IFMSA Policy Document
Meaningful Youth Engagement

Proposed by Team of Officials
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Policy Statement

Introduction

Youth, as one of the biggest demographics on earth, are undoubtedly an important agent of positive change in the world. They are the backbone of the future and the new leaders of tomorrow. Through active participation, youth are empowered to play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities. They offer refreshing and innovative ideas reflecting the needs and concerns of future generations. Throughout the years, they have been calling out for more civic, economic, political and social involvement. However, worldwide, youth face multiple challenges in terms of access to equal opportunities and involvement in decision making processes which affect their lives and future. These challenges withhold them from participating and engaging in a meaningful way, which requires that individuals are entitled to participate in the decisions that directly affect them, including research, design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and further improvement of interventions. This is often a result of lacking the proper tools, education, employment, resources and opportunities to participate effectively.

IFMSA Position

IFMSA affirms that:

1. It is committed to uphold meaningful youth engagement as a key issue to be addressed in world affairs.
2. Inclusive youth engagement in decision making processes is of utmost importance on all levels of development, both in health-related as well as health-unrelated issues.
3. Action needs to be taken to support youth and tackle the challenges that limit their active and meaningful participation and involvement at all levels.
4. Policies and programs which invest in youth and promote their empowerment and meaningful engagement are of great significance and should be further highlighted as best practice examples.
5. Further research and implementation of initiatives that provide opportunities for meaningful youth engagement needs to be conducted in order to provide equal access to opportunities through addressing equity in participation.

Call to Action

Therefore, IFMSA calls on:

1. Governments to:
   a. Identify and address the problems and challenges that youth face in society, including all social, economic, political and cultural barriers which limit their meaningful participation and engagement.
   b. Develop national policies which ensure youth participation in social and economic development and support youth efforts in decision-making processes.
   c. Reform national education systems to ensure that youth are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to positively participate in their communities.
   d. Tackle youth unemployment and create decent jobs and working conditions for youth in a changing labor market.
   e. Increase funding and investment in youth programs focusing on acquiring the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities to participate actively.

    f.   Create and implement a structured system for the youth delegates programme that includes and supports youth representatives being meaningfully involved in any governmental participation, including that in international meetings, missions and consultations.

2. NGOs and International Agencies to:
    a.   Ensure the full and effective engagement of youth led- and youth serving-organizations and entities at all levels, including in high level meetings.
    b.   Strengthen and support regional and international youth networks that provide platforms for youth to share and exchange culture, knowledge and experience.
    c.   Provide technical assistance, funding and investment benefiting opportunities for youth led-organizations and entities.
    d.   Create effective youth volunteer programs which focus on developing the necessary skills and knowledge of young leaders in a fruitful environment, which takes the workload in consideration.
    e.   Facilitate and support youth participation in internships in NGOs and international agencies, which help youth to gain professional skills, experience and networks. Furthermore, increase the accessibility and affordability of such internships to all youth, regardless of their socioeconomic background, and commit to addressing barriers that may impact youth participation in such opportunities, including developing paid internship opportunities.

3. Universities and other educational institutions to:
    a.   Provide equal access to education to all youth.
    b.   Provide proper investment in education, capacity building, training and skill development of youth, regardless of their background, which ensures their adequacy to actively participate in the civic, economic and political processes in their countries.
    c.   Actively support student- and youth led-organizations and entities, and provide them with the financial means to ensure their sustainability. In addition, support and promote their initiatives, projects and activities.
    d.   Strengthen student councils and provide them with a platform to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes that affect students and youth.

4. National Member Organizations (NMOs) and their members to:
    a.   Raise awareness among fellow youth about the importance of meaningful youth engagement and our pivotal role in shaping the future of their communities.
    b.   Advocate and carry out campaigns which call for youth participation and involvement in decision-making processes at all levels.
    c.   Develop the necessary skills and acquire the knowledge which enables youth to take on an active role and positively influence their meaningful contribution in their communities.
    d.   Participate, engage and collaborate with other youth- and student-led organizations and entities to promote a cohesive and interdisciplinary youth action.
    e.   Advocate towards national stakeholders to increase and set up opportunities for meaningful youth engagement in local and national settings.

5. International, regional and national Youth and Student Organizations to:
    a.   Actively advocate for youth involvement and empowerment, by joining voices and collaborating together at all levels, including joint (inter)national campaigning and advocacy, including policies and statements in high level meetings.
    b.   Provide the relevant national stakeholders with evidence from other countries on successful meaningful youth engagement in the decision making processes.
    c.   Promote interprofessional and intergenerational collaboration and exchange of expertise and knowledge, to provide youth with skills and knowledge from different perspectives.

d. Set out an example of meaningful youth participation and promote the role of youth, through community led initiatives and campaigns which positively influence and target the needs of their communities.

Position Paper

Background information

The youth generation is growing every day and is the largest the world has ever known.

The UN definition that uses the mean age group of 15- 24 as youth, is statistically required for cohesiveness when assessing the needs of the young people and providing guidelines for youth development. [1]

There is no universally agreed international definition of the youth age group and the definition varies according to different entities, even within UN structures. It is defined as ages 15-24 by the UN Secretariat, 15-29 by OECD, 15-29 by European Commission, 15-32 by UN Habitat (Youth Fund), and 15-35 by African Youth Charter. [1,2,3,4,5,6] The definition also varies amongst different UN entities, as well as other organizations, agencies and countries around the world. Different definitions of youth are dependent on several aspects, especially demographic, financial, socio-economic and cultural settings. There are also several distinctions according to age groups within the general definition of youth, e.g. child (UNICEF), adolescents/teenagers, young people/young adults (WHO, UNFPA). [1]

More than 60 percent of the population in many countries are youth aged 15-24, amounting to 1.2 billion worldwide. However, the challenges this generation faces are also increasing, from lack of opportunities and unemployment to multiple forms of inequalities and discrimination, particularly for youth belonging to vulnerable and underserved groups. [2,7,8]

Young people—educated, empowered and engaged—will be and are the new leaders, today and tomorrow. Youth have shown their ability and capacity to be the positive change agents who can address and help solve the emergent issues we face today around the world. They have the potential to contribute towards building resilient nations whilst ensuring sustainable human development and quality of life for generations to come. Therefore, ensuring meaningful youth participation, which requires that individuals are entitled to participate in the decisions that directly affect them, including design, implementation, and monitoring of interventions, is vital. This is not only to help youth reach their full potential, acting as leaders and positively change agents in the world, but for the welfare of communities and nations today and for generations to come. [9,10]

Discussion

Engagement in Decision-Making Processes:
In a survey conducted by YouthCan, between April - June 2016, to measure "Youth Responses to Resolution 2250 and the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism", a majority of the youth surveyed felt that youth were not enough involved in decision-making processes at the local or national levels. Among the respondents that reported youth involvement in local or national contexts, a majority reported that most youth positions in their communities felt more symbolic than that they reflected meaningful participation. Some respondents labelled current models of youth involvement as disingenuous and tokenizing and believed that youth were not yet given positions in which they would be able to affect real change. [11]

Youth continue being negatively affected from staying at the margins of the political, social and economic decisions, in most parts of the world. Many political and decision-making processes are still accompanied by limited youth participation. Therefore, youth are increasingly demanding to be involved in the decisions that shape their communities, present and future. Several United Nations Member States have established youth structures and programs to bring the voices of youth to government representatives. [12,13]

This signifies that youth are considered as important members of the society and that their inclusion in the decision making process will help produce more inclusive and evidence-based decisions, targeting

all the community members' needs. The role of youth as agents of change is also recognized as necessary for the implementation of 2030 Agenda. [10,12]

Participation is one of the guiding principles of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and youth's right to participation has been deemed important in numerous international agreements. In order to respond to the needs of youth, and to guarantee that their basic human rights are recognized and achieved, active and meaningful participation of youth in their societies and in democratic practices and processes is of crucial importance. Meaningful youth participation and leadership require that young people and youth organizations have opportunities and capacities, and benefit from an enabling environment, relevant evidence-based programs and policies at all levels. [3,8]

Youth can play an important role in almost any policy relevant to their communities and future, both as the target of youth policies and as actors in implementation. This is especially true when their role is clearly recognized in the national youth strategy. Youth inclusion ranges from comprehensive open consultations with young people to partnerships in the entire policymaking process. Benefits of the approach include averting the marginalization of young people, challenging youth stigmatization, strengthening the credibility of State institutions, optimizing the positive impact of policies on young people and encouraging youth participation and empowerment. [11,12]

Economical Engagement:
However, worldwide, youth face multiple challenges in terms of access to equal opportunities and involvement in the decision making processes which affects their lives and future. This is often a result of lacking the proper tools, education, employment and resources to participate effectively. Unemployment is a concern in almost every country, with a global youth unemployment rate at 13.6 per cent in 2019. In some developed countries, the youth unemployment rate has climbed above 50 per cent. Unemployment negatively affects sustainable human development and health and wellbeing. Without fair economic opportunity and reward, youth will not be able to contribute positively to the development of their communities and to actively participate in social cohesion and decision-making. [14]

Young people are increasingly turning to unpaid internships as a gateway to the labor market. With limited employment opportunities available, internships can provide an excellent opportunity for young people to gain occupational knowledge and develop skills and capabilities to better equip them for a career in their desired field. In recent years, the economic crisis has brought about a shift in the role internships play within the employment framework in many areas. Increasing numbers of companies and organizations are offering, often full-time and unpaid, internships for recent graduates. [15] However this means that internships are privileged to youth who are financially capable of supporting themselves, thus discouraging people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in specific internships and developing workplace skills. This constitutes a major obstacle for first-time job seekers and perpetuates a cycle of economic disadvantage for youth who are most vulnerable. In conclusion, this unemployment challenges meaningful participation of youth at many levels, underscoring the need of tackling unemployment and creating decent jobs for youth in a changing labor market.

In the next 15 years, 600 million jobs would need to be created in order to satisfy the youth unemployment needs. Decent work is also difficult to find for this demographic, with many areas of working conditions being severly lacking. Low youth unemployment rates are often times masking poor job quality and large structural barriers. Amongst key findings that are crucial to be addressed, when it comes to youth and the need for decent work, are violence in the workplace, discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion and ability, difficulty with work-life integration, ill mental health, as well as debts from training and lack of structured remuneration models for early career professionals. To remove structural barriers and tackle youth unemployment challenges evidence suggests a valuable contribution of social entrepreneurship to create sustainable and inclusive jobs. [16,17]

Community Engagement:
Involving youth—as collaborators, team members, leaders and decision makers—in addressing the day to-day issues that affect them offers a broad range of benefits to both young people and their communities, those benefits vary from greater community connectedness and social awareness of individuals to enhanced participatory decision-making and democratic governance in community

institutions. Although the extent of their participation varies across time and places, youth have always been actively engaged at the community level through volunteerism, peacebuilding efforts and sporting activities. Youth engage for a number of reasons ranging from self-actualization and peer recognition to the desire to solve problems, make changes or fight injustice through social or political activism. [3,15] Nowadays, numerous youth led organizations and networks exist around the world, which are committed to fight for human rights, adequate education, better communities and a brighter future. They aim to promote voluntary work and development of communities and represent youth in decision making processes in all levels.

Education:
Education is central to economic and social development and to the improvement of young people's lives globally. Lacking a proper education is often one of the challenges that youth faces in participating meaningfully. 9% of the world's youth (15-24 years old) are non-literate, without basic numerical and reading skills, and as such lack the means to be able to sustain a living through full and decent employment. [18,19] There is a need to align education policies, curricula and training programs, in a people-centered way, with national development priorities and needs, international development strategies and labor market requirements. Doing so will promote the advancement beyond basic education of young people, help fight extreme poverty, and leverage the benefits of globalization for youth. [20] Incorporating aspects of non-formal learning into the formal education curricula, enhancing open access to education, focusing on vocational and technical training and practical skills development, as well as facilitating the school-to-work transition and skills gap must be priority areas in youth development. [10,18]

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