

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EU DECISION-MAKING

This paper was drafted by Plan International to share our approach to youth engagement with the EU. We welcome the different initiatives of DG INTPA that aim to increase youth engagement and to mainstream youth priorities in EU development policy, and we hope this can contribute to further strengthen them.

The principles and suggestions presented below may apply to a number of processes and initiatives, such as those currently being considered for the headquarters level as well as those in EU delegations. They are inspired by the experience of Plan International in engaging with young people, partnering with youth-led organisations and supporting youth-led collective action. As an organisation working with and for girls and young women, we also highlight in particular ways to address barriers to their participation.

The paper is structured in three parts:

- 1) guiding principles for youth participation;
- 2) preparing for youth participation;
- 3) ensuring meaningful, safe and inclusive participation.



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Guiding principles for youth engagement

Plan International aims to support girl- and youth-led collective action that is:

Safe - We do no harm and never encourage activities that may put the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person at risk. We build risk and mitigation as well as self-care and wellbeing into all that we do to support collective action and train youth to analyse and manage risk.

Meaningful - We endorse the influencing agendas of youth themselves. This means avoiding tokenistic engagements and supporting sustainable girl- and youth-led collective action.

Sustainable - We invest in multi-year initiatives and provide training on self-organisation and resource mobilisation so that collective action can outlive the standard life of a programme and grant.

Strategic - We train youth to develop their own vision for change and collective plans of action that are based on evidence, research and analysis. We support them to target those with influence and engage in activities that help them to meet their goals and objectives.

Inclusive - We actively support diverse groups and invest efforts into building commonalities across groups. This includes supporting marginalised and excluded voices. We do this with an intersectional approach, acknowledging different and intersecting forms of discrimination which affect young people differently depending on their backgrounds and identities.

Gender-Transformative - We take a gender transformative approach that tackles the root causes of gender inequality and support youth to:

- develop a shared vision of change;
- build critical consciousness through critical self-reflection;
- engage in collective action and movement building for gender equality and girls' rights;
- co-design and co-deliver strategic advocacy plans that transform gender discriminatory social norms and structures and advance legislation and policy for equality.

Safeguarding

How to support activists and youth-led groups to be risk & safety aware in their work and in their engagement with the EU?

As we partner with and support activists and youth-led groups around the world, in what can be difficult environments for civil society, many Plan International offices organise workshops to strengthen the capacity of youth groups to prevent risks and ensure their own safety. Safeguarding is absolutely essential if the EU is to engage young people and representatives of youth networks, be it at headquarters level or through EU Delegations.

We are currently in the process of developing a series of tools which will constitute a pick-and-mix package for youth groups to develop their own understanding and planning on navigating political environment and risk, as well as a Training of Trainers guide. This material should be available in summer 2021.

Preparing for youth participation

The EU should promote **legal and policy frameworks in partner countries** that protect the civil and political rights of young people and **creates an enabling environment**, so that young people can enjoy to the fullest extent their right to influence decisions through peaceful assembly, protesting and free speech without fear of loss of freedom or retaliation.

To develop a **greater understanding** of the role and purpose of the participation of young people in decision-making, there should be:

- Training programmes provided to policy-makers at the Headquarters and EU delegation levels on the right to participation, with an anti-oppressive approach, addressing gendered biases, and explaining what it means to de-centre authority¹;
- A strategy and/or framework establishing young people's participation and engagement within the space as a priority, in order to help to ensure buy-in, the funding and resources required for implementation.

Lessons learned from the Youth Advisory Panels

Youth Advisory Panels (YAPs) are groups of young people within a given Plan International office. When our first YAPs began operating in 2013, they aimed to include the voices of young people within internal decision-making processes (governance). Since then, some have evolved into influencing groups involved in advocacy and campaigns. Their role and composition vary across offices, but range from groups of 10 to 20 members, with ages from 11 to 25 years old.

YAPs were originally created as an **add-on structure to existing adult centric systems, which functioned completely independently**. Therefore, the decision-making power stayed with the adults and the process tokenised the young people, leading to a lack of accountability to the YAPs. As the YAPs shifted from being involved in internal governance to campaigns and advocacy, their priorities became more embedded in our advocacy work as they work directly with members of the policy and advocacy departments*. In certain offices, **staff have objectives on collaboration with youth**, which enables better collaboration and accountability.

* There is also usually a youth focal point who is responsible for maintaining and organising the group

¹ CIVICUS' reflective playbook for donors and youth organisers offers useful exercises that may help redress power imbalances in such instances. Available at: <https://www.civicus.org/documents/en-Playbook-2020-march.pdf>

Ensuring that participation is meaningful, safe and inclusive

In order to enable all young people' access to participation, we recommend the EU to:

- Ensure long-term, unrestricted funding for participatory opportunities, leading to the permanence and reliability of these opportunities. Funding should also be accessible to youth-led collectives and organisations, with training and support available to such groups looking to apply for this funding. Where required, additional funding should be made available to conduct outreach and capacity-building activities for the most marginalised youth and groups in advance of these opportunities.
- Pair any digital opportunities that enable youth participation with efforts to distribute community access to the internet in rural communities, low-income communities and/or any other communities where young people are without internet access.
- Recognise that gender-based violence is a key factor preventing girls and young women's participation. The EU should adopt a gender-transformative approach to violence prevention and response, both offline and online. This is done by considering harmful social norms and unequal relations of power and how they contribute to violence towards specific gender identities. In line with this, the EU should ensure girls and young women feel safe when they participate in decision-making processes, including safe access to physical or digital spaces, protection from retaliation and protection of their right to privacy so that they can speak freely on personal or sensitive issues.

To ensure that young people feel actively included in decision-making, concrete inclusive mechanisms and practices should be implemented, in dialogue with young people. We recommend for the EU to:

- Discuss and determine in advance with young people the extent of their participation.² Young people should be involved in co-designing the participatory opportunity, including when relevant the thematic areas for discussion, with the possibility to input into the agenda
- Invest proper time and resources in strengthening young people's capacity. This is necessary to enable and ensure meaningful participation. The initial capacity assessment should not only focus on skills that are necessary to make the given project or initiative a success, but should also address needs identified by young people themselves. Non-traditional ways of learning should be considered – social media, video, peer support.
- Outreach to grassroots organisations, those in remote areas and those without access to internet, as well as youth-led organisation representing youth from minority and other marginalised voices. In addition, consideration needs to be given to gender balance and intersectionality in every engagement opportunity, including ethnicity, socioeconomic background, age and SOGIESC of young representatives. In certain cases the creation of separate spaces might be needed to ensure safety and meaningful engagement.
- Provide safe and meaningful decision-making opportunities online, when access to physical decision-making fora is not possible.
- When engaging young people and youth-led organisations in existing mechanisms (for example, the CSO roadmaps in partner countries), give strong consideration to

² The extent of participation could be measured according to frameworks such as Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Voice or Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation.

these recommendations to adapt these mechanisms, in order to ensure a youth-friendly and inclusive engagement of young people in all their diversity.

To ensure that decision-makers are accountable to young people, and that opportunities to participate are not tokenistic, we recommend the EU to:

- Engage young people in decision-making spaces and recognised them as experts in their own lived experiences.
- Organise regular interface between young people and decision-makers (including at senior level), including follow-up opportunities for young people to hear the rationale for why their suggestions have or not been followed.
- Strive to establish shared-value partnerships between youth and adults to ensure the engagement is an exchange between equals where both parties are gaining something and the voices of young people are valued and heard. This is critical to address the negative or skeptical opinions adults may hold with regards to youth engagement, and tokenism in programs involving youth.
- Involve young people in the monitoring and evaluation of participatory programmes and opportunities.
- Where EU institutions are engaging youth in decision-making or seeking their time and expertise, they should budget at minimum for translation and interpretation, data packages and stipends/remuneration as relevant to the level of engagement.

Youth advisor

Finally, here are thoughts on how to ensure a youth advisor role with the capacity to develop meaningful and sustainable youth engagement mechanisms that bring the needs and rights of young people at the heart of EU decision-making on external action:

- To fully unlock the advisor's potential to meaningfully contribute to the establishment of youth engagement processes for EU institutions, initial **capacity strengthening or training** activities should be planned for.
- To ensure that the youth advisor can create long-lasting structural change for youth centred decision-making, the mandate should be long enough for the youth advisor to get familiar with the role, and grow with it on a personal and professional level. This will also ensure a more **coherent** and **sustainable** contribution, until handover.
- In order to ensure that the voices and interest of young people, in all their **diversity**, are reflected in EU policies, the youth advisor should have first-hand experience or knowledge of the groups that face the most obstacles in participating in decision-making processes, including girls and young women. Additionally, a regional rotation in the selection of youth advisors is encouraged to ensure that **different geographical experiences** are considered.
- Given the high **responsibility** and **expertise** this position implies and requires, it should be remunerated. This will also help in ensuring the youth advisor's inputs are not tokenistic.