Youth, Protests and the Polycrisis

Contents

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Synopsis

There has been a significant increase in global protests in recent decades, with students and young people at the forefront. This paper explores protests as a preferred method of political engagement by young people and an expression of their future aspirations. While cautioning about the risks, this report assesses the transformative potential of youth participation in protests, combining quantitative research and qualitative insights, including from young people themselves. These are our main findings:

Young people prefer informal to formal political engagement, such as through protests and direct action, and various factors and grievances drive youth mobilization. Youth activism often stems from a perception of marginalization, with diverse political, environmental, economic and social issues triggering protests. Protests on global issues, such as against climate change or racism, including through transnational youth-led movements, have increased.

Young people help to diversify protest tactics and bridge online and offline activism. Digital technologies and platforms have been increasingly used by youth, bringing innovation to protests, fostering inclusivity and lowering the costs of organizing movements, though not without risks. Online mobilization may aggravate digital divides, and is also subject to surveillance, harassment and repression.

Youth participation can contribute to more peaceful and inclusive activism, but even non-violent action faces pre-emptive repression. Most protests involving youth are peaceful, contradicting a misperception that young people are violent and unruly. Additionally, protests with youth participation are more inclusive and larger. At the same time, governments are more prone to repress mass protests pre-emptively and violently when they involve youth.

Youth participation contributes to protest impact and social change, but this does not necessarily produce direct gains for young people. Young people's participation in protests means less violent, larger, more inclusive and more innovative campaigns, and these elements contribute to higher impact. Mass protests where young people are on the front lines are more likely to be effective and to achieve positive outcomes in their aftermath. On the other hand, even when mass protests are successful, they do not seem to result in direct improvements for young people, suggesting a lack of youth involvement in the movements' decision-making.

It is difficult to predict future levels of protest, but the research also points to important **drivers of future activism:** past protest levels, increasing food prices, declining satisfaction with life, particularly among youth, and higher levels of urbanization. Based on these predictors, it is expected that demonstrations and youth participation in them will continue to rise. The young people involved in this report agree with this assessment and envision even greater use of digital technology in their activism. They aspire to become more proactive and professional protestors, continuing to rely on non-violent methods and enjoying greater public recognition for their positive role.

Youth protests can play an important role in the construction of better futures. By raising awareness of important issues in their societies, and by providing a platform for young people to share their political demands, youth protests can help to build public support for change. Activists, young and adult, as well as policymakers, should take measures to harness this potential.

Introduction

In the past couple of decades, concerned citizens have taken to the streets in record numbers, with students and youth at the forefront.[1] The proportion of people willing to participate in demonstrations has increased to its highest levels since the 1990s, and the number of protests has also risen in this period.[2]

There are many reasons that lead people to protest, and some are not new. In the past, activists also marched to voice their discontent about economic, social, environmental and political issues that mattered to them. But this recent protest wave is unfolding while civic participation is increasingly restricted. Over the past few years, multiple and overlapping crises – which some call the 'polycrisis' – have made children and young people more vulnerable, particularly those who are already marginalized.[3] These dynamics are likely to influence demonstrations and how youth take part in them.

The recent increase in protests raises concern but also hope. On the one hand, youth activism exposes the fractures between their aspirations and complex challenges facing the world. Protests can turn to unrest, lead to polarization, violence and human rights violations, and disrupt the economy and the provision of public services. At the same time, young people's mobilization is an expression of their agency to demand change and to present solutions, opening up the possibility of alternative futures.[4] Protests, particularly non-violent ones, can also contribute to democratization, greater transparency and better governance.[5]

This report delves into this transformative potential of youth protests, while cautioning about the risks. Although many analyses exist on specific youth protests, fewer studies have global coverage. This paper combines quantitative research on protests with qualitative insights, including from young people themselves, and compiles some of the most valuable global findings. We explore two questions: (1) what are the most relevant trends in youth protests, their context, motivations, methods and impact in the last two decades?; and (2) based on the main drivers of protests, what can we expect in the future?

Answers to these questions matter to young people and policymakers alike. A deeper understanding of the contributions of young people to protests would allow those concerned to fully harness the power of these events to bring about positive change. And by drawing on the creativity and imagination of young people, the world can be better prepared to confront the most pressing challenges of our time.

CHAPTER 1

Emerging trends in youth protests

Throughout history, students and young people have been at the centre of various social movements, campaigns and protests, as influential political actors. They have joined labour unions, led massive uprisings, protested against wars and contributed to national independence movements. Youth activism has shaped societies and changed the course of events in many countries.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, new trends that distinguish recent protests from those of the past have become more evident. Young people have played an important role in defining some of these patterns. Below we present the broader context of these new dynamics, but also the emerging motivations, methods and impact of this most recent wave of youth protests.

Protesting peacefully is a human right[6]

Protests, demonstrations, sit-ins and flash mobs that use non-violent methods are types of peaceful assembly. Children – i.e., individuals under 18 years of age – have the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, according to Article 15 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[7] All human beings are entitled to the same right in accordance with Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[8]

Peaceful assembly is an important way to express opinions and participate in shaping society. Children and young people have the right to protest peacefully regardless of their opinions, and as long as they stay within permissible restrictions. This right is interconnected with other rights, such as the right to be heard on matters affecting children, or the right to freedom of expression and association. As most children generally do not have the right to vote, this right is particularly important for them.

All people are entitled to protection during protests, but children in particular have the right to additional safeguarding. Children should not be forced to participate. They have the right to choose whether to join a protest and to receive guidance from a parent or legal guardian to make such a decision in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities. Paternalistic views in society, manipulation and co-option, as well as intimidation of protestors and crackdowns on protests, can further hinder children's ability to exercise this right.

Context

Young people prefer informal to formal political engagement

Across generations, the proportion of people who are interested in politics has remained steady over time, and more than half of respondents in polls have expressed this interest.[9] However, global analyses have shown in recent years that older and younger cohorts have different views on democracy as a platform for political engagement. Compared with older cohorts, youth have become increasingly frustrated by the inadequate performance of democratic institutions.[10] A recent survey in 30 countries found that 57 per cent of people aged 18–35 preferred democracy to other forms of government, compared to 71 per cent of those aged 56 and above.[11] Although researchers have not agreed on the reasons,

this dissatisfaction with democracy may be related to a perception of economic exclusion by young people in established democracies, and the persistence of poverty and corruption in developing ones.[12]

This frustration with democracy may be leading youth to exercise citizenship in different ways compared with adults. When it comes to political engagement, they favour informal means, such as protests, petitions or boycotts, rather than formal ones, such as being a member of a political party or voting in elections. An analysis of survey data collected from close to 1 million people in 128 countries from the early 2000s up to 2017 found that those under 40 were more likely to prefer informal political activities than those older than 40 (see Figure 1).[13] Some believe this is because young people have greater interest in issue-based politics and action that requires no intermediaries, rather than in traditional, institutionalized politics.[14]

Figure 1. Percentage of people interested in informal politics, from surveys in the 2000s compared with 2017
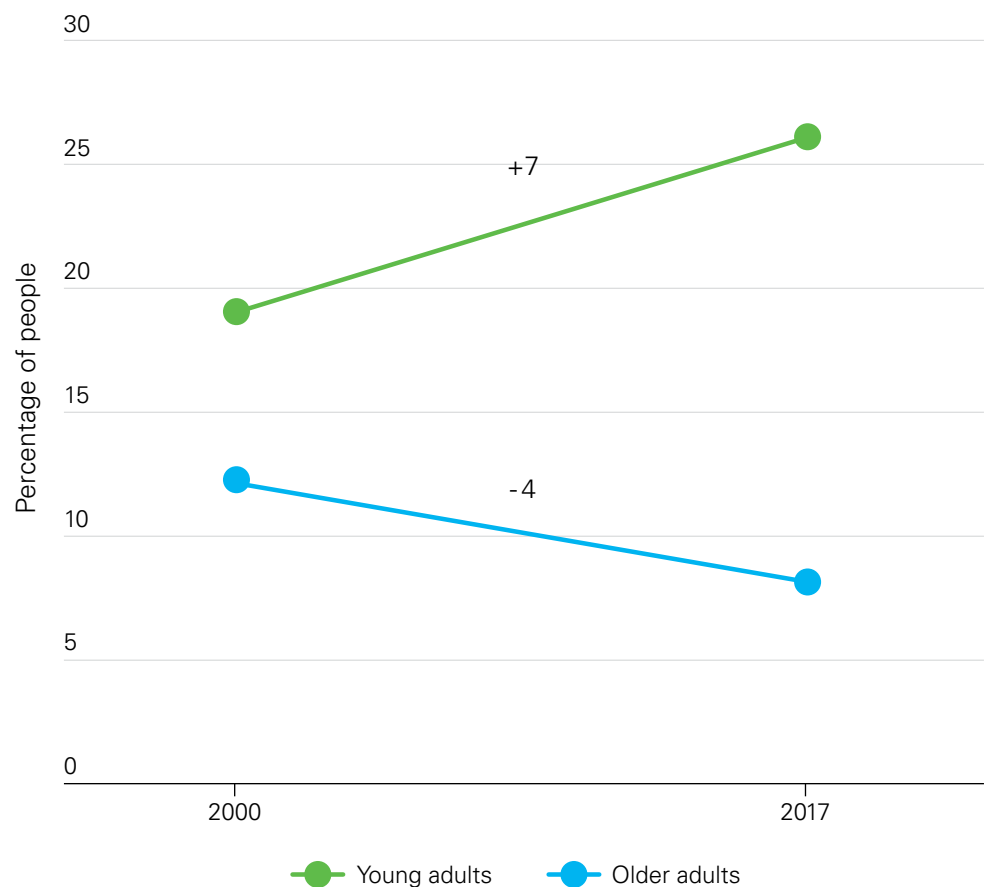
Source: Morrison and Tyree (2018).[15]

Younger people also seem more likely to protest than older people. This may be related to their inclination towards direct action, idealistic views on societal challenges, and relatively lower cost of joining demonstrations (since they have more time and fewer responsibilities) compared with older groups.[16] They may also face barriers to access the more formal mechanisms of political participation given their age.

Youth participation in civic action is important not only as the fulfilment of a right on its own, but also because it helps to sustain social movements over time.[17] Such movements offer them the opportunity to contribute to causes they care about, with more tangible results such as media visibility and policy changes.[18] In addition, becoming involved in activism at a young age can shape how someone takes part in social issues throughout their life.[19]

Understanding young people's participation in informal activism can thus shed light on their overall political engagement and aspirations. In addition, examining protests as a way to be politically active can offer additional insights given their quantifiable nature. Protests are usually measured as individual events based on news reports or as a series of larger mobilizations or 'campaigns' that take place over time. Most sources agree that these forms of direct mobilization have increased in the past two decades, reaching peaks in the early 2010s with the Arab Spring and just before the COVID-19 pandemic.[20]

Protests involving youth and students have also increased.[21] Youth participation and leadership at the front line of mass non-violent mobilizations, or mass peaceful protests aiming at regime change, have also grown since 1990.[22] In more than 80 per cent of these campaigns, youth represented at least 25 per cent of participants.[23] Figure 2 shows youth's increased front-line participation over time.

Figure 2. Percentage of youth front-line participation by campaign onset year, 1990–2019
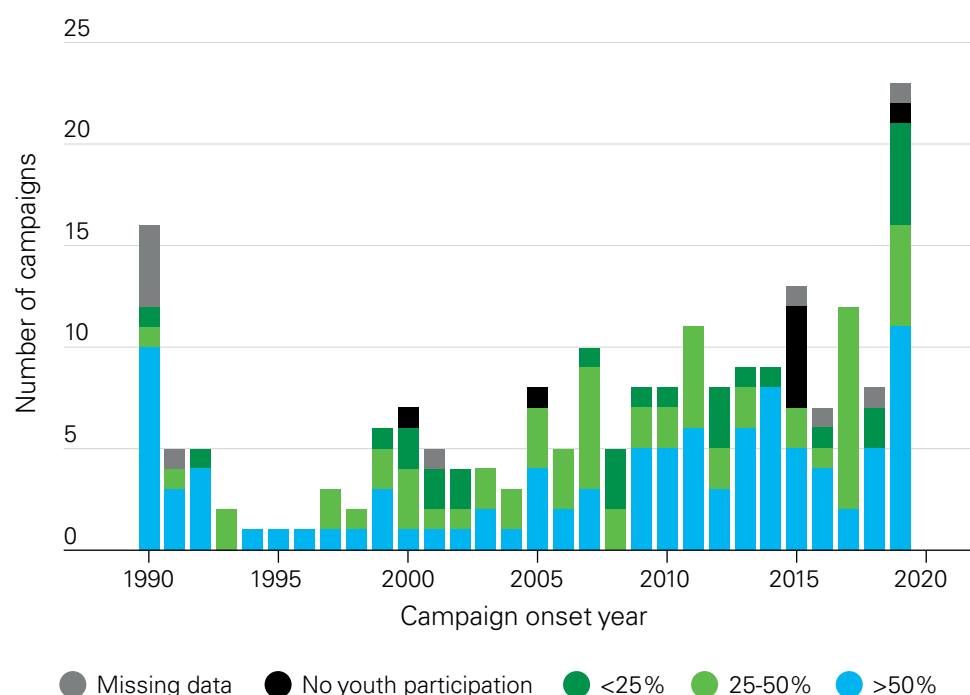
Source: USIP (2023).[24]

Motivations

Various factors and grievances drive youth mobilization

There are many factors that contribute to protests and to how people choose to protest. Certain cultural values (i.e., whether societies are more traditional or more self-expressive),[25] political opportunities (i.e., whether the political system is more or less open to protests), structural factors (such as the relative size of the urban population),[26] the human, financial or organizational resources available to protestors, and even individual characteristics (such as willingness to protest or education level)[27] impact protest rates. The research is not conclusive about which of these factors matters most: It is likely that a combination of these elements manifests differently in different contexts.

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The agency of protestors and their perceptions about the issues that justify civic action are important determinants of protests.[28] A commonly cited theory suggests that the economic, social and political marginalization of young people is at the root of current youth mobilization.[29] Some youth groups understand that this state of precarity is the result of a failure of States to provide benefits to younger generations that may have been enjoyed by previous generations.[30]

Available quantitative data do not discern a clear trend about the main grievances triggering youth protests globally or regionally. One qualitative analysis about global youth mobilization suggests that young people have been actively demonstrating on four main types of issues since the turn of the century: democracy and the working of institutions (global and national); environmental issues, in particular climate change; discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity and other grounds; and other more immediate youth-related issues, such as education, work and living conditions.[31] Many protests, however, combine demands across these categories.[32] In addition, some events may garner more attention, such as climate strikes or far-right protests, and this may skew public perspectives about young people's concerns, possibly reinforcing stereotypes.[33] Additional research into youth protest claims is important, since it could help to identify critical issues that matter to young people, as well as demands that shape our collective future.

Since the end of the twentieth century, social movements have increasingly organized national, regional and international networks, increasing the number of protests and other types of mobilization on global issues.[34] These include global protests against globalization at the start of the twenty-first century, against the economic crisis from 2007, demanding more action to tackle the climate emergency in 2019 or against racism in 2020. Qualitative evidence suggests that youth have been at the forefront of these global movements.[35] For instance, in 2019, following the example of Greta Thunberg in Sweden, millions of children and young people organized school strikes and protests across the world, calling for global action against climate change.[36]

People are more likely to protest on local events than global issues, but local grievances can also spread to neighbouring countries and spark movements across borders. In the early 2010s, mostly young people led a wave of popular uprisings in the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia, in response to corruption and economic stagnation. Protests quickly spread to other countries, including Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, and led to the overthrow of governments in some cases.

The global reach of youth protests, via global justice claims or diffusion across countries, also reflects the international collaboration fostered by young people. This collaboration results in the sharing of preferred ways of mobilizing, with similar patterns of space occupation, use of social media and more horizontal organizational cultures.[37]

Methods

Young people help to diversify protest tactics and bridge online and offline activism

In the past few decades, the ways in which activists and social movements organize have changed, and this has impacted protests. The internet has enabled rapid communication and collaboration. Social media has become ubiquitous in rallying support and sharing information. Crowdsourcing has magnified the opportunities for raising funds. Recent research has deepened our understanding of protest metrics and impact, prompting wider sharing of evidence-based lessons.

Young people have played a critical role in incorporating these different tactics for collective action. Below we focus on youth's contributions in using two main methods: digital activism and non-violent action.

Digital activism

People in many countries view social media and digital platforms as effective tools for influencing politics.[38] Hashtags convert individual messages into collective action and, through that, participants can claim new public spaces.[39] This technology has also lowered the costs for organizing events and disseminating information, helping to gather more support. Protestors increasingly resort to digital action, using new communication platforms to mobilize quickly, share information and prevent repression.[40]
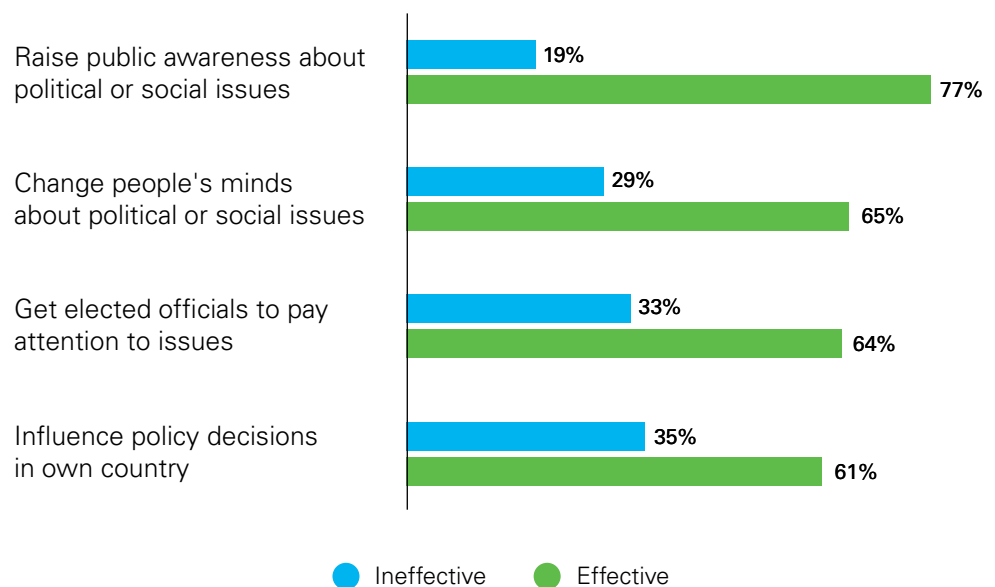
Young people have played a key role in diversifying movements' tactics, including through digital tools.[41] This diversification of methods to engage in civic action is crucial for the effectiveness of protests and movements, as it helps them adapt to challenging circumstances, such as in facing repression.[42] Creativity and innovation are important assets for impactful activism,[43] and young people have helped to make civic action more mobile and agile, often leading to more inclusive participation and decision-making. For instance, in Thailand in 2020, protestors used social media to put decisions to a vote and to inform members about the whereabouts of the police.[44] In the United States of America, the Black Lives Matter movement used videos and posts to document acts of injustice and demand accountability, attracting global attention. In other situations, common forms of in-person protest shifted to online spaces entirely, such as through website defacements or organized surges in traffic to targeted websites to make them crash, also known as 'virtual sit-ins'.

But online and offline engagement are not entirely separate.[45] Digital efforts – from the creation of content and art to online petitions and broadcast – support and complement in-person activism.[46] The internet and social media create 'connective action', mobilizing people to become active in social movements and to occupy public spaces.[47] During the 2010s, the Spanish *Indignados* and the Italian 5-Star Movement against corruption and the excesses of capitalism successfully used this hybrid approach: They maintained momentum and leveraged various media platforms to engage citizens in demonstrations, particularly young people, without relying on traditional media or established political institutions.[48]

Online mobilization is not without risks. Internet-based communications may aggravate existing inequalities in access to digital spaces, which prevent participation.[49] This type of action is also subject to surveillance and censorship, and leaves movements vulnerable to internet shutdowns.[50] Online activists may also be charged and detained. They can fall victim to disinformation campaigns and may face harassment and discrimination, especially if they represent or belong to marginalized groups, such as women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ individuals.[51]

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who say social media is an ineffective/effective way to do the following


	Ineffective	Effective
Raise public awareness about political or social issues	19%	77%
Change people's minds about political or social issues	29%	65%
Get elected officials to pay attention to issues	33%	64%
Influence policy decisions in own country	35%	61%

● Ineffective ● Effective

Source: Pew Research Center (2022).[52]
Note: Percentages are medians based on 19 countries. Those who did not answer are not shown.

Non-violent protests

Overall, protests and mass mobilizations have become **less violent over time.** A well-known platform monitoring political violence, ACLED, shows a significant gap between the rising number of protests (non-violent) and a stable number of riots (violent).[53] Despite the increase in violent flanks in non-violent mass protests calling for regime change since the 2000s, data on these campaigns also show a much larger number of actions that are overall non-violent than those that are violent.[54] This is important because campaigns, particularly non-violent ones, are more likely to succeed and can lead to more democratization and longer-term stability.[55] The impact of non-violent methods in protests will be discussed in more detail below.

**Figure 4. Number of non-violent and violent campaigns, 1900–2019**
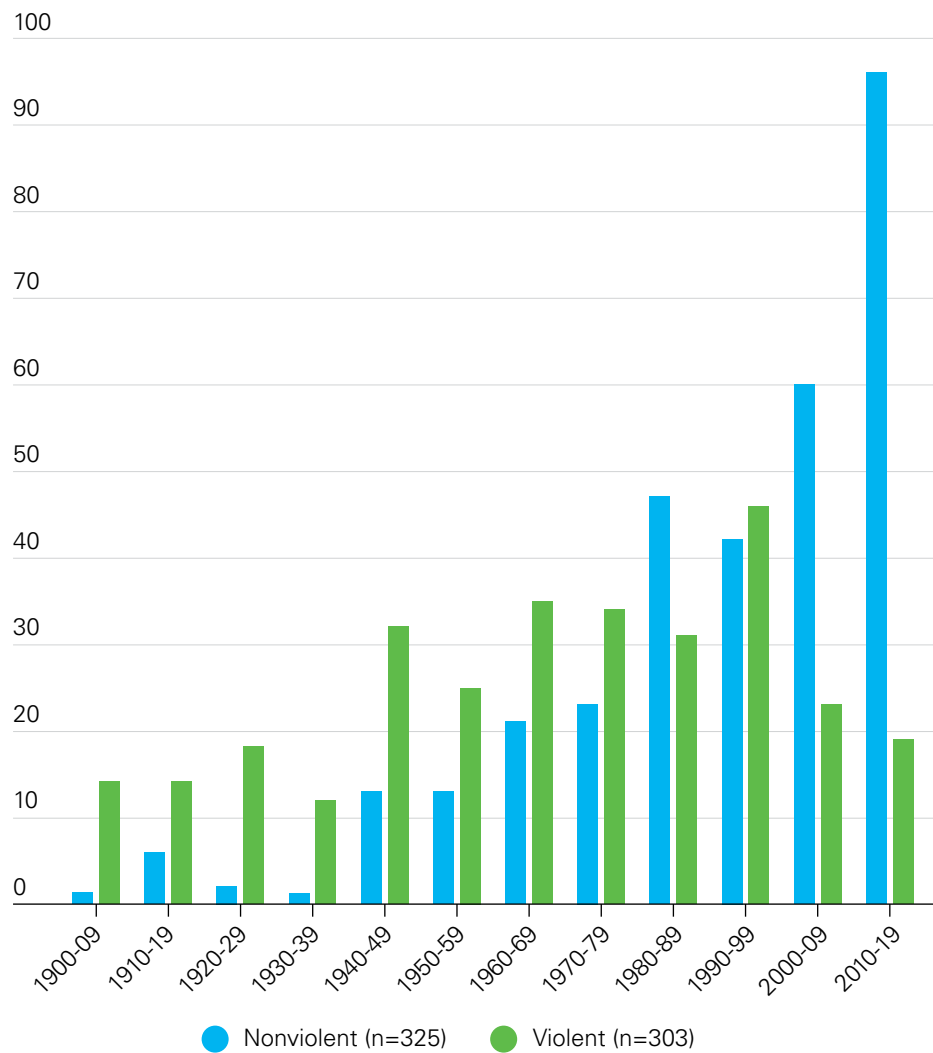
Source: Chenoweth (2020).[56]

Evidence on the relationship between young people and political violence is mixed. At the macro level, researchers have found a strong correlation between the proportion of youth in the general population and political instability.[57] At the same time, other experts exploring individual protest behaviour in democracies suggest that higher percentages of youth in societies increase the likelihood of peaceful protests.[58]

Studies assessing events that have taken place, however, show that the majority of protests involving youth are peaceful. In mass campaigns globally, student and youth participation decreased the chances that protests would turn violent, such as through vandalism or by attacks against the police.[59] In Latin America, researchers looking at more than 4,000 protests by college students between 2000 and 2012 found that only 11 per cent of them used violent tactics.[60] These findings contradict a common belief that youth are violent or unruly, which authorities often deploy to justify violent repression of protestors.

Figure 5. Probability of peaceful, disruptive or violent tactics in student protests in Latin America by protest size (in number of protestors), 2000–2012
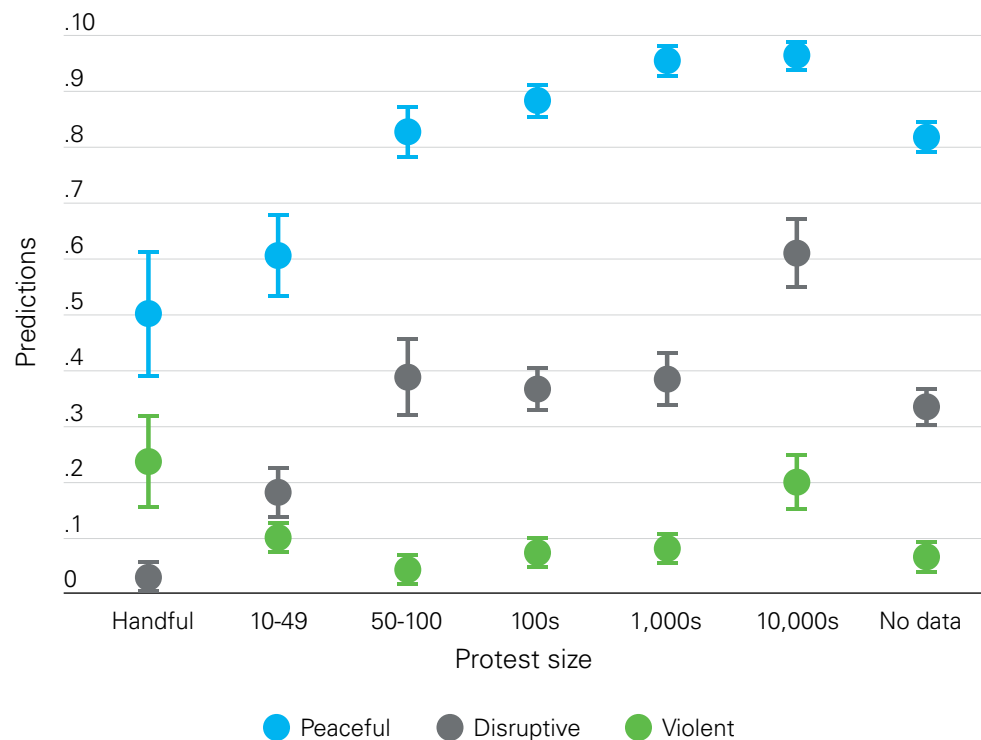
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The choice of non-violence, the size of protests and inclusivity are interconnected with youth participation. The same study on Latin America found that the size of student protests determined the methods used: Larger protests were generally more peaceful.[62] In hundreds of protests over more than a decade in Chile, researchers found that the participation of high school and university students helped increase the size of demonstrations.[63] Protests with significant youth participation also tend to include diverse groups and gather more people. A survey of people in Nigeria and India found that youth protests are more likely to elicit broader popular participation.[64] An analysis of case studies of youth activism and non-violent mobilization in Armenia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela concluded that youth-led movements had a positive impact in overcoming polarization, making movements more inclusive and building coalitions necessary for success.[65] Youth protestors are also more likely to bridge social divides and integrate participants with different profiles.[66]

But even when people protest peacefully, their activism and dissenting voices continue to face strong resistance from those in power. Despite international guarantees, authorities globally have taken similar measures to restrict civic space – i.e., the opportunity for civil society members to exist or challenge the status quo has been reduced. Detention of protestors, fear, intimidation, harassment and prosecution have increased,[67] and youth are demonstrating at great risk. The research on youth-led campaigns shows that governments are more likely to repress mass actions **pre-emptively and violently** when they involve or are led by youth.[68] The authors propose that governments mistakenly perceive youth participation as indicative of unrest.[69] In Iran, for example, mostly peaceful protests led by young women and girls since 2022, demonstrating after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini (Jina), have faced violent repression. Hundreds of people, including dozens of children and adolescents, have been killed, injured or detained.[70]

While repression harms protestors and deters activists from expressing themselves and assembling peacefully, attacks on civil liberties do not signal an end to activism. Civic spaces are not uniform; in fact, they vary significantly within countries, and some areas may be safer than others.[71] Restrictions transform resistance and shift the arenas of contention, including in online spaces. Even in fragile

settings, protests and other under-the-radar actions continue to happen.[72] During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, despite the risk of repression, individuals employed various tactics to join street protests in many parts of the world.[73]

Impact

There are different metrics to assess whether protests or certain protest methods are effective. This is also because demonstrations have different goals, from changing political systems, to prompting a policy reform, to attracting public attention. In addition, protests are typically organized by social movements, which tend to have longer-term goals beyond an impactful protest.[74] As a result, success manifests in various forms.[75]

Non-violent campaigns aiming at regime change are more successful than violent ones.[76] Non-violence prompts larger mobilization and this, in turn, increases resilience and legitimacy, diversifies tactics and prompts shifts in the loyalty of those supportive of powerful actors.[77] Larger demonstrations normally attract more attention from the media and the authorities, so protestors' demands are more likely to be heard.[78] Research on global protests, when counted as individual events, proposes that they tend to achieve more if they last longer and make more concrete demands, such as a specific policy change, rather than call for systematic transformation in society, such as ending racism.[79]

When assessing the wider repercussions of non-violent campaigns after their conclusion, the research points to the positive impact of youth involvement. Since young people's participation contributes to less violent, larger, more inclusive and more innovative campaigns, as explained earlier, it indirectly contributes to protest success. One study found that mass protests where young people are on the front lines are more likely to be more effective and to achieve democratic outcomes in their aftermath.[80] These campaigns are correlated with short- and long-term governance and equality gains, with more consultative decision-making.[81] The same research also found that successful, non-violent campaigns involving youth were correlated with lower infant mortality rates five years after the actions. Looking at infant mortality as a proxy for long-term development, the researchers suggest that youth-led campaigns can contribute to broader developmental and societal gains.[82]

But even when mass protests are successful, youth leadership does not seem to result in direct improvements for young people. Five years after campaigns were over, social indicators that would point to immediate benefits for young people, such as youth employment, did not improve.[83]

...But youth-led campaigns do not necessarily produce direct gains for young people

This suggests that youth may not be as involved in the movements' decision-making, during or in the aftermath of the actions,[84] as a result, their concerns are not addressed. Newly established government positions following regime change may also fail to integrate young people. Indeed, many young protestors feel their participation is instrumentalized for the political gains of other groups.[85] And young women tend to face even bigger challenges in influencing movements' decisions given pervasive barriers to gender equality.[86] In Sudan, despite the leadership of young people's groups – particularly women – in the nationwide protests of 2019, political parties dominated the negotiations that established the subsequent civilian government, later abolished through a coup in 2021.[87]

Future protest trends and youth perspective

Predicting protests and levels of youth participation is challenging. As mentioned earlier, there are many factors that lead to protests, and demonstrations often unfold unexpectedly. Changes in social, environmental, economic and political contexts – exacerbated in a polycrisis – as well as technology-based mobilizations, may trigger events very quickly.

This section is divided into two subsections. The first explores findings from quantitative research on indicators that are significant predictors of protests. Based on these analyses, it is expected that protests with youth participation will continue to rise. The second subsection presents young people's vision for protests and how they will participate in these events in the future. Protests are also changing in nature, and youth engagement has a role in this. We asked young people to reflect on future prospects and share their contributions.

Drivers

Some experts suggest that **past levels of protests** are the most significant factor in anticipating future uprising.[88] Even higher levels of political mobilization are expected in the coming years, including those with youth participation. Protests also spread across borders through diffusion, so this trend will likely affect not only the places that experienced many demonstrations in the past but also neighbouring countries and regions.[89]

Figure 6. Number of protests per 100 events, from 1995 to 2020

Number of protests per 100 other events
(4,15]
(3,4]
(2,3]
(1,2]
[0,1]
No data
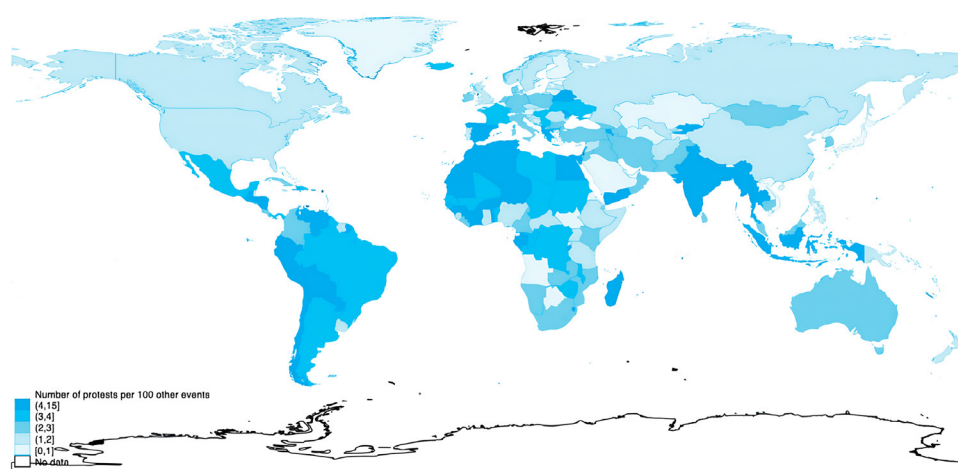
Source: Cantoni et al. (2023) using data from ICEWS.[90]

Food inflation is also a strong predictor of protest levels,[91] and the rise in food prices has long been linked to social unrest.[92] Indeed, when governments fail to provide the basic conditions necessary for citizens to maintain a decent standard of living, people are often compelled to take to the streets and demand change.

One of the defining aspects of the polycrisis is the cost-of-living crisis, and related protests have already increased. The economic recovery since the COVID-19 pandemic has been uneven, and challenges were aggravated by the war in Ukraine, resulting in a combination of global inflation and disruption in supply chains.[93] Between November 2021 and October 2022, more than 12,500 protests and riots against the cost-of-living crisis took place in close to 150 countries.[94] Students were involved in around 10 per cent of these events, and the main trigger was not only inflation but also energy and food shortages.[95]

With food prices remaining high even after a recent peak and still high energy inflation in most countries in 2023, a continuation of protests induced by these issues is likely.[96]

Figure 7. Food, fuel and cost-of-living protests
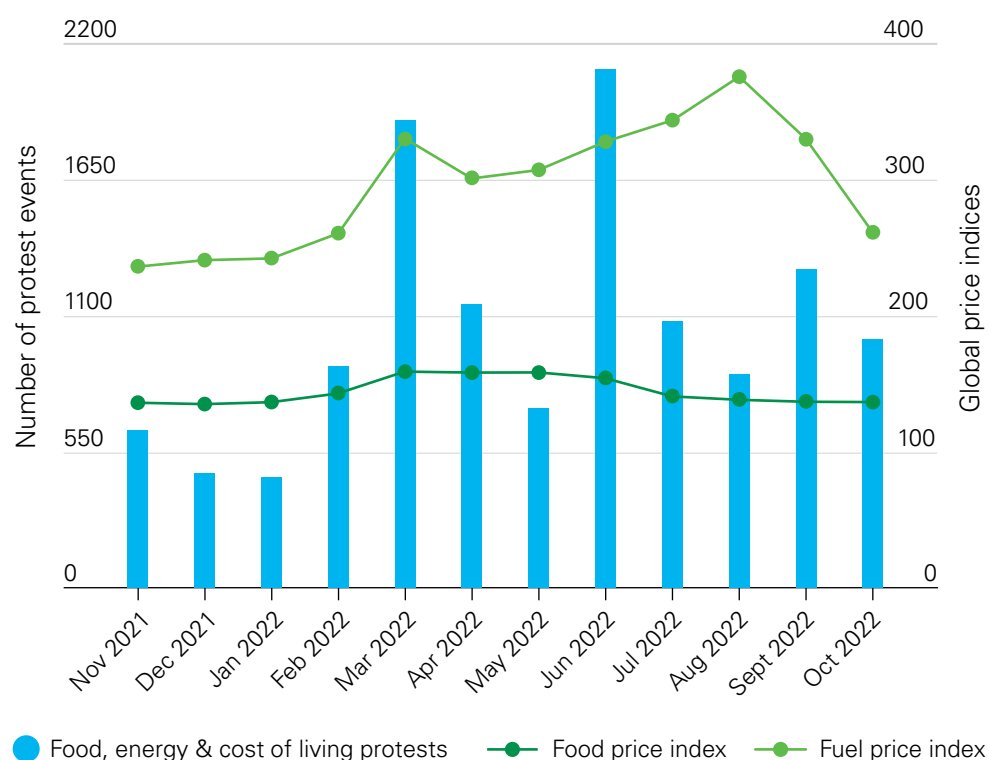
Note: FAO food price index averages indices of meat, dairy, cereals, oils and sugar. 2014-16=100. IMF Fuel (Energy) Index, 2016 = 100, includes crude oil (petroleum), natural gas, coal and propane. Protest events from authors' analysis of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).

Source: Hossain and Hallock (2022).[97]

Continuing decline in satisfaction with life suggests more protests

It is not only objective measures that trigger activism: **People's perception about their lives** and a sense of deprivation can also help predict protests. Using data on peaceful protests and strikes from 2007 to 2014 from 118 countries, researchers found that a decrease in subjective well-being strongly correlates with civil resistance.[98] Another study found that a personal sense of disadvantage among youth was a significant predictor of engagement in protests, according to cross-national data from 50 democracies.[99] For instance, between 2010 and 2019, there was a persistent decrease in both the current and future levels of life satisfaction among young people in Hong Kong.[100] In 2019, students represented the majority of people protesting against new extradition laws, unleashing a political crisis not seen in the city in many decades.[101]

There has been a steady decrease in average life satisfaction since 2006, but it is especially significant among 15–29-year-olds.[102] This highlights the importance of monitoring and addressing lower levels of subjective well-being and perceived disadvantage, especially among children and youth.

Figure 8. Global life satisfaction, measured on a scale of 0 (lowest satisfaction with life) to 10 (highest satisfaction)

● 15-29 years old   ● 30-49 years old   ● 50+ years old
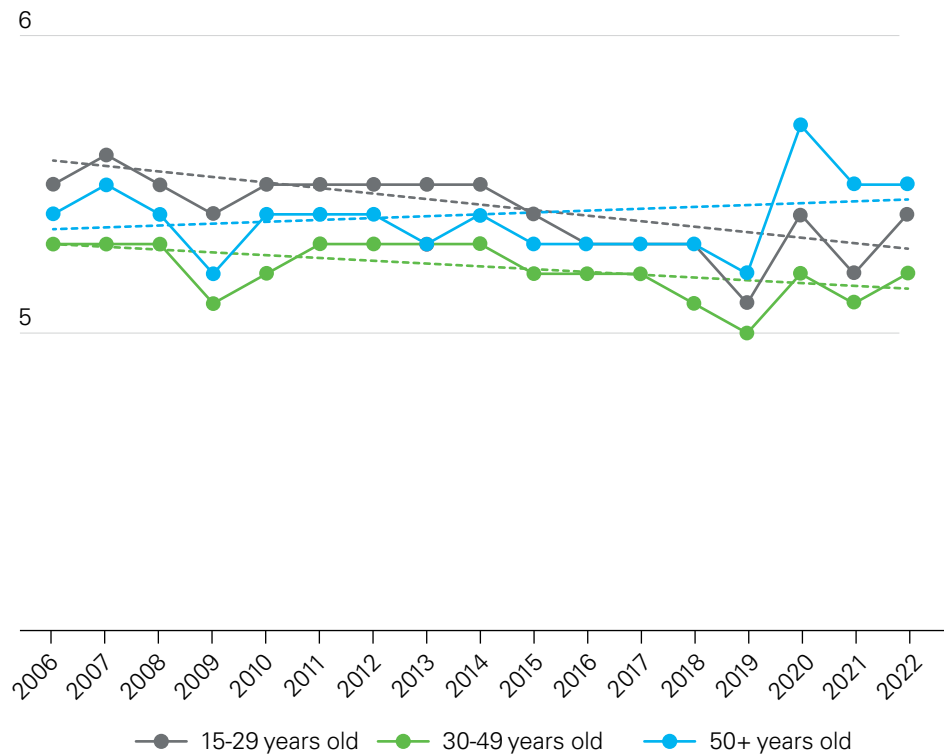
Source: Gallup (2022).[103]

Structural factors are also connected to protest rates, even though the changes they trigger are gradual and their impact is evident over the long term. People in urban areas are more likely to protest than people in rural areas because they have more resources, are more connected to each other and can gather more easily.[104] Cities offer spaces to mobilize larger groups and ramp up pressure by attracting media attention, disrupting public services and being close to policymakers. Similarly, young people, particularly students, can more easily organize, spread information about protests and recruit others to participate.[105]

Researchers assessing data from 1950 to 2010 in 98 countries found that the growing young population in urban centres was a strong predictor of protest activity.[106] By 2030, it is estimated that a majority of the urban population – 60 per cent – will be under the age of 18.[107] This is particularly relevant for developing countries, which are home to 85 per cent of the world's youth population,[108] and where urbanization rates are also increasing. With more young people in urban centres, the opportunities to join protests are also expected to rise.

Young people's vision of the future of activism and youth protests

This section was co-authored with 29 young participants in two online consultations carried out by UNICEF in June 2023 using a foresight exercise called 'Futures Triangle', a technique aimed at mapping the weights of the past, the pushes of the present and the pulls of the future. This vision reflects young people's aspirations about what activism, including protests, should look like in the coming decades.

Young people recognize the imminent threats to their future and expect that this will contribute to a surge in youth participation in protests and activism. The young generation understands that relying solely on adults to save the world is unrealistic, so a proactive approach is needed. They will become more confident, critical and professional advocates and will strengthen their capacities across different issues.

The weight of the past, including human rights violations, divisiveness, multidimensional poverty, cultural barriers and stigma against young protestors, exclusion of young people from spaces of power, media manipulation, limited democratic freedoms and shrinking civic space will gradually fade. At the same time, the push of the present towards collective action, a greater sense of community and common goals will drive young people to a future of engaged activism.

Science and research will guide young people, leading to evidence-based and preventative protests – i.e., mobilization to address emerging issues that will impact the future. Strong messages will find a new shape in more impactful methods, greater reactivity when facing injustice and a larger number of participants. Young activists will continue to rely on non-violent approaches, using civil disobedience – i.e., the peaceful refusal to respect a law

perceived to be unlawful – as their preferred method. The protection of protestors and their safe participation will be paramount, and international laws will be implemented to safeguard their rights. Protests will not be criminalized.

The future of youth protests will also witness an amplification of voices – particularly those that have been silenced – and will be more inclusive and more diverse. Protests will draw on young people's creativity, skills and artistic forms of expression. Technology will foster a merging of traditional and digital platforms, and more 'virtual protests' are expected, reaching even more people. Technological innovation will convert information into collective knowledge and foster democratic consultations. Digital activism will be an important weapon against totalitarian governments and regressive movements. Social media will lead to more interaction across countries and more effective decision-making mechanisms.

Local, national and international organizations (including UNICEF) will hold governments to account when it comes to youth mobilization and will call for hearings with protestors so that their claims are heard. Young people will also receive the support they need to engage in civic participation more effectively. The public will recognize youth protestors as a catalyst for positive change, not as criminals. Media transparency and unbiased reporting will provide an accurate depiction of social events triggering protests.

Youth and adults will be seen as equals in running the world's affairs, with young voices resonating both locally and globally. Young people will take a more active role in shaping public policy and government decisions, including through their involvement in grassroots movements, voting and via more young politicians and representatives. Wide networks of partners and allies will strengthen the sense of community and activate international advocacy networks. Partnerships between youth activists and government bodies will increase trust, enabling meaningful intergenerational dialogue and institutionalizing participation. This collaboration, improved legislation and policies on youth participation will slowly eradicate adult-centrism. Prompted by youth activism, better strategies will strengthen institutions that protect human rights and bolster an enabling environment for all actors wishing to make positive contributions.

In this envisaged future, young people will emerge as leaders, and their voices will have power in more concrete ways. With a collective sense of purpose, they will steer societies towards a more just, inclusive social order.

Recommendations

The growing involvement of young people in protests is changing what it means to be politically active.

Protests are a popular way of addressing collective issues and challenging powerful actors. The number of protests worldwide has risen in the past couple of decades, and young people are leading the charge. This trend is expected to continue in the current context of multiple, and more complex, crises.

The growing involvement of young people in protests demonstrates their interest in direct action with more immediate results. This is changing how politics is done and our understanding of what it means to be politically active. Youth increasingly prefer public and everyday acts rather than contributing to traditional institutions and processes. Indeed, protesting is a political action. Policymakers will need to become more responsive to this dynamic form of political engagement, improving the mechanisms through which they listen to young people and address their concerns.

Youth involvement in protests is also strategic for social movements. Youth bring innovative methods to call for change and mobilize action, strengthening and sustaining movements, and contributing to their inclusiveness and success. While limited data on demonstrators' ages hinder the understanding of the involvement and contribution of children – i.e., individuals up to 18 years of age – it is possible to hypothesize that they also contribute to more peaceful and impactful protests, but more research is needed. Activists must ensure that their mobilization and organizations become more welcoming spaces and prevent harms for children and young people, both online and offline.

Ultimately, youth protests can play an important role in the construction of better futures.

Ultimately, youth protests can play an important role in the construction of better futures. By raising awareness of important issues in their societies, and by providing a platform for young people to share their political demands, youth protests can help to build public support for change. Activists, young and adult, as well as policymakers, should take measures to harness this potential.

Our recommendations below aim to balance the transformative potential of young people's activism with the need to safeguard children's and young people's rights and well-being.

Recommendations for government stakeholders, including policymakers

- **Listen to and act on the demands made by children and young people, including those that may lead to protests.** Ensure the creation of platforms for youth and child participation in formal spaces (such as community or youth councils, youth parliaments or forums, youth advisory boards) but – importantly – also through informal means, which are preferred by young people (such as through direct consultations and surveys). This will encourage their meaningful participation in the design, monitoring and implementation of legislation, policies and plans related to issues that matter to them.

- **Actively engage with children and young people involved in protests as a rich source of anticipatory insights and futures thinking.** Governments should ensure they integrate children's and young people's demands, including in relation to environmental, social and political issues, into anticipatory policymaking – i.e., policies to tackle future risks before they emerge. By establishing inclusive platforms for dialogue, policymakers can tap into the aspirations and concerns of children and young people, and collaboratively envisage policies that align with these ambitions through a proactive approach.

- **Take measures to ensure governments facilitate children's and young people's rights to peacefully protest and to express their views.** This also means that governments must refrain from interfering with those rights and must provide adequate protection to those who engage in peaceful protests.

- **Do not interfere with children's and young people's right to peaceful assembly based on perceived or actual risks.** Participation in peaceful assemblies is unlikely to fundamentally compromise children's education and prospects. Governments must empower children and young people to be able to exercise their rights and to counter co-option and manipulation by adults. Government surveillance of protestors should uphold human rights principles, including in digital spaces, and never be used to retaliate against activists.

- **Do not prohibit, block, disperse or disrupt peaceful protests unless on legitimate grounds.** Legitimate grounds are: 'the interests of national security'; 'public safety'; 'public order'; 'the protection of public health or morals'; or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.[109] For example, children and young people should never be arrested or detained simply for taking part in a peaceful protest. Also, governments should not block or otherwise hinder internet connectivity in relation to peaceful activism.

- **Prioritize the prevention of violence during protests.[110]** If a protest becomes violent and force must be used, it must be necessary and proportional. Only trained officials should police protests. Firearms should only be used in strict circumstances, and less-lethal weapons only as a last resort. Containment ('kettling') should be used only when necessary and proportionally. Injuries and deaths from the use of force must be investigated under the law.

Recommendations for activists and members of social movements and other organizations mobilizing for protests

- **Engage with young people and children as equal partners in decision-making before, during and after protests, and articulate a concrete ask.** Activists and members of social movements should create and maintain platforms for youth and child participation in formal and informal spaces.[111] Young people and children should be supported to take part in the selection of tactics as well as in broader strategic choices for the movement.

- **Take all measures to prevent violence during protests.** Non-violent protests are more likely to succeed and gather support.

- **When involving individuals under the age of 18 years old in protests:** conduct a risk assessment; design risk mitigation measures and steps to respond to incidents; and ensure compliance with child safeguarding procedures, in line with the best interest of the child.[112]

- **Build the awareness and strengthen the skills of young people and children to promote their participation and civic engagement, especially those most marginalized.**[113] This should include an understanding of the rights and the protections afforded to them in national and international law.

- **Create a positive environment and promote positive social norms around young people, children, civic engagement and their participation in protests.**[114] As shown above, despite misconceptions about links between youth protests and violence, young people can contribute to more peaceful and more successful demonstrations.

- **Build the awareness and strengthen the skills of adults** to promote youth and child participation, ensuring the creation of more inclusive spaces.[115]

Clarification on terminology

Children certainly participate in protests, often in large numbers. UNICEF's mandate is centred on **children**, defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as individuals below the age of 18. UNICEF also advocates for **adolescents** – i.e., individuals aged 10–19. The United Nations defines **'youth'** as persons aged 15–24, and UNICEF considers **'young people'** those aged 10–24.

This paper focuses on **'youth'** and **'young people'** due to the limitations of the existing research; these two terms are used interchangeably. The sources cited in this paper do not define these terms consistently, so the age brackets vary and sometimes are not reported. Existing research does not provide sufficient evidence regarding children's participation in protests for a comprehensive analysis such as the one presented here. As a result, we relied on sources primarily focusing on 'youth' protests or campaigns, and sometimes on 'student' protests, defined as individuals attending school or higher education. At the same time, we acknowledge that some studies on university students may include individuals above the age of 24.

The lack of information on the age of people participating in demonstrations, therefore, makes it hard to reach global conclusions about children or adolescents. We hope that future work will address this gap. It is possible that children's participation also follows the same pathways of young people's activism in making movements more peaceful, bringing more supporters and contributing to positive impact, as shown in this paper, but this hypothesis should be properly tested.

Protests – or in-person gatherings in public spaces – include marches, demonstrations, sit-ins or parades, amend to publicly express contentious views and attract the attention of different groups in society, such as authorities, the media and others. UNICEF defines **'participation'** as a process through which individuals express their views and influence matters that concern them.[116] By **'civic participation'**, 'civic' or 'social mobilization' or 'civic action', we mean "participation in public spheres to improve the well-being of communities or society", including through protests.[117] In this paper, we also refer to **'activism'** along similar lines, though this engagement typically takes place through direct action for a social goal, often defying social norms and traditions.[118] **'Social movements'** are more organized efforts by a group of people who engage in collective action with a shared goal or vision. Protests are one of many tactics used by young people and social movements to engage in civic participation and activism.

In the quantitative work cited in this presentation, **protests** are usually counted as **individual events**. The sources using this methodology typically rely on media reports to produce these figures. Data on individual protests can become available more quickly, but data sets can be biased towards news reports in a few languages, and sometimes lack details on the profile of organizers and on the consequences of protests. We also refer to findings from researchers that investigate **'maximalist non-violent campaigns'**, 'mass protests', 'mass campaigns' or 'mass actions' for short. These consist of several events over time that: (1) do not resort to violence or, when they include 'violent flanks', violence is rejected by the larger movement; (2) aim to "pursue regime change, secession or newly autonomous states"; and (3) involve more than 1,000 people over time.[119] These conditions mean that the sample sizes of campaigns are smaller. And while regime change is only one of the reasons that lead young people to demonstrate, the sources investigating these campaigns offer more details about the profile of participants, success and post-campaign impact.

Methodology

This paper aims to provide insights and preliminary findings on youth and their involvement in protests. The author did not delve deeply into all aspects of youth protests, but this approach allowed for the identification of the most salient trends and patterns.

This work draws primarily on a desk review of more than 100 academic studies, books and reports from think tanks, most of them published since 2000. The selection of sources was conducted through online searches, mainly in academic databases, focusing on peer-reviewed articles about 'youth' or 'student' protests in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. The quantitative findings are drawn from sources using large global samples, in most cases involving more than 100 countries, as they enabled us to derive more generalized conclusions and global trends. In cases where the articles cited use samples restricted to a smaller group of countries – such as democracies or a specific region – this distinction is made explicit in the text.

Young people consulted by UNICEF also offered valuable insights which supported this research, recommending additional topics of investigation and asking valid questions *(see details in the 'Acknowledgements' section).* The section entitled 'Young people's vision of the future of activism and youth protests' was co-written with them.

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