

Expert Group Meeting

“Youth Civic Engagement: Enabling Youth Participation in Political, Social and Economic Life”

16-17 June 2014

UNESCO Headquarters

Paris, France

Concept Note

From 16-17 June 2014, the Division for Social Policy and Development in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations and UNESCO will organize an Expert Group Meeting at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, under the theme “Youth Civic Engagement: enabling youth participation in political, social and economic life.” The meeting will bring together experts and representatives of youth organizations, academia, representatives of Member States, United Nations entities, and intergovernmental organizations to discuss the ways in which youth civic engagement can be an enabler for political, social and economic participation, as well as to examine current opportunities and challenges affecting such potential. These topics will be considered under the framework of both the World Programme of Action for Youth¹ and of the UN System-Wide Action Plan on Youth which respectively incorporate youth participation and youth civic engagement among their priority areas for action.

Objectives

The primary objective of the Expert Group Meeting is to provide fresh impetus and innovative thinking on the topic of youth participation, namely by looking into how the civic engagement of young women and men can be an enabler for a more efficient and informed participation in political, social and economic life. The meeting is second in a series of expert group meetings convened to explore youth participation.² The results of these meetings will contribute to the preparation of the World Youth Report 2015 which will focus on youth participation and engagement. Both the expert group meetings and the development of the World Youth Report 2015 aspire to contribute to ongoing discussions on how best to ensure young women and men’s active participation and engagement, both locally and globally, in a number of policy and civic processes that affect them directly, including the elaboration of the Post-2015 development agenda.

Overview

Civic engagement is increasingly recognized as an important component of youth development because it can help build human and social capital. The practice of civic engagement has an important impact in educating young people about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and allowing them to develop skill sets that are

¹ The World Programme of Action on Youth is an international policy framework which offers practical guidelines for national action and regional and international cooperation on 15 priority areas to improve the situation of young people.

² The first related meeting was Expert Group Meeting on “Youth, development, and rights”, 13-14 November 2013, United Nations, New York. More information: <http://undesadspd.org/Youth/OurWork/Meetingsandworkshops.aspx>

valuable to them as they undergo the transition to adulthood. Civic engagement is also perceived as a driving force for community and national development as it enables youth to unleash their potential and contribute to the development of their societies.

While there is no agreed upon definition of youth civic engagement, for the purpose of the Expert Group Meeting, “civic engagement” will be understood as individual or collective actions to improve the wellbeing of communities or nations. In spite of the lack of a common definition, there are many different forms of civic engagement that are broadly recognized: youth community service, volunteerism, social entrepreneurship, youth leadership and youth media. Throughout, it is increasingly recognized that youth civic engagement is a powerful means allowing youth to build their capacities and assets, make a swift transition to productive and decent work and to public life, as well as to contribute to the development of their communities and countries, of their peers and other social groups that do not have access to human development opportunities.

Civic engagement inherently recognizes the role of youth in development. Youth are seen as important contributors to the development of their societies — contributors whose efforts are recognized and whose involvement is nurtured. Youth civic engagement also allows for interrelated interventions in a number of thematic areas: social inclusion and participation (particularly in urban contexts); disadvantaged or marginalized youth (indigenous and minority youth, youth with disabilities, young migrants, youth with HIV/AIDS, former offenders, among others), youth in rural areas, unemployed youth and youth in post-conflict and post-disaster situations; prevention of violence; intercultural understanding; development and peace; ethics and values; intergenerational dialogue. As such, youth civic engagement has the potential of maximizing standard investments in youth development across different sectors and socio-economic groups.

For all these reasons, the civic engagement of young women and men represents an important strategy that could enable and strengthen the participation of youth in political, social and economic life. Current trends need to be carefully examined, in order to pre-empt challenges and enhance opportunities for participation. Political and economic shifts in recent years, as well as ongoing social transformations, have served to highlight the growing disparities between many young people and the ways in which the political and economic world, as well as their societies, operate and function. Protests across the world, from the Middle-East to Europe, to the global Occupy Movements, have been largely driven by young people demanding a greater say in their governance structures, employment and economic life, and societies more generally, as a response to a growing discontent with their ability to influence and have a say over their political, social and economic lives. Moreover, as newer technologies increasingly infiltrate the lives of all, but especially young people, youth are turning to alternative forms of participation to have their views and voices heard and to bring about change in their societies. ICTs, particularly social media, have played a prominent role in young people’s civic engagement in recent years.

Key issues

The Expert Group Meeting will include three sessions that will respectively examine how civic engagement can enable greater participation in (i) political (ii) social and (iii) economic life. A fourth session will look into the emerging role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in advancing civic engagement. All four sessions will look into the following main questions:

- In view of the massive changes in the political/social/economic climates in recent years, how does the practice of civic engagement contribute to:
 - Improving and “modernizing” traditional participation patterns so that they can adjust to current realities?
 - Expanding or developing new avenues, skills, opportunities (including youth-led) and entry points for youth participation in political, social and economic life ?

- Also, how does the practice of civic engagement enable young women and men to learn about and exercise their political, civic and economic rights?

Session 1. Enabling youth political participation: civic rights, political action, participation in decision-making, shaping national and international agendas

1.1. Shaping political processes at national level

There are different patterns of youth engagement in shaping political processes and agendas at national level. In some countries young women and men serve as members of youth committees in local governments, youth-led organizations, national youth councils or platforms, and political parties offering their views on community issues or participating in student governments and influencing youth policy. Other important pathways of participation that are available to youth include running for electoral office, voting in elections and joining youth-led organizations to give voice to their needs and concerns.

While there is a greater involvement of youth in national youth councils and the preparation of national policies and programmes, in many countries, youth participation structures are heavily challenged, both in terms of inclusiveness and in terms of efficiency. Opportunities for participation may be constrained or obfuscated and vary depending on a series of additional factors. Although certain avenues for participation are available through youth organizations, many of them lack funding and resources, and coordination across organizations tends to be absent or weak. Addressing these challenges is not only vital in terms of making decisions more relevant, sustainable and legitimate, but is equally needed in recognition of the special role that youth led-organizations play in giving young people power over their own lives. Legal, political and economic conditions for youth-led organizations need to improve and reflect their democratic and societal function.

Moreover, the potential of civic education and civic skills development, which remains the very basis for an active engagement of youth in policy processes, has not been fully tapped into, both in the formal and the informal education and learning system. Girls and young women remain at the periphery of political processes. Discriminatory laws and policies, low levels of education, crippling poverty contribute to their widespread exclusion from political life. When they do get an

opportunity to engage with these processes, persistent gender stereotypes, traditional notions of power and rampant sexism limit their advancement in the political field.

Evidence demonstrates that youth involvement in institutionalized political processes is relatively low compared to the participation of older citizens. Electoral participation and voting rates for young voters remains low. In fact, the percentage of young people participating in electoral processes remains low at all levels.³ At the same time, many young people are completely disengaging from existing political and governance systems. They believe that these systems do not reflect their concerns, and refuse to participate in any related processes. This disengagement has led to widespread voter apathy among young voters. As far as running for political office is concerned, people under the age of 35 are minimally represented in top leadership positions in political parties or governments, despite being a member of the largest cohort of youth the world has known. Less than 2 per cent of parliamentarians globally are in their 20s.⁴ This figure rises only slightly for parliamentarians in their 30s at 12 percent.⁵ In a third of countries worldwide, the eligibility for national parliaments starts at 25 or older,⁶ which creates a gap between legal age of voting, which is at 18 years in most countries.⁷

1.2. Youth leadership shaping international agendas

In addition to their engagement at the national level, youth have emerged as effective agents of change at the global level, demonstrating their leadership and capacity to contribute with innovative ideas on a number of issues affecting peace and sustainable development. In recognition of the role of youth in global peace, security and development, the Five-Year Action Agenda of the Secretary-General⁸ identified working with and for young people as a top priority for the United Nations System. There is consensus at the international level that youth concerns must shape the post-2015 development agenda, particularly in the realms of youth participation, education and employment, where both national action and international cooperation are urgently needed.

However there remains a lack of clarity about how these can be further articulated in ambitious international development agendas and, thereby, influence national development policies. On the one hand, youth engagement in shaping international agendas remains dependant on the capacities and the opportunities that are provided to youth to engage first at national level. In many international meetings and processes, an active engagement of youth at the national level can be a prerequisite or a key factor enabling their engagement at the global level. On the other hand, in cases where more and more supranational and all-inclusive procedures are put into place to develop and shape international agendas a wider range of youth groups are given an opportunity to engage. Is there a middle ground between the two? If not, could/should there be a bridge or a common denominator?

³ UNDP (2013). Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the electoral cycle: a good practice guide, p. 11.

⁴ UNDP and IPU (2012) Global Parliamentary Report, p. 108.

⁵ Ibid, p. 108.

⁶ UNDP (2013). Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the electoral cycle: a good practice guide, -p. 4.

⁷ UNDP (2013). Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the electoral cycle: a good practice guide, -p.21.

⁸ For more, see <http://www.un.org/sg/priorities/>

Session 2. Youth driving social change and community development: youth-led movements, community action, volunteerism.

Youth have emerged as effective agents of change at the global and local levels. In recent times, in many parts of the world, young people have taken to the streets in widespread protests to express their dissatisfaction and their grievances with the political establishment. Young people's discontent with the status quo has reflected in protests in a number of Northern African countries, Spain's 15 M, Mexico's YoSoy132 and other youth-led movements that have challenged the political elite class in a number of countries. While in many cases these protests have sparked progressive governmental reforms, youth and youth-led organizations are still not fully represented or consulted in the transition to new governance structures, or in the post-transition landscape.

At the grass-roots, young people are transforming their societies through volunteerism, community service and by leading action that contributes to addressing challenges within the community. Informal youth volunteerism has reached unprecedented levels.⁹ Aiming at improving the quality of volunteer experience and expand the quantity of volunteering opportunities available to young people, a direct outcome of the Secretary-General's Action Agenda has been the creation of a United Nations youth volunteering modality under the auspices of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV). The modality aims to facilitate the engagement of youth in global peace and sustainable human development through volunteerism, bringing the voice of youth into the development discourse and helping young people to realize their full social and human potential.

Session 3: Strengthening youth economic engagement

High rates of youth unemployment have thwarted young people's engagement in economic life. In many parts of the world, prospects for full economic participation for young people seem to be only diminishing, making it harder for young people to be economically participate in their societies. The global youth unemployment rate has reached over 10 per cent for the past three decades.¹⁰ Latest estimates indicate that 73.4 million young people or 12.6% of youth are expected to be out of work in 2013, an increase of 3.5 million between 2007 and 2013.¹¹ It is projected that economic slowdown is likely to push another half million into unemployment by 2014.¹² In the best of times, when young women and men find employment, they are excluded from decent work. Young people, in general, are prone to working longer hours under insecure, informal and intermittent work conditions.

These challenges are heightened by a skills mismatch between the training offered by educational systems in many countries and the expectations of employers in the labour market. While young people may have completed formal education, they do not acquire relevant and marketable skills which are required to enter and excel in the labour market. The rapid changes in technology have further exacerbated this

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a second jobs dip* (Geneva, 2013), p. 11

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a second jobs dip* (Geneva, 2013), p. 11

¹¹ International Labor Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A generation at risk*, (Geneva, 2013)

¹² International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a second jobs dip* (Geneva, 2013), p. 11

situation. Many educational systems are not equipped to keep pace with technological changes, and are not able to provide the up-to-date instruction and online learning opportunities to youth.¹³ In order to develop skills and expertise relevant to the labour market many young people have to rely on opportunities in the non-formal or informal sector.

In this challenging environment, civic engagement practices can help build youth employability, by bridging the skills' gap, as well as provide more inclusive, flexible, and alternative entry points for economic participation. In this respect, two of the most prominent forms of youth civic engagement are youth entrepreneurship, particularly social entrepreneurship, which allows the full development of an individual by creating a space to build skills, management and practical understanding which are fundamental not only for increasing employability, but also for enabling smooth transition and participation of young people in economic life. Social entrepreneurship allows youth to take on an active role in the economic life of their countries and contribute to promoting social peace, innovation, dialogue and development, hence, preventing risk behaviours, including violence. However, despite the surge in youth entrepreneurship and innovation, in recent years, it remains that young people are highly discriminated against when attempting to access credit and finances to start their businesses. In addition, they lack the knowledge and skills to efficiently use and access financial services.

Session 4. The emerging role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in enabling youth civic engagement

Information and communication technologies and social media have been a game-changer in the youth engagement landscape. The unprecedented access to information technologies has shifted the balance of power between young citizens and governmental institutions. Young citizens, increasingly aware of developments in previously remote parts of the world are calling for renewed forms of democracy and demanding more transparency from their governments. Traditional modes of community organizing are being supplemented by ICT developments given the increased speed at which issues arise and crises strike today.

Youth have used these burgeoning technologies to serve as a global platform for their issues, to generate and disseminate knowledge and to create unified youth-led social movements. Technology has enabled youth to participate in new forms of engagement beyond the traditional, formal avenues available to them. Young people are utilizing ICTs to mobilize, organize, network, advocate and develop and spread their message to a wider audience. ICTs are increasingly being used as a means to improve the participation and empowerment of youth in community-led development¹⁴. Social networking tools and the internet are increasingly allowing youth to share ideas and mobilize themselves on particular issues¹⁵. ICTs have especially facilitated youth engagement in urban governance, election monitoring, and government watchdog roles.¹⁶

¹³ International Telecommunications Union, *Digital Opportunities: Innovative ICT Solutions for Youth Employment*, (2014), p. 3

¹⁴ *Unitar web seminar series on ICT policy issues for development/ preparatory event for the global forum on ICT and development (ICT4D)*

¹⁵ *Ibid* comments by Ben Groom

¹⁶ UN-HABITAT, "ICTs, Urban Governance and Youth", (Nairobi, 2012), p. 36

Outcomes

1. 15-18 short expert papers on the thematic areas addressed at the meeting
2. List of key recommendations for the key issues discussed
3. List of indicative practices and concrete examples of youth engagement within the areas discussed
4. Substantive and conceptual input and contribution for the 2015 World Youth Report and for the International Youth Day 2015

Participants

The EGM will bring together 18-22 experts on the specific thematic areas that will be addressed at the meeting. These experts will be identified from civil society organisations, youth led structures, academia, United Nations, Member States, and the private sector to ensure a fully rounded discussion. Gender parity and geographical balance, as well as age balance will also be pursued.

Experts will be asked to present a technical paper on their topic of expertise two weeks prior to the EGM so as to ensure that all participants are fully informed on the subject areas discussed. The technical papers will also be used in the background preparation for the UN World Youth Report 2015 where relevant.