

# Children & Young People: Participating in Decision-Making



## A Call for Action



### **International Youth Foundation**

William S. Release, President and CEO

The International Youth Foundation (IYF) was established in 1990 to bring worldwide resources and attention to the many effective local efforts that are transforming lives across the globe. Currently operating in more than 60 countries and territories, IYF is one of the world's largest public foundations supporting existing practice programmes and scaling up "what works" for young people worldwide.



### **The International Award Association**

David Manson, Secretary General

The International Award is an exciting self-development Programme available to all young people worldwide, equipping them with life skills to make a difference to themselves, their communities and their world. To date, over 5 million young people from over 100 countries have been motivated to undertake a variety of voluntary and challenging activities.



### **The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**

Markku Niskala, Secretary General

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is a humanitarian organization with a unique worldwide network. It exists to improve the situation of vulnerable people, providing assistance without discrimination and promoting humanitarian values. The Red Cross and Red Crescent youth and volunteer network has been implementing programmes for more than 75 years.



### **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director

UNICEF was established in 1946. It works with governments, civil society organizations and other partners worldwide to advance children's rights to survival, protection, development and participation, and is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In programme countries, UNICEF works primarily with Governments to implement a Government-approved Country Programme of Cooperation. In 37 countries in the developed world there are National Committees for UNICEF, whose mandate is to raise awareness of, and support (including financial support) for, UNICEF's work, among people and institutions within their respective countries.



### **World Alliance of YMCAs**

Bartholomew Shaha, Secretary General

The YMCA is a worldwide Christian, ecumenical, voluntary movement, for women and men, especially young people. Founded in 1844, there are 125 autonomous national movements building and strengthening communities, with the involvement of 45 million people. These movements form the World Alliance of YMCAs, which has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.



### **World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts**

Lesley Bulman, Chief Executive

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is one of the largest voluntary organizations for girls and young women, with nearly 10 million members. Through its Member Organizations in 144 countries, WAGGGS provides a dynamic, flexible, values-based non-formal education programme, relevant to girls' needs. Based on spiritual values, WAGGGS has a commitment to peace and world citizenship.



### **World Organization of the Scout Movement**

Eduardo Missoni, Secretary General

There are 28 million Scouts, boys and girls, in 215 countries and territories. Scouting is education for life. It contributes to developing young people's full potential to help build a better and peaceful world of autonomous, supportive, responsible and committed persons, who play a constructive role in society locally, nationally and internationally.



### **World YWCA**

Musimbi Kanyoro, General Secretary

The World YWCA unites 25 million women and girls in over 122 countries through affiliated, autonomous national YWCAs. The purpose of the World YWCA is to develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls around the world, to achieve human rights, health, security, dignity, freedom, justice and peace.



World YWCA



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# Children and Young People: Participating in Decision-Making

## Foreword

The Alliance of Youth Executive Officers (the Alliance), represents a membership of over 100 million young people. Together with UNICEF they form a partnership with substantial practical experience in helping children and young people to fully participate in society. They recognize an obligation to enable children and young people to engage with civil society to find solutions to today's problems and not to wait until tomorrow to address them.

Much work has been done by the Alliance since its inception, within the individual organizations and as a coalition, to involve children and young people in decision-making. UNICEF too has been actively promoting the participation of children and young people at country, regional and global levels. The partnership between the Alliance and UNICEF, therefore, offers an ideal opportunity to promote good practices that provide models of youth participation in decision-making.

The concept of producing a guidance document on children and young people's participation in decision-making was the result of a joint consultation held in May 2003. The outline and content for the paper were developed at a follow-up workshop held in Geneva. This workshop was attended by youth representatives, and specialists in youth participation, from all the Alliance partners and UNICEF.



### To Meet the Challenges of Life

Children, including adolescents, must be allowed to exercise their right to express their own views freely, according to their evolving capacity. They must be enabled to acquire knowledge and skills, such as for conflict resolution, communication and decision-making.

The right of children, including adolescents, to express themselves freely must be respected and promoted and their views taken into account...the energies and creativity of children and young people must be nurtured so that they can actively take part in shaping their environment, their societies and the world they will inherit.

Disadvantaged and marginalized children, adolescents in particular, need special attention and support to access basic services, build self-esteem and to prepare them to take responsibility for their own lives. We will strive to develop and implement programmes to promote meaningful participation of children, including adolescents, in decision-making processes, within families, schools and communities, at the local and national level. (WFFC 32-1)

# Children and Young People: Participating in Decision-Making

## 1. Introduction

The world's population is young, with nearly 2.2 billion people under the age of 18. It is estimated that 87 per cent of the world's adolescents live in countries affected by poverty, hunger, disease and violence. Exposure to these problems without any chance to address the issues can lead to social despair, delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse. Young people may grow up in such bleak landscapes feeling inadequate, alienated and apathetic. By strengthening their capabilities and giving them opportunities to participate, young people can develop positive attributes and skills that will have a positive impact on the rest of their lives.

A commitment to enabling children and young people to express their views is essential. In this document, we reaffirm the right of younger members of all societies to be involved in the development of policies, programmes and activities that affect them. We reiterate our institutional duty to respect and enforce that right.

The duty of adults to take children's rights into account is well established. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (WPAY), the World Fit for Children (WFFC), the United Nations Millennium Declaration and other international instruments and treaties all clearly state that children and young people have the right to participate in public life. They further stipulate that families, communities, national leadership and international partners have a responsibility to support this participation and to take their views into account when discussing issues that affect their lives.

### World Youth Forum (2001)

Three hundred delegates from youth organizations around the world called upon Governments, the United Nations system and civil society organizations to support them. They asked these organizations to aid young people in their endeavours to obtain the necessary resources for youth empowerment programmes.

This document presents the justification and identifies the underlying principles for promoting the meaningful participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. The main barriers to achieving this goal are discussed and guidelines are provided on how to create a more conducive environment. The document ends with an appeal to individuals and institutions to rise to the challenge of moving this agenda forward. Concrete actions need to be undertaken at regional and country levels to eliminate the barriers and to facilitate every young person's right to be involved in the shaping of the future.

*"I would not be able to participate in campaigns, on issues that are important to me, if I did not have support from organizations that work in the field of child and youth development. They give encouragement, financial and technical support. All of this helps me, and others like me, to become involved and to participate in issues affecting my life and the lives of all young people." Worawut (Pan) Ngampiboolwet, an active child rights campaigner in Thailand.*



## 2. The Benefits

The advantages of encouraging younger members of our communities to become more actively involved in making decisions can be far-reaching. When children and young people have the opportunity to identify the problems that affect their lives and, most importantly, find and implement the solutions, it builds their self-confidence and encourages them to value the positive impact they can have on the lives of others.

A meaningful channel of communication between the generations is beneficial to everyone and helps to ensure that even those normally at risk in our communities are not neglected. Participation is an essential part of development, for development is “the process by which communities, families and individuals grow stronger, can enjoy fuller and more productive lives and become less vulnerable”.<sup>1</sup> A community may be considered developed if it ensures that all its members, whatever their age, are involved in trying to shape lives of dignity for all.

### Brothers of Meena, WOSM

Highly motivated scouts in Baluchistan province, Pakistan, have recognized problems in their region and have found and implemented solutions themselves. First they campaigned effectively to encourage parents to immunize their children against Polio. More recently they turned their attention to girls’ education. They went from door-to-door to try to encourage more families to send their daughters to school. When they found out that some girls were not sent to school because there were no girls’ schools nearby they spoke to the decision makers to try to solve the problem. They managed to persuade some boys’ schools to admit girls. In the first year of this project the scouts’ efforts resulted in 2,500 new girls enrolling for school.

*“We used to say that educating our daughters was like watering a neighbour’s plants. The scouts have changed our minds. Now we want our daughters to do their best. We understand that it’s good for all of us.” Abdul Malam, village leader*

Ideally children can begin to experience participation at a very early age. It can begin within their own families, if they are adequately listened to and their opinions are valued. Through increasingly meaningful and active participation in decision-making children can develop their own identity, a sense of belonging and usefulness. This encourages them to respond to educational opportunities and enter more fully into life at school. A child, whose active engagement with the world has been encouraged from the outset, will be an adolescent with the confidence and capacity to contribute to democratic dialogue and practices at all levels, whether at a local or an international level.

### Youth Participation:

- Leads to better decisions and better outcomes.
- Is an integral part of a democratic society.
- Strengthens young people’s understanding of human rights and democracy.
- Promotes social integration and cohesion in society.
- Encourages more young people to participate, by example.

<sup>1</sup> Strategy 2010 – To improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity, 1999, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

### 3. The Challenges

Despite more widespread knowledge of the benefits of participation, why do so many decision makers and institutions continue to exclude children and young people from decision-making? All of the following factors particularly challenge the likelihood of children and young people being given the opportunity to participate in decision-making:

#### **Inequality**

In societies around the world, despite the integral part children and young people play in families, schools and communities, they are traditionally regarded as having a lower social status than adults. This limits the opportunities children and young people have to participate in decision-making as equals. Girls and young women are not given the same opportunities as boys and young men, and all the challenges listed apply even more to them. They are discriminated against by adults because they are young, and by boys and young men because of their gender. There are also many cultural barriers, attitudes and expectations, which affect the full participation of girls and young women in decision-making.

#### **Lack of Mutual Respect and Trust**

The generation gap between younger and older people leads to a number of challenges, such as mutual lack of understanding and trust, lack of cooperation, misconceptions and prejudices and ignorance of each other's culture, language, interests and way of doing things. Negative, preconceived ideas about the abilities of children and young people to bring about social change and about their behaviour deter many adults from consulting with them. Many believe outdated notions, or media misinformation, that portrays young people as transient, chaotic and unreliable.

#### **Poor Education and Training**

Education systems often fail to prepare young people adequately to participate in decision-making. They do not develop the necessary analytical skills for critical thinking or problem solving through participatory, active learning. In some cases young people are given the opportunity to participate in decision-making without ensuring that they receive adequate training or access to the appropriate information that would enable them to make informed decisions.

#### **Weak Infrastructure**

In many countries, children and young people lack direct access to institutional systems and structures within governments, the media and the private and civil society sectors. This severely impedes their ability to advocate for their rights. In the rare cases where young people have been able to influence, or even make decisions, barriers within complicated infrastructure have tended to limit implementation. This destroys young people's confidence and trust in such mechanisms.

#### **Lack of Representation**

Children and young people are not a homogenous group. They differ in age, maturity and socio-economic status. Some are heads of households, parents, involved in child labour or employment, or enrolled as child soldiers. It is therefore, important that children and young people participating in decision-making represent the people most affected by the decisions taken. This presents a challenge even for youth organizations trying to reach marginalized children and young people.

#### **The Cost**

It is argued, erroneously, that involving young people in decision-making at all levels is more expensive than involving adults. At the same time, without some financial support or resources most children and young people will be unable to participate beyond a community level. The positive financial repercussions of allowing young people to determine something that may have an impact on their own lives and others, and may be more readily accepted or practical, are invariably overlooked.



## 4. The Principles

We, the Alliance and UNICEF, recognize that human rights are universal and inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, non-discriminatory, participatory and inclusive. Based on this we have identified the following principles to promote the meaningful participation of children and young people in decision-making:

### **Equity**

Children and young people are entitled, under the CRC, to express their views freely and without discrimination related to gender, age, social background and special needs. It is important that children and young people and those that work with this constituency understand these rights, respect them and create opportunities to practice them.

### **Mutual Respect and Trust**

It is essential that all parties recognize the need for constructive cooperation and communication and to respect all views. Cultural sensitivities and traditions must be taken into consideration when trying to establish an atmosphere conducive to the participation of children whilst allowing parents and other responsible adults to work in the best interests of the child. The differing abilities of children, according to age, should be recognized and respected.

### **Intergenerational Partnership**

The participation of children and young people involves a partnership across the generations within an atmosphere of mutual trust and the development of shared goals. Children and young people should be given the same opportunities to exert their right to freedom of expression and access to information, as others. The promotion of children and young people's participation is not intended to place them in conflict with parental or authority figures, but rather to encourage everyone to work towards a healthy, safe, protective and productive future for all.

### **Opportunities for Education**

Access to equal opportunities for a good education, relevant training and useful information are key to successful participation by children and young people.

### **Effective Representation**

Success depends on effective representation. All parties should be accountable both to themselves and their peers or representative networks; they must not act for an individual need but for the collective good.

### **Cost-Effectiveness**

Children and young people's participation in decision-making is a long-term investment in promoting sustainable and democratic social processes at all levels, from local to global. The internalization of democratic ideals at an early age is invaluable for the future of society as a whole.

## Case Studies

### **‘Active Leadership’, IYF, Armenia**

*“We young people in Armenia have inherited a beautiful country with the many difficulties and issues faced by a developing country. Many become discouraged by the immensity of the problems we face and decide to leave to seek a better life abroad. I thought about that myself but I realised that if everyone escaped the problems instead of trying to overcome them there would be no progress or development. The Active Leadership Project helps to empower young people. We learn how to communicate our ideas, not just with each other, but also with other generations. So that we can work together to develop this country, our heritage.”* Lilit Simonyan, Armenia, International Youth Foundation.

### **Preparing Young Women Leaders, YWCA**

The YWCA has had a longstanding commitment to promoting young women into decision-making positions. In order to avoid potential tokenism or insufficiently skilled leadership they have learned, through experience, that relevant information, training and support are essential. Leadership training is provided at regional and global events, internships and exchange programmes are arranged, support and information is provided through a global electronic network and information and individual mentoring is encouraged so that skills and knowledge are shared. These methods have proved successful and young women have, in turn, brought their own insight, visions and energy to the partnership. *“I believe that, taught the right skills, young women can face and overcome all the obstacles and challenges that face them. I’ve seen it happen.”* Sakhile Ndhlovu, former national youth president, YWCA Zimbabwe.

### **Positive Girl Guides in Uganda**

In 2003 the Girl Guides initiated a project reaching out to young people living with HIV and AIDS. Many members are children who have inherited the virus from their mothers. One of the main focuses of the project is to combat the stigma and ignorance that the girls believe prevails in Ugandan society. They use drama to educate people and have been on tour with a play based on a member’s own testimony of how she lives with AIDS. The play has not only helped to dispel the stigma within the local communities, it has also helped the members to grow in confidence and to feel more positive about the future. One member says: *“Being part of this group helps us to focus on living. We have grown up to associate HIV with death. We want to show the world that we can be HIV positive – healthy and happy. HIV doesn’t hurt us as much as ignorance does.”* This project has widened its outreach to include people of all ages.

### **YMCA Full Board Project, Scotland**

This project supports, trains and develops young people on YMCA’s Board of Management. The trainees receive training on strategic planning, committee skills, writing budgets and understanding financial reports. Many of those trained use their skills to initiate their own projects. One graduate has become a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament. *“I feel much more confident to voice my opinions or to ask questions. I feel that I can understand and engage other management committee members on equal terms.”*



## 5. A call for Action

To overcome the challenges outlined we, the Alliance and UNICEF, are calling for action. We propose to take steps, at regional and country levels, to help bring about the structural changes necessary to create an environment that makes children and young people feel welcomed and empowered to actively participate in decision-making processes. We invite our member organizations and partners to collaborate with us on the following actions:

### Advocacy

We will support advocacy campaigns to review existing social policies and/or put in place appropriate policies to ensure the creation of structures and opportunities for children and young people's meaningful participation. These campaigns should be aimed at persuading and motivating decision makers to recognize the benefits of involving children and young people in decision-making processes concerned with their rights.

### Good Governance

We will promote good governance in public institutions and civil society organizations and undertake to ensure that the provisions and principles of participatory rights are widely understood by decision makers. These rights should be implemented and monitored with the active participation of children and young people. At the same time, systematic training in participatory skills for all professionals working with, and for, children and young people should be made available.

### Education & Information

We will mobilize the public to lobby for the establishment of child-friendly formal and non-formal education systems that enable the effective development and participation of young people. At the same time, we will advocate for democratic, gender-sensitive and peace-minded curriculum development and teaching methods, and for the elimination of corporal punishment. We promote the principle of involving young people in the design and management of effective, safe and protective learning environments.

### Opportunities for Volunteers

We will work with all sectors of society, including governments and businesses, to create opportunities for voluntary service for children and young people to contribute, with their enthusiasm, idealism, experience and skills, to community development. This will involve advocating for extra-budgetary resources, as well as mobilizing financial and human resources from government, private sector and civil society.

### The Media

We will establish and strengthen relations with youth media producers, to implement programming for and with children and young people. This will involve developing relevant editorial and management policies and possible reorientation of radio, television and print products. This should lead to new programming with children and young people trained to produce relevant programmes and articles. Monitoring mechanisms will need to be established to assess the impact of child-centred public information media services. We will also encourage and promote communication mechanisms among young people that will enable the sharing of experiences and ideas, as well as the creation of peer support and information networks.

**We the Alliance and UNICEF are confident that this call for action is implementable. We have the experience, the support mechanisms and the understanding to transform this call into meaningful action. Knowing the potential value of the contribution to society by children and young people, we recognize that more can be done to realize this potential and advocate for their meaningful involvement in all decisions affecting the society that they live in.**

## Case Studies

### A Ray of Sunshine (HIV/AIDS), ICRC, Uruguay

Uruguay's Red Cross youth volunteers have taken measures to address their concerns over the country's growing HIV/AIDS problem. They perform plays and hold 'prevention' workshops for their peers in schools, community centers and other institutions. They work together with NGOs, to organize an annual summer camp for underprivileged children living with HIV/AIDS. Fourteen-year-old Paula suffered from discrimination when she was diagnosed HIV positive. Undernourished, in poor health and with no relatives to take care of her she was refused entry to any children's home. Paula was going to be placed in an old people's home. With the support of the Red Cross volunteers and the NGO workers she is now in a girls' home, has gained 15 kilos and is in much better health. She is a summer camp regular. *"I'd like to play my part too. I want to make life better for other children, like you do. I'll help bring other children to places like this, where they can relax and play and not worry about what everyone else thinks, just be themselves."* Paula, to one of the Red Cross volunteers.

### Tolerance over the Airwaves, Kyrgyzstan

Radio Salaam was launched as a youth radio station in an isolated, troubled region where young people had no previous access to any form of electronic media and where ethnic tensions were high. The station broadcasts local and world news to allow people to stay informed. The young and creative staff were all trained by Kyrgyz 'Internews' to use innovative approaches in their development of programmes about health, education, economics, children's rights and of course, music. A 'Youth Development Centre' has been set up next to the radio station to train local volunteers to become actively involved in the running of Radio Salaam. 'Salaam' mailboxes are placed outside village schools and volunteers on bicycles collect the letters regularly. *"This has encouraged a very lively exchange of ideas and opinions! We try to encourage tolerance and friendship because that's best for everyone. We also encourage listeners to come and talk on the shows. We discuss major problems like unemployment, suicide, drug abuse. We also play cool music!"* Alex Gaphurov, 17-year-old DJ on Radio Salaam supported by UNICEF and the Foundation for Tolerance International.

### Giving Something Back

Every three years The Duke of Edinburgh's Award International Association organizes an International Gold Event. This provides committed Gold Award holders the chance to take part in a programme of discussion, sharing experience and ideas on a number of issues concerning the Award.

Twelve Youth Representatives are elected by their peers to sit on the International Council (the Award's decision-making body). Their task is to represent their colleagues and provide the Council with the benefit of their experience. They are involved in the development of guidelines and drafting of papers thus enabling them to have a say in the formation of Award policy at the highest level.

At present two very successful business internship initiatives which were developed and instigated by the Youth Representatives are being piloted in Canada and India. These are helping to cement a mutually beneficial understanding and appreciation between the Award and the corporate sector. Suren Govil, Chairman of the Award in India said: *"The young people and the management of the organization became aware of the benefits of the Award and provided the Programme with valuable corporate publicity while the intern gained important career experience."*

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