

VOICES FOR IMPACT

Meaningful Youth Engagement in the Multilateral System



Preface

The United Nations Secretary-General has stated that young people have become a driving force for societal change through social mobilization.¹ They are pushing for climate action, seeking racial justice, promoting gender equality and demanding dignity for all. By advocating for their active inclusion in policy spaces, young people provide diverse perspectives that improve and inform critical decisions.

But unfortunately, despite their engagement in the multilateral sphere, youth continue to exert little influence over decision making on sustainable development, the maintenance of peace and security, and human rights.

Over the last decade, there has been significant progress in youth inclusion within the multilateral system. This reflects a growing recognition of the importance of young people's participation in global governance. The United Nations, being a core component of the multilateral system, has played a critical lead role in this space.

Key milestones have been achieved in elevating the role and impact of youth. This includes the appointment of the first United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth in 2013, with a mandate to serve as global advocate for the needs and rights of young people and for bringing the United Nations closer to young people. The launch of Youth2030, the United Nations Youth Strategy,² was the first-ever strategy aimed to act as an umbrella framework to guide the entire United Nations as it steps up its work with and for young people across its three pillars – peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. There's been a notable increase in youth representation through the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme, global youth summits and youth-focused initiatives led by United Nations agencies, programmes and funds. This has created engagement opportunities for youth in civil society, academia, the private sector and other spaces. Several United Nations resolutions acknowledge the critical role of youth as stakeholders, such as the Youth Peace and Security Agenda.

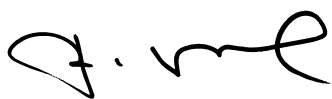
The recent appointment of the first-ever Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs and the creation of the United Nations Youth Office in 2023 mark an exciting new chapter that consolidates the progress of youth inclusion and sets the stage for scaled commitments to meet the Secretary-General's ambitious Our Common Agenda, especially Policy Brief 3 focusing on meaningful youth engagement in decision-making and policymaking processes.³ This is a call for the entire United Nations system and Member States to ensure the meaningful engagement of young people in decision making at all levels. It ultimately asks to strengthen intergenerational cooperation to tackle present and future global challenges, including the advancement of the child rights agenda.

While significant progress has been made, ensuring equitable, impactful and sustained meaningful youth engagement at the heart of global governance remains an important and ongoing challenge.

And it is in this context, heeding the call for scaled and improved meaningful youth engagement, that UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight embarked on a youth-centred journey to better understand the evidence gaps and priorities that can guide the next steps as all stakeholders collaborate to scale and improve how young people participate in multilateral forums.

Ten years ago, youth participation at multilateral spaces, such as at the United Nations General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties, would have been inconceivable at the scale we see now. Today young people are leading research, advocacy and action for the causes they care about. They are representing their communities, participating in intergenerational panels, and contributing their unique perspective and dreams for a shared future.

Young people are here and ready to lead. It is our duty to work with them as equal partners and to strengthen the multilateral system, for present and future generations.



Bo Viktor Nylund

Director

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research
and Foresight



Shai Naidés

Chief of Youth Engagement and Strategy

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research
and Foresight

Key findings

Multilateral international organizations bring people together on global platforms to discuss and make decisions on building a more prosperous, equitable and sustainable future. Young people are an essential part of this process. They bring insight and energy to the discussions and their input is critical to creating the future they will inherit.

Providing opportunities for young people to engage meaningfully in international platforms has the potential to enrich conversations and strengthen the decisions. It also offers young people an opportunity for agency in building the future.

Over the last decade, there's been a tremendous push for participation of children and youth in multilateral forums. And there have been many attempts to include them in decision making.

But have these efforts been successful?

Have young people had a meaningful impact on policy, decisions and results?

What impact does youth participation have on the lives of the participants?

This report answers these questions, starting by examining the existing literature on youth engagement. After the literature review, research was conducted via interviews and workshops with young people who participated in multilateral international platforms. The interviews offered an opportunity for young people to provide information and mould recommendations. Overall, the goal was to provide an evidence-based road map for engaging children and young people – meaningfully – in creating a better future for all.

Barriers to meaningful youth engagement

Barriers to meaningful engagement still exist, despite the noticeable progress over recent years in involving young people and designing youth spaces that are safe and effective. According to former youth participants who were interviewed for this research, the following are the key barriers to meaningful youth engagement.

1. **Insufficient support:** 94 per cent of youth participants reported that they did not have sufficient support before, during and after participation to be able to meaningfully participate in multilateral forums.
2. **Not inclusive enough:** 90 per cent of youth participants did not find the processes and spaces for youth engagement to be inclusive, equal and representative enough.
3. **No real youth involvement:** For 81 per cent of young people, youth participation in international events is often tokenistic and young people's ability to impact policies and decisions is limited.
4. **Exploitative environments:** 76 per cent of youth participants reported feeling exploited by an environment aimed at solidifying a predetermined agenda without consideration for young participants' mental and emotional health.
5. **Lack of harmony and structure:** 56 per cent of youth participants reported that the absence of formal mechanisms and structures make the participation process feel inconsistent.

Enablers of meaningful youth engagement

Even when young people's ideas and perspectives were included in multilateral forums, youth voices have had little influence on policy. Young people felt frustrated and demotivated by their engagement. So, we asked former youth participants: What can be done differently to make engagement more meaningful and impactful?

According to former youth participants who were interviewed for this research, the following are the key enablers of meaningful youth engagement. These enablers of meaningful youth engagement also informed the guidance note on meaningful youth engagement that is shared in this report.

1. **Provide support:** For 42 per cent of youth participants, support means providing young people clear guidance on the objectives of participation, financial resources to cover costs, logistical support, pre-participation trainings, and networking and professional opportunities.
2. **Encourage intergenerational dialogue and learning:** 39 per cent of youth participants emphasized intergenerational interaction and experience with decision makers, first-hand policymaking and high-level negotiations as a key enabler of meaningful youth engagement. Interactions with people in power have the potential for real learning opportunities, mentorships and opportunities for professional growth and advancement.
3. **Foster a youth-centred approach:** 35 per cent of youth participants considered involvement in the entirety of the youth engagement process as a key enabler. This means that young people are defining the issues at hand, designing the space for engagement, defining the objectives and goals of engagement, implementing the decisions and driving results.
4. **Make youth engagement inclusive and representative:** For 31 per cent of youth participants, connecting with a diverse set of young people – people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and people with unconventional personal and educational backgrounds – makes youth engagement more intentional.
5. **Provide continuity:** 13 per cent of youth participants considered continuity to be crucial in youth engagement. In the aftermath of a major event, opportunities are needed to track progress and follow up on young people's input.

"For me, people are just using [young people] to create, you know, emotions. But I don't really feel like what they say in these international conferences is heard. . . . The simple reason is that we don't really see the impact of those words in the decisions."

– A youth delegate.

Contents

Introduction	7
The research	10
More than participation	12
Key elements of youth engagement	17
Impact of youth engagement	19
Meaningful youth engagement: A guide	22
Recommendations	28
Conclusion	30
Endnotes	31
References	32
Acknowledgements	34
About us	35

Introduction

We are at a crucial moment in human history.

Globally, communities are dealing with a multitude of issues, from tackling the climate crisis, to the rapid development and diffusion of Artificial Intelligence, growing economic inequality, or the rise in geopolitical tension and conflict. The interconnected nature of our global system calls for innovative solutions and the involvement of young people as change makers so that they have a say in the world they will eventually inherit.

But how do we involve young people in ways that are meaningful?

Since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, many models have been designed to involve children and young people in programmes and in decision-making processes.⁴ Both nationally and internationally, platforms for youth voices have proliferated. These efforts were driven by the belief that children and young people have the right to express their views and that this right must be supported.⁵

Existing governance structures and consultation spaces (both international and national) have been redesigned or adjusted to include youth voices. These include national governance structures such as national children and youth parliaments, national surveys, and spaces for young voices in international consultation activities and decision-making processes. Toolkits that provide guidelines on how to effectively engage with children and young people have also proliferated. Even though youth participation is not a new concept, never before has there been such formal support and global movement of youth involvement as there has been in the recent years.

As a result, children and young people's voices have been heard and amplified. Youth participation has made a difference.

"I think for me the programme opened so many doors. . . . It gave me another vision of life, another perspective and allowed me to get to leadership positions from a young age."

– A youth delegate (2015–2020)

"Yes . . . people see you differently, they take you more seriously. You can take advantage of this dynamic to get involved in the political sphere, in projects."

– A Youth Ambassador (2017)

Such experiences show us the kind of impact youth engagement can have on young people: deep, meaningful impact that can empower and transform young lives. Meaningful engagement gives young people the agency they need to become the leaders of today and tomorrow.

But this is where youth engagement misses its mark.

“Young people are no longer content with participation for the sake of participation.”

– A youth delegate

Where young people are invited to speak before world leaders, share their struggles and their experience, inspire others and advocate for change, little to no action follows. The impact of young people’s engagement in decision-making processes lasts only for the duration of a conference or a summit.

“The Y7 and Y20 youth communicates [sic] were great. Did they influence the G7 and G20 decision-making processes? Probably not.”

– A Y7/Y20 youth delegate

Young people are asking international organizations and global leaders to do more for youth engagement and to do it better. It is no longer sufficient to give platforms to young voices. Young people are demanding a seat at the table.

And why shouldn’t they? Young people’s voices, perspectives and ideas are unique, and offer valuable insights that have the power to transform our shared future. When young people are allowed to voice their concerns, thoughts and solutions about the issues they are most passionate about, it builds trust in public institutions, governments and their leaders.

And yet today, too few opportunities exist for young people to actively contribute to resolving global challenges in a world in which they will be expected to lead.

Decision makers must recognize that the absence of a deeper engagement by children and young people in decision-making spaces has consequences on those spaces, too. Leaders miss the opportunity not only to empower the young generation with critical skills, but also to better anticipate how the world is changing and make more informed decisions.

Young people have always been a force of change throughout history. Despite intensified calls and many initiatives that attempt to represent and amplify youth voices in decision making, it remains unclear whether these efforts shape decision making or impact young people’s lives.

The research in this report investigates whether the approaches that have been used to involve young people have been effective in meaningfully engaging them in decision-making processes. It also explores whether involving young people in decision making influences policies, shapes communities and impacts the lives of young participants.^{6,7,8}

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- Does involving young people in multilateral forums of decision making have an influence on policy decisions?
- What is the impact of youth engagement in decision making?
- What meaning do young people attach to their experiences of participation? What are their expectations?
- What are the barriers and enablers to meaningful youth engagement?

It is our hope that this report will contribute to a new era of youth engagement, which aligns with the United Nations Secretary-General's call for governments and the multilateral system to ensure young people are meaningfully engaged in policy and decision making – not in tokenistic or performative ways, which we unfortunately still see too much of.

What is meaningful youth engagement?

Meaningful youth engagement is where children and youth are involved as equal partners; where their views and circumstances are respected; where marginalized youth also get the opportunity to participate; and where youth from all backgrounds are welcome and engaged as agents of change rather than just beneficiaries.

The research

Young people and their lived experiences at multilateral forums informed this study, and key experts in adolescent and youth engagement helped shape the guidance note on meaningful youth engagement in multilateral forums.

To examine youth participation and what makes it meaningful, this report presents young people's perceptions, expectations and recommendations on what makes their engagement meaningful.

This report is the result of a two-phase research process. The first phase relied on former youth participants in multilateral forums of decision making to share their experiences of participation and how they perceived the impact of youth engagement.

Following a thorough literature review, 80 former youth participants were selected and interviewed. These young people had participated at international forums between 2017 and 2023. These interviews helped draw out the key barriers and enablers to meaningful youth participation. The impact of youth engagement on young people, their challenges, frustrations and wins that they experienced during participation were further investigated to create impactful solutions.

During the second phase, workshops were held with young people and experts in the field of adolescent and youth engagement. The dialogue in these workshops was focused on ways to improve the meaningfulness of youth engagement mechanisms and programmes based on the research findings.

The guidance note offered in this report was developed from these workshops. Participants included young people; UNICEF personnel who work directly with adolescents and young people in headquarters, regional and country offices; and the United Nations Youth Office.

How old are young people?

There is no universally agreed definition of the youth age group.

The United Nations defines 'youth' – without any prejudice to any other definitions made by Member States – as persons between ages 15 and 24 years.

In this study, 'youth participants' refers to people between ages 15 and 28 years at the time of participation.

The study focused on multilateral youth engagement initiatives because they offer more visibility to participants, gather high profile audiences, are more structured and have more resources.

Many of the young people interviewed had participated in more than one of the following forums: Young Leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals, G20/Y20, G7/Y7, United Nations Youth Delegates Programme, European Union Youth Dialogue, One Young World, Conference of Parties and the European Union Youth Parliament.

At the time of their participation in multilateral forums, the youth participants were aged 15–28 years and had played an active role during the event by expressing ideas or views, participating in group discussions or contributing to the drafting of a final proposal.

What does participation mean?

As a rights-based concept, participation is the idea that young people have the right to express themselves on matters that affect them directly and indirectly. The Committee on the Rights of the Child identified participation as one of the four fundamental and general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

For meaningful participation to occur, young people's voices must be heard, listened to and their views given due weight in all matters affecting young people, directly and indirectly.⁹

Recognizing the challenges young people experience in participation and decision-making processes, the Secretary-General, in Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3, calls on Member States to consider the following recommendations for meaningful youth engagement:¹⁰

- Expand and strengthen youth participation in decision making at all levels.
- Make meaningful youth engagement a requirement in all United Nations decision-making processes.
- Support the establishment of a standing United Nations Youth Townhall and an integrated programme from the United Nations systems to facilitate greater diversity, representativeness and preparedness in youth participation.

More than participation

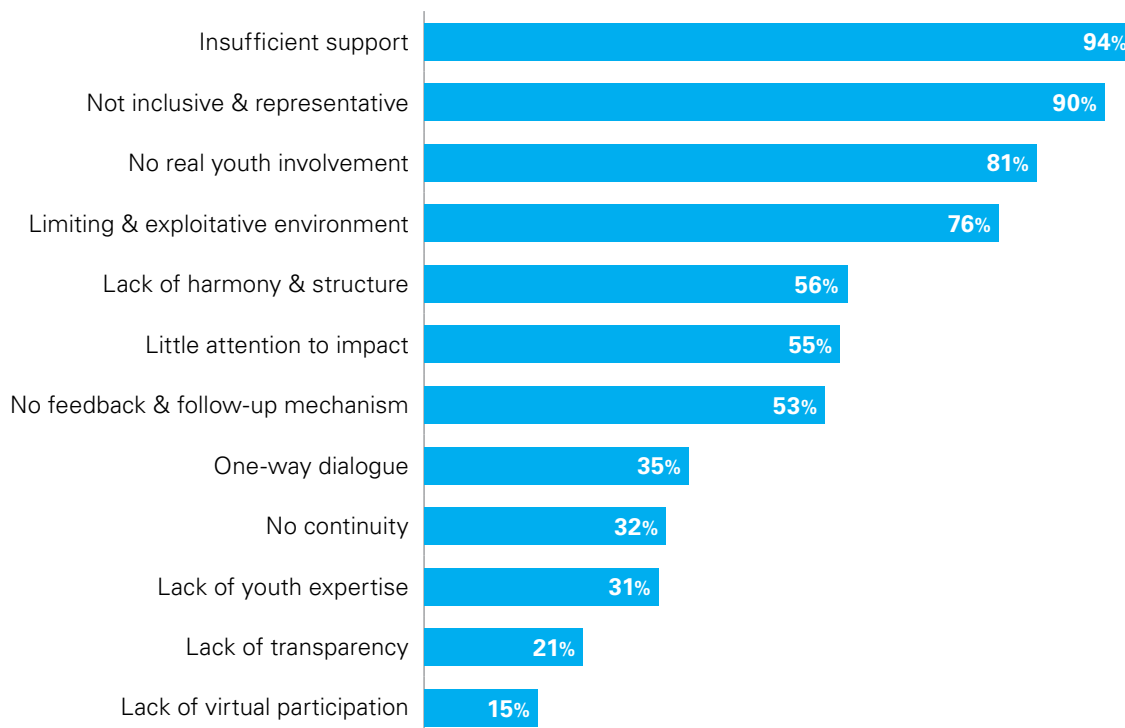
Acknowledging that youth voices are integral to creating solutions is just step one of meaningful youth engagement processes. Their presence alone at multilateral forums does not guarantee that young people's ideas, perspectives and calls for actionable solutions will be heeded.

"Amplifying youth voices is necessary, but it is not sufficient."

– A youth delegate

The research showed that young people experience multiple barriers to meaningful youth engagement. In particular, they are frustrated by the lack of results despite their participation. Young people qualified their experiences as performative, tokenistic, and lacking real purpose and influence. For young people, listening to youth voices is not enough. They want to be active participants and stakeholders in decisions that will have a lasting impact on their lives, communities and countries.

Figure 1: Barriers to meaningful youth engagement



Meaningful engagement asks us to go deeper in our relationship with young people by giving them agency to take part in building their own futures. But young people cannot do it alone. We must go beyond the act of listening to young people: we must hear their call, and we must rally behind them to achieve positive change.

We asked youth participants, based on their experiences, what are the main barriers to meaningful youth engagement?

And this is what they shared.

Insufficient support

Young people are asking for support when engaging with decision makers, as well as support in their work and for quality participation. Research showed that 94 per cent of youth participants did not have sufficient support (before, during and after participation) to be able to meaningfully participate.

The absence of systematic and structured resourcing to support youth participation means that it is often the most privileged youth who can access and afford to volunteer their time and out-of-pocket expenses.

“And I keep going back and forth asking them for just a meeting. . . . Despite all those efforts and all the changes you are making and trying to make – but you do not even get an actual support.”

– A Youth Ambassador (2019)

Financial and logistical

Young people feel financially constrained to cover the costs of attending multilateral forums. Financial backing and local support for youth-led projects is also often lacking. They find themselves competing with larger government bodies or other non-governmental programmes for funding. Complex funding application processes and requirements also limit their access to funds.

Youth participants are at times unable to acquire relevant visas to attend multilateral forums. Language and access barriers (such as lack of a sign language interpreter or wheelchair access) have also been reported as key logistical challenges for youth with disabilities.

“Sometimes we reach a particular summit, it feels like we were an afterthought. . . . I was there but I couldn’t access many side events because of my wheelchair.”

– A youth delegate (2019 and 2021)

Training support

For 31 per cent of the youth participants, lack of expertise on technical subjects held them back during participation. They also pointed out the need for pre-summit trainings on communication and negotiation skills to enable them to formulate their opinions and arguments.

Trainings on negotiation and public speaking skills are also needed to effectively communicate their needs. For many youth participants, topics and subjects were too technical to understand and meaningfully engage. As eager as they are, young people do not always know how to formulate their proposals. Even though in most cases they know exactly what they want, they may struggle (especially when inexperienced) to understand some of the technical issues they are asked to discuss. The lack of technical expertise also affects how much consideration is given to their voices.

"It was a bit difficult because the expectation was 'Go and represent the youth of your country,' and as much as we wanted to do it and do it well, we just didn't have the tools to make the most of it."

– A youth delegate (2019 and 2020)

"We didn't have previous trainings on how to speak in multilateral spaces of decision making. And it was completely left in our hands to figure it out. . . . So, it was a little bit difficult because the expectation was to perform without being enabled to do it"

– A youth delegate (2017 and 2022)

Exclusive not inclusive

Equal opportunities for all young people regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic background is at the foundation of meaningful youth engagement. For 90 per cent of youth participants, youth engagement at multilateral forums was not inclusive, equal and representative enough.

Exclusive

For one, most participants usually came from major cities, had gone to university (mainly prestigious universities), spoke English and often had some professional standing. Youth participants felt that voices from unprivileged backgrounds were rarely seen within these spaces. They expressed difficulty in representing young people who are from completely different backgrounds and advancing issues that they do not face themselves.

"Invariably, the opportunity to have this sort of high-level political representation for young people is skewed towards those who already have advantages. I am certainly one of them."

– A youth delegate (2018 and 2019)

Most decision-making spaces come with exclusion criteria in the form of qualifications required to participate. Young people with unique experiences, perspectives and qualifications that are not necessarily recognized by mainstream systems get locked out of participation opportunities.

Not inclusive

They also spoke of the lack of representation of young people living with disabilities. Youth participants with disabilities reported feeling overlooked because of their disabilities. They also felt that the focus is often on their identity as youth living with disability rather than on the subjects at hand.

"I can be a person with disability and be an environmental activist. This is where inclusion becomes problematic. If an event or a summit focuses on young people, or on disabilities, then we get access. But if it is around a specific topic, like the environment, where being young or having a disability is not the focus, we are often overlooked."

– A youth delegate (2019, 2021 and 2022)

Many young people felt that the experience of participation was not homogenous. Access to key decision makers and to other resources is often dependent on country of origin and existing networks.

Furthermore, the lack of accessible information about participation opportunities, the lack of multilingual materials and the complex selection processes are considerable barriers for many young people.

No real youth involvement

The politicization of youth participation often means that many young people still do not feel free to share their true opinions. They are often confronted by political pressures and the demands to align themselves with their government's stance on different issues.

For 81 per cent of youth participants, opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes were few and far between. Young people see their participation as tokenistic and want a more intentional youth engagement – for example, by integrating young people within systems of national governance.

To many, being invited in multilateral spaces of decision making becomes a one-time event without in-country legitimacy and recognition even when there is a mandate attached to young people's participation. They are not included in national forums and rarely get the opportunities to represent youth voices in own their countries. This, according to many, makes participation incomplete as it limits the advocacy and implementation work that they are often expected to do.

"I mean, you know this right, like governments go there with an agenda, very little actually gets decided there. Also, sometimes young people have their own youth resolutions. . . . But let's be honest . . . I don't think at all that policymakers take that into consideration. In fact, I know that they don't at all."

– A youth delegate (2019)

One-way dialogue

Segregated spaces offer little to no chance of interaction with people in power. Young people are invited to give their opinion and draft proposals on key issues, but youth-powered solutions never seem to move beyond the confinement of the youth-only spaces. Those with the power to effect change are often making decisions in spaces that young people cannot access.

About 35 per cent of youth participants expressed frustration with the limited scope of interactions with decision makers. Without a direct dialogue and with no systems of accountability that incentivize decision makers to take into consideration youth input, youth participation in multilateral spaces of decision making remains a one-way dialogue.

Exploitative environments

A considerable majority of the youth participants interviewed – 76 per cent – felt limited in their ability to participate. They felt exploited by the environment as it was more suited to furthering an existing agenda without consideration for participants' mental and emotional health.

Young people felt a lack of ownership over their own stories, especially after they were shared. The stories were at times being used without consent to fit a narrative the young person did not agree with. Some also spoke about being invited to share traumatic experiences, then being left alone to deal with the aftermath of reliving those experiences.

"I felt physically exhausted and mentally assaulted."

– A youth delegate (2018)

Lack of structure and harmony

Youth participation processes often lack structure and harmony; 56 per cent of youth participants noted that different host countries brought different experiences, and each event seemed one-off with little progression or continuity.

"We were not really told why exactly we needed to be there. Yes, to share a youth perspective. But why that perspective was needed and once we are done sharing what exactly can we expect as a return."

– A youth delegate (2023)

Absence of feedback and follow-up

The one-time nature of youth participation platforms is one of the key barriers to meaningful youth engagement, with 53 per cent of youth participants being disappointed by the absence of follow-up mechanisms and feedback.

"It felt like it was an effort to be there, working together to propose solutions, and then everyone goes back to their countries and that's it."

– A Youth Ambassador (2021)

Key elements of youth engagement

For young people to be meaningfully engaged, several factors influence the success of youth participation at multilateral forums. The goals of participation, the selection process, the location of the convening event and opportunities for interactions with decision makers – with or without youth spaces – all have a significant influence on the quality of participation.

Selection

Youth participants are either selected through a competitive process, nominated or elected. About 81 per cent of those interviewed were selected through a lengthy and competitive process. For these young people, a competitive selection process gave them a boost in self-confidence and an increased sentiment of self-efficacy. Around 18 per cent of youth participants were nominated (or introduced by someone they knew or an organization).

Only one respondent was elected. Although a unique case, this young person reported direct and continued contact with policymakers, and their engagement had subsequent effect on policy. This shows how different selection processes may produce different outcomes. How candidates are selected can increase the likelihood of their impact on policy while also increasing policymakers' accountability.

"My team, including myself, were working in government at the time. . . . We were able to get some good access, and we were able to use our resources. So, it was quite easy for us to get that access, but it wasn't set up for us."

– A youth delegate (2021)

Goals

For many respondents, pre-participation information on the goals and objectives of their involvement was missing. The goals of participation are important because they shape the design and the outcomes of specific youth engagement arrangements.

"A lot of the time when you're going to a summit or a conference, their agenda has already been set. You are just invited to provide your view."

– A youth delegate (2021)

Location matters

At least half of the respondents were from developed countries whereas the other half came from developing countries. Both groups reported differences in availability of resources, such as pre-participation trainings, participation stipends, paid-for flights and accommodation and so on. Such resources can influence, positively or negatively, a youth delegate's experience and the personal outcomes of their participation.

The host country's culture and perception of young people also influenced the quality of participation. The more hierarchical a culture, the less it was believed that young people were able to contribute to policy or participate in problem solving.

"In one country, it was very institutional, they always invited policymakers and interesting speakers, but it was always a very formal kind of communication. We could ask some questions at the end, but it was never the type of dialogue we could have expected."

– A youth delegate (2019 and 2022)

Spaces matter

Whether youth spaces were exclusive to youth participants or were shared with decision makers had an impact on the quality of engagement.

Shared spaces, according to our interviewees, seemed to provide more opportunities for intergenerational learning and for real interactions with those in positions of power, leading to more opportunities for co-creation and partnerships. Many reported that shared spaces also increased the feeling of being heard and taken seriously.

"These are youth spaces that are even already marginalized spaces because it's never like the main stage. It's like, oh, this is the youth part. Maybe these spaces are even hostile to young people and at the same time not even inclusive of all youth."

– A youth delegate (2017 and 2019)

Skills matter

The level of subject expertise, individual skill sets and previous achievements of young people influenced participation. Many of our interviewees reported that with expertise and prior successes they felt more confident in their ability to formulate good proposals, and also felt that their opinions were taken more seriously.

Impact of youth engagement

Does youth engagement have an impact on young people? Does it have the power to transform societies and influence policy?

The research found that young people benefit greatly from their participation at multilateral forums, as the experience brought more participation opportunities, fostered deeper connections, personally and professionally, and provided young people with new skills and capacities.

But beyond the personal improvements, young people felt that their participation in multilateral forums did not have the expected impact on communities and on policy.

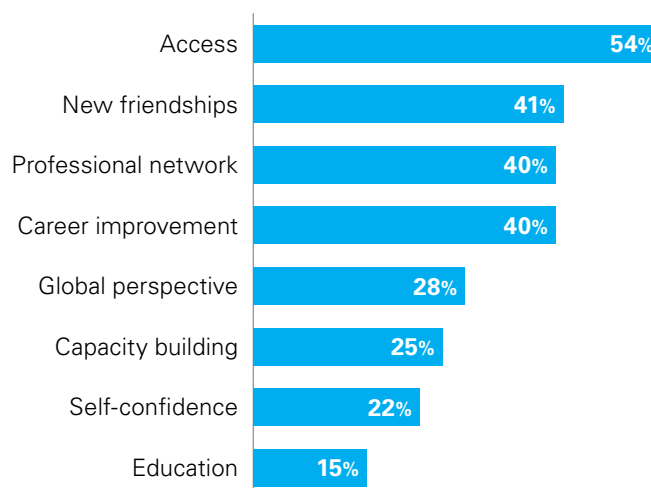
Impact on youth participants

Youth engagement brings visibility and credibility to young people and their work. It opens doors to further opportunities and career advancements. About 54 per cent of respondents experienced better access to resources (such as fellowship opportunities, grants and sponsors) and more opportunities to participate.

"Yes . . . people see you differently, they take you more seriously. You can take advantage of this dynamic to get involved in the political sphere, in projects. There are so many doors and opportunities open to you"

– A Youth Ambassador (2017)

Figure 2: Youth engagement and its impact on youth participants



Being part of a multilateral decision-making process benefited youth participants as they formed valuable friendships (41 per cent) from diverse regions and backgrounds, and made new professional connections (40 per cent). Youth participants were also able to make gains in their career (40 per cent).

Participation also provided a better global perspective on current issues (28 per cent) and allowed young people to see the world, its problems and potential solutions from a different viewpoint. Some individuals also acquired new capabilities (25 per cent) when trainings and mentorships were offered before the events, such as public speaking, organizational skills and language skills.

Youth engagement also helped young people gain a deeper understanding of policy and politics and a clearer vision of their professional and educational paths. But only 3 per cent of those interviewed reported feeling inspired by their participation, and even fewer reported feeling an increase in their self-esteem and self-awareness.

Despite the personal gains made from participation, why is it that the majority of the young people interviewed felt demotivated and uninspired after participation?

"You get exhausted with the same speeches about 'you are the future go forth and do the work,' but that does not get the work done. . . . It cost[s] money to do impactful work. It maddens me that sometimes I must pull from my own pocket in ways that severely disadvantage me."

– A youth delegate (2019)

Social impact

Youth participation has the potential to considerably transform communities. But does it have a social impact? Only 8 per cent of youth participants interviewed said that their involvement in multilateral forums led to a tangible social change. Among those who reported an impact, 85 per cent said this was because of their participation in forums that were geared towards amplifying youth voices and supporting their work.

But the vast majority of interviewees – 92 per cent – did not notice any social impact from their engagement in multilateral forums. Many attributed the absence of effect to the lack of resources and financial support.

"I have no type of funding, and I have been really tired because I have been spending a lot of money from my own personal money. I do not get any type of support and if I can't even get a meeting . . . then what's the point?"

– A youth delegate (2018 and 2021)

Figure 3: Social impact of youth engagement



Policy impact

Youth engagement has little impact on policy. And participants know it.

Youth participants who provide their inputs and share their experiences at global forums are aware that their testimonies and participation will have little to no impact on policy decisions. According to them, the complexity of policymaking processes, the unbalanced power dynamics between young people and decision makers, and the lack of accountability on the part of decision makers to consider youth views are factors that considerably limit young people's impact on policy.

A few cases of policy impact were reported by some participants who cited their subject-related expertise, their previous achievements and their strong existing networks as factors that enabled them to make their voices heard and impact policy decisions.

"For me, people are just using [young people] to create, you know, emotions. But I don't really feel like what they say in these international conferences is heard. . . . The simple reason is that we don't really see the impact of those words in the decisions."

– A young delegate

Figure 4: Perceived impact on policy decisions

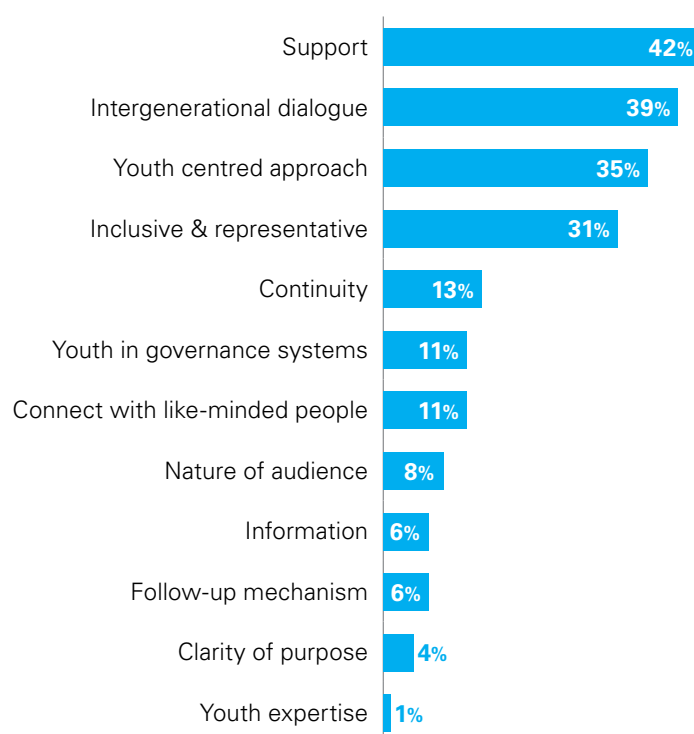


Meaningful youth engagement: A guide

This guidance note is the product of the knowledge shared by young people as well as youth engagement experts from UNICEF offices (headquarters, regional offices and country offices) and the United Nations Youth Office.

When asked how participation can be made more meaningful for young people at multilateral forums, youth participants interviewed for this research identified several enablers. These enablers reflect on the need for young people to be supported, have meaningful dialogue with decision makers and have access to youth-centred spaces in multilateral forums. They also stressed on the importance of making multilateral forums more inclusive and representative, and having proper feedback mechanisms in place.

Figure 5: Enablers of meaningful youth engagement



Workshops were organized to reflect on the findings of the research and discuss the enablers and solutions needed to make youth engagement more meaningful in formal structured multilateral forums. The quotes included here are those shared by experts and young people who participated in these workshops.

Pre-participation

“Youth participation events are rarely impactful in themselves. However, they have the potential to empower their participants to impact their communities. The main focus should thus be on empowering young people.”

– A former youth delegate and a current youth engagement expert

Define goals and objectives

- Incorporate youth perspectives into all stages of decision making for input and increased accountability – from goals and objectives to implementation and evaluation.
- Ensure transparency in decision-making processes and provide mechanisms for accountability. Publish youth engagement data to make institutions more accountable.
- Measure success differently. Go beyond quantified measurements (e.g., how many youths are engaged, geographical and gender composition and so on).
- Find agreement on the standards and principals for meaningful youth engagement and have a clear monitoring mechanism to track progress of implementation of those standards, shared through a periodic progress report.
- Create a communications loop where young people are the creators and the receivers of information.

Ensure true representation when selecting candidates

- Selection criteria for youth participants must include experience working closely with the young people they are representing. Allow long timeline for selection processes. Select candidates closer to the communities they serve and give them time to reach out to other youth in their communities.
- Include young people from different communities, cultures and geographies. Having different nationalities represented is not enough.
- Consider mixed youth cohorts that include subject matter experts, young people with unconventional educational backgrounds, out-of-reach youth, youth from minorities, youth with disabilities and inexperienced youth.
- Outline the inclusion and diversity standards of the selection process.
- Establish an assessment mechanism for the inclusion and diversity criteria. Criteria may differ depending on the process, but an evaluation mechanism is a great tool for ensuring accountability and improving processes.

Improve information sharing

- Use multiple languages to disseminate information about participation opportunities. Provide translation and interpretation services as well as guidance on the use of internet tools.
- Use a variety of communication channels (including local radio programmes) to advertise opportunities.
- Provide internet packages for access before virtual events.
- Reach out to unconventional groups, such as young farmers associations and educational institutions, and invite them to participate.

Provide support: Training, logistical and financial

- Offer short trainings and mentoring opportunities pre-participation to empower the youth voices involved in decision-making processes.
- Secure funding and set sustainable and equitable ways to support participants.
- Establish strategies and resources to ensure that extra attention and resources are given to those who need them the most. This may mean more financial support to those who live in remote areas, administrative support to those needing visas or logistical support to those with disabilities.

Improve access and ensure an equal experience

- Foster digital participation. Consider combining digital participation with physical participation to improve access.
- For young people with disabilities, ensure a physically accessible environment. This requires communication and investment beforehand. Specially appointing personnel responsible for inclusion and diversity matters could help smoothe the process.

During events

“Intergenerational solidarity and cross-sector collaboration is key. Ageism, stigma and other barriers impact how seriously young people’s inputs are taken, so having the inputs supported by allies is valuable.”

– A youth engagement expert

Create a well-designed space

- Define the audience. When young people are called into spaces to speak about their perspective, experience or work, it is important to have the right audience and stakeholders in the space who have the potential to make a change for young people and in the world. It should include those who can inspire, those who have the potential to provide support, those who can help build networks and those who have the potential to shape policies and support young people to achieve their goals.
- Create space. Space should be provided to young people to speak freely beyond reading scripts. Youth-only spaces are important safe spaces where young people can share their views without fear of retaliation or judgment. Youth-only spaces are not sufficient, however. They should exist alongside shared spaces where young people are given opportunities for direct interaction and engagement (as equal partners) with policymakers and other stakeholders in co-creation exercises.
- Priority must be given to spaces that are smaller and more meaningful (such as breakout groups). A hybrid model can be implemented using online tools to ensure that ideas are shared and that young people can pursue action together with other stakeholders.
- Make use of strategic foresight tools that enhance participation, including but not limited to the Futures Wheel, Scenario Planning, and Backcasting. Use online participatory and interactive platforms to foster collaboration and ideation between participants.
- Be considerate of specific needs. Youth with disabilities need extra support to fully enjoy participation.
- Offer translation services to ensure that the information shared is accessible to more young people.
- Depending on their origins and issues at hand, some young people will require more efforts and more safeguarding measures to ensure that they can safely participate and enjoy all the benefits of their involvement in decision making.

“Any new agendas that aim to address current and future issues (climate change, peace, technology, etc.) must be created with intergenerational cooperation and equity in mind so that there is true representation of society and an enhancement of the relevance and sustainability of such initiatives.”

– A youth engagement expert

Spotlight: EU Youth Sounding Board

The European Union Youth Sounding Board is a group of young people who advise the Commissioner and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships on youth participation and empowerment in EU external action. This allows young people to have an influence on EU external action and international partnerships, and thereby contributes to making EU action more participatory, relevant and effective for young people in EU partner countries.

Post-event

Continuity is crucial for meaningful youth engagement as it moves away from the typical one-time event engagement. Young people must be provided with feedback and follow-up on the actions taken by policymakers after participation activities. Impact assessments, feedback processes and continued support of youth-led initiatives are some ways to ensure meaningful youth engagement.

“Bringing young people to the table is one thing but leaving them without support to squarely argue their case is undoubtedly a form of tokenism which ensures that young people are unable to contribute meaningfully.”

– A youth engagement expert

Conduct impact assessment

- Conduct impact assessments to increase accountability and improve processes and outcomes by bringing enablers and barriers to the surface.
- Use the assessments to consider the meaningfulness of youth participation programmes and events, and avoid the tendency to involve young people for the sake of youth participation.
- Make youth-friendly platforms that allow the tracking of participation as well as youth-specific inputs.
- Create parallel systems for impact evaluation for youth participation. This could involve having youth-generated reviews of impact reported by various stakeholders.

Follow up and provide feedback

- Ensure youth participation processes have feedback and continued engagement. Consider policy reviews by young people to support the assessment of impact, or circulate a form where participants can give their feedback.
- Create platforms and spaces to monitor and follow up with events, commitments and discussions.
- Examples of follow-up: Young people who participated in workshops or ideation processes could receive a monthly newsletter to stay engaged. Those who were instrumental in creating initiatives should be invited to partake in processes beyond debriefs, such as programme evaluation sessions or the design of the next iteration of the initiative.

Create continuity

- Promote and fund youth-led initiatives by including them as implementing and knowledge partners.
- Create a youth opportunity platform to connect participants to mentorships and funding opportunities that allow young people to sustain their work.
- Ensure, when possible, that the programme can run for a longer period with frequent and regular touchpoints.
- Give young participants titles/certificates to increase legitimacy in home countries.
- Young people want to be implementers, not just beneficiaries. Consider providing small grants, accelerators, etc., that support capacity building.
- Consider developing small grants schemes for youth leaders to implement the follow-up activities on the ground.
- Organize debriefs to hear the ideas and take-aways that youth bring back to local stakeholders, and to mutually agree on concrete actions and support for implementation.
- Consider engaging with youth cohorts more than once. When possible, consider continued engagements or mandates that guarantee more than one attendance.
- Establish peer-to-peer networks that connect young participants to other young leaders to allow them to learn from each other.
- Establish a youth advisory board of former participants to help guide and share knowledge with new participants.
- Help connect youth work with local and international opportunities.
- Improve collaboration with United Nations country teams and offices to improve access to national/local networks.
- Create global initiatives with local perspective.

Spotlight: Be Seen Be Heard

The Be Seen Be Heard initiative seeks to create long-term structural changes to decision making to be more inclusive of young people.

Recommendations

Meaningful youth engagement brings a sense of ownership and responsibility for youth participants. Their active participation in decision-making processes brings creative solutions, passion and drive to produce positive changes in our world. To fully leverage the benefits of meaningful youth engagement, the following recommendations are offered.

Provide support before, during and after youth engagement

- Support young people before the engagement – financially, technically and logistically. Offer trainings, expert advice, mentorships and so forth to prepare participants for a deeper engagement. Provide support in obtaining visas and cover costs related to travel and accommodation.
- Separate youth selection criteria from national political processes to ensure independence of youth participation processes from political considerations.
- Design youth participation spaces with young people. Determine how young people are involved, the tools and resources that are needed to achieve the goals, and a mechanism to assess the achievement of those goals at the end of participation.
- Prioritize the mental and physical well-being of young people involved in youth participation. Young people should receive prior information on their participation, role and expectations.
- Have a safeguarding mechanism to ensure that young people are given a safe space to express their views and share their stories without consequences for their health, security and well-being.
- During the event, offer language services, youth spaces, resources for accessibility for youth with disabilities, and opportunities to interact with decision makers.
- After participation, provide and seek feedback from participants.
- Offer continuity through grants, fellowships, internships, seed funding and so on to support young people's work. It is crucial to ensure sustainable funding of youth engagement and establish permanent structures of youth participation.

Create enabling environments that empower young people

- Help bridge the gap between young people and their governments. This can be done by granting youth-led organizations and projects formal status, giving legitimacy to young people's work and advocating for them beyond summits and conferences.
- Connect young people to opportunities at national, regional and international levels. Increase visibility of youth projects.
- Consider the audience. Who is listening to young people, are these people in power and can they bridge the gap between youth views and policy? The relevant audience is a source of learning and inspiration for young people.
- Create structured and harmonious youth engagement processes to avoid ad-hoc approaches. This is to ensure that key components of meaningful participation are always incorporated regardless of the context/host country.

Make participation go beyond consultation

- Create opportunities for intergenerational dialogue and decision making.
- Establish youth task forces to voice youth perspectives where young people are absent from formal processes; create youth councils with national representation and a mandate to advance youth rights.

Be inclusive and truly representative of youth voices

- Ensure sufficient resources are made available and that outreach strategies are intentionally designed to reach and include different groups of young people (including those from rural areas).
- Clearly define strategies and concrete steps to ensure representation in youth participation. Pre-participation strategies should reach and attract even the most marginalized and sceptical groups of young people to ensure broad representation.
- Create accessible and attractive communication (that also emphasizes the personal benefits of youth participation, especially with regards to skills, employability, etc.) and innovative outreach approaches to widen the diversity of young people engaged in decision making.
- Ensure that young people with disabilities and their representative organizations are directly involved in developing strategies and tools to facilitate their participation.

Be accountable

- Develop accountability mechanisms and supporting tools, such as a youth participation index that ranks countries according to the extent to which they meaningfully engage young people in decision making. This can increase the awareness and accountability of governments.
- Designate seats for young people in various processes (at national, regional and international levels) to prevent asymmetric power dynamics. Quotas for young people are needed in different representative roles to ensure that youth voices are considered in decision making.

Conclusion

Children, adolescents and youth have the right to participate in decision making and policy formulation in local, national and global governance. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly recognizes the right of the children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. Additionally, Our Common Agenda, the Secretary-General's vision for the future, emphasizes the importance of meaningful youth engagement and urges all United Nations Member States to go beyond tokenism and strengthen youth participation in decision making.

The research findings presented in this report demonstrate how far international organizations and the global leadership have come in youth participation and how much further we must go to achieve meaningful youth engagement.

And, while the findings may seem disheartening at times, tremendous progress has been made, thanks to the tireless work of child and youth participation professionals and advocates in governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector.

It is our hope that the findings of this research will support the international global community in the multilateral system to enhance and expand on youth engagement efforts and investments. This will not just strengthen and improve current mechanisms and initiatives in youth engagement, but will also allow innovative and new opportunities to surface for true partnership with young people.

The findings in this report are a wake-up call – urging stakeholders not only to recognize the importance of youth engagement, but also to take immediate and concrete steps to implement the recommendations.

Building on all the progress to date, a new era of youth engagement in multilateralism can address the specific needs and rights of young people in the global governance system. It has the potential to strengthen democracy, promote innovation and secure equality for current and future generations.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations Türkiye, “Meaningful” Youth Involvement in Decision-Making Critical to Sustainable Future: Guterres”, United Nations Türkiye, Ankara, 20 April 2023, <<https://turkiye.un.org/en/228296-‘meaningful’-youth-involvement-decision-making-critical-sustainable-future-guterres>>, accessed 3 September 2024.
- 2 United Nations, ‘Youth 2030: The UN Youth Strategy’, n.d., <<https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/youth-un/>>, accessed 3 September 2024.
- 3 United Nations, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes – Report of the Secretary-General, A/77/CRP.1/Add.2, United Nations, New York, 23 March 2023.
- 4 Johnson, Vicky, Tessa Lewin and Mariah Cannon, ‘Learning from a Living Archive: Rejuvenating child and youth rights and participation’, REJUVENATE Working Paper 1, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK, 14 December 2020.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Lansdown, Gerison, ‘Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation’, United Nations Children’s Fund, New York, March 2018.
- 7 Checkoway, Barry, *Youth Participation and Community Change*, Routledge, New York, 2011.
- 8 Iwasaki, Yoshitaka, ‘The Role of Youth Engagement in Positive Youth Development and Social Justice Youth Development for High-Risk, Marginalised Youth’, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2016, pp. 267–278.
- 9 Crowley, Anne, ‘Is Anyone Listening? The impact of children’s participation on public policy’, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, vol. 23, no. 3, October 2015, pp. 602–621.
- 10 Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3.

References

- Afande, Francis Ofunya, William Nderitu Maina and Mathenge Paul Maina, 'Youth Engagement in Agriculture in Kenya: Challenges and prospects', *Journal of Culture, Society and Development*, vol. 7, 2015, pp. 4–19.
- Ashing, Inger, 'Youth and Youth policy – A Swedish perspective', in *Introduction to Youth Policy – Swedish and Turkish perspectives*, Swedish National Board of Youth Affairs, Stockholm, April 2013, pp. 4–12.
- Augsberger, Astraea, Mary E. Collins and Riana C. Howard, 'The Global Context of Youth Engagement: A scoping review of youth councils in municipal government', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 156, art. 107349, January 2024.
- Bernier, Anthony, ed., *Transforming Young Adult Services*, Neal-Schuman, Chicago, 2013.
- Bessant, Judith, 'Mixed Messages: Youth participation and democratic practice', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2004, pp. 387–404.
- Butler, Udi Mandel, and Kelly Teamey, 'Conclusion: Unlearning Participation', ch. 12 in *Children and Young People's Participation and Its Transformative Potential: Learning from across countries*, edited by E. Kay M. Tisdall, Andressa M. Gadda and Udi Mandel Butler, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, pp. 208–226.
- Chambers, Robert, *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for rural development*, Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1993.
- Checkoway, Barry, *Youth Participation and Community Change*, Routledge, New York, 2011.
- Checkoway, Barry, Kameshwari Pathukuchi and Janet Finn, 'Youth Participation in Community Planning: What are the benefits?', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 14, no. 2, January 1995, pp. 134–139.
- Cislaghi, Ben, *Human Rights and Community-Led Development: Lessons from Tostan*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018.
- Crowley, Anne, 'Is Anyone Listening? The impact of children's participation on public policy', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 23, no. 3, October 2015, pp. 602–621.
- de Waal, Alex, and Nicolas Argenti, eds., *Young Africa: Realising the rights of children and youth*, Africa World Press, Trenton, N.J., 2002.
- Galambos, Nancy L., et al., 'Adolescents' Subjective Age: An indicator of perceived maturity', *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1999, pp. 309–337.
- Goetz, Anne Marie, and John Gaventa, 'Bringing Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery', IDS Working Paper 138, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK, July 2001.
- Grosvenor-Alsop, Ruth Janice, Mette Frost Bertelsen and Jeremy Holland, *Empowerment in Practice: From analysis to implementation*, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2006.
- Harlan, Mary, 'Constructing Youth: Reflecting on defining youth and impact on methods', *School Libraries Worldwide*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–12.
- Harper, Caroline, Nicola Jones and Carlotta Tincati, 'Opportunities and Challenges in Promoting Policy- and Practice-Relevant Knowledge on Child Rights', Working Paper 318, Overseas Development Institute, London, July 2010.
- Hauge, Chelsey, and Jennifer Rowsell, 'Child and Youth Engagement: Civic literacies and digital ecologies', *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2020, pp. 667–672.
- Hill, Malcom, et al., 'Moving the Participation Agenda Forward', *Children & Society*, vol. 18, no. 2, April 2004, pp. 77–96.
- Ibrahim, Solava, and Sabina Alkire, 'Agency and Empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators', *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2007, pp. 379–403.
- Iwasaki, Yoshitaka, 'The Role of Youth Engagement in Positive Youth Development and Social Justice Youth Development for High-Risk, Marginalised Youth', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2016, pp. 267–278.
- Johnson, Vicky, Tessa Lewin and Mariah Cannon, 'Learning from a Living Archive: Rejuvenating child and youth rights and participation', REJUVENATE Working Paper 1, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK, 14 December 2020.
- Jones, Lisa M., and Kimberly J. Mitchell, 'Defining and Measuring Youth Digital Citizenship', *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 9, October 2016, pp. 2063–2079.
- Lansdown, Gerison, 'Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation', United Nations Children's Fund, New York, March 2018.
- Lundy, Laura, 'Voice is Not Enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2007, pp. 927–942.

- Maxwell, Joseph A., 'Designing a Qualitative Study', ch. 7 in *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*, edited by Leonard Bickman and Debra J. Rog, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2009, pp. 214–253.
- McCabe, Erin, et al., 'Youth Engagement in Mental Health Research: A systematic review', *Health Expectations*, vol. 26, no. 1, February 2023, pp. 30–50.
- McGinley, Brian, and Ann Grieve, 'Maintaining the Status Quo? Appraising the effectiveness of youth councils in Scotland', ch. 23 in *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, edited by Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 276–283.
- Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An expanded sourcebook*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1994.
- Moley, Sean, Rose Wiles and Patrick Sturgis, 'Advanced Research Methods Training in the UK: Current provision and future strategies', ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, Southampton, UK, February 2013.
- Norwegian Agency for Development Corporation, *A Framework for Analysing Participation in Development*, Norad, Oslo, 2013.
- Pickering, Christina J., et al., 'Insights on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Youth engagement through Photovoice', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 83, art. 103420, December 2022.
- Reed, Mark S., et al., 'A Theory of Participation: What makes stakeholder and public engagement in environmental management work?', *Restoration Ecology*, vol. 26, no. S1, April 2018, pp. S7–S17.
- Robinson, W. S., 'The Logical Structure of Analytic Induction', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 16, no. 6, December 1951, pp. 812–818.
- Sharma, Bhavna, 'Voice, Accountability and Civic Engagement: A conceptual overview', Discussion Paper 14, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, Oslo, August 2008.
- Shaw, Martin, *Global Society and International Relations: Sociological concepts and political perspectives*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 1994.
- Sjogren, Ashlee L., et al., 'Afterschool Engagement: A mixed methods approach to understanding profiles of youth engagement', *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2022, pp. 638–656.
- Sloam, James, 'Diversity and Voice: The political participation of young people in the European Union', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 3, August 2016, pp. 521–537.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John Turner, 'An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict', ch. 4 in *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, edited by Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
- Tisdall, E. Kay M., Andressa M. Gadda and Udi Mandel Butler, eds., *Children and Young People's Participation and Its Transformative Potential: Learning from across countries*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014.
- Tyyskä, Vappu, 'Conceptualizing and Theorizing Youth: Global perspectives', ch. 1 in *Contemporary Youth Research*, edited by Helena Helve and Gunilla Holm, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 19–30.
- United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25, United Nations, New York, 20 November 1989.
- United Nations, 'Youth', n.d., <www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>, accessed 4 September 2024.
- Villa-Torres, Laura, and Joar Svanemyr, 'Ensuring Youth's Right to Participation and Promotion of Youth Leadership in the Development of Sexual and Reproductive Health Policies and Programs', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 56, no. 1 suppl., January 2015, pp. S51–S57.

Acknowledgements

This report is produced by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight under the guidance of Bo Viktor Nylund, David Anthony and Shai Naides. This report was authored by Eugenie Mireille Kodogo and Shai Naides. Developmental editing and editorial production was managed by Sahiba Minhas Turgesen. The research design and implementation was led by Eugenie Mireille Kodogo. The workshops with youth engagement experts, which informed the guidance note, were designed and implemented by Shai Naides and Eugenie Mireille Kodogo. Thank you to our outstanding interns Ginevra Gianardi and Franck Hermann Boundin, who supported the data collection process.

We express our profound gratitude to all the young people – former and current youth delegates and ambassadors – for your input, and for the knowledge and experiences you shared. Without you this project would not have been possible. Thank you.

We are grateful to the adolescent and youth engagement practitioners within the United Nations who provided reflections and expert advice in response to the research findings, including the team at the United Nations Youth Office under the leadership of Assistant Secretary-General Felipe Paullier, which includes Hillary Bakrie, Sudha Balakrishnan, Delphine Bost, Dorris Chepkoech, Xiaoman Dong, Angga Dwi Martha, Anca Gliga, Shuo Guo, Bianca Herzog, Matthew Hunter, Volodymyr Naumenko, Romeral Ortiz Quintilla, Idil Uner and Marija Vasileva-Blazev.

Our heartfelt thanks to the UNICEF colleagues working in country offices, regional offices and headquarters: Shelly Abdool, Claire Akehurst, Yoonie Choi, Ali Danish, Natalie Esmail, Pagmasuren Ganbold, Ticiana Garcia-Tapia, Arzoo Garg, Adriana Gonzalez, Hira Hafeez-ur-Rehman, Sumaiya Iqbal, Gloria Kaberia, Eva Kaplan, Sylvia Mariettah Nabukalu Katende, Marcy Levy, Nadzeya Lukina, Roli Mahajan, Ana-lunona Mavlea, Miriam Obibi, Rebekka Perdereau, Tanya Phiri, David Ponet, Maria Jose Ravalli, Florence Roberts, Hana Sahatqija, Adam Sharpe, Priyanka Shendage, Nathalie Thomas, Irfan Ullah, Manasa Priya Vasudevan, Gavin Adam Wood and Eleanor Zeitlin. Your leadership and commitment to the meaningful engagement of adolescents and young people in the multilateral system inspires us, and your expertise has greatly enriched this report.

Thank you to all the young people, advocates and experts – past and present – who've played a role in advancing youth inclusion within the multilateral system. We hope this research will contribute to this new era of youth inclusion, engagement and leadership within the multilateral system.

Photo credits

Cover: © UNICEF/UN0364373/Aliaga Ticona

Design and copy-editing: Small World Stories

About us

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfil their potential, from early childhood through adolescence.

And we never give up.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the current and emerging questions of greatest importance for children. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represent the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development.

The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

Published by

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight

Via degli Alfani, 58

50121, Florence, Italy

Tel: (+39) 055 20 330

Email: innocenti@unicef.org

Social media: @UNICEFInnocenti on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X/Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#)

Suggested citation

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, *Voices for Impact: Meaningful youth engagement in the multilateral system*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, September 2024.

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), September 2024

for every child, answers