

Elevating Youth Voices in Climate Action Planning

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“How dare you?”

These three simple yet powerful words spoken by Greta Thunberg in her address to the United Nations Climate Action Summit resonated around the world as she criticized world leaders for not acting fast enough. The direct and emotional plea made by Thunberg shone a spotlight on the power of youth voices, as well as their notable absence from most decision-making spaces.

As youth-led climate movements have become central to public dialogue on climate change, the notion of youth participation has also gained increased attention in planning discourse. In practice, however, there remains a notable absence of youth perspectives and involvement in climate action planning and governance.

Thunberg sparked a global movement that led to over 6 million people across 150

countries participating in climate protests in September 2019; despite this she also faced vicious backlash in response to her activism. Thunberg has been delegitimized due to her age, mocked for her appearance and disability, and accused of being a puppet of liberal organizations. Maxime Bernier tweeted that she was ‘mentally unstable,’ while Donald Trump accused her of having an ‘anger management problem.’ Such comments were not only driven by ageism, but also the sexism and ableism that systematically exclude diverse voices from positions of power. Rather than considering the merits of her message, Thunberg is too often dismissed because of her age.

Although the United Nations defines ‘youth’ as those between 15 and 24 years of age, there is no universally agreed upon

definition of the term. Many cultures acknowledge that children and youth are different from adults, yet the idea of ‘childhood’ carries different meanings across cultures. Therefore, when considering youth participation in planning and governance, it is critical to examine the social perceptions held of youth and question our preconceived notions and beliefs.

The old English proverb that children should be seen and not heard illustrates the cultural norms from which Western society has evolved. In Western culture, young people are often viewed as inexperienced, naïve, or idealistic, rather than capable, educated and deserving of public trust.

Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island, however, offer alternative perspectives towards youth. *Inunnguiniq*, which translates to ‘the making of capable and contributing human beings’ in Inuktitut, describes traditional Inuit childrearing practices. Under the *Inunnguiniq* model, community members of all ages are considered to be both teachers and learners. When named after a deceased relative or friend, a child carries their namesake’s soul, personality, and knowledge, affording them a great deal of independence and respect compared to Western standards.¹

Autumn Peltier, an Anishinaabe youth environmental activist and water warrior, offers an example of youth leadership in an Indigenous culture. At the age of 15, Peltier was appointed as Chief Water Commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation, taking over from her late great-aunt Josephine Mandamin who previously held the role. This leadership position is tasked with raising awareness of water issues, providing management advice, and sharing traditional knowledge. By being given this role, it is clear that Peltier holds



the respect and trust of her community, despite her age.

Comparing the receptions of Thunberg and Peltier represents a stark contrast. While Thunberg has received significant media attention, she continues to strike in attempt to make governments implement substantial changes toward climate action. Conversely, Peltier has been appointed to a position of authority and responsibility within her community, allowing her to affect change from within.

The growing popularity of youth-led climate movements and the involvement of youth in the political sphere show that today's youth want to participate in a more positive and sustainable future. Thanks to educational programs and social media, today's youth are more informed about climate change and environmental issues than generations past, and they hold strong potential as agents of change.

Urban planners are uniquely positioned to empower and elevate youth voices to advance fairer and more representative decision-making. Meaningful consultation lies at the heart of planning practice, and concepts such as social equity and reconciliation have become mainstream planning ideals. However, thoughtful and proactive youth engagement still remains on the periphery of planning practice. Planners must begin to create opportunities for youth participation, particularly as it relates

to climate action planning. As segment of the population that will be disproportionately affected by climate change, youth inclusion in climate action planning is an imperative that cannot be overlooked.

Meaningful youth engagement also offers opportunities for planners to multi-solve: it improves youth mental health outcomes, decreases rates of climate-induced stress, and builds confidence, communication, and leadership skills among young peopleⁱⁱ. Ensuring youth voices are included in planning can also have a ripple affect among other young people who see their peers involved climate action. Finally, it can create opportunities for intergenerational relationships, fostering feelings of genuine partnership and improve perceptions of youth by adults.

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted the momentum of recent in-person youth-led protests calling for 'greener' planning policies. Despite this, youth have demonstrated resilience and dedication in migrating their movements to social media platforms, as seen by the #climatestrike-online and #facetheclimateemergency movements. Calls for renewable energy investment and greater efforts towards carbon capture and storage are just a few of the policies promoted by these youth movements. Rather than imposing a barrier for youth involvement, the pandemic has created an alternative avenue through which planners can engage with youth ideas and perspectives.

As we continue to navigate the uncertainties of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, the following is certain: from the high-profile leadership of Thunberg and Peltier in the political sphere to the widespread activism of young people across all communities, youth will continue to demonstrate that they are

prepared and eager to raise their voices to influence climate planning and policies. The question that remains is: are planners ready to listen? ■

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ⁱTagalik, S. (2009). *Inunnguiniq: Caring for children the Inuit way*. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. <https://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/docs/health/FS-InunnguiniqCaringInuitWay-Tagalik-EN.pdf>

ⁱⁱMacKay, M., Parlee, B., & Karsgaard, C. (2020). Youth Engagement in Climate Change Action: Case Study on Indigenous Youth at COP24. *Sustainability*, 12(16), 6299. doi:10.3390/su12166299



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