

Creating spaces for co-research

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Abstract: In the current era of peak youth, young people's voices and authentic participation are needed more than ever. This article focuses on how youth participation in research can enhance wider understanding of young people's experiences, perspectives and solutions, while also empowering young people. There is an established tradition of engaging young people and children with the qualitative research process, ranging from youth focussed research to youth-led participatory action research. Within this we occupy a middle ground, arguing for the need to create heterotopic spaces for participation in which both young researchers and professional researchers learn from one another's expertise. Mindful of the roadblocks to authentic participation, this article systematically approaches engaging young people at six critical stages in the research process, namely: setting the framework; question design; data collection; analysis; validation; and sharing results for discussion and action. Youth co-research offers methodological rigour grounded in a reconceptualization of where expertise can be found, a committed approach to research training and youth empowerment, greater access to hard-to-reach groups of young people and data validity built upon close engagement with young researchers. To demonstrate our approach, we share in this article three youth co-research case studies, which focus on young people experiencing climate change disruptions in Uganda, young people impacted by COVID-19 in Indonesia and Nepal and a youth think tank convened between East, West and Southern Africa. The rigour and value of youth-engaged qualitative methodologies can benefit young people, as well as the academics, policymakers and NGOs with whom they work.

Keywords: inclusion, authority, participation, young people, Africa, Uganda, Indonesia, Nepal

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Introduction

There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. (Arnstein 1969: 216)

Young people are on the agenda like never before. The United Nations (UN) has a Special Envoy for Youth and within the UN Young UN advocates for the visions of young employees, while the climate change protest movement is increasingly led by young people (Nakate 2021; Young UN 2022). Young people have a growing presence at international meetings – sometimes challenging the status quo, sometimes fitting into prescribed developmental roles (Bersaglio *et al.* 2015; Barford & Cieslik 2019). Demographically speaking, young people are centre stage too. In many lower- and middle-income settings youth populations are large and, in some countries, peaking; in much of sub-Saharan Africa population momentum means young populations are likely to grow for many decades to come (UN Population Fund 2022). Alongside these population trends and organisational structures, there are calls for youth engagement alongside recognition of past failures to listen to young people. Academics are increasingly engaging young people's experiences, perspectives and aspirations (e.g. Punch 2002; Newell 2006; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Denov *et al.* 2022; O'Loughlin & Sloam 2022), a response to a longer standing critique which highlighted the limited engagement and empowerment of young people (Dyson 2008: 163; Mitchell 2008; Ayele *et al.* 2017; Denov *et al.* 2022).

This article offers an approach to meaningfully, effectively and rigorously engage young people with research.¹ Beyond finding out about young people in order to better respond to their needs, we explore engaging young people in the research process itself, with young people occupying both sides of the researcher-researched relationship alongside 'technical researchers'.² This article builds upon longer trends of

¹ Throughout this article, we use the term 'young people' to refer to those aged 18 to 35, otherwise often referred to as 'youth'. We take a more expansive age definition than that used by the UN, for example, to reflect the definition of 'youth' in the sub-Saharan African countries where much of our work has focused. In practice our work has predominantly engaged those aged 18–30. We refer to 'young people', rather than 'youth,' as the young people we have worked with prefer the former and find the latter demeaning.

² We use the term 'technical researcher' to differentiate between the young researchers whom we create more space for in the youth co-research process. These 'technical researchers' are the professional researchers – academics and others – who typically lead the research process and who are typically slightly older, have university-level training, and have several years of professional research experience. Our approach does not differentiate between where these technical researchers come from or where they are based; so, this includes both local and international experts. We invite others to further unpack this nuance.

participatory and co-research research (e.g. [Hartley & Benington 2000](#); [Littlechild et al. 2015](#); [Cargo & Mercer 2008](#)). Ideally, equitable participation offers an antidote to top-down or more extractive approaches, as it can empower those involved (e.g. [Haynes & Tanner 2015](#); [Oladeinde et al. 2020](#); [Goessling & Wager 2021](#)). However, this is difficult to achieve. As with wider critiques of participation, what looks superficially participatory can hide ‘new tyrannies’ ([Kothari & Cooke 2001](#)). Power relationships are hard to escape, and research projects can reinvent inequitable relationships despite the best intentions (*ibid.*). While our positionalities and those of the people with whom we work are embodied and embedded ([Noxolo 2009](#)), our approach reworks possibilities in purposefully created alternative spaces, or *heterotopias* ([Foucault 1984](#)).

This article establishes the value and rigour of youth co-research. The central value of co-research includes equitable engagement and co-learning for young people, policy- and practice-oriented researchers and academics which can strengthen research outcomes and subsequent impact. Firstly, we consider the meaning of, and potential for, participatory approaches by drawing upon concepts of heterotopia and dialogue. Then, based on the wider literature and first-hand experience, we briefly review participatory and youth-engaged approaches to research. We conceptualize youth-involved approaches to research, mapping out the varying degrees to which young people are engaged in research processes, and paying attention to both sides of this relationship. We use levels of inclusion and authority to understand the relative roles of young and technical researchers at different stages in the research process. Case studies of our earlier co-research projects are shared to demonstrate these ideas in practice. Overall, we take a realistic and practical approach to making research do-able and youth inclusive, while benefitting from the diverse skillsets within the team.

Participation and participatory spaces

Participation in research and politics has a long history, becoming increasingly widespread and fashionable during the past two decades for practical and ethical reasons ([Ozkul 2020](#); [Kothari & Cooke 2001](#); [Cornwall 2011](#)). The various approaches to bringing ‘would-be subjects’ into research include emancipatory research, decolonizing methodologies and empowerment evaluation ([Cargo & Mercer 2008](#)). This builds upon a history of often unmet demands for full inclusion and representation of marginalised groups. With respect to citizen participation, [Arnstein \(1969: 217\)](#), and later [Hart \(1992\)](#), helpfully set out a continuum or ladder of participation in which the lower rungs of manipulation, informing and consultation are more ‘substitutes for participation’ than authentic participation

Table 1. Youth-involved research mapped onto Arnstein and Hart’s ladders of participation.

Youth-related research type	Arnstein’s (1969) ladder	Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation (adapted to youth)
<i>Youth participatory action research</i>	8. Citizen control	8. Youth-initiated shared decisions with adults 7. Youth-initiated and -directed
<i>Youth co-research</i>	7. Delegated power 6. Partnership	6. Adult-initiated shared decisions with youth
<i>Youth-focused research</i>	5. Placation 4. Consultation 3. Informing	5. Youth consulted and informed 4. Youth assigned and informed
<i>Co-option of young people</i>	2. Therapy 1. Manipulation	3. Tokenism 2. Decoration 1. Manipulation

(as shown in [Table 1](#)). Moving up the rungs, Arnstein progresses through practices of engagement, partnership, delegated power and at the topmost rung: citizen control. The upper rungs offer an alternative to the closely observed exclusion of some groups from research ([Chambers 2017, 1994](#)). At its best participation is empowering and equalising:

Participation is a political process that recognises and enables those at the heart of the issue to address it and learn from the process. Recognising that people’s chances of being healthy are affected by social structures and systems, the approach is not simply a target-oriented intervention, but is instrumental and substantive, an interchangeable means and end. ([Oladeinde et al. 2020: 2](#))

There is, however, considerable debate about the potential that participatory programmes have to challenge or overthrow existing power structures. [Cooke & Kothari’s \(2001\)](#) influential book *Participation: the new Tyranny?* focuses on the downfalls of participation, arguing that hopes for more equitable relationships are sometimes destroyed when participation – sometimes unintentionally – reinforces power structures and inequalities, to the extent that participation may even be imposed upon supposed collaborators. And these power imbalances can run deep, sometimes blocking genuine participation:

These roadblocks lie on both sides of the simplistic fence. On the power-holders’ side, they include racism, paternalism, and resistance to power redistribution. On the have-nots’ side, they include inadequacies of the poor community’s political socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base, plus difficulties of organizing a representative and accountable citizens’ group in the face of futility, alienation, and distrust. ([Arnstein 1969: 217](#))

Such roadblocks should not be enough to destroy the principles and ambitions for productive participation. Here we draw upon the writings of [De Sousa Santos \(2007, 2008\)](#) who welcomes the acknowledgement of and working with the perplexity of such power structures, the colonial histories and their legacy, the challenges of capitalism, the deep and urgent inequalities we face today. Instead of allowing these perplexities to result in immobilisation, De Sousa Santos sees potential for ‘an open field of contradictions... open[ing] space for social and political innovation;... help[ing] people and movements to travel without reliable maps.’ ([De Sousa Santos 2008](#): 251). Making space for contradictions and disagreement is essential to ensuring engagement and avoiding co-option.

In his writings, De Sousa Santos recognises the many sides of the participatory relationship, rather than focusing predominantly upon a more marginalised group – the people who [Kothari & Cooke \(2001\)](#) identify as having participation ‘done to’ them. Instead, the *interaction* and *intercultural dialogue* across differences, such as the south and north, female and male, rural and urban, is key in the bringing together what he calls ‘an ecology of knowledges’ ([De Sousa Santos 2008](#): 259). In this formulation, diversity can become the foundation of unity, an opportunity to connect. Ongoing vigilance is needed as such dialogues play out, given existing power structures and historical precedent (*ibid.*). This leads to a call for the creation of ‘contexts for debate’ ([De Sousa Santos 2008](#): 260), for which we find parallels to this idea of alternative spaces in Foucault’s writings on heterotopia.

Heterotopia is distinguished from its perfect but imaginary counterpart, utopia, by being real ([Foucault 1984](#)). The concept of heterotopia offers a way to make sense of participatory spaces as alternative spaces – perhaps akin to De Sousa Santos’ ‘contexts for debate’ ([2008](#): 260). Heterotopias offer counter-sites, which differ from the other real sites to which they refer. These sites allow a distancing from other spaces and juxtaposing realities, offering the distance required for self-reflection and even reconstitution of the self ([Foucault 1984](#)). Heterotopias can form alternative spaces which compensate for the problematic realities beyond (*ibid.*). Applied to participation, heterotopias can offer options for redlining hierarchies and bringing people together on different terms to those entrenched in other spaces. Complementary thinking can be found in [Goessling and Wager’s \(2020\)](#) arts-based concept of ‘places of possibility.’

Heterotopic spaces can be spaces of co-research. The following section discusses existing approaches to participatory research, focusing specifically on the dynamics of technical researchers collaborating with young people. A full account of the fascinating dynamics between young researchers, or among technical researchers, is beyond the scope of this article. Overall, participatory research aims to connect research and practice while enabling increased control from people who would most often be

responding to externally driven processes (Cargo & Mercer 2008). Of course, no single method can fully resolve deeply ingrained inequalities (Langevang 2007). Despite the well-documented shortfalls of participatory approaches (Kothari & Cooke 2001), the aim of creating spaces for open-ended approaches based upon unity built upon differences (Foucault 1984; De Sousa Santos 2008) necessitates that we continue this endeavour, cautiously and reflectively. And to assess the outcomes, De Sousa Santos proposes the following:

Success is measured not by the correctness of the theoretical positions assumed, but by the extent of concrete transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority relations in the specific social field in which the collective action takes place. (De Sousa Santos 2008, 260–1)

Approaching youth-involved research

It is widely recognised that young people are usually absent or marginal within research and policy design (Enns & Bersaglio 2015); in response many researchers recommend a deeper form of engagement with young people (Ayele *et al.* 2017; Punch 2002). Following increasing recognition of the benefits and importance of participatory research (discussed above), there has been an increasing acknowledgement that young people can, and arguably should, play a role in research processes that examine the issues that affect them. There is also evidence of young researchers actively seeking to increase their involvement and responsibility within research projects (Denov *et al.* 2022). When excluded, young people stand to lose out from decisions and policies that do not take their perspectives and experiences into account (London 2003), and wider society misses out on young people’s direct and local insight into youth issues (Wallerstein 2010; Scott *et al.* 2020). This approach to inclusion must also be applied to sub-groups of the youth population, as more disadvantaged and marginalised young people are often the least heard.

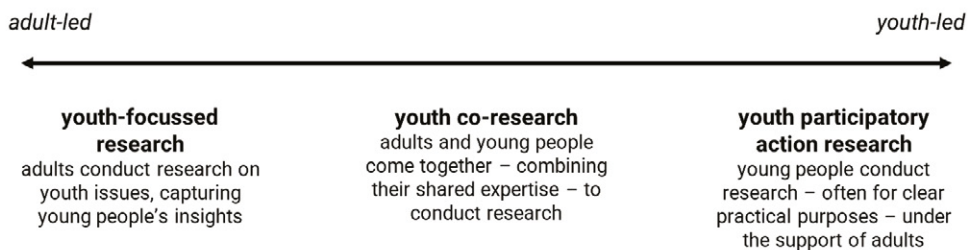


Figure 1. How Youth Co-Research Compares to Other Methodologies.

Recent studies have therefore begun to identify concrete roles that young people can play in discrete stages of the research process – either through the development of the research tools and protocols (Tsang *et al.* 2020; Moss *et al.* 2023), through analysis and dissemination approaches (Scott *et al.* 2020; Mueller *et al.* 2023) and through advisory roles (Spencer *et al.* 2023). Youth participatory action research (frequently referred to as YPAR) offers an alternative way to structure the research process with youth at the forefront. It places value on young people’s in-depth knowledge of the issues they face and on ‘the ability of [young] people to critically reflect upon their own experiences to generate scientific knowledge without the intermediary of the outside researcher’ (London 2007: 407). In contrast with more extractive models of youth participation in research, young people stand to benefit from leading research, developing soft skills that contribute to their broader development as individuals, as members of communities and as engaged citizens (Suleiman *et al.* 2006).

Distinct from youth participatory action research, we find particular value in a middle ground, which we refer to as youth co-research. Figure 1 characterises youth co-research in comparison to other methodologies employed by those investigating youth issues. While youth participatory action research puts youth at the forefront of examining – and acting on – an issue that matters to them, the vast majority of research on youth issues has instead been youth-focussed. Youth-focussed research typically collects data from young people without meaningfully engaging them in the research process. Youth co-research operates in the middle of this continuum of leadership, aiming for a collaborative interaction between young people (who possess in-depth lived expertise) and adults (technical researchers who possess broader professional expertise in sector trends and research methodologies).

Oliveira & Veary (2020) recognise that in such collaborative research spaces the equalising of technical expertise is not merely an ethical move but also a political move, opening up new intellectual and practical spaces. In its remaking of who does what in the research process and of how young people engage in academic research on the issues that matter to them, youth co-research is less concerned with elevating youth voices than with creating heterotopic spaces – compensatory alternatives to the traditional patterns of knowledge production based on intergenerational dialogue (Foucault 1984). Further, learning is by no means one-way, which also has practical benefits. For instance, when young people are confident to disagree, they can reject unworkable or misaligned elements of a research design (e.g. Moss *et al.* 2023; Goessling & Wager 2021). Just as combining the sight of both the left and right eyes allows for vision that has depth perception, we find that a research process that combines these two types of expertise produces a richer, more nuanced perspective of youth issues. Even amongst young people, it is important to consider the expertise and knowledge offered by disadvantaged young people, for

whom peer-to-peer research can be especially effective in accessing and learning. Therefore, youth co-research does not replace technical researchers' expertise with that of young people but instead reframes the relationship between them.

Interpersonal dynamics, positionality and skills make a great difference to the effectiveness of youth co-research. Just as researchers consider their own identities and their impact on the research process and findings, it is important to also consider positionality and soft skills. One useful skill for technical researchers is that of an 'animator', the ability to 'give life to the potential in young people' (Hart 1992: 14). In recruiting young researchers, we have valued recruiting on *potential* to do research, and then providing training given that most young researchers have not previously done social research (Denov *et al.* 2022 took a similar approach to recruiting youth researchers). Nevertheless, certain pre-existing foundational skills are required to enable young researchers to meaningfully participate in research. These include communication and interpersonal skills, literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to communicate in both the local language and that used by the technical researchers. In addition, young researchers' deep understanding of the research context stemming from their direct lived experience is immensely valuable.

Similarly, we find that co-research works best where technical researchers have positive perceptions of working with young people and are already reflective about their positionality and contribution to power dynamics. This awareness is usefully complemented by strong interpersonal and facilitation skills to create adequate space for young researchers. We acknowledge that young people with certain pre-existing skills and technical researchers predisposed to working with young people are both distinct subsets of wider populations. This combination could boost the potential for reshaping power dynamics or instil other forms of exclusion and reinforce hierarchies. Future research could usefully address the tensions around which young people are engaged as youth researchers and the dynamics within this group. Moving beyond these descriptors, Hart's (1992) discussion of child participation can be extended to describe the interpersonal dynamic that we seek to achieve within youth co-research:

Adults do, however, need to learn to listen, support, and guide; and to know when and when not to speak... One should rather think of what a child might be able to achieve in collaboration with other children and with supportive adults. (Hart 1992: 31)

London (2007) proposes two parameters for reflecting on young people's involvement in the research process: *authority*, which is the extent and depth of youth decision-making, and *inclusion*, which is the quantity and frequency of youth involvement in the research process (409). We employ these parameters to characterise the relationship between – and the role of both – young researchers and technical researchers in the youth co-research model (as shown in Table 2). While

Table 2. Typical roles of Young Researchers and Technical Researchers in the Heterotopic Spaces in the Youth Co-Research Process. The roles detailed here show the general arc of youth and technical researcher engagement for the research studies detailed in this article (as detailed in section 4). Others might find this format helpful for mapping out young and technical researchers' engagement throughout a project.

Stages of the Youth Co-Research Process						
	1. Setting the Framework	2. Designing the Research	3. Collecting the Data	4. Analysing the Data	5. Validating the Findings ³	6. Disseminating the Findings
<i>Role of Technical Researchers</i>	<p>High Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Design funding application and research objectives</p> <p>Identify research focus and research questions</p> <p>Training⁴ to young researchers on research design and collection</p>	<p>High Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Design the research tools and organise translation</p> <p>Provide technical expertise on methods</p> <p>Lead ethical review</p>	<p>Shared Authority, Low Inclusion</p> <p>Establish and oversee data management quality control</p> <p>Provide ongoing coaching to young researchers</p>	<p>Shared Authority, High Inclusion (UNITY)</p> <p>Determine the analytical framework⁵</p> <p>Provide capacity-building to young researchers on analysis</p> <p>Conduct second-level analysis of data</p>	<p>Low Authority, Low Inclusion</p> <p>Determine validation exercises</p> <p>Co-develop facilitation plan with young researchers</p>	<p>High Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Lead academic dissemination</p> <p>Contribute to public dissemination</p>
<i>Role of Young Researchers</i>	<p>Low Authority, Mixed Inclusion</p> <p>Contribute to the research objectives</p> <p>Provide feedback on the research focus and research questions</p>	<p>Low Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Draft questions for research tools</p> <p>Providing input on research methods</p>	<p>Shared Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Operationalize data collection plans, identifying subjects</p> <p>Directly collect primary data, build rapport with participants</p>	<p>Shared Authority, High Inclusion (UNITY)</p> <p>Conduct first-level analysis of data</p> <p>Collate/interpret field-level observations</p> <p>Provide feedback on second-level analysis</p>	<p>High Authority, High Inclusion</p> <p>Operationalize facilitation plan, identifying spaces and participants</p> <p>Determine how feedback is shared/incorporated</p>	<p>Mixed⁶ Authority, Mixed Inclusion</p> <p><i>For broader dissemination:</i></p> <p>Ideate creative, impactful approaches</p> <p>Co-lead dissemination strategy</p>

³ This step is not present in all research processes; however, for us it has been integral to the practice of creating inclusive, heterotopic spaces for sense-making. In this step of the youth co-research process, young researchers take the findings back to a sub-sample of the respondents of the study to validate the findings, confirming that they have accurately captured the experience of those they interviewed and identifying any gaps or clarifications to be addressed in the final documentation of the findings.

⁴ To date capacity-building has been concentrated on technical researchers providing training in key research skills to young researchers who do not have prior formal research exposure. This has not been complemented with capacity-building provided to technical researchers, in part due to the aforementioned limitation of having worked predominantly with technical researchers who are predisposed to value young people's contributions often built from prior exposure to youth engagement. However, we do acknowledge that technical researchers build greater awareness of how to work with young researchers – and better appreciate the meaningful insights that they provide – by working with this approach. We invite future researchers using a youth co-research approach to expand on this.

⁵ Analysis takes a grounded theory approach, in order to protect space for new ideas and approaches to emerge.

⁶ Young researchers' authority is mixed at this stage because it differs based on the audience that findings are disseminated to. Young people's decision-making tends to be most welcome amongst broader, less technical audiences.

London applies authority and inclusion to reflect upon young people's involvement in research, we use the same parameters to characterise the roles of technical researchers, thus more fully describing the relationship between these two groups of researchers. [London \(2007\)](#) reminds us that low authority or inclusion of young people is not necessarily bad, as this should be dictated by the research team's capacity to provide appropriate support to young people. We identify how young researchers' and technical researchers' authority and inclusion fluctuates between research stages; this flexibility facilitates the maximisation of the teams' collective skills and expertise.

As [Table 2](#) shows, young researchers and technical researchers have different levels of inclusion and authority at different stages of the research process. In youth co-research, the authority and inclusion of technical researchers at any step in the research process is not necessarily the inverse of young people's. Instead, we identify stages where young researchers and technical researchers share authority – complemented by the high inclusion of both parties – which supports the creation of shared, heterotopic spaces. In the analytical stage, complementary youth-led and professional-led analysis processes allow for both parties to play a strong role in the sense-making of the data. Both parties have a high level of authority and inclusion – a unique moment in the youth co-research process and a space of shared power where it matters most, which we refer to as 'unity.' Unity at this stage depends upon a degree of shared authority and inclusion at previous stages, to form the basis of a mutually trusting partnership. We recognise that there could be further opportunities for 'unity' based on how a research project is conceived and designed.

4. Youth co-research case studies

Having shared the thinking behind youth co-research and its goals, and the arc of youth and technical researcher engagement (as shown in [Table 2](#)), this section offers three case studies of research projects in which this approach has been applied. These examples show how despite having a shared core approach, the details have flexed between research settings, project design and funder. This variation allows a necessarily pragmatic approach to fitting co-research within the wider parameters and limits of a project, while proactively creating spaces for young people and technical researchers to share their complementary skills. The three research projects referred to below all recruited young researchers not on their prior exposure to formal research training and processes but instead on their ability to conduct research, given the right conditions and support to do so. This widens the pool of potential young researchers to include those with in-depth lived experience of a particular context

but less access to formal education and skilling opportunities. Technical researchers who are amenable to working with young researchers are supported to understand the youth co-research process, highlighting how to: build spaces for young researchers' authority and inclusion; use targeted training materials for each step of young researchers' participation; and facilitate young researchers' participation. Thus, both sets of researchers gain new knowledge, perspectives, skills and work experience. The case studies refer to research with young people experiencing climate change disruptions in Uganda, young people impacted by COVID-19 in Indonesia and Nepal and a youth think tank convened between East, West and Southern Africa.

Case study 1. Peak youth, climate change and the role of young people in seizing their future

This youth co-research project focuses on young people's working lives in Uganda, in particular, examining the impacts of climate change on young people's livelihoods and how they have responded. This research topic was chosen due to several influences, some youth-focused, some youth-directed. Earlier research with young people had identified their challenges in getting by and making a life, while scientific reports describe the devastating impacts of climate change on vulnerable people and some young people express their serious concerns regarding climate change (IPCC 2014; Nakate 2021; Barford *et al.* 2021; Barford, Coombe & Proefke 2020, 2021). Informed by these wider trends, this research project was designed by technical researchers at Restless Development, the University of Cambridge, and Makerere University. The project was funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures programme, which purposefully aimed to bring 'a youth lens to the global sustainable development challenges' (British Academy 2019).

The methods were identified when writing the research grant which, as with most research grants, allowed a period of several months in which to respond to the funding call. Methods, chosen by the technical researchers while building a team and designing the project, included interviews, focus groups, a survey and policy panels. While the technical researchers selected these headline methods, young people advised on the detailed design through three wide ranging discussions about young people and climate change, followed by further discussion with the Ugandan National Youth Working group. These discussions with young people were carefully formulated, ensuring that most of the group was made up of that age group and only involved one member of the technical research team to put the young contributors at ease and help reduce any shyness about speaking openly. This group composition ensured that young people were the experts in the virtual room. In addition to discussion, white board-based exercises were used to encourage other forms of communication.

These conversations identified the issues faced, feeding directly into the questions posed by the research tools; tools that were later tested by young people before being rolled out.

The research tools were subject to their own time and bureaucratic pressures which prevented more active youth involvement. A two-stage ethical review process in Uganda meant that early application for ethical clearance was critical to delivering the project in good time. To keep to the timescales the research tools were designed and translated, then submitted for ethical review. This process lasted over six months and delayed the start of data collection. Thus, practical and legal requirements needed a pragmatic response, with youth collaboration reduced accordingly as time pressure limited the team's capacity to create authentic heterotopic opportunities to collaborate. While equitable co-research has been prioritised, it is at times in tension with other demands of the research process, good project management means delivering on these *together*.

Young researchers were recruited in two groups, one for the qualitative and one for the quantitative strand of work. Each group was split between the Busoga and Karamoja subregions of Uganda, but they joined for research methods training, a critical review and testing of the research tools (Barford *et al.* 2021). Following this, the team returned to their home regions, where they have substantial insight into local livelihoods and economic dynamics, climate change disruptions, languages and culture. With training, support and guidance from the technical researchers when needed, the young researchers undertook the first steps with data collection, collation, translation and analysis. This required high levels of authority and inclusion from young researchers, as they were responsible for recruiting interviewees and survey respondents, for managing their timetables and for handling research data. At this stage the technical researchers had lower inclusion, except for the research co-ordinator who was available to tackle issues as they arose.

A major issue that did arise was COVID-19. A strict lockdown began just as the research team were embarking upon the data collection, making it impossible to do the in-person interviews and surveys that had been scheduled. Working our way around this challenge required the skills and know-how of the whole team – using the local networks and contextual knowledge of young researchers in conjunction with the technical researchers' knowledge of other projects' approaches to similar problems and oversight of research methods. The strategy was to use telephone interviews to collect data, ensuring that the young researchers and their respondents were properly compensated for the costs of phone use. Recognising that key groups would be excluded by this approach, some respondents lent their mobile telephones to those who did not have one of their own. After the lockdown, the research team prioritised data collection from groups who were underrepresented due to these changes in data

collection techniques. This example shows the value of bringing together the skills and knowledge of diverse groups within the research team.

The analysis stage was particularly useful as a moment for unity between young and technical researchers, as the young researchers drew upon their considerable knowledge and experience of conducting data collection, and shared their insights into key themes and issues, which technical researchers were then able to follow up in their slower, technology-enabled analysis and write ups. Following this, young and professional researchers came together to disseminate the research through presentations and policy discussions with local stakeholders. These were held in person in the capital city Kampala, as well as in the regional capitals, Jinja and Moroto. One of the young researchers was also an invited speaker to a session we ran at the Education Rewired summit in Dubai in 2021, and many others took up speaking opportunities at the numerous other events we contributed to.

The write up of academic findings was limited to the technical research group in this case, due to the time needed for detailed writing. While the young researchers were not involved, the technical team consisted of several early career researchers who have been deeply involved in writing up findings for the media and for academic journals. For collaborative write ups to become more of a practical reality, we would recommend designing this into the proposal complete with the correct time and financial allocations to allow for this, as well as writing workshops to offer the necessary oversight and to hone the skills needed for this part of the research process. We are certain that a lot could be gained from such an approach in terms of insights and co-learning.

Case study 2. Youth in a time of crisis: livelihood diaries from Nepal and Indonesia during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019 and quickly spread across the world. Its novel, highly infectious and deadly nature resulted in national lockdowns which brought national economies to repeated temporary standstills during 2020 and 2021. Young people were especially impacted by this due to their collectively weaker labour market positions; particular subgroups of young people were worse impacted than others (ILO 2021). Furthermore, young people often lacked policy support to mitigate these impacts (Barford, Coutts & Sahai 2021). At a time when in-person research was unpredictable and often impossible due to public health containment measures, diary methods offered a viable and interesting approach to collecting accounts of how young people were impacted (Mueller *et al.* 2023). In this case, our qualitative research focused on those who were especially unprotected from the impacts of COVID-19. The theme and subgroups were proposed by the technical research team

and the funder (the Asian Development Bank) and refined in conversation with project partners Restless Nepal and Rutgers WPF, young people in Indonesia and Nepal, as well as through discussions with the National Resident Missions of the Asian Development Bank.

In this research, young researchers were recruited as ‘rapporteurs’, each of whom oversaw a cluster of diary writers with a shared characteristic. Their language skills, local expertise and similar demographics enabled a peer-to-peer engagement between young rapporteurs and research participants. The research clusters comprised young mothers, migrant waste pickers, health care workers, trekking and tourism workers, people living with disability and people who self-define as LGBTQI+. Young rapporteurs were trained and then supported to engage the diary writers on a weekly basis, quickly identifying and often solving problems as they worked. Here the high authority and high inclusion of young researchers made it possible for them to make these decisions themselves, referring to the technical researchers when needed. The young rapporteurs were experts in their own clusters and ran the first round of analysis for their individual cluster based on their in-depth knowledge of the cluster and the local context in which they were situated. The rapporteurs also ran focus group discussions, during which we made a conscious effort to manage and balance the inter-generational and international power dynamics by briefing more experienced group members on the importance of respectful listening and resisting being the first to respond to questions. It was important to remain aware of these underlying power dynamics in seeking to create heterotopic spaces.

Some of the young researchers on the team were highly involved in dissemination of the research findings. This took the form of international online events to present research findings. Due to there being ten rapporteurs, no one was obliged to present in this way, but every speaking opportunity was filled by willing volunteers; those not presenting were often in the audience and actively participating in the parallel online chat. Thus, the dissemination enabled a heterotopic space in which young people were speaking with authority about their research findings, in spaces usually reserved for more traditional-looking experts. In terms of the write up of the findings, the authors were the technical research team, including the country co-ordinators from each country. As suggested above, a study resourced to support the engagement of young researchers in the academic write up would offer an opportunity to explore the potential for boosting youth inclusion and authority in stages of the research process where they are typically less involved.

Case study 3. Youth think tank: a five-year strategic investment in investigating topics in youth economic opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa

Through a five-year partnership with Mastercard Foundation, Restless Development received funding to train and support 100 young researchers from seven sub-Saharan African countries to conduct six studies on youth economic opportunities, each delivered by a different cohort of young researchers. It is worth highlighting here that this case is distinct from the others presented in that the ratio of young researchers to technical researchers was significantly higher. This was because this initiative did not involve a partnership with academic researchers but rather included a few technical researchers within Restless Development for technical backstopping and engaging Mastercard Foundation partners at key moments. This led to greater spaces for young people's authority and inclusion in the research process but also meant that the project benefitted less from varied perspectives that a research team with more diverse experiences can bring.

Following an initial open-ended scoping study on the state of youth economic opportunities across East Africa, which focused on research questions identified by the young people themselves, Mastercard Foundation identified the next two topics that the Youth Think Tank researchers would focus on. Both these topics stemmed from the key unanswered questions from the scoping study. However, the focus of all future studies was identified – and proposed – by the young researchers themselves, based on what they saw as being key priorities for young people's economic opportunities. The short list of potential topics that they provided were then reviewed by technical researchers at Restless Development and by Mastercard Foundation partners for alignment to ongoing academic and technical conversations. Later cohorts of young researchers then investigated the finalised research topics and questions, as identified through this consultative process. To a large extent in this approach, then, young researchers had a high level of authority in the process of setting the research framework. Because this funding did not require prior research proposals of all research topics, cohorts of young researchers could iteratively determine a shortlist of research priorities that also aligned to the priorities of young people like themselves. In co-designing the research topics and questions that youth co-research projects would focus on, technical and young researchers created heterotopic spaces where both groups co-identified the strategic research priorities that would determine how research investments were utilised. Therefore, this investment showcases how there can be opportunities for 'unity' at other stages of the youth co-research process, dependent on grant and funding structures that allow for more inclusion at the research design phase.

Once the research objectives were collaboratively determined, technical researchers from Restless Development facilitated young researchers in how to move from

research objectives to research questions through an in-person two-week workshop, and young researchers identified the research questions that would be most meaningful to them based on the priorities of young people. However, technical researchers' support was needed to reformulate the research questions in a concrete way with appropriate focus, given the scale of the research and to advise on which methods would be best placed to answer these research questions. Similarly, technical researchers provided young researchers with guidance on how to design the research tools; young researchers worked in small groups to develop drafts; and these drafts were then finalised by the technical researchers at Restless Development. Therefore, while young researchers had a high level of inclusion in this stage of the research process – taking the first step to identify both general research questions and those addressed to respondents – they had a lower level of authority. We found that a certain level of experience-based expertise is required to phrase strong research questions, determine which methods should be applied and to translate research questions into specific questions directed to respondents. However, we encourage other researchers to identify better ways to expand young researchers' authority in this process, perhaps by concentrating on how to provide more accessible but also more in-depth capacity-building in this skill.

Following training in how to collect data according to the methods identified for each study and guidance on who and how to sample respondents, young researchers led on data collection within their countries themselves, reaching out to the technical researchers at Restless Development only as needed to help troubleshoot challenges that they faced. As technical researchers provided ongoing guidance, and young researchers provided field leadership, this stage of the research process represented a moment of shared authority – but varying levels of inclusion between technical and young researchers with the latter having less inclusion. Instead, analysis represented a unique moment of unity, where young researchers and technical researchers both had a high level of authority in identifying the emerging findings and a high level of inclusion in the process of doing so. Through another in-person two-week session, technical researchers and young researchers worked together to identify key themes and trends emerging from the data. While technical researchers provided the analytical framework for analysis based on their technical experience, young researchers – organized into smaller working groups – worked with the data to identify key findings. These were then peer-reviewed by the other groups of young researchers as well as by the technical researchers who played the role of 'critical friend' asking key open-ended questions about emerging trends and themes to ensure that they were well substantiated with the evidence captured. In this moment of unity, the co-analysis process in the analysis workshop represented both a physical and conceptual heterotopic space for sense-making that allowed for greater inclusion of young people's insights than other

less-participatory approaches. Similarly, writing up the results reflected a process of high inclusion for both technical researchers and some young researchers. Writing responsibilities were shared between technical researchers at Restless Development and a subset of young researchers from each study who came together to form a writing group, authoring key sections of the report.

Young researchers also had a high level of authority and inclusion during the validation exercises that they led following the analysis stage of each research project. Following analysis, technical researchers supported young researchers to identify outstanding questions that could be addressed through the validation exercise and to develop a facilitation guide for these exercises. Technical researchers then identified a sampling strategy that would guide young researchers in selecting locations and participants for these exercises. Within this framework, young researchers took on the role of identifying and mobilising participants, as well as facilitating and documenting the discussions. Following these validation exercises, young researchers then discussed how to utilise the lessons from the validation exercises to add further nuance to the findings, as captured in the research reports. Therefore, while technical researchers took a role in determining a structure for this stage of the youth co-research process, young researchers led on the sense-making from this process.

Findings from each of these studies were disseminated through multiple forums and channels in an example of mixed authority and inclusion between young researchers and technical researchers. Technical researchers from Restless Development and partners from Mastercard Foundation convened in-person national dissemination workshops targeting key government and development partner stakeholders, leveraging our combined networks. One such event was held per study in one of the seven countries, where Restless Development and Mastercard Foundation deemed that the research would be most relevant, based on key topics and discussions in policy and practice in that country. However, young researchers determined how these events would be facilitated and led all discussions of the research findings within them, creating heterotopic spaces to discussion and dialogue. These national dissemination events were complemented by in-country dissemination plans developed by the young researcher country teams, based on what they felt would be the most impactful audiences to target with the findings and which channel should be used to do so. They often used a mix of bespoke engagements with key stakeholders, in-country launch events, radio shows and several other creative approaches. In developing these dissemination plans, technical researchers from Restless Development instead played a technical assistance role, providing advice on which stakeholders to include, which findings might resonate most with them and how to reach them with these messages; however, this support was on-demand, not directive. So, in practice, these youth-led localised dissemination activities created heterotopic spaces in the research process,

challenging who ‘owned’ the findings and who determined how they were presented and shared with others, representing a high level of authority and inclusion for young researchers in sense-making of the research.

We acknowledge that what these case studies do not address is how to reconcile issues of power and inequality within the two groups of researchers – between young researchers and between technical researchers – which were at times live issues during our case studies. However, these are still open questions, and we invite other researchers to expand on answering them.

Conclusion

Long-standing trends towards collaborative and participatory research have great potential when applied to youth studies. This article situates our approach to youth co-research within the wider range of approaches which span from youth-focused (about young people) to youth-led (initiated and directed by young people). Here we present our approach to engaging young people on a fruitful middle ground, whereby young researchers collaborate with technical researchers. As others have argued, there is much to be gained from interaction and partnership across differences (Hart 2008; De Sousa Santos 2008). This involves learning and sharing skills and expertise across groups, with each group bringing something distinctive and valuable to the table which deepens cross-group understanding and improves the relevance, reach and insight offered by shared research. This collaboration also offers a reformulation of the type and quality of interaction between adult and young researchers – a compensatory heterotopia in which the nature of collaborations can be reworked as an antidote to dominant social norms (Foucault 1984).

There is a tendency for research methods that involve young people to focus primarily on young people, overlooking the positionality and attributes of the technical researchers with whom they are working. In this article we intentionally consider the dynamic relationship between these groups. We hope to follow De Sousa Santos (2008) in creating unity across difference, so both sides of this difference require acknowledgement. Positionality matters a great deal, yet it is important to make sense of this not only in terms of the demographic descriptors of age, gender, race and class; but also in terms of attitude, group dynamic, ability to listen and approach to facilitation. These features are also stressed by Hart (2008) as being crucial to enabling younger people to effectively participate. We have described the shifting roles of young and technical researchers, in terms of their inclusion and authority in the research process (after London 2007), mapping out how this is distributed across different stages of the research collaboration (as shown in Table 2). Future methods articles might helpfully

explore ways to promote inclusive dynamics *between* young researchers, or *amongst* technical researchers.

Collaboration is important for moving ahead to solve some of the deep and pressing issues that concern young people and wider society. We have seen this in the climate change movement, with calls for international and intergenerational solidarity (e.g. Nakate 2021). What we present here is a formulation of how to effectively draw upon the different and often complementary skills of young people and professional researchers. Our approach has been used in many international studies so far and will benefit from future development. Areas where greater shared inclusion and shared authority might be developed in the future are particularly around the initial formulation of the research and the academic write up of the findings. A key message for fellow researchers interested in pursuing youth co-research is this: if you don't budget for it, you won't be able to do it. Here, budgeting refers to money, but also to time and space, reminding us to design in young researchers from the start. Looking ahead, we are eager to learn of new ways to shift the authority/inclusion balance and generate more stages of researcher unity within the research process.

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