



EMPOWERING YOUTH - Young activists fighting for the right to health in Congo, the Philippines and Palestine



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Palestinian youths from the Gaza strip during a Union of Health Work Committees workshop.
Photo on front page: Congolese youngsters from Étoile Du Sud.

This paper was written by Julie Steendam. The information in it is based on academic research, TWHA reports and Skype interviews with Billy Mwangaza Katya (Congo), Maysoon Bseiso (Palestine) and Samy Abd El Nasser Atallah (Palestine). The information on the Philippines was researched by Andrew Aytin through interviews with youth activists in Roxas and Capiz. Our thanks go out to all these people, this paper would not have been written without their cooperation.

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THE YOUTH OF TODAY

Are the youngest generation just lazy and spoiled or do they happen to have the most creative and new ideas? Are they interested in politics and do they want to participate in policy-making? Or is all of this of no concern at all to the average 18 to 25 year old?

Research has shown global election turnout is lowest among young people aged 18 to 25.¹ On the other hand, we do see that some of the most powerful movements of our time owe their dynamic to young people. The worldwide Occupy movements, protesters during the Arab Spring, and the young people supporting Bernie Sanders in the US are just a few examples. The answer is a bit of both. Young people tend to turn less to classical political structures and actively create new forms of participation and democracy.^{2, 3}

Young people have plenty of reasons to make their voice heard in policy-making: the youth's share in world population has never been as big as it is today. This is mainly the case for developing countries: in the world's 48 least developed countries children and people aged 10 to 24 make up the majority of the population.⁴ However, this over-representation does not reflect in political circles: in the entire world, only 2% of members of parliament are under 30⁵, while the average age in parliaments is 53⁶. In times of economic crisis, young people suffer first as they have not had the chance yet to acquire a stable income or the necessary experience and training. Youth unemployment is one of the main challenges of today's global economy: in the Philippines 16,4% of people aged 15 to 24 are unemployed, in Palestine figures even rise to 42,7% (figures dating from 2014). In Palestine youth unemployment has doubled between 1991 and 2014.⁷ In Congo many young people only manage to get jobs in the unstable informal sector.

This paper will investigate the ways young people can influence policy. We will do this through analysis of three of TWHA's partners' youth programs in Palestine, Congo and the Philippines. TWHA and its partners in these countries are determined to focus on adolescents and actively involve them in their work.

We need a strong movement fighting for the right to health. Such movement should be able to rely on active people willing to commit for the long term. Young people find themselves in a time when they make important choices for the future. What will I study? Where do I want to work? In which goal will I invest my talents? The importance of appealing to them during this phase of their lives is obvious.

1. UNDP, Fast Facts: Civic Engagement and Participation of Youth in Politics and Public Institutions, 2014, p.1, <http://goo.gl/b5uGWX>
2. The politics of youthful antipolitics: representing the 'issue' of youth participation in politics, Rys Fartyhing, p.181-185, 25/02/2010, Journal of Youth Studies, Volume 13, 2010 - Issue 2, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676260903233696?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
3. The World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement, executive summary, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016, http://www.unworldyouthreport.org/images/docs/wyr_civic_engagement_executive_summary.pdf
4. 10 things you didn't know about the world's population, Steven Edwards, UNFPA, 17 april 2015, <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/04/10-things-didnt-know-worlds-population/>
5. SDG indicator 16.7.1; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016: Youth participation in national parliaments, 2016, <http://goo.gl/A83XGf>
6. Enhancing youth political participation throughout the electoral cycle, UNDP, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1dd2a2L>
7. The ILO only considers the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for Palestine, without taking the unemployment figures for East-Jerusalem, that has been illegally annexed by Israel, into account. The average global youth unemployment rate is at 14%. Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate), International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market database, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?end=2014&start=1991&view=map>, consulted on December 15, 2016

1. THE CONTEXT YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE IN

The health conditions in which young people grow up are a key factor in their future development. This includes all the factors determining their health: the living environment and community, the state of their homes, their social position, job, education and income, access to culture, etc. In the three countries we will be discussing all these factors, also called social determinants of health, are far from evident. This is especially true for young people.

Congo sees big differences in living conditions between rural and urban areas, but also between different neighborhoods in cities. This is mainly due to differences in political attention given to those areas. A lack of political interest in poor popular neighborhoods of Kinshasa for example has led to insufficient health care, neglected roads and sewers and garbage left on the streets with no organized garbage collection in place.

Access to drinking water is a striking example. Decent water supply is limited to the residents of the city center and a handful of affluent neighborhoods. In the suburbs and rural areas there is little to no access at all. The Mfumu Nsuka neighborhood in Kinshasa only has water access between one and three at night. Without water it is hard to maintain personal hygiene and keep homes and surroundings clean. This in turn paves the way for mosquitoes and other carriers of diseases. The consequences are enormous: in 2012 one in 7700 Kinshasa residents suffered from cholera. In North-Kivu the number rose to 1 in 1000.⁸

The Israeli occupation of Palestine causes the social, mental, economic and political situation of Palestinians to worsen. The Israeli army uses a policy of arbitrary arrests and administrative detentions. The number of minors being arrested keeps on rising.

Many Palestinians are unemployed. Unemployment rates are highest among those with higher education.⁹ Feelings of frustration, despair and uselessness and the attacks on their dignity inflicted by poverty and unemployment only increase existing social tensions, leading to high violence and crime rates and drug use. Many young people opt to emigrate in search of better living opportunities.

In the Gaza strip, under blockade since 2007, the situation is even more fragile. The population is among the youngest in the world, bringing its own specific challenges. The blockade is a structural problem causing difficult access to vital products and services like quality education. The occupation also makes effective economic planning difficult.¹⁰

The Philippines' main concern are the unequal power relations. A handful of super wealthy families are in charge of the political and economic system, leaving the rest of the population to suffer from daily problems including poverty, lack of social services, corruption and human rights violations. The Philippine government actively promotes health services privatizations through public-private partnerships. Hospitals are no longer state owned, but run by companies aiming at making profits. Companies make money and get financial support from the government, while less funds are available for health, education and welfare. This makes hospital bills for the public more expensive. The average hospitalization bill equals 167,5% of the monthly minimum wage.¹¹

Serious inequality and widespread poverty also have their impact on the population's health. The poorest areas see people's life expectancy decreased by 20 years, infant mortality rates nine times worse and ten times more deaths during pregnancy compared to the most affluent areas. This is not a coincidence: living conditions are considerably worse in poorer neighborhoods.

8. Ministère de la Santé, Secrétariat Général à la Santé, Direction de Développement des Soins de Santé Primaires, Bulletin SNIS SSP No. 8, Mai 2012

9. Le Bureau Central Palestinien des Statistiques

10. Gaza in 2020: A liveable place?, UNRWA, 28 August 2012, <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=1423>

11. Health care access in the Philippines, G3W-M3M, 2016. twha.be/news/paper-health-care-access-philippines

2. CHALLENGES FOR GREATER YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The academic literature is unanimous: improving young people's health is crucial to their positive long-term development. The World Health Organization acknowledges popular participation in health policy making and execution is essential when it comes to improving living conditions.¹²

In other terms, political participation is a direct social determinant of health.¹³ Stimulating social cohesion in communities through activities involving young people is even more important than their individual empowerment. Having young people actively work with their environment also helps them develop qualities like a stronger self-consciousness, a feeling of control and awareness of their rights and the context of their living environment. They are taught practical and social skills including working in a team, problem solving, communication and debate moderating skills.

There is one footnote to all of this. While participation of young people definitely needs to be encouraged, we should not have them carry full responsibility. We should not underestimate the varying power instruments people have during different phases of their lives. Through experience and contacts, an adult will have access to resources young people do not have (yet). In a number of societies, young people have lower social status and fewer rights than adults do as well. Only rarely do they have full control over the processes they are aiming at changing. Research tends to indicate help and guidance from adults in youth projects are crucial. The balance should not shift in the other direction too much either: initiatives where young people were handed a merely 'symbolical' role with no form of decision-making authority at all, generally had worse results. Many young people abandoned those projects after a while. In general terms, research suggests more equal relations between young people and adults should be the aim.¹⁴

2.1 The current situation of youth participation in Congo, Palestine and the Philippines

In practice, we often see participation devaluated to a container term, used to give projects more legitimacy in the eyes of donors and governmental institutions. Often real empowerment is lacking, meaning the participation through collective action inspiring changes to power relations.

In Congo, community participation is still widely regarded as sharing costs and use of existing health services. This vision is deeply rooted with local authorities, the health sector and certain NGO's. Residents of deprived neighborhoods and remote areas are frustrated as the health system does not respond to their needs and does not function democratically. They feel left out by the political class only coming to see them at the time of election campaigns. Their daily struggle for survival inevitably pushes them towards a form of individualism impeding collective action and social cohesion.

Billy Mwangaza Katya, responsible for the youth section of Etoile du Sud (EDS), TWHA partner in Congo: "Young people are the majority of the population. They need to take their future into their own hands. A lot of initiatives try to involve young people, but they are often too institutionalized. Personally, I started my commitment at the youth parliament. We had a meeting with the authorities but that was where it stopped. I asked myself: 'Which part of the population is actually involved here?' In order to change things, you need to start at grassroots level, in the neighborhoods. That's when I was introduced to the EDS program and I made a positive choice to commit myself at this level."

13. Déclaration politique de Rio sur les déterminants sociaux de la santé, Conférence mondiale sur les déterminants sociaux de la santé, Rio de Janeiro (Brésil), 21 octobre 2011, http://www.who.int/sdhconference/declaration/Rio_political_declaration_French.pdf

13. Women's and Children's Health: Evidence of Impact of Human Rights, F. Bustreo, P. Hunt et al., World Health Organization, 2013, http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/84203/1/9789241505420_eng.pdf, p.14

14. References to specific research can be found at: A Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment for Child and Adolescent Health Promotion, Naima T. Wong, Marc A. Zimmerman, Edith A. Parker, *Am J Community Psychol* (2010) 46:100-114, 12/06/2010



Palestinian youths from UHWC are giving a workshop for local youngsters.

In Palestine, young people are not politically represented in government institutions. A lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making has created a deep generational gap. Traditional leaders dominate social organizations. In order to truly integrate young people, many government institutions, including local authorities and ministries will need to rejuvenate. The Palestinian authority has made promises along those lines, but little progress has been made.

The Palestinian context also has other obstacles to youth participation. Certain traditions may prevent girls from participating in activities. The snowball effect makes it even more important for young people to be a part of projects because they show a positive example. Parents see their sons and daughters help their community and are less reluctant to let them participate.

Manifestations are another means of political participation. These rallies, often violently interrupted, are supported by Palestinian citizens of all ages and social classes, both men and women. Young people take a strong position during these manifestations. The Palestinian social movement was born from the increasing number of unpunished acts of violence by part of the Israeli colonists against Palestinian citizens, the structural violations of basic rights and the lack of progress in the peace negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government.¹⁵ This proves the desire of Palestinian youngsters to be politically active, but also a preference to show their commitment in alternative ways, as they are not comfortable within the lines of the traditional political system.

¹⁵ Intifada or not, something powerful is going on, Nigel Wilson, Al-Jazeera, 17 oktober 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/10/palestine-intifada-powerful-151016094419464.html>

Maysoon Bseiso researches forms of youth participation in 20 NGOs based in Jerusalem, Palestine. She has detected a double trend. While 75% of the organizations stated they provide services for young people and depend on young volunteers, their impact on this target audience is rather limited. Maysoon thinks this is mainly due to the level of participation young people have. Unless they have executive tasks in the programs, they are absent in management and leading positions. Board members are very concerned about young people but are not younger than 50 and thus deprive young people of opportunities to express themselves. Bseiso says young people should be allowed to assume roles that involve planning and decision-making. Older people could use their experience to support them in those roles. “Young people know the context very well. They are aware of all the details and have a lot of ideas. They should be given the chance to actively change things”, she claims.

Andrew Aytin, TWHA employee in the Philippines, recognizes this tension between generations: “Young people are indispensable in any social movement. The older generation acknowledges the advantages of their ability with new technology and social media, for example. But they may not always share the same targets and ideals. When young people are not allowed the space to let their voice be heard, they get disillusioned. It is the responsibility of each social movement to fully expose young people’s potential by actively involving them in decision-making processes.”

Billy is familiar with this relationship between motivation and sustainability. “In Kimbanseke, we saw young people organized in health committees facing teams dressed in overalls. These professional teams are paid by government-funded organizations. Once the money runs out, people find themselves back in their original situation and health problems become even worse. This has seriously weakened activism in these communities. Young people are left with no hope.”

Underrepresentation of young people in policy-making causes two tensions. Firstly, it is hard to satisfy their needs when they are not sufficiently represented. Secondly, young people do not have the same opportunities in terms of participation and executive power. True integration of young people will require urgent rejuvenation of government institutions.

2.2 Awareness in a context of threat

Billy believes education and awareness are the first important steps towards a strong movement: “What prevents proper participation of young people in governance is a lack of quality information, education and sense of community during problem solving”.¹⁶

In Palestine, Maysoon Bseiso also notices an important lack of educational services in the various organizations. Bseiso thinks it is crucial young people are aware of their rights in the area of their living conditions but also in the area of politics. This is particularly true in the Palestinian context.

Since the escalation of violence in 2015, Palestinian youngsters and organizations have often been subject to intimidation by the Israeli government. One example of the repression Palestinian organizations suffer at the hands of the Israeli authorities is the extradition and subsequent arrest of Daoud Ghoul. Daoud is the coordinator of Health Work Committees’ youth program and was forced into exile for months before eventually being arrested. He was not given a fair trial and no chance to stage a defense. Daoud is not a unique case: in November 2016 alone 527 Palestinians were arrested, with 120 children among them.¹⁷

Activities in East-Jerusalem are often canceled at the last minute because the Israeli authorities prohibit them. In some cases, parents refuse their children permission to participate in activities, fearing they may become victims of violence by the Israeli authorities.

The Philippines also see repression against health and development workers on the rise. The authorities accuse them of rebellion when they resist against violations of their rights. An increasing number of activists against mining and land grabbing are being killed by soldiers and paramilitary groups. It is obvious this may deter many young people from committing themselves to this case.

16. Testimony ‘Most Significant Change’ villy Mwangaza Katya op 04/11/2015, G3W-M3M

17. Thuis maar nog niet vrij, onze Palestijnse collega Daoud krijgt 10 dagen huisarrest, Fiona Ben Chekroun, G3W-M3M, 12 december 2016, <https://g3w.be/news/thuis-maar-nog-niet-vrij-onze-palestijnse-collega-daoud-krijgt-10-dagen-huisarrest>

3. CONGOLESE, PALESTINIAN AND PHILIPPINE YOUNGSTERS IN ACTION

What are the alternatives to youth participation? We examine three examples of TWA partners involving young people: Etoile du Sud in Congo, Union of Health Work Committees in Palestine and Gabriela in the Philippines. What these organizations have in common is that they train young people to become youth leaders themselves. They use a bottom-up strategy and empower young people. Efforts focus on enforcing leadership in a bid to encourage them to take their problems into their own hands and play an active role in their community. This allows young people to coordinate their own youth groups and involve social organizations and public institutions in their initiatives.

Etoile du Sud (EDS) coordinates a network of health committees in various Congolese provinces. These committees organize the population and set up health education, prevention and action on health problems in the living environments in neighborhoods. In a bid to respond better to specific needs of young people and women, EDS created small action groups working on the right to health called “dynamiques” or “dynamics”. One of those focuses on people between 15 and 25 years old: la Dynamique des jeunes. Supporting women, and more specifically, young women is one of the targets of this dynamic. It is important to avoid fragmentation but setting up and expanding these various groups may facilitate recruitment and mobilization of members. The organizations and authorities in the movement can provide more specific answers to the needs of young people and women. Billy explains how Dynamique des jeunes proceeds to organize young people: “Our current youth coordinators start by looking for one or two persons interested in becoming youth leader in the neighborhood. We train those candidates on the vision of EDS, the social determinants of health and the meaning of the right to health.” Then, the committees map the various actors in their neighborhood and their mutual relations: who are the health activists, which organizations and local NGO’s are active, who are the religious representatives, which schools and universities are present in the area, who are the professional health workers, the local authorities, etc. They identify the daily problems the population is facing and may affect their health. The group decides which problems get priority treatment. Special attention is given to the causes of those problems and they create proposals for local solutions. “In the meantime we have trained about fifty young people who in turn can address new young people.”



Filipino youth fighting for women’s right during One Billion Rising, the biggest international campaign on violence against women.

The Union of Health Work Committees (UHC) adopt a similar method. The Health Work Committees (HWC) and UHC are two of the most prominent health organizations in the occupied Palestinian territories. HWC offers health care in 17 health centers all over the West Bank. UHC is HWC's sister organization and is active in the Gaza Strip providing health care to over 380,000 residents a year. In four health centers, culture spots have been set up for kids, youngsters and women. Just like HWC, UHC is building a network of young people committed to their community. The aim is to help young people confronted with violence and repression from the occupation and several conflicts remain positive and courageous. UHC stages regular trainings on leadership for volunteers. Samy Abd El Nasser Atallah, UHC youth program coordinator, explains their method: "The interests of our young people are our starting point. We train 14 to 17 year olds to analyze their neighborhood's problems. In doing so, we raise their awareness on their own skills and themselves in general. These skills include time management, teamwork, expressing your opinion and finding solutions. Between the age of 19 and 25 they become youth trainers and health teachers of their own and are given the chance to set up local initiatives and workshops on the social determinants of health. They make their own analysis and independently choose the program. This means the entire movement consists of young people, with trainers that were once participants themselves. Their mutual relationship is very strong and important."

Both in Congo and Palestine, the aim during the entire process is to have the population -young people, women, health workers- actively participating in the debate and campaign. In Congo, EDS also involves the local authorities. This has two purposes. Firstly, the "dynamiques" have a main goal of making young people understand they too have power and the state has the obligation to guarantee the right to health for all Congolese. Secondly, suggested solutions have a bigger chance of being actually implemented with sustainable results.

It is clear the political context is never absent in the work of these organizations. The Israeli occupation of Palestine easily turn local initiatives into acts of resistance. By exchanging their experiences, local groups counter the imposed division of the Palestine territories and its population. The barrier wall, the checkpoints and the Gaza Strip blockade often make it impossible for young people from different parts of Palestine to meet each other physically. Samy describes the challenges: "Young people are an important part of our community. They have special skills but also need someone helping them to build on those skills. The challenge is to transform a negative attitude to a positive commitment and make them a productive part of society, finding effective solutions. This allows them to influence policy-making by demanding their rights and it helps us change the situation in the Gaza Strip together. We work towards this from a health perspective."

This double purpose of youth work -improving the population's living conditions and structural political change- is also evident in the Philippine organization Gabriela. Gabriela is the umbrella organization of various women's organizations and offers trainings on gender and the right to health. Gabriela members commit themselves to the community they work and live in. Recently, they have also launched a youth program: the Gabriela Youth (GY). The Gabriela Youth members are university students and young people from the community. They mainly focus on participation of young women and offer trainings on influencing policy-making and campaigning. Andrew Aytin, TWHA employee in the Philippines, summarizes: "The eventual goal is not only to improve the health system and the social determinants of health, but also to mobilize the population to obtain a social situation where the right to health is guaranteed for all. This requires the youth to be aware of their objective situation and for them to learn how to launch their own initiatives. In other words: promoting democratic participation of youth in social change." He adds that merely influencing young people is not enough. Only by making them raise awareness, organize and mobilize they become true actors of change.

3.1 What action do they take?

The Philippine, Congolese and Palestinian youngsters set up their own actions that already have seen them obtain some tangible victories.

A characteristic activity of the *dynamique des jeunes* is the weekly garbage collection action that sees young people mobilize residents on Saturdays to collect the garbage on their streets. Participants are members of the people's health committees and of the "dynamiques" for youngsters and women. Billy concludes: "The efforts and mass participation of young people in community services and social activities show the importance of the dynamics, the mobility and the flexibility of young people in the activity's success."

The action's main purpose is to significantly and directly improve the living conditions of local residents. The activists also want to show local and provincial authorities what circumstances people live in and their desire to change this. For EDS this action is the opportunity to "make clear to the authorities that residents should and can be involved in important decisions on their living conditions."

In another campaign, youngsters contacted neighborhood representatives and paid home visits to discuss the problems residents are facing. Afterwards, they searched for solutions together.¹⁸

The importance of being present in neighborhoods and getting to know the actual living conditions of the population and improving them is also clear in HWC's methods. Farah is 23 and just graduated. As a volunteer, she regularly offers psychosocial support to kids and young people in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza. And this is certainly required. An OCHA¹⁹ report states that after the conflict in July 2014 there still are 225.00 children requiring psychosocial support. She testifies: "In order to get to know each other and reinforce the team, we decided to visit each other's homes. This would allow us to see how families live and what their concerns are. One of the girls in our group had a difficult home situation. Her father had heart problems but could not afford his medication and the rent. Together, we looked for a solution. This is but one example. Our community analysis showed us many Palestinians suffer from the bad socio-economic circumstances. Despite the fact we are still young and don't have a lot of resources, we can still change things in our community. We work together. This is our contribution as citizens to life in our environment and may turn us into tomorrow's leaders able to bring about even more change."²⁰

Andrew recognizes the same principles in the Philippines: "Young people have a task of informing others. But they also need to learn from others and the best way to do this is to integrate with them. They need to be reminded change is not happening by sitting behind a computer. Change happens in communities, in streets and because people come together."

A concrete example comes from Roxas City. In 2013 it was one of the areas devastated by super typhoon Haiyan. A few weeks after the typhoon, the government declared a number of typhoon affected coastal areas as no dwelling zones, meaning, families whose houses were destroyed in these zones were not allowed to rebuild them. However, the government didn't provide any relocation site. Moreover, the residents sensed that there was business interest in the government's attempt to drive them away from their place.

18. DR Congo: 13.000 vrijwilligers op straat voor een gezonde omgeving, Fanny Polet, G3W-M3M, 1 augustus 2016, <https://g3w.be/news/dr-congo-13000-vrijwilligers-op-straat-voor-een-gezonde-omgeving>

19. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

20. Farah (23) uit Gaza getuigt: "Wij zijn misschien de leiders die morgen voor verandering zorgen", Lena Van Der Bruggen, G3W-M3M, 6 oktober 2016, <https://g3w.be/news/farah-23-uit-gaza-getuigt-%E2%80%9Cwij-zijn-misschien-de-leiders-die-morgen-voor-verandering-zorgen%E2%80%9D>



Congolese youngsters talk to residents to learn about their living conditions.

Gabriela immediately launched a campaign against this as it mobilized the people to hold protest actions to pressure the local government not to enforce such policy. In this campaign, the youth played an important role by leading the communities in their actions. One of these youth leaders is Analiza. In her early twenties, Analiza led her village in opposing the demolition of their houses despite the presence of soldiers who tried to prevent the residents from doing so. She said: “We will not just grin and bear it. We will fight. While beach resort and restaurant owners are given all the assistance they need to rebuild and restart their businesses, we, the poor, have never received anything from the government. Worse, the government is trying to evict us from our land using the military to harass and sow fear among us.”

To increase the capacity of community leaders like Analiza, Gabriela held training on advocacy and campaign management to sustain the people’s mobilization. As a result, more than 10,000 people joined in what was considered as the biggest protest rally in the city’s history. They marched through the streets and held vigil in front of the city hall to condemn the ‘no dwelling zone’ policy and the continued neglect of the national government of the plight of the typhoon victims. And this led to a big victory: the military soldiers encamped near the village were compelled to pull out.

“Any social movement that does not involve young people will find it very hard to survive. Youth adds vitality and intensity to a progressive organization’s ideals. Young people are the ones developing new strategies to mobilize the population, through new communication technologies for example. Historically, young people have always been in the frontline in the fight for social change. They are most prepared to serve the population and to challenge the status quo. They have the desire and the abilities to change things. They just need to realize that organizing themselves is the only way to bring about effective change”, Andrew claims.

4. CONCLUSION

Young people are facing a world full of challenges. Despite the different living conditions, we can conclude that the lack of attention from policy-makers for young people in the Congolese, Palestinian and Philippine societies is problematic. The authorities do not believe in their abilities enough and attribute little value to their contributions. Young people feel left out and this leads to passiveness. They get demotivated and frustrated by initiatives promising true involvement, but ignore them when decisions are being made.

This contrasts starkly with initiatives at grassroots level that do actively involve young people. Participation gives hope. This is much needed, as big challenges will not resolve themselves. To get structural change, a strong movement is needed where young people play an active role stretching beyond mere symbolism.

Empowerment of young people allows them to actually participate in political, economic and social decisions. More dialogue and mutual understanding between young people and public authorities are required to prevent exclusion. This also helps youth groups develop awareness on their identity, helps them learn about other important actors of change and participate in decisions that may improve their individual and community living conditions. Add to this the snowball effect that makes more young people want to be part of the process.

Gabriela Youth, Union of Health Work Committees and Étoile du Sud put this vision into practice and actively organize young people. They share three important principles:

- 1. Commitment in the field:** Teach young people about their environment and the acute problems of the population through their presence in the field and through commitment to people in communities and neighborhoods.
- 2. Involve them on every level** of the organization and give them real decision power. A youth movement not only exists for young people but is also made by them.
- 3. Double road to success:** Firstly, looking for solutions for the neighborhood together is crucial. Secondly, it is important to raise this to a higher level and address policy-makers on their responsibilities in guaranteeing the right to health for the entire population.

Both Billy from Congo and Samy from Palestine speak about the commitment that doesn't stop when people grow older. Samy: "The current coordinators of our health centers were once members of our youth program. Now that they have raised their skills, they stay committed to our organization. Together we can face the challenges."



Philippine youngsters speak out against large scale mining.



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