully evolved adults" (Farthing, 2012). In other words, opportunities for youth to meaningfully engage with decision makers are often hindered by their perceived inability to make effective ones.

In countering the conservative critique described by Farthing, numerous youth development practitioners and scholars have emphasized the importance of empowering youth voices through capacity building over the past few decades. This emphasis is encapsulated by a 2003 article published in *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice, and Research*, in which the argument is made that "authentic youth engagement requires that young people be given the time and space to develop the skills they need to participate effectively," and that the assumption that young people are ready to meaningfully contribute if only given access to the right spaces is false (O'Donoghue, J., Kirshner, B., and McLaughlin M.W., 2003).

Following this school of thought, government entities in countries such as New Zealand and Ireland, as well as international and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN DESA, UNESCO, OECD, the European Union, have developed toolkits and guidelines stressing that effective youth policies can only be produced with youth who have the knowledge to develop such policies. Taking this theory one step further, organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, and UNESCO have focused on increasing the ability of young people to research and

produce evidence on the issues that matter to them, so that they might better advocate for their causes (see UNESCO's *Youth as Researchers COVID-19 Response Programme*, which was implemented between 2020 and 2021).

For those who wish to engage youth in the design, development, and implementation of their programs and policies, the answer isn't as simple as asking a young person's opinion. Investments must be made in the knowledge and skills of young people, particularly in their ability to come up with policy recommendations and priorities, as well as help generate the evidence for informing such recommendations.

### **Futures Literacy as a tool for Policy Development and Enhancing Youth Voices in Decision-Making Processes**

The challenge and imperative of creating policies that are fair to present and future generations has long been recognized in both indigenous and contemporary policy spaces. The Seventh Generation Principle, for example, is based on an ancient Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) indigenous philosophy that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. Fast forward 400 years, and Wales has its own Future Generations Commissioner empowered by legislation that provides a legal obligation to improve social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being today and tomorrow through the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. Intergenerational fairness frameworks have also been made available by the School of International Futures to support policy makers in this endeavor. While these initiatives appear to be the exception and not the rule, the question of how to create policy today to make way for a better future for the next generation is increasingly being raised, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 and in the face of rapid economic, ecological, demographic, and geopolitical change.

One of the ways in which such investments are being made, particularly in policy visioning, is through *futures literacy*. Futures thinking and foresight aim to explore, analyze, and articulate changes 5-50 years (and beyond) into the future, separating it from other more traditional analytical and planning tools used by governments, corporations and individuals. The purpose of foresight in governance, according to Leon S. Fuerth, "is to enhance the ability of decision-makers to engage and shape events at a longer range and, therefore, to the best advantage of the citizens they serve" (Fuerth, 2009).

There are numerous functions of foresight in policy-making: (1) Informing policy by generating insights regarding the dynamics of change, surfacing emerging issues, creating options and new opportunities; (2) Facilitating policy implementation by building the capacity for change within a given policy field, increasing awareness of current and future challenges, strengthening networks and co-creating shared visions; (3) Supporting policy definition by jointly translating outcomes from collective processes into specific options for implementation; (4) Reconfiguring the policy system itself so that it is more adept at addressing long-term challenges; (5) Symbolic function communicating to the public that policy is based on rational information; and lastly (6) Embedding participation in policy-making by facilitating inclusion of civil society, and in this case youth, in the policy making process, thereby increasing transparency and legitimacy (Da Costa, Olivier & Warnke, Philine & Cagnin, Cristiano & Scapolo, Fabiana, 2008).

Participation should not be seen merely as a function of foresight, but a critical success factor (Inayatullah, 2015). The same can be said for meaningful youth engagement in policymaking. Integrating various perspectives and contradictions ensures that "culture does not eat strategy for breakfast" when it comes to policy implementation. Moreover, all stakeholders in a society, whether intentionally or not, impact the future. Historical events shape generations, and generations shape historical events (Strauss and Howe, 1992). Thus, understanding how any stakeholder group sees the future is crucial to enhancing our own self-awareness, and in turn our anticipatory capacity. Conversely, excluding stakeholders from policy making processes inevitably results in blind spots.

By truly valuing the perspectives of diverse young people as a critical success factor in effective policy making, we can embrace inclusion and reject tokenism, thereby deterring international organizations from falling into the familiar trap of training young people to think and act like adults. On the contrary, let youth be youth! By heeding this mantra, futures thinking, and foresight can level the playing field in policy spaces and help create a challenging collaborative environment that intergenerational groups can thrive in (Sharpe & Lucht, 2021).

Aside from facilitating youth participation in policymaking, inclusion in foresight processes may also provide much-needed capacity development opportunities for youth. There is empirical evidence that futures and foresight taught in education leads to statistically higher performance in two dimensions crucial for effective policy making, namely transdisciplinary systems thinking and openness to alternatives. Additionally, learners are more optimistic about the future (Kuo-Hua Chen, 2020). It is therefore fair to assume that youth inclusion in policy spaces powered by futures and foresight may result in participants growing empowered, thereby enhancing project quality and policy outcomes.

It is against this backdrop that the case for futures literacy (Miller, 2018) can be made with gusto, defined by UNESCO as a universal capability or skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur. Framed in this way, futures literacy is akin to reading and writing literacy, for it is a skill everyone can and should acquire.

While futures and foresight has traditionally been the preserve of governmental, nongovernmental, and corporate policy makers, anticipating the future can no longer be a luxury benefiting those in ivory towers, but a critical 21st century skill for us all to survive in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. This is hard to dispute in a post-COVID world which has catalyzed what Heinonen terms a “Tsunami of foresight” (Heinonen, 2020). While a Tsunami as a metaphor implies something to fear, perhaps a rising tide that raises all boats is more apt. The impact of the pandemic on young people psychologically and economically has been “systematic, deep and disproportionate” leaving youth around the world deeply concerned about the future and their place within it (ILO, 2020).

How might policy makers who have traditionally excluded youth from the decision-making table respond? The motivation for preventing youth inclusion in decision making structures should provide the motivation for their dismantling, in that young people tend not to share the ethos of the global system (Gidley, 2002). They are unanchored to the weights of history for they had no part in their once (presumably) rightful establishment in the very first place. Therefore, in any attempt to transform policy, as opposed to simply maintaining the status quo, the ideas and visions of youth must be seen as part of creating a new story (Bussey, 2002).

### **Case Study: Developing Youth Policy in Laos through Futures Literacy**

In June 2018, UNESCO was invited by UNFPA Laos and the Lao People’s Revolutionary Youth Union (LYU) to help support in the development of Laos’ very first national youth policy. While recognizing the critical role youth play in the design, development, and implementation of policies that will ultimately impact them, it was also understood that young people in Laos and elsewhere may lack the knowledge and skills needed for effectively contributing to such decision-making processes. With this in mind, UNESCO, together with Mr. Shermon Cruz of the Philippines Futures Thinking Society, conducted a two-day workshop on futures literacy to help support youth in Laos towards coming up with recommendations and priorities for their country’s future youth policy. The workshop took place from 13-14 June 2018 in Vientiane Capital.



**Fig. 2:** Workshop participants with banner for Training on Youth Policy Development, Data Analysis and Presentation in Lao PDR in background. Photo Credit: David Young

To meet the objectives of the workshop, the engaged foresight approach (EF), UNESCO Futures Literacy and some elements of the Six Pillars of Futures Thinking method were employed. Blending these frameworks enabled the team to design a solutions-centric and simulation driven approach to futures thinking. Through creative action learning via prototypes, participants created a model and storified their envisioned futures, which they later translated into written policy priorities and recommendations.

*Session 1: Understanding the Current Realities (or trends) for Youth in Laos*

As a first step, participants were divided into five groups to match the five policy themes selected by the Lao Youth Union. After introducing them to the concept of futures literacy and visioning, participants were asked to remember the past; unpack the present using experiential questioning and shared history anticipatory tools. Questions discussed and explored were: 1) What is the current reality? 2) What are the challenges? (i.e., the barriers, what frustrates them, what are they struggling with? 3) What are our needs? The various groups were also asked to explore the causes of the current realities.

An example of the discussion by the “Health” group regarding current realities is provided in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Current Realities of “Health Group”

<b>Current Reality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health services and health care not up to date and don’t cover vulnerable groups like LGBTQI</li> <li>• Youth health centers only exist in Vientiane Capital</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health services are not modern</li> <li>• There are not enough “youth friendly” services/facilities</li> <li>• Mental health services are underfunded; there is a lack of mental health facilities in Laos</li> <li>• Lack of counselling centers and encouragement; strong peer influence that leads to drug use</li> </ul>
<b>Causes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of youth focus on existing health programs</li> <li>• Widespread use of drugs amongst young people in the city including rural settings is an increasing concern</li> </ul>

- Lack of mental and youth supportive health programs
- Lack of access to existing programs.
- Lack of information,
- Early pregnancy is not seen as unusual in the rural area

#### Needs

- Mental health facilities and counselling support
- Youth-friendly services
- Inclusion and provision of health and mental services for LGBTI youth
- Support and early intervention to prevent early pregnancy and drug addiction

### *Session 2: Questioning the Default Futures*

Once the participants had finished discussing the current realities of youth in Laos, the groups envisioned the “default” future, or the trajectory of the future in 30 years based on the current trends identified. This was done using the “futures wheels analysis” model.



**Fig. 3:** Participants map the trajectory of the future in 30 years based on current trends using “futures wheels analysis.” Photo Credit: David Young.

Some of the major “default” futures identified by the participants included:

1. Increased incidence/cases of mental depression and suicide amongst young people
2. Low skilled youth or hardly employable graduates
3. Increased migration, criminality, theft, substance abuse and human/drug trafficking
4. Intergenerational poverty – poverty is passed from one generation to the next
5. Increased cases/incidence of STDs and related diseases
6. Increased cases/incidence of early pregnancy potentially resulting in more cases of neglected/unprotected children and persons with disabilities (PWDs)

### *Session 3: Envisioning Alternatives*

During the third session, the participants were asked to rephrase the problems that they identified earlier as “how might we questions.” By turning the problems into questions, participants could find possible solutions.

An example of this can be seen in the “Employment” group’s discussion in Table 2 below:

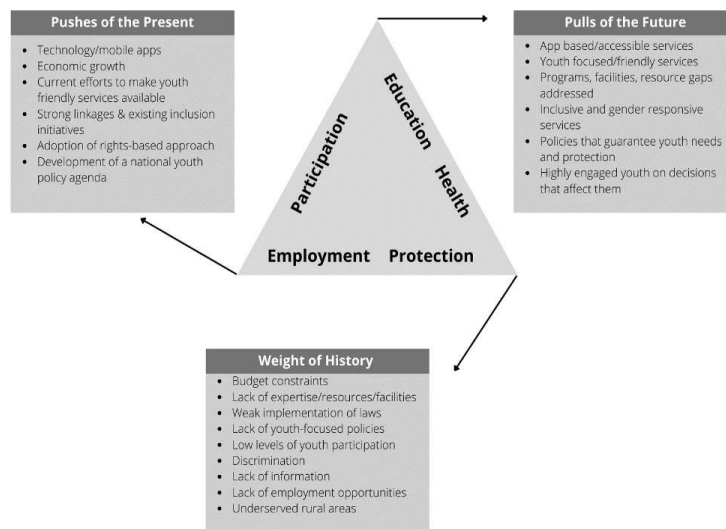
**Table 2:** “How Might We...?” Discussion of “Employment Group

<b>“How might we..?”</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might we make employment more easily accessible for young people?</li> </ul>
<b>Possible Solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create more vocational skills opportunities so that young people can have small jobs to occupy themselves</li> <li>• Develop youth counseling and vocational training center; encourage young people to get information on jobs</li> <li>• Create and encourage companies to create quota for young graduates</li> </ul>

*Session 4: Mapping the weight, pushes and pulls of the Futures of Laos’ Youth*

After thinking about the default future and ways in which to challenge it, participants were asked to create a “futures triangle.” The aim of this activity was for them to identify the “pulls” (aspirations/preferred visions for the future), “pushes” (current trends and opportunities to push them towards their aspirations) and “weight of history” (the forces preventing the aspirations from being realized).

The futures triangle developed by each of the groups is presented in Figure 4 below:



**Fig. 4:** Futures Triangle of Workshop Participants:

*Session 5: Imagining and Modeling the Preferred Futures of Laos’ Youth*

On the final day of the workshop, participants were asked to create models that visualized their preferred futures of health, education, participation, employment, and protection in Laos. Leveraging from their outputs of the previous futures literacy sessions, participants were given guiding questions to facilitate conversation, such as *what do we want the future to be like, what is your plausible preferred future?*



**Fig. 5:** Workshop Participants create models of their preferred futures. Photo Credit: David Young.

The prototypes allowed participants and facilitators to test the viability and feasibility of their output, assumptions, ideas, and strategies. Through design prototyping participants could demonstrate the potentials of their envisioned futures.



Several examples of the groups’ preferred futures as well as their models can be seen in Figure 6 below:




Themes	Preferred Futures	Prototypes
<p><b>Participation</b></p>	<p><b><i>Playground for Inclusion aka Playground for Kids:</i></b> A future scenario where young people in the rural areas are participating in village or community decision-making. This is a future where young people can freely speak up, listen, and share their thoughts, and where where village elders and leaders acknowledge the value of their ideas and opinions.</p>	
<p><b>Health</b></p>	<p><b><i>Happy Health, Easy App:</i></b> A future where mobile application-based health care access and services are available, catering the needs of young people in Laos. The app can be downloaded/available on different platforms’ (i.e. smartphone, iWatch, tablet, etc.). The health app guarantees health information, confidentiality, and security and GPS locator allows young people to find doctors and clinicians nearby and quick.</p>	
<p><b>Employment</b></p>	<p><b><i>Life is in your finger – Just Click!</i></b> An employment future in Laos where employment information access and opportunities are available via the Just Click! App. The mobile app linked to a job listing portal enables inclusive recruitment providing job opportunities and skills training to young people with disability, the vulnerable and disadvantaged people.</p>	

Fig. 6: Preferred Futures Prototypes of Workshop Participants.

### Session 6: Policy Prioritization and Visioning

The workshop concluded with a session on developing policy priorities, followed by an activity that gave participants an opportunity to articulate the visions they modeled in their prototypes into written visions for the youth policy, as well as write several priorities that matched with their visions. These visions and priorities would be presented to the Lao Youth Union during the youth policy development consultation meetings held by ministry and government officials later that year.

The work of the “Employment” group provides a clear example of this work and is provided in Table 3 below:

**Table 3:** Vision and Policy Priorities of “Employment Group”

<b>Step 1:</b> Preferred Futures Prototype	A mobile application for young people to find jobs easily and get more details about work.
<b>Step 2:</b> Purpose of Prototype	Reduction of unemployment amongst young people.
<b>Step 3:</b> Vision	All youth in Laos, regardless of gender, should have the right to access details on employment opportunities and to be able to receive professional advice on saving money or time to outreach the work.
<b>Step 4:</b> Priorities	All youth have access to employment advisers  All youth in the high school have knowledge and details of employment opportunities before they graduate.  All the youth understand and recognize the importance of gender equality in the workplace.

### Aftermath and Reflection

In late August, several months after the workshop, the Lao Youth Union organized a high-level meeting/consultation with relevant government and ministry officials to review and revise the draft youth policy that had been written. All the youth who had attended the futures literacy workshop were invited to attend this consultation and were provided with opportunities to discuss the draft policy and their recommendations with the ministry officials. At the same time, since many of these youth had been involved in conducting research on the needs and concerns of vulnerable youth in Laos (through a previous workshop conducted by UNESCO), they also used the space provided by the consultation to present the results of their studies. For several of the groups, particularly the LGBTQI group, this was the first opportunity for them to speak face-to-face with policymakers. A little over two years later, in December 2020, the *First National Youth Development Strategy for Laos* was officially endorsed by the country’s prime minister, and launched in June 2021 (UNFPA, 2021).

While the final youth policy document acknowledges the active role that the young workshop participants played in its development, not all their recommendations made it into the final policy. For example, during the workshop, the group focused on employment recommended increasing the availability of information on employment opportunities and training. The need for training young people is highlighted as a strategic directive in the policy, while access to information is not mentioned at all (Lao Youth Union, 2021).

The primary goal of the workshop’s organizers was always to build the capacity of the young participants in articulating a vision for their country’s youth, and to provide them with a space/opportunity to share that vision. The inclusion of these visions and recommendations in the final policy was always an ideal, but never an expectation. Given its tangible and intangible outcomes, the entire process was in many ways a success.

At the same time, however, with these successes also came several major challenges that was worth discussing. The process through which the participants were able to get from “Point A” to “Point B” was not without its obstacles. In preparing for the training in Laos, very little was done by the facilitators to completely understand the nuances of the various youth participants, which included members of the LGBTQI community, as well as ethnic minorities. This was largely due to the limited timing and budgetary constraints of the workshop and its facilitators. Moreover, difficulties were faced by the participants when they tried to translate their visualizations of the preferred future (prototype models) into policy recommendations and visions that could be better understood by their country’s leaders. In other words, while they were able to present what they wanted for their country’s future, they found it difficult to explain it as a possible policy.

Considering the successes and challenges discussed above, several key insights and recommendations can be made for the application of futures literacy as a tool for empowering youth in Southeast Asia. First, even within relatively restrictive environments where critical thinking is discouraged, the methodologies and tools used by futurists have the fantastic potential of encouraging forward thinking and visioning amongst young people, while at the same time enhancing their abilities to analyze and understand the consequences of decisions made today. The ability of the young participants to successfully envision a preferred future speaks volumes about the strengths of the methodology itself.

Second, the question of how to encourage creative thinking and facilitate transdisciplinary thinking, while also ensuring that participants stay focused on the goal (i.e., coming up with policy recommendations and visions), is a critical one to answer. On the one hand, a futurist facilitator may risk interfering or influencing the thought process of a young participant; on the other hand, that same participant might be completely lost without any guidance or understanding of the activity’s intended purpose. Within the context of Laos and other similar countries throughout the region, where rote learning is encouraged over creative and critical thinking, this issue takes on even greater importance.

Third, futures literacy trainings for young people, as with any other programs and trainings, must be adapted to their abilities and context. Therefore, future workshops and trainings of a similar nature might take the approach of not only translating its content, but also actively engaging with local youth stakeholders (i.e., UN agencies, NGOs, universities) in its design and development.

## Conclusion

The ideas and voices that young people can bring to the decision-making table are critical for the success of policies and programs that are targeting them. This is especially true in Southeast Asia, where many of the countries within the region boast significantly higher youth populations. However, while inviting a handful of the country’s brightest and most articulate youth superstars to a high-level meeting may yield some interesting insights, it will not result in a policy or program that effectively addresses the needs and concerns of the entire youth population. Quite the opposite, in fact. As Rodger Hart argued in the same publication where his *Ladder of Participation* was first presented, “articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent . . . programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability.” (Hart, 1992).

This article has set out to emphasize the importance of participatory and inclusive youth policies in providing spaces and opportunities for youth empowerment, while at the same time examining the common barriers that young people and youth development specialists face in achieving such empowerment. For those who seriously wish to engage youth in future decisions, investments must be made in their knowledge to do so. Rather than dismissing youth as incapable of making informed decisions regarding their own futures, we must actively encourage and foster the enthusiasm that many have shown in recent years.

With its emphasis on equal participation of all stakeholders involved in a process, as well as its focus on building their capacity to make creative but informed decisions, futures literacy can serve as a strong vehicle not only for empowering young people, but also facilitating the kind of partnerships needed for developing a successful and effective policy.

In the case of Laos, a relatively restrictive society where the formal education system discourages critical thinking and younger generations are taught unflinching deference to their elders, futures literacy prepared a group of young people to envision more sustainable futures for youth that would ultimately be considered by their country's leaders.

At the same time, the benefits of building futures literacy among Laos' youth go far beyond their capacity to prescribe nuanced and out-of-the-box policy recommendations to then be accepted or rejected by those in power. The recognition that our images of the future shape our present reality can bring back agency to a generation growing up in a deeply uncertain and complex world. Their idealism and vision, values the adult world has lost touch with, is needed in policy making spaces and beyond.

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