

# USING MINECRAFT FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DESIGN AND GOVERNANCE





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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to outline UN-Habitat's approach to using information and communication technology (ICT) as an enabler to encourage youth participation in urban design and governance

UN-Habitat believes that ICT can be a catalyst to improve governance in towns and cities and help increase levels of participation, efficiency and accountability in public urban policies, provided that the tools are appropriately used, accessible, inclusive and affordable. Research shows that ICT use by youth can have a direct impact on increasing civic engagement, giving them new avenues through which to become informed, shape opinions, get organized, collaborate and take action (Ben-Attar & Campbell, 2015). UN-Habitat's experiences of using the video game Minecraft as a community participation tool for public space design confirms this view and shows that providing youth with ICT tools can promote improved civic engagement.

Youth are at the center of the ICT revolution, both as drivers and consumers of technological innovation. They are almost twice as

networked as the global population as a whole, with the ICT age gap more pronounced in least developed countries where young people are up to three times more likely to be online than the general population (Ben-Attar & Campbell, 2015). Recognizing this potential, UN-Habitat in 2012 started working with Mojang, the makers of the popular computer game Minecraft. Through the partnership with Mojang, Block by Block, UN-Habitat uses Minecraft to involve youth in the design of urban public spaces. In participatory design workshops, young people are brought together to visualize their ideas in Minecraft, and present these to city authorities and local government officials. UN-Habitat and local implementing partners then work with local governments to implement the ideas generated through the Minecraft process in real life.

## BACKGROUND

Arguably, three of the most important changes currently facing the world are urbanization, digitization and the youth bulge

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 10 per cent of the world's population lived in urban areas. By 2009, this had reached 50 per cent and by 2030 it is forecast to be 60 per cent, with the majority of the growth taking place in Africa and Asia. Twenty years ago, only 0.4 per cent of the world's population had access to the internet, a figure that had increased to 43 per cent, or 3.2 billion people, by 2015 (ITU, 2015). The population of the world is also young. In Africa, youth under the age of 24 account for 60 per cent of the population and in Latin America and Asia, around 40 per cent (United Nations Department of Social Affairs, 2015). Another important factor is the age of the urban population. Estimates indicate that by 2030 as many as 60 % of urban dwellers will be under the age of 18.

It is widely agreed that citizen participation is important for city governments to consider the needs, interests and knowledge of different stakeholders, something requiring collaborative design and participatory decision-making processes (von Heland et. al., 2015). However, often public policy making is not done through deliberation but through the technical expertise of public officials or focused on more powerful stakeholders (Adams, 2004). According to the OECD, governments need to direct special attention towards engaging hard to reach groups such as youth in these processes (OECD 1992). When some groups cannot influence agenda-setting and decision-making, or obtain relevant information to assess how well different policy alternatives serve their interests, they are more likely to be ill-served by new laws, policies and development plans (Fung 2006).

Community participation in urban planning can improve outcomes by bringing together people with different information, knowledge, skills and ideas, promote mutual learning, create a sense of ownership and commitment and increase support for implementation (Mahjabeen, et. al., 2006). Citizen involvement may also help produce policies with greater public acceptability and improve trust in government, while promoting the personal growth of participants (Yang and Pandey 2011). This is increasingly important due to the present trend towards increasing intra-urban inequality and stratification in many cities (UN-Habitat 2014).

But despite their growing number, youth are often excluded from participation in decision-making processes, leaving them socially and politically marginalized and frustrated (Chawla et al, 2005). Many governments and public bodies lack the necessary capacity, resources and tools to effectively engage youth in urban planning, design and governance processes. However, in recent years, a growing recognition is evident among policy makers and practitioners that youth are an important source for positive social change and technological innovation (Hart, 2002; Ragan, 2004). Now that awareness of the importance of youth participation has been raised regarding the "what" and "why" of youth participation, more work is now needed to address the "how." UN-Habitat's work with Minecraft, as a civic engagement tool with youth is one important model that addresses that question.

## MINECRAFT FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

ICT is often considered to provide new opportunities to engage citizens and improve the quality of political deliberation and decision

For example, ICT can be used to communicate technical information to enhance understanding, provide public access to information that was previously only available to experts and officials, to crowdsource information and feedback directly from citizens and make it publically available. (Von Heland, et. al., 2015). ICT is also useful for visualizing ideas, thus promoting shared understanding and facilitating interaction between citizen and government. For example crowdsourcing data can provide opportunities for urban “citizen observatories” in which citizens crowdsource urban information which can be useful for policy makers. However, ICT and citizen participation in urban planning and design is still a young field, and more research is needed to study its social impact.

As a way of engaging citizens, particularly young people in the design of urban public spaces, UN-Habitat in 2012 entered into a partnership with gaming company Mojang AB, the makers of the computer game Minecraft. Minecraft is one of the world’s most popular computer games with over 100 million players worldwide. In Minecraft, players interact with the game world by placing various types of colored blocks – similar to a ‘digital Lego’ – in a three-dimensional environment with the purpose of building creative structures, such as buildings and cities. Minecraft can be played online on multiplayer servers, or in single player worlds, across multiple game modes. Creative mode enables gamers to easily create buildings similar to those produced by complex 3D modelling software, with the additional



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