



Department for Economic and Social Affairs  
Division for Social Policy and Development

**Expert Group Meeting**  
**'Youth, Development, and Rights'**  
**13-14 November 2013**  
**New York**

**Concept Note**

From 13-14 November 2013, the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN will organize an Expert Group Meeting at United Nations headquarters in New York under the theme 'Youth, development, and rights'. The meeting will bring together experts and representatives of youth organisations, academia, Member States, UN entities, and intergovernmental organizations.

The Meeting will focus on the barriers, and how to overcome the barriers, facing young people in exercising their full set of rights to participation in civic, political and economic life. The Meeting will focus on issues related to 'Civic and Political Participation' on day one, and 'Economic Participation' on day two.

In choosing the issues to be discussed, set out below, particular attention was given to areas of concern identified by young people and youth organizations as received via consultations with young people for the preparation of the System-wide Action Plan on Youth, the 2011 and 2013 World Youth Reports, as well as in meetings and events during the International Year of Youth and thereafter.

**Day one: Political and Civic Participation**

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**Political Participation**

*Electoral participation*

The percentage of young people participating in electoral processes remains low at all levels.<sup>1</sup> In the majority of countries globally, young people remain disenfranchised until the age of 18,<sup>2</sup> but even when legally eligible to vote, low voting figures persist. Demonstrations across the world in recent years, often led by young people, in demanding political reform and democratic governance, negate the response that young people are not interested in politics and therefore have no interest in participating electorally. Rather, young people often claim their lack of electoral participation is because the political system is inaccessible to youth in terms of relevance, structure and language.

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP (2013). Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the electoral cycle: a good practice guide, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

**This session will focus on discussing:** Why are young people not coming out to vote?; What barriers exist to their active participation?; Would lowering the voting age encourage greater youth participation?; In countries where the voting age has been lowered, has there been an increase of youth participation in voting?; Do 'youth parliaments' detract from the real issue of ensuring young people are involved in mainstream politics?; What can be done to make voting more relevant and attractive to young people?

#### *Running for office – local and national level barriers to participation*

The electoral system is also inaccessible in terms of youth representation in political office. Even when young people have reached the age of majority allowing them to exercise the right to vote, they often face restrictions in being able to run for political office at all levels. In many parts of the world the age of eligibility for office runs anywhere from age 22-28 years on average, being higher in some places, in some cases to age 36.<sup>3</sup> The disparity between the age of being allowed to vote versus the age you can be voted for can lead to a feeling of frustration and an opinion that formal political processes do not consider young people to be relevant.

**This session will focus on discussing:** Are current political structures at odds with encouraging young people's participation– how can we foster a more inclusive structure for young people's participation? Does the legal framework, such as age restriction, need to change? Where the age to run for office has been lowered – has the number of young people holding political office positions increased?

#### **Civic engagement**

##### *Youth-led organizations*

Youth-led organizations often fill the gap where young people cannot yet officially vote or run for office. Youth-led organizations provide an important platform for young people to discuss and advocate for issues of concern to them, whether at the local, national or international level. Whether political or thematic based, youth platforms foster an environment for young people to develop skills and qualities better equipping them with life and employment skills. Indeed, many politicians have gotten their 'start' through participation in their parties' youth structure.

Despite their value, youth organizations stress the precarious position their organizational structures are in. Youth organizations often lack sustainable operational funding, often only being for grants and funding on a project by project basis. Such funding makes creating a sustainable structure and long-term planning for youth organizations difficult and limits the possibilities of how they can work responsively to ideas and initiatives as they arise.

Even when operational funding is available, youth organizations may still be deemed ineligible to apply as a result of their legal status and age criteria. Many granting and funding offers require organizations to be fully registered non-profit structures, and to be able to prove a number of years of accounts and financial stability. In particular, youth organizations in their infancy may face significant challenges in establishing themselves under the requisite conditions, particularly if a young person is deemed 'too young' to be an official administrator and financially responsible for the organization.

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<sup>3</sup> UNDP (2013). Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the electoral cycle: a good practice guide, p. 22.

**This session will focus on discussing:** How can youth-led structures be better supported to sustain their operations and to become credible stakeholders in applying for funding and grants?; What changes are needed to regulatory frameworks so as to allow the development of sustainable youth-led structures?; What options exist for youth structures to utilise 'parent' organizations to gain funding and what impact does this have on their independence and claim to be truly 'youth-led'?

## Day Two: Economic Participation

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### Recognition

#### *Skills recognition<sup>4</sup>*

With high levels of youth unemployment globally, young people are facing a harsh climate in regards to securing decent jobs. Competition for jobs is made all the more difficult by the fact that many people claim there is a significant mismatch between education received and the skills needed for today's labour market. In fact, many young people develop skills and expertise relevant to the labour market in a non-formal or informal context. For example, through volunteerism leadership and organizational skills can be developed, while many of the young entrepreneurs spearheading technological advances have no formal IT education but learn-by-doing. Despite this, there is still an onus by employers to only hire young people with formal degree-level certification.

Young people unable to secure formal work are often using their time to volunteer with youth organizations and NGOs, or develop their own online projects. However, lack of recognition of skills learned either informally or in a non-formal context can result in young people, who would otherwise be qualified for a particular job if such skills were recognised, not to be considered. The situation is particularly true of young migrants, where even formal education received in their country of origin may not be recognised in their country of destination, making the employment maze even more complicated.

**This session will focus on discussing:** How can young people be better equipped to meet the needs of today's labour market? What role do skills learned in non-formal settings play in preparing a young person for the labour market and how can these skills be marketed? How can qualification and skill recognition be improved across borders?

#### *Internships*

With limited employment possibilities on offer, young people are increasingly turning to internships as a gateway to the labour market. Although internships can provide an excellent opportunity for young people to learn a profession and develop skills and capabilities to better equip them for employment, there has been a trend in recent years for employers to offer unpaid internships while allowing no possibility for progression within the organization. Moreover, it is not unusual for many young people to 'internship hop', completing two, three and more, often unpaid, internships before they are able to secure a regular job. This situation hinders young people's ability to become economically independent and to lead sustainable and independent lives.

Indeed, many young people do not have the economic capacity to be able to support themselves through a sequence of under or unpaid internships, and

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<sup>4</sup> Skills Recognition is an acknowledgement of the skills you have learned from your work, from life experience, or from any previous training.

internships are increasingly being regarded as a pastime of the elite. This makes it even more difficult for disadvantaged youth to get a footing on the career ladder. In addition, many view the increasing use of internships to fulfil otherwise regular paid jobs as the exploitation of youth as a free workforce in an unforgiving economic climate.

**This session will focus on discussing:** The pros and cons of internships – a valuable learning period or unpaid labour? What are legal safeguards in place to help ensure young people are not exploited in today's tough economic climate via internships?

### **In the Workforce**

#### *Contracts and benefits*

Once in the formal labour force, young people often face more unfavourable terms and conditions than their older counterparts. With dauntingly high youth unemployment figures in many places of the world, employers have the advantage of being able to offer young workers contracts which offer little in the way of career security and benefits, knowing that young people with few other prospects are not in a position to bargain.

In addition, the trend towards more transient career trajectories than previous generations means that young people today will likely work for a number of different employers through their career span. There is therefore even less of an incentive for employers to offer young employees a package that will encourage them to stay with the company for the long haul.

As a result, many young people end up in precarious work situations, with short-term contracts, and little to no pension benefits or health insurance. This hinders a young person's ability to be able to plan for the future and become financially secure.

**This session will focus on discussing:** With a changing professional/career trajectory, how can young people ensure stability and security in their jobs? What can young people do to better advocate for their employment rights when starting out in the working world?

### **Going it alone**

#### *Youth entrepreneurship*

Where young people seek to create their own employment via entrepreneurship and self-employment schemes, they also face significant barriers hindering such ingenuity. Lack of access to financial services, such as credit, loans, creating bank accounts and financial education, impede the ability of young entrepreneurs to get their ideas and businesses off the ground. Few financial service institutions adequately cater to the needs of young entrepreneurs and more is needed to ensure an environment which fosters young people's economic creativity.

**This session will focus on discussing:** What changes need to take place to allow for a better enabling environment for youth entrepreneurship, access to credit and financial services? Has the increasing number of young entrepreneurs in the tech world changed the view of financial services towards young people?

## **Mainstreaming themes**

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Throughout the Expert Group Meeting a number of mainstreaming themes will be present during each of the sessions, focusing on the diversity of youth, the added discrimination young people can face as a result of such diversity, and how to better ensure the inclusion of young people who face such discrimination.

### **Gender discrimination**

Girls and young women face additional barriers to participation in civic, political and economic life. Despite significant strides globally in securing women's right to vote, women often continue to face either legal or societal restrictions in exercising this right – for example, needing to have a certain level of formal education to be allowed to vote. Even where women's right to electoral participation is unimpeded, the low representation of women in political positions highlights the stark and persistent reality of gender inequality in the realm of political participation

Moreover, young women still face more unfavourable job prospects and economic climates than their male counterparts. In many parts of the world women are still relegated to work in the home or in the informal economy. When they do work in the formal employment sector, they often receive lower salaries and fewer benefits than their male counterparts. Stark differences in parental leave and rights, with men typically receiving very limited parental leave, also have a significant impact on gender balance and parity within the employment sector.

### **Diversity and discrimination**

Young people can often face multiple forms of discrimination in civic, political, and economic life. For example, as a result of their age young people may face barriers to voting and running for office, while they may be taken less seriously or offered less attractive employment packages than older counterparts because of their youth.

In addition to age, young people from minority or ethnic backgrounds often face an extra layer of discrimination, making it tougher for them to get a footing on the employment ladder. A name on a resume, an accent, the colour of one's skin, gender, LGBT status, the address of the applicant, to name but a few, can all act as barriers to young people being considered for a job.

Whereas youth organizations and civil society structures can provide an important platform for young people to engage civically and participate actively in society, many young people continue to experience marginalization from participating in such forums. Young people with disabilities, indigenous youth, LGBT youth, and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds may face greater challenges in participating in youth structures in mainstream society, particularly when such societies are homogenous in their make up.

## **Objective and structure of the meeting**

This Expert Group Meeting will be held over a two-day period with day one focusing on the political and civic engagement of young people, and day two on the economic engagement of young people.

### **Participants**

- Representatives from youth organizations
- Academics, experts, resource persons
- Government representatives specialized in youth policies and programmes
- Representatives of various UN Agencies and Programmes – Inter-agency Network on Youth Development
- Representatives of global international and intergovernmental organizations
- Representatives of the United Nations Focal Point on Youth, Division for Social Policy and Development/DESA