

# IFMSA Policy Document

## Meaningful Youth Engagement

Proposed by Team of Officials

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## Policy Statement

### Introduction:

Young people's representation in decision-making processes is not proportional to their number in the world's population and even less adequate when considering the amount of time they will live under the conditions originated by the decisions of today. This phenomenon biases the process of policy- and decision-making not only at the national level, but also at the local and international level. The disparity is even more obsolete when compared to the eagerness to impact society shown by young people in other settings, such as civil society or volunteering. Yet, we are still kept away from direct political decision-making, something that must be changed, just like in the success stories of the recent past.

Meaningful Youth Engagement refers to the active involvement of young people in all stages of decision-making, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Despite facing significant barriers when trying to engage in political decision-making, our fresh perspectives reflect the evolving needs and concerns of current and future generations and, with the proper education, tools, resources and opportunities, we can be counted on to address the complex problems of today.

### IFMSA position:

IFMSA affirms that:

- Direct and democratic representation of young people in decision-making bodies is the best way of allowing adequate representation of their views, and youth consultations are especially relevant when the matter at stake affects young people directly;
- The barriers that hinder youth from accessing otherwise possible modes of participation (especially financial ones) should be minimised;
- There should additionally be an investment in capacity building of young people, allowing for better debating and and decision-making;
- There are many successful long-lasting examples of Youth Delegate Programs and other engagement formats that can guide future youth engagement strategies.

### Call to Action:

Therefore, IFMSA calls on:

#### Governments/Health Ministries:

- Implement Youth Delegate Programmes to relevant UN bodies, namely the WHO;
- Tailor national education systems to ensure that youth are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to positively participate in their communities;
- Provide conditions for every young person to reach their full potential regardless of their background, namely through the assurance of housing, education and healthcare;
- Create formal spaces for the impact of the youth in political decisions, namely by considering the positions of national youth parliaments, councils or other forums and following-up adequately;
- Support youth-led organizations, namely through official recognition of their representation capacity, consultation on topics of interest and logistical/financial support for their maintenance;
- Provide in a timely manner the relevant information for the youth in civil society to be able to prepare and advocate on each topic\*;
- Fund youth engagement opportunities, to avoid selection bias due to financial constraints. \*

#### The UN system (including WHO), international agencies and civil society:

- Officially endorse and incentivise countries to implement Youth Delegate Programmes to UN bodies, namely the WHO;
- Have formal effective youth-involvement structures, providing a space for the young members of

civil society to have a larger impact in their governance, namely through a UN Youth Townhall or equivalent spaces for youth to prepare and engage in the UN's decision-making mechanism;

- Provide involvement opportunities at the global, regional and national levels, creating a standard for meaningful youth engagement in decision-making;
- Provide support to youth organizations with similar goals by providing technical assistance, funding and other relevant resources;
- Provide internships and other capacity-building and networking opportunities for young leaders.

#### **Medical Schools and Universities:**

- Provide access to education to a diverse cohort of students, for example by providing scholarships and by having quota spots for groups historically underrepresented;
- Support student- and youth-led organisations and provide them with financial means to ensure their sustainability. In addition, support and promote their initiatives, projects and activities;
- Strengthen student councils and provide them with a platform to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes that affect students and youth;
- Introduce civic and political education into the curriculum for youth to better understand the roles and responsibilities of responsible citizenship and how to have an active political participation;
- Participate actively in youth-led campaigns and events, namely through youth councils;
- Engage students as equal partners in all facets of decision making processes, including but not limited to, curriculum planning and development, admission policy, research priorities and opportunities, student support services, budget allocation and infrastructure development, with representative voting power equitable to that of faculty members;
- Create channels for open and transparent communication between the school board members and students through regular meetings, a feedback system and adequate follow-up.

#### **Health Sector providers and professionals:**

- Establish channels of communication that allow younger professionals to engage with the heads of facilities and provide input in its management, namely through youth/residents' councils/representatives, allowing young health professionals to take on positions of leadership;
- Create a working environment which allows for young doctors'/residents' input to the daily practice of the healthcare teams without undue retaliation from more senior peers.

#### **Youth and Student organizations (including NMOs and Medical Students):**

- Lead research, data collection/analysis and youth consultations for policy and decision-making on youth matters in their countries, showcasing they can adequately represent their young peers;
- Join efforts with each other in activities, campaigns and advocacy, showcasing to partners and governments the capacity of youth organizations, besides promoting youth engagement directly;
- Create and provide governments/relevant national stakeholders with evidence from other countries' successful policies engaging their youth in decision-making processes;
- Have peer-to-peer education opportunities in technical and advocacy matters, ensuring interprofessional and intergenerational collaboration and exchange of expertise and knowledge;
- Engage with relevant medical education non-governmental organizations, conferences, accreditation bodies, and educational companies to empower, capacitate, and empower medical students in their involvement with medical education.

## Position Paper

### Background information:

People up to the age of 30 make up 47% of the world population. In the first 15 to 20 years of life, children and adolescents do not even have the possibility of participating in most countries through elections, one of the most basic civil participation formats. But even in young adulthood, youth representation is very scarce.<sup>[1]</sup> This means that almost half of the world population is severely underrepresented in the political setting from the start. Furthermore, these young people are the ones who are expected to live for longer on this planet, which means an even more disproportionate access to decision-making power in comparison to the impact of policies adopted.<sup>[2]</sup>

One of the best ways of characterising with more detail the actual level/reality of the formats for engaging youth and which will be used in this document is the Hart's Ladder of Participation <sup>[3]</sup>, which has the following levels:

1. **Manipulation:** This is the lowest level, where youth are exploited to support causes that don't really benefit them, while they are not actively involved in any decision-making.
2. **Decoration:** Refers to youth being exploited to indirectly support a cause.
3. **Tokenism:** Refers to youth seemingly being given a voice, yet having little to no control over what they do or how they engage.
4. **Assigned but informed:** Refers to youth being assigned a specific role and informed regarding how and why they are being involved, without any decision power.
5. **Consulted and informed**
6. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth**
7. **Youth-initiated and directed**
8. **Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults**

The first three levels (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) are an example of youth non-participation, with higher levels corresponding to higher and better youth participation.

The challenge ahead of us is how to increase the weight of young people's opinion in decision-making processes to a level more proportional to the impact these decisions will have on them. As such, the aim of the discussion that follows is to make the case for strategies which make young people's views more impactful in the decision-making process - both from a logical point of view and with examples.

### Discussion:

#### 1. Young People's Challenges

Young people are the first beneficiaries when we go after meaningful engagement in decision-making. On most occasions and at the various levels of decision (local, national or international), young people feel like they are underrepresented when they look at the policies adopted and the decision-makers behind them. <sup>[4]</sup> This is not an unexpected reality, as very rarely these decision-makers are similar to them in terms of age and other factors. <sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, the same happens with their decisions - they are less aligned with their priorities.

Even when there is a planned format for engagement, young people will often be relegated to a position still far away from actual sharing of decisions. For example, tokenism is a very frequent strategy by people who hold power and want to do no more than showcasing inclusive decision-making. <sup>[6][7]</sup>

Furthermore, youth already face multiple barriers when it comes to participation in decision-making on all levels, be it local, national or international. Some of the identified barriers to youth engagement are:

- **Exclusivity of the access to youth representation:** Even if youth are being engaged in the first place, its limited presence will hinder the diversity of youth representatives. The opportunities for

participation will be rather exclusive, usually reserved for the most privileged. This leads to a lack of representativity and input diversity in the representation process. It is important to reach out and empower youth from all backgrounds.

- **Lack of access to technology and the internet:** The Internet and social media are ways to connect with youth, but some countries have not succeeded in providing this ease of access to all their youth. This inaccessibility leads to further limitations when it comes to youth education and participation.
- **Lack of financial means:** Financial constraints can severely affect how youth are engaged. The costs of youth engagement activities vary according to the type of activity, but include training sessions, travel costs, website maintenance, among others.
- **Level of trust in the youth perspective:** Due to their young age, the representation capacity of young people is often questioned when it comes to their input. It is important for organisations and governments to break the cycle of seniority, work on building the capacities of youth and engage them in conversations. [23][2]
- There are also other factors that on certain occasions impact youth engagement, such as disability, ethnicity and race, gender, and identification with the LGBTQ+ community. Individuals may face discrimination based on one or more aspects of their identity which often leads to a cumulative disadvantage.

These barriers raise the problem of having a great fraction of society underrepresented in decision-making and therefore shaping up a world which isn't the best for current and future generations.

## 2. Governmental and Societal Added Value

Governments being able to better account for the full extent of their population when making decisions is of value. However, governments and society in general are secondary beneficiaries of meaningful engagement in decision-making. Governments can showcase their genuine consideration of the voting youth by prioritising their concerns, generating a favourable impression among the wider population. This can be achieved by proactively recognising and addressing the specific challenges faced by young people who are not yet eligible to vote. [8][2] Additionally, engaging young people in politics helps enhance the legitimacy of governmental institutions and democratic processes as when youth feel their voices are heard and their concerns are taken seriously, they are more likely to trust the political system. [20]

Furthermore, meaningful youth engagement can result in improved decision-making as youth bring diverse viewpoints and experiences which can result in critical thinking and better-informed decisions and more effective policies and solutions.

Meaningful youth engagement fosters social cohesion and inclusivity and by giving youth an opportunity to take an active role in society and creates a more inclusive and participatory democracy. Also, by providing young people the opportunity to engage in politics and high-level decisions, they develop essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, leadership, and teamwork. These skills not only benefit them individually, but also contribute to the overall development of society in the long term as engaged youth become engaged citizens who can contribute positively to their communities throughout their life course, regardless of the format in which they do it - from voting, to the daily debates on trending topics, to the direct political participation -, therefore contributing to a more robust democracy [21].



Finally, society in general comes out on top: better integrated youth will be more active and less isolated. They will seek knowledge and skills which allow them to take up a job with a positive impact on themselves and the ones around, while also becoming more resilient to abrupt changes in life. [9]

### 3. International Organization's Endorsement

From a youth perspective, a stance that would benefit our representation could be seen as one promoting an undue weight in decision-making. However, it is clear that not only does the youth seek for more recognition and the Member States benefit from it, but the largest international organizations of interest to us (both the UN and WHO) have officially endorsed such ways of participation since many decades ago [10], with a recent surge in these appeals, of which three can be highlighted:

- UN's Secretary-General launch of the policy brief on Meaningful Youth Engagement in policy-making and decision-making processes [2]
- WHO's Director-General call for Member States to include youth representatives in their delegations to the World Health Assembly [11]
- WHO's creation of their own consultative Youth Council [22]

These appeals do not come as isolated proposals to have more youth engagement in decision-making. There is a context and a set of principles that these organizations themselves also propose, that not only solidify their proposal, but also align with youth organisation's vision for youth representation. This not only adds value, but should also guide youth organisation's way of promoting and advocating for engagement. Some of the core principles to take into account are to make youth engagement accessible, resourced, transparent, partnership-based, institutionally-mandated and reciprocally-accountable.

### 4. Specific situations to deserve even higher youth involvement

While it is essential to have meaningful youth engagement in all political and high level decisions, there are certain areas which, because of a more direct impact to medical students or a more profound influence in the lives of young people, deserve an even more direct involvement of the youth:

- **Climate change**

Climate change and its consequences are an issue in which the asymmetry of consequences between the current and the future generations is especially dramatic, due to the accumulating impact and difficult reversibility of environmental change.

On this issue, there is a long way to go to truly involve youth. Some of the actions to take, besides the ones already stated, come from specific capacity building needs due to the specificity of the topic and the fact that access to networking and reliable information is also particularly difficult. [12] [19]

- **Emergencies**

Health emergencies come with widespread negative impact in populations and young people still form the bulk of those at the forefront of emergency response - for example, as staff in laboratories during pandemics or junior healthcare workers during outbreaks. With more or less training for those roles, they are often the first point of contact with victims, since they are usually the lowest cadre in the healthcare workforce. This puts them at the highest risk of getting infected, experiencing trauma or other damaging consequences and makes health emergency prevention and preparedness an area with a special need for youth engagement in decision-making.

- **Medical Education (Meaningful Student Involvement (MSI))**

As medical students are directly affected by their medical education, it is important for the educational system to have processes that allow students to be meaningfully and actively involved and represented in all levels of medical education decision making. This involvement can range from advocacy efforts to co-directing education programs, as students are the foremost experts in their own educational needs and demands in- and post- medical school. Medical students should have representation in the decision-making bodies of their medical schools and be involved with providing input on curriculum planning, recruitment and promotion processes. MSI acknowledges students' role in developing and evaluating curricula and teaching strategies for an optimal learning experience. Importantly, MSI can also have a long term impact in equipping students with leadership skills and contributing to the professional development of future physicians during undergraduate education. [\[13,14\]](#)

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The role of youth in shaping the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development cannot be overlooked. With approximately 90 indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) directly relevant to youth, we have a vested interest in the achievement of these Goals. Young people possess immense potential to actively participate in translating the 2030 Agenda into local, national, and regional policies. Their involvement is pivotal in implementing, monitoring, and reviewing the Agenda, as well as holding governments accountable.

A comprehensive analysis of national reports on voluntary national reviews and other sources have revealed gradual improvements in engaging young people in national efforts to follow-up and review the SDGs. This engagement takes various forms, such as involvement through national youth councils, participation in technical working groups for voluntary national reviews, inclusion in national Sustainable Development Goal councils, the establishment of a Youth Ombudsperson for the SDGs and the participation of young people in national delegations attending high-level political forums on sustainable development. [\[2\]](#)

To ensure progress on the SDGs, it is imperative to take urgent action, with youth empowerment included.

## 5. Good examples

All this rationale could be disregarded to a certain extent by alleging it's no more than a theoretical exercise for planning more youth intervention. But in fact not only are the challenges real, but also there have been instances with very good examples of success in better taking youth into consideration. [\[15\]\[2\]](#)

One of the most noticeable examples is the one of Youth Delegates in Member State delegations - to various organisations, but WHO in particular. By guaranteeing delegation spots to young delegates, the delegations of each country will have young people's opinion taken into consideration at all steps of their preparation. [\[16\]](#)

Other good examples that have been compiled on proactive youth engagement in intergovernmental decision-making processes include The UNEP, The International Migration Review Forum and The United Nations Framework Convention On Climate Change. They vary on how the process is carried out (participation in sessions, speaking in round tables & policy debates, representation in negotiations, among others). Thus, each organisation can incorporate a robust mechanism of youth engagement fitting its own singularity, but not overlooking this unalienable right of meaningful engagement. [\[2\]](#)

At the national level, good examples include the United Kingdom's Department For International

Development (DFID), where young people are integrated as advocates and agents by designing and delivering a youth summit endorsed by the department. [3] In Thailand, the child & youth council recommendations set the cornerstone for the implementation of essential legislation on the prevention and alleviation of adolescent pregnancy, by issuing an inter-ministerial memorandum of understanding ensuring all pregnant adolescents and young people can stay in the Thai education system. [2]

## 6. Guaranteeing essentials before engaging

A country's government might have the best intentions for youth engagement. But having an influence in decision-making will not be a priority for people struggling to access basic living conditions such as housing, education and healthcare. Not only that, but for example having policies that facilitate access to a job and a salary will allow people entering their work life to stay active in society. [9]

Going one step further, even after basic needs are met, there's no guarantee of an interest and capacity for participation. To go after that, there must be knowledge/information transfer, be it in the format of campaigns for a wider audience or training according to specific interests of a sector of society). For example, health sector students and young professionals provided with capacity building opportunities on health management and public health policies will be better able to contribute to the debate around public policies regarding health. [17][18]

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\*Call to Action that applies both to Governments/health ministries and to the UN system (including WHO), international agencies and civil society.