



## How Community Leaders Can Help Young People Address Economic and Climate Crises

**Tania M. Schusler**, Loyola University of Chicago

In response to mounting crises posed by economic inequality and climate change, many local communities aim to develop economic opportunities that also enhance environmental sustainability and climate resiliency. Such conversations and planning processes involve professionals, policymakers, business leaders, funders, and other experts. Local people are another key but often missing set of participants, vital to envisioning and constructing sustainable, equitable, and resilient communities. And young people can be especially vital contributors. Local participants, including young residents, can offer valuable understandings of the dynamics of local places.

### Youth Civic Engagement Improves Communities

As the United Nations Population Fund reported in its 2014 *State of the World Population*, “Young people are about to inherit an enormous responsibility for resolving many long-standing complex problems, ranging from poverty to climate change, yet they have mostly been excluded from participating in the decisions that will determine what the future looks like. Young people must therefore have a say now in shaping the policies that will have a lasting impact on humanity and the health of the planet.”

In the United States, adults often view youth in terms of the future citizens that they will become rather than as present-day contributors to their communities. Rarely do decision-makers consult with youth about official actions related to land use, transportation, economic development, and other priority issues, despite the fact that such decisions affect young people’s health, recreational opportunities, mobility, and employment prospects. When given the opportunity, young people make valuable civic contributions that improve local communities. Youth civic engagement efforts encourage young people to develop their capacities to participate and collaborate with others to shape their communities.

Environmental action is one form of youth civic engagement. It involves collectively analyzing a social-environmental challenge and acting to solve it. In urban, suburban, and rural communities across the country, youth have contributed to physical environmental improvements by transforming vacant lots into urban farms or restoring native prairie habitats. They also have conducted research on environmental issues, presented policy analyses to state legislators, led community education programs, and produced value-added goods and services that contribute to local economies.

### Youth-Adult Partnerships Require Shared Decision-Making

Essential to youth civic engagement is the willingness of adults to share community decision making power with young people. Another term for this is a “youth-adult partnership.” Adults accustomed to being in control will likely experience tensions from shared decision-making. Navigating these tensions well is important to ensure that youth have genuine opportunity to participate in their communities in meaningful ways. Effective youth-adult partnerships combine young people’s experiences and creative insights with adults’ support and guidance to generate innovative possibilities for sustainable development. Furthermore, youth civic engagement involves a positive feedback loop. As young people help improve their communities, they also develop a range of assets that promote their own well-being. These assets, in turn, enable young people to participate more deeply in environmental or other community action.

### How to Foster Youth Engagement

Educators, community development professionals, planners, policy makers, and funders can facilitate youth participation in envisioning and creating sustainable, equitable, and resilient communities. The following principles should guide such efforts:

***Facilitate opportunities for genuine youth participation*** – Efforts must extend beyond simply inviting young people to be present in token ways. Adults need to create legitimate means for youth to have voice about the future of their communities — for example, by including them in the preparation of grant proposals to fund. Two useful references on facilitating genuine youth participation are Roger Hart's *Children's Participation* and David Driskell's *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*.

***Apply principles of positive youth development*** – Shift from a focus on reducing specific problems like drug use to building on young people's strengths, so they can develop new skills essential to well-being. According to a comprehensive review by the U.S. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, settings that promote positive youth development share similar characteristics: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for making effective contributions, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. Along with these eight characteristics, researchers have documented that helping young people define their identities facilitates youth environmental action and other kinds of civic activism.

***Critically reflect on each adult's role in sharing decision-making with youth*** – Within youth-adult partnerships, adults might have to deal with challenges such as stepping back to let youth lead and stepping in to keep a project on track or integrating youth interests with organizational goals. Navigating such matters involves structuring youth participation and supporting young people's efforts to deal with new decision-making powers. Adults can do this successfully by valuing reciprocal learning and recognizing the unique assets adults and youth both bring to joint endeavors. Adults can also pay attention and act to lessen power imbalances between themselves and youthful participants. This may mean following young people's lead even when they suggest a direction counter to adults' preferred routes. At the same time, adults must be transparent in communicating their own points of view. As the founder of a youth-driven environmental and community development organization states, "It is important for young people to be able to be in leadership and to sit with leadership."

To create more innovative strategies for community development that jointly further improvements in the economy, social equity, and the environment, community leaders of all kinds must facilitate opportunities for genuine youth participation. They must structure and engage in efforts that apply basic principles of positive youth development and thoughtfully share decision-making power with young people.

**Read More in** Tania M. Schusler, Marianne E. Krasny, and Daniel J. Decker, "**The Autonomy–Authority Duality of Shared Decision–Making in Youth Environmental Action**," *Environmental Education Research*, 24, no. 4, (2016): 533–552; Tania M. Schusler, and Marianne E. Krasny, "**Environmental Action as Context for Youth Development**," *Journal of Environmental Education*, 41, no. 4, (2010): 208–223.