

Meaningful Youth Participation: what it actually means for you, your work and your organisation

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15 years ago, the Programme of Action (PoA) was signed by 179 states during the International Conference on Population and Development. One of the key promises articulated in the PoA was to increase youth participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that directly affect our daily lives. 15 years later, it's important for us to evaluate youth participation, and determine how we can move forward to achieve meaningful youth participation.

What exactly does meaningful youth participation mean?

Broadly speaking, it means the range of processes that empower young people to take an active role in all phases of decision making that affects our lives and to take up leadership roles to address and promote the issues that matter most to us. More specifically, meaningful youth participation is underpinned by a number of core principles:

1. Youth participation means more than involving young people in existing structures and processes. It requires making structural and procedural changes to adapt to the needs and realities of young people;
2. Tokenism and Exclusivity are detrimental to meaningful youth participation; Tokenism occurs when young people are invited to a process without being able to substantially influence it. Meaningful youth participation requires adults, organizations, programmes, and policy making processes to involve young people at all levels and for our contributions to be afforded the same weight as others. Exclusivity is when the same group of exceptional young people are continuously invited to participate in processes. This excludes others from participating, gaining new skills, sharing diverse perspectives and hinders sustainable youth leadership development.
3. Youth participation aims to provide a 'youth perspective' to given discussions and work, it does not mean that the young person is 'representative' of all young people, which is an extremely large, heterogeneous and diverse population.
4. Youth participation does not mean that adults have to surrender their roles, but rather work in equal partnerships with young people; Youth-adult partnerships are key to achieving meaningful youth participation;
5. Young people need more than just opportunities to participate – a commitment to on going training and capacity building is essential for effective youth participation;
6. Capacity building for adults on the importance of meaningful youth participation and how to work with young people equally important as capacity building for young people.



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Why is meaningful youth participation important?

Meaningful youth participation is important for young people, adults and society as a whole. Meaningful and effective youth participation offers several benefits:

- Gain a real understanding of young people's needs and realities. Young people understand best our own needs and realities. We know what issues affect us most. We know what our preferences are, and what kinds of messaging and programmes resonate with us. And we are also aware of our capacities and limitations, as well as our fears and desires. Programmes and policies that address young people's needs must be informed by youth perspectives. In doing so, they will be much more successful.
- Benefit for adults. Adults can gain a better understanding of youth issues and youth perspectives. Moreover, meaningful youth participation lends credibility to organizations, not only among young people, but also among the growing number of decision makers, donors and leaders who recognize the value of meaningful youth participation.
- Provide capacity building for today and tomorrow. Youth participation offers capacity building opportunities for young people to become stronger leaders and champions today and in the future. It's important to stress that young people are not only important leaders of tomorrow. Young people are critical partners and of leaders today, especially for sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Contribute to the youth sexual and reproductive health and rights field. As the largest generation of young people that the world has ever known, many of us are entering into our sexual and reproductive lives at a time when high unmet need for family planning, a lack of adequate sexuality education, as well as insufficient access to SRH services and supplies, concerning rates of STIs, including HIV, characterize the regions where youth populations are the largest. Clearly, in such a context, youth perspectives and youth participation warrant a central place at the table. And the full and effective participation of young people and youth organizations at the local, national, regional and international levels could help our society to achieve the international declarations including the Millennium Development Goals, the promotion and implementation of the World Programme of Action.

How do international declarations and conventions address youth participation?

Youth participation was included and highlighted by several international declarations, such as The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) developed in 1989, the Program of Action (PoA) developed during the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 1994, the Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS, developed during the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV and AIDS (UNGASS on HIV and AIDS) 2001.

- Article 12 of the CRC: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child..."

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- Article 13 of the CRC: “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression...”
- Basic Action 6.13 of the PoA: “Countries should aim to meet the needs and aspirations of youth, particularly in the areas of formal and non-formal education, training, employment opportunities, housing and health, thereby ensuring their integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political process and preparation for leadership roles.”
- Basic Action 6.15 of the PoA: “Youth should be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that have a direct impact on their daily lives...”
- Basic Action 7.47 of the PoA: “. . . Adolescents must be fully involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of such information and services with proper regard for parental guidance and responsibilities”.
- No. 33 of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS: “Acknowledging the particular role and significant contribution of people living with HIV and AIDS, young people and civil society actors in addressing the problem of HIV and AIDS in all its aspects, and recognizing that their full involvement and participation in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes is crucial to the development of effective responses to the HIV and AIDS epidemic.”

Moving forward

There are definitely signs that governments and civil society have made progress towards achieving greater meaningful youth participation. However, much remains to be done to mainstream meaningful youth participation and overcome tokenism and exclusivity. The aim is for youth participation to be embedded in all institutions and processes that influence our everyday lives. In order to do so, we urge you to take the following actions:

To Governments, we recommend:

- I. Develop, operationalize, evaluate national youth policies that work towards better addressing the needs of young people, especially our SRH needs;
- II. Meaningfully involve young people in all levels of policy and programme decision making especially for SRH at a national and international level;
- III. Ensure comprehensive sexuality education for young people in formal and non formal learning environments. Young people can only become meaningfully involved when equipped with sufficient knowledge.
- IV. Involve young people in planning youth friendly SRH services and in designing sexuality education curricula to meet our needs.

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To Funders, Civil Society and Governments, we recommend:

- i. Involve young people when developing strategies for youth participation and deciding the best ways to work with young people;
- ii. Support youth organizations, especially youth led organizations, through funding and providing a conducive policy environment that helps develop and sustain youth organizations;
- iii. Support research on youth issues and youth participation, using participatory research approaches that involve and empower young people;

Basically, we urge you to work in partnership with young people to build structures, systems, policies, programmes that will secure our health and rights today and for generations to come with an ultimate goal of fully implementing the ICPD PoA and achieving MDGs.

Some useful materials on youth participation

Below is other useful material about youth participation:

- *Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, Planning and Implementation*, Family Health International;
- *Setting Standards for Youth Participation*, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF);
- *Taking Young People Seriously: Consulting Young People about their Ideas and Opinions: A Handbook for Organizing Working with Young People*, The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria;
- *Youth Leadership: Recommendations for Sustainability*, developed by the Youth Coalition, aids2031, the World AIDS Campaign, GYCA and CHOICE for youth and sexuality.

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