



Cultivating Young People's Empowerment and Participation in Society

Dr Darren Sharpe

Young people are central to a country's growth and development, as they bring fresh perspectives and innovation. However, the path towards gaining full inclusion in society can be arduous for many youths, particularly those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds.

In England, young people who are most active in political and economic life tend to be from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Ultimately, this leads to governments that are not representative of wider society. By including young people from diverse backgrounds in political life, the British Government would create and implement more inclusive policies, towards achieving social equity.

Dr Darren Sharpe, a Senior Research Fellow at University of East London's Institute for Connected Communities and CAPE Policy Fellow at the University College London, has recently examined some of the challenges faced by young people in England on their path towards achieving full participation in society.

In his recent paper, Dr Sharpe reflects on how youth services can help disadvantaged and socially excluded groups of young people overcome the obstacles that prevent them from becoming engaged citizens, and from having a voice in local and national politics. Dr Sharpe's paper summarises the results of four studies involving

young people between the ages of 15 and 21.

One of these studies focused on the 'unemployment trap', which refers to the tendency of some young people to remain unemployed for long periods of time, relying on state benefits because there are no incentives to become economically independent.

Many of the study's participants felt frustrated by the ways in which unemployed young people are portrayed in society. This negative perception of unemployed young people compounded their lack of self-confidence and self-worth, and formed a barrier to them finding meaningful employment and engaging with their community.

This is where youth services could play an important role. By nurturing young people to increase their self-confidence and self-worth, such services could help youths to break out of the unemployment trap, putting them on the path to becoming engaged citizens.

The second study focused on the challenges encountered by young people from Roma and traveller communities, including racism and bullying. These young people's involvement in the UK Youth Parliament facilitated their participation in society, while also allowing them to observe social issues associated with their communities from different perspectives.

The third study highlighted the importance of actively giving young people a voice in local politics. This study, based in a disadvantaged urban area, revealed how older adults on a town council were unaware of many issues faced by local youths, including violence, drug misuse and a lack of 'safe spaces' to socialise. By giving a permanent voice to young people on the council's regeneration board, the local young people's feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation were transformed into tangible outcomes of recognition and respect.

Finally, the fourth investigation explored factors that can encourage young people to be politically active, including participating in school councils and attending National Student Conferences. This work demonstrated that the shift from dependency to independence is a crucial step in young people's empowerment.

Dr Sharpe offers valuable insight that could guide the development of new initiatives aimed at broadening the participation of young people in society. He also highlights the crucial role that youth services can play in ensuring that young people from all backgrounds are heard and politically engaged, towards building a more prosperous and equitable future.