



Our Common Agenda
Policy Brief 3

**Meaningful Youth
Engagement in
Policymaking and
Decision-making
Processes**

APRIL 2023



**United
Nations**



Introduction

CHAPEAU

The challenges that we are facing can be addressed only through stronger international cooperation. The Summit of the Future in 2024 is an opportunity to agree on multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow, strengthening global governance for both present and future generations (General Assembly resolution [76/307](#)). In my capacity as Secretary-General, I have been invited to provide inputs to the preparations for the Summit in the form of action-oriented recommendations, building on the proposals contained in my report entitled “Our Common Agenda” ([A/75/982](#)), which was itself a response to the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations (General Assembly resolution [75/1](#)). The present policy brief is one such input. It elaborates on the ideas first proposed in Our Common Agenda, taking into account subsequent guidance from Member States and over one year of intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultations, and rooted in the purposes and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments.

PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY BRIEF

The world today has the knowledge and resources required to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But transformative changes will simply not be possible at the scale required without the buy-in and contributions of a wide range of actors. This is especially true of the 1.2 billion young people alive today.

Youth are key to identifying new solutions that will secure the breakthroughs that our world urgently needs. As future custodians of the planet, they also stand to lose the most if societies become more insecure and unequal and if the triple planetary crisis continues unabated. In recent years, young people have become a driving force for societal change through social mobilization – pushing for climate action, seeking racial justice, promoting gender equality and demanding dignity for all. There have also been countless examples of young people driving innovative change in a host of arenas, such as in business, technology and science.

When it comes to participation in public policy-making and decision-making, however, youth remain almost invisible. This is evident at the national level, where mechanisms such as youth parliaments or youth councils struggle to make an impact on decisions being taken at the cabinet table, votes on domestic budgets, compromises in a peace process or agreements on a just transition. The same is true in the multilateral sphere, where, despite the emergence of a patchwork of

youth engagement opportunities, youth continue to exert little influence over decision-making around sustainable development, the maintenance of peace and security and human rights.

Over the past three years, young people have repeatedly voiced their frustrations with current arrangements to support youth participation in decision-making at all levels. Many identify participation in decision-making as one of their top priorities but see current arrangements, particularly in the multilateral sphere, as ineffective and, at times, tokenistic. They want their input to be taken seriously. They want to be engaged in all decisions that count. They want to be engaged throughout the decision-making process, not just when a decision is being announced. Furthermore, they are eager to see the platforms and networks used to facilitate their engagement become more diverse, more representative, more agile and better equipped to exert an impact on decision-making.

Responding to these perspectives is not about appeasing young people. It is about making decision-making more effective and building greater trust in public institutions at a time when the stakes for people and the planet have never been higher and when social cohesion is on the brink. It is a critical step towards a breakthrough

to a better future for all. Young people are also deeply concerned about the future and frequently demonstrate a greater willingness to think big, innovatively and with a long-term perspective – a clear synergy with efforts needed to secure the rights and interests of future generations.

Building on Our Common Agenda and intergovernmental and extensive multi-stakeholder consultations, including with youth, three key recommendations are put forward in the present brief. It is recommended that Member States:

- a) Expand and strengthen youth participation in decision-making at all levels;
- b) Make meaningful youth engagement a requirement in all United Nations decision-making processes;
- c) Support the establishment of a standing United Nations Youth Townhall and an integrated programme from the United Nations system to facilitate greater diversity, representativeness, and preparedness in youth participation.

What is meaningful youth engagement?

Meaningful youth engagement refers to how youth should be involved in decision-making and policymaking processes. Over the years, governments, youth organizations and United Nations entities have developed a series of principles that, when implemented collectively, can help to ensure that youth engagement is more meaningful and effective – from the perspective both of youth constituencies and of policymakers.¹

When youth engagement strays from these principles, it risks becoming tokenistic and can result in decision-making that is divorced from young people's lived realities, expertise and solutions. As a result, trust and confidence in public institutions are eroded² and policymaking is rendered less effective.

TABLE 1**GUIDING CORE PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**

RIGHTS-BASED AND SAFE	Young people should be informed and educated about their rights ³ and empowered to hold duty bearers accountable for respecting, protecting, ⁴ and fulfilling those rights. Duty bearers must ensure that measures, including referral systems, to protect youth from threats and attacks are established and strengthened.
INSTITUTIONALLY MANDATED	Engaging youth in decision-making processes should be formally mandated to prevent an ad hoc approach and to ensure that youth perspectives are integrated throughout the full decision-making process.
DESIGNATED	Designated seats are to be made available for young people in various processes in order to prevent unequal power dynamics and competition between youth and non youth actors.
RESOURCED	Adequate and earmarked funding for the engagement of young people is critical to support their participation in decision-making processes.
TRANSPARENT	There should be a clear and mutual understanding of how young people's information, skills and knowledge will be shared, with whom, and for what purpose.
ACCESSIBLE	Decision-making processes should be made accessible to all groups of young people, particularly young people with disabilities. ⁵
VOLUNTARY	Young people must not be coerced into participating in actions or expressing views against their beliefs and wishes. They should have the right to cease involvement in any process at any stage.
INFORMATIVE	Throughout the engagement process, youth should be provided with timely, clear, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about issues under discussion as well as their role and their rights.
RECIPROCAL ACCOUNTABILITY	Duty bearers should make available transparent information on how young people's inputs have been used and interpreted to influence outcomes. Young people should consult with wider youth constituencies throughout the engagement period, as they feed into various decision-making processes.
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION	Based on the principle of non-discrimination, all efforts should be made to ensure inclusiveness and diversity of voices, regardless of their race, sex, language, religion, age, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, disability, migrant or economic status and other characteristics. ⁶
YOUTH AS PARTNERS	Young people should be recognized as equal partners in decision-making processes and their engagement should be facilitated.

Meaningful youth engagement advances the achievement of sustainable development, peace and security, human rights, and gender equality goals

Referred to as the “torchbearers” of the Sustainable Development Goals, youth played a major role in the process to secure agreement on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With some 90 Sustainable Development Goal indicators deemed to be youth-related, youth have a vested interest in the realization of the Goals.⁷ As illustrated in the figure below, they stand to benefit significantly from the achievement of the Goals and, as outlined in subsequent sections, they are playing a major role as partners and participants in implementation.

Youth are also crucial actors in strengthening peace and security.⁸ When engaged as partners for peace, they help to shift a widespread perception of mistrust of young people, to more accurately presenting youth as “positive and constructive social agents” who play an essential role in building sustainable peace.⁹ The normative foundation for youth-led peacebuilding efforts was

laid in Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), with an emphasis on participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration.

Young people have also been at the forefront of efforts to promote and protect human rights, exercising their right to freedom of information, opinion, expression, association and assembly, both online and offline. They are frequently at the fore of efforts to achieve gender equality and realize the rights of women and girls. They have also been leading global efforts to ensure that decision-making spaces are inclusive for all, especially young women, adolescents, LGBTIQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, indigenous youth, and refugee and migrant youth. By advocating for their active inclusion in policy spaces, young people provide diverse perspectives that improve and inform critical decisions.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Children and youth account for two thirds of the world's poor, yet are often excluded from decision-making processes on poverty reduction and eradication. Financial inclusion can support youth in accumulating savings and reducing the impact of economic shocks.



Hunger and malnutrition often prevent youth and children from taking part in society, at every level. Responsibly engaging youth in sustainable agricultural policies and practices is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2.



Investing in the health and well-being of youth can support sustainable development outcomes around the world. The active participation of young people can lead to better health outcomes, including with respect to vaccination programmes and mental health.



The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the education of children and youth. Ensuring access to inclusive and equitable quality education is essential for successful transition into the labour force and attaining decent work.



Providing financial access and developing the financial capabilities of young women and girls build social and economic empowerment, allowing them to take advantage of greater economic opportunities.



Youth collaboration initiatives, such as the Water Youth Network, can help to connect young people to the water and sanitation sectors to inform innovative solutions at the local and national levels, as well as providing platforms for sharing best practices.



Building the renewable energy skills and capacities of youth can help to accelerate action on clean energy. Innovative hubs and accelerators that empower young people can help to foster cleaner and more affordable energy transitions.



Youth represent the highest unemployment rate in the labour market. Young people must be better engaged in skills and capacity-building policies and programming in order to achieve more inclusive economic growth.



Youth have an important stake in ensuring access to digital infrastructure. Nearly a third of those who are not connected to the Internet are young people. Their active engagement can ensure that a greater number are not excluded from the modern digital world.



Young people must be involved in the creation of social protection programmes and policies in order to reduce the lifelong consequences of poverty and discrimination, which fuel inequalities around the world.



Children and youth are key to ensuring that urban development strategies support financial inclusion and social empowerment and create sustainable and safe cities.



Decades of evidence show that widespread behavioural change, such as recycling and using less plastic, often begins with children and youth. While they are the least responsible for environmental degradation, they will bear the greatest burden of its impact.



Close to half a million youth around the world have taken action on climate change. Supporting youth-led initiatives can help to empower young people to take action in their local communities to combat climate change.



Young people can provide local knowledge and innovative solutions for the conservation and protection of the world's marine ecosystems and coastal communities.



Youth are active agents in tackling deforestation and desertification. To preserve biodiversity, young people must be engaged in policies and programmes at the local, national and global levels.



Millions of young people around the globe continue to face violence in their homes, schools, communities and online. Youth engagement in capacity-building and institutional inclusion can foster more peaceful and just societies.



Partnerships for the Goals must be youth-sensitive and inclusive, drawing on the knowledge and experience of young people to drive forward solutions for a greener, more prosperous and safer future.

Source: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "UNICEF and the Sustainable Development Goals", available at www.unicef.org/sdgs (accessed on 20 March 2023); United Nations, "Global issues: youth", available at www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth (accessed on 20 March 2023); and Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, "#YouthStats: hunger and poverty", available at www.un.org/youthenvoy/hunger-poverty/ (accessed on 20 March 2023).

Youth engagement at all levels: moving from quantity to quality

Since its establishment, the United Nations and its Member States have repeatedly championed youth engagement.¹⁰ In 1965, the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples¹¹ initiated discussions on youth at the United Nations. In 1995, through the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond,¹² the General Assembly went one step further, calling for “the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making”. This commitment has been reiterated in numerous subsequent resolutions.¹³ As illustrated below, these pronouncements have helped to spur a series of actions at all levels to deliver on the commitment to secure meaningful youth engagement in decision-making. The effectiveness of these measures is also explored.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Many Governments have taken steps towards ensuring meaningful youth participation since the adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995. A significant proportion of Governments have put in place national youth policies¹⁴ and many have also established mechanisms to facilitate more structured participation of young people in decision-making (see table 2 for illustrative examples).

Some countries have established national youth councils. These serve as representative bodies that have a consultative role in the definition of youth policies. They have the right to formulate opinions and recommendations on youth issues directed to policymaking bodies at all levels of government. In some instances, youth councils are established and defined by law. In others, they are non-governmental organizations without an official legal basis that are considered as partners to be consulted by the national authorities. National youth parliaments provide another avenue for youth participation in decision-making. They often provide platforms for young people to articulate specific youth-related issues and to share their perspectives on matters of national importance.¹⁵

An analysis of national reports on voluntary national reviews and other sources demonstrates that there have been slow but steady improvements in the engagement of young people in national Sustainable Development Goal follow-up and review efforts.¹⁶ This takes many forms, including engagement through national youth councils, the participation of youth in technical working groups on voluntary national reviews, the inclusion of young people in national Sustainable Development Goal councils, the appointment of a Youth Ombudsperson for the Sustainable Development Goals and the participation of young people in national delegations attending the high-level political forum on sustainable development.¹⁷

In addition, youth are often engaged in thematic policymaking processes related to specific Sustainable Development Goals, where they have a particularly strong interest. Many countries have moved to establish mechanisms for engaging students on education policy development,¹⁸ on entrepreneurship, jobs and skills for the future,¹⁹ on adolescent health²⁰ and in tackling the climate crisis.²¹

Another critical area in which youth participation in decision-making is on the rise is peace and security. In the 2022 report of the Secretary-General

to the Security Council on youth and peace and security,²² several examples were highlighted of national and regional coalitions on youth and peace and security that have been established to bring together organizations led by young people, national authorities and international partners. The launch or preparation of dedicated national action plans by several countries was also described.

Youth also engage in decision-making through the formal political process. While there are some encouraging examples of young parliamentarians playing significant roles as government ministers or in parliamentary committees, the fact remains that only 2.6 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide are below the age of 30 – only about 30 per cent of whom are young women.²³ A “youth in politics” index, proposed in Our Common Agenda,²⁴ could encourage and help to track the opening of the political space to youth around the world.

TABLE 2

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

EXAMPLE	HOW YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO DECISION-MAKING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL
2030 NATIONAL YOUTH VISION IN IRAQ	The Government of Iraq has partnered with the United Nations and other partners to establish a youth advisory group to support the review of the 2030 National Youth Vision, which is a youth-oriented, human rights-based and multisectoral road map for empowering young people in Iraq and creating opportunities for them.
YOUTH CLIMATE COUNCIL IN GHANA	The Youth Climate Council in Ghana, with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund, is working to strengthen the entrepreneurial skills and capacities of young people as a contribution towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The collaboration with a locally led youth council is mobilizing youth voices in climate change advocacy at the national level by providing technical and financial support to new and existing youth-led advocacy initiatives.
CITY-LEVEL PACT FOR YOUTH IN RIO DE JANEIRO	The Rio de Janeiro City Hall, through the Special Secretariat for Youth, launched the Pact for Youth, an unprecedented public policy programme in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The programme is focused on citizenship training and capacity-building for young people living in situations of extreme social vulnerability.
YOUTH FOR PEACE IN SOLOMON ISLANDS	Through the “Empowering youth as agents for peace and social cohesion” project in Solomon Islands, support was provided to marginalized youth, particularly young women, to engage in decision-making and act as proactive social entrepreneurs to address local sources of grievance. ²⁵ As a result, youth have started to recognize their potential, importance and centrality within their respective communities, and there has also been a shift in public perceptions of youth.
YOUTH ADVOCATING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS IN THAILAND	The Child and Youth Council of Thailand provided recommendations to the national committee responsible for the implementation of the Prevention and Alleviation of Adolescent Pregnancy Act, supported by the United Nations Population Fund. This contributed to the Ministry of Public Health issuing an interministerial memorandum of understanding in 2020 on ensuring all pregnant adolescents and young people stay in the education system.
PRIME MINISTER’S YOUTH COUNCIL IN CANADA	In Canada, the Prime Minister’s Youth Council, a group of young people aged 16 to 24 years, provides non-partisan advice to the Prime Minister and the Government on issues of importance, including employment, access to education, strengthening communities, climate change and clean growth.
YOUTH TACKLING GENDER BARRIERS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION	Youth Co:Lab helps to advance young people’s contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and policymaking processes by producing action-oriented research to contribute to system-level change and policy development. For example, in its report entitled <i>Addressing Gender Barriers to Entrepreneurship and Leadership among Girls and Young Women in South-East Asia</i> , Youth Co:Lab provided insight into structural barriers that young women face in South-East Asia, and provided recommendations for policymakers to address those challenges.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN UNITED NATIONS ORGANS AND RELATED MECHANISMS AND PROCESSES

Young people have been actively engaged in the decision-making architecture of the United Nations for decades. This has evolved considerably during the past 20 years, yet major gaps in coverage remain.

In Agenda 21, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, Member States called upon “each country and the United Nations to support the promotion and creation of mechanisms to involve youth representation in all United Nations processes in order to influence those processes”. In response to this and other similar pronouncements, there has been a steady, if uneven, expansion of arrangements to enable young people to actively engage in intergovernmental decision-making processes.

Formal youth engagement in the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is carried out through the Major Group for Children and Youth, one of the major groups and other stakeholder constituencies.²⁶ The Major Group for Children and Youth is a self-organized mechanism for young people to meaningfully engage in the sustainable development-related work of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council, as well as in follow-up to sustainable development-related agreements on such topics as finance, climate change and countries in special situations.²⁷ At the high-level political forum on sustainable development, for instance, the Major Group for Children and Youth enjoys significant engagement opportunities, including submission of position papers, participation in negotiations on the Ministerial Declaration and speaking opportunities during the presentation of voluntary national reviews.²⁸

Another key entry point for youth is the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme,²⁹ which facilitates youth representation in Member State delegations.³⁰ Coordinated and supported by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the selection process, mandates and responsibilities of youth delegates are determined by individual Member States.³¹ Member State interest in the Programme is evident in the steady rise in participation in it, from 7 delegates at the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly to 71 at the seventy-sixth session. Today, some 90 Member States have included youth delegates to engage in decision-making processes, bringing the total number of youth delegate participants to almost 1,000.

The Economic and Social Council youth forum is another significant space for young people to engage at the United Nations – and the only United Nations organ with a dedicated space for youth engagement. Focused on the role of youth in contributing to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, participants include ministers and senior representatives of Member States, youth focal points in United Nations entities, civil society and other stakeholders. The forum is co-organized by the Major Group for Children and Youth and the International Coordination Mechanism of Youth Organizations. Youth engage with the forum through various channels, such as online submissions, virtual consultations, videos and social media, as well as in-person participation. Held online in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, more than 22,000 participants engaged in the forum in 2022.

The Peacebuilding Commission has also been particularly supportive of the critical role of young people and youth organizations in peacebuilding and sustaining peace. In 2021, the Commission adopted a strategic action plan on youth and peacebuilding³² and, in 2022, representatives of youth organizations and initiatives participated in

37.5 per cent of the Commission’s meetings. The Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security plays a key role in facilitating this work.

Elsewhere, however, youth participation is less structured. For instance, there is no formal mechanism for youth to engage systematically in the work of the Security Council, resulting in young people being invited to join only a handful of thematic discussions, open debates or Arria-formula meetings. Similarly, there is no structured approach to youth engagement in the Human Rights Council, even though youth has been the focus of numerous meetings, panels, reports and resolutions in recent years. Work will begin in 2023 on a biennial panel on youth and human rights. In addition, thematic youth engagement mechanisms have emerged in an organic way across a range of other intergovernmental decision-making bodies (see table 3).

For their part, United Nations entities have similarly sought to increase their ability to engage young people. Some have established dedicated youth advisory boards or councils. Others have appointed youth envoys, created pacts with youth or established spaces for partnership development and co-creation. Under the umbrella of the

first United Nations system-wide youth strategy, “Youth 2030: working with and for young people”, launched in 2018, 131 United Nations country teams and over 50 United Nations entities measure progress towards the implementation of youth engagement in their work. Four years into the implementation of the strategy, significant improvements in working with youth have been reported across the United Nations system, both in terms of the diversity of youth involved, as well as in terms of the various processes and platforms where young people are engaged.

The decision by the General Assembly to establish and fund the first United Nations Youth Office in the Secretariat will further strengthen the ability of the United Nations system to engage young people in its work, both formally and informally – by establishing a dedicated capacity at the core of the United Nations with the explicit mandate to support meaningful youth engagement and to coordinate the United Nations system’s overall work for and with youth.

TABLE 3

ILLUSTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS TO SUPPORT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN INTERGOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

INTERGOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM	HOW YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT ASSEMBLY OF THE OF THE UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (UNEP)	Children and youth major group	Participates in all relevant global and regional forums, in particular in the regular and special sessions of the United Nations Environment Assembly, in accordance with UNEP Governing Council decision SSVII.5 of 15 February 2002 and the rules of procedure of the United Nations Environment Assembly.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM	HOW YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION (ITU)	Generation Connect Visionaries Board and youth envoys	Ensure that the youth perspective is incorporated in the development and implementation of the action and strategic plans of ITU, in accordance with resolution 198 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference and resolution 76 (Rev. Kigali, 2022) of the World Telecommunication Development Conference.
PROGRAMME OF ACTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT	High-Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit	Provides high-level leadership and advocacy to accelerate progress towards the goals of the Programme of Action as an 18-member commission from governments, civil society organizations, the private sector and youth.
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN	Interactive dialogue with youth representatives on the priority theme of the session of the Commission	Develops recommendations on the priority theme of the session of the Commission as part of the annual informal youth forum, presented through discussions during the interactive dialogue with government delegations.
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION REVIEW FORUM	Migration Youth and Children Platform	Participates in the International Migration Review Forum, including through speakers on round tables and in the policy debate; serves as Youth Rapporteur for the informal multi-stakeholder hearing held prior to the Forum; and participates in the full preparatory process for the Forum, including at the regional level.
GLOBAL EDUCATION COOPERATION MECHANISM	SDG4Youth Network	Occupies the youth and students' seat of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, providing youth perspectives and meaningful youth engagement in the coordination and implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education.
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO)	WHO Youth Council	Engages youth in WHO governance processes, including developing a proposal to engage with WHO member States to develop mechanisms to integrate youth delegates as part of official delegations.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MECHANISM	HOW YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE	Youth non- governmental organizations (referred to as "YOUNGO")	Represents young people in climate negotiations through, among other activities, access to deliver statements in the plenary, receipt of informal advance information on upcoming sessions from the secretariat, timely information through constituency daily meetings and access to bilateral meetings with officials of the Convention bodies, in accordance with an intergovernmental decision ahead of the seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties, in 2011.
INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM	Internet Governance Forum Youth Track	Aims at developing cooperation among young people on public digital policy issues as part of the Forum's capacity development strategy and also at integrating youth in Forum processes, including its intersessional work and annual meetings.
UN-HABITAT ASSEMBLY	Youth Advisory Board	Participates in all governing bodies of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), including the UN-Habitat Assembly, and advises the Executive Director on leveraging youth initiatives to promote sustainable urban development.

GAPS AND SHORTCOMINGS

As highlighted above, there are many avenues available to young people to participate in decision-making at the national, regional and international levels. The meaningfulness and effectiveness of these arrangements, however, vary significantly.

At the national level, specific arrangements, such as youth parliaments, are often aimed more at boosting civic engagement than securing youth input to decision-making. On the other hand,

youth councils can offer a stronger connection to policymaking but are often limited in scope to issues deemed of specific relevance to young people. Their influence can be further curtailed if not well funded or placed on a formal footing. The social, political and economic environment in which youth councils operate is also critical.³³ Arrangements aimed at facilitating youth engagement in decision-making processes on Sustainable Development Goal implementation, can often be ad hoc in nature and operate on the margins of core socioeconomic decision-making at the national level. In addition, there are limited

arrangements in place to facilitate meaningful youth participation in the work of municipalities and local governments.³⁴

Additional conclusions as to the inclusivity, diversity, safety and affordability of youth engagement efforts at the national level are beyond the scope of the present brief, owing to gaps in data on this issue, despite regular monitoring of the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth. This is, in itself, an important area for further action.

At the international level, young people have highlighted significant shortcomings in current youth engagement arrangements in four key areas.

First, young people have noted the variance in opportunities for youth to engage in United Nations decision-making processes. The mandate of the Major Group for Children and Youth, for instance, does not apply across the full range of work of the General Assembly and, as one of 21 constituencies comprising the major groups and other stakeholders, participation opportunities are quite competitive. As noted above, the Security Council has no established mechanism to facilitate youth engagement. Furthermore, the engagement of United Nations youth delegates is largely limited to the work of the Third Committee of the General Assembly and the major forums of the Economic and Social Council.

Second, youth have conveyed their frustration with the gap between input and impact. They are deeply concerned about “lip service” participation, whereby they are invited to participate only at the announcement of a major decision. They find also that even in the most forward-leaning spaces, such as the Economic and Social Council youth forum or long-established thematic policymaking spaces, there is no follow-through

between their inputs and positions and the specific decision-making process. It has also been noted that there is limited space for genuine engagement with decision makers. They do not always see themselves in the decisions taken by intergovernmental bodies.

Third, they have flagged that existing arrangements can become barriers to inclusivity and diversity. The absence of systematic and structured resourcing to support youth participation means that it is often the most privileged youth who can afford to volunteer their time and pay out-of-pocket expenses to engage in the multilateral processes. This leads to a high turnover rate among youth participants and a lack of consistent leadership, which in turn hinders representation. It can often mean that youth contributions to such processes are not sufficiently representative of youth voices in all their diversity. Concerns regarding safety, protection and reprisals similarly impact on the diversity of participation.

Fourth, young people have highlighted the challenges to being truly prepared to engage in decision-making processes. They note barriers to coordination across youth constituencies, limited access to information in a timely manner, insufficient guidance and training opportunities and difficulties in navigating a fragmented and complex United Nations decision-making system.³⁵

Without strong and targeted actions to address these shortcomings, youth engagement in decision-making at all levels will remain of mixed quality, and the capacity of governments, public institutions and multilateral institutions – including the United Nations – to understand and respond to youth concerns will remain severely hampered.

Making youth engagement meaningful: recommendations to Member States

In Our Common Agenda, I urged the United Nations system and Member States to take steps to make youth engagement in United Nations deliberative and decision-making processes “more meaningful, diverse and effective”. Institutional capacities to meaningfully engage with young people need to be built and strengthened to this end, both across United Nations entities and in Member States, making use of the tools and resources at our disposal. It is only in this way that our institutional cultures can be transformed in the long term. In recognition of the vital contributions that young people can make to securing a breakthrough to a better future for all, I urge Member States to take action in three critical areas.

EXPAND AND STRENGTHEN YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING AT ALL LEVELS

Member States have repeatedly underscored the importance of youth engagement in decision-making processes. It is essential that this commitment is translated into action at all levels and that it be accompanied by a sea change in the quality and effectiveness of participation.

I propose, therefore, that Member States:

- a) Make a strong commitment to meaningful youth engagement in decision-making at the local, national, regional and global levels and endorse a global standard for meaningful youth engagement based on the core principles outlined in the present brief (see table 1 above);
- b) Ensure the establishment of a national youth consultative body in every country that adheres to the core principles and has a mandate and the requisite resources to formally engage in national policy-making and decision-making processes;
- c) Establish a clear and effective monitoring framework to track progress against these commitments, including through regular reporting to the General Assembly.

MAKE MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT A REQUIREMENT IN ALL UNITED NATIONS DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

If the multilateral system is to be fit to deliver a present and future that works for all, then meaningful youth engagement must become the norm rather than the exception. We must take existing youth arrangements to the next level, create new opportunities and arrangements where they do not yet exist and ensure that youth participation is effectively resourced.

I propose, therefore, that Member States:

- a) Take a decision to ensure the systematic integration of meaningful youth participation into all United Nations intergovernmental mechanisms and processes at the global and regional levels;
- b) Put in place clear arrangements for youth engagement across the work of the General Assembly as a complement to those under the remit of the major groups;
- c) Grant formal status and a stronger mandate to the Economic and Social Council youth forum so that it serves as the official entry point for youth engagement across the Economic and Social Council cycle;
- d) Review the working methods of the Security Council and its relevant subsidiary bodies to significantly strengthen youth engagement in its work;
- e) Enhance the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme through wider participation by Member States and by expanding its application across a wider range of United Nations intergovernmental processes;
- f) Ensure more systematic financial resourcing of youth engagement in intergovernmental processes with a particular focus on boosting participation of young people from developing countries.

SUPPORT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A STANDING UNITED NATIONS YOUTH TOWNHALL AND AN INTEGRATED PROGRAMME FROM THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM TO FACILITATE GREATER DIVERSITY, REPRESENTATIVENESS AND PREPAREDNESS IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The United Nations system has a critical role to play in supporting young people to be adequately prepared to participate in decision-making processes at all levels. The United Nations system can also help youth organizations and mechanisms to ensure that young people participating in decision-making processes represent the views and diversity of young people across the world. This calls for a broadening of existing youth participation arrangements as well as greater synergies across different youth organizations and platforms. It also calls for a much greater leveraging of digital technologies, strengthened communications and a significant boost in the support provided to participating youth and youth organizations.

I propose, therefore, that Member States:

- a) Support the establishment of a standing United Nations Youth Townhall, convened by the Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs, to provide the world's young people with a dedicated space to better prepare for participation in decision-making mechanisms of the United Nations and to boost the diversity of youth voices informing the work of the United Nations;
- b) Support the development of an integrated programme of work by the United Nations system to facilitate more meaningful youth participation at all levels – ranging from capacity development and training to systematic sharing of tools and information.

Conclusion

Initial consultations with Member States, the United Nations system, and youth-led and youth-focused organizations have produced broad clarity around the gaps and areas for proposed action as presented in the present brief.

Now, Member States have an opportunity to seize the momentum, and elaborate on each of these areas for action, exploring in greater depth how best to deliver on our common commitment of engaging young people in decision-making in the most meaningful and effective manner possible.

I also urge young people to continue to support and participate in our efforts to advance Our Common Agenda, to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals and to engage in decision-making processes with a spirit of openness, inclusion and partnership that this moment demands.

Annex

CONSULTATIONS WITH MEMBER STATES AND OTHER RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

The proposals put forth in the present policy brief draw on:

- a) The global listening exercise conducted as part of the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations,³⁶ in which 1.5 million young people from all countries participated in surveys and dialogues;
- b) The first MY World survey,³⁷ in which almost 10 million young people from 194 countries voted;
- c) The MY World 2030 survey,³⁸ in which almost 600,000 young people voted;
- d) The series of discussions with 600 youth through the Next Generation Fellows programme³⁹ of the United Nations Foundation and its outcome report entitled *Our Future Agenda: A Vision and Plan for Next and Future Generations*,⁴⁰ which served as a formal contribution to shaping of the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”;
- e) The recommendations made by youth to the Human Rights Council,⁴¹ the Economic and Social Council youth forum and the Security Council open debates;
- f) A focused discussion with Member States on 30 August 2022 on identifying ways and means for more meaningful engagement of youth in the work of the General As-

sembly,⁴² convened by the President of the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly;

- g) Informal dialogues with youth delegates on 4 October 2022 and 6 February 2023,⁴³ convened by the President of the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly;
- h) Thematic consultations with Member States on the topic of meaningful youth engagement were held through focused regional group consultations throughout February and March 2023.

On 17 February 2023, the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth gave a briefing to young people on progress towards the implementation of Our Common Agenda and the establishment of the United Nations Youth Office, at which young people further voiced their expectations vis-à-vis meaningful youth engagement in United Nations decision-making processes.

The present policy brief was written in consultation with over a dozen United Nations entities, all actively engaged in facilitating youth engagement across various pillars of the work of the United Nations.

A synthesis of the youth views gathered through the processes listed in the present annex, as well as commitments to meaningful youth engagement in intergovernmental agreed documents, is available at www.un.org/en/common-agenda/further-information.

Endnotes

- 1 To facilitate oversight of the United Nations Youth Strategy by United Nations entities and United Nations country teams, the High-Level Steering Committee for the Strategy has adopted a set of principles on meaningful youth engagement, drawing on those previously developed by governments, civil society, youth and other United Nations entities.
- 2 Edelman, *Edelman Trust Barometer 2022* (2022); and Pew Research Center, "Summer 2020 survey data". Available at www.pewresearch.org/global/dataset/summer-2020-survey-data (accessed on 24 March 2023).
- 3 Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *World Programme for Human Rights Education: Fourth Phase – Plan of Action* (HR/PUB/21/1), dedicated to human rights education for, with and by youth.
- 4 Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, *If I Disappear: Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space* (2021).
- 5 In line with article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- 6 United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, *Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development – A Shared United Nations System Framework for Action* (New York, 2017).
- 7 United Nations, *World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2018).
- 8 Security Council resolutions [2250 \(2015\)](#), [2419 \(2018\)](#) and [2535 \(2020\)](#).
- 9 [S/2020/167](#); and United Nations Population Fund, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (2018).
- 10 For statistical purposes, the United Nations Secretariat defines "youth" as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, but recognizes that there is no universally agreed international definition of youth, and other definitions in use by agencies, funds, programmes and Member States are therefore considered in the present brief without prejudice.
- 11 General Assembly resolution 2037 (XX).
- 12 General Assembly resolution 50/81, annex.
- 13 Member States have addressed the issue of youth participation in decision-making in over 70 resolutions in recent decades. A list of commitments is available at www.un.org/en/common-agenda/further-information.
- 14 See [A/70/156](#).
- 15 National Youth Parliament, "Report on Youth Parliament 2019".
- 16 ActionAid International and others, "*Believe in Better: a working paper on young people's inclusion in national follow up, review and accountability processes of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*" (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2020).
- 17 United Nations, *World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.
- 18 Anja Hopma and Lynne Sergeant, *Planning Education with and for Youth*, (Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015).
- 19 International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022: Investing in Transforming Futures for Young People* (Geneva, 2022).
- 20 High-Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 Follow-up, *Sexual and Reproductive Justice as the Vehicle to Deliver the Nairobi Summit Commitments* (2022).
- 21 United Nations Development Programme, *Aiming Higher: Elevating Meaningful Youth Engagement for Climate Action* (New York, 2022).
- 22 [S/2022/220](#).
- 23 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Youth Participation in National Parliaments* (Geneva, 2021).
- 24 [A/75/982](#).
- 25 The project was spearheaded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Labour Organization. UNDP, "Spearheading youth engagement for peace in conflict and crisis-affected societies: thematic paper for the report by the Secretary-General on youth, peace and security, 2022". Available at <https://youth4peace.info/system/files/2022-11/YPS%20thematic%20paper%20-%20spearheading%20youth%20engagement%20for%20peace.pdf>.
- 26 The terms of reference for the major groups and other stakeholders coordination mechanism were approved by consensus on 18 December 2020. The groups are composed of "autonomous social groups and societal constituencies". See https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/migrated/documents/27114MGoS_TOR18_Dec_2020.pdf.
- 27 Beyond the high-level political forum on sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda is supported by many other frameworks, which young people also have the opportunity to formally engage with through the Major Group for Children and Youth, via similar modalities. These include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway.

- 28 Youth can nominate lead discussants and representatives to make statements in the official thematic sessions; participate in expert group meetings; speak in the ministerial declaration session; ask questions to countries presenting voluntary national reviews; host side events; participate in voluntary national review labs and special events; and submit official discussion papers, position papers and reports under paragraph 89 of the 2030 Agenda.
- 29 United Nations, *The United Nations Guide to the Youth Delegate Programme: 2nd Edition* (New York, 2020).
- 30 General Assembly resolution [72/146](#), para. 25.
- 31 General Assembly resolution [62/126](#), para. 19.
- 32 [S/2022/220](#), para. 21.
- 33 National Democratic Institute, *Global Youth Council Guide: Promoting Youth Voices in Local Decision-Making* (2021).
- 34 United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Youth and the New Urban Agenda* (Nairobi, 2013). Available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/11/youth-and-the-new-urban-agenda-english.pdf>.
- 35 United Nations, "UN Youth Delegates at 75th GA session". Available at www.un.org/development/desa/youth/un-youth-delegates-at-75th-ga-session.html/ (accessed on 24 March 2023).
- 36 United Nations, *Shaping our Future Together: Listening to People's Priorities for the Future and Their Ideas for Action* (New York, 2021).
- 37 United Nations, "Have your say". Available at <https://vote.myworld2015.org/> (accessed on 24 March 2023).
- 38 United Nations, "What is MY World 2030?". Available at <https://about.myworld2030.org/about-new/> (accessed on 24 March 2023).
- 39 United Nations Foundation, "Next Generation Fellows". Available at <https://ourfutureagenda.org/nextgenerationfellows/> (accessed on 24 March 2023).
- 40 Next Generation Fellows, *Our Future Agenda: A Vision and Plan for Next and Future Generations* (Washington D.C., United Nations Foundation, 2021). Available at <https://ourfutureagenda.org/report/>.
- 41 [A/HRC/49/32](#).
- 42 See <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1q/k1q2k02llk>.
- 43 President of the General Assembly and United Nations, "Concept note: PGA's informal dialogue with UN youth delegates to the 61st session of the Commission for Social Development: 'a youth-centric discussion on sustainable transformations for environment, education and employment'", 6 February 2023. Available at www.un.org/pga/77/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2023/01/Concept-Note-PGA-Dialogue-with-CSocD61-Youth-Delegates.pdf.

