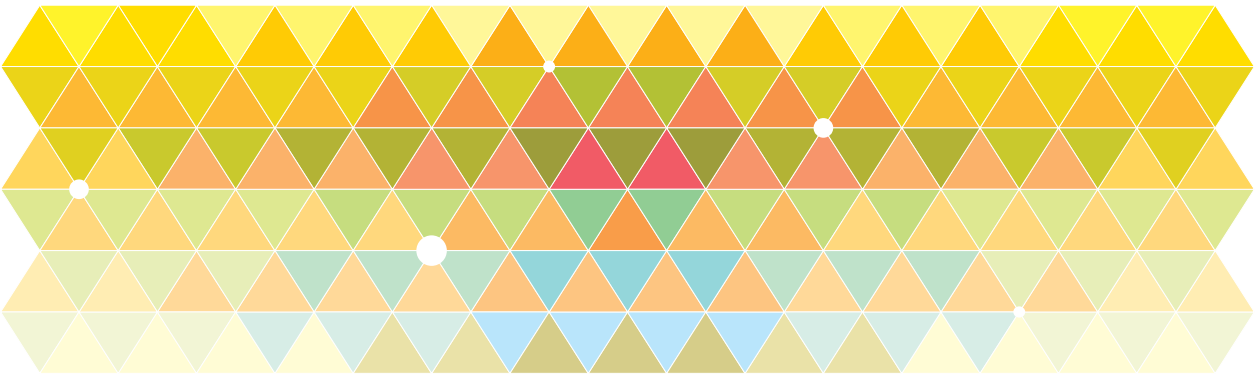


# GUIDELINES FOR DEBATE

WHAT IS A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE?






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The intent of this edition of *Guidelines for Debate* is to clarify discussion items around the so-called “youth perspective”, identifying what it is and where it comes from, while considering elements and tools used for analysis.

**The aim of the series **GUIDELINES FOR DEBATE** is to influence the formulation, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies through guidelines that foster the debate of ideas from a progressive approach. The collection features a cool exchange of data and theoretical and methodological tools for analysis and action aimed at emerging political generations.**



# OFF WE GO

Today is the first time in history that most of the world's population is young. However, this is not reflected in better performance of our Human Rights. From the 90's onwards, civil society organizations, researchers, and some governments or cooperation agencies have shown the importance of improving the quality of life of young people as a way to improve developing countries. However, when we analyze initiatives aimed at young people, often times we face a problem: there is no "youth perspective" in them.

But what does it mean to include a 'youth perspective' in initiatives, actions, plans or programs for young people? If initiatives involve young people, that means there is a 'youth perspective' already? Conversely, why should institutions that focus on youth be in fact exclusive of children, women or other populations?

To understand the implementation of a 'youth perspective', we will review first what youth means and how it is configured, then explore the origin of these perspectives and approaches. This will, consequently, help us explain some concepts and applications of the "youth perspective" and its legal protection.

## **TAKE 1 TO BE OR NOT TO BE?** What is youth? Why youth?

For me, youth has been a time of my life in direct confrontation with the world, but also a time to generate autonomy. Yet, it would be a mistake to think that all young women living in a city can define their youth as I have lived. Thus, one of the great historical questions in this subject matter considers that even by assuming that there is a large segment of the population considered young, no one quite knows who they are or what defines them. This has to do with a simple construction element of identity.

Just as women begin to define ourselves in opposition to men, and much later to reflect on mobilization or through analytical exercises on our own condition, young people build their identity in a similar fashion. The first references to be found on youth are institutions that attempt to define what we name.<sup>1</sup> It is only recently, from the 90's and much more in the XXI century, that young people like us begin to deconstruct these discourses and build less stereotyped institutional analysis.

It is therefore necessary to observe the speeches of these institutions that have named and characterized the youth, as they have shaped our way of looking at young people. What follows is a brief account of the different perspectives that define what youth is:<sup>2</sup>

# INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

## ADOLESCENCE

### ADOLESCENTS HAVE TO BE CONTROLLED AND CARED FOR THROUGH THEIR BIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

This view on young people often times indistinctly uses the word 'teen' as a synonym of youth, or referring to those who have not surpassed the legal age to turn an 'adult'. This concept comes from a youth perspective that focuses on psycho-biological development of individuals through stages of life. This perspective is based on two schools that come up in the 60's, a medical and a psychological one, where youth is a "stage" with a beginning and an end, marked mainly by the biological-sexual development.

**THEORISTS.** Stanley Hall, who says that adolescence is a transition process dominated by anxiety, confusion and changing mood.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** Using this approach reduces people to predetermine being defined by their genetic, biological or psychological characteristics, considering only its risks or medical anomalies.

## DEMOGRAPHIC BONUS

### YOUNG PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT FOR THEIR RELEVANCE AS A DEMOGRAPHIC BONUS

This perspective comes from the population and statistical analysis where young people are a group between 15 to 29 years of age. This raises the so-called "demographic bonus" that is the identification of the economically active population crossed by age.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** This perspective homogenizes people who agree on a range of age for statistical purposes. On the other hand, this homogenization has had among its effects to deny the diversity of young people such as young women, indigenous, rural, young people with disabilities, homeless, etc.

## YOUTH AS A STAGE OF LIFE

### YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE EDUCATED TO BE ADULTS

In the 90's, theorists deal with "the young" from sociology, considering it as a transition stage for social integration. This stage is vital for people to form and acquire what is necessary to become productive adults in society. In these studies the concept of "youth identity" is highlighted based on emotional and learning characteristics common to individuals of this stage on their way to responsibility. To achieve the proper development of this stage people should focus on maintaining an activity structure for the development: school, work, use of leisure time.

**THEORISTS.** Talcott Parsons, considering the young urban middle class student, on the way to adulthood.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** Stereotypes of this approach assume, first, that young people are males devoted to learning, and secondly, that this should lead to the creation of an adult who is responsible. The particular gender bias of these sociological studies is that for young men there is the promise of reaching adulthood and responsibility and rights, while for young women, this stage is of permanent transit, women continue to be "minors", "dependent" and in need of being guided. de ser guías.

## **YOUTH AS A REVOLUTIONARY**

### **YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE FUTURE AND HOPE OF THEIR COUNTRY**

This is an idealistic vision of youth, placing it as the engine of the revolution, highlighting and acknowledging their contribution to social change processes significant as the French May, the student movement in the United States, the Cuban revolution, the peace movement, the Movement 68 in Mexico, among others.

There is a change of view on youth, which tends to be more positive compared to the previous outlook. While it is a feature that identifies them as political subjects, it also puts them in hopes of changing the prevailing social reality. Sceptics and conformists, young people become rebellious and questioning.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** The great example of this approach is that to be young is to question power, so if you are not a revolutionary, you are not young.

## **PROBLEM**

### **YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CRIMINALS OR PROBLEMATIC**

In the late twentieth century more analysis on youth related issues such as poverty, high incidence of unemployment, increased illicit drug use; teenage pregnancy, etc. are conducted. Young people are identified as part of the main problem of development countries. This arises from the institutional perspective of the issue within government structures. A reference is the World Summit for Social Development (1995), which clearly identifies young people as a population at risk, or as a vulnerable group, whose integration is "key" to the socio-economic development.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** Only identifies young people as part of development problems such as addictions or teenage pregnancy, without structurally analyzing why young people are most affected in these situations.

## **GENERATIONS**

### **THE YOUNG GENERATION OF THE 60'S ACTUALLY PARTICIPATED (UNLIKE TODAY'S GENERATIONS).**

Another perspective of analysis, presented in the early XXI century, is to identify youth in terms of significant historical events (fashion, political or economic conditions, behaviors, etc.), and at a certain time, categorizing them through generations. Generations are identified primarily by periods: "Lost Generation" (80's), "Generation X" (90's), and so on.

**ELEMENTS TO BE QUESTIONED.** This analysis homogenizes by assuming all sectors are determined by historical events. Not consider the differences between urban, rural, women and men, and so on.

From the review of these perspectives one can analyze various positions that policies have been built upon to respond to young people. Such is the case, for instance, of educational policies. In Mexico, the way to improve education for young people in public secondary education is by basing on a teenage perspective where control over the bodies from the inhibition of any sexual reference. Or the revolutionary perspective that permeates civil society in Latin America, and gets frustrated when realizing that not all young people are rebellious or questioning of authority. We could continue to identify examples but the point is that we have different perspectives on reality that are not neutral but have been what it means to be young from perspectives that are not those of young people

Moreover, from these categories questions such as those formulated by researcher Carlos Feixa<sup>3</sup> have been made, agreeing with youth-led civil society,<sup>4</sup> and speaking to the relevance of a less stereotypical definition of youth. Feixa identifies that youth is a historical and cultural construction determined by the place and space where it is constructed, with special features to their ethnic, cultural, class and gender factors, amongst others. It also highlights the importance of identifying them and creating the conditions for them to be subjects of rights. Thus, breaking the ward perspective and identifying them as individuals with autonomy and/or citizens. That is, placing the importance of youth participation as a guiding principle in any definition.

Finally, from dis/organized youth-led civil society groups; this perspective takes the element of diversity. Proposing to understand the concept of “young people” or “youth” considering its heterogeneity. However, studies so far considered predominantly white young males -whether student or poor- women, indigenous people, youth in the streets, with different sexual orientations, among others are still left out. Also, this new understanding shall integrate diverse age ranges, generic, ethnic, territorial, cultural and historical factors, amongst others.<sup>5</sup>

## **TAKE 2 THESE LENSES HAVE COLOR...** Approaches and Perspectives

It is of particular importance to talk about a 'youth perspective', which refers to the identification of perspectives and approaches that we have at our disposal with particular utilities. An example to this understanding may be the gender perspective, which helps us to analyze power relations between women and men in various fields. It is generally said to be like putting glasses on to see reality from another angle. Imagine red glasses for the youth perspective through which to analyze the role of young people in reality.

Thus, perspectives or approaches (synonymous in this text) are tools of reflection through which to generate policy. For example, researcher and expert on youth Ernesto Rodriguez<sup>6</sup> suggests that to improve youth policies -as the feminist movement did when defining the gender perspective- young people and experts must promote a youth perspective. However, even if we recognize their need and usefulness, we are yet to find a clear characterization of this in related literature. That is, although youth-led civil society has used this concept as a critical element for the analysis of actions aimed at young people, we still lack clear reference to what this constitutes.



## **TAKE 3 I SAID, YOU SAID, S/HE SAID** (Or of some conceptual confusions)

So far, we can begin to define the youth perspective from elements identified as: the definition of youth, and the geographical context and the type of relations of power, over others. However, it is common to face two other tools of analysis in the literature and debate: *Generational Perspective* and *Youthful Perspective*.

**YOUTHFUL PERSPECTIVE:** Despite the limited literature on these definitions, a youthful perspective differs from the youth perspective, even though they have both been used as a synonym for youth inclusion. That is, its meaning is directly related to the inclusion of young people in processes meant to build a youth perspective, which is wrong. While it is of utmost importance that actions aimed at young people engage young people themselves, this is a mechanism for youth participation not a perspective itself.<sup>7</sup>

However, mechanisms for youth participation themselves do not guarantee an emancipatory perspective of power relations, and we must be very careful here because this has nothing to do with delegitimizing the capabilities of young people already participating. To delegate young people with the responsibility to change power relations that have been perpetuated by them is, to a degree, a generational injustice. As mentioned by Ernesto Rodriguez, the main perpetrators of young people's rights are established institutions such as government, parents, and so on. Thus, actions to shift this would be more effective when routed towards these players rather than towards young people themselves.<sup>8</sup> This is to say that the inclusion of young people to address

unequal power relations above mentioned is not simply resolved with the involvement of young people (though this is a first step), but by transforming the look of families and other institutions when relating to youth empowerment and emancipation.

**GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:** This concept, used more recently, utilizes a historical view of the stages of life throughout mankind development, as well as the bonds of solidarity across generations. One must not, however, confuse the generational perspective with the youth perspective. The generational perspective acknowledges necessary to identify power relations between different ages of life and its links to improve conditions of life and common development. This approach also considers that children, youth, adulthood and seniors must have a connection as a whole by playing a role in a common history, which needs to be strengthened throughout generations.

An example of this has been emphasized by the sustainable development movement, which is jointly responsible for the advocating of proper use of resources in pursuit of a healthy environment for future generations. In the feminist movement, the younger generations question building new positions and forms of feminist activism, while there are still inequities in gender relations. This entails various generational approaches to similar problems with different understandings. Thus, a generational perspective has long-term contributions considering the different generations, and placing the importance of building co-responsibility between them. While a generational perspective is different from the youth perspective, they both consider young people as part of their nodal approach.

## TAKE 4 A BASIC CHECK-LIST

We consider the following questions may be a necessary analytical guideline to challenge any document, be it an academic proposal, policy or program, through the effective implementation of the *youth perspective*. Hopefully, this implies a contribution towards a more systematic definition of this analytical approach.

To this end, a first step in defining the ‘youth perspective’ (though not enough) is to identify the role of young people within a program or policy. Retracing the history of feminism and the relevance of the gender perspective, this is not only based on identifying how women and men relate, but the basic analysis of power relations. In other words, a central element which fills the approach is the analysis of levels of oppression, and conditions of control and autonomy existing in the relations between young people and other age groups. To be a young person with autonomy and a holder of rights, it is necessary to dignify their relations of power, oppression and / or control as opposed to institutions, the adult world (adulthood<sup>9</sup>), and other sectors or age parameters.

## **IN YOUR ADDRESSING OF YOUTH** have you considered the following?

### **NOTE THE DEFINITION USED FOR YOUTH**

- How is a young person named or symbolized? Have you considered a “teen”, a “demographic bonus”, a “revolutionary youth” or in a “transition phase”, etc..?
- Are you generalizing young people and homogenizing youths?
- Do you consider and refer to young women?
- Does your construction of youth involve the perspective of those involved?

### **IDENTIFY THE PARAMETERS OF YOUTH**


- Have you reflected upon ethnic, gender, creed and other contextual constructions?
- Are you applying participation mechanisms for young people?

### **ANALYZE THE POWER RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH EMANCIPATION AND AUTONOMY**

- Does the document identify equitable relationships between young people and other institutions (adults, parents, governments, etc)?
- Do you consider the power relationships between men and women?
- Do you plan any participation, contribution or collective construction from young people themselves?
- How do you define autonomy? Is it within expression of opinions, involvement in decision-making, or the sole responsibility of young people to change?

In conclusion, to consider a youth perspective involves not to partially focus on young people, but considering the power relations that limit the autonomy of individuals based on a determining factor defined by age (the older one gets the more power you have). Therefore, it is necessary to create conditions of empowerment and autonomy mainly amongst young women and men, through a critical and analytical gaze that identifies where and how are young people being controlled and manipulated from.

1. The reference is specific to young men only since the first studies of youth do not identify a specific analysis of the characteristics of young women, they continue to be comprehended within women in general.
2. This categorization is an exercise based on the analysis of Lydia Alpizar and Marina Bernal. See: Alpizar, Lydia and Marina Bernal. *The social construction of youths*. Ultima Década Number 19. Viña del Mar. NPRDC November (2003).
3. Carlos Feixa. *Reloj de arena*. Causa Joven. Mexico (1995).
4. By youth civil society we understand young social activists, civil organizations and NGOs, youth movements and young researchers or scholars.
5. Important to note that we do not need to refer to youths perspective in plural, as it refers to the prospect and not the subjects. Compared with the gender perspective, we do not say "genders perspective" but gender perspective in the singular. In this sense the youth perspective does not eliminate diversity.
6. Ernesto Rodríguez. *Políticas Integrales de Juventud*. Instituto Nacional de la Juventud. Montevideo. March (1995).
7. It is an ethical responsibility that young people participate in any capacity as part of measures aimed at other young people.
8. *Ibid.*
9. We can find a definition of adulthood in: Alpizar, Lydia. *Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres Jóvenes y la Cedaw*. [Human Rights of Young Women and the CEDAW]. ILANUD / REDLAC. Mexico (2002).



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