

Believe in Better: From Policy to Practice

Strengthening accountability relationships with and for young people

FOREWORD, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, KEY MESSAGES AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Foreword

Progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals will not be achieved without the participation, ideas and energy of young people. Indeed, many of the challenges we face – from climate change and poverty to human rights and the inclusion of marginalized groups in public life – disproportionately affect young people. It is crucial, therefore, that they have opportunities to be meaningfully included in the decision-making spaces where collective solutions are debated, and that they have ways of holding duty bearers to account when they fall short of their promises to instill change.

The research underpinning this report demonstrates how the United Nations is supporting young people to do this at multiple levels of governance across a range of countries, with differing challenges and opportunities. It covers how they are finding innovative ways to engage duty bearers, monitor their actions and contribute to new ideas, behaviors and policy directions. There are numerous insights into how young people are organizing, included, and responded to by those in positions of power. At the heart of these efforts is the strengthening of social accountability relationships between young people and governments, as well as the United Nations, who work with both.

Yet, young people tell us that we can do more, with more of their peers in their full diversity and in ways that are more likely to foster transformative change. Their well-meaning critiques ask us to be radical, to be hard-headed and realistic about what we are achieving, the leverage we possess and the spectrum of possible outcomes in different contexts. Furthermore, as youth-led social movements in many countries demonstrated when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to largely turn to digital and rethink modes of engagement, young people want us to be nimble and seize windows of opportunity where they arise.

A clear roadmap we have to support in these efforts is “Our Common Agenda” – the United Nations Secretary General’s latest agenda of action that presents concrete proposals for how we can all work together and create a future that’s better for everyone. At the core of its recommendations lies the need to deepen solidarity with the world’s young people; re-building trust and removing obstacles that stand in the way of meaningful intergenerational partnerships.

I hope that those reading this report draw inspiration from it, whilst taking its messages as a chance to reflect on their own work supporting young people to participate in decision-making and to hold governments to account for progress towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. A lot has already been done and much of it is beginning to bear fruit, even under the most trying of circumstances. It’s now time to take stock, listen to what young people say works and what else can be done, and to partner with organizations and governments pushing for change wherever they may be.



Jayathma Wickramanayake
United Nations Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth



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Executive summary

Young people are central to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their voices, energy and creativity are needed to ensure that decisions and policies that affect their lives fulfil the Agenda's promise to tackle the biggest issues facing the world both today and in the future.

This report explores the ways the United Nations (UN) is supporting young people to engage in participatory decision-making processes and to hold duty bearers in their governments to account for the realization of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). It focuses on activities in 37 countries across five UN regions, including deep dives into seven: Kenya, Ghana, Thailand, Albania, Jordan, Pakistan and Guatemala, to showcase stories of successful collaborations, challenges and hopes for the future.

The research uncovered a range of activities and processes supported at different levels of governance by UN entities. Among them are spaces for deliberation and decision-making to which young people are invited by states and international organizations. It also includes ad hoc, created, and increasingly digital opportunities for young people to engage duty bearers, raise issues that are important to them, and nudge agendas in new directions. All these activities have the potential to contribute to what this report terms **healthy social accountability relationships**.

The report also describes outcomes from the UN's support to young people that cover a broad spectrum. These run from awareness-raising, mobilization and empowerment, to capacity-building, consultation and advocacy, and then to commitments to behavior and policy changes. Each is more or less possible depending on the enabling environments in which UN entities and young people work together. And each is an important step towards transformative change.

The report concludes with recommendations on how UN entities can support young people and strengthen social accountability relationships across different contexts. A spectrum of types of support in different enabling environments is identified. The report's annex includes a list of open-source case studies, tools and other resources that UN entities and young people can use to build their capacity for future engagement.



Key messages

- **The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women were mentioned most frequently by young people as supporting them to engage in social accountability initiatives.** Young people are most often supported to work at the sub-national level, followed by the national level. Yet, there were also suggestions from the seven deep dive countries that UN entities often work in silos and their work can overlap.
- **Almost all of the surveyed government respondents reported that they involve young people in decision-making processes.** Most common were regular opportunities for young people to engage government representatives, followed by helping them access information and securing commitments to youth participation in planning and budgeting processes.
- **All 25 UN Country Teams included in this research indicated they support a broad variety of social accountability initiatives.** In particular, young people were supported to work on COVID response and recovery, program implementation and policy making. More technically difficult initiatives, such as formal SDG review and follow ups, planning and budgeting, legislative activism, and monitoring and evaluating policies and programs were less supported.
- **Over half of young respondents reported being supported by UN entities with training on, or tools for, social accountability.** Most common were those related to accessing information, data and evidence, followed by training on rights-based and awareness-raising approaches, and online advocacy. More technical activities, such as public expenditure tracking (PETS) and grievance redress mechanisms were the tools young people were supported with least.
- **Grassroots groups, girls and young women, and young people with disabilities were the top three categories of young people supported by both UN Country Teams and governments to engage in social accountability initiatives.** However, conversations with young people revealed that the location where UN entities work affects who they support. For example, they argued that 'politically connected' groups in urban areas are the ones supported the most, whilst peripheral and rural young people can be overlooked.
- **Outcomes claimed by UN Country Teams were generally related to women and children, and the health and education sectors.** This likely reflects the mandates of UNICEF, the UNDP and UN Women. The next most-commonly cited sectors were culture and sport, social protection, and employment and labor.
- **There was a general reluctance among UN Country Teams to claim outcomes related to their support for young people to engage in social accountability initiatives.** This likely stems from confusion over what should count as a good outcome in different enabling environments, as well as difficulty in identifying attribution and measuring the impact of such work.
- **Over half of UN Country Team respondents said that their initiatives were not monitored or evaluated, or that they were not sure if they were.** While the majority of young people indicated that they had been asked to provide some form of feedback to UN entities, only about a third said this was for an evaluation of a social accountability-related activity.



Key recommendations

- **Reach beyond the usual suspects.** Young people felt that UN entities should work harder to support difficult-to-reach and marginalized groups. It was argued that this can be achieved through innovative funding mechanisms and small grants distributed among networks that have a presence among grassroots civil society organizations.
- **Raise awareness about and translate the SDGs.** Young people suggested that there is a need to raise awareness of the SDGs beyond young people directly engaged by UN entity programs, and to translate their rationales into language they can easily understand, including more succinct measures of progress towards targets.
- **Capitalize on what young people are already doing.** Some young people argued that they are already part of successful initiatives and efforts to engage duty bearers, and that with UN support they could scale up their activities and have greater impact through training in how to better use evidence to support advocacy.
- **Challenge tokenism and follow up.** Across the deep dive countries, young people argued that consultations and decision-making platforms could often feel tokenistic. To address this, UN entities must ensure there is follow up after consultations and platforms, and communicate back to young people what has changed or not as a result of their participation.
- **Lend credibility and amplify marginalized voices.** Youth representatives from deep dive countries urged UN entities to use their position and leverage (often through funding governments directly) to open up spaces for young people who are harder to reach or who governments do not always want to engage with (e.g. LGBTQI+ youth). This was seen as particularly important in places where governments are most comfortable engaging young people who do not challenge them.
- **Define social accountability.** Further work could help UN Country Teams map out how supported initiatives contribute to social accountability, even in contexts where youth holding duty bearers accountable may be a distant aim. This should also help Country Teams spot instances where participation strays into tokenism – or where windows of opportunity arise for transformative change. UN entities could learn from ‘theory of change’ and participatory monitoring approaches to improve their support for social accountability.
- **Set clear, contextually relevant and realistic goals.** UN Country Teams should see themselves as catalysts of healthy social accountability relationships. To do this, they must ensure they understand their enabling environments’ challenges and opportunities, and begin their interventions with realistic goals. This will help them to not unduly raise expectations among young people and duty bearers.



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*References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UNSCR 1244 (1999).