

Tuesday, 16 May – Opportunities for Youth Activism

Speakers: **Sara Murawski** (Socialist Party, Netherlands), **Salwa Abdel Wahed** (Institute of Social Studies) and **Molefi Ndlovu** (Institute of Social Studies)

Together with NIMD and ISS, SID-NL organized a debate on 16 May on the topic of youth activism and its opportunities. This debate is part of the spring series focussed on doing democracy differently. Young people are at the heart of lots of civic activism worldwide today. Given the enormous challenges of closing civic spaces, are youth offering new ways of political engagement? Are they addressing new themes and priorities? And do they do so in different ways? Maybe making more links to music and cultural events? And are we seeing new youth movements emerging, for example in schools and universities? Is youth civic engagement in developing countries different from what we can see in European countries?

Sara Murawski

Sara is a 29 year old policy advisor on the financial topics at the SP. In her work she mainly focusses on the EU policies, but also on fighting against TTIP and supporting the G20 anti-capitalist event in Hamburg. Although the common thought is often that youth is not involved in politics, Sara does see a lot of young people fighting for certain causes and being part of activist movements.

The topic of immigration is important during Dutch elections and throughout Europe it is one of the main points during campaigns. Different opinions in society on the refugee crises create a divide. This divide combined with people staying in their own bubble, on all levels, creates a situation in which those who are involved in politics and doing democracy are creating their own space. This space is not easily accessible for people outside the bubble. Sara calls for going into the actual spaces, for example Schilderswijk, to meet the people and burst the bubble. By trying to create a new structure on a small and local level, youth can become involved in politics and the status quo can be changed. *Is youth activism addressing new topics?*

Sara's party successfully changed the Dutch youth wage system, which means youth now gets paid a full wage earlier than before. This is a specific topic that affects youth which now is changed through the work of youth activists.

Salwa Abdel Wahed

Salwa worked with NGOs focusing on youth participation in the Arab region and now does a master on social justice perspective at ISS.

She argues that youth are innovative, you need to speak the language of the youth in order to get to them. The most used language is the language of social media. Arab spring and social media changed the game. Combined they allowed youth to speak up and make a change. The use of social media gives a sense of protection because you work in an international setting and the world watches what you do. Besides the relative easy access to social media, the demographics also play an important role. Never has there been so much youth in the world. Although social media allows almost everybody to participate and be an activist, there is a small group of privileged activists. Salwa explains that she often sees the same faces at conferences and meetings etc. It is difficult for activists that are new or do not speak the language an organization requires, to enter this group. Being aware of this issue is a start and Salwa tries to do her best to

Molefi Ndlovu

Molefi is president of the student association at ISS. He is from South Africa and transitioned from being an activist to a scholar. He explained that people get moved by things that touch them. Youth activism in general touches on a lot of different topics since there are great differences amongst young people of what matters to them and causes them to act. Molefi said that in youth movement an issue occurs in the demographics. Youth identity is always in a shift. Activists might move to married life which makes that their form of activism changes.

From his own experience in South Africa Molefi learned that people fight for something that affects them on a daily basis, in this case the cutting off of electricity. He only later understood that this was linked to processes around the world. With the right schooling and training people understand the situation they are in. Molefi sees the power of social media in South Africa with the #Rhodes must fall movement. What started as a hash tag became a nationwide movement. Whereas social media is powerful, it is not flawless. Social media reproduces sort of capitalism; giving a like on Facebook to support a movement is worth as much as a like on shoes. Giving a like does not mean one is engaged, it does not create an occupation of actual space. This makes it hard to see how many people are actually fighting for a certain cause, you cannot use the amount of likes to demonstrate the impact of your movement.

