

A vibrant, colorful graffiti wall serves as the background. In the foreground, two people are walking away from the camera, their figures slightly blurred, suggesting movement. The overall scene is urban and artistic.

# YOUTH LEADERSHIP: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EVIDENCE BASE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief summarises results of an annotated bibliography on youth leadership written following discussions with Plan staff in order to update the knowledge base by highlighting relevant recent additions (2008-2017) to the literature on the subject. The aim of the recent focus was to highlight the current context as most relevant to youth experiencing the world today. Key areas of discussion and contention were included, along with attention to what the research suggests matters to the field for future theory and practice. While some entries of course exhibited some degree of crossover, the research tended to cohere around 6 key thematic categories.

These included:

- 1 THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS;**
  - 2 FORMAL (SCHOOL- OR UNIVERSITY-BASED) YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS;**
  - 3 YOUTH LEADERSHIP & POLITICAL INCLUSION;**
  - 4 YOUTH-LED APPROACHES TO PROGRAMS AND/OR EVALUATION;**
  - 5 GENDERED ANALYSES OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP: FOCUS ON YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS;**
- AND OTHER PUBLISHING RELEVANT TO YOUTH LEADERSHIP RESEARCH.**

Across the literature spanning these categories, many report on studies based in North America (US and Canada) though studies from a number of other countries (e.g. the Philippines and Hong Kong) have also been conducted. The studies tend to concentrate on youth deemed to fit one of two categories – existing youth leaders or young people seen as marginalized or at-risk based on one or more factors, such as race, gender, or indigeneity for example. However, youth who may face other types of marginalization, such as young people with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> youth in settings facing conflict<sup>2</sup> or youth in complex emergencies<sup>3</sup>,



are rarely considered in this body of literature. Using a range of methods and qualitative and quantitative approaches, the researchers included in the annotated bibliography consider diverse frameworks and theories deployed in policy, practice, and curricula seeking to support, build, or enhance youth leadership. These initiatives predominantly occur in community-based organisations, schools, universities, and through other non-government organisations.

Reflecting on work already completed and theorizing about future implications, the authors consider how, why, and how successfully youth leadership initiatives have been deployed in these diverse contexts. While there is diversity among the views and findings, scholars researching youth leadership tend to agree that young people are important as current and future political actors who can play critical roles in leading for sustainable, positive social change. While young people, especially those under 18 years old, may often be excluded from a number of formal political leadership roles, such as running for office, the studies make a case for understanding youth leadership as an ever-evolving concept that can include a variety of activities and roles played by a diverse range of young people around the world. While some of the research will be more relevant to certain initiatives than others, taken together these studies help advance the evidence base for designing, implementing, and evaluating youth leadership efforts to enhance their effectiveness.

1 An additional targeted search did uncover a few scholarly studies addressing youth leadership that include attention to youth living with disabilities.

2 There are however, some studies that look at youth leaders working for peacebuilding.

3 An additional targeted search uncovered one scholarly study addressing youth leadership, young people with disabilities, and young people's roles in disaster risk reduction.

# RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON

## THE LITERATURE



Adult facilitators, allies, and peer educators working with youth leadership efforts should:

- Receive adequate training, support and practice in order to ensure their ability to:
    - Apply a non-judgmental approach
    - Use active listening and positive tones in communicating with youth
  - Critically reflect on how to best support youth-led approaches and/or youth-centred approaches that incorporate intergenerational (or multigenerational) collaborations to redress existing hierarchies – especially intergenerational hierarchies – and pursue sustainable social change.
  - Recognise the need for including attention to broader social inequalities and supporting youth to advocate for broader political change. This could include:
    - Learning and applying young people's understandings of leadership to research, policy, and practice – noting that their views on leadership often relate most strongly to contemporary approaches that focus on collaboration, collective action, and transforming leadership while allowing for individual difference
    - Prioritising youth voices, and focusing on meaningful participation
    - Rejecting stereotypes that suggest youth are lazy, apathetic, or incapable
    - Involving youth in all stages of the project cycle
    - Working together with youth to analyse and solve social problems
    - Building positive cross-generational relationships
    - Actively engaging with youth
    - Creating/advocating for opportunities for youth to practice leadership with substantial responsibilities (e.g. activities such as experiential or service learning and creating and implementing their own projects)
    - Supporting youth to develop confidence and skills such as public speaking and capacity for critical thinking
  - Using accessible language and other communication strategies, recognizing youth vernacular may differ significantly
  - Being flexible to allow youth to learn actively and take on increasing responsibility
  - Work to create safe spaces where youth can discuss issues that matter to them (including sensitive topics such as discussions around sexual and reproductive health)
  - Consider using creative, participatory approaches such as Photovoice, playback theatre, or participatory action research (PAR) to include youth in programs, research, and facilitation at all stages.
  - Consider offering peer education opportunities in which young people can learn from a diverse range of peers.
  - Recognise and account for contextual and individual factors (e.g. gender, nationality, class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.) that may affect young people's beliefs about and knowledge around leadership.
    - Doing so may mean altering program design or creating programs aimed at including particular groups of youth.
    - At the same time, working to create connections across difference for young people from diverse backgrounds can be important.
    - Providing a range of diverse role models who exhibit trust and respect is also critical.
    - There should be recognition and addressing of particular gendered barriers to leadership young women and girls around the world face.
- Role models were also noted as critical. Youth workers and other adults seeking to act as role models for youth leaders should exhibit:

- a strong work ethic
- positive character traits,
- good interpersonal skills.



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### About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

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