

## Youth participation in an environment of harassment. The case of Mexico City

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### Abstract

Youth participation in Mexico City holds a long tradition and remains active as to our days. However, in recent years, the freedom and safety of young activists has become more contested, since a recent increase in harassment and violence against civil society activists has been documented. Between 2006 and 2012, over 60 human rights defenders and activists, many of them young, were killed because of their work in Mexico. Since 2012, aggression and persecution seems to be on the rise, especially during public protests: during 2014 alone, over 300 attacks against human rights defenders and journalists were reported. More than 200 human rights defenders have been accorded protective status by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in recognition of the high risk that they face. This high level of attacks suggests that safe conditions for participation do not exist. However, youth participation has not decreased but, on the contrary, has acted in a strong and reactive way, investing all its energies on human rights defense.

There seems to remain the misleading idea of young people being politically apathetic, when reality shows us the new strategies of participation are recurring to new strategies, such as the organisms' decision of remaining informal, in order to not compromising their agenda with government pressures.

Recent events in Mexico related with repression, disappearances, and a persistent lack of justice during judicial processes, has affected the mechanisms of action for civil society, where a large diversity of civil society members, from an uncountable number of diverse causes, formal and informal organisations, but also non-involved population and single activists, gathered together as a single cause and acted as a congregated group to take actions and protest as a single movement, and evidence shows us that they will keep getting together when that cause demands it, for then desegregating and continuing for a self-specific cause. Therefore, there needs to be a change in the way that we conceive participation, since these new strategies seem to be functioning as emergent actions, that can make a single agenda for different kinds of actors, but that will not require them to lose their own agenda. In that sense, "modern human agency is constituted as modular". (Gellner, 1996)

This paper seeks to establish, first, a brief context of the conditions where the current youth participation occurs for, in section II and III, exploring the results of fieldwork in terms of young activists' political work, the main elements that drive or obstruct their political actions and, finally, the specific processes involved with harassment and how they respond and address this issue within the transgressed space.

Method: in-depth, semi-structured interviews and ethnography, involving 12 young activists —six women, six men— belonging to formal NGOs, con-legally constituted collectives or working as independent activists. They all had less than 35 years during the time when the interviews were conducted and developed most of his political work in Mexico City. The ethnography occurred

during one of the organisations' formative process, as well as the main public protests that occurred during the field work period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This research paper is the extended version of my individual contribution for the research project “The Case for Space”, that was focused on exploring the enabling environment to improve the conditions and structures affecting child and youth development. [www. fromrhetorictoaction.org/gyr/rocio/] The field work was developed during the May-August period of 2015.