

# Generation Z and Inclusive Policy Design: Bridging Youth Priorities with Public Governance



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## Abstract

*Generation Z constitutes a significant and increasingly influential segment of India's population, with distinct priorities related to social equity, employment security, digital inclusion, climate action, and mental well-being. Despite their demographic and political importance, Indian public policy frameworks often provide limited and symbolic avenues for meaningful youth participation. This study empirically examines the extent to which Generation Z priorities are reflected in inclusive policy design within the Indian governance context. Anchored in theories of participatory governance and social inclusion, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a structured survey of Gen Z respondents across selected Indian states with qualitative interviews involving youth leaders, civil society representatives, and policy practitioners. The findings reveal a significant gap between Gen Z policy expectations and existing institutional mechanisms, particularly in areas of education reform, employment and skill development, digital governance, and climate policymaking. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for engagement, issues of accessibility, representation, and policy responsiveness persist. The study demonstrates that inclusive policy design that meaningfully integrates Generation Z perspectives enhances policy legitimacy, democratic participation, and governance outcomes. The paper concludes by offering evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at strengthening youth-centric institutions, improving participatory mechanisms, and embedding Generation Z priorities into India's public governance processes.*

**Keywords:** Generation Z, Inclusive Policy Design, Youth Participation, Indian Governance, Public Policy

## Introduction

India is home to one of the world's youngest populations, with Generation Z typically defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s forming a critical segment of its demographic and democratic landscape. This generation has come of age amid rapid digital transformation, climate uncertainty, economic restructuring, and heightened social movements advocating equity and inclusion. As future voters, workers, and leaders, Gen Z holds the potential

to significantly influence public governance trajectories.

Despite this demographic importance, Indian policymaking remains largely adult-centric and hierarchical, often treating youth as passive beneficiaries rather than active contributors. Inclusive policy design is defined as the meaningful participation of diverse stakeholders in policymaking and has gained prominence in governance discourse, yet youth inclusion remains uneven and often symbolic. This misalignment raises

critical questions about democratic legitimacy, policy effectiveness, and long-term governance sustainability.

This paper seeks to empirically examine the relationship between Generation Z priorities and inclusive policy design within the Indian governance context. It asks: To what extent are Gen Z priorities reflected in Indian public policies, and what institutional mechanisms facilitate or constrain their meaningful participation?

### Research Objectives

The present study seeks to examine the relationship between Generation Z priorities and inclusive policy design within the Indian public governance framework. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the major policy priorities of Generation Z in India, particularly in relation to employment, education, climate governance, digital rights, and mental health.
- To assess the extent and nature of Generation Z participation in public policy-making and governance processes.
- To examine the institutional mechanisms that facilitate or constrain youth inclusion in policy design and implementation.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of digital governance platforms in promoting meaningful youth engagement and participatory governance.
- To analyze the gap between youth consultation and actual policy influence within Indian governance structures.
- To propose policy recommendations for strengthening inclusive policy design through meaningful youth participation.

### Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods empirical research design to systematically examine the alignment between Generation Z priorities and inclusive policy design within the Indian governance context. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research captures both the breadth of youth perceptions across di-

verse socio-demographic contexts and the depth of institutional experiences shaping youth participation in policymaking. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation of findings, thereby enhancing the validity and robustness of the analysis.

### Research Design

The research adopts a convergent mixed-methods design, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed independently before being integrated at the interpretation stage. This design is particularly suitable for studying complex governance phenomena such as youth inclusion, as it combines measurable trends with contextual and experiential insights. The quantitative component provides generalizable evidence on Generation Z policy priorities and participation patterns, while the qualitative component offers interpretive understanding of institutional processes and governance constraints.

### Quantitative Component

**Sample and Population:** The quantitative phase of the study surveyed 420 Generation Z respondents, aged between 18 and 25 years, representing a critical transition period between education, employment, and civic engagement. The sample was selected using a stratified purposive sampling technique to ensure representation across gender, educational background, and urban-rural residence.

**Geographic Coverage:** To capture regional diversity and governance variation, respondents were drawn from five Indian states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Assam. These states were selected to reflect differences in socio-economic development, political culture, and administrative capacity, thereby strengthening the external validity of the findings.

**Data Collection Tool:** Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered using digital survey platforms. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, designed to measure respondents' perceptions, experiences, and

attitudes toward public governance and policy inclusion.

**Focus Areas:** The survey instrument covered four key dimensions:

- **Policy priorities**, including education, employment, climate governance, digital rights, and mental health
- **Participation experiences**, such as engagement in consultations, youth organizations, and digital platforms
- **Perceptions of inclusiveness**, assessing whether youth voices influence policy outcomes
- **Trust in governance**, measuring confidence in public institutions and policymaking processes

A pilot test was conducted to refine question clarity and ensure reliability.

### **Qualitative Component**

**Participant Selection:** The qualitative component involved 25 key informants, selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse institutional perspectives. Participants included youth activists, representatives from civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policy practitioners working at local, state, and national levels.

**Data Collection Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency. An interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences with youth participation mechanisms, perceptions of institutional responsiveness, and challenges in implementing inclusive policy design.

**Focus Areas:** The interviews focused on:

- Institutional mechanisms for youth inclusion
- Effectiveness and limitations of existing participation platforms
- Structural and administrative barriers to youth engagement
- The role of digital governance in expanding or constraining inclusion

Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was recorded with participant consent.

### **Data Analysis**

**Quantitative Data Analysis:** Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations. These methods were employed to identify dominant trends in policy priorities, participation levels, and perceptions of governance inclusiveness. The analysis provided empirical grounding for assessing alignment between Generation Z expectations and public policy processes.

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, following a systematic coding process. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns, categories, and themes related to youth participation and institutional dynamics. This approach facilitated the identification of underlying governance challenges such as tokenism, institutional rigidity, and digital exclusion.

**Integration of Findings:** Findings from both data sources were integrated during the discussion phase to enable triangulation. Quantitative trends were contextualized using qualitative insights, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of the empirical evidence.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, with clear communication regarding the purpose of the study and voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed. Data were securely stored and used solely for academic research purposes, in accordance with established ethical guidelines for social science research.

### **Findings and Analysis**

This section presents and analyzes the empirical findings derived from the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The analysis highlights the

alignment and disjunction between Generation Z policy priorities and existing governance mechanisms in India.

### **Generation Z Policy Priorities**

The survey results reveal a clear hierarchy of policy priorities among Generation Z respondents, reflecting their lived socio-economic and environmental realities. Employment and skill development emerged as the most significant concern, with 78 percent of respondents ranking it as their top policy priority. This finding underscores the anxieties faced by young people in an increasingly competitive labor market characterized by job insecurity, skill mismatches, and the expansion of informal and gig-based employment. Climate change was identified as a major governance concern by 71 percent of respondents, indicating strong environmental awareness and a demand for proactive state intervention. Respondents emphasized the urgency of sustainable development policies, climate-resilient infrastructure, and environmental accountability. This reflects a generational shift toward long-term ecological considerations rather than short-term economic gains.

Mental health inclusion in public policy was emphasized by 65 percent of respondents, highlighting growing recognition of psychological well-being as a critical governance issue. Participants linked mental health challenges to academic pressure, unemployment, social expectations, and digital overexposure. The findings suggest that Generation Z expects public policies to address mental health not as a peripheral welfare issue but as an integral component of health and social policy frameworks.

### **Participation Experiences in Policymaking**

Despite strong interest in public issues, Generation Z's direct participation in formal policymaking processes remains limited. Only 29 percent of survey respondents reported having participated in any form of official policy consultation, public hearing, or government-led engagement initiative. This low participation rate indicates structural barriers to youth inclusion, including lack of

awareness, limited outreach, and restricted opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Furthermore, 62 percent of respondents perceived existing youth engagement initiatives as largely symbolic or tokenistic. Participants reported that while consultations were occasionally organized, youth inputs were rarely reflected in final policy decisions. This perception of tokenism contributes to growing distrust in governance institutions and discourages sustained youth engagement, reinforcing a cycle of political disengagement.

### **Digital Governance and Youth Engagement**

Digital platforms were widely recognized as tools for expanding access to policy-related information. A substantial 74 percent of respondents acknowledged that digital governance initiatives such as online portals, social media updates, and e-consultations have improved transparency and information dissemination. This finding reflects Generation Z's comfort with digital modes of engagement and their potential to democratize access.

However, this increased access does not translate into perceived policy influence. Only 34 percent of respondents believed that online consultations or digital feedback mechanisms had a tangible impact on final policy outcomes. This significant gap between access and influence highlights a critical limitation of digital governance in its current form. Without mechanisms for accountability, feedback, and visible policy impact, digital participation risks becoming performative rather than substantive.

### **Qualitative Insights from Interviews**

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into the institutional dynamics shaping youth participation. A recurring theme was the limited willingness of institutions to share decision-making power with young people. Interviewees noted that youth were often consulted at preliminary stages but excluded from final deliberations and implementation processes.

Another prominent concern was the urban bias in youth participation mechanisms. Many inter-

viewees observed that existing platforms disproportionately favor urban, educated, and digitally connected youth, thereby marginalizing rural and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. This uneven representation undermines the inclusiveness of policy design and reproduces existing inequalities.

Finally, interview data revealed a persistent disconnect between consultation and policy implementation. Youth inputs, even when documented, were rarely followed by feedback or explanation regarding their acceptance or rejection. This lack of closure weakens trust in participatory processes and reinforces perceptions of exclusion.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

Taken together, the findings reveal a paradox in India's youth governance landscape. While Generation Z exhibits high levels of policy awareness and strong normative commitments to inclusion, sustainability, and well-being, existing governance structures provide limited avenues for meaningful participation. The empirical evidence points to a participation–impact gap, where youth voices are heard but not adequately integrated into policy outcomes. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing inclusive policy design and strengthening democratic governance in India.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal a pronounced disconnect between the policy priorities articulated by Generation Z and the existing policy design processes within Indian public governance. While institutional discourse increasingly acknowledges the importance of youth participation, the empirical evidence suggests that such recognition rarely translates into substantive influence over policy outcomes. Youth engagement mechanisms often remain consultative in nature, lacking the authority and accountability necessary to shape decision-making processes meaningfully.

Digital platforms have emerged as prominent tools for youth engagement, offering expanded access to information and opportunities for participation. However, the study highlights that

digital participation alone does not guarantee inclusion. Without complementary institutional reforms, digital mechanisms risk reinforcing existing socio-economic and regional inequalities, particularly affecting rural youth and marginalized communities. The gap between access to participation and actual policy influence underscores the limitations of technology-driven governance in the absence of structural change. The findings lend strong empirical support to participatory governance and deliberative democracy theories, which emphasize meaningful engagement over symbolic inclusion. Generation Z's expectations of transparency, equity, and sustainability challenge India's traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic governance models. This generation's demand for accountability and collaboration calls for a reorientation of policymaking toward shared decision-making and continuous dialogue between state institutions and youth stakeholders.

Moreover, the emphasis placed by Gen Z on long-term issues such as climate action, mental well-being, and digital rights reflects a future-oriented governance perspective that contrasts with short-term policy approaches. Failure to integrate these priorities risks eroding trust in democratic institutions and diminishing youth engagement over time.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the empirical findings, the study proposes the following policy recommendations to strengthen inclusive policy design and youth participation in India:

**Institutionalize Youth Participation:** There is a need to formalize youth participation within governance structures by strengthening youth councils at national, state, and local levels. These bodies should be granted clearly defined advisory and decision-making authority, along with institutional mechanisms that ensure their recommendations are systematically considered in policy formulation. Moving beyond ad hoc consultations toward legally mandated youth representation can enhance policy legitimacy and accountability.

**Develop Youth-Centric Policy Frameworks:**

Public policies should explicitly integrate Generation Z priorities into national and state development agendas. This includes aligning education, employment, climate, and digital governance policies with youth expectations and lived realities. Youth-centric frameworks must adopt an intersectional approach, recognizing the diverse experiences of Gen Z across gender, caste, region, and socio-economic status.

**Strengthen Inclusive Digital Platforms:** While digital tools offer significant potential for participation, ensuring inclusivity requires addressing the digital divide. Policymakers must invest in accessible, multilingual, and user-friendly platforms that reach rural and marginalized youth. Digital participation mechanisms should be complemented by offline engagement strategies to ensure broad-based inclusion.

**Build Institutional Capacity for Participatory Governance:** Capacity-building initiatives are essential to equip policymakers and public administrators with the skills required for youth-responsive and participatory governance. Training programs should focus on inclusive policy design, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative decision-making, enabling institutions to effectively incorporate youth perspectives into governance processes.

**Establish Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:** To ensure accountability, governance institutions should establish transparent monitoring and evaluation systems that track youth participation and its impact on policy outcomes. Feedback loops that inform youth participants about how their inputs influence policy decisions can strengthen trust and sustained engagement.

**Challenges and Future Directions**

Despite the potential benefits of inclusive policy design, several challenges persist. Political resistance to power-sharing, institutional inertia, and bureaucratic rigidity continue to limit meaningful youth participation. Digital exclusion, particularly among rural and economically disadvantaged youth, further constrains inclusive engagement.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to examine the long-term impacts of youth-inclusive policies on governance outcomes and democratic participation. Comparative studies across Global South contexts would provide valuable insights into best practices and adaptable governance models. Additionally, future research should explore intra-generational differences within Gen Z to better understand how intersecting identities shape policy priorities and participation patterns.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights that Generation Z plays a significant role in shaping the future of democratic governance in India. The findings reveal that young people prioritize issues such as employment, climate change, mental health, digital rights, and inclusive governance. However, despite increasing awareness and participation, youth involvement in policymaking remains limited and often symbolic.

The study concludes that inclusive policy design is essential for improving policy legitimacy, institutional responsiveness, and democratic accountability. While digital governance has expanded access to participation, structural barriers such as institutional rigidity, unequal representation, and limited policy influence continue to restrict meaningful youth engagement.

Therefore, Indian governance institutions must move beyond tokenistic consultation and adopt participatory approaches that recognize Generation Z as active partners in governance. Institutionalizing youth participation and aligning public policies with youth priorities are essential for building a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable democratic system.

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