

ActionAid International & OECD Development Communication Network

Beyond Smiling Faces:

**How engaging with youth can help transform societies
and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals**

Policy Note, October 2015¹

“The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands.
It lies also in the hands of today’s younger generation
who will pass the torch to future generations”

Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
adopted at the United Nations on 25 September 2015

I. Young women and men are speaking up, and world leaders have begun to listen

Youth across the world are **frustrated and are speaking up**. Through the Arab Spring in 2011 and a series of youth-led protests (e.g. in Brazil in 2013, Bahrain in 2014 or Burkina Faso in May 2015), young women and men have drawn attention to the lack of decent jobs, inadequate social services, inefficient and corrupt political systems, and limited rights and freedoms.

Meanwhile, **youth represent a growing constituency**.² According to the UNFPA, there are about 1.8 billion people worldwide aged between 10 and 24.³ This is more than at any point in human history. Indeed, many developing countries are facing a “youth bulge”. In Africa alone, there are almost 200 million people aged between 15 and 24.⁴ In 2014, more than half of the world’s refugees were below 18 years of age.⁵

By coupling their frustration with drive, determination and hope, young men and women are fuelling movements and forming networks. An increasingly **coherent youth agenda is emerging** across continents, calling for more equality, greater well-being and the protection of human rights.

As a result, **engaging with youth is no longer just optional**. A large number of governments have understood this imperative and begun designing national youth policies.⁶ At the global level, the

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² Some organisations use 15-24 as a useful starting point for youth engagement and analysis. ActionAid, however, works with youth into their very early 30s, recognising that social markers of adulthood, such as securing a job, getting married or starting a family, nowadays often occur at later points in the life cycle.

³ *The State of World Population 2014*, United Nations Population Fund.

⁴ *2012 African Economic Outlook*, African Development Bank, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

⁵ *Global Trends 2014*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

⁶ An up-to-date list is available at Youthpolicy.org. <http://www.youthpolicy.org/nationalyouthpolicies/>

newly adopted **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** represent an **unprecedented opportunity**. They acknowledge youth as an important constituency and address issues that are of particular concern to young people. They also provide a platform from which young women and men can co-create and contribute to better development policies and more effective international development co-operation.

II. A cornerstone of development: Why engaging with youth is pivotal

Engaging with young women and men benefits both the individuals themselves and society as a whole. Participatory approaches help young people develop crucial “soft” skills, self-awareness and identity.⁷ These skills, in turn, are linked with better educational outcomes, jobs and incomes.⁸ Young people who contribute to public life are also more likely to remain engaged as adults.⁹ If young people do not feel engaged in global development today, will they support international co-operation tomorrow?

Of course, young women and men can do much more than voice their support. They can improve the design of policies and ensure that they address the needs of the most marginalised populations. Their knowledge and ideas can help identify “fit-for-purpose” solutions, while their participation in the policy process can increase legitimacy within communities. “Nothing about us without us” has become a catchphrase for many youth groups.

The risk of ignoring youth or leaving out those from marginalised backgrounds is too high. It represents a missed opportunity, a tragic waste of human, social and economic potential. Indeed, where young women and men do not feel heard by or represented in formal institutions, they are likely to look elsewhere for support and legitimacy. In OECD and other countries, violent fundamentalists and extremists are recruiting young people by exploiting their frustrations.

III. A valuable opportunity: The SDGs recognise young people and their concerns

Young people and their concerns receive strong recognition in the *2030 Agenda* adopted by world leaders at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. Indeed, youth were heavily involved in shaping the agenda, successfully calling for specific goals and targets both formally, through the UN Major Group of Children and Youth, and informally, through worldwide grassroots coalitions such as *action/2015*.

The Agenda commits leaders to “provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities”. It calls young men and women “critical agents of change”, who “will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world”. It highlights youth employment as a particular challenge for sustainable development and refers to young people as being at particular risk of marginalisation.

Among the 17 SDGs and their targets, several mention young women and men explicitly. Goal 4 calls for better education and Goal 8 calls for decent work, while Goal 13 calls for youth in the poorest countries to be supported in addressing the impact of climate change. Other goals are of particular relevance to young people, not least Goal 10, which tackles inequality, and Goal 16, which promotes peace and justice.

⁷ *Get Youth On Board! Youth Participation Toolkit*, Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2009; *Participate: The Voice of Young People in Programmes and Policies*, International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2008.

⁸ *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, OECD, 2015.

⁹ *Investing in Youth in International Development Policy: Making the Case*, Overseas Development Institute, 2013.

Meanwhile, Goal 17 calls on all actors to come together in partnership to help achieve the SDGs. It is an important entry point for young women and men to contribute their energy, solutions and ideas, and to help monitor progress and hold governments to account for their promises.

IV. Youth-led development: The SDGs require updated approaches to youth engagement

Besides confirming the need to engage with young people, **the SDGs also challenge governments to find new modes of engaging** with them. After all, much has changed since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated 15 years ago.

Take the overarching principle of the SDGs that **“no one must be left behind”**. This means that anyone wishing to engage with youth today needs to do so with young women and men from all backgrounds. All too often, government consultations still assemble privileged elites, who do not represent the diversity of concerns and contributions. To help transform societies and reform policies, youth from marginalised or isolated backgrounds need support in overcoming societal barriers and gaining voice in public spaces.

A further characteristic of the SDGs is their “universality” – unlike the MDGs, they set **targets for all countries, not just the poorest**. The SDGs recognise that local and global progress are often closely intertwined. This means that, when empowered, young people can help achieve progress both in their own countries and abroad. They need to be engaged both in improving development policies at home and in improving the quality of international development co-operation.

Even if global goals are shared, **approaches need to be adapted to local contexts**. Challenges like youth unemployment or environmental degradation are common to many countries. However, in some countries, youth might constitute a minority group, often faced with debt burdens and the need to support older generations. In other countries, youth might represent a rising demographic group, their wellbeing hampered by poor governance and growing inequality.

BOX 1: What is youth-led development?

Youth-led development is an evolving concept. Several initiatives, such as Peace Child International, the DFID-CSO Youth Working Group and youthpolicy.org, have explored its features.

There are three core principles:

1. Diverse youth (including young women) define **their own development goals** and objectives.
2. Youth have **intellectual, physical and socio-political space** to participate in development and social transformation.
3. **Peer-to-peer mentorship and collaboration** (including mutually-agreed adult support) is encouraged to enable and harness youth innovation and creativity.

Youth-led development can and should be supported in both formal/organisational spaces and informal/public spaces. It can take several forms:

- **Policy.** Youth are a formal part of the policy process, participating in policy design, decisions, monitoring and accountability processes.
- **Campaigning and advocacy.** Young women and men design their own campaigns and collaborate with civil society organisations and others to make their views heard and impact on policy.
- **Programming, monitoring and accountability.** Youth participate actively in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes that promote development and social transformation, contributing knowhow, skills and ideas.
- **Communication and research.** Young women and men search for answers and solutions, e.g. via investigative journalism or peer-to-peer action research, to better understand development issues and explain them to society as a whole.

Source: Authors.

The **emergence of new technologies** serves as one useful example of the need to adapt to different audiences. In some contexts, social media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram may constitute excellent channels to engage in a conversation with young “millennials”. In others, young women and men may not yet have adopted these tools, or may not even have access to them. Storytelling through film, radio programmes in local languages or face-to-face interaction may constitute more effective means.

All of this reminds us that **youth are neither a homogenous nor a static group**. Furthermore, there is no agreement on what age range constitutes “youth”.¹⁰ Any initiatives to engage them need to be well targeted, but inclusive. They need to identify common ground, while respecting difference.

V. Promising examples of policies, practices and initiatives for youth engagement

Many government agencies are exploring ways to engage with youth or support youth groups. Some take more traditional, consultative approaches, while others are more progressive, promoting *youth-led* development (see Box 1). Some initiatives were started by “adults” (government agencies or non-governmental organisations), while others grew from young people themselves.

A number of regional frameworks provide valuable anchors for these initiatives. In 2003, the Council of Europe adopted the Revised Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Other regional frameworks include the European Union 2010-2018 Youth Strategy, the 2005 Ibero American Convention on the Rights of Youth and the 1998 African Youth Charter.

Youth participating in the policy process

Governments who have consulted with youth have found them to be a crucial resource for improving policies. In Brazil, for example, a Youth Dialogue Project (2004-2006) generated ideas for educational reform that were subsequently put into practice by several states.¹¹ In 2010, a DFID-CSO Youth Working Group identified numerous examples of consultations leading to policy change, for example in Bahrain, Viet Nam and Uganda.¹²

Going beyond consultations, some governments have provided space for youth to participate in actual decision-making. In several Latin American countries, participatory budgeting has been a feature of local governments since the 1990s. In the City of Rosario (Argentina), more than 10 000 young women and men participated in budgeting decisions between 2007 and 2013.¹³ In 2014, the City of Boston (United States) asked young women and men to submit ideas to improve neighbourhoods, to develop these into full proposals and to select the best ones for funding.¹⁴

New technologies have brought new opportunities. UNICEF’s U-report is a social platform that currently helps more than 1 million young Africans (“U-reporters) to share their ideas and observations via text message. In Uganda, where U-report was introduced, parliamentarians have begun using the platform to better understand and respond to their constituents’ concerns. Young people have spoken up about the outbreak of diseases, the practice of female genital mutilation, rising inflation and unsafe drinking water.¹⁵

To help facilitate the participation of youth in the policy process and address youth issues, governments like that of Ghana have created formal structures and mechanisms, such as youth ministries, platforms for young female parliamentarians and national youth councils.

¹⁰ See footnote 2 above.

¹¹ Silva, I & Salles Souto, AL (eds.), *Democracy, Citizenship and Youth: Towards Social and Political Participation in Brazil*, International Development Research Centre, 2009.

¹² See *Youth Participation in Development: A Guide for Development Agencies and Policy Makers*, DfID-CSO Youth Working Group, 2010.

¹³ See <http://participedia.net/en/browse/cases>.

¹⁴ See <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/boston>.

¹⁵ See <http://www.ureport.ug>.

There is, however, recognition that institutions need to be supported by effective youth policies. In 2014, a UN-sponsored Global Forum with 700 participants from 165 countries produced the “Baku Commitment to Youth Policies”, calling for more inclusive policy processes and identifying principles for youth policies.¹⁶ In recent years, various UN bodies have published guidance for governments developing national youth policies.¹⁷

Youth driving campaigns and advocacy

Official donor agencies have been promoting grassroots youth activism for many years, often through partnerships with civil society. Norway, for example, funds the ActionAid Young Urban Women Project, which supports advocacy and campaigns instigated by young women for sexual reproductive health rights and decent work.

Meanwhile, civil society groups have been supporting youth bodies to increase their impact on policies. In 2014, the ONE Campaign’s Youth Ambassadors – 250 young volunteers from 7 countries – helped convince more than half of European parliamentarians to sign the ONE VOTE 2014 pledge. In 2015, more than 500 Global Youth Ambassadors helped “A World at School” gather over 10 million signatures for its #UpForYouth petition.

Youth delivering and monitoring programmes

Enabling youth to participate in monitoring government performance is a powerful way to promote accountability and empower young women and men as active citizens. Social audit monitoring tools will no doubt play a role in holding governments, donor agencies, civil society and private actors to account for their SDG-related commitments. Public service “scorecards” have become more common in countries like Kenya, Malawi and Sierra Leone. With the help of ActionAid, youth perspectives have been brought into their design, compilation and analysis.¹⁸

Citizen-driven initiatives around the world are empowering young people to strengthen their contributions. The social enterprise Edgeriders, for example, is a new form of consultancy, which began with formal support from the Council of Europe. It is now an independently run collective of young women and men coming up with innovative and original ways to address a broad range of social and economic challenges.

During the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, the Daily Talk chalkboard, placed on one of Monrovia’s main roads, became a powerful way to monitor the government’s crisis management. Initiated by one young Liberian citizen and supported by Accountability Lab (a youth-run not-for-profit organisation), Daily Talk delivers valuable news to Liberians who lack the means or education to navigate print media or the internet. This initiative shows how young women and men can be more than just service providers. They can help ensure that development interventions are communicated back to local communities.

¹⁶ According to the *Baku Commitment*, youth policies should be rights-based, inclusive, participatory, gender-responsive, comprehensive, knowledge-based and evidence-informed, fully resourced and accountable.

¹⁷ See, for example, the *UN World Program of Action For Youth*, the *UNDP 2014-2017 Youth Strategy*, and UNESCO’s 2004 publication on *Empowering Youth through National Policies*.

¹⁸ See *Democracy Watchdogs: Youth-driven Participatory Monitoring and Accountability in the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, ActionAid, 2015.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

Efforts to engage with youth are wide-ranging, but there is scope for much more. Ultimately, engaging with youth to help achieve the SDGs will require a **shift in attitude and culture**. Among some governments and development agencies, young women and men are still treated as passive beneficiaries of development co-operation or disengaged voters. While they might be regarded as “foot soldiers” who can help implement programmes or campaigns, allowing them to lead processes appears risky.

The examples featured in this Note show that **youth-led development is a risk worth taking**. Young women and men should be recognised as agents of change, as co-creators of development, and as enormous assets for society. They are not just tomorrow’s voters, but can be today’s policy makers, promoting development and improving the impact of development co-operation.

The challenge for governments and development agencies will be to create an **enabling environment for youth inclusion**. Formal institutions will need to become more flexible in giving young people a real voice. They will need to reach out and actively support youth groups, while accepting and safeguarding their independence. Contributions and provocative challenges made by young women and men will need to be made visible and addressed in the policy process.

To underpin these efforts, governments and development agencies will also need to **deepen their understanding of the concerns, needs and potential contributions** of young women and men. The arrival of the SDGs has seen a global push for **better data**. The disaggregation of data to shed light on youth issues should be of high priority. There are also significant gaps in our political and socio-economic understanding about how youth groups can influence policy processes.

Young women and men are fast drivers on the road to global development and social change. Governments must make sure they are not left behind.