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# Young people's involvement in migration research – opportunities for (re)shaping research priorities and practices

*Grace Spencer, Jill Thompson, Fanny Froehlich, Divine Asafo, Michael Tetteh Doku, George Asiamah, Jemima Mornuu, Amidatu Kassim, Stephen Owusu Kwankye and Ernestina Dankyi*

*Abstract:* Young people are frequently involved in research about their own lives and their contributions to the shaping of research priorities increasingly valued. Recently, young people's participation in research has been extended to advisory group roles including supporting the planning, design and delivery of projects. Such involvement marks an important shift towards valuing young people's views on how research should be conducted and is often required as part of research funding processes. In this article, we explore the value and contribution of young people's involvement in a research project focusing on the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana and the related possibilities for empowerment. Our collaborations remind us of the pitfalls of working from an adult centric lens, and how this may inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of adult ways of understanding young lives. Here, our project Young Person Advisory Group members share their experiences of being youth advisors – highlighting both challenges and opportunities for young people's meaningful involvement in research.

*Keywords:* young people, participation, Young Person Advisory Group, empowerment, migrants, youth advisors

*Note on the authors:* see end of article.

## Introduction

Young people's involvement in research has increased rapidly in recent times and in line with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) (particularly Article 12), which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. This is happening at a time when new research methods and forms of engagement have been developed to aid the more meaningful and effective participation of young people in research about their own lives (for some examples see Christensen & James 2008; Ansell *et al.* 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh & Okyere 2020). Different forms of involvement offer different ways of engaging young people in research including as active research participants, co-researchers, peer researchers and as research advisory group members (Porter 2016). Despite these advances, involving young people in research is not without important ethical and methodological challenges and considerations, which are often complicated by the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants (James 2007; Holland *et al.* 2010; Spyrou 2016; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020).

In this article co-authored with our project youth advisors, we share our experiences of working with young people as part of the Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG) for an international project focusing on the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana, and the related possibilities for understanding empowerment. In doing so, we offer a careful reflection and critique on how young people are involved in the project as advisors, including advancing understanding of what meaningful participation (as defined by young people) might look like in practice and how this (for our young advisors) ties to broader research impacts and possibilities for social change. Issues of diversity and power come to the fore – reminding us of how research agendas often remain adult-led, despite best intentions. Yet, these reflections also open up new ways of thinking about, and enabling, young people's meaningful involvement in research as our later analysis unpacks.

The article commences with an overview of the contributions to young people's involvement in research, including charting some of the practical, ethical and methodological challenges documented in the literature to date. Together with our young advisors as co-authors, we reflect on and pay particular attention to the complexities of engaging young people in a research study located in different countries and how dominant assumptions tied to Western notions of youth participation can shape our understanding of 'youth involvement'. We then proceed to detail the genesis, aims and activities of our YPAG and their specific contributions to the project – setting out how this differs from peer or co-research with young people. Drawing directly upon our young advisors' perspectives, we share our experiences of the opportunities and challenges young people's involvement in our project has afforded. We conclude

by highlighting some of the possible 'dangers' of adult centric research and how these might inadvertently reinforce dominant power relations.

## Young people's involvement in research

The involvement of young people in research has expanded rapidly and the literature highlights many examples of young people's engagement in research – and in varying capacities and roles (e.g. as research participant, advisor, co-researcher). Contemporary examples of young people's research participation can be found across a range of disciplines and areas, including (but not limited to) education (see [Can & Göksenin 2017](#); [Forde et al. 2018](#)), health (see [From 2019](#); [Martin et al. 2018](#)), family life (see [Shah et al. 2021](#)), and social media and peer relationships (see [Goodyear, Armour & Wood 2018](#); [Hunter, van Blerk & Shand 2021](#)). The increasing commitment to the 'meaningful' engagement of young people in research has been largely triggered in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ([UN 1989](#)). The UNCRC heralded the rights of young people to participate in cultural life – crucially, positioning young people's perspectives at the forefront of decisions that directly affect their lives ([Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012](#)). Such an emphasis offers a direct challenge to the invisibility of children across a number of spaces; including migration studies (see [Bhabha 2003](#); [Stalford 2018](#)).

The UNCRC marked an important shift in emphasis from young people as the passive subjects *of* research to more active participants *in* research ([James & Prout 2015](#)), particularly in relation to Article 12, which sets out the rights of all children to express their views on matters that affect them and crucially, that such views are taken seriously. In research, this emphasis signals a move away from adult centrism towards understanding and conceptualising issues from young people's own frames of reference. Such a shift is regarded as important within childhood and youth studies, both from a moral or rights-based perspective, but also in terms of the contributions that young people can make to research through their 'lived experiences' and opening up important debates about whether young people have the right to be involved in research about their own lives (for discussions see [Ennew & Plateau 2004](#); [Lundy & McEvoy 2012](#)). Indeed, ethically, undertaking research *with* young people is considered 'the right thing to do', with the idea that such an approach respects young people's contributions and agency compared to more traditional approaches that have a tendency to privilege research *on* or *about* young people ([Ansell et al. 2012](#)).

As part of the movement towards more active participation in research, methodological advances have sought new ways to enable the meaningful inclusion of young people in research, along with frameworks that usefully describe and conceptualise

young people's participation (and at different 'levels') (e.g., Arnstein's 1969) ladder of participation, Shier's 2001) pathways to participation, and Lundy's 2007) model of participation). These models reflect varying understandings of 'meaningful participation', which has been differentially used in the literature, but seldom defined from young people's own meanings of the term. As our analysis reveals, meaningful participation may have specific connotations to young people.

Expansion of methods such as participatory drawing (Pavarini *et al.* 2021), PhotoVoice (a qualitative method that asks participants to take photos of their experiences, alongside their narratives) (Volpe 2019), visual mapping or timelines (Thomson 2008) and the use of drama and performance arts (Shabtay 2022) have been positively advocated as 'youth-friendly' data collection approaches and because of their potential to redress (to some extent) the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants. Other advances seek different ways to involve young people in research beyond the role of participant to that of co-researcher, peer researcher and advisory group member (for some examples see Ansell *et al.* 2012; Chappell *et al.* 2014; Porter 2016; Cluver *et al.* 2021). These approaches focus on the importance of co-production of knowledge and harnessing young people's ways of knowing, and are often (sometimes uncritically) advocated as enabling greater 'power-sharing' as young people influence the design and direction of research in partnership with adult researchers. In contrast to peer research, where young people are trained to undertake the research, appointing a youth advisory group reflects young people's governance of the project and thus, the accountability of adult researchers to young people and their perspectives (Cluver *et al.* 2021).

Despite offering important advances, there is often a tendency to conflate these very different types of youth involvement as evidence of their 'active participation' without a full consideration of the different opportunities (and challenges) these approaches afford young people, their ethical consequences, or indeed whether young people want to be involved and in what capacity. Ansell *et al.* (2012) caution against the over-simplification of such 'power-sharing' and remind us of the (ongoing) dangers of exploitation. Further critiques of such approaches highlight how possibilities for tokenism remain (Alderson 2001; Lundy 2007), along with neglect of how young people's social identities and diverse backgrounds (e.g., socio-economic position, ethnicity, education, gender) may differentially privilege (or deny) some young people's involvement, especially in contexts of adversity or vulnerability. Ultimately, how we engage with such diversity may determine whose perspectives are accessed, 'get counted' and represented in our research (see also Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020). Such critiques draw important attention to the ways existing social relations and structures shape the relative power and privilege occupied by different groups of young people – and the wider landscape in which the research is located

(Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012). Ansell *et al.* (2012) highlight how some young people may be better enabled to share their knowledge because of their social position – thereby potentially exacerbating existing power inequities and inequalities. In the context of this study, our participants were migrants many of whom lived and worked in precarious circumstances with no fixed abode. This precarity raises important questions about which young people might be best placed to advise the project team on the aims and directions of the research – a point we return to in our final discussion.

Power inequities are especially relevant when working across different country and cultural contexts (Duramy & Gal 2020) and with different groups of young people. Indeed, the very idea of youth participation may reflect adult centric Western notions of, and priorities for, participation, which might be especially difficult to achieve in contexts where socio-cultural norms continue to position young people as subservient to adults and discourage (or even deny) young people the freedom to express their opinions until they reach a particular age (Duramy & Gal 2020). Such challenges once again remind us of the dangers of oversimplifying young people's participation in research as being a 'good thing', and without due regard to socio-cultural understandings of childhood and youth and how these shape the workings of power in, and through, research. Or indeed, neglect the possibility that young people might not want to be involved in research and have other priorities in their lives.

James (2007) also encourages researchers to be mindful of not undertaking 'ethnographic ventriloquism' within projects, claiming to speak for, or on behalf of, young people – something that is particularly challenging when trying to authentically share young people's perspectives on involvement, all the while trying to avoid the dangers of suggesting 'truth'. This is especially relevant during the analytical stages of research and how young people's interpretations of findings are harnessed, taken-up or otherwise reframed or 'explained away', all the while suggesting an 'authentic' representation of young people and their 'voices' (see Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020 for a critique). These complexities are reflected here as we work towards co-authoring some of the opportunities and challenges of young people's involvement in research as youth advisors located in two different countries (see Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Marecki 2022 for further discussion on co-authorship).

### **Establishing a cross-national (UK, Ghana) Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG)**

This article draws on our experiences of working with a cross-national Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG) as part of a research project examining the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana and funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures

Programme<sup>1</sup>. The project's main aim was to advance understandings of empowerment as it relates to the everyday working lives of young migrants (aged 15–24 years) in Ghana and harness these understandings within the development of sustainable policy approaches that enhance positive youth futures. Migration was both internal (e.g., from regional/rural areas to the city) and international from neighbouring West African countries. In this context, migration was usually for economic reasons to escape poverty and poor living circumstances. Whilst such migration might be defined as 'voluntary, economic migration', our study findings suggest this is too simplistic a definition as our participants described how they had little choice, but to move for work and a 'better life' and escape such hardships.

The study included focus groups, dyads, interviews and observation with fifty-nine young migrants from six different countries in Western Africa. These methods aimed to capture a detailed account of young migrants' working lives and migration experiences. Ethical approval for the main study was granted by a UK research ethics committee and the respective committee in Ghana. All participants were fully informed about the study and their involvement prior to consent being ascertained. A further key aspect of the project aimed to identify the methods and methodologies that sensitively and effectively ascertain young migrants' own perspectives on their livelihoods, crucially, building cross-national youth partnerships and capacity-building that maximises opportunities for youth-led responses to new policy approaches and forms of knowledge exchange and advancement. The project commenced in March 2020, but was then on-hold during the initial stages of the pandemic. The project ended in September 2022.

As part of our commitment to the meaningful involvement of young people and the importance of harnessing young people's perspectives in the development of the project, we established a cross-national (UK, Ghana) Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG). The YPAG comprises of five young Ghanaians (three young men, two young women) aged between 20 and 32 years, reflecting the African Youth Charter definition of youth, of whom two live in the UK and three live in Ghana. As such, our understanding of 'cross-national' focuses on the current geographical locations in which YPAG members are located, rather than them being from different nations. Our young advisors were recruited for their knowledge and experiences of living in Ghana, migration and their advocacy work in relation to young people and in particular, Ghanaian youth. For example, our YPAG members are actively involved with enhancing the voices and participation of young people in issues directly affecting their lives (in the UK and Ghana). In the UK, we approached the Ghana Student

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the programme, please see: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/youth-futures-promoting-sustainable-livelihoods-unpacking-possibilities-empowerment-migrants-ghana/>



Society to identify and invite expressions of interest from potential young advisors representing young Ghanaians in the UK. In Ghana, we identified student advocates working with local organisations with an interest in migration issues affecting young people. Our decision to recruit young Ghanaians located in the UK and Ghana was largely guided by our commitment to developing cross-national youth partnerships, but also to ensure our YPAG members had direct experience of migration (albeit in a different context) and an understanding of the implications for young lives.

The YPAG were not recruited as study participants or peer researchers, but rather, were involved in an advisory capacity to ensure our research processes were guided directly by (and accountable to) the perspectives of young people. As such, our YPAG advised on different aspects of the project including our recruitment strategy and development of study materials, our data collection plans, organisation of our dissemination workshops and the design and development of our project website and online youth forum.<sup>2</sup> The latter was specifically designed to offer a platform to engage young people in the project and for them to contribute their ideas to contemporary debates on the project's main themes; namely, empowerment, livelihoods and migration. Opportunities for our YPAG to be involved with the data analysis and dissemination events and study outputs, including co-authorship, were maximised as far as possible to ensure meaningful and effective pathways for impact that are led directly by young people. Our engagement with our YPAG included bi-monthly online meetings and regular emails, as well as via our online youth forum and social media sites. As described, our discussions focused on different aspects of the research process, including recruitment strategies, the development of interview questions and preparation of dissemination materials for young people. Opportunities for face-to-face discussions were explored, but were largely limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our YPAG members were offered a small honorarium to acknowledge their contributions to the project – and to reflect the time taken from their studies and advocacy work to participate in discussions and project activities.

This article draws directly on our consultations with our YPAG members and their experiences of working on the project as advisors. As part of this, we asked our YPAG members to respond to a series of questions about their involvement in the project (see [Table 1](#)). For example, we asked our YPAG about their specific experiences of being involved in this study and their broader reflections on young people's involvement in research. These questions were circulated via email by our project Youth Co-Researcher (YCR) (FF) to collect individual written responses from each YPAG member. These written responses were followed-up with online group discussions led by our YCR to develop a deeper understanding of young people's involvement in the

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.youngmigrantsghana.com/>



**Table 1.** Discussion questions for our Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG).

- 
1. What is it like to be a young person involved in a research project?
  2. What have been some of the most positive aspects? What have you gained/what did you like about the experience?
  3. Have there been any challenges of working as an YPAG member?
  4. What impact would you hope to see from the research?
  5. How can research (our project) be more relatable to young people?
  6. What would be the best ways for researchers to involve young people in research?
- 

project and research more broadly. Our online discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure an accurate record of the discussions was captured and then analysed thematically by the team in collaboration with our YPAG members.

What follows is a careful and critical reflection on these experiences to help advance understanding of both the complexities and opportunities offered by young people's participation in research as project advisors – along with our YPAG's thoughts on young people's involvement in research more broadly. To avoid 'ethnographic ventriloquism' or 'sanitising' young people's accounts with academic conventions, our YPAG members share their first-hand accounts of their involvement in the project (see also [Box 1](#)). These accounts were selected here by our YPAG members to best capture their thoughts on the discussion areas. We then offer some further analytical reflections on what these insights might tell us more broadly about young people's participation in research within the final discussion.

### **Young Person Advisory Group Experiences**

In the section that follows, our young advisors share their experiences of being part of a cross-national advisory group, including what their involvement means to them. Our advisors reflect on both their experiences of being an YPAG member, but also their broader thoughts on young people's involvement in research. These latter discussions highlight the crucial importance of young people's meaningful participation in, and through, research and how this might be achieved in practice; and through, for example, developing real-world impacts and social change. The value of acknowledging the diversity of young people's perspectives is especially important, yet also draws attention to the tricky issues of power in research and how best to reconcile different perspectives. During these moments, the inherent power imbalances between young people and academic researchers come to the fore – highlighting the value of building trusting relationships with young people premised on mutual respect and reciprocity. Our young advisors remind us of the importance of maximising opportunities for

### **Box 1. First-hand accounts of YPAG members' involvement in research: meaningful participation, effecting change and power relations**

#### **Amidatu (Youth Advisor, Ghana)**

*I'm interested in seeing how migration might improve people's quality of life. People's social lives are improved as they learn about other cultures, customs and languages. I also expect to see that the research makes a difference. I mean there have been research like different research going on, but after the research, we do not see any difference in what they have been researching. So, I hope that after this project, research can make a difference, you see a difference. And I also hope that it shifts the policy on migration through advocacy. So, advocating about the livelihoods of young people in Ghana, researching about it, it will be able to shape some of the policies we have.*

#### **Divine (Youth Advisor, UK)**

*[I]ncorporating the views of young people throughout the research project as evident in our current research enhance participatory action research, which is designed toward findings bespoke solutions to societal problems [...]. Theoretically, I hope the research will add to existing knowledge about the conceptualisation of empowerment and its various dimensions. More importantly, I hope the findings will highlight the idea of empowerment in the Ghanaian context as a case study of the Global south. This will not only provide a different perspective of empowerment, but expand the debate on what empowerment actually means to people of different ethnic background. And how this changes across location [...]. Involving myself in a research project presents the opportunity for me to share my experiences and opinions about a research theme. Importantly, it also offers me the platform to be directly engaged in a research project. Engaging in a research project connected me to people of different levels of research experience, age and expertise [...]. One major challenge that surfaced in the running of the young people in a research project is the issue of time and mode of meeting. In terms of time, it appears there is always the challenge of finding the most suitable time for a meeting. This results from our diverse engagements.*

#### **Jemima (Youth Advisor, Ghana)**

*Involving young people in projects like this, makes them feel very useful, and makes them want to be available to offer any help they can [...]. With a position like*

*advisory role, in a research involving doctors and professors, it is a big privilege for me. I can confidently say that, I have learnt a lot from this engagement with different people from diverse backgrounds, and I am still learning. I like the fact that young people are being engaged through platforms (social media) that are known to be young people-dominant. I am happy about this research and I'm hopeful that this will not be the end of young people engagement, especially in topics/matters of their concern [...]. One thing I know is young people share more views on topics they understand and relate well to. In future researches, this can help when young people's views are needed.*

**George (Youth Advisor, UK)**

*Overall, it has been wonderful being part of this project, and I hope the results and recommendations will go a long way to help empower young people in Ghana [...]. The main positive has been the opportunity to learn from senior and experienced researchers. I have learnt a lot about the design of research project, which will be very beneficial to me as an aspiring researcher. Being part of this research has also enhanced my team play as I work with people from different academic backgrounds and different level of expertise. This project also gave me the opportunity to reflect about myself as a youth and what the various themes and concepts such as empowerment meant to me [...]. From the bottom up, especially with the engagement of young people, we've been able to understand what empowerment is, using those social media platforms, sharing our ideas. It sort of enlightened us, and gives us broader knowledge about what's empowerment and what's the general consequences and everything about migration [...]. So, in a way it empowers us being part of the research to gain more knowledge about the topic being studied. So, yeah, apart from the top down, which is the influencing policy, it also empowers us, and it helps us in that bottom-up sense.*

**Michael (Youth Advisor, Ghana)**

*Just like any other activity, research into any problem will not interest you if you do not understand what it is seeking to achieve. For young people to better relate to research and the areas it seeks to explore, we'd need to understand how we're affected and how important it is to our day-to-day lives. This should be devoid of technical jargon as much as possible [...]. The positives for me is how we (the young people) are involved every step of the way. How the thoughts we share as an advisory group are respected and how they influence decisions. As a result of this initiative, I have developed a budding interest for research into social issues that affect livelihood*

*and hope that I would get the opportunity to lead a research project of this kind someday [...]. For me, it just reemphasises how important it is that young people are involved in things that affect their lives. Because most of the time (and especially on this side of the globe), a child is seen as a child and nothing more, as such there are regular expectations on the things you should focus on, and things you shouldn't. However, I know from personal experience that being involved in designing solutions to the challenges that young people face contributes to your development, builds your interest and makes you more oriented and proactive, making you more likely to want to solve a problem, rather than just stand by and watch.*

everyone to express their views and to look for (different) ways to harness young people's ways of developing knowledge and understanding of issues more effectively – as we illustrate in our final discussion. Crucially, our advisors emphasise how young people's involvement in research (whatever their role) should go beyond tokenistic forms of consultation and instead be at the forefront of effecting change at the policy level.

### **Young people's meaningful participation in research**

It is different from the regular data collection I am privy to, it gives me the hope that meaningful youth participation would gradually become something that's intentionally practised. By giving young people the opportunities to make contributions right from ideation to implementation, it positions us to develop interests in areas we wouldn't have hitherto. As young people, we possess different skills and come from different backgrounds, this should be leveraged. Researchers should give young people the opportunity to meaningfully participate, not just mere representation. It shouldn't be assumed that young people are uninterested or have nothing to contribute to the process. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

It feels very stimulating and fulfilling to be part of this project as a young person. I take satisfaction in the fact that I am making a contribution to address a particular developmental challenge in my country. Being part of this research emboldened me; it made me feel like my voice is being heard and that I am not just an interviewee or onlooker, but an active participant who helps in shaping and directing the research. (George, Young Advisor UK)

It's basically involving young people when it comes to decision making. When it's about meaningful youth participation, it's like bringing all these young people together in order to contribute. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our YPAG's reflections on their participation as project advisors highlights a strong preference for what they describe as 'meaningful participation', which for them extends beyond data collection. When asked further about their involvement in the project – including the things they enjoyed and gained from participating, our young advisors positively shared their perspectives on what participation means for them. Certain aspects were particularly valued including opportunities to learn new (research) skills and build their confidence (e.g. through participating in project meetings and suggesting items for discussion, producing recruitment materials), along with collaborating with experienced researchers. Crucially, for our young advisors, the project provided a space for their ideas and contributions to inform key priorities on issues affecting young people and specifically, young migrants in Ghana. For example, as a team, we sought ways to encourage the exchange of ideas via our online forum – learning directly from the experiences of our YPAG members.

It's fulfilling to [be] a young person involved in a research project. Getting to share my ideas and thoughts on issues around me and how it can be resolved is one thing I'm passionate about [...]. I like the fact that everyone was involved. I got the privilege to do a flier to help sharpen my creative design skills. I'm really grateful for this great opportunity and experience. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

I have been able to sharpen my human/social relations skills through working with the team. The periodic meetings involving deliberations and planning of activities of different kinds have taught me to appreciate diverse views and always put forward the interests of the group above my personal interests. Additionally, being able to relate with senior academics for the running of the project has built on my experience about how to relate with people of higher status. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

I see this as a learning opportunity, and I am glad to be a part. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our advisors also shared what they thought about young people's meaningful engagement in research more broadly. These discussions highlighted the ways in which efforts to engage young people are often tokenistic or even denied. Michael, for example, talked about the dangers of tokenistic representation of young people in research. In these examples, adult researchers often continue to lead the focus and direction of research – despite best intentions. Likewise, Divine and George signalled the importance of involving young people at each stage of the research. Meaningful participation thus means going beyond conducting data collection on, or with, young people to offering active opportunities for young people to take part in all stages of the research. Our project aimed to achieve this through, for example,

our youth forum and social media accounts, but also via our meetings and ongoing discussions with the YPAG members

It's important that we are intentionally involved, and at every step. As such, our participation shouldn't be just for the sake of it. That will be tokenism. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

[M]eaningful participation [...] it's not really about being a respondent to a research project, but [...] taking part in all the other phases of the research, including defining the research methods and taking part in the writing and dissemination of findings. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

[M]eaningful participation means that you've been active throughout the research purposes from the design [...]. We've been active throughout the research purposes from the design up to data collection and everything. And also it gives us that opportunity to just not be participants or we've been the object studied but then we also got that dual role, it makes you as an active participant. (George, Young Advisor UK)

Despite such positive experiences, barriers to effective participation were also shared and help us to think about new ways of supporting cross-national exchange of perspectives. Particular issues have been experienced with the internet, which at times, fragmented and hindered some of our discussions. Although our cross-national YPAG enabled the bringing together of young people living in different countries/regions, the different localities of our advisors also presented obstacles to deeper-level discussions and the coming together in a shared space to discuss ideas.

[F]inding an appropriate time to conduct meetings has always been successful. Our different locations demand that we meet online, which is swifter and more efficient in terms of time management. However, the relatively poor network which characterizes other places, especially in Accra does slow our meetings sometimes. This results in missing out on important conversations with our counterparts in Accra. Nonetheless, there is always a frantic effort to ensure that contributions and discussions are collated using other platforms such as emails. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

As indicated, such challenges offered new ways for us to think about how to maximise meaningful engagement across countries, particularly when internet connections were poor. Reverting to other modes of dialogue and exchange including email, WhatsApp video meetings and via our project website and social media sites, enabled us to maintain open communication and ensure regular updates on the project are shared with the full team. These platforms helped to ensure that opportunities for listening to a range of perspectives from the full team, and through different fora, were offered.

I like how no one's idea is unwelcome and how accommodating everyone is with everyone. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our YPAG's accounts of meaningful participation reflects the importance of developing an open approach that accommodates diverse ideas to be shared and welcomed – and crucially, to move towards impact activities directly informed by young people's perspectives.

### **Impact and effecting social change**

One way to ensure young people's participation moves beyond tokenism is to secure clear pathways to impact with young people and identify possibilities to effect social change. Our young advisors shared passionately their desires for any research with young people to inform policy agendas and, in the context of this project, contribute to sustainable development debates. These discussions provided broader implications for the ways in which young people's involvement in research can, and should, effect change. Crucially, impact activities can support processes that enhance young people's capacities and opportunities for empowerment (part of our original study aim):

Most often, research projects end after findings. It is my hope that the outcomes of this research will be disseminated into the right spaces in order to influence policy and program[me]s that affect the lives of young people [...]. Young people are important. And so, when it comes to research, we are like any other important stakeholder in the research, and it's imperative that we are involved, and that we are heard. And not just heard for the sake of it, like a classic case of tokenism where you are invited to the table, you get to say something but no one cares afterwards. [...]. Whatever we have to say should also affect decisions because that is the purpose. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

Given that the research seeks to unpack the meaning of empowerment among young people in Ghana, I hope that the findings will go a long way to inform national policies on youth development, empowerment and employment at the national, regional and local levels. This can be done by translating the findings into policy briefs for government agencies. The findings can be disseminated through workshops and seminars with these institutions. Such platforms will inform and shape the process and approach used for engaging youth people and building their capacities. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

I am hoping that this research will influence youth development policies in Ghana. I believe the participation of young people who are directly affected by youth policies will bring out first-hand experience, which will enrich future policy development in Ghana. (George, Young Advisor UK)

Prerequisites for effecting change led by young people include enhancing accessible modes of participation (e.g. online and via social media), as well as the use



of language that is free from technical or academic terms and conventions. For example, the team debated at length how best to operationalise terms such as power and empowerment to ensure relevance and meaning to young people. Such techniques help to ensure discussions are more relatable to young people, but also provided new opportunities for learning from others from different backgrounds and experiences.

People's social lives are improved as they learn about other cultures, customs and languages. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

One of the ways of making our research relatable is by engaging in interactive activities. The running of a website and social media accounts offers an important platform for discussing everyday issues concerning young people. These platforms can also be used to provide up-to-date information on critical issues affecting young people and the opportunities available to them. Additionally, employing everyday jargon used by young people in their daily conversations will help the research to situate itself within the lived experiences of young people. I anticipate such an approach will give young people the comfort and leverage to interact and relate with the research. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

Of significance is the importance of recognising young people as experts on young lives. Such recognition is a necessary first step towards redressing the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants and advisors which we discuss in the section that follows.

I think that with the young people involved my colleagues and I, we, become experts on youth issues. And that is especially when it comes to the issue of migration. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

### **Diversity and power structures**

A key strength of the project for our advisors was the recognition of, and space for, diversity to be embraced. As outlined, our young advisors were located in different countries and have different genders, ages, socio-economic backgrounds and educational experiences (although all have attended, or were currently studying at, university). Whilst all share commonalities in terms of being a young Ghanaian with experience of youth advocacy work, this diversity is welcomed as an opportunity to learn from each other and open up space for the genesis of new ideas to inform the research. Our advisors described how such diversity positively enabled multiple perspectives to be shared and as an important marker of respect for their contributions. Indeed, the notion of respect is seen as a crucial prerequisite for building meaningful partnerships with young people (Spencer 2013).

If there is one thing I have learnt, it is to be accommodating and ask questions from quite a number of people, to have diverse ideas and suggestions. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

[T]here is a whole strength for me to go into because there is this kind of different perspectives to define an idea. Depending on where I grew up, I will see things differently. For instance, what I will say will differ from what George says because of where he either grew up, where he schooled or even in terms of religion, or even his home orientation. This underpins how we perceive things and how we discussed it differently. I see that as a challenge, but more of a strength which contributes to the diversity of the group. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

Yet embracing diversity has not been without challenges, including the difficulties of reconciling different perspectives on topical issues. For example, how different ideas on the project should be developed and prioritised, as Divine alludes to above. Inevitably, the project's main aim, activities and milestones needed to be met and were largely determined by the intended original focus of the project (e.g. understanding empowerment in the context of young migrants' lives and livelihoods) and within a particular timeframe. The issue of time is crucially important to maximise meaningful involvement and something that our advisors felt should not be overlooked when seeking to engage young people in research. The need to ensure the project followed its intended course reminds us of the ultimate power that resides with adult researchers – despite best intentions. Our young advisors spoke openly about power relations, what this means for research and young people's broader involvement – often reflecting on the negative ways power can operate to exclude or dismiss young people's perspectives. Yet, also sharing ways that power might be addressed and through developing respect for everyone's contributions.

[T]he diversity and power structure can pose as a challenge. Even though we've not witnessed it much here within this group. But it could be a challenge looking at the power structure, the level of experience or age. Sometimes [...] for others to sharing their views because I may think that what I'm saying is wrong or I might put it in the right context, what others think of me that I have no knowledge about what I'm talking about. So that sort of power balance can also be a challenge for a diversified group like this [...]. But then to think about how to overcome it, I think [...] this group that's about giving everybody the opportunity and not looking down on anybody within the group. I think that's one key way of addressing that power structure within a diversified group. (George, Young Advisor UK)

And for me in the beginning (during the introductory stage), I felt like 'Well, what do I have to say that these people can't say already?' and so I was a little intimidated [...] But later when our real work began, I thought about it and realized that, I was

representing a demographic and my role in the group was to share what I thought and believed was the reality of young people based on my experience, and it doesn't necessarily have to be right or wrong. I'm also representing a group of young people who are also going to be affected by what the research looks to achieve. So, it's important for me to play my role in that regard, irrespective of who else is a member of the advisory group. I think diversity is very important, we just have to be intentional about how meetings are moderated and create a safe space where everyone gets to feel that we are on the same level. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

Ensuring the team remained 'on the same level' reflected a shift in power relations and more traditional forms of research that are typically led by senior academics. Achieving such a shift requires all perspectives to be valued and taken seriously as one way to build trust and respect for and with young people and their contributions. In this study, the team comprised highly experienced childhood and youth researchers, which aided the building of rapport and through, for example, demonstrating interest and respect for the lives of young people. The importance of developing an inclusive approach, as Divine and George describe below, is especially valued for its potential to break down dominant power relations and offer space for diverse ideas to be shared and respected. For example, in our study, we aimed to offer different platforms for the exchange of ideas and perspectives, but also sought to ensure our YPAG had diverse experiences related to the project's aim. A dedicated project role (e.g. our YCR) also aimed at ensuring the constant involvement of our advisors.

Sometimes it feels a bit frightening or intimidating working with senior researchers. There comes the feeling that senior colleagues know more about the subject area than you do and you are tempted not to say anything or share any ideas with the fear of getting it wrong [...]. The best way to address power imbalance between senior researchers and the young people could be done through mutual respect for one another, and also encourage young people to share their personal experiences and opinions without any fear of being wrong. (George, Young Advisor UK)

I think that one other thing I find interesting was how the research we are engaged in now, kind of serves as a moment of building trust. Because you know that we're getting this information from people who ordinarily should have been part of the 'research object' but they are also part of the research design [...]. Because we ourselves are young people and what you are asking us is, what we are telling you; it's kind of a representation of what you would have found out there. So overall, this builds some sort of trust within the entire research. So collaborative research is kind of trustworthy. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

These reflections tell us more about the importance of trust and reciprocity as important markers of respect for young people and having their perspectives valued. As

our YPAG members suggest, collaboration with young people needs to ensure inclusivity and diversity are respected and harnessed in the development and direction of research and at every stage. Offering opportunities for research to be relatable to young people including their involvement in the analysis stages and project impact activities, may lend itself to further meaningful engagement. Yet these next steps may also expose new challenges that centre on reconciling different interpretations of the data and the intricate workings of power within these analytical and dissemination stages that may privilege particular perspectives over others (see [James 2007](#); [Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020](#) for critiques).

## Discussion

Our discussions and reflections with our project youth advisors offer important insights into what meaningful participation in research might ‘look like’ for young people and how this tied closely to the impact of our project and broader contribution to enhancing young lives and futures. For example, our research aims sought to identify how young people’s perspectives on work, migration and empowerment might be harnessed in policy initiatives. Creating meaningful opportunities for young people to be involved in research – and at every stage – marked one important step towards the centring of young people’s perspectives and experiences as dominant ways of knowing and doing ([Spencer 2013](#)). As our YPAG members have shared, young people are experts on young lives and the issues that affect them and thus, such experiences should be at the forefront of the shaping of research and policy agendas, priorities and processes. Yet, here we are reminded of some of the assumptions and challenges that can be all too often overlooked when seeking to (uncritically) engage young people in research – and without a full-fledged engagement with how dominant relations of power can shape the research landscape and ultimately privilege particular perspectives or ways of knowing and doing ([James 2007](#); [Lundy 2007](#); [Holland et al. 2010](#); [Spyrou 2016](#); [Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020](#)).

Adult centrism can play out in different ways as young people are ‘identified’ as potential participants, contributors and advisors in research. For example, our recruitment of the YPAG members ultimately ‘selected’ which young people were involved – and largely those with experience of migration, development challenges and youth advocacy work in Ghana and university educated (and thus, less typical of our sample who were socio-economically disadvantaged, although some had attended, but not completed, tertiary education). The research team were keen to ensure our YPAG remained committed to the project for its duration and had access to means of communication (e.g. internet) to enable discussions. These ‘requirements’ influenced our

decision not to recruit young people that more closely matched our study sample who were more mobile, marginalised and living in contexts of vulnerability and thus, perhaps less able to take up an advisory role. Such decisions, perversely, reinforced the ways in which our study may have contributed to the invisibility of young migrants in shaping the direction of the research, not just as study participants. Furthermore, this approach also raises questions about how well we engaged with diversity and through, for example, implying that young people from different backgrounds can speak on behalf of other young people and thereby inadvertently homogenising young people – a position the team have always sought to work against in recognition of the diversity of young people and their experiences.

These reflections remind us of how dominant power relations between adult researchers and young people continue to (sometimes unknowingly) shape the research landscape – often defining which young people are included and whose perspectives ‘get counted’ (see [Holland \*et al.\* 2010](#); [Spencer & Doull 2015](#); [Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020](#)). Indeed, our initial research proposal detailing the research design and methods was largely determined prior to establishing our YPAG as part of the funding application process. Our YPAG was established thereafter. However, arguably, establishing our YPAG without confirmation of funding may have been equally problematic – raising expectations, but also asking for young people’s time commitment without knowing if the research would progress. Such an approach may well have centred the research and its aims from the perspectives of adult researchers – despite our intentions.

As our YPAG members have openly shared, creating meaningful opportunities for diverse perspectives to be taken seriously is an important step towards de-centring adult ways of knowing. Yet, time is needed to build trusting relationships and the forms of mutual respect and reciprocity that give way to power-sharing and to co-create research contexts in which young people feel comfortable and able to share how they would like to be involved (or not) in different stages and aspects of the research ([Spencer & Doull 2015](#)). The concept of reciprocity underscores the importance of developing a shared purpose and a ‘mutual recognition of meaning and power’ ([Lather 1986](#): 263). Our discussions with our YPAG suggest that research reciprocity should move beyond young people’s involvement in data collection and work towards the building of relationships that support ongoing exchange and dialogue that fosters realistic opportunities for social and political change ([Thi Lin & Jones 2005](#)). This might be achieved by ensuring advisory group members have knowledge and experience of the field of research and context, but also through creating a ‘safe’ space where all views are welcomed irrespective of knowledge and experience and where mutual learning and exchange is made possible throughout the research process ([Robertson 2000](#)). Here, we have sought to offer such spaces in a variety of formats (email, online

forums, project meetings online and face-to-face). Yet, the relative successes of each of these approaches may well depend on cultural norms about childhood and adulthood and the ‘acceptability’ of young people challenging adults. In many African countries, children and young people occupy a subservient position to adults. Asking young people to ‘speak out’ or offer a different way of thinking about the research may be difficult when dominant cultural norms uphold respect for adult authority.

Recognition of the varying ways in which different groups of young people may like to be involved in research (or not), and what they would like to get out of the experience, is also a crucial reminder about diversity and the importance of critically questioning whose interests young people’s involvement in research actually serves. The increasing focus on involving young people in research within funding calls uncritically assumes this is something young people might want. Researchers must be mindful of the purpose of engaging with young people, what it is hoped will be achieved and refrain from over stating claims of ‘giving voice’ (James 2007; Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020). Indeed, it is important to recognise that different roles fulfil different purposes and young people themselves will have different preferences about how they would like to be involved (or not) in research. As our YPAG reflect in their accounts, some members welcomed the opportunity to utilise their creative skills through producing research fliers, some preferred the writing and dissemination tasks, whilst others enjoyed the team working and networking aspects of the project. However, as highlighted, our YPAG reflect on their experiences as advisors, rather than as study participants or peer researchers. The latter group may have different thoughts on young people’s involvement in research and how this should be supported.

Of particular value to the project were our YPAG’s connections with organisations supporting youth, which enabled us to expand our discussions and consultations with stakeholders and develop our knowledge exchange activities. Feeding back to young people and other dissemination activities are important marks of respect for their contributions and to illustrate to them the impact and outcomes of their involvement, which, as described, is especially valued by our young advisors. Yet, opportunities for social and policy change often extend well beyond the completion of a project and thus, young people may remain uninformed of the wider impacts of their contributions, unless processes for ongoing dialogue are agreed and established in advance of the project end. For example, our study participants were young migrants with no fixed abode and thus, ensuring effective knowledge exchange with study participants will be difficult to achieve, even with support from the YPAG.

Indeed, despite best efforts, our project was ultimately led by the main goals of the research and the timeframes in which these must be achieved, which (in part) shapes the roles young people are afforded within the confines of the project and

its milestones, as well as the opportunities for meaningful knowledge exchange with young people. We have sought ways to 'push back' on adult-defined parameters and through, for example, co-creating an online youth forum led directly by our YCR and young advisors, but, at times, the broader engagement of young people with this was limited. Together, we have discussed at length some of the complexities of operationalising concepts such as power and empowerment in our data collection methods and analysis. Such discussions have provided new insights into how young people understand key terms that are often applied to their lives, but without their input or perspectives on their meaningfulness and relevance to young lives.

This ongoing critical dialogue with our YPAG reflects our commitment and collective efforts to create space for diverse perspectives to come to the fore and challenge existing (adult) frames of reference on young lives. We thus continued collaboratively, yet cautiously, to keep a check on how our research processes may inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of adult centrism and power. Crucially, leveraging young people's understandings without reframing them within (or against) a dominant adult narrative challenges us to consider alternative ways of knowing and conceptualising young lives. As Divine shares with us, this may offer further challenges to the unpacking of what 'meaningful participation' might look like from (different) young people's perspectives – offering new perspectives to the understanding, and strengthening, of participatory forms of research *with* young people.

## **Conclusion**

This co-authored article with our YPAG members aims to expose and critically reflect on one type of youth involvement in research and namely, as advisory members. Our project's main aim to examine concepts of empowerment as they relate to the lives and livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana offered both opportunities and challenges to the 'meaningful participation' of young people in research – raising critical questions about whose interests such participation serves, particularly when much research is pre-determined by funding or institutional requirements and academic conventions. We thus offer caution and criticality when advocating for young people's involvement in research – particularly when issues of power, diversity and inclusion can be all too often overlooked as 'youth participation' continues to be popularised. We encourage researchers to thus, work closely and flexibly with young people to design, develop and undertake research – all the while acknowledging that young people have their own lives and may not want to participate in every aspect. Identifying opportunities for youth-led and youth-informed impact is an important mark of their contributions



and desired outcomes of research, which may call upon researchers to rethink their ways of knowledge exchange and how to effect change in line with young people's perspectives.

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