



Youth Voices from the Frontlines: Facilitating Meaningful Youth Voice Participation on Climate, Disasters, and Environment in Indonesia

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Abstract

In Indonesia children and youth are often impacted the most by disaster, environmental degradation, and a changing climate in ways unique to them. Yet in discussions to address specific impacts, they are rarely part of formal decision-making even when their participation is promoted as a foundational expression of child rights. The reason for such absence is rarely that young people have little to contribute as youth are often passionate advocates for change interested to identify, explain, and act on issues important to them. What is more likely to be lacking are opportunities to learn youth-friendly techniques and tools for exploring and sharing their concerns, as well as access to decision-makers open to hearing and responding to what they have to say. In support, there is a growing interest by

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development organizations in using participatory media as a collaborative, exploratory storytelling process that can amplify youth voices in policy spaces as a way to rebalance decision-making power. Such interest was at the core of a 2016–2017 initiative in Indonesia entitled *Youth Voices from the Frontlines*. This paper offers insight from the initiative for promoting meaningful youth participation in governance such as ensuring adult participatory media facilitators have sufficient training, mentorship, and organizational support and that social mobilization projects are adequately resourced for meaningful dialogue and listening interactions critical for building influential youth voice. Creating such environment can support youth in tackling the issues they decide are most pressing to them – in this case, flooding, polluted rivers, fire, pollution haze from peat fires, and more.

Keywords

Disasters · Climate change · Youth engagement · Capacity building · Community digital storytelling · Child rights · Advocacy · Voice · Listening

Facilitating Meaningful Youth Participation

In Indonesia children and youth are impacted by disaster, environmental degradation, and a changing climate in ways contextually relevant to their subject positions and surroundings (UNICEF 2015). As one example, children breathe at twice the rate of adults, so they face a disproportionate health risks from the impacts of the air pollution from the peatland fires that occur in Kalimantan, Indonesia (UNICEF 2016a). Similarly, due to their age and development, they are more vulnerable to hunger and malnourishment during floods and droughts (ibid). In response, multiple development strategies are required not only to secure child rights to safe environments but to promote their meaningful participation in decisions that directly affect their lives (Ruiz-Casares et al. 2017; UNICEF 2017). Participation is used here in relation to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which highlights children’s rights for their views to be seriously considered in governance decision-making (United Nations General Assembly 1989). The focus on meaningful child participation as a human right means that youth-engaged initiatives go beyond merely consulting youth and amplifying their concerns. Youth must also be adequately supported with the appropriate tools, knowledge, and resources to actively engage with issues, offer their own solutions, and be sufficiently heard, valued, and responded to (Lundy 2007; Plush 2015; UNICEF 2017). Youth, in this case, refers to young people aged 15–24 as per the United Nations universal definition (United Nations 2018a).

Globally there is a growing interest in and use of participatory media to engage youth and connect their voice to policymakers, especially as a strategy for disaster risk reduction (DRR) and reducing climate change impacts (Fletcher et al. 2016; Haynes and Tanner 2015; Plush 2009). As an example, UNICEF’s Disaster Risk



Fig. 1 Flood in a participating youth's Badung neighborhood. (Photo by Nurul)

Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Unit developed the 2016–2017 *Youth Voices from the Frontlines: Community Digital Storytelling (CDST) for Social Change* initiative in Indonesia to enhance dialogue and response between young people, communities, and decision-makers on topics of climate, disasters, environment, child rights, health, and well-being (UNICEF 2016b) (Fig. 1).

This article explores the *Youth Voices* initiative to offer insights into using participatory media as a strategy to increase youth participation in decision-making. The initiative was implemented as part of the Children in a Changing Climate (CCC) coalition in Indonesia (Globally CCC is a partnership of five child-centered development and humanitarian organizations: ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, and World Vision International). The workshop focused on strengthening youth voice at scale across the region by training 11 CCC network members and 14 young people from 10 organizations to apply the CDST methodology (including ChildFund; Plan International Indonesia; Yayasan Sayangi Tunas Anak, Save the Children; Climate Warriors; Pramuka [Scouts]; Wahana Visi Indonesia [WVI, World Vision]; National Youth Forum [FAN]; Youth for Climate Change Indonesia [YFCC]; Youth Network on Violence Against Children [YNVAC]; and Sinergi Muda). The initiative was co-designed and facilitated by an international consultant and PannaFoto Institute staff in Jakarta, delivered in Bahasa, and supported through PannaFoto staff mentoring and a CDST training manual in English and Bahasa developed specifically for the initiative participants.

Using Story for Social Change

The *Youth Voices* network initiative used Community Digital Storytelling (CARE 2015b) as a process to engage and mobilize youth affected by the impacts of disaster, environmental degradation, and a changing climate. This included directly working with more than 300 youth across Indonesia in rural areas affected by air pollution caused by land and forest fires and carbon emissions, as well as urban areas affected by flood, drought, and river pollution (Fig. 2).

CDST is a creative participatory media process – directed by young people in this case – aimed at catalyzing action within a community. Photo-based videos are produced through collaborative processes in which facilitators and youth participants generate stories together using different creative forms of communication and expression such as photography, narration, and music. As a core value of the CDST process, storytellers own the stories they produce and have the ability to make informed choices about the content, production, and use of their work. In the Youth Voices project, ownership processes for youth participants were guided and agreed upon through action plans developed and reviewed as part of ongoing mentorship support to facilitators.

The intention of CDST is that story development and sharing processes of research, reflection, dialogue, engagement, and mobilization strengthens the knowledge and self-confidence of participants on a pathway for more engaged citizenship (CARE 2015a). The process is built on core values that align with participatory development and communication for social change literature, including:



Fig. 2 A West Kalimantan youth photographs her environment as part of her CDST photo-video. (Photo by Ng Swan Ti)

- It is *community-driven* where youth are equal production partners in storytelling (Milne et al. 2012; Servaes 2013; Shaw 2015).
- It is *flexible and embedded* within organizational structures and networks to enhance ongoing empowering initiatives (Gaventa and Barrett 2010; Waisbord 2008).
- It is *aware and respectful* of cultural, social, and political contexts to support complex processes of social change (Cornwall et al. 2011; Walsh 2016).
- It supports *dialogue and listening* as key components for meaningful youth participation (Dutta 2014; Dobson 2014; Waller et al. 2015).
- It is mindful of making *appropriate technology choices* in the type of media to use to enhance local capacity and minimize power imbalances so the least heard can participate (Askanius 2014).
- It is vigilant about ensuring *informed consent* as well as an environment free of harm for people sharing their stories (Cornwall and Fujita 2012; Wheeler 2011).

Participatory media initiatives like CDST hold promise for meaningful youth participation in decision-making, which can be especially empowering for young people living in poverty or vulnerable situations who may struggle to have their voices heard due to multiple factors (Gidley 2007; UNICEF 2017). For instance, they may not speak the official language being used in decision-making forums (CARE 2015a). They may have restricted access to local, regional, or international policymaking spaces or lack the confidence to raise their voice with more influential people in society (Coudry 2007; Sparks 2007). They may be restricted by gender, social, or cultural norms or affected by stigma (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Dasgupta and Beard 2007). Here, participatory media offers potential to build youth awareness, increase self-confidence, and mobilize young people when positioned alongside strategic, comprehensive, and supported activities for youth engagement (Milne et al. 2012). Such actions are globally understood as imperative for addressing disasters and climate change, as illustrated in the child-centered adaptation approaches promoted by the United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change as part of the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (United Nations 2018b; article 6; United Nations General Assembly 2016).

Developing CDST as an Adaptable Approach

Supporting CDST facilitators to implement participatory media processes both in the long-term and in their own contexts was deemed critical in the design of the *Youth Voices* initiative – especially in training multiple organizations focused on youth, climate change, and DRR. Thus, in addition to providing ongoing mentorship after the initial training workshop, the workshop trainers developed a CDST guide in English and Bahasa that responded to how participants planned to use the methodology. It included steps so participants could adapt the process to the various contexts in which they work (see Table 1).

Table 1 Youth voices from the frontline: steps in the guide for using community digital storytelling for social change (UNICEF 2016b)

Prepare for CDST	Facilitators analyze issues of risk for youth to determine if CDST is appropriate Facilitators ensure they will have sufficient time, resources, and management support for a CDST initiative Facilitators and youth participants determine how to monitor and evaluate the initiative
Use photography to identify key themes	Facilitators build youth photography and media ethics skills Youth take photos on the topic they are exploring Facilitators print the photos for story development (printing helps to equalize power in the group) Youth sort the photos together to develop key themes for further exploration for the final story
Develop the story	Youth determine who should hear their story, including what they want viewers to see, think, feel, discuss, and do? Youth take more photos to expand their story; ensuring the photos adhere to ethics and have proper consent Youth prioritize the top photos Facilitators print the photos for collaborative storyboarding Youth develop a script to match their storyboard Youth attain photo and script approvals from key stakeholders
Produce photo-videos	Based on feedback, youth finalize the script and record the narration Youth select emotive copyright-free music, or record music Facilitators and/or the youth technically produce the photo-videos Youth review and approve the final photo-videos, and seek final approval from stakeholders
Strategically use photo-videos to engage youth and decision-makers	Facilitators support youth in connecting them to decision-makers Youth develop questions to accompany the photo-videos Youth use the photo-videos to spark dialogue on the topics with people they want to influence Youth use social media to engage audiences as appropriate Facilitators and the youth use the photo-videos for advocacy as per a youth-approved strategy for dissemination Facilitators and the youth review the photo-video use against monitoring and evaluation objectives to assess impact, making changes as needed

The CDST steps are designed to explore and address youth concerns through young people telling their own stories in their own voice and language (Fig. 3). As a driver of social change, they incorporate techniques to negotiate power within the group that might marginalize some youth. For example, the CDST process encourages facilitators to print the photos youth have taken to create the story structure rather than using digital photos on a computer for story development. This is strategic to ensure that less technically adept youth are able to fully engage during story development as the group sorts, prioritizes, and arranges the printed photos into a storyboard – which may not occur if the photo selection is done on a computer (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3 Young people narrate their story as part of a Pramuka initiative in Bogor. (Photo by Edy Purnomo)



Fig. 4 Youth learn the CDST storyboard process with photos at the Jakarta workshop. (Photo by Ng Swan Ti)

As another example, CDST prioritizes strategically working with young people to reach different audiences according to whom they want to influence. The focus on generating meaningful response is critical, as merely holding an event to show the youth photo-videos cannot guarantee sufficient response to youth concerns and could even be harmful if decision-makers fail to respectfully and responsively listen (Kindon et al. 2012; Ruiz-Casares et al. 2017). Considered effort by supportive adults is often required for youth to enter the complex arenas of local governance and be heard in ways that can lead to meaningful social change (UNICEF 2017).

Championing Youth and Their Stories

Through the Youth Voices CDST initiative, youth across Indonesia created 16 independent stories on the themes of climate change, disaster risk, and issues of child rights, health, and well-being. The photo-videos focused on flood prevention and warning systems, cleaning up polluted rivers, fire detection, and responding to air pollution from slash-and-burn practices. The young people also shared their concerns and ideas with their peers and decision-makers locally and nationally at various events. A few examples include a youth storytelling peer learning event in Jakarta (Plan International Indonesia); a screening with health, education, and child protection government representatives (Wahana Visi Indonesia); a photo-video showing with health, agriculture, education, and social affairs government representatives (ChildFund); a school discussion event (Climate Warriors) (Fig. 5); and story sharing at the national Pramuka (Scouts) Jamboree.

Within participatory media initiatives, skilled facilitation, and a contextually informed vision are necessary to ensure meaningful engagement and influential voice in policymaking (Plush 2016; UNICEF 2017). Accordingly, the *Youth Voices* initiative took steps early to ensure organizational support for the initiative and the trained facilitators. For instance, the training included developing action plans with both the facilitators being trained and their managers. Even so, only six of the nine implementing organizations who participated in the workshop were able to fully complete all steps within the CDST process. Time availability, sufficient resources, and ongoing organizational prioritization for CDST were identified as the key challenges for CDST facilitators. In one case, for example, the trained facilitators were unable to complete the CDST activity and handed it over to other staff members. The untrained facilitators struggled to understand and fully implement the storytelling process according to the CDST values, specific steps, or in adherence to media ethics and copyright law taught in the workshop.

Other organizations struggled with the initiative's flexible timeframe that allowed organizations to fit CDST into ongoing program activities as appropriate. Here, the non-binding commitment appeared to work best within established, child-focused, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) with a wide base from which to allocate



Fig. 5 Youth attend a Climate Warriors photo-video screening in Bandung. (Photo by Deden Iman)

resources as needed. In addition, internationally supported NGOs were often well-equipped to connect the youth participants to local, provincial, and national decision-makers in Indonesia with potential to respond due to internal communication and advocacy efforts. The implication in the *Youth Voices* initiative was that CDST proved the most sustainable when embedded into ongoing youth programs with dedicated facilitators equipped to support the entire storytelling process from creation to dialogue and response. That said, complex participatory media processes that aim to politically engage youth (such as CDST) are not *inherently* better suited for NGOs. For even in the initiative, one of the youth trained in the workshop from a youth-centered organization – with limited means and supervision – was able to create, share, and advocate for a concerning issue through the CDST photo-video story she developed.

Rather, the learning highlights that, from the start, initiatives must readily acknowledge that sufficiently engaging youth in participatory decision-making may require additional capacity-building investment and initiative funding when working with less-resourced and/or connected organizations. This finding in particular was highlighted by one organization that integrated use of additional tools into a broader *Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation* (UNICEF 2016c). The kit was designed to build capacity of adolescent groups to be better prepared before, during, and after an emergency and to find solutions to problems faced in their communities.

Focusing on Responsive Listening

As the initiative showed and scholars argue, public screenings themselves require considered attention by supportive adults (Kindon et al. 2012). Ensuring trained facilitators have the capacity to work with youth from a story's telling to realizing its influence is critical as young people negotiate complex processes of both speaking and listening. For instance, sharing their stories in public can be an affirming act of representation for aspiring youth citizens (Milne et al. 2012). However, public screenings can also bring harm if they lead to embarrassing, intimidating, or even emotionally scarring situations that might occur if those listening are not in a position to respect youth views and provide meaningful response (Wheeler 2011). What this means is that extra efforts and resources are required to ensure young people stories can be told without harm and that they are shown in places of influence where decision-makers are not only open to hearing their ideas but able to provide direct response to the issues raised (UNICEF 2017) (Fig. 6).

To foster greater listening and response, the *Youth Voices* initiative emphasized that the act of storytelling is only one part of social and political change. Attention is especially required for understanding the politics of listening that might keep youth voices from being heard within the differing contexts in which they live (Dreher 2009). Issues of concern to youth can be complex or politically sensitive and can put youth at risk in telling their stories. For instance, a group of young people in the *Youth Voices* initiative investigated and shared stories about the negative impacts of



Fig. 6 A CDST storytelling event by youth and Plan International champions youth voice in Jakarta. (Photo by Edy Purnomo)

air pollution from fires intentionally started to clear land for palm plantation planting – activities which are often illegal (Varkkey 2012). They did so through an organization that knew the issue well to ensure their safety in telling their story. This illustrates the importance of participatory media facilitators understanding issues of local context, media ethics, and child well-being. For on the one hand, raising issues that directly affect them through storytelling supports young people in understanding their world. Additionally, hearing directly from affected youth holds potential to influence policymakers when they connect lived experiences to their decisions. This can help to promote constructive and changing perceptions of adults toward young people (UNICEF 2017). On the other hand, storytelling activities can increase a young person's marginalization or vulnerability if institutions fail to recognize and respond accordingly to the risky and sometimes delicate nature of the process (Plush 2016; Ruiz-Casares et al. 2017).

Adult facilitators need to be aware that telling certain stories might threaten a young person's rights to safety and security as outlined by the UNCRC (United Nations General Assembly 1989). It is thus valuable to incorporate child protection specialists into the storytelling process so they can flag concerns early in the story production, as well as during development and public sharing. Such attention on child protection was incorporated in the facilitation training workshop but was identified as a gap within individual CDST story development during individual initiatives. Involving communication and advocacy teams early in the initiative can also support youth in connecting them to decision-makers at local and national levels. In the *Youth Voices* initiative, as mentioned, NGOs proved the most successful at linking youth to audiences with the power to meaningfully respond to their issues based on their existing programs. Here their strength lie in the potential to incorporate CDST stories into larger youth participation and mobilization efforts. This supports critical arguments that influencing policy debates is a longer and more involved endeavor than celebratory, public story-sharing events may imply (Kindon et al. 2012; Wheeler 2011). Rather, strategic efforts are required to shift marginalizing powers and processes that might silence youth concerns so their voice can be sufficiently considered, valued, and incorporated into decisions that affect their lives (Cornwall and Fujita 2012; UNICEF 2017).

Strengthening Youth Voice and Influence

The Indonesia *Youth Voices from the Frontlines* case study highlights that participatory media initiatives can benefit from a strategic design that prioritizes sufficient facilitator capacity and an attention on listening for youth participation in and influence on decisions that affect their lives. Such action requires strategic visions and plans for ensuring youth are not only provided opportunities to voice opinions. They must also be supported as active participants in researching and acting on issues that concern them as they acquire the knowledge and tools to safely share their concerns and ideas. Doing so starts with strengthening individual and organizational capacities in sustainable ways, as well as positioning youth engagement and

mobilization activities in large organizations and national coalitions for greater policy influence. It requires participatory media facilitators with sufficient and appropriate tools, resources, capacity, and organizational support to adeptly use participatory media to navigate and address the contextual constraints and possibilities for youth voice and influence. In the case of the *Youth Voices from the Frontlines* initiative in Indonesia, such support offered youth opportunities to identify and champion solutions to overcome the negative impacts of disaster, environmental degradation, and a changing climate. The stories not only raise critical concerns for Indonesian youth but position young people as key actors able to understand, address, and solve the country's greatest challenges today and in the future.

Disclaimer The opinions expressed in this chapter are the authors' and do not reflect the view of UNICEF.

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