
YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AS A CATALYST FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: EVIDENCE FROM BANGLADESH AND THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Youth leadership development has emerged as a critical lever for strengthening democratic governance across the Global South and its diaspora communities. This paper examines the theoretical and practical dimensions of structured youth leadership programmes in Bangladesh and their replication models within South Asian immigrant populations in the United States. Drawing on two decades of practitioner experience in designing, coordinating, and evaluating youth parliamentary and leadership initiatives-including programmes under the Commonwealth International Youth Caucus and the Oxfam International Youth Parliament-this study synthesises primary observational data with existing scholarship to explore how formal leadership cultivation shapes civic agency, political participation, and institutional trust among young people aged 18–35. The findings indicate that participatory parliamentary models, when adapted to local cultural contexts, produce measurable improvements in civic knowledge, inter-communal dialogue, and long-term democratic engagement. This article further argues that immigrant leadership development platforms constitute an underexplored dimension of transnational democracy-building, with implications for diaspora policy, community governance, and post-migration civic integration. Recommendations are offered for policymakers, civil society organisations, and international development actors seeking to scale youth leadership investments.

KEYWORDS: Youth leadership; democratic participation; Bangladesh; South Asian diaspora; civic education; parliamentary model; immigrant civic integration; political empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between youth leadership cultivation and democratic vitality has attracted sustained scholarly attention over the past three decades. In societies undergoing democratic transition or consolidation, such as Bangladesh, which has navigated complex cycles of military rule, competitive authoritarianism, and popular mobilization, the political socialization of young citizens is not merely a developmental aspiration but a structural necessity. Over 51 per cent of Bangladesh's population is below the age of 25 (BBS, 2022), a demographic reality that renders youth political agency central to any credible account of the country's governance trajectory.

Despite this demographic salience, the systematic cultivation of youth leadership through structured institutional channels has remained episodic rather than embedded. Parliamentary simulation programmes, leadership academies, and youth representation bodies have proliferated in civil society, yet evidence regarding their long-term impact on political participation, institutional trust, and inter-group cooperation remains fragmented. This gap is compounded at the diaspora level: millions of Bangladeshis and other South Asians residing in Europe and North America negotiate dual civic identities, but programmes specifically designed to channel their political energies toward constructive democratic engagement are rare.

This article seeks to address both dimensions. It draws on the author's two decades of direct involvement in designing and coordinating landmark programmes, including the Commonwealth International Youth Caucus in Asia, the Oxfam International Youth Parliament, and its subsequent replication as the National Youth Forum of Bangladesh-to offer a practitioner-informed synthesis of evidence on what works, for whom, and under what conditions in youth leadership development. The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical landscape; Section 3 presents the methodological approach; Section 4 details the materials and programme contexts; Section 5 reports the key results and discussion; Section 6 presents conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on youth leadership and civic participation spans political science, developmental psychology, and education research. Putnam's (2000) foundational work on social capital established that civic engagement is not spontaneous but cultivated through structured institutions, networks, and norms of reciprocity. Youth leadership programmes function as deliberate interventions into this cultivating process.

In the Global South context, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) demonstrate through a large-N cross-country analysis that civic education and participatory institutions produce compounding returns on political agency, particularly for young people in under-resourced communities. Similarly, Norris (2011) argues that political socialization during adolescence and early adulthood shapes durable civic orientations that persist across the life course—suggesting that investments made during this window have outsized systemic returns.

Bangladesh-specific scholarship has documented the simultaneous promise and fragility of youth political engagement. Riaz (2016) traces the politicization of student bodies and youth wings of political parties as a structural feature of Bangladeshi politics, one that tends to subordinate genuine civic development to factional competition. Against this backdrop, non-partisan civil society leadership initiatives occupy a distinctive and necessary space: they can model collaborative, interest-aggregating forms of politics that party structures typically suppress.

The parliamentary simulation model has attracted scholarly interest. Davies et al. (2011) and Levy and Akiva (2019) find that model parliament experiences generate significant gains in civic knowledge, argumentation skills, and tolerance for opposing viewpoints—benefits that are amplified when participants come from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. This finding carries direct relevance for Bangladesh's stratified educational ecosystem, in which elite English-medium schools and madrasas operate in near-total mutual isolation.

On the diaspora dimension, Ahmadi (2020) and Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) establish that immigrant political engagement is profoundly shaped by the availability and quality of civic infrastructure in host countries. South Asian diaspora communities in the United States have historically participated in electoral politics through ethnic community organization, but structured leadership development pathways tailored to bridging homeland and host-country civic identities remain underdeveloped in both practice and scholarship.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining practitioner-based qualitative evidence with a systematic review of peer-reviewed and grey literature on youth leadership development in Bangladesh and the South Asian diaspora. The methodological design reflects the interpretive and applied nature of the research problem.

Primary evidence is drawn from two sources. First, structured observational records were maintained across the Commonwealth International Youth Caucus programmes (2003–2009)

and the National Youth Forum of Bangladesh (2006–2012), encompassing participant cohort data, facilitator field notes, and post-programme follow-up records. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 former participants and alumni of these programmes, sampled purposively to reflect gender balance, geographic diversity within Bangladesh, and post-programme civic trajectories.

Secondary evidence draws on a systematic review of literature published between 2000 and 2025, sourced from Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories of the World Bank, UNDP, and Commonwealth Secretariat. Search terms included combinations of "youth leadership," "civic education," "Bangladesh," "parliamentary model," "diaspora civic integration," and "South Asian political participation." Eighty-seven sources met the inclusion criteria.

Data synthesis followed a framework analysis approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), with thematic coding conducted across both primary and secondary data streams. Analytical categories were derived inductively from the data and then mapped against the four theoretical constructs identified in the literature: civic knowledge acquisition, inter-group tolerance, institutional trust, and long-term political participation.

4. MATERIALS AND PROGRAMME CONTEXTS

4.1 The Commonwealth International Youth Caucus (CIYC) - Asia Programme

The Commonwealth International Youth Caucus convened annually to bring together young delegates from across Asia under a structured deliberative framework modelled on Commonwealth parliamentary procedures. As Coordinator for the Asia region, the author designed curriculum, managed participant selection, and facilitated dialogue across delegates from countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. Cohort sizes ranged from 45 to 90 participants annually. Delegations were trained in policy analysis, cross-cultural negotiation, resolution drafting, and public advocacy over an intensive five-day residential format.

4.2 Oxfam International Youth Parliament - Bangladesh Representation

The Oxfam International Youth Parliament assembled youth representatives from Oxfam partner countries to deliberate on themes of poverty, climate justice, gender equity, and democratic accountability. The author's role as Bangladesh's representative involved both national-level preparation of Bangladeshi youth delegates and international facilitation of cross-country working groups. This experience generated direct evidence on how structured

role-based participation enhances delegates' confidence, cross-cultural empathy, and understanding of policy trade-offs.

4.3 National Youth Forum of Bangladesh (NYFB)

Following her international experience, the author designed and implemented the National Youth Forum of Bangladesh as a domestic replication of the Oxfam parliamentary model. The NYFB convened quarterly sessions involving university students, youth civil society activists, and young professionals in Dhaka and divisional cities. The Forum operated as a non-partisan, non-governmental body, explicitly oriented toward leadership development rather than electoral mobilisation. A three-tier structure- local chapters, divisional assemblies, and a national session- enabled both geographic reach and hierarchical competency building.

4.4 School of Leadership USA - Diaspora Programme

Since relocating to the United States, the author founded the School of Leadership USA (SOLE), a global platform for developing leadership among immigrant and refugee communities. SOLE operates multiple programme tracks addressing civic integration, entrepreneurship, political participation, and educational access. Active projects include the Bangladesh Youth Parliament Project, the Electoral Justice Project, and the Refugee Asylum Seeker Immigrants Network (RASIN). These programmes adapt the parliamentary model to the specific civic context of the United States, with particular attention to the legal rights, electoral pathways, and institutional access points available to naturalised citizens and lawful permanent residents.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Civic Knowledge and Policy Literacy

Across all programme contexts, structured parliamentary participation produced substantial and consistent gains in participants' civic and policy literacy. Alumni interviews revealed that even those who had subsequently entered non-political careers described deliberative training as formative in their capacity to engage with institutional decision-making. Eighty-three per cent of NYFB alumni surveyed reported that their programme experience had directly influenced their subsequent decisions to vote, engage with local government, or participate in civil society advocacy. These figures are consistent with the broader experimental literature on civic education (Levine & Littlefield, 2018; Campbell, 2006).

5.2 Inter-Group Tolerance and Social Capital Formation

Bangladesh's acute social stratifications-by class, religious tradition, geographic origin, and educational background-pose persistent barriers to inter-group civic cooperation. The

deliberate inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds was a structural feature of the CIYC and NYFB, and the evidence suggests this design produced durable inter-group bridging capital. Follow-up records indicate that 61 per cent of NYFB alumni formed at least one sustained professional or civic collaboration with a co-delegate from a different educational background within two years of programme completion.

This finding aligns with contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which predicts that structured, equal-status contact under institutional authority and cooperative goals can reduce prejudice and build intergroup trust. Parliamentary simulation provides this architecture precisely: participants are assigned to negotiate across differences under rules that demand reasoned argument rather than positional assertion.

5.3 Gender Equity and Women's Political Empowerment

A consistent challenge across all programme contexts was the underrepresentation of women in formal deliberative spaces and the subtle marginalization of female participants' contributions within mixed-gender sessions. Targeted design interventions-including gender-balanced cohort requirements, women's caucus pre-sessions, and female-led facilitation-produced measurable improvements in women's speaking time, confidence scores (self-reported), and leadership role assumption. Female alumni of the NYFB have demonstrated particularly strong trajectories into civil society leadership, with 47 per cent holding senior positions in non-governmental organizations, local government advisory bodies, or private sector leadership within five years of programme completion.

These findings reinforce a substantial literature demonstrating that generic youth leadership programmes tend to reproduce existing gender hierarchies unless actively countered through structural design (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; UNDP, 2021). Leadership programme designers must treat gender-transformative practice not as an optional enhancement but as a core programme theory commitment.

5.4 Diaspora Civic Integration and Transnational Democracy-Building

The SOLE programmes in the United States operate in a notably different civic environment from their Bangladesh counterparts, yet the underlying logic of participatory leadership cultivation translates across contexts. Diaspora participants describe navigating dual civic identities as both a resource and a burden: they bring perspectives on governance, rights, and institutional diversity that enrich deliberative processes, but they also frequently encounter deficit framings in host-country civic life that position immigrants as recipients rather than contributors of civic knowledge.

SOLE's Electoral Justice Project has been particularly effective in transforming this dynamic, equipping naturalized citizens with the knowledge, skills, and networks to participate meaningfully in local electoral processes. Participant surveys (N = 138, 2023–2025) indicate that 71 per cent of programme graduates who were eligible to vote did so in the most recent local or state election, compared to a baseline participation rate of 42 per cent for comparable demographic groups in the host region. While causal inference is limited by the non-experimental design, the gap is substantively significant and consistent with pathway models of civic integration (Bloemraad, 2006).

The Bangladesh Youth Parliament Project further demonstrates that transnational programming-connecting diaspora youth with counterparts in Bangladesh through joint deliberative exercises-can generate mutual civic benefits. Diaspora participants gain contextual knowledge of homeland governance challenges; Bangladesh-based participants gain exposure to comparative democratic practice. The exchange functions as a form of soft diplomacy and democratic learning that neither partner could produce independently.

5.5 Institutional Trust and Democratic Consolidation

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding concerns the relationship between programme participation and institutional trust. In a political environment marked by Bangladesh's historical institutional volatility, programme alumni demonstrate notably higher levels of differentiated trust, distinguishing between imperfect institutions and the democratic norms they imperfectly embody. This nuanced trust posture, which Levi and Stoker (2000) term "conditional trust," is precisely the orientation that democratic consolidation theorists identify as conducive to institutional resilience.

Alumni who attributed their conditional trust explicitly to programme experience (62 per cent of those surveyed) described specific deliberative exercises-particularly those involving role-plays of institutional negotiation and the experience of being in a minority on a contested resolution-as formative. This suggests that exposure to legitimate procedural disagreement, rather than consensus-building per se, may be the crucial mechanism through which parliamentary simulation builds democratic disposition.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that structured youth leadership programmes, when designed with attention to inter-group diversity, gender equity, and contextual adaptation, constitute high-yield investments in democratic governance both in Bangladesh and in the South Asian

diaspora. The evidence synthesised here, drawn from two decades of practitioner experience and a systematic review of comparative literature, supports four primary conclusions.

First, parliamentary simulation models produce durable gains in civic knowledge, policy literacy, and inter-group tolerance that persist well beyond programme duration. Second, gender-transformative design is not optional: without deliberate structural interventions, leadership programmes reproduce rather than disrupt gender hierarchies. Third, diaspora communities represent an underexplored site for civic leadership investment, with significant potential for transnational democratic learning and cross-border civic capacity building. Fourth, the mechanism most strongly associated with democratic disposition-building is exposure to legitimate procedural disagreement under conditions of institutional authority and mutual respect-not the achievement of consensus.

These findings carry actionable implications for multiple constituencies. For policymakers in Bangladesh and in the diaspora, they argue for sustained public investment in non-partisan youth leadership infrastructure, with explicit gender and diversity mandates. For international development actors, they suggest that parliamentary model programmes merit both greater investment and more rigorous longitudinal evaluation. Civil society organizations, they highlight the importance of programme continuity, alumni networks, and transnational linkages as multipliers of programme impact. And for scholars, they identify a set of theoretically rich mechanisms-contact, procedural legitimacy, conditional trust-whose elaboration in South Asian democratic contexts remains a promising frontier for empirical research.

The youth of Bangladesh and its diaspora are not merely the leaders of tomorrow-they are, as millions of young Bangladeshis have demonstrated repeatedly and dramatically, the civic agents of today. The institutions that choose to cultivate and channel that agency will shape not only the futures of individual young people but the contours of democracy itself across one of the world's most consequential demographic frontiers.

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