

The Role of the Youth in Achieving SDG 11: Pathways to Build Sustainable and Resilient Cities

Ana Gabriela Ynestrillas Vega, Project Lead of the Local Pathways Fellowship, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (corresponding author)

ana.ynestrillas@sdsnyouth.org

+1 (917) 536 - 5762

475 Riverside Dr., Suite 530

New York, NY 10115 USA

Elie Kallab, Project Officer of the Local Pathways Fellowship, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network - Youth

1. Abstract

This paper analyzes the correlation between the potential of the youth for the achievement of SDG11 and the challenges they encounter in their journey to support this goal. Young people are being referred to as "torchbearers" of the 2030 agenda. The youth is a double sword agent¹. On the one hand, they are considered as beneficiaries of the 2030 agenda, and on the other hand, they are partners and participants in the implementation process.

When it comes to SDG11, literature shows that our cities will be home to 70% of the projected 9 billion people. Although various initiatives were presented to reinforce the role of the youth around the world, the potential of the millennial has not been taken seriously into play by different stakeholders².

The narrative above revolves around three main pillars: (i) stakeholders have not yet realized that the sustainable development goals are a young and urban affair, (ii) Governments tend to lean mostly on older age groups for policy and decision making, and (iii) youth around the world do not have equal access to the same tools, resources, and opportunities to promote local ownership of the goals to make their cities more sustainable.

Following the above pattern, this paper answers the following research question: How can capacity be built among the youth to capitalize on their potential to advance problem-solving for sustainable urban development and mobilization towards the 2030 Agenda at the local level?

Section 1 discusses the different challenges that the youth encounter, which hinders their potential in realizing SDG11. Section 2 discusses the issue of young people's access to inequality to tools and resources to implement their projects and solutions. Section 3 showcases the impact of urban solutions developed by Local Pathways fellows. Finally, concluding on the importance of including the youth for the realization of SDG11.

The LPF is a program by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network- Youth Initiative, which's core component is a practically-oriented training program designed to enable young fellows to understand the process of "localizing" SDG 11 in the cities they represent and to guide them through the development of a project.

¹ United Nations. (2018). *Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (pp. 14–23). New York .

² United Nations (2010); see also General Assembly resolution 50/81 of 14 December 1995 on the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (A/RES/50/81) and resolution 62/126 of 18 December 2007, "Policies and programmes involving youth: youth in the global economy—promoting youth participation in social and economic development" (A/RES/62/126).

2. Introduction

Urbanism has been considered as one of the greatest intergenerational challenges of the twenty-first century. In this rapidly urbanizing world, young urbanists are forced to find solutions to solve the unprecedented challenges ahead of them, “ from building adequate housing, providing access to decent public transportation and ensuring the supply of safe drinking water to building resilience to climate change and providing walkable streets and green public spaces where people can live healthy and productive lives”. In other words, young urbanists must work collectively to achieve a liveable city. Urbanism is successfully addressed in the realm of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within SDG 11 which states “ make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.”

SDG 11 calls for both enhancing and strengthening livability in cities and human settlements. It names a range of targets that vary from ensuring access to adequate, safe, and sustainable housing and transportation systems to tackling inclusivity in public spaces. Achieving such an interconnected spectrum of targets requires young urban planners to adopt a comprehensive approach to achieve deep sectoral changes in their neighborhoods, provinces, and eventually cities.

And still, young people's potential to affect positive change has not yet been entirely realized. Young people can be viewed as passive recipients rather than enablers of change, a problem rather than a solution. The narrative above revolves around three main pillars: (i) stakeholders have not yet realized that the sustainable development goals are a young and urban affair, (ii) Governments tend to lean mostly on older age groups for policy and decision making, and (iii) youth around the world do not have equal access to the same tools, resources, and opportunities to promote local ownership of the goals to make their cities more sustainable. According to a report by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, “over the next decades, urbanization will be a defining trend in [many] parts of the world, especially in East Asia, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where the bulk of extreme poverty is concentrated”. The Global Coordinator of UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Youth, Siamak Loni in his article *Cities Of The Future: Why We Need Young People To Help Transform Their Communities*³ states that millennials have little influence on the policymaking process as to how their cities are planned and organized. He describes the young people as “ tech-savvy, generous, entrepreneurial and committed to social justice and community service”. Therefore, the cross-generational aspect of integrating the youth in the policymaking process will ensure a sense of belonging and continuity in cities.

The Local Pathways Fellowship Program supports capacity building in cities by training young urban sustainability leaders and SDG advocates by educating them on the process of “localizing” the SDGs. The fellowship empowers young people by helping them answer the critical questions of “what can I do” and “how”. It equips fellows with the tools and resources they need to advance problem-solving for sustainable development at the local level by providing them with the means to engage local stakeholders in dialogue and collaboration. This mobilizes support for the 2030 Agenda and secures local commitment to prioritize the implementation of the SDGs.

³Cities Of The Future: Why We Need Young People To Help Transform Their Communities, Siamak Sam Loni, Huffington Post, October, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cities-of-the-future-why-we-need-young-people-to-help_b_580824a0e4b00483d3b5cfc2

3. Methodology

To address the gaps in capitalizing the potential of youth in achieving the targets of SDG 11, this paper aims at answering the following research question: how to build capacity among the youth to capitalize on their potential to advance problem-solving for sustainable urban development and mobilization towards the 2030 Agenda at the local level?

This paper analyzes the correlation between the potential of the youth for the achievement of SDG11 and the challenges they encounter in their journey to support this goal. A sample of different projects that showcase urban solutions developed by fellows that are part of the Local Pathways Fellowship (LPF), is studied in this paper. The LPF is a program by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network- Youth Initiative, which's core component is a practically-oriented training program designed to enable young fellows to understand the process of "localizing" SDG 11 in the cities they represent and to guide them through the development of a project.

Below the hypotheses proposed to empirically study the research question:

Hypothesis 1: Inequality in access, not much of voice

Hypothesis 2: The youth is equipped to solve our current challenges

Variables:

Dependent variable: The capacity among the youth to capitalize on their potential to advance problem-solving for sustainable urban development

Independent variable: Access to economic resources, access to data, access to knowledge, degree of participation in the decision making process, institutional structure.

Considering the lack of empirical data, the analysis will refer to reports published by the fellows within the cohorts of 2019-2020. An interview will be conducted with a sample of fellows from cities geographically represented in the five continents.

Limitations and Challenges

Methodology (details on how the survey was conducted, the countries are included, how the data were analyzed).

This research represents a descriptive case study following a qualitative methodology and text mining approach. Materials that would be used in collecting adequate data would be even attained through internet-based research by searching academic databases. Aspects to be considered when using the internet in attaining data is using source criticism and keeping in mind the reliability of the source provided

Section 1 discusses the different challenges that the youth encounter, which hinders their potential in realizing SDG11. Section 2 discusses the issue of young people's access to inequality to tools and resources to implement their projects and solutions. Section 3 studies the impact of some youth projects by providing existing initiatives presented by fellows in the Local Pathways Fellowship program that aim to address the challenges presented in Section 2. Finally, concluding on the importance of including the youth for the realization of SDG11.

4. Results & Discussion

Section 1 and 2 discuss the results found in a survey carried out where 20 young respondents across different countries spoke about their perceptions on the challenges that the youth encounters when localizing SDG11 and inequality in access to tools and resources to implement projects and solutions. The findings of the survey cover a wide range of geographical opinions that include representation from the following major areas, regions, and countries as shown in Table 1.

Section 3 discusses the impact of some youth projects by providing existing initiatives developed by fellows from the Local Pathways Fellowship program from the 2018 and 2019 cohorts.

Table 1: Major areas, regions, countries, and cities represented in the survey “The Role of the Youth in Achieving SDG 11”

Major Area	Region	Country	City
Africa	Western Africa	Burkina Faso	Ouagadougou
		Liberia	Monrovia
	Southern Africa	South Africa	Durban
Asia	Southern Asia	India	Pune
			New Delhi
		Bangladesh	Dhaka
	Eastern Asia	Taiwan	Kaohsiung
		China	Shanghai
Western Asia	Cyprus	Nicosia	
Europe	Eastern Europe	Russia	Moscow
	Northern Europe	United Kingdom	London
	Western Europe	France	Montpellier
	Southern Europe	Spain	Barcelona
Madrid			
Northern America	Northern America	Canada	Montreal
Latin America and the Caribbean	Caribbean	Dominican Republic	Santo Domingo
	Central America	Mexico	Mexico City
	South America	Chile	Santiago de Chile
		Brazil	Curitiba

**Definitions of major areas and regions as per the regional groupings used in Report and Statistical Annex of The Sustainable Development Goals Report (<https://unstats.un.org/sdqs/indicators/regional-groups/>)*

Section 1 - Our analysis of the survey data identifies key challenges that the youth encounters when localizing SDG11. This will inform which are the main drivers that hinder the potential of the youth.

As found in the analysis of the survey the youth identified the following challenges in their practices:

a. Lack of access to economic resources

Half of the respondents mentioned lack of access to economic resources in the forms of poverty, challenges in accessing funds and grants to develop projects, lack of engagement of donors, lack of financial support, unaffordability to access data, lack of networks to be able to raise funds, and lack of paid opportunities for youth to work on any of the SDGs but in particular SDG 11. This challenge was mentioned by respondents from Burkina Faso, Cyprus, Canada, Taiwan, South Africa, United Kingdom, Russia, India, and Liberia.

b. Lack of access to decision making

Half of the respondents mentioned lack of access to decision making in the form of lack spaces to discuss ideas with decision makers, lack of collaboration opportunities with decision makers, limited access to the government machinery, lack of access and representation of the youth on decision making positions, lack of desire and openness for the participation of young people in institutional spaces, lack of co-creation opportunities, weak power to influence policy making, bureaucracy limiting opportunities. This challenge was mentioned by respondents from Mexico, India, Brazil, Cyprus, South Africa, China, Spain, and Russia.

c. Lack of access to knowledge

A fifth of the respondents mentioned lack of access to knowledge in the forms of illiteracy, poor education systems, mismatched capacity building training that does not meet with the demands of the 21st century, and lack of awareness. This challenge was mentioned by respondents from Burkina Faso, Liberia, and Russia.

d. Lack of access to data

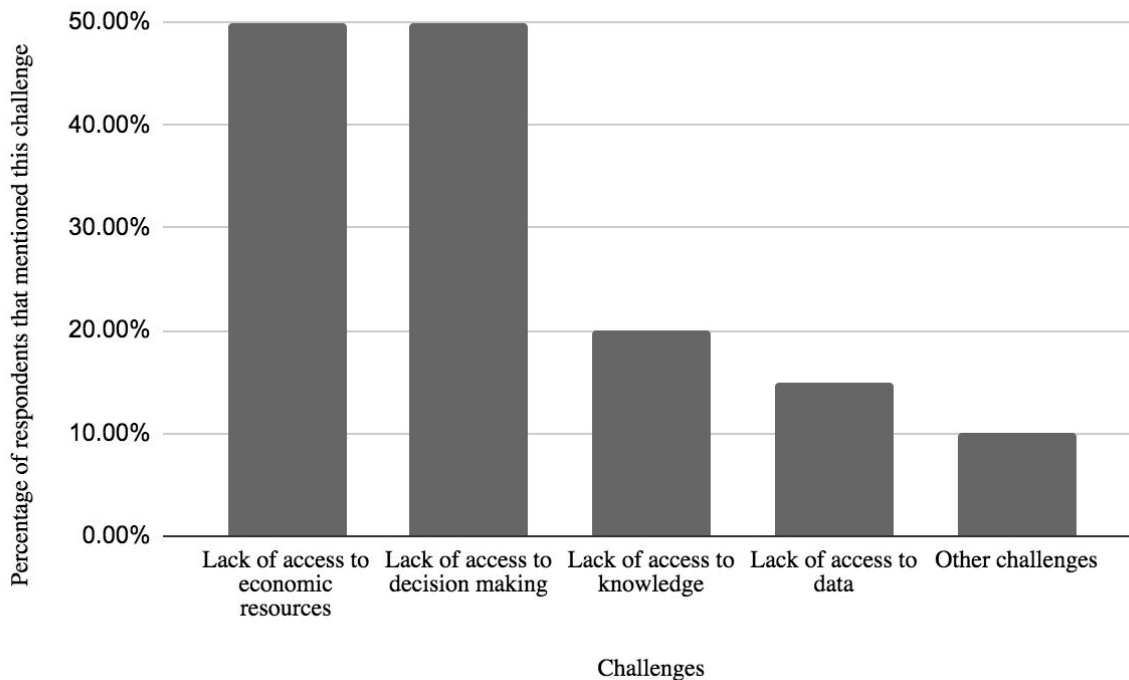
Nearly a fifth of the respondents mentioned lack of access to data forms of lack of availability of local level data, lack of access to government data or data in general, economical costs to access data, and lack of transparency. This challenge was mentioned by respondents from Bangladesh, India, and France.

e. Other challenges

Ten percent of the respondents mentioned other types of challenges that included lack of home buy-in or home support, lack of visibility opportunities and a lack of a climate of peace. These challenges were mentioned by respondents from Cyprus, Taiwan and Spain.

Graph 1 shows the percentage of respondents that mentioned each one of the identified challenges. Being the lack of access to economic resources and the lack of access to decision making the most prominent challenges across all regions mentioned by half of the respondents. Followed by lack of access to knowledge with less than half of the mentioned than the previous 2 challenges. Lastly lack of access to data and other challenges showing up in 15% and 10% of the respondents accordingly.

Graph 1: Percentage of respondents that mentioned each one of challenges identified



Section 2 - Our analysis of the survey data identifies that 75% of the respondents perceive inequalities in access to tools and resources to implement projects and solutions. Respondents who agreed to perceive this are from Burkina Faso, Chile, India, Taiwan, Brazil, South Africa, Cyprus, United Kingdom, France, China, Spain, and Dominican Republic.

This section reiterates the challenges identified in section 1 as respondents mentioned unequal distribution of education, skill development opportunities, information, data, financial resources, and access to mentors and networks. And reiterated that youth in their countries the youth hardly ever occupies decision-making positions. All these are elements that strongly shape the outcomes when designing/implementing/developing projects.

It was also mentioned that access to tools and resources is not easily available and when they are provided they revolve around awareness and advocacy, instead of action. There's a perception of having no real participation and opportunities to work on making an impact. Additionally, this section of the survey found mentions of inequalities in distribution among the youth of the tools and resources when available with biases based on socio-economic status, geographic location, and gender.

Section 3 - Presents how the Local Pathways Fellowship program supports capacity building in cities and 2 concrete examples of youth-led projects developed by fellows from the Local Pathways Fellowship program from the 2018 and 2019 cohorts. It outlines the challenge they addressed, the solution they designed and the impact it had in their city. These are only 2 examples out of the 243 projects the fellows have developed through the 2018, 2019 and 2020 cohorts of the Local Pathways Fellowship program.

The Local Pathways Fellowship Program has various objectives. Firstly, it provides young people across the world with tools and resources to promote local ownership of the SDGs to

create more prosperous and livable cities. It also connects young urban innovators on a global network for knowledge and ideas exchanges. Besides, it enables young people to have a voice and be part of the Cities 2030 global conversation. Finally, it advances local dialogue and demonstrates potential to localize the SDGs and implement the New Urban Agenda at a local government level.

The program adopts four main pillars to achieve the above-mentioned objectives. These pillars are mutually exclusive but independent at the same time. The pillars are training, mentoring, connecting and increasing visibility. Training is a key component of the program in which the student attends the “Sustainable Cities” SDG Academy Course led by Aromar Revi. When it comes to mentoring, LPF provides the equipes with project management and project development methodologies via a webinar series provides insight from experts into various aspects of the industry. The connecting pillar is achieved through a reinforced peer to peer strategy. Finally, fellows participate in conferences and events which increases their visibility.

Below two examples of projects developed by Local Pathways fellows. These exemplify what the youth can achieve when given the tools and resources they need.

a. “Maharashtra State Startup Policy 2018” by Umesh Balwani, 2018 Local Pathways Fellow from Mumbai, India

Challenge: Mumbai is the capital of Maharashtra, the financial capital of India, and is a home to major corporate houses and financial institutions. Contributing nearly 15% to India’s GDP, Maharashtra is the most entrepreneurial state in India and is at the forefront of economic growth. For sustaining this growth, and creating an economy resilient to 21st-century global changes, there is an immense need to promote innovation-based entrepreneurship.

Solution: As a Local Pathways Fellow from Mumbai, India, Umesh leveraged his presence within the Government of Maharashtra to conceptualize and draft the Maharashtra State Startup Policy 2018. The policy intends to catalyze the growth of an innovation-driven entrepreneurial ecosystem for socioeconomic development of the state and was approved by the state’s cabinet of ministers on 17th January 2018. It adopts a holistic approach that involves establishing a network of incubators, relaxing regulatory requirements for startups, cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets among school and college students, creating linkages between all concerned stakeholders and making strategic investments to foster the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the state.

Impact: Over the next five years, the policy is expected to lead to the creation of 10,000 startups, bring in investments to the tune of \$800 million and generate direct and indirect employment opportunities for around half a million people in the state. The generation of livelihoods would further act as a foundation to achieve other SDG’s related to education, health, and quality of people’s lives in the cities of Maharashtra. The innovative startups would also bring efficiencies in the way resources are produced and consumed and thus reduce the trade-off between economic growth and environmental sustainability, making it possible to achieve both.

b. “The voices of Belo Horizonte's women: Collectively building public spaces that are safe and inclusive for all” by Leticia Pinheiro Rizério Carmo, Local Pathways fellow 2019 from Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Challenge: In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, women and girls face violence not only in their homes and relationships, but also in public spaces. Intimidation, and harassment are forms of violence that limit women’s mobility, influencing the way women use and occupy the city. These facts bring a deeper reflection on where women are allowed in their own cities - “where”, “how”, and “when” they are welcome to walk.

Solution: To understand how to plan and manage urban environments so that they are safe and inclusive for women and girls, managers and planners must have accurate information about women’s experiences in the city. The best way to do this is by consulting and making them an integral part of the decision-making process. As a Local Pathway Fellow, Leticia organized two large seminars with the Belo Horizonte government, bringing together civil society, academia, and the city council to debate the lack of a gender perspective in the city’s planning. In addition, she organized a Women's Security Audit in the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, in order to bring women together to evaluate public spaces safety and to recommend changes and improvements. The Women's Safety Audit is a participatory methodology designed to provide detailed information on women's safety issues and to empower women to work with local decision-making for positive change in the community.

Impact: The events, workshops, and activities organized during the Local Pathways program brought together 200 people, including city officials, students, urban planners, and civil society organizations. The women's safety audit carried out on the university campus gained national attention, as it was part of the urban circuit organized by the UN Habitat. In addition, in collaboration with civil society organizations, she secured a budget of \$20,000 from the state government to finance new mechanisms for reporting harassment on public transport, which will soon be implemented across the city.

5. Conclusion

After analysing the answers from the survey that encompassed 20 young people across 17 countries and 19 cities we can conclude that the main challenges that the youth encounter in their practices when localizing SDG11 are: lack of access to economic resources, decision making, knowledge, data, and visibility opportunities. These drivers hinder the potential of the youth.

Being the lack of access to decision making one of the 2 most prominent challenges mentioned in the survey we can say that stakeholders and governments are not leaning as much as they could on the potential of the youth to advance problem-solving for sustainable urban development. This is a systemic gap problem that most countries are currently facing.

This is the gap that the Local Pathways Fellowship aims to fill. It empowers the youth to work together with local authorities in planning, building, and maintaining cities that are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. The example projects showcased in section 3 demonstrate that the youth understands the importance of the realization of SDG11 and their ability to conceive better cities.

6. References

1. United Nations. (2018). Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (pp. 14–23). New York .
2. United Nations (2010); see also General Assembly resolution 50/81 of 14 December 1995 on the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (A/RES/50/81) and resolution 62/126 of 18 December 2007, “Policies and programmes involving youth: youth in the global economy—promoting youth participation in social and economic development” (A/RES/62/126).
3. Cities Of The Future: Why We Need Young People To Help Transform Their Communities”, Siamak Sam Loni, Huffington Post, October, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cities-of-the-future-why-we-need-young-people-to-help_b_580824a0e4b00483d3b5cfc2
4. Report and Statistical Annex of The Sustainable Development Goals Report, August 1, 2019, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/regional-groups/>