

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations recently criticized the Canadian Government for lacking a unified federal policy for child programming; lacking a clear strategy in the development of youth rights, opportunities, and initiatives; and averting accountability as there is no assurance that these programs are effective due to the absence of evaluative methods. The UN went on to highlight that addressing these issues in Canada is particularly important for “vulnerable” youth such as Aboriginal, black, immigrant, and disabled children.

Youth- that being anyone between the ages of 15 and 24- have been greatly, if not completely excluded from research that informs public policy and planning, and barred from the opportunity to meaningfully participate in planning processes that affect their lives. This has left industry professionals with a large anomaly when it comes to ensuring inclusive, effective, and sustainable planning practices within communities.

Of the limited research that has been conducted, the majority is largely focused on the cognitive capacities of young people when participating within the adult dominated realm of planning. Overwhelmingly, researchers discover that young people do in fact have the ability and motivation to effectively participate in planning, and that when they do their communities experience a wealth of positive impacts as a result.

Despite the evidence, research into youth participation is still relatively fragmented and lacks contextual diversity (i.e. different abilities, classes, ages, genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic environments). This has left planners with very little information in how to effectively engage and plan for their young participants, and has reinforced serious misconceptions about young people’s abilities to effectively plan.

The declining neighbourhood conditions within the City of Toronto suggest a need to engage a diverse spectrum of young people in planning. Attention towards inclusive and effective planning is emphasized among Priority Neighbourhoods, as they face marginalization, poor access to resources, and declining infrastructure. As Toronto is home to a sizeable youth population, utilizing them in community planning would be a viable opportunity for comprehensive urban planning and revitalization. Though, even with the strong need for youth participation within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), there is little to no overarching policy or framework in place to support or sustain such beneficial programs.

As planners we are legally and ethically obligated to seek out and properly facilitate opportunities to discuss and utilize the opinions and concerns of all community members- including youth. This is indicated within the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) Statement of Values and Code of Professional Practice (2004), the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) Professional Code of Practice (2009), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)(1989). To simply include youth is not enough to ensure that their voices are being heard or that planning projects/ initiatives reflect their actual needs, wants, and concerns. For planners in Canada, this problem is far-reaching, demonstrating the urgency for young people to be active agents in planning. In doing so, planners will be able to identify more clearly the reality and best practices of

youth participation, arming them with information with which to enact the most relevant and effective best practices for planning.

To do this, there needs to be an increase in contextually variant research on the participation of young people in planning in order to gain comprehensive knowledge of its impacts. With approximately seventy-five percent of people being under the age of eighteen, and worldwide, youth accounting for approximately one-third of the world's population, the evolution of our ability to successfully plan relies on the continued research of planning impacts and effective methods, and our awareness of opportunities in which to do so.

For these reasons a diverse spectrum of youth and societal conditions were analyzed in order to assess the limited discourse on youth participation, and to propose a set of best practices in which to prevent the intermittent success of youth participation facilitation in the future. In this study a multiple-method triangulated research approach was employed. By using widely held academic theory on youth participation in planning and practice to gain insight into its current status, findings from selected academic case studies on youth in planning were compared with case study findings from the Community Design Initiative (CDI) revitalization project within the Kingston-Galloway/ Orton Park (KGO) Priority Neighbourhood in Scarborough, Ontario. By doing so, this report aimed to diversify the reality of young people's participation in planning, and derive a deeper understanding of how youth and communities benefit when youth participate in planning, and develop a more comprehensive and relevant set of best practices for its successful facilitation.

When youth acted as resources communities improved their social, physical/environmental, and economic infrastructure, and strengthened democratic processes. Case studies frequently cited assessing community resources, and supporting planners and youth through programming as effective methods in facilitating young people in planning. Diverse community contexts were shown to experience these benefits in equal and greater ways, resulting in a reduction of stigmatization, and strengthened socio-economic conditions.

This study highlighted a variety of areas in which improvements need to be made for successful youth participation in planning, with the following five recommendations being the most salient for planners at this time in its successful facilitation, and in achieving inclusive, effective, and sustainable community planning practices:

- 1. Ensure that a backbone organization is in place before initiating youth participation in community planning.**
- 2. Employ an ongoing mentorship program for professionals and planners who work with youth.**
- 3. Involve youth in the creation of the framework, vision, and goal setting during the initial stages of the planning project/ initiative.**

**4. Ensure that participation frameworks and activities are flexible and diverse.**

**5. Periodically evaluate youth participation planning frameworks and facilitation methods.**

At this stage in the discourse on youth participation in planning there is an alarming need to further develop and conduct research that showcases diverse youth contexts, is longitudinal in nature to better evaluate the effectiveness of their participation over time, and features mixed research methods to ensure that a wider spectrum of youth and communities can benefit from their participation. Only then will planners have the information in which to effectively facilitate and support youth in the planning process, ultimately creating the societal conditions needed for the more comprehensive planning of inclusive and vibrant communities for the present and for the future. In doing so, Canada would move towards fulfilling the UNCRC (1989) treaty ratified in 1991, and uphold its international reputation as a mecca of human rights and equality, and home to some of the best cities in the world.