

Sibnath Deb  
Shayana Deb *Editors*

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# Chapter 25

## Youth Participation in Community Development: Issues and Implications



S. Lalitha

**Abstract** Youth is a dynamic category and a potential human resource for sustainable development and a resilient Society. Although they are numerically determined high but often seen less in terms of their participation in community development. Therefore, a few questions arise, while determining youth participation in Community Development viz., Why are youth neglected and not much discussed as a center of community development? Why is their least interest in community development critiqued rather than analyzed critically? Are the structural barriers hindering youth participation in community development? Are the youth disengaging themselves owing to the inter-generational conflicts? Do they possess a deep drive for individualization? Are they self-engaged? Are they afraid of accepting the responsibilities due to their commitment? Do they lack institutional support and guidance? which undermines youth participation in community development. Globally, the youth are a sizable population, and having realized that the United Nations emphasized the crucial role of youth explicitly in the 2030 Agenda especially for implementing the SDGs. Youth being a functional unit of any society, they can be made as social change agents for Community Development. They can play the roles of critical thinkers, change-makers, innovators, communicators, and leaders in achieving the SDGs by ensuring their active participation in the community development activities. This chapter focuses on the importance of socio-economic and political context of the youth and also the contextual factors that influence them in rendering their participation in community development. The strength-based approach in Social Work is suggested as a suitable intervention to work with youth, to enhance youth social capital for Community Development.

**Keywords** Community development · Participation · Strength-based approach · Sustainable development · Youth

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S. Lalitha (✉)  
Department of Social Work, RGNIYD, Sriperumbudur, India  
e-mail: [drlalitha.rgniyd@gmail.com](mailto:drlalitha.rgniyd@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Youth is a matter of concern not because of their age but being a resourceful population. Although youth participation in civic engagement and community development have been emphasized by the governments at State and Central levels and at times emphasized by the International organizations such as United Nations and UNFPA, however youth participation in the community development activities is not significant especially in India, an aspiring country with a huge young population. This has become a point for discussion in any academic or political arena as to why youth participation is less or not seen in the community development activities. The country has National Youth Policy (2014) and the draft Youth Policy 2021; besides there are States that have their own State Youth policies and welfare programs despite the fact that youth participation is not seen overtly in community development activities. This chapter critically examines the reasons for disengagement of youth in community development, structural and systemic barriers to youth participation in community development, socio-economic and political contexts of youth in India, role of the youth as a critical change agent, and the need for explicit and sustainable participation of youth in community development to achieve the SDGs. This chapter also emphasizes the significance of strength-based approach in Social Work to devise a suitable intervention to promote youth participation in the community development activities.

## Youth as a Heterogeneous Community: Characteristics and Trends

Youth is a concept, a category based on age, as well as an idealized and institutionalized group (Concept of youth., n.d.). Youth have certain attributes in general and they differ in needs and aspirations. Aspirations are created through social interactions and social existence by socializing. It is crucial to study young people in the contexts of their social lives (Ansell et al., 2020) in order to have a greater understanding of them. Though youth is a transitory stage (Andy, 2013), it is very important to understand them as their actions always determine their characteristics. Needs and aspirations of youth are diverse as youth being a heterogeneous population. So, location, time, gender, and context-specific strategies are imperative to gauge their needs and aspirations; and for devising suitable strategies for youth development. Over a period of time the term youth is constructed socially based on action and inaction. They are identified as contributors when their actions are rational, altruistic, and bring about positive results or constructive changes in the society. At the same time if their actions are irrational, destructive, and affects the society, they will be viewed as deviants are destructive forces. However, it should be noted that since youth are always interacting with the society through social relationships, it is not the youth that



causes problems by their actions but rather the society. Youth demonstrate their resistance when they are under social pressure or are trying to gain approval from others. Adults commonly misinterpret youth resistance. Adults should attempt to identify the causes of youth resistance rather than finding fault with it. Also, youth are viewed by the society as being uncontrollable, although psychological theories emphasize that the youth go through a number of developmental stages that are prescribed by the society as well as endure stress and storm. Moreover, youth are generally brought into conflict as a result of their inactivity and lack of involvement in the community. Youth are consistently used by inter-generational conflict as problem-makers. Therefore, in order to better understand youth, the inter-generational power relationships should be examined (Jones, 2005).

The political factors also play a significant role in locating and constructing youth in the society. During pre-independence youth were viewed as change agents and as revolutionaries when they took part in the independence movement to fight against the colonial government. Later due to advancement of science and technology and globalization youth were connected globally and got access to global knowledge and expanded their global social connections. However, of late, volunteering for the social cause and exercising their political rights are seen very less since the youth detached themselves from the immediate society per se rather become more individualized. Lack of political awareness, political dis-engagement, and political divide are the reasons for youth not to have greater say in the community actions rather becoming victims of politics. Political awareness must be created in youth right from the school level. Issues related to politics and political matters must be discussed by youth freely at higher educational levels. Their affiliations to political movements and associations need to be encouraged (youth) and it is imperative to promote political leadership and political activism in them. Social norms become the barrier for youth not to engage in politics, especially it is evident among the female youth. Participatory structure and capacity building are the means for making youth a politically sound population for rendering participation in community development. Although the socio-political factors have greater influence for youth participation in community development, however, there are many more questions that remain unanswered and few among them are viz., Why the youth disassociate with community action? What makes them not to be a part of change? Also, why do the present youth possess a deep drive for individualization? Are they self-engaged? Are they afraid of accepting the responsibilities due to their commitment? Finding answers to these questions will be very helpful to engage youth productively in community development activities. The physiological and mental maturity must occur simultaneously for civilization in youth (Jones, 2005) otherwise it may be a threat to the society. The institutions such as family, school, neighborhood, and associations play crucial roles where the power conflict arises between the youth and adults. Young people must be allowed to experiment to achieve their own ethics. The morality (learned behavior) and the environment created by adults for the youth to experience and develop ethics matters during the developmental stages. When the development stages are not smooth the individual may encounter problems and challenges in later periods. Neuroscientists have also pointed out that experiences, well-being, and relationships have greater

impact (Andy, 2013) on the development and the process of decision-making. So, they need adult support to search for positive experiences which will further enable them to fit into the social structures and as a contributor. When youth do not get opportunities for experiences they lack responsibilities. When youth lack adults' support they replace it with peers. So the self-identity is constructed during the youth stage with the influence of peer relations or peer bonding. Youth express themselves through culture and subculture means. They also express their resistance through culture and subculture. Sometimes their actions and expressions can be better understood through their music, dress, and drugs. Youth culture in the late modernity affects authenticity and transformative power (Jones, 2005). When young people are allowed to live autonomy they become independents. Persons nurtured with autonomy will have more sense of responsibility and function as a contributor. Those who were nurtured in a dependency culture will become reflexive and individualized. In order to promote development of individualization in youth they need to be connected with resources and support systems.

## **Community Development in India: An Overview**

The term community development was identified as community participation by the United Nations in 1950s (Abbott, 1995) and it is viewed as a process designed to enhance socio-economic conditions of community by enlisting the people's participation (Murthy, 2013) and community collective efforts. It places a strong emphasis on the involvement of all those who are impacted, particularly local participation. It goes through several stages, including organising the community, identifying the needs of the community, designing programs by communities to answer the requirements, and carrying out the planned programs while making the best use of the resources at hand. Community development places a high value on self-help, independence, and altering one's viewpoint since it has great faith in people's inherent abilities.

In pre-independence times many experiments were made by the Indian government and the voluntary organizations with a view to promote people's participation in the developmental activities in rural areas (Maheswari, 1995). However, a great momentum happened only after independence when the community development program was launched on 2nd October, 1952. Although the Ministry of Community Development was established in 1956 to implement the rural development programs, later it was changed as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. But later it was further changed to the Ministry of Rural Development in 1969 and since then it has been promoting rural development through centrally and state-sponsored programs. When the community development program was launched its primary objectives were to bring about progress in the lives of people as a result people would be ensured with freedom, dignity, respect, security, self-reliance, and self-development. Social and economic development was viewed as key aspects of

community development programs. Later the Urban development/community development programs were launched for enhancing the standard of living of people in the urban areas. Over a period of time and till date many programs have been launched and experimented for the socio-economic development of the people in the rural and urban areas. However, the development programs did not create a strong community forum or an active social movement at the grassroots to function as a change agent or active participants of the community development initiatives. Although the community development programs and schemes have inbuilt focus on the development of youth, however such programs have not yielded fullest participation of youth. So, it is necessary to understand why youth are disinterested toward community development? Also why are they neglected and not been much discussed as a center of community development? And why their least interest in community development is always critiqued rather than analyzed critically?

## Youth in India: Role and Function as an Established Unit

India is the youngest country having 27.1% (Economy, 2022) of youth as per the Youth in India Report 2022. Youth is a primary course of discussion of the country since the country has a sizable proportion of youth. The youth policy of India (2014) emphasizes the holistic development and participation of youth in community development. It also illustrates the roles and responsibilities of youth to be active agents of change. Youth being a functional unit of a society, can be made as social change agents for Community Development. Youth social capital is significant for engaging them in community development. In order to make youth participate in community development activities they need to be better understood. Socio-economic and political contexts of the youth and the contextual factors influence the youth to render their participation in community development.

Firstly, understanding youth in their social context is prerequisite. Social context means social environment or the neighborhood in which the youth live in. Environmental factors influence youth and affect their characteristics. Youth cannot act in a vacuum. To make youth perform meaningful social action, their role and functions has to be well aware by youth and also a supportive social environment is essential to enable them to execute the intended action. Often the structural barriers are hindering the youth participation in community development. Social divisions form the basis of social structure (Wood & Hine, 2009). Social relationships, institutions, and groupings play a key role in determining power, status, and opportunities of the individuals. Also, the social systems like family, religion, geographical location, neighborhood, caste, power structure, etc., influence youth and control their actions. Youth actions are seen through behaviors and attitudes. Of course the behaviors and attitudes are shaped by the outcome of socialization and social interaction of youth when they encounter various social institutions. The self is developed through psychological and socio-political factors. Nature and nurture are the key essential aspects in the lives of a youth which reveals them as a burden or contributor to the society.

Secondly, the lack of adequate economic resources forces youth vehemently to take possessions of others and excludes them from formal production (Robert White, 2002) which supposedly gives legitimate identity. Denial of opportunities and non-participation in the formal economic sphere leads to youth idleness and exclusion; and has adverse impact on the lives of youth especially the marginalized youth in the society. Prolonged unemployment and gap in supply in demand for labor disintegrates youth in the society (Andy, 2013) and becomes reasons for risky behaviors in youth. So, it is imperative to capitalize the potential of youth (RGNIYD, 2017) in India for sustaining a stable growth in the global economy.

Thirdly, Young people's political opportunities are reduced by generational inequality, which stops them from using their creative abilities and energy to solve difficult problems that impact society as a whole. In the Indian context participation among youth is generally constrained based on systematic factors caste, religion, gender, education, location, and political divide. Also, the risky behaviors in youth, prolonged engagement in the social media, and individuation (consumer culture) lead them to have detached life and trouble them in establishing self-identity. A youth belonging to low socio-economic conditions, lives in a crime-prone area (Hall & Jefferson, 2006), will be having more chances to indulge in risky behaviors. It is not the youth who creates the problems rather the societal pressures create problems for the youth. So, to understand youth better it is imperative to understand their lifestyle, leisure time activities, needs, and aspirations and the factors that affect their lives. Further it is also necessary to know how youth relates with the adults? Whether adults are accepting the changes and trends? Are they showing an empathic approach toward youth? Whether the inter-generational conflict creates disengagement of youth in community actions?

## **Youth and SDGs: Agenda 2030**

The Sustainable Development Goals are intended to combat the global issues of poverty and the social needs by promoting economic growth and environmental protections through different strategies (UN, 2022). Globally the youth population between 15 and 24 years are 16 percent. Although the 17 SDGs are directly and indirectly involving the youth, specifically the seven goals and 169 targets are youth focused. The UN views youth as the center of development and advocates that the youth development policies and programs should fulfill the needs and aspirations of youth. Further, youth are viewed as a key stakeholder in achieving the SDGs and for the sustainable future. It is emphasized that their knowledge of the triple bottom line of sustainability viz., economic, social, and environmental (Ismail et al., 2022) is an essential for achieving the SDGs. According to the World Youth Report (2020), young people in developing nations face significant social and economic problems and are frequently left out of choices that will affect their lives now and in the future.

Youth being a functional unit of any society, they can be made as social change agents for Community Development. They can be a dynamic force of political change

and social transformation for which their participation in the decision-making process is essential (hand book youth). They can play the roles of critical thinkers, change-makers, innovators, communicators, entrepreneurs, and leaders in achieving the SDGs by ensuring their active participation in the community development activities.

## **Youth as Agents for Change in the Community**

Community is a geographic territory bounded with a sense of belongingness and composed of various sub groups. Youth can function as an agent of change individually and as a collective. Youth need space for participation and contribution. Undermining youth potential by merely quoting their age, inexperience, culture, caste, and gender must be changed in the minds of adults, power structure in the community and in the policymakers. It is the youth who can better converse their issues that they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Today's youth are tomorrow's adults. If their opportunities are denied, how can they take up constructive roles in the later period? The community may have wider issues and needs. Since youth is also a part of the community, their voice should be heard in the community decision-making process. Trust, access to opportunity, social connections, and positive social relationships provide youth confidence and will inculcate the spirit of civic engagement. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020) says that globally the population of youth is increasing and at the same time the youth are experiencing structural barriers due to which they are prevented from entering into the labor market. Merely youth are in the informal sector globally and the working conditions are very dangerous and they are deprived of legal and social protection. Also, the youth face limited opportunities for training and career development. When it comes to India, youth face numerous problems especially the social exclusion, unemployment, lack of access to decent jobs, and lack of substantial skills for the labor market due to unstable political institutions and socio-political consequences. For youth to be productive members of society, the right skill sets, high-quality education, and training must be offered. In order for the young people to transition from an individualized space to a collective space. For this reason, youth ought to be seen as a partner in community development programs. Proactive policies that promote youth development will provide a way for youth participation in community actions. Youth development organizations must take a key role in creating awareness of the policies and programs in youth for their active engagement in community development.



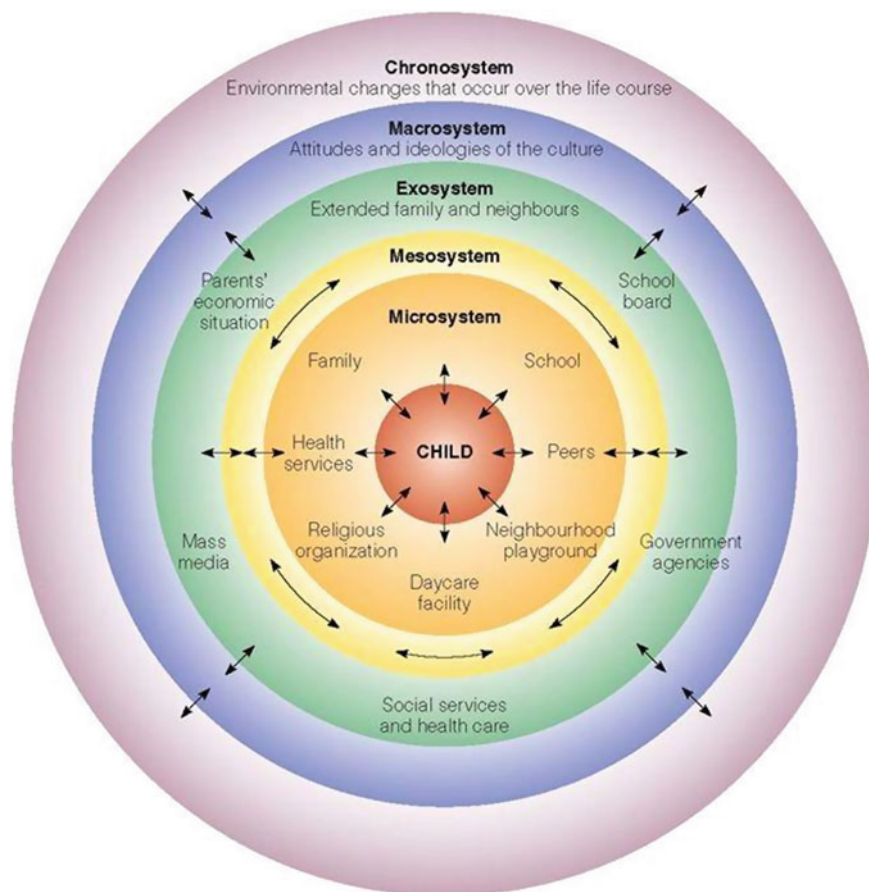
## **Theoretical Framework for Youth Participation in Community Development**

The transparency of the government, particularly in facilitating public engagement in the decision-making process, is the most important factor in community development. Youth development is a means of community development. A conducive and safe environment is a prerequisite for youth development. So a question arises whether youth have choices to share their lives? Do they make choices and take initiative in their own lives? Do they independently? But, in general, youth are seen as a dependent category, and this is also true in India. There is a notion that always persists in adults that youth are not engaged in community development activities. They are least engaged and busy with their personal commitments. Also youth are blamed for being more self-concerned and least concerned about community development. So the question arises that is it the youth are really not interested in community development activities or they were not given any opportunities for community engagement. But it has to be noted that the youth experience is dependent on the opportunities that they get. It is merely said that life with uncertainty and frequent being revised by youth affects their transition and makes them reflexive. The Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory of Ecological system depicts the individuals at the core of the system and illustrates the relationship between individuals and five major sub systems such as families, schools and peer groups, and external environments and broader socio-cultural contexts. Primarily the theory highlights the complex interaction between individuals and the subsystems and its impact on youth behavior and development (Fig. 25.1).

Also, it has to be noted that the youth in India lack institutional support and guidance. Although they extend their participation in various ways, what undermines youth participation in community development. Are they lacking technical knowledge and decision-making skills? If so, youth need to be provided essential training and capacity building. In fact, capacity building must be viewed as the objective of all community development programs and social welfare schemes. Youth can be involved in making community action plans and be made as the service delivery agent for which their rights are to be regarded. A proactive approach is imperative for community youth development for which young people need institutional support (Wood & Hine, 2009) and more particularly at the community level.

## **Promoting Youth Participation in Community Development Using Strength-Based Approach**

Since youth is a transition period and a crucial stage their attitude and skills need to be sharpened to enable them to gain positive identity in self and in society. So any programs aimed for community development should be youth focused and must make youth a center for community development. For which the empathetic approach



**Fig. 25.1** Bronfenbrenner's five ecological systems

is essential. Youth participation at different levels has to be meticulously planned and implemented. The fundamental problem of youth for non-participation in community development is that youth are never consulted nor approached by the authorities or the institutions which are responsible for policy formulation and implementation. It is always challenging for youth to identify the ways to participate in community development. The ways and means of participation are not widely told to the youth. To participate meaningfully in community development programs, they require the support of adults with the necessary skills and relationships. However, they are not given these things. The intergenerational conflicts, structural barriers, and systemic oppression also become a threat to participation of youth. Youth in India are pressurised for attainment of education and employment status and always it is not of their choice but of society. Although social interaction is viewed as a crucial element (Neal

et al., 2013) in the development process the youth in late modernity are more individualized and less connected physically in the social interaction and socialization process. The less social interaction and less socialization results in a lack of sense of belongingness toward community development activities. Participation in community development requires a mere sense of responsibility which is in fact nurtured by the institutions such as family, school, religion, and neighborhood characteristics. If these institutions fulfilled their role by instilling the values, attitudes and skills in young people civic engagement and citizenship it would have certainly resulted in effective participation of youth in community development. Also, the citizenship opportunities should be contextual and must provide localized experience (Wood & Hine, 2009).

By realizing the youth potential, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the youth participation in achieving the SDGs. Youth should be encouraged as active social agents and they must be made aware of different roles that they can perform in achieving community development. Youth always appreciate the innovative ways to engage themselves. Hence the channel of connecting and organizing youth for community development should be well thought and be often updated with the trends. Technology-enabled participation, real-time participation monitoring techniques, appreciation and acknowledging the youth in Social Media Platform, and peer-facilitated participation may be considered for youth participation in community development. Youth can be facilitated to extend their collective participation as an organized group such as youth club/forum or association (Lalitha et al., 2020). So, the local youth clubs/forums need to be digitally connected and audited for valuing their participation in community development activities. Community Youth Development model (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) can be encouraged to prevent risky behaviors and promote youth well-being; also the Youth-led development models (Ortega-Williams, 2020) can be encouraged to promote six Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring/compassion and contribution). Also, a list of desirable competencies for young people was also developed by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, and it encompasses academic, cognitive, civic, emotional, physical, social, cultural, and occupational competence.

The opportunity to contribute to one's self and community can be facilitated by youth workers, particularly professional social workers who have received training in youth work. For youth engaging in community development should give excitement, fun, and experience. They need friendly space, a safe environment, and mere acceptance for their engagement. In social work, a strength-based approach is widely used to help the client system to contribute for self and society. Strength-based approach focuses on the abilities and talents of the individuals and not on their short falls. To be an active social change agent the youth needs adequate support and opportunities. The youth need social connection inside and outside the communities to function as a social capital. If youth are given leadership responsibilities, they will contribute effectively to community development activities. Youth development (FCYO, 2000) is the process that all young people go through as they develop the personal qualities or skills required to participate in adolescence and adulthood. Youth leadership is a crucial part of the youth development process as it helps young people assess

their own strengths, guide, direct, and influence others, and serve as role models (Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

Promoting developmental strengths includes resilience and youth development which will lead to creating and sustaining asset-building communities. The developmental assets framework can be used to analyze critically the life journey, hardship that they went through, and their reflective experiences (Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007) that they encountered in their community. Priorities and research findings form the foundation of social policy (Chopra et al., 2001). In light of the fact that government policies would undoubtedly have an impact on the country's youth, youth perception, aspirations, and priorities (Karnataka Jnana Aayoga, 2011) should be in line with those of the government. So, it is indispensable that youth should always be the focal point of policies and programs intended for community development because they are the active citizens with innovative thoughts; and can play a significant role in program planning and community mobilization.

## Conclusion

If youth are regarded as a center of community development, then all the initiatives will be appropriated toward enabling youth to participate in community development. Instead of blaming the youth for non-participation it is the responsibility of the social, economic, and political institutions and especially the States to devise various ways and innovative strategies to encourage youth participation in community development. The conventional approach in community development programs needs to be altered with a youth friendly approach. Youth collective participation has to be appreciated in community development activities. Structure and the systems/institutions should provide favorable for youth to access and to participate in the community development activities. Youth-led initiatives have to be. The use of strength-based approach will help to increase youth social capital which is essential for successful participation of youth in community development activities.

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**S. Lalitha** is currently an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development. A Visiting Fellow at King's College, London, UK, at the School of Education and Communication and Society in 2019. As an ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow, she worked at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT-Madras). She holds a Ph.D. (Social Work) from the University of Madras, a Master of Philosophy (Social Work) from Loyola College in Chennai, and a Master of Arts (Social Work) from Stella Maris College in Chennai. A PG Diploma in Human Resource Management was earned from Anna-malai University, and she qualified for the UGC-NET in Social Work in 2000. She completed a certificate course in Administrative Management in Tokyo, Japan, in 2011. In Stockholm, she attended conferences funded by international grants, including World Water Week (2011) and Social Work and Social Development (2012). In the year 2015, she attended the Active Citizens



Social Enterprise Leadership Programme-A Global Master Facilitator Development Workshop in London, UK. She has presented papers at national and international conferences and published articles in national and international journals. As the Coordinator of the Centre for Dalit and Subaltern Studies at RGNIYD, she conducts training programmes for marginalized youth nationwide. Community development, water governance, youth studies, social inclusion, and social entrepreneurship are her areas of interest. Her memberships include Professional Social Workers Association, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Indian Society for Professional Social Work, Chandigarh, India, and JICA Alumni Association of India. In 2022, she conducted a study on “Social Reality of Scheduled Caste Youth in Tamil Nadu with reference to Sustainable Development Goals”.