

Report of the YMCA / DDP Youth Imbizo

Date : 19th -22nd of September 2008

Venue : High Over Wild-life Sanctuary

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The YMCA in collaboration with the DDP convened a youth Imbizo to engage the youth on issues of development and governance. Young people are arguably the most affected by the social calamities that plague our country, like high unemployment, underemployment, HIV/AIDS. More harrowing, they are generally marginalized from decisions affecting them, or even worse, lack information about their right to participate in public affairs. This has fuelled a ubiquitous culture of passive citizenship amongst the youth. The main purpose of the workshop was thus to assess how young people engage in public affairs.

Day one:

The first order of business was to familiarize all participants with the programmes and activities of YMCA and DDP.

Expectations

Some of the expectations from the participants were:

- Gaining knowledge from our partners as to how projects and programs can be implemented
- Finding answers to the questions of how the youth of KwaZulu Natal can work beyond party politics to achieve over-all empowerment and development
- how can we build social and political consciousness amongst young people
- Gather information as to whether we are subjects or citizens or how we (the youth) can become active citizens
- Understanding the structure of the YMCA as well as its principles
- Understanding the responsibilities attributed to citizenship.

Day Two-Three

Ibrahim Steyn's Presentation

Ibrahim stated that the perception that young people are apolitical and disinterested in matters of socio-political relevance to them as youth is highly problematic especially given that young people formed the backbone of our political struggle against the apartheid regime, and therefore played a pivotal role in the achievement of our democracy. Hence, his presentation was aimed at testing the claim that young people are apolitical by investigating the patterns of youth participation in democratic politics. He first problematised the theme of the Imbizo "*From subject to citizen*". He argued that it lends support to the assumption that individuals enjoy equal status to realize their right to civil liberties such as freedom of speech, freedom of association and socio-economic rights. According to Ibrahim, this view is out of sync with the daily realities of ordinary people. In the case of poor people in communities, the absence of resources and lack of improvement in livelihoods means that they will find it difficult to realize political equality or even enjoy socio-economic rights. Therefore they will continue to "*Straddle different political Identities as subjects and as citizens*". Furthermore, in the midst of playing these varying roles of subjects and citizens, citizens are no longer just participating in elections but they are also engaging in public affairs and participating through two forms of spaces or platforms:

- **Government created platforms:** ward committees, municipal assemblies, public hearings, Izimbizo's, IDP's, youth parliament and so forth.
- **Citizen initiated platforms:** street protests, neighborhood committees and a range of other associations, coalitions and networks.

He indicated that government-created spaces are frequently criticized for the following reasons:

- they constrain the participation of ordinary people at grass roots levels
- They are often inhabited by those who are considered close to the ruling party or the party (in the case of ward committees, etc).
- they often marginalize opponents of the ruling party and government
- empirical data of the operations of ward committees indicates low levels of youth participation
- the institutional environment of government created spaces has also been identified as a barrier to popular grassroots participation more especially for marginalized groups who lack the necessary vocabulary and rhetoric that is endemic to state-provided spaces for public participation.
- Not all groups in society have the logistics and funds to access these spaces.
- Governments created spaces are seen as participatory spaces for the politically connected and those who enjoy the necessary resources and technical capacities.
- Furthermore, participation in these forums does not extend to decision making (or political power) and therefore limits peoples influence and control over the outcomes of the participatory process.

Citizens thus create their own spaces of participation to circumvent the barriers of government-created forums. According to Ibrahim, the participation of young people in these spaces is disproportionate to those created by government. Youth predominantly participate in more radical forms of engagement and often serve as proxies for the older folks. The Durban-based “Abahlali Basemjondolo” social movement is a case in point. The Abahlali Basemjondolo engages in mass mobilization, media work, and court action and in its struggles against evictions and forced removals, it has also used the promotion of access to information Act with great success to force the city of Durban to reveal its removal plans. The youth and young women in particular, are at the forefront of the social struggles and campaigns of the abahlali movement.

Based on his snapshot assessment of patterns of participation, Ibrahim concluded that the proposition that young people are “apolitical” reflects a simplistic reading of their involvement in politics. Even though their participation in electoral politics may have declined, they are engaging in a wide range of other spaces of participation and therefore expanding their involvement in politics. **(See annexure A for full presentation)**

Questions arising from presentation:

- How do we make sure that we actually engage youth, what kind of strategy should we use?
- The primary question of capacity and the technical aspect of the know how : can DDP be available to assist us (YMCA and other youth organizations) with this process
- How can we (the youth) hold our leader accountable
- Have government forums given people a chance to go and make a difference

The session of “***commissions at work***”, took place after the above session and was aimed at unpacking the content of the presentation and applying it to the South African Context. The participant group was then split into four groups and asked to discuss and report back on the following questions:

1. **Do we as young people participate?**
2. **Which space of participation do we use do we use the most as youth?**
3. **How do we see participation as young people, is it efficient or not?**
4. **Which space do we think is the right space:**
 - **Government Platforms/ Forums and Mediums (OR)**
 - **Civil Society Platforms (i.e.) Protests and other self made platforms**
5. **What are the challenges we face when we participate**
6. **What can we do as youth to ensure that our participation is effective?**
7. **Who can we call upon to help us address the aforementioned regarding youth participation?**

Responses from the various groups:

Group One: TOTI YMCA

1. Yes we participate but not as much as before in the context of youth from the mid-60s
2. We as the youth are more prone to using self made platforms
3. Our participation can be affective depending on the techniques which we use
4. A combination of both spaces (Government Platforms and Civil Society Platforms) can prove to be best affective when tackling various problems.
5. Some of the biggest challenges that we face when we participate as youth is lack of coordination. Our activities are not as effective as they should be because of the lack of proper organization
6. Try to organize ourselves more and work together.
7. We can call upon government as well as various NGO's to help us with our initiatives.

Group Two: Durban YMCA

1. Yes we do participate however
2. Mostly self made platforms
3. Our participation is effective because messages are conveyed.
4. We use both self made and Government created platforms
5. The biggest challenge that we face is that if there is an event that has been organized, a street march or protest the youth does not attend. In instances where we are suppose to show up in our numbers, only a few people show up.
6. we should mobilize more people and speak with one voice
7. Invite the relevant stakeholders like DDP and other organizations which have an interest in youth matters.

Group three Beatrice-Street YMCA

1. In our locality, we do participate but to a certain extent
2. as a civil society organization we mostly use self made platforms
3. Our participation is not effective because of the lack in response
4. We use mostly self made platforms. we have never had access to government created platforms they are out of our reach as ordinary citizens
5. Our biggest challenge is lack of transparency in youth organizations, power abuse, resistance from targeted institutions, and people with the movements that are out for their own personal gain.
6. We need to identify where advocacy is really needed and seek alliance with the chapter 9 institutions.

7. Ewe should call upon the media as a role player in our efforts of participation as youth, and to publicize the problems that we are facing in order to possibly find solutions.

Group four: Eedendale YMCA

1. Yes we do participate, but minimally because of the lack of information at our disposal
2. We use mostly community created platforms
3. Our participation Is never really effective
4. Self made platforms are more effective due to the fact that they are in the hand of the ordinary people and grassroots groups can have access to them and voice their grievances and protestations.
5. the biggest challenge that we face is lack of knowledge and education
6. We need t gather as much information as possible as youth in order to best tackle all the adversities that we are faced with.
7. Invite police services and the people in the legal sector as some of the relevant steak holder

Overall Analyses of youth challenges:

The relevant youth structures are no longer focused on the relevant youth issues. The ANCYL is now focused on successions battle matters and debates and the tensions and shortcomings amongst the national ANC structure. Furthermore due to internal conflicts within the ruling party youth matters have steadily become sidelined. Party politics have always been an issue in youth development. The major problem that youth are facing in this context, especially when applying for employment in government institutions and offices such as municipalities, is that they are asked for Political party membership cards as a prerequisite for possible employment. This is a classic example of how party politics have impeded on the development and empowerment of young people.

Overall Readiness of the participant group for future workshops:

The groups of participants in the Imbizo stated that they had gained a lot of information from this event, expressing hope of more workshops of this nature. From the discussions and debates that took place, it was clear that another major challenge for young people is the lack of information as to the possible avenues, and techniques of dealing with all the aforementioned issues. There is heavy lack of full force mobilization of youth in targeted areas and of appropriate coordination of planned activities. These are just some of the areas where they need assistance and support .

Annexure A

Patterns of youth participation in democratic politics: are youth apolitical?

We are led to believe that young people are generally apolitical – it is said that they are enmeshed in the niceties of consumerism, aggrandisement, kwaito, sex, and so on. We need to take this claim serious, especially given that young people formed the backbone of our political struggle against apartheid and therefore played a pivotal role in the achievement of our democracy. In order to test the claim that young people are apolitical we need to investigate the patterns of youth participation in democratic politics.

But, before pursuing this question, I would like to problematise your theme: “from subject to citizen”. Your theme lends support to the assumption that individuals enjoy equal status to realise their right to civil liberties (i.e. freedom of speech, association, etc) and socio-economic rights. I disagree. This view is out of sync with the daily realities of ordinary people. For example, the poor frequently establishes dependency relations with their local councillors, traditional leaders and political and civil society organisations for securing their livelihoods. Hence, in the absence of resources and improvement in livelihoods, the poor will find it difficult to realize political equality, let alone giving effect to socio-economic rights, and as such will continue to straddle different political identities i.e. as citizens and subjects.

Now returning to my main concern, it is an accepted fact that citizens are no longer just participating in elections and adhering to legal rules and norms (i.e. obey the rule of law, report crimes when you see it, etc), but are engaging in public affairs. Political theory distinguishes between two forms of spaces for participation; those created by governments (i.e. ward committees, municipal assemblies, public hearings, Izimbizo, Integrated Development Planning processes, youth parliament, etc) and those initiated by citizens (street protests, neighbourhood committees, and a range of other associations, coalitions and networks). The creation of spaces for citizenship participation raises three fundamental questions: who enters them, how do people participate inside them and what are their democratic and substantive outcomes?

The prevailing critique against spaces created by government for public participation is that they constrain the participation of ordinary people. It is argued that they are often inhabited by those who are considered close to the ruling party or the dominant party (in the case of ward committees), marginalising opponents of the government. Empirical data of the operations of ward committees indicate low levels of youth participation. The institutional environment of government-created spaces has also been identified as a barrier to popular grassroots participation, especially for marginalized groups who lack the necessary vocabulary and rhetoric that are endemic in such state-provided spaces of participation. In addition, it is argued that not all groups have the logistics and funds to access them. Consequently, they are seen as participatory spaces for the politically connected and those who enjoy the necessary resource and technical capacities. Meanwhile, participation in these forums does not extend to

decision-making, and therefore curtails peoples influence and control over the outcomes of the participatory process.

Thus, to overcome the barriers associated with participation in state-provided forums, citizens initiate their own spaces for engaging government. These spaces are created either by local communities or grassroots social movements, and are located in the streets; squatter camps or informal settlements, neighborhoods, etc. Empirical evidence points to a strong correlation between these spaces (i.e. those participating in protest action also participate in community meetings/forums). The participation of young people in these spaces is disproportionate to those created by government. They predominantly participate in more radical forms of engagement, and often serve as proxies for the older folks. There is also a strong correlation between education and protest action, with the more educated being the more militant groups.

However, instead of making a crude trade off between state-provided and citizen-initiated spaces, recent community or social movements, especially those that emerged since early 2000, in line with the participatory approach of the TAC, use a combination of formal channels of participation and those that they create themselves. The purpose of this approach is to place in the hands of ordinary people more control and decision-making power over issues of public policy.

Consider the Abahlali movement, for example. The Abahlali baseMjondolo engages in mass mobilization, media work and court action in its struggles against evictions and forced removals. It has also used the Promotion of Access to Information Act with great success to force the City of Durban to reveal its removal plans. They thus combine conflicting forms of participation characteristic of citizen-created spaces with more cooperative strategies of engagements. Interestingly, as is the case in other movements else well, the youth, especially young women are at the forefront of the social struggles and campaigns of the Abahlali movement.

Thus, based on this brief analysis of citizenship participation, we can draw a basic conclusion that the proposition that young people are “apolitical” reflects a simplistic reading of their involvement in politics. Whilst the participation of young people in electoral politics might have declined, they are engaging in a wide range of other spaces of participation, and therefore expanding their involvement in politics.

Going forward, the challenge therefore is

- to interrogate notions of politics to establish what is considered political and what is not
- to investigate which type of spaces young people populate based on their differing social status, and how to connect with their activities

Finally, I would like to leave you with this thought:

Lorna Mlofana was raped in Khayelitsha in December 2003 by three young men. One of her alleged rapists was only fifteen years old. Lorna Mlofana was also twenty-one years old. She had HIV and had developed AIDS. Lorna was on anti-retroviral therapy and was a treatment literacy educator in the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). As one of the women who lived openly with HIV/AIDS, she educated thousands of people about prevention, treatment and care. When her rapists learnt from a bystander that she had HIV/AIDS, she was brutally murdered. Her life and death provides us with insights on the challenges that face all young men and women today. Her example shows that young people love politics, they love organising, they love speaking, dancing and they love life.