

Principles and Barriers for Meaningful Youth Engagement



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*United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth
Principles and Barriers for Meaningful Youth Participation¹*

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This document contains the synthesis of the collective views of different contributions from the membership of the UN MGCY. They are not the sole view of any one author or contributor.

The United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UN MGCY) is the UN General Assembly-mandated official, formal and self-organised space for young people to contribute to and engage in certain intergovernmental and allied policy processes at the UN. It has been a key player in global policy formulation since its creation in 1992, as part of Agenda 21

The UN MGCY acts as a bridge between children and youth and the UN system in order to ensure that their right to meaningful participation is realised.

Its primary purpose is engaging communities of young people, in the form of formal and informal child-led, youth-led, and child-and-youth-serving public interest federations, unions, organisations, platforms, associations, councils, networks, movements, mechanisms, structures and other entities [*hereinafter “entities”*], as well as their members and individuals, in the *design, implementation, monitoring, follow-up and review* of sustainable development policies at all levels. To achieve this, it facilitates and conducts a number of online and offline activities in the following areas: *Policy & Advocacy, Capacity Building, Youth Action and Knowledge*.

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UN Major Group for Children and Youth

the space for children and youth in the United Nations

General Principle and Barriers for Meaningful Youth Engagement at the United Nations

Background

This set of principles is derived from consultation processes of the UN MGCY and builds on its work around related efforts throughout the UN system. The UN MGCY sees them as intrinsic to any form of meaningful youth engagement with the UN. In addition, these principles draw legitimacy from rights already granted to young people while engaging with the UN in various avenues.

Principles

Self-Organised

In the context of engagement, this implies autonomy and being free from outside control or pressure. Each group of young people can and will decide the best structure and working style for them based on their interests and capacities.

Legally Mandated Rights-Based

In the context of the UN, the imperative to engage in any initiative/avenue should be formally enshrined as a requirement in its rules of procedure or modalities through wording that makes it clear that the 'youth' in the conversation have an equal say in any decision. This is critical to prevent an ad hoc approach and/or be entirely dependent on the prerogative of the engaging party.

Designated

Young people should not be made to compete with other stakeholders, parties or groups for space in the modalities and process of engagement. Specific designated/reserved seats must be made available in mechanisms through which they engage.

Well Resourced

Engagement is a right, and young people should not have to spend out of pocket for the realisation of this right. Arranging the budget for the engagement of young people should be the obligation of the engaging entity/entities.

Accountable

To ensure far reaching engagement, the respective engagement structures should have built in accountability, reporting & feedback mechanisms towards a constituency of young people & the UN.

Barriers

These highlight some of the most pertinent, recurring and systemic problems faced by young people and youth-led entities during their course of engagement and/or intended meaningful engagement.

Individualisation

There is a growing trend of proactively enabling and promoting the participation of individual young people picked by the engaging UN entity or otherwise in various avenues while displacing and eroding resources away from thematic engagement, constituency (formal and/or informal) based mechanisms and rights based practices. This is problematic because of the following reasons:

- Creates a democratic deficit and undermines due process for representative engagement models or those with feedback loops that connect a constituency of young people with formal deliberations;
- People are not constituencies, especially when not picked (elected/selected) by other young people who have a stake in the deliberations;
- Helps so called 'adult gatekeepers' to control the narrative and agenda;
- Makes it easier to tick the box of having engaged youth;
- The individual is more obliged to the 'establishment' and UN entity as opposed to a constituency of young people;
- It is fundamentally against the principles of the UN that are based on collectivism.

No Resources

Currently the UN has no dedicated resources to facilitate youth engagement, either for core funding or for an ad hoc basis. An ironic example includes the fact that, even the lowest salary in the UN is higher than its 'youth engagement budget'. In addition, more resources are being raised and used for participation models that further perpetuate individualisation and non collective youth agendas. The problems young people face stemming from no availability of resources are self explanatory and need not be elaborated.

Regressive Normative Framing

The narrative on youth as a demographic is increasingly moving away from realising the human rights of young people and obligations of duty bearers (states), and towards young people primarily being a good economic investment and inputs to an extractive economic system. Before being consumers, target audiences and vote banks, young people are humans.

Changing Engagement Landscape for Non-State Actors

There is a push in many avenues in the UN system (in large part by the UN) to reduce the avenues of engagement to only 'business, civil society and academia'. This pushes youth into general civil society, takes away constituency status and eliminates designated rights-based spaces.

Annex

Concept of Individuals

The UN MGCY is not opposed to the concept of 'individuals' for the sake of it. In fact its Process and Procedures (constitution) recognises 'individuals' as a category of engagement, and also allows 'individual' to even hold certain mandated positions. In addition agenda 21 and several UN resolutions identify individuals as category for engagement.

Please see the direct excerpt below:

- "Its [UN MGCY] primary purpose is engaging communities of young people, in the form of *formal and informal, organized and unorganized child-led, youth-led, and child-and-youth-serving federations, unions, organisations, associations, councils, networks, clubs, movements, mechanisms, structures and other entities, as well as their members and individuals*, in the Design, Implementation, Monitoring, and Follow Up & Review of sustainable development policies at all levels..."

As you can see, this is very wide in scope, with many permutations. Through our existence over the past 25 years, we continue to explore and adapt to what this entails as part of our core activities. After all our primary work is 'youth engagement' In regards to individuals we can use the following categorisations::

1. Individual activists that have had to distance themselves from certain groups because of scrutiny from government or corporate authorities;
2. Individuals who are 'young experts', either through experience and/or training, on specific topics or areas of work not traditionally covered by youth entities or not covered in ways that are most conducive to the specific engagement (eg- terminology and indicators groups). Examples of areas include- *early warning systems, gene-editing technology, coral reef biodiversity, humanitarian mapping, disaster medicine, ecological economics, access to essential medicines in challenging contexts, etc;*
3. Individuals who are members of organisations, but for whatever reason are not in a position to be formal representatives of the organisation;
4. Individuals who previously engaged through organisations and are now no longer in those positions, but maintain an interest;
5. Individuals who do not want to engage in organisations (in the broad definition), as they perceive themselves as celebrity one-person-shows that are larger than any structure (some in the UN actually encourage this). Our internal position on this has moved from "do not encourage" to "fully and openly denounce";
6. Individuals that do not have access to any 'formal or informal entity'

- a. To give context, many youth groups in informal settlements are informally organised and engage directly through their informal group and also through organisations that they work with
- b. Other examples include: temporary status refugees, youth in informal settlements, affected by disasters, subsistence farmers, informal manual workers, people living under occupation, etc.

To make things a little more complicated and interesting, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Many 'individuals' fall in more than one of the six categories.

Additionally, when we talk about 'individualisation' as a barrier, we are primarily referring to Category 5 and/or the out of context application and/or misappropriation of Category 2. This mostly happens with the proactive support of or due to the preference of the engaging entity.

Individuals in Category 6 are the most marginalised and face maximum challenges. Many do not have status documentation, or have English as their primary language. This is not an issue for us at all, and a lot of our capacity is dedicated to engaging these individuals. If funding and adequate time is available, this would make it a lot easier.

Youth-Related UN Meetings, Events and Forums

This is a set of practices derived from the above mentioned principles and barriers. These build on already existing and operating (in some contexts) modalities and are codified through general experiences, internal consultations, and evaluations of participation in different youth focused avenues, events, meetings and forums.

These set of practices (with basic adaptations) should be applied to any effort by the UN System to organize a youth-related meeting, event, or forum (specially the ECOSOC Youth Forum) so as to ensure the full, meaningful, and impactful participation of young people.

