



## Municipal Child and Youth Councils **in France**

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**World Urban Forum, Barcelona 2004**

Youth and environment workshop

Facilitated by Nadia Hedar, Jackie Amsden, Yvon Detraz

The City of Vancouver hosted a panel discussion on youth and local government attended by 50 conference participants to examine how young people can be made to feel their voices are heard and brought more into the mainstream for the next World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006. At a parallel conference in Barcelona chaired by Kevin Millsip, Trustee of the Vancouver School Board, delegates discussed how to integrate young people into local government and local governance through participatory research.

A key message from the panelists was that youth were active leaders in their community, yet often unable to be involved because of adult politicians or institutions. All panelists felt that young people need resources to support their own programmes for their cities and their neighbourhoods.

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**Working group on Bordeaux Youth Council,  
Bordeaux, France**

September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004

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The city of Bordeaux has two councils, a child council for those between the ages of 8 – 11, and a youth council for those between 13 – 15 years of age. A third council, a youth council, will be created in October 2004, for youth between 15 – 22. Youth graduates from the existing youth council are currently working to create this structure. As it stands now this new council will consist of a permanent commission responsible to connect youth with the city and better coordinate existing youth services. As one youth described, the purpose will be to centralize what exists already, not recreate project or services. This will involve such functions as coordinating associations, schools and NGOs, administration, representing the existing youth council, and linking youth with partners and the municipality.

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## Introduction:

“Une société qui condamne sa jeunesse condamne aussi son avenir.”

In the field of youth participation in governance, France’s municipal child and youth councils offer an innovative model to learn from. Already, many other European countries, such as Italy, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Belgium have turned to this example to structure their own child and youth councils (Jodry, 2002). So, what about Canada? This paper was written as part of an exploratory study to better understand this model of youth engagement from a Canadian perspective.

This paper presents an overview of child and youth councils in France, based on information discovered through interviews with youth and city representatives from Bordeaux, Issy-les-Moulineaux, and Poitiers. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of the National Association of Child and Youth Councils (ANACEJ), which provided resources for background research.

In compiling this report, we have attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How did child and youth councils come about in France?  
(See the history section)
2. What is their goal? (See the purpose section)
3. What do they actually look like? (See the structure section)
4. What are the basic needs/requirements for implementation?  
(See the needs section)
5. What are some of their challenges? (See the challenges section)
6. What good can they do? (See the outcomes section)

## History

Child and youth councils emerged as a result of a variety of social and political perspectives that evolved over the last century.

1. Broader understanding of the rights and capacity of children. No longer considered adults in waiting, the capacity and importance of children and youth was recognised by a number of movements in popular education. In France especially, the increasing participation of youth in social movements contributed to this new conception of children and youth (Richez, 2003):
  - The period following the Liberation and the Second World War saw the rise of youth as a movement. The “résistance” was largely movement of youth.
  - The ideology of the Front Populaire gave birth to a number of projects: Francas, Fédération des Maisons de jeunes et de la culture, Scouts, les Compagnons de France, and les Éclaireurs de France (1949 congress called Society of Youth).
  - Series of pedagogy movements recognising the importance of participation and the autonomy of youth, such as the Républiques d'enfants.

The Convention on the rights of the child increased pressure towards realising this new perspective by obliging states to uphold the rights of young people to express themselves and participate in decisions affecting their lives (Richez, 2003). Although not ratified by France until 1991, this new understanding influenced the evolution of child and youth participation much earlier. For example, in the first experimentation of youth councils:

- First Wave of councils: 1963: first youth council, mainly just attended council meetings and defended or attacked projects of the mayor (Jodry, 2002).
2. Emergence and self-awareness of youth as an age class, with its own culture, codes, and styles of music, leading to demands for youth to have their own place in society.

This call was taken up by popular education associations (MJC, Cemea) denouncing the place left for youth in society, and a new generation of teachers taking up such methods as cooperative schools, and a growing concern in the long-term effects of a society that forgets its children (Richez, 2003).



### Bureau des Jeunes, Poitiers, France

September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004

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After the youth participate in the Conseil Communal des Jeunes, they have the option of continuing through the Bureau des Jeunes. The mandate of the Bureau des Jeunes is to act as a source of information and guidance for youth. Under the Bureau, youth can create Junior Associations, which means they can then apply for grants to carry out projects. For example, Zikebin is an association created by youth to organize “Sorts de ta bulle”, a music and information fair to connect youth with local associations.

“On voit directment les effets de notre travail. Ici on fait des choses concrets, ce qui’est plus difficile a faire a l’ecole./ We see directly the effects of our work. Here we do concrete things, which is difficult to do at school.”

– Jules

## Appendix I



**ANACEJ** guides the network of Youth councils and supports the participation of young people on a local level. The National Association of Youth councils was founded on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1991 in order to bring together everyone who worked towards the recognition of young people as full partners in local community life by the formation of district, municipal inter-district general and regional Youth councils. Thanks to ANACEJ, elected officials, the administrators of the “youth” and “local democracy” services, council leaders, members of various associations and young people get together to exchange ideas and consider new ways of looking at and thinking of their roles. It gives help on a day to day basis towards setting up or improving Youth councils by answering their questions and offering them training courses, discussion days, conferences, symposiums, tools (newsletters, videos, exhibitions, etc.) and studies.

“We didn’t want to tell people what they need a council to look like that, just to respect certain golden rules. For example you need financial support, human support, and involvement of associations, schools and community centres. With these elements, and by continuing to rethink the structure and operations of the [youth council], it can be successful. Young people change, local authority changes, so the youth council is a moving object, it cannot be established in any one way forever.”

– Mikaël Garnier-Lavalley , ANACEJ Director

- 1971: Vandoncourt youth councils at Montbeliard: place of civic instruction, but also taking into recognition the value of imagination and fantasy—let youth be themselves and develop their own identity. Included 13 members of between 15 – 25 years (Richez, 2003).
  - 1979: Schiltigheim child councils, born out of recognition of the rights of the child to be actors in their cities, citizens, and not passive.
  - Multiplication of councils: 1982 – 1992: The experience and public attention given to the Council in Schiltigheim spurs the creation of a number of youth councils. Specifically, these were initiated in new cities to prevent delinquency, to support national education, or to fight against exclusions and develop ways to work with youth (Richez, 2003).
  - Renewed interest in the importance of civic education in the school system, learned in an active and interactive way.
3. Current crisis in Western Democracy: A combined crisis in employment, elongation of the age period considered to be “youth”, questioning of social policies, upheaval of communication system, increase in conservatism and racism, lack of public confidence in elected officials and policy has put increased focus on participatory democracy (Jodry, 2003).
- Number of child and youth councils increases at a fast rate (940 in 1997).
  - International convention of rights of child ratified in 1991 by France, introduces the idea that the councils are not just a space for expression but also action.
  - Officially recognised by the state starting from the 1980s when statement by Prime Minister Joxe endorses child and youth councils as a form of local democracy.

Today, the state has adopted the obligation to create youth councils. There are currently 782 councils, 304 members of ANACEJ in 1995. Fifty-nine are youth councils, 122 are youth and child councils, and 156 are child councils (Richez, 2003). They are dispersed relatively uniformly across cities in relation to size, although large cities and rural areas are under represented.

## The Purpose of Child and Youth Councils

### Objectives of child and youth councils

The following points describe the primary objectives of child and youth councils in the form they have evolved to today (adopted from Jodry, p.20, 2003):

- A way to foster dialogue between youth and elected representatives;
- A way for youth to express their perspectives on their community, followed by actually formulating and carrying out actions and change in this domain;
- A way for youth to carry out actions;
- A way for youth to give their advice and influence community projects concerning them;
- A way for elected officials and their partners to consult with youth regarding policies and projects affecting the community.

### Principles

"With these elements, and by continuing to think each time and allowing it to change it can be successful—young people change, council authority changes. It's a moving object, it cannot be established forever." (Mikeäl Garnier-Lavalley, Director, ANACEJ, 2004)

The operating principles of child and youth councils are experimentation, flexibility, local relevance and responsiveness. This is further expanded on in the following "golden rules" of child and youth councils (adopted from Jodry, p.77, 2003):

- Child and youth are actors in both their environment and the functioning of the council;
- The council is a space for free, innovative, and critical analysis and thought;
- The opportunity to engage in the life of the city through the possibility of proposing, critiquing, transforming, and intervening in the city and how it is organised;
- Pedagogy is a medium not a goal, achieved through involving youth in decisions concerning the improvement of their city—not a reproduction of the classroom;

## References

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Richez, J.C. (2003). *Les conseils de jeunes dans toutes leurs histoires. Les jeunes conseillers: engagés dans la démocratie locale*. INJEP: Paris.

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Rossini, N. Personal Interview. Paris, July, 2004.

youth. For although the experience of youth council often inspires youth to act, it does not necessarily lead to them knowing how to pursue that desire (Richez, 2003).

For example, the experience of having been elected remains a long-term source of personal pride for youth, as well as having acted as mediators between their peers and the municipality. This is one of the key elements that have been found to affect their long-term aspirations.

## Conclusion

Through this study, the team gathered a great quantity of information about child and youth councils in France. One of the major observations we made was the importance of not having one specific model of youth. Each municipality, in some cases each neighbourhood, has to find a way of working that makes sense for them. For example, we met one council that has in its mandate that it must have representation from marginalized youth on the council. As well, some councils have mandated gender parity. Councils differ as well in terms of the age ranges of members, how they become involved (election or volunteer basis), and where they draw their membership. Through this diversity we noted that youth with a wide range of interests and backgrounds are attracted.

Taking into account the importance of diversity and flexibility, we understand that this model does not provide a definitive design of how to engage children and youth, however we do believe that this model provides lessons that can be applied to existing and new models of youth participation in Canada.

- Learning through action on the ground, research, and sharing of collective knowledge;
- Provision of adequate human and financial resources to reach the goals of youth;
- Recognition of the constraints of children and youth, in relation to their needs, capacities, and character;
- Reciprocal listening between youth, elected officials, public servants, and experts to evolve and improve understanding amongst these groups.

## Structure

Child and youth councils are based in the local municipality, through the provision of resources, a coordination, administrative support, and working relationships with elected officials. The child and youth councils must submit their proposed projects to the municipal council for review. However, they are not institutionalised, that is to say that they are independent in terms of their daily operations and the municipality's power to influence the operations of child and youth councils is limited (Rossini, 2004).

As a result of the importance for flexibility and local relevance, there is a high level of diversity across councils. However, there are various common elements to their functioning (Jodry, p.14 – 16, 2003):

- An election by peers, depending on the age range, for a two-year mandate generally (although some collectives choose to offer council positions on a volunteer basis instead);
- General assemblies of all youth council members, animators, and district representatives three times a year;
- Time for reflections and action around 2 times per month, by small groups organized into theme-based commissions or around specific projects.

Areas where differences are most common include the following (attributed to influence of different mayors, availability of resources, and differences between mentalities and cultures):

- Child (9 – 13) or youth (13 – 18) focus, chosen depending on perspective of municipalities (whether they think children or youth are priority);
- Different levels of councils correspond to municipality's landscape. This means that some councils are organised as centralised bodies, whilst others are organised according to districts. A growing trend is for more

broadly based councils, representing the desire to consult with youth on broader levels (started with only local councils, now broadening to inter-community level);

- Age restrictions also vary greatly, with a current trend for a widening and mixing of child and youth councils (9 – 16);
- Cultural and class compositions of councils varies. Certain councils include only members from a middle class background, whilst others are composed of youth from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds.

## Needs

« La succès des conseils, ça dépend les moyens et les credibilitie que nous les donnons. » (Rossini, 2004)

The following points describe the basic requirements for the functioning of a successful child and youth council (Jodry, p.38, 2003).

- Objectives for the creation of the council written and precise;
- Considered to be an element of local democracy, linked with the ensemble of policies of the community;
- Engagement of elected officials;
- Regular return to objectives by youth councils;
- Adequate human and financial resources;
- Participation of different actors and partners (NGOs, schools);
- Identified animator and coordinator;
- Responsible adults;
- Help of experts;
- Adult support, and not steering, for youth activities;
- Permanent attention for elected youth;
- Good visibility and promotion of the actions of youth council;
- Regular evaluations

## Social inclusion

Youth councils also can serve as a link to reintegrate youth that may have suffered failures in the traditional school setting (Rossini, 2003). Councils hold the advantage of having a more mixed geographical representation within its membership, and they recognize different forms of knowledge than the traditional school setting. Contrary to the classroom, the council is recognised as a place where youth listen and are listened to: « À l'école, tu suis les cours et puis voilà. Tu es plus un mouton qu'a autre chose. Alors qu'avec le conseil, tu prends plus ta vie en main» (Rossini, p.72, 2003).

Youth councils can also act as a space to create intergenerational links. Working in partnership with adults, youth often express feeling as that they were authentically listened to for the first time (Rossini, 2004). Adults also have a chance to learn from the youth.

## Perspectives of political world

Child and youth councillors gain a familiarization with municipal governance (Rossini, 76). In those cases where elected officials meet regularly with youth councils, personalised relationships between youth and the world of politics are established. This effects a demystification of municipal politics.

Young people also expressed a respect for the responsibility to vote, including not just the act itself but also becoming informed on the platforms and issues of candidates (Rossini, 94). At the same time, youth did express scepticism in the power of voting to affect real social change.

These young councillors also gain a greater understanding and compassion for elected officials, in realization of the system and its limits, in which they work (Rossini, 77). They also generally appreciate the fact that the municipal council has created a child or youth council. These opinions are, of course, depending on their own experience and how they perceive the elected officials.

## Long-term Engagement

In general, as shown by Rossini, youth that have participated in a council are more likely to have a higher interest and desire to act and engage in the life of the city and have a greater knowledge of the spaces open to them in which they can (Rossini, 98). This can be understood in light of the type of "legitimised" engagement facilitated through councils, in which youth work in consultation and collaboration with elected officials on the affairs of the city. However, this engagement is dependent on such "authorised" spaces being available for the

proposed by councils, then you can question the utility of the council. Also, during discussions what happens? Do the councils say yes and only yes, but no why, or explain why they say no if this is the case.”

The outcomes of participation in council for the youth themselves, on the other hand, have been studied. The following describes some of these results as stated by Rossini, accompanied by the words of the youth themselves.

## Personal Development

As a result of their participation in youth councils, the following effects were identified in the sphere of personal development and identity construction (Rossini p.67 – 74, 2003):

- Skills in speech and oral expression: « Ca m'appris à bien argumenter, à mieux m'exprimer envers les autres »;
- Improved self confidence, especially relevant for youth that have not succeeded in the traditional school environment: « Je pense que ça a apporté un peu d'amour propre, pas de fierté, un peu d'amour propre de se sentir utile, pas responsable, mais utile... »;
- Ability to listen and respect the ideas and voices of others: « Nous avons appris à partager nos idées et à pouvoir choisir ensemble et ça, c'est nouveau. »;
- Respect for the collective, solidarity and unity: « Déjà, j'ai appris qu'il faut être uni. »;
- Connects youth and the urban environment: « En construisant la ville, on se construit aussi, je crois. Si on veut faire une belle ville et que nous-mêmes sont pas des exemples, on ne sera pas crédible. »;
- Establishment of self-respect and independence of girls. This is particularly strong in the case of girls from immigrant families, where participation in youth council represents a form of emancipation, a source of respect from their parents and an entry into participating in society that might not have been available to them in their country of origin.

## Challenges

The following points describe some of the major challenges experienced by child and youth councils (Rossini, 2004):

- Mentality of local administration: not used to working with youth, not used to youth conceptions of time and process;
- Inter-service coordination difficult;
- Councillors need to take the time and effort to think about how the youth council will function, what it will need, but this is not always done;
- Not always awareness amongst population that there is a youth council;
- Elected youth not always able to maintain links with their peers in relation to their work on the council (accountability).

## Activity

The following section describes the primary activities of child and youth councils (Jodry, 2003). These are generalizations, however, and are actualised differently in each setting. Most notably, child councils do not generally become involved in consultations on city policies and projects, but focus rather on the implementation of projects.

### 1. Elections/Volunteers

The majority of child and youth councils are formed through elections. Children and youth campaign within their scholarly institutions to gain the support of their peers. The election is organised in the same way as regular elections, with children and youth receiving voting cards and casting their ballots in voting booths. As a result, the electors and candidates are able to experience first hand the democratic process of elections. In some cases, the councils may choose to adopt a volunteer system instead, especially in cases where the membership of the council is mixed between youth and children.

### 2. General Assemblies

Youth and child councils attend at least three general assemblies per year, in which they have the opportunity to dialogue with elected officials and other adult allies and are able to express their ideas and perspectives publicly. These assemblies are also a place for youth to officially debate with the mayor, and other members of the municipality.

### 3. Training/Seminars/Conferences

Children and youth receive training and orientation to their new roles in the following areas: the role of youth councils, the value of the democracy, the functioning of the municipality, and specific skills relating to communications (such as argumentation, public speaking).

Child and youth council members also have the possibility of attending conferences and seminars to exchange knowledge, ideas, and practices with children and youth from other municipalities. These gatherings are organized by the Association National des Conseils des enfants et jeunes, and so only municipalities that have joined this network can participate.

### 4. Commissions

Children and youth counsellors self-divide into commissions to create projects on specific themes, such as environment, child rights, solidarity, racism, sports and culture, European citizenship, and employment. These projects generally fall into one of the following typologies:

- Awareness campaigns
- Creation of resources/information on local community
- Infrastructure projects
- Actions and events to build community relations

The focus of these projects is to work with existing associations and city partners to create actions in collaboration with the community, particularly with the elected officials.

### 5. Dialogue with elected officials:

Elected officials consult youth for their perspectives of city projects and policies.

### 6. Communication with youth electors

In order to ensure that there is communication and reflection between the elected youth and youth in the community, there can be any number of the following activities:

- Debates and forums for youth and elected officials held in schools or associations on a particular theme, or council project;

- The electronic creation of a youth council newsletter;
- Radio broadcasts on youth council activities.

## Level of Child and Youth Engagement

Child and youth councils represent one of few areas in France where young people are provided with institutionalised support and encouragement to create, modify, and experiment in the social sphere. In this way, child and youth are recognised as actors and given the opportunity to affect real change. The following points identify specific ways in which children and youth can exercise power through this structure (Rossini, 2003):

- Children and youth can design their own projects concerning the city;
- Children and youth put into action or facilitate the creation of projects;
- Children and youth can modify the functioning of their council: they decide council rules and create a charter;
- Youth can influence the function of the municipal council through consultations on policies, although it is up to the will of the elected officials (the mayor) to decide which projects concern youth and thus which they will be invited to consult on. Youth can still exert pressure to push beyond these limitations.

## Outcomes: Children and Youth

The following information is based on a qualitative research study conducted by Nathalie Rossini, *Les jeunes conseillers engagé dans la démocratie locale*. This summary does not cover all of the outcomes stated in this study, but further information in this area can be made available if required.

Child and youth councils influence their communities, the municipal government, as well as the youth themselves. For example, according to Richez, the existence of child and youth councils affects municipalities and their willingness to integrate youth dimensions into their policies by supporting the creation of missions regarding youth services, as well as contributing to changing the perception of the administration of the place of children and youth in the city. However, concretely measuring these effects is difficult and has not yet been attempted. As Garnier-Lavalley (2004) explains, this question needs to be explored qualitatively in each council:

“If you want to measure the effects on local authority you can look to see if they have consulted youth on their projects, also if they have refused the projects