

Why youth should be engaged in policy-making



"Normally when we need to know about something we go to the experts, but we tend to forget that when we want to know about youth and what they feel and what they want, that we should talk to them"

Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary-General

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Introducing the issue

The past decade has seen a growing recognition of the importance of youth participation in decision-making, as successful efforts by governments to engage youth have led to better policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. This, in part, has been driven by a growing consensus that youth participation has not only a demonstrated value - it is a political right. Public recognition of young people as key actors in social development processes has been strengthened through the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)⁸, the most widely ratified international agreement, which recognises that participation is a right of all children and young people.

Box I. UN mandates for youth participation

-- The World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (A/RES/50/81) recognises that the active engagement of young people themselves is central to its successful implementation and, accordingly, affirms the full and effective participation of youth in society and decision-making as one of its 10 priority areas for action. This resolution asks policy makers to "Take into account the contribution of youth in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans affecting their concerns"

-- UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/57/165 (December 2002) on Promoting Youth Employment "Encourages Member States to prepare national reviews and action plans on youth employment and to involve youth organizations and young people in this process"

-- The Commission for Social Development Resolution 2006/15 on Youth Employment and the UN General Assembly Resolutions A/RES/60/2 (2005) and A/RES/58/133 (2003) on Policies and Programmes involving Youth have a number of references to youth participation in policy making.

Source: UN Programme on Youth www.un.org/youth

"All children have a right to express their views and to have them taken into account in all matters that affect them."

The right of youth to participate in policy-making processes is also supported by a number of UN General Assembly Resolutions, including two specifically focussing on youth employment (see Box I).

Yet, far too often, the roles played by youth in

these processes are marginal. Why? Youth continue to face institutionalised prejudice in many quarters that see youth as lacking expertise, experience, capacity, or drive. Despite the increase in the number and range of mechanisms to engage youth, young participants continue to see their roles undermined by governments and policymakers, based on these perceptions.

Youth participation must lie at the centre of

⁸This increased focus on youth rights should be seen in the context of the overall movement by the international system towards a rights-based approach to development. This approach uses fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as the framework in which development policy should be crafted. (UNHCHR, 2007)

⁹Care should be taken to distinguish between the concepts of 'child' and 'youth'. Under the UNCRC, children include all people up to age of 18. The official United Nations definition of youth however is the age bracket 15-24, as interventions in favour of both children and youth may overlap for the 15-18 year old age bracket.

the creation of policies for youth. Just as the recipient of any policy must be engaged to ensure their concerns are effectively addressed, youth are no exception. They must be viewed as partners in devising solutions to common concerns. Rather than being viewed as a problem or risk to be contained

or solved, youth should be recognised as social actors with skills and capacities to bring about constructive solutions to societal issues that directly affect them. Policy makers should not only invite young people into policy discussions but also listen and act upon their advice.

The policy processes that have been most effective are those which have committed to empowering young people by working with them to allow their own experiences to inform the development of appropriate interventions and services¹⁰.

Focusing on employment

The same patchy results with regard to youth participation in policy-making initiatives generally can be attributed to the specific topic of this guide, youth employment. Whilst there is certainly no “one-

size-fits all” solution to the complex and multifaceted challenge of youth employment (see Box II), the YCG sees the lack of substantive youth participation as a key factor contributing to flawed policy development.

Box II. Youth employment as an entry point in the development agenda

The International Labour Office (ILO) has estimated that youth unemployment is at an all time high; 85 million youth are unemployed, representing 44 percent of the total number of unemployed persons worldwide. In many economies, young people are more than three times as likely as adults to be out of work. Open unemployment is however only the tip of the iceberg – the ILO estimates that an additional 300 million plus youth can be categorised as “working poor” meaning that they are living below the US\$2 a day poverty line, despite working. These youth are often forced to work in deplorable conditions, for meagre pay, trapped in the limitations of the informal economy.

According to the ILO a lack of decent work, if experienced at an early age, often permanently compromises a person’s future employment prospects and can trap youth in a vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

Given these factors, youth employment offers a strong bridge between the development and security agenda embodied in the Millennium Declaration. Decent and productive work will enable the approximately 1.2 billion young people who will become of working age in the next decade to lift themselves out of poverty, will allow young parents to save for their children’s futures, and provide a sense of purpose and pride, reducing the potential for socially and personally destructive behaviours.

Indeed, in its 2001 Global Employment Trends for Youth report, the ILO estimated that halving the world’s youth unemployment rate would add an estimated US\$ 2.2 (4.4%) to 3.5 (7.0%) trillion (based on 2003 values) to the global GDP.

Source: ILO Global Employment Trends for Youth 2006. A detailed listing of the specific disadvantages youth face towards the labour market can be found in Box XI.

¹⁰For example, UNAIDS/WHO reports in its 2006 AIDS Epidemic Update that most of the reported progress in slowing down the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic could be attributed to successful youth programming.

It is clear that any proposed solutions to the youth employment challenge which do not take onboard the expectations, frustrations and aspirations of young people in relation to the labour market, will struggle to meet the needs of youth.

As part of the 2007 UNDESA / YEN Review of National Action Plans on youth employment, the YEN's YCG produced an analysis of the degree of youth participation in the development of these 41 plans, or progress reports towards plans, submitted to the UN. Their report highlighted that only eight countries mentioned the involvement of youth in their submissions.¹¹ The evidence from these submissions indicates that:

- There are governments which have made some efforts to consult with youth organisations in the NAP process. These consultations, however, have often been passive and time bound in nature - through meetings and surveys that give youth the opportunity to offer their ideas and opinions but rarely involve them further in the policy process. They are not given equal standing with other stakeholders in defining policies and no attempts have been made to ensure their participation on a long-term basis.
- There are certain governments which take the involvement of youth organisations in youth employment policies more seriously. This is demonstrated by the active involvement of youth organisations in the policy-making process through expressions of

their views, testimonies and opinions. This engagement, in cases, is an ongoing process facilitated through the creation of sustainable engagement mechanisms, such as youth advisory groups or a youth 'seat' in national coordinating structures tasked with designing and implementing policies.

In drawing conclusions from this analysis, the YCG suggested that whilst it was evident that some governments are meeting their commitment to involve youth in the development of National Action Plans, the majority of governments do not involve youth in the preparation of youth employment policies nor in their implementation. These governments, for the most part, continue to rely on traditional stakeholder groupings, such as line ministries, workers and employers' organisations, often to the exclusion of civil society actors.

As such, the YCG recommends that significantly more effort must be made not only to promote youth employment as a central development issue, but also to ensure the active involvement of youth and youth organisations in policy development at all levels. A number of country examples of youth engagement in youth employment policy-making processes can be found in Section B of this guide.

What is the added value of youth participation?

On a fundamental level it is clear that youth have the best understanding of the realities of their own lives (whether it is education, health or the challenges associated with finding a decent job) and as such have much to offer policy makers. Designing a youth policy involving young people themselves stands a much greater chance of

success, as interventions will have greater ownership and legitimacy amongst youth. Ignoring this dynamic can have potentially negative consequences.

Broadly speaking, youth participation encourages youth to become active members of a democratic society. By involving and em-

¹¹It was evident during the drafting of this report that a number of other Governments do have a progressive approach to youth participation but could not be mentioned as they have yet to submit a report to the UN.

powering youth through the political process, young people develop important skills and improve self-confidence. They also gain a greater understanding of human rights and governance that is important in both newly formed and well-established democracies.

For youth themselves, active and equal participation in decisions affecting their lives provides hope and dignity, fostering a better understanding of community issues and a sense of inclusion and belonging. Such participation benefits governments, families, and societies as a whole by providing civic role models to other youth whilst counteracting the immense potential social costs that can be created through apathy, frustration and social exclusion of young people.

Youth represent some of the most dynamic, creative and talented people in today's societies, yet at the same time they often represent some of the most vulnerable and most powerless in the labour market. There is a paramount need for policymakers to 'get it right' by and for youth. This is vital in order to meet young people's needs today, and also to create the adequate pre-conditions for their future impact on society as parents, civic leaders, employers, workers and politicians. In order to get it right, active and equal engagement with youth in policy-making efforts is essential. By encouraging youth to become active participants in policy development they can become long-time advocates in the fight against un(der)employment, as concerned employers and employees in later life.

What are the consequences of not involving youth?

Despite some examples of progress, for the most part there is still a failure by decision-makers to recognise the value of young people's contributions to programme development and policy-making. The perception that policy-making is an activity that is for "experts" and that young citizens do not have the necessary skills, expertise or knowledge, continues to prevail.

Equally there is a persistence of stakeholder attitudes which frustrate or highly circumscribe youth participation, particularly in patriarchal or highly stratified societies.

Furthermore, there is often a lack of knowledge and skills on the part of decision-makers about how to increase involvement of young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives.

The consequences of not involving youth can range from the development of ineffective policy to more serious consequences for society as a result of the consistent exclusion or

alienation of youth.

When youth and youth organisations are not consulted in the policy-making process, their needs are likely to be ignored or insufficiently addressed. With regards to the employment issue, there are several cases in which failure to seek youth input has resulted in serious consequences, as most recently seen in France (see Box III).

The exclusion of youth from policy-making processes and power structures, whether deliberate or unintentional, can create significant tensions in society which can manifest itself in forms that represent a serious threat to the social fabric, such as crime and violence. In the worst cases, a poor economic and social environment can foster conditions in which youth without prospects are manipulated by leaders, and are recruited or forced into armed conflicts, both within their own borders and also in neighbouring countries (see Box IV).

Box III: Contract Première Embauchée - France

In an attempt to address rising youth unemployment, French policymakers introduced the Contract Première Embouchée (CPE) (First Employment Contract) in early 2006. Focusing on young people under the age of 26, this law made it easier for employers to hire youth on short-term contracts, while simultaneously allowing them to terminate these contracts without notice within the first two years of employment.

This law sparked nation-wide protests and strikes; students from high schools and universities forged alliances with the trade union movement and other social groups and took to the streets of major cities; and in some instances, violence erupted. Their grievances centred on a perception that the government rushed the policy through without adequate consultation with its intended beneficiaries - youth themselves.

Critical reaction against the government was based on the popular belief that the law only served to institutionalize the existing situation of employment precarité (precariousness), which has been a growing concern in France for some years. Following a weekend of protests in early April 2006, which saw 2 million youth and their supporters gather in France's largest cities to demand that the law be revoked, the government backed down and rescinded the law.

The case of CPE shows that failing to develop policy without the appropriate consultative process involving all key stakeholders can result in interventions that are ineffective, unpopular, and ultimately very difficult to implement, regardless of their perceived merits. By contrast, Germany has a flexible youth contract law very similar to the CPE, but has witnessed none of the opposition seen in France, largely due to what was perceived as a more extensive and transparent consultation process with all stakeholders, including youth.

Box IV. Youth unemployment and insecurity

The link between youth unemployment and insecurity has been given prominence in recent years. In 2003 a UN Security Council mission to West Africa reported that "In every county visited, the mission heard about the problem of unemployment, particularly among young people, and how this was a perennial source of instability in West Africa". Furthermore, a November 2006 report of the UN Secretary General (S/2006/922) on the United Nations Office in Sierra Leone, stressed that the problem of youth unemployment and marginalisation remained the most immediate threat to the country's fragile stability.

There is also a growing political recognition of this challenge. During a 2005 YEN High-Level Dialogue a Rwandan State Secretary stated: "A lot of Rwanda's problems in the past have had to do with young people who are uneducated, unemployed, and unemployable. This meant that they were fertile ground for manipulation and for misuse by the selfish politicians that led to the 1994 genocide".

In December 2005, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) produced a report, Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurity in West Africa, highlighting these linkages and citing the threat posed by the growing numbers of youths who lack prospects of decent work, and the desperation that accompanies this, to the future of the entire sub-region. In response to these concerns, a YEN Office for West Africa (YEN-WA) was set up in 2006 to assist governments in addressing these challenges.

Which youth?

Defining Youth

Internationally, there is no generalised definition of the term “Youth”. According to the United Nations definition (United Nations, 1992), youth comprises young people aged between 15 and 24 years, a definition which will be used for the purposes of this guide¹²

In general terms, youth can be defined as the stage in the life cycle before adult life begins.

The definition that countries adopt is probably affected by factors such as the average age at which people are expected to play adult roles in the community, as a result of the progressive acquisition of civil, economic and social rights. The relatively wide age-span suggests that the process of achieving an independent, self-sustaining livelihood can take a relatively long time, particularly in poorer societies.

Ensuring Representation

Youth are not a homogenous group; they confront diverse realities. Differences in age, sex, experience, marital status, interests and preferences, family background, income, and religion, amongst others, can create a wide gap between the needs, aspirations and expectations of youth all over the world. The options and constraints they face vary widely as well.

Any policy focusing on youth must reflect the cultural diversities of each society. The “Lisbon Declaration¹³” recognises *“that the formulation and implementation of strategies, policies, programmes and actions in favour of young women and young men are the responsibility of each country and should take into account the economic, social and environmental diversity of conditions in each country, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions of its people, and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”* Therefore it is important

that young people participating in decision making represent those most affected by the decisions taken. Cultural sensitivities and traditions must be taken into consideration when trying to establish an atmosphere conducive to the involvement of all youth. This presents a challenge even for mainstream youth organisations trying to reach marginalised young people.

Given the relative ease of organisation, and based on resource constraints, youth consultations are often drawn from urban populations, and are frequently held in the official administrative languages of the country, for example English rather than Swahili in East Africa. The views represented can be dominated by educated and privileged urbanised youth and the voices of the poor and unemployed majority (both urban and rural), are often lost. Consultations based on this dynamic are much less likely to lead to successful outcomes.

¹²Furthermore since this publication is discussing employment issues, 15 is referenced as the lower cut-off for the youth age bracket as that represents the minimum age of work as per the ILO Convention 138 pertaining to Minimum Working Age (1973).

¹³The Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes (12 August 1998) was the outcome of the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, convened by the Government of the Portuguese Republic in cooperation with the United Nations, gathered in Lisbon from 8 to 12 August 1998.

Successful youth policy depends on effective representation. All parties should be accountable both to themselves and their peers or representative networks; they must not act for an individual need but for the collective good. It is essential that all parties recognise the need for constructive cooperation and communication.

The differing views and abilities of youth should also be recognised and respected. Youth representation in policy-making should also seek to guard against excluding the interests of youth, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds based on factors such as gender, ethnicity and social situation¹⁴.

National Youth Councils or similar structures can offer effective mechanisms to ensure representative youth participation. A national youth council can be seen as a youth NGO platform uniting youth and student NGOs in a country to represent the views of a broader spectrum of youth. Over 100 Member States have such national youth NGO platforms, but many of them need to be strengthened.

The existence of a National Youth Council (NYC) is not always a guarantee of adequate and effective youth representation. It is critical that NYCs be non-governmental and independent in accordance with the principles of an open and democratic society. Unfortunately the ability of many NYCs to impartially represent the perspectives of youth are limited by their political linkages, such as having their funding allocated on the basis of government conditionality and their being staffed from youth wings of the ruling political parties.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ), a member organisation of the YEN's Youth Consultative Group (YCG), which represents the interests of NYCs in more than 30 countries, believes that the independence of NYCs is essential for their legitimate functioning and in 2001 drew up the following list of rights and privileges for effective functioning of NYCs:

- The right to choose their own representative organisational structure;
- The right to elect its own leadership and representatives through democratic procedures;
- The right to determine composition of statutory bodies and working structures;
- The right to take decisions on issues of membership;
- The right to select its working methods, including the right to have closed meetings for its members only, to set its own agenda, determine frequency and dates of meetings, etc.;
- The privilege of accountability only to its own members; and
- The privilege of financial support from government given freely without infringing upon the rights mentioned above.

Source: 2001 European Youth Forum PadYf'cb'h Y Independence of National Youth 7 ci bWg

In the formulation of the YEN Youth Consultative Group in 2004, the issue of representation was closely addressed. The YCG consists of representatives of 13 youth organisations drawn from a wider pool of 30 organisations. These organisations decided amongst themselves which 13 organisations would represent the wider group. The composition of the YCG reflects the global spread and representation of youth organisations and includes student organisations, political groupings, regional youth platforms and employers' and workers' associations.

To help facilitate adequate representation, the YCG member organisations have the mandate to review their composition on an ongoing basis, to replace organisations which are unable to meet their commitments and to include new youth structures which meet the commonly agreed membership criteria (see Box V below). The YCG also strives to strike a balance between developed and developing country representation and similarly with regard to gender.

¹⁴A comprehensive listing of disadvantaged or vulnerable grouping of youth can be found in the World Youth Report 2003. A detailed listing of the specific disadvantages youth face towards the labour market can be found in Box XI of this guide.

Box V. YCG Membership Criteria

The Youth Organisations should meet the following criteria:

- Have democratic processes and have legitimacy and credibility
- Be a membership based youth organisation (assuring a link between the local, the national, the regional and the global levels)
- Be accountable and transparent in their activities and programmes at the various levels
- Have constructive, positive common goals in relation to youth employment
- Demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency impacts
- Be committed to a sustainable global cooperation in relation to youth issues
- Be respectful of cultural and ideological diversity and human rights

Source: YCG Terms of Reference, 2006