

## Youth Extremism Series, Paper 2: Understanding Youth Engagement

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### Introduction

Globally, societies are at a crossroads. With over 3.5 billion youth and tens of thousands of communities in developing regions facing massive challenges brought about by limited access to education and socio-economic development opportunities, researchers, policy makers, and government bodies will either focus on creating access for these vulnerable populations or experience the consequences of ignoring this vast marginalized group. The number of youth (15-25 years of age) worldwide is at an all-time high. According to the United Nations, a third of the 7 billion people on Earth are age 15 or younger; half of all global citizens are under the age of 25. This demographic 'youth bulge' is unparalleled and further compounded by the fact that 85% percent of all youth live in less developed countries and areas. This reality creates an environment in which the active engagement of young people and their communities is essential for high impact capacity building, global security, gender equality, equal access to education for all, and a host of personal and socioeconomic development outcomes.

If ignored, this setting may likely signal a tipping point where failure to ensure youth engagement jeopardizes stable, civil societies worldwide. Most visible are issues of drug addiction, violence, early pregnancies, preventable disease, and most alarmingly, the increasing drift of disenfranchised youth to extremist and terrorist activities. Beyond the individual and community level, youth engagement has national and global implications.

When considering ways to combat youth extremism, it is important to understand what youth engagement looks like and how it can be used as a positive force to prevent anti-social behaviors among young people. Active engagement of youth in their communities is a critical part of maintaining a stable, civil, and productive society. It is important for young people to have defined and respected roles within larger society. A variety of forms and contexts of engagement exist, and program and policy makers should be aware of these varieties in order to best target approaches to engaging youth within specific settings.

#### Positive Youth Development & 4-H

The [4-H Youth Development Program](#) is a model program for the practice of positive youth development (PYD) in the US and worldwide. It creates positive learning experiences, positive relationships for and between youth and adults, positive, safe environments, and opportunities for positive risk taking. The program is implemented in the US through a partnership between the US Department of Agricultural and land-grant universities' cooperative extension services. The essential elements of the 4-H program include creating an environment where youth feel a sense of **belonging**, have an opportunity to **master skills**, practice **independence**, and develop a spirit of **generosity**. In the US, 4-H serves over 6 million youth. Globally, 4-H programs are found in more than 50 countries. 4-H has conducted a [longitudinal study of its PYD program](#) in the US since 2002. 4-H'ers in Grades 7-12 are nearly 4 times more likely to make contributions to their communities, and 4-H'ers in Grades 8-12 are about 2 times more likely to be civically active.

Before discussing specific strategies for engaging youth, it is useful to understand the ways in which youth engagement has been discussed and conceptualized. While youth engagement can be talked about as a way to prevent negative outcomes, the positive youth development movement has encouraged adults to think about the positive abilities of youth first, rather than considering youth as problematic (Lerner et al, 2005). Positive youth development emphasizes the benefits that youth and adults can have when youth are engaged in their communities and contributing to community life. Also, because those who study and work in the area of youth engagement come from very different disciplines, the discourses used to talk about youth engagement also differ slightly, and these distinctions are important. Political science, human rights, social work, and psychology are all fields that have helped develop the field of youth engagement and their perspectives differ about the purpose, goal, and strategies for engaging youth in social life.

## Understanding forms of engagement and opportunities for challenging extremism

Civic engagement is not a neutral concept, but rather encompasses a variety of perspectives about the relationships individuals have to their society. Different viewpoints carry different messages about the purpose of youth as citizens. Throughout research and literature about youth civic engagement, five key themes are evident. These invoke youth civic engagement and action as a desirable activity. While these viewpoints are not mutually exclusive, they each contain distinctive strands. These five perspectives are summarized in Table 1 below and were taken from the 2017 UN World Youth Report.

Discourse	Impact	Key Aim	Concern for ...	Desirable ...
Democratic citizens	Society	Participation	Recognition; voice; right	Engaged in decisions and influence
Justice	Society	Understanding and tackling injustice	Acknowledging root causes of structural inequality	Social justice
Self-Care	Self and Society	Build social support and resilience	Build strengths in adversity; Prevent escalation of problems; Increase protective factors	Supportive/more effective networks and programs
Positive youth development	Self	Idealized adulthood	Adaptation; Behavioral/ cognitive/ moral adaptivity; Life Skills	More socially adapted individuals for future adulthood; Social conformity; Less risky behaviors
Belonging	Self	Cultivate affective social inclusion	To increase attachments to place & others; build social capital – trust, networks, norms; Find spaces for sense of inclusion	Stronger connectedness; Better Interactions; Stronger youth-adult interdependencies

Table 1: Discourses Informing Civic Engagement (Dolan & Brennan, 2017)

## Understanding governmental, institutional, and grassroots approaches to youth engagement

While it is important to understand how to think about youth's engagement in their society, it is also important to understand forms of their disengagement in society. Elkman and Amná (2009) have developed a way to organize and understand different types of civic engagement and include disengagement as an important category. Their categories of civic engagement acknowledge that some people actively choose not to engage with political or social issues, some engage in social action, while others become involved in political action.

This way of thinking about civic engagement can help practitioners and policy makers consider ways in which youth may be engaged in social life without being involved in traditional political activities. Some engagement actions are "intended to influence circumstances in society that is of relevance to others, outside their own family and circle of close friends" (p.15) and these forms of engagement might set the stage for future political action. These categories can help those interested in youth civic engagement think about this engagement as a process rather than a fixed state. In this way, a young person's lack of engagement could be spurred into social action through interpersonal and informal relationships, and later emerge as political engagement. This process also reflects the development and learning that youth are undergoing cognitively and emotionally during this period of their lives.

Elkman and Amná's typology is useful in that it draws attention to the range of forms that youth civic engagement can take, of which conventional political participation is just one. International evidence suggests that youth are not apathetic or disinterested in civil society and politics, but that their engagements on issues occur in other spaces. Youth also engage in many issues in more ordinary and sometimes unique ways. The increased usage of social networking sites on the internet are recognized as forms of engagement by many youth, who feel they do not have a public space or public recognition factors in place to engage with others.

The goal of youth political engagement, therefore, should be to move disengaged youth along an engagement continuum from disengaged, to formal political participation and even activism. Individually and collectively, youth who are actively involved in and engaged with the political process will be less likely to become susceptible to violent extremist ideologies. Table 2 is a modification of Elkman and Amná's summary of forms of civic participation.

Form of Participation		Examples
<b>Non-Participation</b>	Active forms	Being antipolitical—choosing to remove oneself from politics
	Passive forms	Being apolitical—having no strong feelings about politics
<b>Civic Participation</b>	Social involvement	Giving attention to social issues
	Civic engagement	Engaging and acting on social issues
<b>Political Participation</b>	Formal political participation	Engaging in established political forms of action
	Activism	Engaging in new forms of political action, often to change the existing political situation

Table 2: Elkman and Amná's (2009) Typology of different forms of disengagement, involvement, civic engagement and political participation.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers interested in encouraging youth civic engagement:

- 1) **Understand and consider the type of youth engagement your organization or cause is most interested in fostering and why.** Be explicit about these goals and approaches when recruiting, training, or inviting youth to participate in programs or policies.
- 2) **Recognize that youth engagement may look different from adult engagement and that engagement is a process that can occur over time.** Focus on the development of social relationships among young people and their communities and these more active forms of civic and political participation may emerge naturally.
- 3) **When exploring reasons for youth disengagement, ask critical questions about whether the setting in question truly reflects youth interests and respects youth voice.** If the answer is no, consider strategies for improving the environment for youth and tackle issues of importance to them. Avoid faulting youth for disengaging in processes which do not serve their needs.

## References

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