

The Right of Youth Participation in Decision-Making GCE Briefing, July 2017

In January 2015, the World Assembly of the Global Campaign for Education formally recognised the need to represent and include youth-led movements. Part of this is recognising the need to provide support for youth-led organisations on the local and national levels, including in national education coalitions. This briefing paper provides a background to the right of young people, to actively and meaningfully participate in education advocacy, policy, and decision-making processes and how GCE can support this.

Background

The past ten years have witnessed a gradual increase in the recognition of the necessity of youth engagement on issues that concern young people. This increase comes with a similar rise in the number and proportion of youth in the world. According to the United Nations, in 2015, youth between the ages of 15 and 24 numbered 1.2 billion, or over 25% of the global population. A wide variety of actors has taken steps to systematically and productively include young people in their decision-making processes. These actors include government at national and sub-national levels, intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education, and INGOs such as Plan International, ActionAid, and Save the Children.

Young people's right to participation

The key role of young people in leading global efforts on peacebuilding and sustainable development has recently been enshrined in two global intergovernmental resolutions. The first resolution, the 2015 United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, also known as *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, repeatedly specifically references young people as a vulnerable group in need of empowerment (art. 23) and entitled to a “nurturing environment for the full realisation of their rights and capabilities (art. 24), in particular with regard to quality education and employment opportunities (arts. 14, 24, and 27). The second, UN Security Council Resolution 2250, emphasises the importance of youth participation in fostering and maintaining sustainable peace. It urges member states and others to provide opportunities for youth to participate on all levels (art. 1), recognising and enabling young people's efforts toward social cohesion, education, employment, and entrepreneurship (arts. 10 and 11).

These resolutions build on the two-pronged understanding of the need for youth engagement: the marginalisation of youth is detrimental to building sustainable peace in all societies, and young people have the right to have a say in all matters that concern them. Young people are able to bring in new and innovative perspectives and are able to fully participate in decision-processes that concern them, as has been partly enshrined in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), article 12.

Recent efforts by the United Nations to include young people in the development process of the Post-2015 Agenda, include: the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/288, “The Future We Want” (2011), in particular article 31 which notes that sustainable development must be inclusive and people-centred, benefiting

and involving all people including youth and children; article 43, which included youth as a main group to be consulted on development, and article 50, which stresses the importance of the active participation of young people in decision-making processes and the promotion of intergenerational dialogue. Similarly, the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda (2013) identifies youth as a cross-cutting issue and notes that young people must be subjects, not objects of development, and therefore necessarily be active participants in decision-making. Youth, in the Secretary-General's Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2014), are highlighted as the torch bearers of the new sustainable development agenda in article 3, and called a dynamic, informed, and globally connected engine for change in article 71.

Momentum for enhancing youth participation in global education efforts is strongly supported by youth and education champion Malala Yousafzai. Young people have grown to be increasingly active in education advocacy and policy-making. Globally, the UN Secretary-General's Global Education First Initiative Youth Advocacy Group (GEFI-YAG) is a strong voice for youth rights and youth engagement in the field of education. Similarly, young people have been comprehensively engaged in education-related conferences, including the Aichi-Nagoya Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development (2014), the Global Partnership for Education Second Replenishment Conference in Brussels (2014), and the Second UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education (2015).

Several regional frameworks for ensuring a holistic, not tokenistic, approach to youth participation and youth engagement have been published over the past decade. The African Youth Charter (2006) in article 11.1 reaffirms the right of "each young person ... to participate in all spheres of society"; a message similar to the Ibero-American Convention on Rights of Youth (2005). The Revised European Charter for the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2008) recommends the inclusion of young people in all matters pertaining to their education.

Notwithstanding these conventions and resolutions, the participatory role for young people in decision-making is often marginal either due to negligence, lack of funding and capacity or discrimination and stereotyping. Young people face systematic prejudice and are often seen as too inexperienced to drive development. Consultation, although a crucial component of youth engagement, is not sufficient for safeguarding the participation of young people. To value their perspectives, insights, and ability to contribute to education in a constructive manner, evidence-based youth participation must lie at the centre of the creation of education policies for young people. Youth are active social actors capable of designing and carrying out constructive policies, as several recent youth engagement projects by the likes of Oxfam, Plan International, and ActionAid have shown.

Positive impact of meaningful youth participation

Meaningful youth participation is a right, and can be transformative for the lives of young people, their environments, and the decisions that are taken about them.

Firstly, meaningful and inclusive participation is a transformative experience for young people. Participation in project and policy design, implementation, and monitoring allows for youth to obtain new knowledge and skills. Integrating young people in the decision-making process fosters their sense of accountability, responsibility, and conscientiousness. The experience that their voices are not only heard, but matter in the decision-making process, increases their development of a democratic frame of mind. Through their engagement, young people hone their communicative and collaborative skills and learn how to make decisions in the interest of themselves and others around them.

Secondly, engaging young people in the decision-making, implementation, and monitoring of education policy promotes the spirit of community volunteerism, enhancing social cohesion and mostly, countering the emergence of violence and extremism, which can take place in situations in which the voices and needs of young

people are not otherwise acknowledged and channelled, positively engaging them in matters that pertain to the maintenance or improvement of their lived realities will have a positive impact on their localities and societies as a whole. In addition, engagement fosters the development of local, national, and global citizenship, providing young people with the opportunity to understand the challenges of and barriers to equitable access to education. This understanding also influences their immediate environments and creates an aware and engaged generation.

Finally, youth participation enhances the success of education policies. Through their meaningful participation, young people experience increased levels of ownership over decisions taken and projects implemented. The quality of policy decisions benefits from the novel and unique perspectives youth can provide based on their own experiences and analyses. Increased ownership and different ideas improve policy outcomes and may be the basis for the development of new projects, including in the areas of improving access to equitable and quality learning opportunities for all. Notable youth engagement practices are:

Youth Engagement in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, many schools ask their students about both peripheral issues (about whether a football pitch should be constructed, or whether lockers are necessary, sometimes even allow them to structure their own education; The National Youth Council has lobbied for the new education policy (Onderwijs2032), and for decades, there is an organisation called LAKS, consisting of high school students, which controls the quality of the central final exams in high school and holds government and exam authors accountable for questions that are unrelated to what students had to learn.

National Youth Coalition on Education's work with Civil Society Action Coalition on Education For All (CSACEFA)

The National Youth Coalition on Education was created with the aim to build synergy between young people in order for them to work together in ensuring equitable access to education for children in Nigeria. To this end, the team has worked closely with the Civil Society Action Coalition for Education For All and other NGOs such as Connected Development to boost youth engagement in monitoring and evaluation of education projects in Nigeria as well as improve accountability and transparency through budget tracking.

The European Students' Union (ESU)

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 38 countries. It is led by students for students – which means that the day to day leadership and work of ESU is conducted by democratically elected students who must work within the context of accurately representing their members. ESU became a member of GCE in 2016, and it is GCE's first fully youth-led member.

National Unions of Students also work to the same principles: they are student-run, autonomous, representative and operate according to democratic principles. Similarly, NUSes are open to all students in their respective country regardless of political persuasion, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation or social standing.

As well as working on issues which pertain specifically to students (fees, conditions, teaching and learning), they work across regional and global education issues. For example, ESU is one of the four Organising Partners of the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group, along with GCE, EI, and ICAE, which seeks to represent education civil society at the UN level of accountability for the delivery of the SDGs.

The (former) UN Global Education First Initiative Youth Advocacy Group (UNGEFI-YAG)

The former Youth Advocacy Group (YAG) comprised 14 youths from around the world who supported the UN Global Education First Initiative (GEFI). The YAG worked towards achieving GEFI's objectives which included: putting every child in school, improving the quality of learning, fostering global citizenship. They achieved these goals by working with their networks and partners to organise consultations with other youth in their countries, regions, and globally; providing strategic advice on the education priorities of young people; promoting the priorities and voices of young people in the advocacy messages and activities of GEFI and mobilising young people and governments to make pledges in support of education and hold them accountable to their commitments. The group was able to create awareness about the role of young people in ensuring education for all and building the capacity of young people in advocacy through a book published in 2014. While this group is no longer functional, it played an active role in raising global awareness of the importance of young people's participation in education decision-making.

The Role of Civil Society Organisations

It can be said that there has been a lot of effort in promoting youth inclusion in decision-making regarding education for all. However, there is more to be done. Young people need to be at the forefront of this discussion at national and subnational levels, contributing to the creation, implementation as well as the monitoring and evaluation of education policies and projects. Civil society organisations have a strong role to play in ensuring this happens, they can create an enabling environment where young people can work with education stakeholders such as governments and the private sector in order to ensure that young people are not only getting the skills needed for a life of dignity, but can also contribute from their own perspective, effective solutions to dealing with the barriers in getting all children into school and learning.

The Global Campaign for Education, being a civil society movement can play a strategic role in mobilising CSOs within their global network to promote meaningful youth engagement at local and global level.

Conclusion

Young people have a right to participation in decisions that affect them. It is important for young people to be pioneers and collaborators in development. Effective youth engagement strategies within the GCE system and beyond will lead to a more productive and successful implementation of education projects and policies. It will also begin a momentum where children and youth have a strong say in policies that affect them.

GCE Policy Resolution:

Child and youth-led organisations' participation in GCE

Adopted by GCE World Assembly February 2015

Preamble / justification:

Child participation is a core principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that children and young people have the right to freely express their views and that there is an obligation to listen to children's views and to facilitate their participation in all matters affecting them within all social and institutional settings. According to this basic principle, Plan has increasingly worked with children and youth and not just for them, while we recognize that children and youth are active right holders as well as the main actors in the education processes. It is both right and timely that GCE should create the opportunities for children and

youth to get engaged in decision making and governance structures, not only in terms of value and legitimacy but also in terms of learning from the unique perspective that they can bring to our work.

GCE resolves to:

1. Encourage member organisations to progressively and structurally include meaningful children and youth representation in their constituencies, staff or collaborators and facilitate their engagement and initiative in decision-making, planning and actions, according to their interests, needs and age.