

Youth and Participation in Decision-Making

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Goal 1: Promote social and political involvement by youth and ensure youth participation in implementing and evaluating national policies that affect their lives.

Target 1.1: By 2015, increase youth participation in formulating and evaluating national policies that affect their lives.

Target 1.2: By 2015, increase by 50 percent the funding for youth organizations that offer educational, technical, and financial support for youth involvement in the political process.

Goal 2: Encourage international collaboration among youth organizations and protect the freedom of political association and involvement by youth.

Target 2.1: Between 2000 and 2015, create an international conference on youth that would address the priority areas in the World Programme of Action of Youth and also allow youth from all countries to discuss and frame their own concerns, exchange ideas and experiences, and develop collaborative projects.

Target 2.2: By 2015, ensure that the freedom of political association and involvement of youth is protected according to international human rights law.

Goal 1:

There is increasing interest in youth participation in decision-making and politics, however many approaches are shaped by assumptions about how youth are defined, and what we (adults) expect them to do or say that sometimes limit input and involvement by youth. Since “youth” is a category that is inbetween childhood and adulthood, there is often both fear and anxiety, on the one hand, and expectations and idealized hopes, on the other, about what the next generation represents for the political future of any society.

While youth organizations in certain countries are flourishing, there is often an underlying assumption that youth need to be socialized into existing ideas of citizenship that support the

status quo or that are circumscribed by narrow definitions of what constitutes “political” engagement. There is often frustration that young people are not sufficiently politically involved or are “indifferent” to politics in countries such as the U.S., and while this is true in some cases, it is also true that youth are expressing a rejection of the limitations of electoral politics, as organized by particular states, and are skeptical due to the ongoing political corruption or systemic exclusion that they observe. Some non-governmental organizations have expanded the space for youth involvement by recognizing that young people are grappling with questions of citizenship, human rights, or democracy through their own everyday experiences in the family, school, or workplace. Through these and other programs, it is clear that young people often already have an understanding of how policies affect their lives and that they benefit greatly from mentorship and training in leadership skills that could practically affect their lives and communities. Yet as the World Youth Report 2007 acknowledges, “much of the discussion on youth participation continues to focus on strengthening youth involvement in political processes, neglecting the broader aspects of participation—in personal, educational, social and economic development” (xxxviii).

Youth are often invited to participate in adult-organized or political activities in ways that are tokenistic or symbolic. Furthermore, young people are often included as representatives of particular groups (ethnic, racial, religious, caste, etc.) while other categories of experience (for e.g. class, refugee status, prison experience) are sometimes neglected thus excluding experiences of youth who are already marginalized or invisible. Rather than just being asked to represent or speak for views that are already pre-determined, there must be meaningful participation by youth and an effort to understand the perspectives they offer on issues such as human rights, development, and democracy. There needs to be ongoing input and consistent participation by youth rather than ad hoc, one-time activities. There are also needs to be reflection and discussion among the adults involved about expectations, assumptions, and underlying agendas for youth involvement and some openness to learning from youth about their concerns and experiences. Target 1.1 aims at ensuring youth participation in formulating and evaluating national policies that affect their lives. Including youth representatives in local, regional, and national policy development, possibly creating national youth councils, and encouraging youth to participate in

international forums (such as national delegations to the General Assembly) would strengthen meaningful youth participation.

Young people's involvement in formal or informal politics is circumscribed by class background and time and resources available for participation, issues that are shaped by realities of poverty, education, employment, and access to information technology that are addressed in the other priority areas.¹ Thus Target 1.2 aims to increase by 50 percent the funding for youth organizations that offer educational, technical, and financial support for youth involvement in the political process, by the year 2015. This funding would include scholarships that would allow less privileged youth to participate without suffering financially, stipends for travel to meetings or conferences, training in leadership/media/policy-making skills, and hiring of competent and experienced staff who can mentor and educate youth. Systematic research and evaluation would also help provide insights into what youth concerns are, so that these organizations are perceived as relevant to the issues facing youth in their everyday lives while helping connect these to larger national and international contexts and translating them into policy discussions.

Goal 2

Young people are increasingly aware of experiences of youth in other parts of the world through electronic media as well as global migration, but there is still a need for structured spaces in which youth from different countries and of diverse class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds could meet, exchange ideas, and collaborate. Target 2.1 aims to create an international conference on youth, between 2000 and 2015, that would address the priority areas in the World Programme of Action of Youth and give young people an opportunity to have productive dialogues with others whom they might otherwise never meet or learn about.

A major concern for many young people is the risk of reprisal or harm if they participate in activities that are perceived as threatening to their governments or to particular interests.

¹ Volunteerism is increasing and offers important experiences and skills but in many cases it is circumscribed by class privilege and hinged to career advancement, and also, in some contexts, tied to social services that are increasingly privatized rather than offered by the state with the shift to neoliberal policies. Rather than conceiving of youth participation in terms of "volunteer work" (as opposed to non-volunteer work) it would be more helpful to focus on the issues in which young people are or are not participating, the kinds of young people who are included or excluded, and what it would take to support greater inclusion.

Therefore if one wants to encourage youth to become involved in the political process it is imperative that the right to freedom of expression and freedom of association be supported and enforced in keeping with international human rights. These rights needs to be supported for all young people, regardless of their ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, gender, caste, or class. Young people should not be detained or deported simply for expressing political views that challenge government policies or for associating with groups that are critical of a particular government. Young people who are detained should have the rights due to minors or prisoners under human rights law. Target 2.2 aims to ensure that the freedom of political association and involvement of youth is protected according to international law by 2015. This is important to uphold if we want young people to believe in democracy and human rights, let alone engage in organizing around these principles.