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# Asian Bay Areas' Experiences in Promoting Youth's Participation in Social Innovation

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes the experiences and approaches of Asian bay areas, particularly China's Greater Bay Area and Japan's Tokyo Bay Area, in promoting youth participation in social innovation. Through a literature review and four case studies, the paper explores how social innovation helps young people address modernity challenges, including unemployment and social isolation. The cases include knowledge enhancement programs, breaking social isolation, providing work promotion opportunities, and empowering and inspiring youth to engage in social innovation. These methods not only contribute to solving social issues but also enhance young people's self-efficacy and improve their employability. The findings suggest that social innovation programs targeting youth must be tailored to meet their diverse needs, ranging from personal development and community belonging to professional advancement, all of which play a vital role.

**Keywords:** social innovation; youth participation; Greater Bay Area; Asian bay areas

### 1. Introduction

Young people often find themselves at the forefront of societal change, acting both as catalysts and as those most impacted by the shifts in modernity. Failing to chase the pace of change, many young people are confronting disconnection problems, including unemployment, loneliness, and lack of self-efficacy (Spaulding, 2019). Major Asian bay areas such as China's Greater Bay Area and Japan's Tokyo Bay Area are not only where rapid social changes take place but also places with dense young populations. According to statistics, the population below 65 years old in GBA takes up 91.4%, ranking highest among the four major city clusters in China (Xuan, 2021). The proportion of the youth born after 1990 increased from 12.4% to 18.6% from 2010 to 2020, representing a growth of 106% (Huang et al., 2023). Therefore, experiences of these two places in coping with the issues are worthwhile for further research.

Characterized by creativity, adaptability, and sustainability, social innovation has the potential to bridge the gap between rapidly changing societal expectations and the realities faced by younger generations. In this essay, I will analyze strategies for promoting youth participation in social innovation via case studies and then discuss how these social innovation programs may ease the tensions and challenges that young people face in modernity.

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## 2. Literature Review

Social innovation is a creative process that provides novel solutions Aimed at meeting social needs and tackling social issues. In practical terms, it means developing new models and services in the welfare and public sectors (The European Social Innovation Alliance, 2024).

It encompasses several characteristics that are crucial for us to understand it:

- 1) Social innovation values creativity. Innovators ought to find new and better solutions.
- 2) Social innovation emphasizes adaptability. It seeks to produce innovations adaptable to varying circumstances and responsive to continuously emerging challenges.
- 3) Social innovation is equipped with sustainability. It asks for the long-term effects of the issue addressed.

To sum up, according to the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation (2018), social innovation aims to have long-lasting influences, empower social development, and increase social welfare.

The characteristics of social innovation mentioned above require social innovators to be creative, highly interested in social issues, and can consistently contribute to addressing them. Youth, which refers to people aged 15 to 24 years or 15 to 35 years, according to the United Nations (2008), are energetic and open-minded to innovations and may meet these requirements. In Dickinson et al.'s research (2023), youth younger than 24 occupy 40% of the world population, possessing the energy and creativity necessary for providing transformative solutions. The study also pointed out that despite the overlooking and under-resourcing faced by youth-led innovations, they have had outstanding achievements using youth's unique talents, spirit, and creativity (Dickinson et al., 2023). Therefore, the youth who satisfy all these requirements are ideal stakeholders and agents of social innovation. They contribute to social innovation by holding social entrepreneurs, working as volunteers or members in relevant organizations, and participating in various social innovation programs. Besides, through innovative civic activities, the significance of youth involvement has been increasingly recognized by public bodies, who invited young people to participate in public service design, allowing them to get a more significant say in school running (Sebba et al., 2009). For instance, in Trafford, service providers with young members participating in a youth-led improvement process will be awarded a 'Youth Approved' standard from Evaluating Services Provided (ESP) (Sebba et al., 2009). These acknowledgments of youth's unique perspectives show that young people are becoming increasingly important in promoting social innovation.

In addition, youth engagement in social innovation benefits society helps solve issues youth face and fosters personal development among young individuals. The modernity problems mainly include unemployment and loneliness, as bay areas of Southern China and Japan have both witnessed rapid industrialization, technological advancements, urbanization, and cultural shifts, bringing many challenges and issues to all humanity, especially young people who are lack of social experience and vulnerable to social shifts, such as unemployment and social isolation (Giddens, 1990; Wolff, 2024). According to research (Li et al., 2022, as cited in Green & Henseke, 2016), college graduates' unemployment has been a growing social challenge, raising considerable concerns in various countries, especially China. Although social innovation cannot offer abundant employment opportunities directly, it improves youth's creativity and social adaptability through co-creation in communities or social networks. This improvement is beneficial for young people who want to get employed. As the research (Li et al., 2022, as cited in Cumming, 2010) mentioned, the primary cause of college graduates' current employment difficulties is the lack of "employability," enabling youth to become more employable and competitive in the labor market. According to research, creativity, and social adaptability are crucial to

these capabilities. Social innovation cultivating these two capabilities is very possibly helpful for youth's employment.

Another issue threatening youth's well-being is loneliness or social isolation, which can also be help addressed by social innovation. Research showed that internet and smartphone addiction heavily increased social isolation and damaged the social network of Japanese youth. At the same time, both males and females used gaming and the Internet, respectively, to avoid social communication (Tateno et al., 2019). In China, "empty-nest young people" emerged as a new trend in 2018 when 77 million Chinese young people lived alone and remained unmarried, and the number reached 92 million the following year (Zhou, 2021). Social innovation, which encourages participants to collaborate to address community or societal issues, can help young people step out of their "nests" or online worlds to establish more interpersonal connections, thus breaking isolation and reducing youth's loneliness.

To summarize, Social innovation represents a collaborative, sustainable, and transformative approach to addressing social challenges and can be a powerful tool in easing the clash between young people and modernity. Meanwhile, the active involvement of youth in this process is crucial, as their unique skills and perspectives drive innovative solutions and contribute to a more equitable society. Understanding the interplay between youth and social innovation is essential for fostering a culture of social entrepreneurship and ensuring lasting positive change in communities.

### 3. Case Study: Mobilizing Young People to Engage in Social Innovation

Bay areas are places where social innovation thrives. This section will analyze three cases of how social enterprises or organizations mobilize young people to participate in social innovation and summarize their different methods.

#### 3.1. Case 1: Facilitate Knowledge Enhancement Programs

Firstly, facilitating knowledge enhancement programs can mobilize young people to participate in social innovation.

Polaris Youth has used this approach to attract young volunteers to participate in social innovation projects. Take Polaris Youth's "Late Night Café" program as an example. It aims to provide a place for citizens struggling to fall asleep late at night, allow them to have a drink, and calm their minds. This program demands young volunteers, as Café runners, to have a certain level of listening skills, be able to answer questions and solve problems in others' lives. Therefore, Polaris Youth assists volunteers in meeting these requirements by offering them training from the Stanford Life Design Course. The course can not only help young people enhance their communication skills to fulfill the job requirements but also help them discover their interests, develop their potential, learn from numerous life experience cases, and design their careers.

Polaris Youth once cooperated with Stanford University to sell these courses, only to find that the high course fees deterred most participants. However, when combining the Stanford Life Design Course and the Café program, Polaris Youth benefits from the operation of the Café, as young participants can use their salary from the café running project to pay for tuition fees. In this way, a win-win method is put forward.

The effect of this method is fantastic. During my internship at Polaris Youth, I witnessed more than 2000 participants participate in this project within only five days. Fifty people decided to pay off tuition fees before starting to profit from the "Late Night Café" project, while the rest waited to gain money to support their life-designing learning. From their reflections, I know that they were attracted not only because they could learn life knowledge but also because they could apply what they learned to work in the Café program and help others who also feel lost.

Generally, beneficial knowledge and skills are more critical for young people than salaries and a part-time job. So, on the one hand, facilitating knowledge enhancement

training will effectively attract youth who are willing to be a better person. On the other hand, these social innovation programs may change one's life completely, giving them directions and improving their living status.

### 3.2. Case 2: Break Social Isolation

Secondly, providing shortcuts to make friends and break social isolation can mobilize young people to participate in social innovation.

Via this approach, Polaris Youth initiated the "YES GO" campaign. The "YES GO" campaign aims to persuade youth to leave their places and discover a broader world and life with other community partners. The campaign emphasizes "communities" and aims to offer "life-long community companionship." Once involved in the community, participants can have activities every weekend and do exciting things together for a longer time, usually during long vacations.

The campaign is divided into three stages: Knowing, Exploring, and Rebuilding. In this campaign, participants are encouraged to explore their shared interests, such as performing the scripts they write, giving a public speech, and completing an innovation. At the beginning of this first stage, which will last for three months, participants will have a non-speaking trip together, during which they will not need to speak with each other but only help each other complete the challenges through action. This activity is one of the ice-breaking activities of Polaris Youth, aimed at helping young people with social anxiety get to know each other without communicating verbally. The first stage of "YES GO" helps young people overcome the barriers of social anxiety, get to know more about their peers, and gradually integrate into a community of mutual assistance and support.

The second stage of the campaign, "Exploring," lasts for 12 months, when community members attend weekly collective activities on weekends instead of long-term activities in the first stage. Those who are becoming friends in the first stage can now watch meaningful movies or play role-playing games to relax and develop friendships during this period. Many young people break free from being single at this stage and become couples with community partners they know.

The third stage, "Rebuilding," lasts for the rest of their lives. Through stages one and two, young people have established their social circles and friend networks, eliminating loneliness with community support. Therefore, they are able and obliged to reach out to other lonely peers and help with their integration.

Generally, the "YES GO" campaign is Polaris Youth's most successful social innovation program, achieving broad community coverage. Until 2023, it reached over 50 cities through online communities (Polaris Youth, 2023). Polaris Youth also collaborated with more than 300 universities and has engaged over 30,000 individuals (Polaris Youth, 2023). Its high popularity among young people shows their desire to break social isolation, indicating that providing such assistance can better mobilize young people to participate in social innovation campaigns.

### 3.3. Case 3: Providing Work Promotion Opportunities

Thirdly, making social innovation go beyond a simple extracurricular activity or a part-time amateur business is the key to activating young people participating in social innovation.

Under the guidance of this concept, the Corporate Volunteering Program (CVP) launched by the NGO "Cross Fields" is an excellent example. Cooperating with Japanese corporations, Cross Fields introduces its employees to Asian social enterprises and NGOs as volunteers for the social innovation program. Cross Fields works to match employees with specific social issue-solving projects based on their professional skills and the requirements of the projects. For Cross Fields, the program helps gain volunteers with professional expertise to address social issues. Meanwhile, it cultivates more talented employees and future leaders with valuable experiences for cooperative corporations. More

importantly, this program provides young employees an extra opportunity to achieve higher status and promotion in the workplace. Participants work for 2-12 months overseas each time, getting more chances to be promoted according to their performances. For instance, one employee from a Japanese consulting firm, "Triumph," who took part in the 2017 CVP working in India, was promoted to executive officer of Triumph four years later (Cross Fields, 2022). She stated that she would never be afraid of failure after that experience.

In conclusion, Cross Fields has achieved positive results in terms of social issues and new business models. Until 2022, it had carried out 147 projects overall and mobilized 2685 participants from 69 partner corporations (Cross Fields, 2022). It successfully ties social innovation with a proposed brightened future for its participants, encouraging young people to join in and contribute.

### 3.4. Case 4: Empowering Youth with Inspiring Stories

Lastly, empowering young people by foregrounding their power and narratives in resolving social issues is the center of mobilizing youth integration in social innovation.

Take "Florence," a Japanese Non-profit NPO aiming at helping needy women with sick children and pregnant women, as an example. To help ill children, it develops home care services provided by professional staff trained by young volunteers. As a non-profit NPO, Florence faces severe funding and staff source challenges. Florence's achievements will be limited without donations, funds, and participants willing to endure relatively low salaries and heavy workloads. However, Florence has developed its service and expanded its members from 38 in 2004 to over 5000 within only 12 years, and it still rapidly grows to help those on a long waiting list (Sugeno, 2017). Hiroki Komazaki, the founder and CEO of Florence, achieved this through his hard work and, more importantly, by his efforts to empower young people.

Florence acknowledges, publicly recognizes, and celebrates the contributions and achievements of young people in helping mothers and children in need. Moreover, Florence provides their young donors with constant feedback and actual philanthropic practices. This way, young people are heard and respected and can witness the families they helped improve significantly.

All in all, empowerment inspires young people to participate actively in social innovation.

## 4. Discussion

The four cases of Bay Areas' social enterprises/organizations' experiences indicate four methods to overcome difficulties in mobilizing various types of youth to participate in social innovation.

Polaris Youth's "Late Night Café" effectively mobilizes those confused about their lives to participate by integrating personal development learning with volunteer work. For these young adults, it is unreasonable to help others and serve society while they have no direction in life. What they need most is learning and planning for the future, yet it usually costs a large sum. By combining profit-earning social innovation work with costly learning resources, Polaris Youth offers youth motivation to use social innovation to learn and do life planning. However, this model may put too much pressure on young participants as they have to work in their leisure time while spending time learning lots of knowledge. If they have jobs, then the pressure will be even heavier. For youth with poor mental health and limited peer support, it may be over-burdening.

Polaris Youth also carries out the "YES GO" campaign to cope with the social isolation challenge, improving young people's mental health by providing community companionship and friend networks. It is attractive to lonely youth. Unlike "Late Night Café," participants have little pressure and gain a sense of belonging through having fun within communities and designing engaging, innovative activities for other participants. However,

these for-fun activities cannot address different social issues and help participants have more significant achievements. Some young people may consider them entertainment approaches, thus deciding to use their time to achieve their goals or solve others' real-life problems instead.

Cross Fields' CVP solves conflicts between volunteer work and real-life jobs by linking career advancement with social innovation participation. This model especially appeals to young employees with professional aspirations, making social innovation rewarding by framing it as a pathway to career development. The benefit may increase participation among young professionals, as they can balance their work with meaningful contributions to society using professional skills. However, the focus on individualism in this model might overshadow the collective social responsibility that drives many youths to engage in social innovation. Participants may inadvertently prioritize their returns from performances to be promoted. Forgetting broader societal goals, they might be trapped in vicious competition with colleagues or even fraud, causing damage to social innovation programs and their careers.

While the three models rely on the knowledge, emotional, and economic (career) benefits to mobilize youth, Florence returns to the core of social innovation:

- 1) Helping those in need.
- 2) Increasing social welfare.
- 3) Empowering youth.
- 4) Inspiring the youth to contribute.

Comprehensively speaking, this model is suitable for non-profit social entrepreneurs and organizations. Furthermore, it is more effective in causing systematic change, as empowered youth can lead more collective movements beyond any single organization. Yet it is doubtful whether youth are willing to face the difficulties mentioned before and participate just for the inspiration of social responsibility.

These case studies illustrate Asian Bay areas' social enterprises/organizations' experiences effectively mobilizing youth in social innovation. Applying and evolving these methods requires a multifaceted understanding of young people's needs, motivations, and challenges.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiences of Asian Bay Areas in promoting youth participation in social innovation highlight the importance of tailored approaches that address the unique challenges young people face. By implementing innovative programs like Polaris Youth's "Late Night Café" and "YES GO" campaign, as well as Cross Fields' Corporate Volunteering Program and Florence's empowerment initiatives, these regions have effectively mobilized young individuals to become active contributors to society. Each case demonstrates that fostering youth engagement requires recognizing their diverse motivations—personal development, community connection, or professional advancement.

Young people are both promoters and beneficiaries of social innovation. All the experiences or methods emphasize one point: youth's modernity problems are equally important as other social issues. These programs not only alleviate social problems but also help young people overcome unemployment and social isolation and empower youth to take ownership of their futures and career development. In the future, a low birth rate and population aging wave will decrease youth's proportion and their overall power in action and discourse. So, isn't empowering youth and helping them solve their problems before they contribute to addressing social issues an extremely meaningful social innovation program? Considering this point, these experiences of Bay Areas to help and mobilize youth are noteworthy and valuable.

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