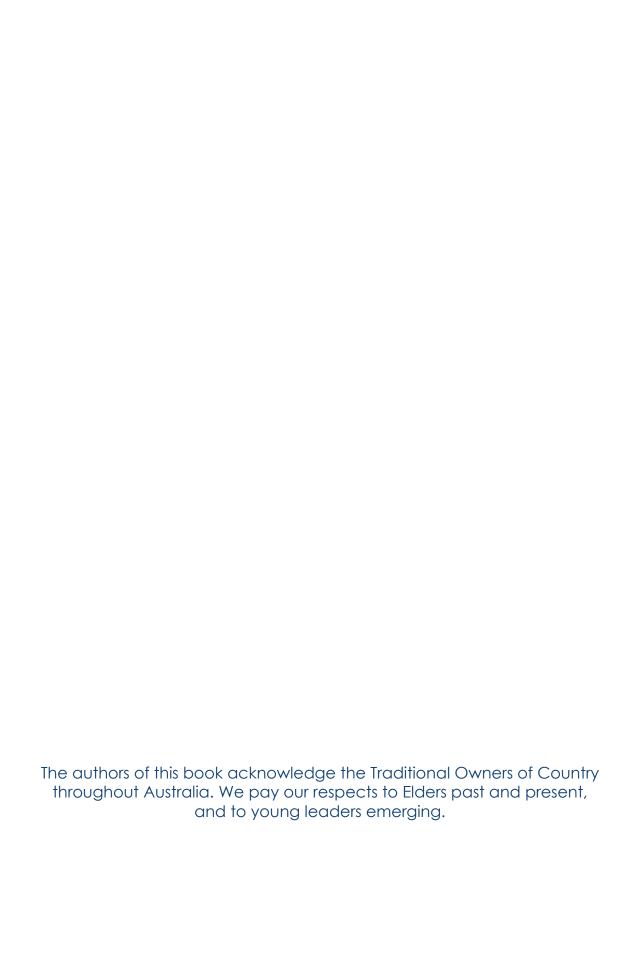
# Just Futures for Australia's Youth

A guidebook that drives youth inclusion.

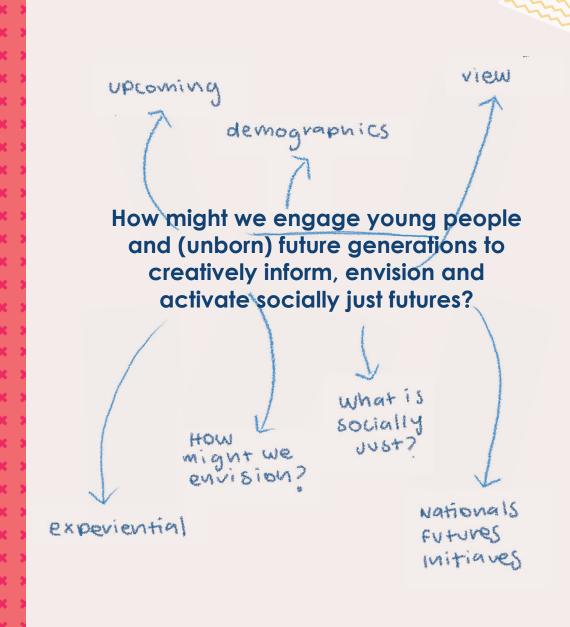


This book is the result of a collaborative effort into what it truly means to centre young people in shaping a socially just future. Co-designed with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and the BCII 2025 Industry Innovation Project team from the University of Technology Sydney, this work represents not only a shared commitment to youth inclusion, but also a living example of what co-design can look like in practice.

We hope this book inspires action, dialogue, and deep reflection. May it serve as both a line of discourse and a practical guide for those looking to meaningfully engage with young people in shaping better futures, for all generations.

### with great care and gratitude

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This question drives every chapter, case study, and insight in this book. It invites us to reflect not just on what the future looks like, but who gets to shape it, and why that must change.

#### Why this book exists

In a world where decisions made today shape the lives of tomorrow, two critical voices are often missing: the voice of **youth** and the voice of **future unborn generations**.

Across Australia and beyond, young people are being sidelined by systems that favour hierarchy, elitism, tokenism, and bureaucracy. Despite having the most at stake in the future, they seem to be rarely given the power to meaningfully participate in shaping it.

This book brings these issues to the forefront through stories, systemic scrutiny, and visions created by **young thinkers**, **doers**, **and dreamers**. It challenges outdated norms, exposes youth-washing, and proposes new methods and frameworks rooted in inclusion, creativity, and justice.

More than a critique, its ultimate purpose serves as a guide for all. For NFPs, policy makers, educators, designers, and future-makers – for those ready to co-design a future not just for the future generations, but **with** them.

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# Why is Youth Inclusion so Important?

#### What is included in this Chapter:

Youth are often excluded from decision-making processes, despite being the generation most affected by those decisions. This chapter will explore why current systems are failing young people and powerful insights to better understand and support youth engagement.

#### This chapter will include:

- A definition of youth inclusion for the future.
- A system maps of current youth inclusion practices across sectors.
- Key insights from council research, interviews, and surveys.
- An analysis of the disconnect between youth aspirations and institutional responses.
- Key personas within the system.
- An assessment for youth engagement practices within your institution.

In Mission Australia's 2024 annual survey for youth, which included 17,480 respondents aged 15-19, only 36% felt that young people in their community have a say on issues that matter most to them.

# What does inclusion mean for the future of a young person?

A socially just future for a young person means having them be actively included in shaping the world they are inheriting.

It's the difference between watching decisions unfold from the sidelines and having a real say in the policies, systems, and structures that impact their lives – like housing, education and mental health.

When inclusion is meaningful, and not just tokenistic, it gives young people agency and purpose. It means they are seen as capable contributors. It lets them design solutions, influence priorities and co-create a society that reflects their values and lived experiences.

Our goal is to create a system that gives young people and future generations the tools, opportunities, and respect to thrive, strengthening the future for everyone.

and with regards to the future generations that will later inhubit the world builds confidence *leadership* diversity

#### **Current System's State**

In both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, there's a gap between **saying** young people matter and **actually** involving them. While youth advisory groups and feedback mechanisms exist, they're often underutilised – often more performative than productive.

For example, some local councils or working groups struggle to maintain momentum or visibility. Without consistent support, they can fade out quietly with little follow-up.

Across the board, key decision-making institutions remain top-down. Young people, especially those in junior roles, are often asked for feedback but are only there to validate choices already made.

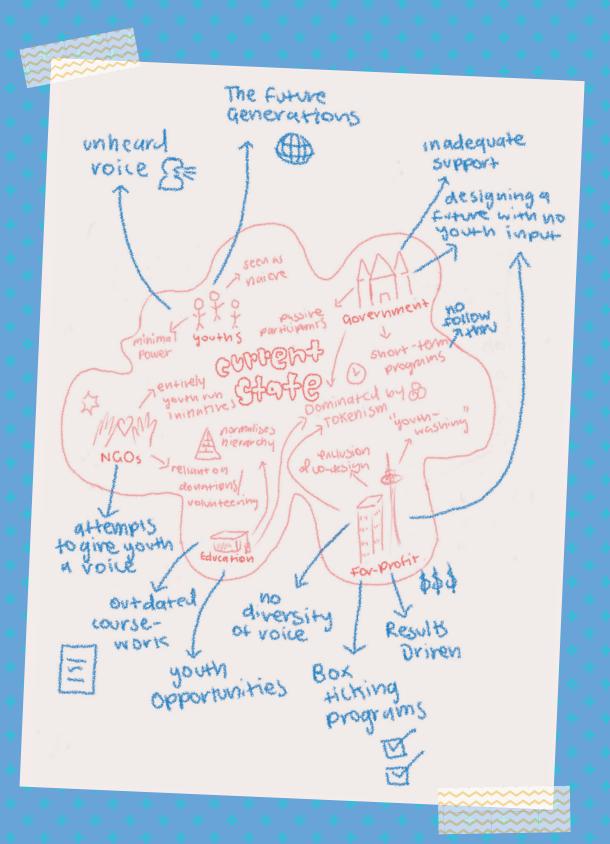
In fast-moving industries like media and AI, even a senior professional seemed to recognise the value of young perspectives, but admitted the projects aren't usually built to include them.

Moving beyond performative inclusion means shifting from ticking boxes to designing processes where youth input is recognised as essential, with clear structures that ensure they're heard, and their contributions acted on when it matters most.

one junior designer shared that their input is often Ignored until outcomes prove their worth.

of young people are often closest to emercy in a trends + drallenges, why aren't bur systems designed to recognise them in a meaningful way?





## Why is our current system failing youth?

In a survey of 31 individuals aged 18-25, most rated their concern for their future as 9 or 10 out of 10. Their ideal future was clear:

When asked what they wanted for Australia, many expressed a desire for a more equitable society, with affordable living, better mental health support, and policies that reflect their values.

But what stood out most were the barriers they named:

This is where the system fails: not in the absence of youth concern or vision, but in its unwillingness to meaningfully engage with them. Despite being directly impacted by today's choices, young people are too often shut out of the conversations shaping their future.

These insights reveal a pattern of frustration. Young people are hopeful, but increasingly disengaged, not because they don't care, but because they are shut out of the system. It's evident that if we continue to ignore youthful voices, it would be a failure of intergenerational responsibility.

mental health

relation swips

> fulfilling life

government, inaction, corporate greed, poor policy

lack of youth representation

one respondent described trying to provide feedback through a city of Sydney "have your say" phone humber, only to find it didn't work.

Others pointed to older generations resisting change, or to undear and maccessible pathways for youth involvement.



### The societal need to include young voices

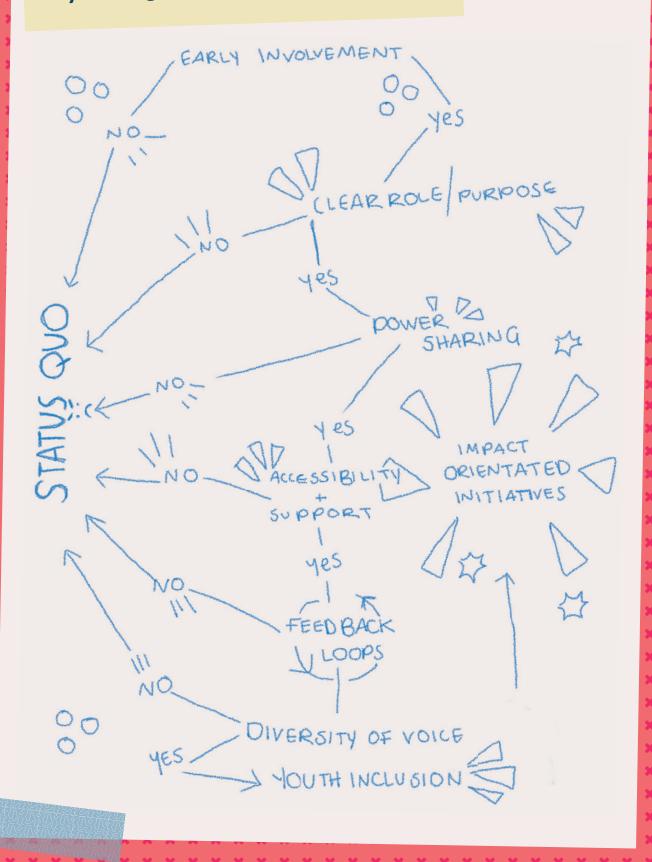
Young people are not just future stakeholders, they're already living through the impacts of decisions made around climate, education, technology and employment. Yet, their lived experiences are rarely embedded into the systems that shape these areas. This lack of involvement often leads to systems and services that often feel disconnected from their actual needs.

One approach with proven impact is co-design. Rather than consulting youth after decisions are made, co-design brings them in from the start as equal contributors in shaping ideas, programs, and policies. It's not just a more inclusive approach, it's also more effective. Research shows that co-design leads to stronger engagement, higher trust, and more relevant outcomes, particularly when working with underrepresented groups (Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

When young people are given the tools and space to contribute, they bring fresh perspectives, cultural and generational understanding, and future-focused thinking that will help inform decisions for future generations too. Using co-design as a standard practice won't just improve outcomes for young people, it will improve the systems they inherit.

Sanders, E. B. N., & Stappers, P. J. (2008). Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. CoDesign, 4(1), 5–18.

### Is your organisation youth friendly?



# The Four Foundations for Change

#### What is included in this Chapter:

The future system proposed is difficult to push forward without the assistance of decision making authority, the reach of government, and the financial power of large businesses.

Several NFP–specific factors have been identified as essential to supporting a socially sustainable and equitable future. These must be considered in practice to ensure meaningful youth inclusion and considerations that serve future generations.

This chapter will include:

- Considerations for where NFPs should invest more time and resources.
- Map outlining four essential areas of focus for not-forprofits seeking to improve youth inclusion.

Learning through direct experiences offers deep and context-rich insights for all involved in addressing the challenge.

By simulating the experiences of stakeholders, organisations can better understand needs, barriers and opportunities that desktop research might miss.

NFPs should seek out opportunities for experiential engagement with youth and the communities they serve to better inform design processes and decision-making.

Sustainable solutions should be designed with longevity in mind.

NFPs must consider frameworks that allow systems to continue to thrive, grow and adapt long after the initial intervention.

process in design and is most notably observed as empathy. eone to fich

This isn't a new concept, it's a well-established

Teach someone to fish and you feed them for a lifetime.

Designing with people, rather than for the end user, is a powerful way to engage in creating solutions that provide enduring relevance.

While it may seem obvious that young people should be involved in shaping the world they live in, these processes are still tokenistic. The real challenge is for NFPs to include youthful perspectives from conception to output.

This means providing the opportunity for youth to contribute to systems they've historically been excluded from, not only for feedback but as co-creators, and even as leaders.

Young people and future generations are not just collectives, but should be treated as individuals and unique future perspectives.

Assumptions based on broad generalisations often ignore the intersectionality of diverse perspectives and rids the identity of targeted groups.

Effective engagement therefore involves listening to a range of voices while recognising that every lived experience brings distinct value.

Inclusive processes must reflect diversity in identity, culture and circumstance, and should treat all participants as collaborators, not just statistics. Regular office switch ups, working in places other than your desk being in spaces that your community or stakeholder uses.

Simulating user journeys by walking through a service or experience as if you were the person it was designed for.

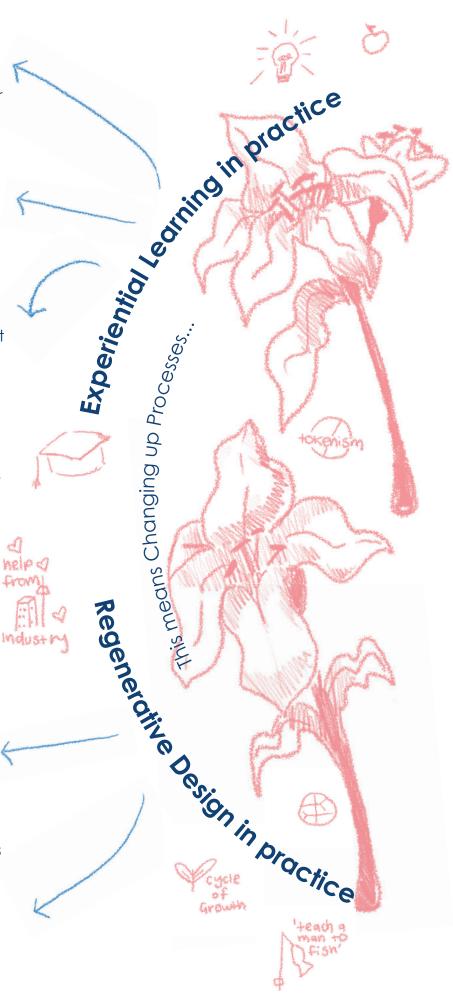
Prioritise field research over desk work to gather rich insights that static research can't provide.

youth decision

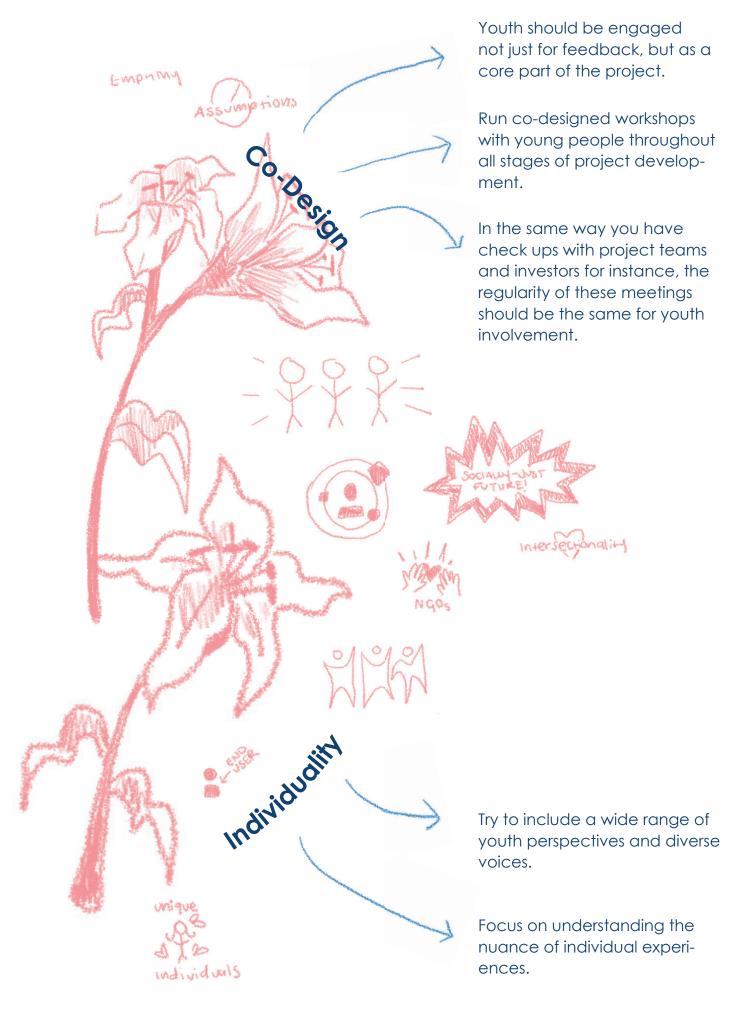
Marting

When thinking up solutions, it is important that a priority is considering the longevity and impact the solution will have once you have passed the

It is a necessary step in the process that all design projects must have: Making sure that the solution proposed has the ability to regenerate time and time again, and work like a cycle after your point of intervention.



torch.



# Principles for Youth Inclusion

#### What is included in this Chapter:

Foundations alone aren't enough for creating systemic change – we also need a clear moral compass.

This chapter will include:

 Five principles that provide practical and philosophical grounding for any project working toward youth inclusion. N

# What a young person needs to best set up their own future

## Safe and supportive environments

This is the seed for an equitable future. Without psychological, emotional, and physical safety, nothing else can meaningfully foster.

free of fear

foster unange

encouraged failure

# 2 Access to resources

Once a young person is safe and supported, they need access to the tools, spaces, information, and people to participate and grow.

create vision





Now with foundational support and access, education can build the appropriate knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate an increasingly complex world.

16ility

creativity

collaboration

4 Mentorship

Education teaches information, but mentorship adds guidance. It's the next principle that connects youth with those who've walked the path previously, helping them translate learning into actionable next steps.

encouragement

SUPPOVY

**5** Opportunity

The culmination of agency. With all the above in place, young people can finally take part in shaping the world, through their voice, leadership, influence, and decision-making.

The journey to systemic change is about applying principled thinking into meaningful action.

given space to make change

oe heard



#### What is included in this Chapter:

Principles guide what matters, but change only happens when we apply them meaningfully. Informed by young voices, the following methods create a reformed process of action for organisations looking to take youth inclusion beyond discussion.

These three workshops make up a complete experiential process, and you and your team are equipped to tackle any of them.

This chapter includes:

- Method 1: The Youth inclusion assessment
- Method 2: Simulating systems
- Method 3: The backcasting lab

Start here!

This reflective activity

This

#### 1: Youth Inclusion Assessment

#### Steps:

- Gather your core team: you'll need a healthy mix of staff to best leverage this method. Whilst perspectives should vary, it's still important to include key decision makers.
- 2. Complete the youth inclusion assessment: should only take 5-10 minutes to complete. Alternatively, you can co-create this tool with some of your organisation's younger stakeholders.
- 3. **Converge and view your findings:** discuss strengths, weaknesses and surprises from the assessment outcomes.
- 4. **Document your team's key insights:** this will help to inform which method to tackle next, forming the start of an action plan for your organisation.

an introductory exercise to see where you've at!

The template can be found on page 17

#### 2: Simulating Systems

#### Steps:

Choose your stakeholder: what challenge space are you working within and who's experience do you want to simulate with this method? Personas should reflect the key groups affected by the problems, challenges or interventions your organisation is exploring. Consider age, cultural background, lived experience, attitudes and anything else that might be relevant to their experience.

This reflective process uses role-play and Journey to ussist teams in developing understanding of stake holder experiences

- 2. **Map the current system:** outline the actual process this persona would go through. Use staff and project knowledge, existing protocols, and public information to simulate the experience step by step. Be as detailed as possible.
- 3. Walk the journey: assign team members to engage in the experience of your stakeholder. This could be phone calls, emails, or in person interactions. If possible, include young people in your team as facilitators or actors in the simulation and encourage team members to get out of their comfort zone. This method works best when participants aren't already familiar with the stakeholders experience.
- 4. Converge and discuss experiences: each team member reflects on the process from the perspective of their stakeholder. What worked? Where did the process break down? Include both practical and emotional insights.
- Redesign the journey with your team: based on your findings, collaboratively remap the system. What would an ideal future state of the process or experience look like? Highlight opportunities for increased transparency, simpler access, or potential youth involvement.
- 6. **Final insights and next steps:** consolidate your insights into practical next steps. This might include entry points in the system, research pathways or the foundation of new interventions.

An exercise in future's thinking and learning awass your timeline and beyond. This method must be facilitated and overseen by youth stakeholders

#### 3: Backcasting Lab

#### Steps:

- 1. Split into teams and define your shared challenge space. You'll need at least 4-6 participants and ideally make at least 3 teams of 2.
- 2. **Design your future:** each group defines their ideal future, keeping it as 'blue-sky' as you can. Imagine a future where your challenge doesn't exist.
- Quick share back to everyone: each team shares their ideal future state, no feedback is given at this stage. Facilitating team begins defining their prospective ideal future to use for notetaking and a point of comparison in final sharebacks.
- 4. **Work backwards:** begin to converge by looking for potential road-blocks, key decisions and systemic shifts on the road to your ideal future. Try to work all the way back to the present day, creating a timeline.
- 5. Consider existing historical context and barriers: jump back even further to consider what factors and experiences shape the present system in your challenge space. What needs to be learned or reimagined? Extend your timeline here.
- 6. **Present your timeline:** each group shares their timeline to an ideal future with the entire group.
- 7. Youth feedback: given based on the youth facilitators professional perspectives, personal experience and response to participant timelines. Both facilitators and participants are encouraged to converse and to ask questions of each other.
- 8. **Group discussion of next steps:** identify trends and potential areas of exploration for the organisation within the challenge space.

what are some methods or processes that would help to put these insights into practice or test assumptions going forward.

#### CASE STUDY: Indigenous Sporting Chance Academy (NASCA)

NASCA is a 100% First Nations-governed and led non profit organisation that helps connect First Nations youth to culture and supports them to thrive at school and beyond.

NASCA hosts a range of programs and initiatives such as Young Women's Academy and Pathway Programs, which provide youth with one-to-one support, group mentoring, academic support, cultural excursions and well being workshops.

The success of NACSA and it's initiatives can be reflected in the 19,000 young people supported through schooling, with a 93% graduation rate (2024).

The success of NASCA's programs demonstrate the value of empowering First Nations youth to maintain a position of autonomy over their own futures despite the overwhelming barriers they face.

#### **CASE STUDY: Oaktree**

Oaktree is an Australian NFP run entirely by individuals under the age of 27.

Oaktree's primary goal is the empowerment and enabling of youth within the Asia-Pacific region.

Oaktree strives to have youth involved in key decision making processes in their communities, and empowers youth to have the capacity and confidence to foster meaningful change.

Oaktree has hosted over 13,000 students within its education workshops and currently has 9 programs running across the Asia-Pacific Region.

Oaktree represents one of the largest youth led organisations, and highlights the power and future potential for youth led organisations, to foster meaningful change.

# Building the Future System System

#### What is included in this Chapter:

From translating insights into a practical system of youth inclusion, this final section brings it all together. This chapter offers a comprehensive blueprint for NFPs and beyond looking to transition from token youth consultation to genuine youth leadership.

#### This chapter includes:

- A vision for a socially just future.
- Structural strategies for embedding youth leadership.
- A visual timeline showing the growth of short, medium and long-term milestones to build a socially just future.



#### What is the new system?

performative and tokenistic

The current system treats youth inclusion as a checkbox.

The future system envisions youth inclusion by placing their voices and considerations of unborn generations at the centre of all design and leadership processes.

This system gives young people agency from the very beginning through co-design.

Stakeholders are transparent in both their decision-making processes and outcomes, flexible and accessible across all generations, and held accountable through clear tools for measuring impact.

The system is ultimately guided by the four foundations of making change and the five principles to facilitate youth inclusion. And in practice, this means young people co-lead projects from all stages of development.

Key principle K

# CASE STUDY: SPEAK FOR YOURSELF EVENT (The Advocate for Children and Young People )

The Speak For Yourself Event is a one day event for children and young people up to the age of 24 who are involved in decision making in organisations and/or are a part of a youth advisory group.

The event provided a platform for children and young people to share what they felt was most important for meaningful participation in organisational decision-making.

It also gave them the opportunity to hear ideas and initiatives from other young people across NSW. The success of the event highlighted the value of peer to peer learning and mentorship, and the value of youth leaders empowering the young people within their communities.

#### CASE STUDY: Loddon Mallee Women's Health Loddon Mallee Women's Health (LMWH)

LMWH is a non-profit and non-government organisation providing information, support, and health services to women in the Loddon Mallee area in Victoria.

It aims to develop the leadership skills of young women, mentor young women's ability to participate in community organisations and increase the participation of younger women on the council of management.

Promoting these kinds of active partnerships between youth and other community members can lead to improved and strengthened communities, which, in turn, increases the organisation's relevance and credibility to young people.

### Actionable steps toward a youth-led future

Key implementations that can be used to build toward the new system

#### Digital Tools for future engagement

- Interactive portals: create a youth portal that allows people to freely contribute to initiatives and timelines in real time.
- **Real time feedback and voting systems:** allow youth to weigh in on decisions through public polls and intuitive transparency.
- **Digital storytelling archives:** create a platform that allows young people to document their lived experiences and creates a database that informs decisions based on individuality rather than collective assumptions.
- **Gamification:** incentivised engagement through apps and challenges.

#### Ways to structure youth leadership

- Youth advisory boards: elected, trained, and consulted regularly.
- Youth consultant workshops: work with young people to assess programs and policies, then get real-time feedback from them.
- Consultancy planning and checkpoint: ensure youth representatives are not one-off consultants, but are regularly built into the processes of the NFPs.

#### Supporting tools for inclusion

- **Workshops:** methods to help NFPs and teams co-create with unique methods and outcomes.
- **Training resources:** to create a system of support that embodies youth voices in resources.
- **Impact measurement tools:** create ways to measure youth inclusion and impact to show real results.

#### **Prompt intergenerational conversations**

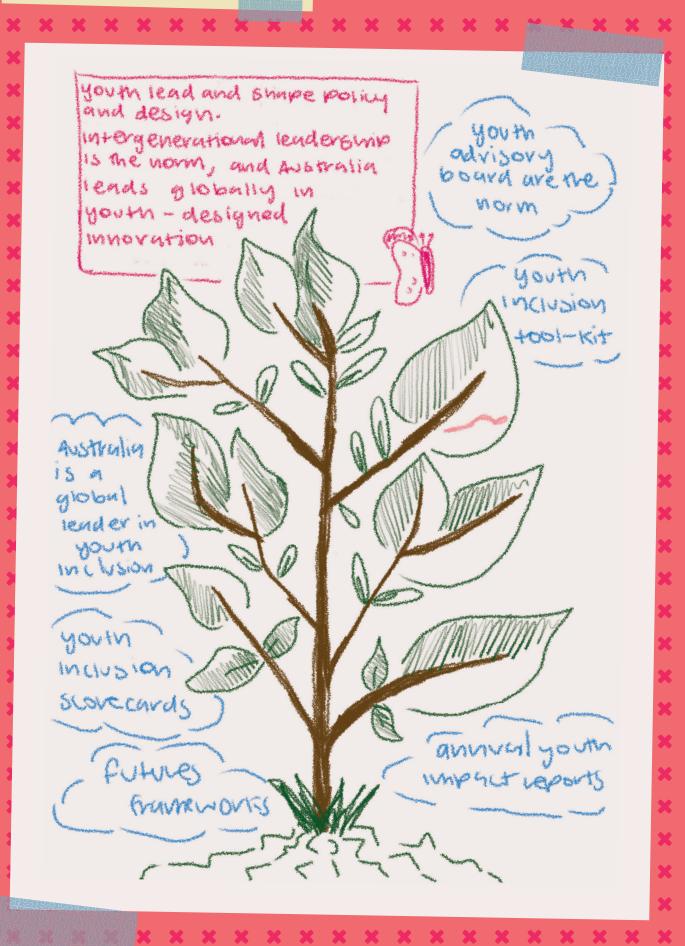
- **Future's framework:** work on bridging a gap between older generations, youth and unborn generations through storytelling, time capsules, mutual goal setting, content creation, campaigns etc.
- Collaboration across all ages: ask, how might we break the stigma of young versus old?

#### **Diversity**

- **Scope:** ways to incorporate diverse and unique voices.
- Consideration of First Nations perspectives: connection with Country, place, land, education and knowledge



#### Long term goals







The systems we build **today** will inevitably shape the lives of younger and future generations.

In every decision we make, we hold the power to repeat the past or reimagine what's possible.

The future isn't just a vision. It's a call to **listen** to youth, not just as an afterthought, but as change-makers, innovators, visionaries, and most importantly, humans – like all of us.

We believe that in a world where young people have the agency and capacity to **co-lead** the world we inhabit, truly inclusive intergenerational collaboration will become standard and a socially just future will naturally be a byproduct.

#### Eulogy for a future's past

The future's not waiting in some distant land, It lives in the choices we wield within our hands, Each voice we uplift, each space we create, Shapes systems we all happen to congregate.

No more empty seats at decision-making tables, No more tokens disguised with made-up labels, This is the time for deep-rooted repair, For young hearts to lead and not just be there.

We dream of a world that's socially just,
Where every vision and action lies within youth trust,
Where boards are diverse, and roles are redefined,
Where futures are co-designed across all human mind.

The past is gone, and so we mourn. So let us not delay, the future starts today.