

BRIDGING PARTICIPATION: CHILD-LED ADVOCACY AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD IN AN ERA OF POLYCRISIS

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Abstract

The transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical stage in child-led advocacy initiatives, offering opportunities to reflect on how young people can continue to engage meaningfully in addressing the world's most pressing challenges. This article draws on insights from Dialogue Works,¹ a global campaign that supports working children in shaping policy dialogues, to explore the actions children, young people, and adults—particularly in the so-called Global South—are taking in the face of overlapping global crises. It examines the experiences of Children's Advisory Committee members as they navigate the shift from child advocates to mentors and resource people, reflecting on what makes intergenerational partnerships "successful" amidst intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination. The article also addresses the challenges of sustaining intergenerational advocacy, including strategies to overcome barriers, such as pervasive adult-centrism, and the critical role of those who have "aged out" of childhood in nurturing advocacy efforts. By anchoring participation in sustainable and inclusive platforms, the article envisions a future where intergenerational collaboration amplifies children and young people's voices and strengthens the collective resilience needed to promote children's rights in an era of polycrisis.

Keywords: children's participation; child-led advocacy; aging out; adult-centrism; transition; childhood youth; adulthood; mentor; intergenerational partnership.

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¹ See the Dialogue Works [website](#) for full details of this project.

[A] INTRODUCTION

The significance of child and youth participation in contemporary global crises, particularly within the Global South, underscores the necessity of amplifying child and youth perspectives and influence in policy dialogues. As the world grapples with polycrises—including the climate crisis, rising food prices, economic instability, and social inequalities—the participation of children and young people is no longer a matter of symbolic inclusion but an imperative for transformative change (UNICEF 2024). Child-led advocacy and activism, though conceptually distinct, coexist as critical frameworks for understanding how children organize themselves to navigate these crises.

Both advocacy and activism can take place in a variety of settings, from local to global levels, and children and youth can engage with institutions such as schools, governments, corporations, or broader cultural narratives. Furthermore, both may occur in restricted, invited, or self-created spaces. While both advocacy and activism play crucial roles in advancing children's rights, advocacy tends to work within systems to promote change, whereas activism seeks to disrupt and redefine those systems to more fundamentally reshape power structures to secure social and/or ecological justice (Taft & O'Kane 2023). An activism approach has been defined as one that is collective, challenges existing expectations, and works toward transforming power structures of justice (Taft & O'Kane 2023). Activism often challenges or bypasses formal systems, employing disruptive or extra-institutional tactics such as protests, strikes, and direct action to demand change, to create new spaces for children's participation and/or new roles for children within existing spaces. In contrast, advocacy typically operates within existing systems and structures, seeking to influence decision-makers through formal channels such as lobbying, letter writing, and speaking at government hearings. Despite these differences, both activism and child-led advocacy share a commitment to collective action and structural transformation, highlighting the need to expand participatory governance spaces that are accessible, equitable, and empowering for children and young people.

This article aims to examine the transition from childhood to adulthood in child-led advocacy, focusing on how young people can sustain meaningful engagement in addressing global challenges. Drawing on insights from the Dialogue Works campaign, it seeks to explore the evolving roles of children and young people—particularly in the Global South—as they navigate intergenerational advocacy spaces. By emphasizing the importance of inclusive and sustainable advocacy platforms, this article

envisioning a future where intergenerational collaboration strengthens the collective resilience necessary to advance children's rights in an era of intersecting global crises.

Dialogue Works is a collaborative campaign led by Kindernothilfe and Terre des Hommes, aimed at fostering sustainable and meaningful participation of working children in subnational, national and international policy discussions. The project supports over 30 Children's Advisory Committees (CACs) across 15 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, to realize working children's right to be heard.

Since their establishment, CACs have actively engaged in participation spaces to share the lived realities and experiences of their members as working children and to develop skills in evidence-based and collaborative advocacy. At the community level, CACs have developed and led their own advocacy initiatives on priority issues affecting them, and they have contributed to practice and policy dialogues from local to global levels. For many CAC members, their journey began as far back as 2016 within the framework of the "It's Time to Talk! Children's Views on Children's Work" research and campaign project.² Over time, numerous CAC members who initially joined the project as children have transitioned into young adulthood.

[B] THE TRANSITION FROM CHILDHOOD TO YOUNG ADULTHOOD IN CHILD-LED ADVOCACY

Too old to lead, and too young to know ...

One of the most significant challenges and opportunities in child-led advocacy is the transition from childhood to young adulthood. Adolescents and young adults who have been engaged in advocacy from an early age often face difficulties in redefining their roles within these spaces as they become adults (Theis & O'Kane 2005). As they age out of the formal category of childhood, they risk being excluded from child-focused advocacy initiatives while simultaneously struggling to gain recognition and establish credibility within adult-led organizations. This transition presents a critical gap that requires greater attention to ensure sustained and meaningful participation in advocacy efforts. The transition can also be identified as an opportunity as there is evidence that children who

² Some young people were part of children's associations that existed before Dialogue Works and the "It's Time to Talk" campaigns, especially associations that were part of broader working children's movements.

actively engage in social action and advocacy initiatives from a young age are more engaged as active citizens as young people and as adults (McGill & Ors 2015; Terriquez 2015).

The CACs have focused their participation experiences on meaningful spaces that allow working children to share their views and experiences while engaging in learning, accountability, and decision-making processes. Understanding the realities of children's daily lives, from their own point of view, is helpful in exploring solutions to address their concerns (Dialogue Works 2023). Recognizing and valuing the range of childhood experiences is only possible when policymakers and practitioners communicate information in ways that are easy for children to understand, engage in dialogue with children from various backgrounds, and actively listen to and act upon children's views and suggestions at every level, from local to global (O'Kane & Ors 2018).

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, children's civil and political rights should be respected which includes Article 12 on children's right to be heard, Article 15 on "the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly", and other civil rights. Children's inherent capacities to express their views and feelings and to contribute meaningfully to the social and political spheres of their communities and wider society should be valued and nurtured. Their interactions, whether social, cultural, or political, are an indication of their potential to influence and be influenced by the collective aspirations of their communities (Daly 2016).

Informal and formal avenues for participation often require individuals to possess expertise, resources, and strategic-thinking abilities. Such knowledge and abilities are cultivated over time and enhanced through experience (Taylor & Percy-Smith 2008). The more time children actively engage in participation spaces—like the CACs—the more knowledge, skills, and opportunities they acquire to shape their own growth and development, and to influence decisions that affect them:

Young people know now how to articulate issues, and to present agenda to duty bearers and key stakeholders. They are now able to get the buy-in of the leaders and the community because they have built credibility by participating in such a process since an early age (Welfare of Children and Youth (WCY), Kenya).

The pursuit of personally meaningful goals allows children and young people to engage in "self-directed development" (Dworkin & Ors 2003) and acquire or practice personal and interpersonal skills within a supportive setting (Larson 2020). However, their goal pursuit depends

on opportunities afforded by their environment (Massey & Ors 2018) and family expectations (Massey & Ors 2008). Young people's ability to strive for and attain their ambitions is, therefore, deeply intertwined with the support and resources that their immediate and extended environments can provide, reinforcing the idea that a supportive ecosystem is crucial for the holistic development and empowerment of children as they grow into young adulthood:

Thank you, CAC, for being our voice and giving us the chance to speak, share, and shine as working children. You believed in us when others didn't, and you helped us grow into brave, kind, and confident young leaders. Because of you, we know our ideas matter and our dreams are possible. Thank you for listening, guiding, and always standing with children. You made us feel important, and we'll never forget that (Former CAC member, 19 years old, Rwanda).

One of the main successes is the growth we have seen in young people as to who they are and how they feel about themselves and the world around them. Many of them have been motivated to pursue human rights related careers (Jesus Cares Ministries (JCM), Zambia).

Transitioning roles

Most CACs supported by Dialogue Works engage with working children between the ages of 12 and 17. However, since the launch of Dialogue Works, a significant number of members have turned 18, with some having actively participated in the CACs for five or more years. Across nine partner organizations, an average of up to 30% of CAC members have reached adulthood since the project began. Their continued participation varies by country, influenced by personal aspirations, work commitments, and the availability of opportunities to remain involved in advocacy.

Child-focused organizations have long championed children's participation, establishing and supporting safe spaces and groups where children can share experiences, co-create initiatives, and lead advocacy efforts. However, there is limited documentation on how these organizations support young people as they transition into adulthood. While many of these spaces aimed to introduce transformative participation experiences through approaches that centred children as active agents in shaping their lives and communities (Tisdall 2013), some young people struggle to sustain meaningful engagement once participants turn 18. While many are still motivated to continue their active engagement, they need to navigate new opportunities and evolving roles and responsibilities in order to contribute while also ensuring that the children under 18 years remain the key protagonists and decision-makers of child-led initiatives (Cussiánovich 2013).

To address such challenges in the Dialogue Works campaign, consultants supporting the campaign collaborated with its implementing partners and with CAC members to examine the evolving roles of former CAC members as they transition into young adulthood (Barros & O’Kane 2024). The three main roles that facilitated the meaningful engagement of former CAC members included: *co-facilitators and mentors, advisors, and champions and resource people*.

Co-facilitators and mentors

One of the primary roles that young people took on after turning 18 was co-facilitation and mentorship. Former CAC members who wished to remain engaged often transitioned into co-facilitators, assisting in the planning, coordination, and implementation of CAC meetings. Their responsibilities extended beyond session moderation to include logistical support such as registration, documentation, and follow-up with younger participants and their caregivers.

Mentorship is another crucial aspect of this role, as young people provided guidance and moral support to new members. By sharing their experiences, they helped younger CAC members navigate advocacy spaces, develop confidence, and understand the broader objectives of their participation. In Latin America, for example, young mentors supported child delegates by helping them lead sessions while ensuring the children remained central to decision-making processes:

Being part of the Child Advisory Committee has shaped who I am, and turning 18 didn’t take that away. Instead, it gave me the opportunity to guide, inspire, and share the knowledge and experiences I’ve gained with the younger members. I believe that age doesn’t remove your purpose in fact it strengthens your role in helping others grow (Former CAC member, 18 years old, the Philippines).

To formalize these roles, organizations are increasingly developing structured transition plans that involve intergenerational collaboration and capacity-building initiatives. JCM in Zambia has implemented a structured youth mentorship programme that enables former CAC members, aged 19-22, to remain engaged in advocacy. Recognizing the need for continuity in youth participation, the organization has developed a co-facilitation model where young people work alongside adult facilitators to design and lead CAC meetings. These young mentors undergo training in facilitation skills, ethical participation standards, and thematic advocacy topics before taking on leadership roles. The young people are also trained to apply tools included in the Dialogue Works toolkit “Supporting collaborative and child-led advocacy” (O’Kane

& Barros 2019) and the *Article 15 Resource Kit* to strengthen child-led organizations (Children's Environments Research Group 2012). Applying participatory tools from such toolkits increases their confidence to help younger CAC members navigate complex issues while fostering an intergenerational learning environment. Furthermore, after each session with CAC members, the young people collaborate with coordination teams to evaluate discussions and refine future approaches. Such reflection and learning not only enhances the capacity of young mentors but also strengthens the sustainability of child-led advocacy in Zambia:

Transitioning out was emotional. It felt like saying goodbye to a family. But the CAC taught me leadership, teamwork, and confidence. I now mentor younger members and support them to do more than I ever could (Former CAC member, 19 years old, Rwanda).

Reflecting on such experiences, a female youth who is a former CAC member and a resource person in JCM, suggested that the structured youth mentorship programme should expand to include young people up to the age of 24 years. She felt this would allow young adults to continue receiving guidance and support during a critical period of career exploration and self-discovery. By the age of 25, they would be better equipped to make informed decisions regarding their careers and personal lives.

She also recommended that there should be additional skills training for the cohort to enable them to better support their peers. This could include topics such as: the effects of peer pressure; healthy relationships and boundaries; and career development and goal-setting.

Advisory role

For young people who wished to stay connected to the CACs but not engage regularly, an advisory role provided an avenue for continued participation. As advisors, they offered strategic insights based on their lived experiences, supporting the CAC members with advocacy planning and stakeholder engagement. However, a key distinction in this role is that advisors did not make decisions; instead, they encouraged child members to take ownership of their own advocacy efforts.

By serving as a knowledge base for CACs, advisors contribute to the sustainability of child-led groups and movements. Their insights help shape advocacy strategies while ensuring that children remain at the centre of decision-making. In some contexts, advisors also facilitate intergenerational collaboration by bridging the gap between children and policymakers:

The young people understood that they are adults already. The decision making is on the children. They help provide relevant information that could help the children decide (Adult collaborator, Kaugmaon, the Philippines).

Champions and resource people

Some young people transitioned into the role of champions and resource persons, especially those who had less time to engage due to education and/or work commitments. As champions, they amplified children's voices in their communities, advocating for inclusive decision-making processes. Their role often involves raising awareness, mobilizing networks, and reinforcing the importance of child participation in governance structures.

Resource persons also acted as connectors between CACs and broader advocacy platforms. They provided occasional training, shared expertise in specialized areas, and facilitated engagement with key stakeholders. For instance, in Rwanda former CAC members living in different cities for work or studies have returned to their former CAC to offer workshops on reproductive rights or provide artistic training, leveraging their professional skills to enrich advocacy efforts:

One child who participated in It's Time to Talk four years ago, later came to train the children on reproductive rights based on the studies he pursued at boarding school. Another former member is now an artist, and he comes every week asking about how to support the CAC to train for free (Adult collaborator, Children's Voice Today (CVT), Rwanda).

Bridging participation: tackling adult-centrism and the key role of the “aged-out” in intergenerational partnerships

Collaborations between children, young people and adults require a commitment to intergenerational partnerships, and respect for the contributions of individuals of different ages, abilities, genders, ethnic or other diversity factors. Yet, adult-centrism is prevalent across different societies. The terms “adult-centrism” and “adultism” have been used as synonyms (Biswas & Ors 2024; Fletcher 2013), describing a form of social organization that is based on relations of domination in which the classes of adult age define and control the space occupied in society by those defined as “under age” (Duarte 2000). Children and young people are often mistreated and disrespected simply because they are young, and such mistreatment is reinforced by laws, institutional, political, social and cultural practices and attitudes (Bell 1995). Adult-centrism is based on the social order of patriarchy and hierarchies based on age,

where adults' views, needs, and priorities are considered more important or valid than those of children. This bias manifests across informal and formal settings, especially in policymaking, where the unique perspectives and voices of children are overlooked or undervalued (UNICEF 2023). Age-based discrimination also intersects with other forms of structural discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status and the like (Rizzini 2024; Brando 2025).

The oft-cited Lundy model of participation (2007) and Roger Hart's (1992) ladder of participation have both been widely used to conceptually and practically inform the meaningful participation of children and young people. However, both models have their limitations—especially when viewed through the lens of adult-centrism.

While Laura Lundy's model outlines the importance of space, voice, audience and influence to ensure children's right to be heard, there is a risk that spaces will be designed and controlled by adults with insufficient attention to power dynamics, thus unintentionally reinforcing adult control. Furthermore, the audience and influence elements assume that adults in power will listen and respond to children. However, the prevalence of adult-centrism means that adults may be reluctant to act on children's perspectives, especially if those perspectives do not align with adults' own goals and interests (O'Kane & Barros 2020):

Sometimes we felt challenged when our ideas weren't taken seriously by adults. I recommend that decision-makers not just listen to us, but act on what we say (CAC member, 16 years old, Rwanda).

Hart's ladder of participation promotes child and youth-led initiatives and shared decision-making with adults. It also outlines forms of participation that must be avoided, outlining ways that adults misuse their power by engaging children and young people in tokenistic ways, as decoration and/or manipulating them for their own agendas. However, it does not explicitly critique the broader adult-dominated systems that enable such negative practices.

Moreover, neither the Lundy nor the Hart model accounts for ways in which adult-centrism intersects with other power imbalances—such as race, disability, or socio-economic status—which can further marginalize the views and suggestions of children and young people. To challenge adult-centric norms, we need frameworks, such as “childism”, that centre the agency of children and young people and recognize intersecting forms of marginalization. Childism is a philosophical and political orientation that critiques adultism and reimagines children as full epistemic agents.

It calls for intergenerational justice and centres children's voices in education, policy, and ethics (Biswas & Wall 2023):

My biggest hope is that all children in Rwanda, even in remote areas, get a chance to participate like I did. Every child deserves to be heard and involved in shaping their future (CAC member, 14 years old, Rwanda).

As described in this article, collaboration with CACs also provides structural spaces and processes towards transformational change where children and young people work alongside adult allies to design, plan, implement and evaluate their own initiatives. When done well, such collaborations shift power dynamics and embed children's perspectives into institutional decision-making (see O'Kane & Barros 2020; Siemon Marques & Ors 2023; Rizzini 2024).

Rather than assuming that they know best due to age, adults need to become collaborative partners with children and young people, to recognize and value the competencies of children and youth, be open-minded and be ready to listen to and learn with and from children and young people from diverse backgrounds. Adult collaborators play a pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability and ethical integrity of intergenerational partnerships.

While young people take on increased responsibilities, adult collaborators provide the necessary institutional support, safeguarding mechanisms, and strategic guidance to ensure meaningful participation of children and young people. Intergenerational collaboration is not solely about children stepping into adult roles; rather, it is a dynamic, ongoing process of mutual influence, where children, youth and adults shape each other's perspectives and actions (Mannion 2010). In this sense, transformative participation requires addressing structural inequalities, power imbalances, and cultural attitudes that often marginalize children and young people (Lansdown 2010):

The experience I got is extremely valuable to me, and I am very grateful for the knowledge I gained in every CAC meeting and every interaction we had. This really helped me boost my self-esteem, and it has contributed in university when it comes to giving presentations. With the interactions we had with different stakeholders, it really boosted my self-confidence. I am really honoured to have been part of the advocacy group where we had to amplify children's voices and their rights. Thank you for believing in me and providing a supportive environment that allowed me to grow, and I appreciate the guidance and mentorship I received through the journey of child participation (Former CAC member, 21 years old, Zambia).

Children and young people bring unique perspectives, creativity, and energy to addressing community challenges. However, for

their contributions to be effective, it is crucial to provide supportive environments that recognize their agency and foster genuine collaboration between generations (Percy-Smith & Burns 2013). In many contexts, civil society organizations act as critical facilitators, offering training, logistical support, and advocacy platforms that enable children and young people to continue engaging effectively. However, the role of adult allies must be carefully balanced to avoid tokenism or unintentional power imbalances. Best practices from various CACs highlight the importance of allowing children to maintain decision-making authority while receiving mentorship from adults who act as enablers rather than directors. By fostering intergenerational collaboration grounded in mutual respect and shared decision-making, adults can help amplify children's voices while ensuring that advocacy efforts remain sustainable and impactful.

Christian Advocates for Justice and Development in Negros (CAJDEN) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Philippines that has developed a natural transition process for young advocates, ensuring their continued engagement beyond childhood. Initially, young members of CACs began informally taking on leadership roles as co-facilitators and animators. Recognizing the value of this organic shift, CAJDEN formalized these positions, allowing young people to actively contribute as facilitators while maintaining children's leadership at the core of advocacy initiatives. Today, at least five former CAC members remain actively involved in this capacity. Additionally, the organization collaborates with local governments to ensure the participation of younger children in CACs, maintaining the advocacy cycle across generations. This structured yet flexible approach allows young people to remain engaged while respecting the evolving nature of their participation.

Building intergenerational collaboration

Intergenerational collaboration in advocacy relies on trust, shared power, and mutual accountability (Freeman & Ors 2015). The experience of Dialogue Works showed that meaningful partnerships require adults to step back and create spaces where children can take the lead while still benefiting from guidance and support, and where youth can also guide and support. Intergenerational partnerships often suffer from power imbalances, with adult-led institutions undervaluing children's and young people's perspectives, or with youth claiming too much decision-making power in relation to children. Addressing these barriers requires systematic efforts to reduce adult-centrism, ensuring not only institutional reforms but also political and cultural shifts to recognize

and respect children and young people as equal partners in advocacy and policy development (Bell 1995; Rizzini 2024; UNICEF 2024):

Accepting that I am now the adult we talked about back then has been a little difficult but a necessary step in my journey. I have learned that even as a child standing up for myself and advocating for change must start with me, I aim to be a leader who inspires others showing them that their voice matters (Former CAC member, 19 years old, Zambia).

Shared power involves structuring participation in a way that acknowledges and respects the evolving capacities of children (Lansdown 2005). When children transition into young adulthood, they need to figure out the limitations of their decision-making power in children's groups while keeping a supporting role that is not relegated to tokenistic participation (Hart 1992). This is why mutual accountability becomes key in making sure both younger and older participants uphold their commitments to effective and ethical participation (Lundy 2007).

In Peru, the NGO CESIP (Centro de Estudios Sociales y Publicaciones) has adopted an approach to ensure that young people remain engaged in children's rights work even after aging out of CACs. One of its key strategies has been to create a flexible and inclusive participation model where young people feel valued regardless of their age. For some members nearing 18, the fear of exclusion initially led them to avoid mentioning their age in meetings. However, when CESIP introduced opportunities for them to stay involved as mentors, they regained confidence in their role. The organization has also integrated younger children (aged 5 to 8 and 9 to 12) into its "Rights Clubs", with older CAC members leading monthly sessions and facilitating art workshops. This model not only reinforces intergenerational mentorship but also ensures that younger participants view older members as role models, fostering a culture of continuity and empowerment:

My experience getting older and transitioning from the CAC has been challenging yet transformative. I realized that it's not just about me anymore, the younger children look up to me (Former CAC member, 19 years old, Zambia).

Building resilience amidst marginalization and discrimination is another crucial aspect of intergenerational collaboration. The process of meaningful participation often results in increased connectedness, a sense of belonging, more trusting relationships, and increased self-confidence and self-esteem, each of which enhances children's resilience (Oliver & Ors 2006). Many children, particularly those from marginalized communities, face systemic barriers that limit their participation in

decision-making (O’Kane & Barros 2021). The experience of CACs highlights the importance of creating inclusive advocacy platforms that recognize the unique challenges these children and young people face:

Being part of the CAC in Rwanda changed how I see myself. I used to be shy, but now I can speak in front of leaders and advocate for the issues affecting other children. Growing older, I want to keep standing up for children who feel voiceless (CAC member, 15 years old, Rwanda).

Intergenerational partnerships can provide children and young people with the tools and support needed to navigate complex social and political environments while also protecting themselves and their peers from risks. In this sense, organizations play a crucial role in ensuring that participation opportunities remain accessible to young people facing intersecting forms of discrimination, such as gender-based exclusion or economic hardship (O’Kane 2018).

Overcoming challenges in intergenerational collaboration

Despite its potential benefits, intergenerational collaboration in advocacy faces significant challenges, including lack of organizational support, insufficient budget and human resource investments, insufficient training, and safeguarding concerns (Barros & O’Kane 2024). Effective planning, budget allocations and organizational support are critical to sustaining youth participation beyond childhood. The experience of CACs showed that, when organizations take a proactive approach in structuring participation by offering young people opportunities to define their roles as they transition into young adulthood, they do not experience abrupt disengagement when they age out of child-led spaces.

Safeguarding policies are essential in maintaining ethical intergenerational collaboration. Young people transitioning into mentorship, advisory, or resource person roles require training to navigate their new responsibilities effectively. Some best practices for safeguarding include requiring young participants to sign a code of conduct and providing ongoing training on safeguarding policies and mechanisms. These measures can help protect younger children while ensuring that young people are not placed in situations where they are expected to assume responsibilities beyond their capacity.

Finally, investing in training and capacity-building is fundamental to overcoming barriers to intergenerational collaboration in advocacy and activism. Children and young people benefit from structured training

on advocacy strategies, leadership development, and policy engagement (O’Kane 2020). Former CAC members highlighted the importance of ensuring that training programmes extend beyond their roles within their groups, as these can also strengthen their own professional profile as part of a broader incentive package that recognizes their time, expertise, and experience (Barros & O’Kane 2024).

Young people’s participation and the sustainability of intergenerational advocacy and activism in an era of polycrisis

In an increasingly complex global landscape, sustaining intergenerational advocacy and activism requires intentional strategies that recognize the evolving roles of children and young people. To ensure that intergenerational partnerships are truly equitable, it is crucial to address adult-centrism and systemic barriers and to promote platforms where young voices are not only heard but also valued in shaping policies and initiatives:

The biggest challenge is figuring out how to gather and engage the youth; and more importantly, how to sustain their involvement. It’s easy to invite them at first but keeping them consistently active and committed is the real challenge (Former CAC member, 18 years old, the Philippines).

Some key conditions for sustainability of intergenerational advocacy and activism identified through Dialogue Works include the following.

Understanding the political, social, and cultural context

It is essential for children and young people and adult collaborators to understand the political, social, and cultural context and how it shapes opportunities for children and young people’s participation and influence (O’Kane & Barros 2020; Rizzini 2024). This includes attention to intersectionality, understanding both barriers to and practical strategies that can overcome structural discrimination based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status or other forms of identity (Brando 2025; Josefsson 2025).

Readiness to analyse power and to identify relevant strategies

Effective advocacy requires children and young people (and adult collaborators) to recognize the power dynamics shaping decision-making spaces and to develop strategies for navigating them (Lansdown 2010). Even in child-led advocacy, power is often held by external actors, such as policymakers, NGOs, and donors, who may limit young people’s

influence beyond consultative roles. To sustain long-term advocacy, children and young people should be supported to gain skills in political analysis, negotiation, and movement-building. In Dialogue Works, for example, CACs were provided with tools to assess institutional power structures—such as mapping stakeholders and identifying leverage points—so that they could develop strategies to maintain influence beyond the project term.

Anchoring participation in institutional structures

Many advocacy initiatives struggle with sustainability because they are linked to short-term projects rather than embedded within long-standing governance mechanisms. Dialogue Works' partner organizations and CACs made significant efforts toward institutionalizing children's participation within their organizations, and also at municipal councils, national policymaking forums, and international advocacy bodies (O'Kane & Barros 2022). A critical step in this process is ensuring that children and young people have designated seats for child and youth representatives within decision-making bodies, allowing them to contribute consistently rather than being invited only for symbolic consultations. Institutionalizing children and young people's representation and participation ensures that their perspectives are not lost when funding cycles end or leadership transitions occur. However, careful attention to issues of inclusion and equity are required to avoid exclusive participation that reinforces existing systems of privilege and bias (see Brando 2025; Josefsson 2025).

Establishing differentiated roles

The effectiveness of intergenerational advocacy depends on structuring participation in a way that accommodates children, youth and adults. Rather than seeing child advocacy as an isolated phase, advocacy platforms should create pathways that allow young people to shift from being direct campaigners to mentors, advisors, and champions. Dialogue Works found that, when young people were supported to develop structured mentorship roles—guiding children, providing institutional memory, and helping shape policy recommendations—they remained engaged while supporting the sustainability of advocacy efforts. Differentiating roles ensures that young people do not feel forced to “step aside” from advocacy upon reaching young adulthood but can instead transition into new, meaningful functions.

Promoting inclusive membership

A critical aspect of ensuring sustainable child-led advocacy is the structured integration of younger members. As older members transition into new roles, it is essential to create inclusive spaces where younger advocates of different genders and backgrounds can gradually assume responsibilities within their groups (Percy-Smith & Ors 2023). Many CACs have recognized the importance of early involvement, noting that children who join at a younger age develop a stronger sense of group identity and ownership over advocacy initiatives. To maintain this continuity, organizations have adopted several strategies, including open dialogue about transitions, milestone celebrations, and peer mentorship programmes. Creating safe spaces for children to voice their concerns and aspirations fosters confidence and prepares them for leadership roles in advocacy (Barros & O’Kane 2024).

Ensuring organizational commitment and adult support

Intergenerational advocacy requires more than children and young people’s enthusiasm—it also depends on adults within organizations who are willing to share power and invest in sustained child and youth participation. Dialogue Works illustrates that organizations with strong adult mentorship models, structured capacity-building programmes, and flexible funding mechanisms are more successful in retaining young advocates over time. Taking a holistic approach to child development and investing in supporting age transitions is essentially making a commitment to nurturing community leaders who lead by example. However, it is crucial to strike a balance between empowerment and exploitation (Larkins 2020). While young people are encouraged to learn and share to the best of their capacity, availability, and interest, they should not be expected to replace the roles and responsibilities of adults. By providing tailored support during this transition period, organizations can help young people navigate their roles effectively, ensuring their continued growth and development as role models within their groups and the broader community.

For intergenerational advocacy to thrive, advocacy spaces must be resilient and adaptable. The Dialogue Works experience underscores the importance of fostering cross-generational collaboration where young people and adults work together to amplify children’s voices. Ensuring that advocacy platforms remain flexible, well resourced, and connected to institutional structures will be key to navigating the ongoing global crises. Ultimately, sustaining child and youth participation in advocacy requires a shift from temporary, project-based initiatives to long-term,

institutionalized frameworks. By anchoring advocacy in resilient and inclusive systems, young people can continue to play a transformative role in shaping policies and addressing global challenges, ensuring that their voices remain integral to the activism and advocacy for children's rights.

[C] CONCLUSION

Intergenerational advocacy in an era of polycrisis is not just an ethical imperative—it is a strategic necessity. As demonstrated by the experiences of CACs, sustaining meaningful child participation requires structured pathways that support the evolving roles as children transition into young adulthood. This article has highlighted the challenges young people face as they transition from child advocates to mentors, advisors, and resource persons. Without clear strategies for role differentiation and long-term engagement, there is a risk of losing valuable child and youth voices in decision-making spaces.

To address these gaps and to maximize opportunities for sustainable engagement, intergenerational advocacy efforts must be anchored in institutional structures that recognize and sustain child and youth leadership. The Dialogue Works campaign illustrates how anchoring child and youth participation in formal governance mechanisms—whether municipal councils, policy dialogues, or advisory bodies—enhances sustainability. However, this requires more than just symbolic inclusion; it demands a commitment to ensuring children and young people have access to resources, training, and decision-making powers.

Additionally, fostering intergenerational collaboration needs a shift in how adults engage with children and young people. Adults should act as enablers, creating spaces where children and young people can lead while at the same time benefiting from mentorship and support. The experience of CACs in the Philippines, Peru, and Zambia demonstrates that when young advocates are given structured mentorship opportunities and transitional roles, they remain engaged in advocacy while ensuring that children's voices remain central.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of intergenerational advocacy and activism largely depends on three key factors: (1) institutionalizing children and young people's participation within governance and policy structures; (2) ensuring differentiated roles that allow children and young people to transition without being excluded; and (3) minimizing adult-centrism and fostering a culture of collaboration that values youth leadership while addressing power imbalances. By embedding

these principles into advocacy frameworks, intergenerational advocacy and activism can move beyond fragmented, short-term projects to become a resilient force for systemic change. Understanding adult-centrism helps illuminate the structural depth of the challenge and the complexity of dismantling adult-normative systems. Systematic and systemic strategies by adults, children and young people are required to cultivate new norms, as well as institutional and political practices where children and young people are recognized, engaged and taken seriously as social and political actors.

As the world faces overlapping global crises, children and young people must not only be included in policy conversations but positioned as key stakeholders in shaping solutions. Strengthening intergenerational partnerships ensures that advocacy efforts remain dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to the realities faced by children and young people worldwide. The challenge ahead is not merely to sustain children's and young people's participation but to expand and institutionalize it in ways that redefine power structures and create a more just and participatory world.

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