

Young Palestinians' struggles for accountability and participation: beyond formal systems and public resistance

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Abstract: Young people worldwide are engaged in diverse forms of participation which offer a pathway for demanding accountability from governance actors. In contexts with fragile governance structures, young people face a unique set of challenges in their efforts to demand accountability or participate in decision-making. The expected relationship between participation and accountability as understood in liberal, democratic settings is often absent and instead demands for accountability are often made through strategies 'at the margins'. Using Palestine as a case study, we show how young people look for accountability beyond state institutions and the national scale, using diverse strategies depending on their embedded position in society. This analysis sheds light on the complex reality of youth participation and accountability mechanisms in socially, politically and physically contested spaces and, by extension, points towards challenges and opportunities in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Palestine, youth participation, accountability, Sustainable Development Goals, governance

Note on the authors: see end of article.

Introduction

The importance of involving young people in political processes and decision-making is increasingly recognised at local, national and international levels (UNDESA 2012; OECD n.d.). However, at the state and subnational levels, vastly different political contexts exist which may promote or prevent youth participation depending on the particular needs and interests of authorities (Theis 2007). As a result, the ways that young people participate vary from engagement in formal processes such as voting in elections, to public protest, to volunteering in community practices of mutual support. Furthermore, young people are not a homogeneous group but a diverse array of individuals who differ by ethnicity, race, religion, abilities, gender and sexual identity and other characteristics which shape their interests and preferences (Checkoway 2011). This calls for an expansive understanding of youth participation that appreciates the many roles young people play in their communities.

Regardless of the form it takes, youth participation is important both as a mechanism for the young people involved to learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens or members of a community (Jeffrey & Staeheli 2016), and as a strategy to ensure that governing institutions are held accountable for their actions. Young people can play an important role in institutionally led accountability measures such as electoral processes or policy development and/or through individual and community-led accountability strategies, including public protest (Avis 2015). When acknowledging the potential of young people to contribute to holding decision-makers to account, it is important to also guard against assumptions of one size fits all. Typical and linear Western-based models depict youth participation as a practice that leads unproblematically to positive social change without considering the complexity and challenges present in different contexts (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Checkoway & Gutierrez 2006; Cahill & Dadvand 2018). Yet the definition of what makes up ‘real, authentic or effective participation’ is contested (Kiilakoski 2020: 7). The participation of young people in accountability strategies both shapes and is shaped by the context in which they operate, including but not limited to questions of scale. For example, at the global level, liberal democratic norms embedded in international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) welcome and encourage the participation of young people. However, this policy dialogue does not necessarily translate into an effective practice of participation, nor does it guarantee open space for civil society in all national contexts (Rafique et al. 2021).

The UN Youth Strategy states that it seeks to ‘ensure [youth] engagement and participation in the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as other relevant global agendas and frameworks’ (United Nations 2018: 5). Significantly, the UN has made explicit the view that youth

have a critical role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Young people are expected to be 'full-fledged partners in the United Nations work to build a better world for all' (United Nations 2018: 6). Participation is a key component of achieving SDG 16 to: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations n.d.a). However, much of the implementation of the SDG agenda relies on the engagement and leadership of national governments, and doubts have been raised about the state as the custodian for a sustainable development agenda in the context of a highly unequal political and economic world order (El-Zein *et al.* 2016). National political contexts do not always align with democratic norms of youth participation and as such, the strategies young people use to demand accountability vary.

In this article we present a complex picture of the diverse strategies for accountability employed by young people, specifically focused on contexts where fragile governance arrangements challenge the expected relationship between participation and accountability as understood in liberal, democratic settings. Using Palestine as a case study, we show how young people look for accountability beyond state institutions and the national scale, choosing how and where to focus their efforts based on scale (both space and time), their lived experience in a particular place and notions of belonging and citizenship in their community. This includes the decision not to participate, particularly in situations where to do so may put their lives and futures at risk. We argue that it is critical to recognise inaction as a legitimate strategy in a situation where young people are confronted with serious risk as the result of a huge imbalance of power. This is a reminder of the need for international institutions that influence governance and accountability to support young people facing oppression and persecution; young people cannot be left without allies at the forefront of the struggle for accountability against powerful institutions that fail to safeguard their rights. This analysis will shed light on the complex reality of youth participation and accountability mechanisms in socially, politically and physically contested spaces and, by extension, point towards challenges and opportunities in implementing the SDGs.

Youth participation and accountability

Not only do youth have the ability to make valuable contributions to decision-making processes but they also have a right to be meaningfully included in society (Narksompong & Limjirikan 2015). The right to influence decision-making is affirmed in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which upholds that children and youth are 'full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views

in all matters affecting them and requires that those views be heard and given due weight' (UN OHCHR 1989). This has been widely affirmed worldwide, resulting in the Convention on the Rights of the Child holding the distinction of being the most ratified human rights treaty in the world with 196 state parties (every country except the United States of America) (UNICEF n.d.). We have also witnessed the UN and international organisations investing in ways of engaging youth in decision-making, such as the establishment of the UN Youth Delegates programme, which gives young people the opportunity to participate in the UN General Assembly as part of their country's delegation (United Nations n.d.b). The mobilisation of young people to take action for the SDGs has often been pinpointed as being essential to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2021).

Nevertheless, the experience of being young, as well as the understanding of who is young, varies from one context to another (Jeffrey 2012; Harlan 2016). Youth is often legally defined as a category based on biological age, yet the conceptualisation of young people or youth is socially constructed and varies depending on social and cultural contexts (UNESCO 2019; Hansen 2008; Worth 2016). This challenges the idea of 'youth' as a generational unit with a collective political agenda. While in some instances identifying as young can form the basis of a political position (Thew et al. 2020), young people also represent diverse perspectives, aspirations and plans for the future – both across and within national contexts. Furthermore, young people are often in an 'in-between space politically and legally' (Skelton 2010: 145), with different relationships with political processes and actors. As such, their interest in and ability to engage with opportunities for participation in governance are diverse.

Participation is broadly understood as the many ways that young people are involved or involve themselves in decision-making processes and institutions (Checkoway 2011; Checkoway & Aldana 2013). Participation should be seen as both a process and an outcome (Imms et al. 2016). In liberal, democratic contexts, public participation (inclusive of but not limited to free and fair elections) is considered to be a defining characteristic of citizenship (Dalton 2008). For young people, participating in political processes and decision-making is an important part of learning what it means to be a citizen (Jeffrey & Staeheli 2016). Participation also creates pathways for citizens to demand accountability, which helps to hold actors responsible for their actions (Gaventa & Oswald 2019; Schedler 1999; Fox 2007; Joshi 2008). Age restrictions close some channels of formal accountability to young people such as voting, which makes their experience distinct from that of older adults. As such, understanding the experience of young people in demanding accountability from decision-makers warrants deliberate attention.

Simply, accountability can be understood as a 'relationship between those responsible for something, and those who have a role in passing judgement on how well that

responsibility has been discharged' (Guerin *et al.* 2018). The legitimacy of governing bodies is rooted in a sense of responsibility to those that place their trust in them (Khotami 2017). Accountability can be interpreted differently by diverse groups and individuals; therefore, conceptualisations of accountability that go beyond formal pathways are needed (Taft & Gordon 2013; Conner & Cosner 2016). However, participation alone is insufficient to ensure accountability and needs to be complemented by an enabling environment whereby institutions have the capacity and motivation to respond to citizens' demands (Fox 2016), including those of youth.

Young people may be restricted from some mechanisms of participation and accountability such as voting due to age restrictions. At the same time, other factors including class, race, gender and geographical location influence how and whether mechanisms for participation are accessible to young people (Checkoway 2011; Beckwith *et al.* 2022; Ramasamy 2018). In fact, Harris and colleagues (2010) showed that young people are often reluctant to participate in formal political processes because they feel their voices and needs are not taken seriously within traditional power and governance structures. This feeling of not being heard was even more prominent among young women than young men (Harris *et al.* 2010: 20). Additionally, different conceptions of citizenship either as a legal status or as a sense of belonging to a community can shape how people participate in society (Staeheli 2011).

However, young people are not limited to participating in institutionally led activities and processes and may prefer to participate in individualised activities or those organised outside institutional structures (Skelton 2010). Notably, online spaces have become an important way that young people connect and engage with issues locally, nationally and even internationally (Farnham *et al.* 2012; Connolly & Miller 2017; Boulianne & Theocharis 2020). Research on the Arab Spring highlighted the use of technology and digital spaces to create innovative means for political participation in the Arab region (Bengtsson 2013; AlSayyad & Guvenc 2015; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). While some social media campaigning has been dismissed as 'slacktivism', studies have shown that rather than displacing offline political organising, online actions can act as a catalyst for further political engagement (Boykoff 2019). However, inequalities in access to digital spaces (through language, socio-economic status, gender or availability of internet connections) means many young people are excluded from online organising (Clark & Themudo 2006; Hubbard & Williams 2021).

Furthermore, there is a trend in the media as well as the academic literature to focus on the activities of young people in high-income countries (Jeffrey 2012; Hubbard & Williams 2021). However, the experience of young people in the Global South participating in decision-making and demanding accountability is diverse and gaining attention (see e.g. Belhadj & Kurze 2021; Nkrumah 2021). In both democratic and non-democratic contexts, youth are engaged in struggles for accountability, often

through the same mechanisms as their peers in the Global North such as voting, volunteering and social media (UNDP 2014). Yet there are also differences, particularly in contexts where governance structures limit or heavily constrain the participation of young people in formal institutions.

Strategies of accountability for young people in contexts with fragile governance

Although the terms accountability and participation have gained popularity among actors in the field of international development, the political will to turn rhetoric into action is not always present (Carothers & Brechenmacher 2014: 27). In areas of conflict, occupation or where political, legal and democratic systems are fragile or non-existent, states and other powerful actors can often evade traditional accountability mechanisms (Anderson et al. 2022). As a result, growing attention has been dedicated to accountability and how to strengthen responses and the responsiveness of governing institutions (Barnes et al. 2021; Gaventa 2002; Guerin et al. 2018). In these contexts, alternative strategies emerge which seek to engage and demand redress from institutions and actors through alternate mechanisms and pathways.

The need to expand our conception of accountability to include participation in contexts of fragile governance has led to increased attention from researchers and activists on bottom-up approaches to accountability. Scholars have shown the important role of young people and women in bringing about political change during the Arab Spring (Ali & Macharia 2013), the use of cyberspace for non-violent resistance by youth movements in Zimbabwe (Gukurume 2022) and the leadership of young people in the pro-democracy protests in Myanmar (Thant 2021). These accounts show that despite restricted civil society space, citizens (including youth) find ways to demand accountability from decision-makers through ‘invented’ spaces of participation, alongside or in the absence of ‘invited’ spaces (Miraftab 2004). Additionally, social media provides an avenue to international attention that was previously unattainable. The #bringbackourgirls movement was able to bring international attention to the 276 girls who were abducted from their school in Nigeria in 2014. The perceived inaction of the Nigerian government resulted in campaigning at the national and international levels with the hashtag #BBOG, which spread across the world and pushed the issue into the international spotlight (Akin Aina et al. 2019). Thus, this campaign sought to leverage international attention to demand accountability at the national level.

Young people residing in contexts with fragile governance systems are faced with a unique set of challenges in their efforts to demand accountability or participate in decision-making. Firstly, discussions around accountability typically assume the participation of some state power. In fragile and conflict-affected states this assumption

may be entirely without basis as power may be contested and institutions too weak to provide even basic needs, leaving an 'empty void' for other actors to fill (Hill *et al.* 2014). In other cases, state institutions may not recognise claims to citizenship from all those living under their domain, which limits the ability of those excluded to access public services or institutions (Ramasamy 2018).

Adding to this complexity, non-state actors play governance and service delivery roles in many settings, and in contexts with fragile governance, actors outside state agencies can take on an increasing importance; these diverse authorities may overlap and even compete (Barnes *et al.* 2021). The accountability mechanisms of civil society groups and NGOs are highly variable, with downward accountability to beneficiaries being a particular challenge for international NGOs with weaker community ties (van Zyl & Claeys 2019). For example, the process of 'NGOisation' within the women's movement in Palestine has led to increased professionalisation and projectisation of civil society, which has restricted the spaces for participation for a diversity of women and instead reproduced a depoliticised, homogeneous version of civil society (Jad 2007). In other words, the 'invited' spaces of participation have taken precedence over the 'invented'.

In a similar vein, in many contexts with fragile governance, civil society actors such as NGOs have filled the void in public service delivery and governance, taking on roles typically filled by state agencies. This has been facilitated by funding arrangements that see civil society organisations as implementing agents of the agendas of other institutions (often international bilateral or multilateral agencies) and are accompanied in many places by a process of professionalisation (Roth 2012). This has turned many NGOs into 'governing' bodies, which has strengthened upward accountability to donors and led to a related depoliticisation and a decrease in their ability or desire to fill an 'activist' role (Atia & Herrold 2018). This has been made evident through an analysis showing how digital feedback harvested from NGO beneficiaries is often siloed to the programme they are interacting with and primarily used to report back to funders rather than facilitating accountability for and to beneficiaries (Madianou 2019). As a result, NGOs may become a target for accountability demands, rather than a facilitating partner.

Given this complex landscape of governance in fragile settings, there is a need to reconceptualise youth strategies for accountability that work across scales and engage non-state institutions. Young people facing an absence of state-supported opportunities for participation and accountability or 'invited' spaces will engage in alternative mechanisms to seek the fulfilment of their rights through 'invented' spaces. In many cases, this occurs through public protests and demonstrations which seek to demand attention from actors at different scales (nationally and internationally). Not all options are open to all young people: who participates in what type of activity

will depend on their embedded position in society, including whether or not they are recognised as citizens, the networks available to them and their geographical location, among many other factors. While publicly performed accountability strategies such as protest are most visible, a range of ‘quieter’ strategies have also emerged as everyday forms of activism (Richter-Devroe 2018). Termed ‘alter-geopolitical strategies’, these forms of solidarity seek to establish alternative securities,¹ particularly in contexts where securities established by state actors are inadequate (Koopman 2011: 277).

Understanding how young people seek accountability in fragile contexts can inform the delivery of the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond, particularly the promotion of SDG 16. If we aim to foster accountable institutions within such contexts, we need to start by recognising and supporting the range of ways young people hold institutions and actors to account.

Using the case of Palestine, we explore how issues such as scale, space and citizenship influence the strategies for accountability that young people deploy in the face of house demolitions. This article focuses specifically on young people facing house demolitions, rather than adults, given existing research highlighting the increased marginalisation of this population due to house demolitions becoming sites of trauma (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009). Palestine offers a lens through which to explore these ideas for three key reasons: there is a range of state and non-state actors involved in the governance landscape; the geographical location of Palestinian homes influences the risks faced by residents depending on whether they inhabit an area claimed by Israeli settlers; and Israeli authorities are unwilling to recognise Palestinians as citizens, which complicates their ability to claim their rights.

The research adopted an interdisciplinary methodological approach that drew on design anthropology and feminist methodological understandings of the situatedness of knowledge (Gunn et al. 2013; Haraway 1988). As such, we co-designed, with youth activists, kits that contained questions and prompts that enabled participants to explore youth experiences of house demolitions (Clarke et al. 2022), in which seeking accountability is viewed as a means of resisting. The co-designed kits included prompts and questions such as ‘What are the future dreams for you and your community?’, ‘How do you prepare for demolitions?’, ‘Scales of effective resistance?’ as well as instructions for participants to map out hope, sacred/threatening/safe spaces in their villages. The kits also contained materials to facilitate participants’ responses and to document them. For example, jars were provided for participants to place into them items collected through the mapping process that resonated with their

¹ Here we use the term ‘securities’ in the plural to encompass ontological security, the sense of everyday security generated through order and continuity (Giddens 1991), as it intersects with other forms of security including information, economic, social and physical security.

understanding of the spaces they were asked to map, as well as paper flags, made out of small wooden sticks and small square papers, that they could use to label the maps they generated. More details regarding the kits can be found in [Clarke et al. \(2022\)](#). While the kits did not directly interrogate accountability per se, participant responses spoke to and about means of attaining accountability. The co-designed kits were then given to activists, who used them to interview and collect responses from youth within their locale and networks. More than fifty kits were used in the field, accompanied by a further ten online interviews as well as diverse stakeholder engagement via workshops and other dialogues. Data collected via the kits included photographic images of written responses made on the materials provided within the kit and audio recordings that were encrypted and transferred to password-protected drives. Rich descriptions of the images and the written responses were generated and inputted into the data corpus. Audio data was transcribed in Arabic and then translated to English by the research team. Data related to seeking accountability was extracted from the data corpus and analysed.²

Accountability and youth participation in the context of house demolitions in Palestine

The case of Palestine is illustrative of the challenges to youth strategies for accountability. It is not simply the case that the current structures for accountability need to be improved so they can work better; they are intentionally built to exclude Palestinian voices. The systematic oppression and domination of Palestinians by Israeli institutions wherever they exercise control has been characterised as a form of apartheid ([Amnesty International 2022](#)). Palestine itself is governed both by the Palestinian National Authority and by Hamas, while governance in the West Bank is complicated further due to the presence of the Israeli Civil Administration, which controls approximately 60 per cent of this area. Multiple, overlapping authorities mean that it can be challenging for people to know where to direct their claims. This unusual political structure creates an environment where levels of accountability can vary greatly depending on an individual's physical location, the means available to them and approaches that they deem fit.

This is particularly true for Palestinian communities close to or within areas claimed by Israeli settlements. Due to demographic and geopolitical factors and the (il)legality

² All quotes presented in this article are attributed to pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of our participants. Recognising that 'youth' is an identity rather than a category determined by biological age, we have not included the age of participants along with their quotes. However, for this research, we used the UN definition of 'youth': ages 15–24.

of Israeli settlement expansion, Israel's systems of control have not been consistently applied across all areas, meaning Palestinians living in different regions have different experiences of repression (Amnesty International 2022; Joronen & Griffiths 2019). House demolitions take place more frequently in the Israeli governed area of the West Bank (Area C) as lands are claimed for Israeli settlements. Since 2009, a total of 8,368 Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished across the occupied West Bank territories. This has resulted in the displacement of 14,277 people to date (UN OCHA 2023). In addition to the devastating losses experienced by those whose houses have been demolished, an even greater number of Palestinians live under demolition orders that have been issued but not yet carried out, subjecting the residents to prolonged periods of fear and uncertainty (Joronen & Griffiths 2019).

The practice of house demolitions is widely regarded as illegal (Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 53, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art. 11) and there are very few circumstances under which such actions can be legally justified. Demolitions have a devastating impact on the lives of many Palestinians. The obstacles to legal redress illustrate the need to look beyond the formal mechanism of the court system through which those on the end of demolition orders are supposed to be able to challenge them and seek accountability. Victims of demolitions and those served with demolition orders are granted access to the Israeli court system as a pathway to recourse, but access is far from guaranteed. Practical barriers such as a lack of financial means and a general lack of awareness of their rights can prove insurmountable. 'There are means to stop the demolition actions for sure, but we don't know them, and we are prepared to do anything that might contribute to stopping such acts, for we are peace seekers; and strive to live in safety and tranquility' (Rami, male). Though difficult, some Palestinians can access the Israeli court system. They can 'challenge' a demolition order. Yet, for the most part, the system of formal and legislative accountability appears biased against the Palestinian people.

We hired an Israeli lawyer who lied to us. We gave him 15,000 shekels. We called him when they came and started demolishing, he said I don't know they just received an order ... so we told him, you know nothing about it! As they were pulling it [the house] down they told us to hire an Israeli lawyer, they, themselves Israelis advise you to hire an Israeli lawyer ... unfortunately this is what we did but it was useless. ... (Samer, male)

The fact that demolition orders are often issued in Hebrew is another challenge faced by Palestinians. These experiences of the highly circumscribed and flawed accountability offered to Palestinians through the legal system highlights the importance of looking beyond formal structures where those are specifically oriented *against* accountability and participation. Through this, we need to bring into view social, political,

cultural and economic practices that might not be traditionally viewed through a lens of accountability, but which express a search for it, in contexts where other avenues are closed.

Alternative strategies for accountability

In the absence of meaningful and effective formal mechanisms for accountability that are appropriate and accessible to Palestinians, our research has explored how young Palestinians have developed alternative strategies to respond to house demolitions or the threat of demolition. Within the wider narrative of Palestinian resistance, it has been highlighted that strategies and actions are not necessarily agreed upon by those resisting, and in some instances disagreements on how to resist have led to stagnation and fragmentation of the movement (Richter-Devroe 2018). Despite that, our research highlighted that these alternative strategies persist, thus highlighting their value for youth as a means of seeking accountability.

Public or performed strategies for accountability

One of the most visible strategies used is public demonstrations or protests. The young people who participated in our research had many experiences of witnessing or participating in protests against Israeli authorities, including traumatic memories of violently suppressed demonstrations. Despite this, public protest was recognised as an important strategy. Said one young woman: 'Even though I don't really like them, they [protests] are one of the most important forms of resistance. By going on protests, we can place pressure on the people responsible of making change' (Sara, female). Recognising the futility of making claims through legal channels, youth who engage in public protest instead aim to catalyse action by putting pressure on Israeli authorities.

Additionally, in our research, the notion of documentation appeared as a recurring theme. Participants referred to the need to document what is happening through photography and film, to ensure that other people, especially international audiences, can bear witness to their plight. 'Because you certainly need photography to document all the oppression against us. We have everything on tape, and we can show it to the world. The world needs to see the facts about the horrendous repercussions of the apartheid. Therefore, documenting through photography provides us with a proof' (Jad, male). A camera was described as an essential tool for young Palestinians in their strategies for accountability as it gave them the means through which to relay their stories to the world. Through telling and sharing these stories through social media and with human rights organisations and NGOs, young people perform 'emotional

labour’ in order to establish and strengthen emotional bonds with current and potential supporters within and beyond Palestine, thereby building a network to support collective action (Bosco 2007).

This strategy was particularly evident in 2021 when a number of young Palestinians gained international followings on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube during periods of unrest (see e.g. TRT World Now 2021; Xinhua 2022). Through music, art and photography, they shared their stories with audiences across the world, spread further as they received interest and attention from high-profile public figures and celebrities (see Figure 1). The use of art and storytelling adds a human story to the ongoing violence and repression of Palestinians and also produces an emotional response in the activists themselves, which is necessary to sustain resistance (Crossa 2013).

Importantly, the use of images, songs and personal stories facilitated emotional bonds with supporters who may otherwise be geographically distant (Bosco 2007). Said one interviewee: ‘Reaching out to the international community helps the rest of the world to know about the harsh reality we live in. Through talking with international

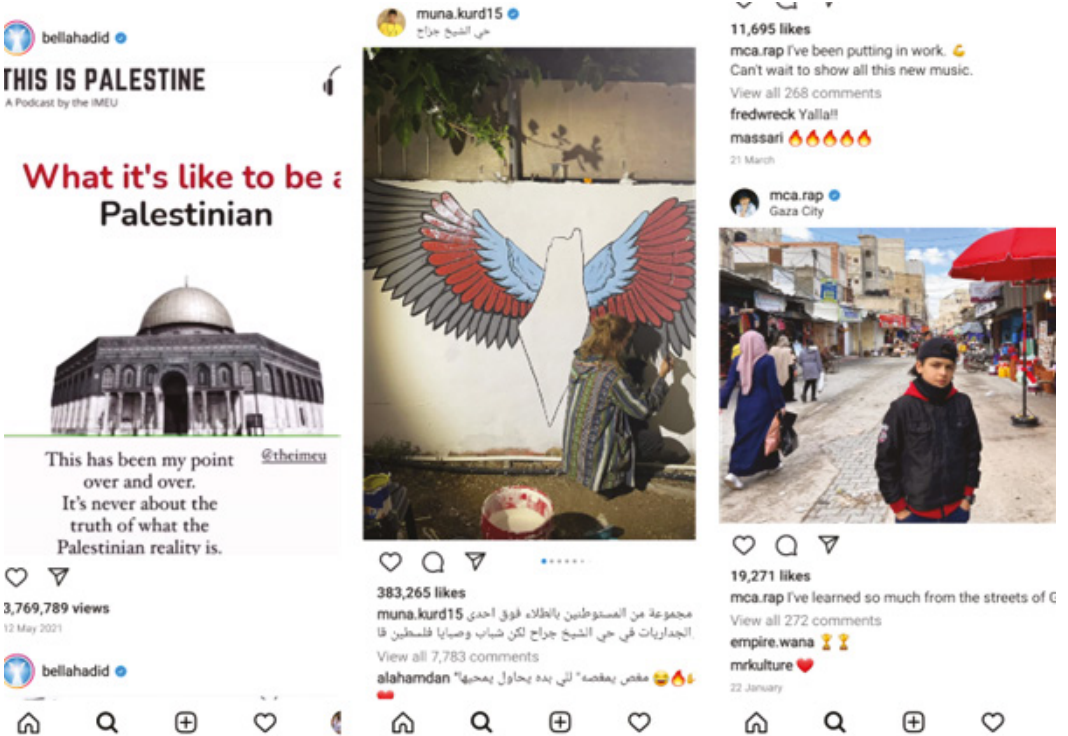


Figure 1. Social media shared by celebrities that depict art calling for accountability for Palestine.

Sources: Hadid 2021; El-Kurd 2021; MC Abdul 2022.

parties, one can find people who can help in any way or form. They advocate for your rights and stand beside you' (Jad, male). Young Palestinians extend their vision for accountability beyond national borders, looking to the international community for power with which to influence the actions of the Israeli administration.

These public strategies for demanding accountability share a focus on the creation of visibility of the problems faced by young Palestinians. Cyberspace is deployed as a platform for non-violent political action by young people who seek to make their voices heard in a context of protracted violence (Gukurume 2022). By making their persecution visible beyond the reach of the Israeli authorities, young people are calling on international actors to redress the power imbalance they face in trying to demand accountability from national authorities who do not see them as citizens with rights in the national context. This then underlines the need to look beyond both formal accountability mechanisms and those contained by the nation state and associated ideas of governance and participation. Young Palestinians, through documentation and social media, see a route to accountability through sites of power outside Israel and Palestine. However, their very public nature can obscure practices that are less easily legible as struggles for accountability since they do not fit established, and often highly problematic, public narratives of Palestinian youth.

Quiet forms of accountability

Though these public and performed strategies to demand accountability may receive significant attention, particularly at the international level, many forms of activism in Palestine are quiet and hidden from the public eye in contrast to widely held expectations of political activism (Richter-Devroe 2018). Not all young people feel public forms of protest are effective. 'I feel that protests are useless, to be honest. If they were helpful at all, we would be liberated by now. I just don't see any significant value for them in reality' (Randa, female). The systematic denial of the rights of Palestinians by governing institutions has created doubt in the minds of some young people that achieving accountability for the demolitions is a question simply of ensuring their story is told. Without the political will at either the national or international level to intervene in support of Palestinians, their efforts to increase information about and attention to housing demolitions may be in vain. For improvements in accountability to occur, governing institutions must be willing and able to meet the demands of citizens (Fox 2016).

In the absence of a conducive political environment in the present day, some young people are taking a long-term approach to accountability by trying to strengthen their position relative to state institutions through education. Said Dana (female):

The greatest resistance you make is to complete your studies, so studying is your strong weapon. It is true that the types of resistance differ, but I see that the most significant type of resistance that has an impact and strength is studying. If I fight someone with an enlightened thought and knowledge, I will be aware of what I am doing, and I can then change the society, so this is the biggest resistance.

This strategy differs from public or performed strategies to demand accountability in multiple ways. Firstly, the time frame for change is significantly longer, looking across the life course instead of seeking change in the immediate or short-term context. This may be a reflection of the way these young people have assessed their own power with respect to the institutions they seek to challenge and their search for pathways to strengthen their ability to influence them directly over the longer term. Research on land grabs in the Global South has shown that in the face of power imbalances, strategies ‘from below’ go beyond resistance to include acquiescence and incorporation (Hall et al. 2015). This perspective recognises the diverse aspirations of community members whose demands cannot always be achieved through protest.

Additionally, these alternative geopolitical strategies are situated in the individual, their community and their society rather than seeking support for accountability at the national or international level. Young people deploy these strategies to create alternative securities and dignified futures (Cassidy & Freimane forthcoming). For example, one young interviewee aspired to become a lawyer in order to help others in her village access their rights:

In my village, people have many rights that they can't exercise. Maybe when I realize this dream [to become a lawyer], the residents of my village can get half of their rights. The Palestinians have been deprived of many rights. For example, we are denied the right to travel abroad except for a permit from the Israelis. Working as a lawyer could help in achieving independence and defending our village in which we were born. (Hiba, female)

These quiet strategies are integral to the way they participate as members of the community. Their personal aspirations and relationships shape and are in turn shaped by their struggles for recognition and redress (Staheli et al. 2012).

Young people are also adopting quiet strategies of resistance through their physical occupation of the land. One young woman said: ‘Another important element of resistance is planting trees. Farming proves your ownership of the land, and the trees you have planted bear witness to this fact’ (Yara, female). This strategy is similar to cases of ‘guerrilla agriculture’ where farmers have used cultivation as a strategy to resist land dispossession (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen 2015). Planting trees is a visible and public demonstration of their claims to their homeland without directly engaging in confrontation with authorities. Similarly, young people intend to resist efforts

by Israeli authorities to deny their rights by continuing to rebuild their homes even in the face of demolitions. One participant shared that if their home was destroyed, 'the third thing I would do is rebuild the house and live in it. Even if they demolish it again, I would keep rebuilding it because it's my home and I would never leave it' (Bouchra, female).

The limits of action: understanding inaction

Young people have found ways to participate at the margins, which is a testament to their creativity and perseverance. However, it is important to resist the urge to hierarchise these different forms of participation as each is incommensurably significant. We seek to recognise the broader political context which shapes the strategies of young people. As such, we must not overlook the validity of inaction as a choice and instead look deeper to understand what these situations can teach us about the particular political realities facing young people who feel they cannot participate. This analysis leads us to go beyond a focus on the actions of young people to understand the broader context in which they operate.

The experience of living in a particular place influences the way young people seek and are able to participate in decision-making (Beckwith *et al.* 2022; Cahill & Dadvand 2018). In Palestine, geographical location also shapes the experience of living under Israeli control (Amnesty International 2022). This is evident in our research in the areas of Palestine that are situated in lands claimed by Israeli authorities, which have experienced the highest rates of house demolitions. In the Jordan Valley, for example, an area sought after by Israeli settlers and consequently heavily guarded by Israeli authorities, our research revealed strong feelings of disillusionment with efforts to hold Israeli institutions to account. We asked young Palestinians how they would react if their house were to be demolished and, for many, their thoughts were not on the legal recourse available to them or on how they could share their experience with the world. Many simply expressed the hopelessness they feel in such situations. One young person in the Jordan Valley stated simply: 'God, there is nothing that can stop them. They see themselves as if they're above the law. That's it, decision is made, and nothing to change. They would then snarl; go away!' (Anwar, male). This was echoed by other young people: 'There is no resistance ... no resistance for anyone ... we're like a bird with broken wings' (Zaki, male).

Though it is important to acknowledge diverse strategies for achieving accountability, we must equally recognise the validity of inaction as a strategy in the face of such a dramatic imbalance of power, be it legal, economic, military or otherwise (Beckwith 2021). This should not be taken as a sign of apathy or passivity but rather one of a range of choices that any individual might make when faced with steep risks

and/or limited resources, including acquiescence or avoidance (Hall *et al.* 2015). While it is important to champion the steps that young people have taken to participate in accountability strategies, we must not neglect to analyse the forces at play behind inaction to understand where young people may be most in need of support to achieve their objectives. Efforts to improve accountability cannot succeed if state structures are not able (or, as in the case of Palestine, not willing) to respond to the demands of citizens (Fox 2016). In order to secure their futures, young people's demands must be heard within enabling environments which are responsive and accountable at all levels. As this case has shown, accountability must go beyond state actors and extend to both the local and international levels and reflect on how all actors, including those in academia and the third sector, should also be held accountable (Davis *et al.* 2014). This is particularly true in contexts of fragile governance systems where the state is unable or unwilling to meet its responsibilities.

Conclusion

The examples of accountability discussed in this article are not intended to be an exhaustive typology but rather serve as an overview of the diverse ways that youth participate in strategies to demand accountability. Understanding the breadth of young people's actions is critically important to realising the ambitious targets set out in the SDGs and ensure that marginalised youth, such as our research participants in Palestine, are not left behind. Young people have the capacity and, crucially, the right to participate in decision-making that affects their future. However, their voices cannot be heard if governance institutions and actors at all levels are not equipped to respond to the diverse ways that young people are calling for accountability.

Though many of the strategies identified in our research have received individual attention through social media and/or academic research, our approach seeks to bring them together to show how these approaches are shaped by the wider accountability ecosystem in which they are constructed and situated. Strategies can also be geographically and politically situated, mirroring how place influences the imposition of approaches to governance or control. Additionally, in contexts of intergenerational and ongoing oppression, such as in the case of Palestine, young people also engage in struggles for accountability which span geographic and time scales to address different aspects of their lived experiences.

This research has provided evidence for how calls for youth participation from the perspective of liberal, democratic institutions may overlook the lived experiences of how young people in contexts of fragile governance are demanding accountability 'at the margins'. Importantly, the mechanisms through which accountability will be

sought will not be the same in all cases. In contexts that lack institutionalised pathways for accountability such as voting, civil society and academia should be aware of the importance of putting in place mechanisms for redress as well as allowing young people the opportunity to 'invent' spaces and pathways of accountability. At the global level, international institutions such as the UN must recognise the limited reach of invited spaces and support youth to come together to shape and design spaces to demand accountability that are fluid and reflective of their own understanding of action.

Looking ahead to the post-2030 agenda, we need to take a broader view of what it means for young people to participate in decision-making and demand accountability, including an appreciation for strategies that work across scales. Our research has shown significant limitations in the widely held model of top-down accountability in contexts where the state (the traditional focal point of accountability) does not seek to promote the interests of all citizens. We must be mindful of the limitations of the SDGs to create real change in contexts where governance is fragile or segments of the population are unrecognised, excluded or oppressed. Rather than a focus on aims and targets, future frameworks need to identify and develop potential pathways for accountable institutions at all levels, fostering not only responsive state actors but multiple enabling environments across scales to reflect the diverse strategies of young people who seek a better future: 'We will never surrender, and we will not remain silent. We will try to the best of our abilities to preserve our lands and homes' (Amal, female).

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