



Meaningful youth participation towards 2030 and beyond

Legitimate national youth councils as platforms for youth participation and facilitators of sustainable change



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WHO ARE WE?

DUF - The Danish Youth Council was founded in 1940 and is an interest and service organization for 77 children and youth organizations in Denmark. The 77 member organizations encompass 600.000 young people all over Denmark. DUF is democratically organized and led by its member organizations.

DUF's purpose is to strengthen young people's engagement and participation in civil society and in democracy locally, nationally and internationally.

In the broader societal context, DUF works to ensure that the unique character of youth organizations is recognized and works cross-politically to highlight the interests of youth organizations in relation to politicians and public authorities.

WHY READ THIS PIECE?

Dear reader,

With the 2030 Agenda, we have witnessed the broadest and most ambitious plan for our planet and its people. Transforming our world is not an easy task. This means that we all have a role to play in creating a sustainable world. The 2030 Agenda reaffirms the crucial role that young people play on the transformative road to 2030 and beyond:

”Children and young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world”¹

While the countries of the world have agreed on this, young people continue to face severe barriers to leveraging their potential to be such agents of change. As evidenced in the 2018 Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, the largest global youth generation is being excluded from systems of governance rather than acknowledged as partners for peace and sustainable development².

The Progress Study highlights **national youth councils** as potential vehicles for increased legitimate youth participation and representation in decision-making processes provided that the national youth councils are legitimate. This has led DUF – The Danish Youth Council to conduct a study on how national youth councils can ensure meaningful youth participation and representation going towards 2030 and beyond. Based on this DUF study, this piece presents key findings and key recommendations on three essential themes:

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INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE OF WALKING THE TALK

WHY PROMOTE MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE SDG ERA?

With the adoption of *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, leaders of the world and a global constituency have committed to achieve 17 ambitious goals to ensure sustainable development for people, planet and prosperity. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges young people as an important constituency, and it addresses concerns that are prevalent to young people all over the world. With the key principle of **'leaving no one behind'**, the 2030 Agenda calls on leaders to provide an environment where children and youth, among others, can enjoy the full realization of their rights and capabilities. Importantly, the 2030 Agenda recognizes young people as critical agents of change in all aspects of sustainable change. This is echoed in the UN Strategy on Youth (*Youth 2030*) which³

- Envisions a world that recognizes young people's agency, resilience and their positive contributions as agents of change
- Aims to ensure youth's engagement and participation in the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda and other relevant global agendas and frameworks

WHAT REALITY TELLS US ...

In the light of the 2030 Agenda, it is deeply concerning that young people continue to face severe barriers to meaningful and equal participation in decision-making processes. Across

→ WHAT CONSTITUTES YOUTH?

There is no one universal definition of what constitutes 'youth' or a 'young person', but definitions are usually made by defining an age bracket. Youth is a demographic and a social category which is transitional by nature as young people outgrow their youth. Youth is not a homogenous demographic but constitutes a microcosm of wider society with inherent diversity.

→ WHY IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION CRUCIAL TO ACHIEVING THE 2030 AGENDA?

Youth participation is **paramount to 'leaving no one behind'**, and the aim of **'reaching the furthest behind first'** calls for the prioritization of broad inclusion of young people of all genders, ethnic origin, religions etc. Youth participation is **foundational for achieving SDG 16 commitments** to effective, accountable and inclusive institutions and decision-making. Young people are **resourceful partners and crucial catalyzers of progress** on the achievement of the SDGs.

the globe, young people occupy very few seats at the table; for example, young people (under 30) make up less than 2% of national MPs.⁴ Even when formal governance structures incorporate young people, this does not automatically translate into acceptance and inclusion of their views and capacities. Indeed, young people's influence on decision-making is routinely curtailed by informal organizational rules and social norms devaluing their opinions. A 2014 study testifies to this:

”young people are more likely to be consulted in the early stages of governance initiatives in order to ‘tick boxes’ on inclusiveness, but young people’s involvement in ongoing reviews is limited, with few chances to provide critical inputs”⁵

As shown in the 2018 Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, the absence of meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes has unequivocal effects:

”Throughout the world, young people [...] expressed that they have lost faith and trust in their Governments, the international community and systems of governance that they feel excluded from, contributing to a strong and ongoing sense of injustice. This must be addressed in order to support and benefit from young people’s contributions to peace, and to realize the potential of 1.8 billion young people”⁶

Such findings emphasize the urgency of sharpening the focus on *meaningful* youth participation. For youth to realize their potential as defining agents of change for sustainable development, the global community must walk the talk. Commitments made by the global community must be translated into action. **This involves identifying and amplifying effective mechanisms for meaningful participation of young people from all walks of life, at all levels of governance and at all stages of initiatives towards the achievement of the SDGs.**

This paper showcases how national youth councils can be mechanisms of meaningful youth participation and important partners on accelerating achievement of the SDGs.

➔ WHAT IS MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION ?

Youth participation is important to **all issue areas, not only so-called youth issues**. Meaningful participation must be **sustained** in the entire process of any initiative: policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, review etc. The reach of young people involved must be **broad and representative**. Young people should not only be ‘included’ but allowed space to **participate and have an influence** on par with other stakeholders. This means that young people should not only have a voice but also **agency**.



**LEGITIMATE
PLATFORMS FOR
YOUTH**

LEGITIMATE PLATFORMS FOR YOUTH

KEY MESSAGES

Legitimate national youth councils or youth council-like networks can be unique vehicles for the participation, representation and influence of young people.

- National youth councils with broad reach and legitimacy, internal democratic governance structures are manifestations of inclusive and accountable institutions and essential to ensuring the ‘*leave no one behind*’ principle
- National youth councils provide platforms that unite youth organizations and empower young people to participate in democratic processes and can access information and opportunities
- Through advocacy work, national youth councils are important intermediaries between young people and duty-bearers, strengthening the voice of youth and relevance vis-à-vis duty bearers

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCILS AS VEHICLES FOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

To ensure meaningful youth participation towards 2030 and beyond, it is necessary to invite young people into existing formalized spaces and ensure that they can participate on an equal level in these spaces. At the same time, duty-bearers must acknowledge, approach and collaborate with the various spaces which young people have created themselves. This requires institutionalized mechanisms that can bridge young people with formal governance structures. **National youth councils can constitute important intermediaries filling this function – provided that such councils are legitimate platforms for youth participation and representation.**

➔ WHAT IS A NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL?

A national youth council is typically a representative body made up of youth organizations or young people in a country. Youth councils can (and do) take many forms and shapes and must be fitted to the context of the country. Youth associations or networks of youth member organizations may also function and be perceived as such.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A LEGITIMATE NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL?

Whether a national youth council is (and is perceived as) a legitimate platform for youth representation and participation is, to a certain extent, dependent on context. However, with a point of departure in the well-established national youth councils in the three Scandinavian countries Denmark – The Danish Youth Council (DUF) –, Norway – The Norwegian Children and Youth Council (LNU) –, and Sweden – The National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU) –, the following best practice characteristics can be identified:

- **Broad reach and inclusion:** Having a large member base which includes a wide variety of member organizations ensures that the national youth council represents a significant number of young people and reflects the diversity of young people in the given population. If feasible in the given political climate this also means including youth wings of political parties from the entire political spectrum.
- **Internal democratic governance:** Transparent and inclusive democratic policies, structures and procedures ensure that all member organizations can participate on an equal basis and that (s)elected representatives hold a strong democratic mandate.
- **Political independence and impartiality:** Being independent from the government and impartial to party politics is essential for national youth councils to maintain a politically neutral position as a strong advocate for youth and youth only.
- **Good relations with the political establishment:** National youth councils must nurture good relations with duty-bearers and decision makers to achieve political change and facilitate access for young people to interact with duty-bearers.
- **Approach to youth:** National youth councils must ‘practice what they preach’ by working for the benefit of youth with youth as partners and be shaped by youth as leaders. Among other things, youth-to-youth methods are at the heart of this approach.
- **Strong support and relations to member organizations:** Maintaining regular communication with member organizations and providing support and facilitating events/meetings that reflect the needs of the member organizations enable national youth councils to create a community among diverse young people. This also helps garnering youth around common issues.

Importantly, national youth councils must obtain (and maintain) legitimacy both in the eyes of young people but also in the eyes of other actors in society. **Legitimacy does not rest on any one characteristic alone but is multi-dimensional and demands a balanced and comprehensive approach engaging with a variety of constituencies.** The legitimacy of national youth councils therefore relies on many factors spanning internal democratic structures, broad reach, capacity-building and service provision towards young people as well as advocacy towards duty-bearers and decision makers.

Case

A BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE: DUF - THE DANISH YOUTH COUNCIL

To ensure broad reach and inclusion DUF has **77 member organizations covering 600.000 individual members**. These are **very different types of youth organizations** varying from political, scout, religious, student, exchange, social, disabled and cultural youth organizations, covering almost all areas of voluntary organizational life in Denmark (except sports organizations, as they are organized under a specific sports-umbrella).

Every second year **the member organizations directly elect the leadership of DUF** – the board, the chairperson, vice chairperson and the executive committee – at the general assembly. Thereby the board is given a mandate to act on behalf of the 77 member organizations and their 600.000 individual members in matters outlined in the goals, principles and policies decided at the general assembly and outlined in the bylaws. The board has the de facto decision-making competence and is actively engaged in DUF's daily work through committees, working groups, strategic processes, policy development, representation etc. This ensures that **DUF is governed by and with young people**.

Member organizations must live up to **a set of specified membership criteria ensuring their legitimacy**. To become a member, organizations must have a purpose that reaches beyond the organization's members and that is engaged in society (aims to make societal changes). Among other things, organizations must have full self-determination, local branches in 3 of 5 regions in Denmark, and the organization must be based on local work and have a democratic internal structure. Also, the organization must work in correspondence with DUF's purpose. This means that **the member organizations, as well as DUF, stand on a foundation of democratic, representative structures**.

Within DUF there are **clear institutionalized processes for working with the member organizations** and the board. The DUF secretariat has a continuous and close contact to the member organizations, among other things through counselling about national and international projects and grants, a wide range of trainings and courses, as well as DUF's 'democracy and youth' projects.

Finally, DUF is **politically independent** and has a strong standing in Danish society. It is an old organization that has a **value-based, continuous and close engagement with youth, noticeable experience and results as well as long-term constructive relations to the political establishment, media, civil society actors and international actors**. Combined with the factors above, this means that DUF is widely recognized as a legitimate platform for youth nationally and internationally.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FIT FOR THE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF YETT

Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) is a youth networking organization committed to the full participation of young people in sustainable development through advocacy and capacity building of youth organizations in Zimbabwe. YETT currently has 33 member organizations and is governed by a board of trustees that provides oversight to the operations of YETT. YETT is seen as legitimate both by the young people with which it has an interface and by duty-bearers. YETT thereby functions as an intermediary between youth and duty-bearers and works effectively to further youth participation in Zimbabwe.

In a highly politicized environment, YETT has managed to remain **politically impartial**. YETT skillfully navigates the political environment with great sensitivity and demonstrates intimate awareness of when, how and how much boundaries can be pushed. This is essential when working in highly politicized environments characterized by low trust in the political establishment.

YETT applies a **holistic approach towards young people and its member organizations** addressing the variety of issues occupying youth. This is both reflected in YETT's activities and in its portfolio of member organizations. Contrary to other youth networks in Zimbabwe, YETT is inclusive of small and grassroots youth organizations to which it offers support and capacity-building to assist them develop. YETT meets its member organizations and young people, at large, at eye-level and works with them on their own terms. This comes from a targeted focus on developing **youth-friendly methods** which are relatable to young people. Moreover, YETT **manages to accommodate the great diversity and facilitate safe spaces for all its young constituencies**, which is an essential skill in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country such as Zimbabwe. In an interview with DUF, a member of a YETT member organization says:

"Diversity is respected [in YETT]. Many employees speak Ndebele also to include these young people and address tribal issues. This sensitivity is not present in other networks. This makes the YETT network more open and effective. They create a socially safe environment where youth can identify and can then better harness [their potentials]."

Strong relations and continuous engagement with youth has enabled YETT to position itself as a relevant sparring partner for decision-makers, providing valuable up-to-date knowledge on youth issues. YETT is **considered a professional actor with expert knowledge within the youth field**. In turn, tactfully navigating the political system and nurturing **good relations with duty-bearers enables YETT to provide young people with a platform for engaging with duty-bearers**.

To work effectively towards 2030 and ensure broad reach, it is **important to support national youth councils building up their capacity to be legitimate and representative platforms for young people.**

POINTS OF AWARENESS

For a national youth council to build and maintain legitimacy, it is important to be mindful of several aspects:

- The foundation for a national youth council's claim to represent young people is that it i.a. is broadly known and relatable to young people. **To avoid becoming an elitist project and being detached from the everyday lives of young people**, national youth councils must continuously engage with young people at eye-level, be responsive to young people's needs, and ensure their work is youth-driven.
- **Having an internal democratic governance structure and similar requirements to member organizations may pose a barrier for some youth organizations to become members** as they find it difficult to comprehend and comply with the requirements. This adversely filters out youth organizations that are less consolidated and have lower capacities at the outset. To mitigate this, national youth councils can help youth organizations build capacity and become eligible for membership.
- Many national youth councils are faced with volatile political landscapes with little transparency. Lacking political will and resource allocation towards youth participation is a common challenge. Having strong relations with duty-bearers may generate mistrust among young people, which can compromise the youth council's legitimacy towards its constituency. **Doing impactful advocacy work while maintaining a politically impartial stance is a fine balancing act** for every national youth council
- National youth councils must be independent from political parties and suchlike in order to **cater to, balance and represent a diverse base of youth organizations**. It requires resources and capacities to handle differences in interests and setting shared priorities and agendas. However, if this is successfully managed, national youth council representatives can speak with an amplified voice vis-à-vis duty-bearers.

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BECOMING CRUCIAL PARTNERS ON THE SDGs

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KEY MESSAGES

Legitimate national youth councils are crucial partners to youth, governments and UN agencies for accelerating deliverance on the SDGs.

- By facilitating platforms for youth organizations working on issues pertaining to the SDGs to, national youth councils support youth in exchanging knowledge and networking, thus contributing to integrated approaches to deliverance on the SDGs
- National youth councils are important intermediaries between governments and UN agencies to ensure young people's contributions are included in planning, implementation and reporting on the SDGs
- Governments and UN agencies can work with national youth councils to increase the awareness and capacity of young people to work on the SDGs and thereby overcome the challenges they face
- National youth councils can target advocacy to push national SDG implementation, ensure a conducive space for youth organizations to work with the SDGs and monitor national implementation engaging young people in holding governments accountable to their commitments

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE INNOVATORS ON THE SDGs

As young people's awareness of the SDGs is picking up pace so are their targeted contributions to solving the challenges and achieving the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda. During the 18 months between the first (2017) and the second (2018) *Youth Solutions Report*, showcasing 50 selected innovative youth-led solutions to achieve the SDGs, the nature of the submitted projects illustrate a heightened awareness about "*the need to take SDG interactions into account*".⁷ However, the dominant challenges identified in the 2017 report continue to loom large for young entrepreneurs in 2018. This calls for targeted efforts to create more enabling conditions for harnessing young people's creative approaches to delivering on the SDGs.

➔ LOCALIZING THE SDGs: YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AS KEY ACTORS

Many young people are not aware of why and how they should engage with the SDGs. However, when youth organizations relate their work to the SDGs, they insert this work into a shared national and global agenda. This facilitates better communication with duty-bearers and UN agencies because it enables them to speak a shared language and to speak to national priorities. Thereby, the SDG framework is an avenue for young people to make themselves heard. **Youth participation is a key mechanism for forging connections between SDG implementation internationally, nationally and locally.**

This builds local ownership and community-level capacity to monitor SDG implementation. Having a shared framework for action that applies locally, nationally and globally can provide youth organizations with a strategic frame within which to advance their work. It facilitates a connection between the local, national and global. Regarding the potential of SDGs as a shared framework for action, a member of a YETT member organization says:

“It helps streamline and analyze our work and determine how to do things. It gives direction [...] You are working with the right people, targeting the rights stakeholders and knowing how to mobilize resources. It is not just an organizational goal, it becomes a regional, national and global goal”

CHALLENGES TO YOUTH'S CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE ROAD TO 2030

A starting point for mobilizing young people to deliver on the SDGs is that they are aware of and can relate to the 2030 Agenda. However, in many countries, **awareness levels of the SDGs among young people remain fairly low.** It is essential that young people understand and buy into the 2030 Agenda in order to leverage its transformative potentials.

As youth organizations already work on the issues captured in the SDGs, the easiest way to inscribe one's organization into the 2030 Agenda is to apply the relevant 'SDG labels' to the organization's work. This forfeits the transformative and catalytic opportunities of the 2030 Agenda. The Agenda offers a blueprint for framing, rethinking, innovating and linking activities and programs and discovering synergies and partnerships. **Working systematically and strategically on and with the SDGs demands knowledge, capacities and supportive structures.**

SDG progress and monitoring are first and foremost the responsibility of national (and local) governments. It is key that governments create an inclusive process and a conducive space for youth organizations (and civil society at large) to engage in SDG work streams. **Failure from governments' side to localize the SDGs and ensure sustained and broad involvement of young people** is detrimental to young people's motivation to engage with the SDGs.

Young people can become resourceful partners for delivering on the SDGs only if governments establish a conducive framework. **If SDG implementation occurs in a top-down**

manner without substantially involving young people, and progress fails to manifest on the ground, the SDGs will be perceived as detached from the lived realities of young people with no real local impact. This speaks to the importance of involving young people as partners at a national and subnational level from the outset of SDG localization and planning and throughout implementation, monitoring and review.

Another key challenge for youth organizations to scale up work on the SDGs is **lack of access to funding and uncertainty of available funding mechanisms**. National youth councils can ameliorate this challenge by administering funds to youth organizations and by supporting member organizations to apply for and administer funds. This requires close collaborations with partners and governments who can allocate such funds.

Finally, **youth-led solutions to the SDGs are not recognized unless they get sufficient visibility and acknowledgement**. This requires exposure to the public and to key stakeholders, duty-bearers and decision-makers. In this way youth organizations can become valuable partners to governments and other stakeholders for delivering on the SDGs.

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCILS AS PARTNERS FOR YOUTH'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SDGs

While the above challenges are present in most contexts, national youth councils can be crucial partners for young people, governments and other SDG implementing actors. Specifically, the establishment of effective partnerships between national youth councils creates a space for knowledge-sharing and mutual capacity-building on the SDGs, enabling youth councils to support youth organizations in localizing and leveraging the 2030 Agenda in their contexts.



THE SDG INITIATIVE IN DUF: PROMOTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ON THE SDGs

In 2016 through targeted advocacy and by channeling the views of young Danes to Danish policy makers, DUF played a crucial role in the inclusion of the pioneering **informal SDG 18 on “Strengthening, including and engaging with young people” into the Danish Development Strategy, thus prioritizing youth engagement as a crosscutting issue.**

Since then, DUF’s commitment to supporting youth in delivering on the SDGs and promoting youth’s contributions in national and global forums has only grown stronger. In 2019, DUF launched its **new international ‘SDG Initiative’ which emphasizes DUF’s position as a national and global actor on the SDGs and on youth participation, representation and influence.** The SDG Initiative contributes to DUF’s overall work with the SDGs, but focuses on SDG16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for action). The initiative is built around three interconnected and mutually reinforcing components:

- **Strategic activities** that strengthen youth organizations’ work with the SDGs locally, nationally and globally
- **Cooperation with and capacity building of national youth councils in the Global South** aimed at mutually strengthening the national youth councils’ ability to act as legitimate and democratic platforms for youth representation and to support youth-led work with the SDGs, as well as mutual exchange of experiences between North-South, South-South and North-North organizations
- **Global policy and advocacy for the youth agenda**, including youth representation, youth engagement in the SDGs and inclusion of young people from the Global South in global decision-making processes

The launch of the SDG Initiative marks a committed effort to supporting youth-led work on the SDGs as well as partnering with other national youth councils to promote a unifying and legitimate voice for young people.

Recognizing its potential as an enabler of youth participation, DUF has also taken initiatives to support its member youth organizations’ work on the SDGs. Many member organizations have put great efforts into ‘localizing’ and making the SDGs relevant in their organizational contexts. Consequently, among DUF’s members, innovative SDG projects and activities are emerging, each with characteristics that correspond to the given organization’s identity, purpose, member base etc.

With the SDG initiative, DUF **leverages national youth councils’ position as intermediaries between young people and duty-bearers and seeks to address a number of the challenges faced by youth organizations and national youth councils in the Global South to working on the SDGs.**





**YOUTH MUST
HAVE A SEAT
AT THE TABLE
IN GLOBAL
DECISION-MAKING**

YOUTH MUST HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE IN GLOBAL DECISION-MAKING

KEY MESSAGES

With their democratic set-up and local embeddedness, legitimate national youth councils' have a unique role in promoting youth participation in regional and global governance structures

- Based on a legitimate member base of locally based youth organizations, national youth councils are well positioned to also promote the participation and voices of young people in regional and global governance
- National youth councils working on both the local, national and global level are critical enablers of bridge-building between local youth activism and global agendas
- National youth councils can facilitate democratic selection of young representatives, who are locally anchored, representative and enjoy legitimacy among a broad constituency, to international governance forums, e.g. through the youth delegate model
- 'Best practice' national youth councils can advantageously contribute to promote those best practices to national, regional and global stakeholders and participate in knowledge sharing, collaborations and capacity building of networks

➔ HOW DOES YOUTH PARTICIPATE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE?

- **As national youth delegates:** Young people participate in meetings as part of the national delegation. In 2018, 38 countries sent national youth delegates to the UN General Assembly. The scheme and selection process vary from country to country
- **As one-of speakers at meetings:** Young people are invited often by a national government or a UN agency. The young person is commonly invited to recount her/his powerful personal story
- **As appointed or selected youth experts:** Young people take part in youth panels or advisory bodies. Almost every UN agency has youth experts commenting on programming. These are commonly selected from the pool of young people who are in the UN agency's own interface
- **As part of civil society organizations or representatives for youth organizations from the civil society:** Young people can participate through their membership of or affiliation with civil society organizations or as representatives of youth-led organizations
- **As members of specific time-bound programs:** Young people are often by selection part of various initiatives with specific focus. An example is UNDP's 16x16 initiative which supports 16 youth-led organizations, movements and networks who contribute to the implementation of SDG 16

Recent decades have seen a move towards stronger awareness of including young people in global and regional governance systems. Youth are increasingly framed in global and regional policy as agents with valuable contributions and recognized for their resourcefulness, rather than portrayed as a demographic that warrants intervention, assistance and management. Despite these positive developments, **the challenge of creating space for youth in global decision-making, not only in wording, but also in action, remains.** While youth as a category has figured in global and regional policy documents and strategies for decades, young people continue to be scarcely represented in global and regional governance institutions. Young people are still predominantly consulted rather than included in decision-making. However, strides such as the 2018 *Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* – mandated by the UNSC 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security – are beating the drum heavily for meaningful youth participation. This creates momentum for more actors to join in on the tunes.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL: THE UNITED NATIONS

Until recently within the UN, youth was pinned to the development agenda and youth involvement was mainly practiced in relation to development issues while being largely excluded from more sensitive political issues such as peace and security. **Today, youth participation is increasingly becoming mainstreamed throughout the UN system** including at key meetings such as the General Assembly, the High-Level Political Forum and other thematic meetings including the COPs, CSW etc.

➔ KEY UN BODIES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- **The Third Committee:** addresses youth in the agenda item '*Social development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, persons with disabilities and the family*'.
- **UN Major Group for Children and Youth:** is the official, formal, self-organized space for children and youth in the UN. It is mandated by the UN General Assembly to meaningfully engage youth and children and support them in contributing to intergovernmental and policy processes in the UN.
- **The UN Youth Envoy:** works to realize the UN Secretary General's (UNSG) vision to '*fulfil the potential of young people*' and oversees the implementation of the UN youth strategy '*Youth 2030*'.
- **UN Agencies:** involve young people through their national and headquarter level programming in different ways focusing on issue areas that correspond to their respective mandates.

The way in which young people can participate in global governance forums depends on their mode of participation, the mandate they are given, and the nature and organizational set-up of the specific forum

- The more *institutionalized* youth participation is in a global forum, the more space there is for young people to participate
- Forums which are highly political, and address highly sensitive issues tend to curtail the maneuvering space for young participants
- As young people often participate for a specific scheme, they must tactfully juggle how to channel the messages of their youth constituencies while staying within the confines of their allocated mandate

CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE FORUMS

It is problematic to infer general conclusions about the state of youth participation in the UN as it varies across forums and modalities and is often tied to the willingness of individual member states to include youth. There is a tendency for engagements with young people to remain predominantly consultative rather than allowing them decision-making power. Nonetheless, the current momentum within the UN shows great potential to tap into with an objective to increase meaningful youth participation across the board and at all levels.

➔ PITFALLS OF CURRENT YOUTH PARTICIPATION MODES

- **Lack of representativeness:** young people are often appointed or invited to participate through non-democratic processes calling into doubt their representativeness. It is problematic as the story and messages conveyed by the representative do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of the youth majority, he/she is meant to represent
- **Lack of influence and tokenism:** Young people are often invited only to share their stories. They may see them used to bolster a political case they do not own. Young people are routinely used as tokens of youth participation without being afforded real influence
- **Member state buy-in:** Differences between member states in the perception of the importance of youth participation and legitimate youth representation invariably affects young people's possibilities to participate in the UN as well as progress on the youth participation agenda at large. UN-based initiatives are not always supported and furthered by all members states neither within the UN nor at national levels

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCILS AS PROMOTERS OF GLOBAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Promising avenues for strengthening youth participation: National Youth Delegates

The youth delegate program is the predominant model for direct youth participation in the important sessions held in the context of the UN. In 2018, 38 countries sent youth delegates UN General Assembly.⁸ The model provides young people with direct access to participate in high-level meetings as part of the official national delegation. Thereby, it presents an opportunity for young people to engage with decision-makers and to liaise with young people from other countries.

According to World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), “a delegate is a person authorized to represent a certain country at an international meeting. A delegate is entitled to negotiate on behalf of her country with directives from her Foreign Ministry. A delegate can make suggestions to her Foreign Ministry on what position the country should take”⁹.

→ ENSURING BEST PRACTICE NATIONAL YOUTH DELEGATE PROGRAMS

- Nomination by a member organization and inclusive selection processes to ensure representation
- Local anchoring through pre-consultations with young people to capture and transmit their concerns and post transmission of experiences, promoting interest in global policy and conducting national advocacy
- Sufficient preparation and capacity-building of delegates
- Perceived legitimacy among young people in the country and by other stakeholders of sending organization
- Trusting and professional relations and collaboration with the national delegation and Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Willingness and capacity of the delegation to include the youth delegates
- Having a clear (and substantial) mandate
- Participation of delegates throughout the entire process including in preparation and pre-meetings and follow-up and policy formulation
- Coordination with like-minded countries to facilitate experience-sharing and joint advocacy
- Mechanisms for hand-over between cohorts of delegates to ensure institutional memory

A youth delegate’s spectrum of opportunities for action depends to a large extent on the formal delegation. The youth delegate can play a role prior to, during and after UN sessions:¹⁰

- **Prior** to sessions, youth delegates can tour their own country to consult and capture the concerns and viewpoints of young people. They can be proactive and coordinate with their country missions prior to departure and for instance provide inputs to draft resolutions or plan events such as pre-meetings with coalitions of other young people.

- **During** the sessions, youth delegates can attend the official meetings, informal negotiations and side events, deliver statements, give input to deliberations, and promote youth participation.
- **After** the sessions, youth delegates can share their experiences with young people in their countries through workshops, talks, debates etc. Ideally, youth delegates are also able to follow-up on the decisions made at meetings and use this as momentum nationally. Although, this may be possible more in theory than in practice.


Case

A BEST CASE EXAMPLE: DUF's YOUTH DELEGATE PROGRAM

DUF manages the Danish youth delegate program in close collaboration with the Danish Government. Danish delegates are widely perceived as representative of the broader Danish youth. They are strong voices and advocates of the youth agenda in global forums. This owes a great deal to the well-developed Danish delegate program as well as to DUF's ability to manage it. Drawing on best practices learned by DUF, for the youth delegate program to provide a successful avenue for youth participation it is a prerequisite that **DUF maintains good working relations with the national Government to ensure that the Government and delegation show a genuine openness to include and support the youth delegates.**

The delegates should have a clear and substantial mandate and participate in pre-meetings with the relevant ministries and politicians. A well-defined mandate provides the delegates with a tangible frame of reference to guide their engagement and pre-meetings equip the delegates with relevant knowledge. Having fairly long mandates allow the delegates to get familiar with the UN system and build important relations to a greater extent.

Coordination with like-minded countries facilitates experience-sharing and strengthens the influence of the youth delegates as it enables them to speak with one voice. The relevant ministry and officials play a key role in preparing and building up the capacity of the selected delegates to understand and be able to navigate the complex political landscapes they are about to enter.

The Danish youth delegates must be nominated by a youth organization and selected through an inclusive process. This is a prerequisite for legitimate representation, but it is not in and of itself enough. **Country-wide pre-consultations and post-transmission mechanisms with young people are equally important to ensure that the youth delegate mechanism is anchored locally.** As the delegate position is interchangeable transmission procedures between cohorts of delegates ensure institutional memory. Although the Danish youth delegate model may not be directly replicated to countries with different institutional set-ups and political environments, **DUF's success can be drawn on to learn from best practices and key challenges when setting up youth delegate programs in other countries.**



Danish Youth Delegate giving Denmark's speech at UNGA 2018

POINTS OF AWARENESS

Each country has its own youth delegate program. In some countries, the delegate program is institutionalized while in others, delegates participate on a case basis often on request by other stakeholders. Such delegates are mostly not funded by the national government, but for example by a UN agency. As such there are **no guarantees that delegates are selected via a democratic process and answer to a significant constituency of young people**. Just as there are no standards of to which degree delegates are afforded substantial participation and influence. For some countries having a youth delegate may in fact be a camouflage serving to convey an impression of real youth involvement while the youth delegate, in reality, remains a token figure. National youth councils managing youth delegate programs must ensure meaningful participation, among other things through selection criteria.

→ INSPIRATION: YOUTH DELEGATE SELECTION CRITERIA IN DUF

- Be between 18-30 years of age
- Be passionate about and have experience with international cooperation
- Be knowledgeable of the thematic area
- Have political diligence and competencies to speak on behalf of the youth in gatherings and among decision-makers in different forums
- Be active in a Danish organization, which engages youth and have experience with international work
- Have knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals
- Have knowledge of DUF and the values and objectives of DUF
- Be nominated by their legitimate youth organization

CONCLUDING REMARKS: MOVING FORWARD TOWARDS 2030

There is unarguably a significant task in ensuring no one is left behind in the progress towards 2030 and beyond. Meaningful youth participation in the decision-making processes on and implementation of the SDGs is not only paramount to the ‘leave no one behind’ principle – it is essential to transforming our world and achieving sustainable development.

Moving forward, there is a need to strengthen the vehicles and forums for meaningful youth participation. As argued in this piece, legitimate national youth councils can offer a unique platform for youth participation and representation in national, regional and global governance structures. **To move forward on meaningful youth participation in the 2030 Agenda implementation and governance, one key action is to capacity build national youth councils towards becoming legitimate, accountable and inclusive youth platforms.**

DATA FOUNDATION

The paper draws on a study conducted in late 2018-early 2019 to inform the Danish Youth Council’s SDG initiative. The study was based on desk research, qualitative data collection in the form of participatory workshops and interviews with informants from Zimbabwe, Ukraine, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, as well as key expert interviews with experts or professionals in the field of youth participation in regional and global forums.

NOTES

- 1 United Nations A/Res/70/1 (2015). Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
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- 3 United Nations (2018). Youth 2030: The United Nations Youth Strategy. p. 5
- 4 IPU (2016). Youth participation in national parliaments.
- 5 Walker et al. (2014). Partners for change: young people and governance in a post-2015 world. ODI, Plan & Restless Development. p. 8
- 6 Simpson, Graeme (2018). The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security. p. 1
- 7 Sustainable Development Solutions Network - Youth (2018). Youth Solutions Report - 2nd edition. Sustainable Development Solutions Network - Youth. New York. p. 19
- 8 www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/youth-delegate-programme/youth-delegates-at-73rd-ga-session.htm
- 9 World Federation of United Nations Associations (2010). Youth at the UN: A handbook for establishing a youth delegate program to the United Nations. p. 7
- 10 Drawn from “A Handbook for Establishing a National Youth Delegate Programme to The United Nations” Published by World Federation of United Nations Associations. 2010.



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