**Thematic Paper: Leadership and Meaningful Participation**

In order to respond to the needs of young people, and to guarantee that their basic human rights are recognized and enforced, young people’s active and meaningful participation in their societies will be of crucial importance.[[1]](#endnote-1) Meaningful youth participation and leadership require that young people from various social backgrounds and with various need have the opportunity and capacity to get involved in all aspects of their own development and that of their communities. They must be empowered to contribute to informed decisions about their personal, family, social, economic, environmental and political development.[[2]](#endnote-2) It further requires that young people have the possibility to work together with adults, as equal partners and on a sustainable basis, in matters related to them.[[3]](#endnote-3) Realizing young people’s right to participation will be particularly vital to ensure the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, such as the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[[4]](#endnote-4) The aim of this paper is to outline the current situation of youth and existing political priorities to improve their opportunities for leadership and meaningful participation in development initiatives. It will look at progress achieved up to date and what the current challenges are in realizing young people’s right to participation. The conclusion will highlight how we can build upon existing efforts and challenges to enhance young people’s leadership and meaningful participation in order to ensure they become an integral part of the ICPD Beyond 2014 and the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

**1. Current situation**

**1.1 The global situation of youth**

Today, young people aged 10-24[[5]](#endnote-5) represent the largest generation in history, 1.8 billion, and represent a divers group with different needs and aspirations that varies across and within regions.[[6]](#endnote-6) Young people, and especially young women and youth from marginalized backgrounds, are historically a socially, economically, politically and environmentally disadvantaged and vulnerable group. Many young people are experiencing challenges with finding decent and sustainable employment, receiving information and access to issues related to health, education, poverty and inequality.[[7]](#endnote-7) To make matters worse, the current situation in the global economy and its impact on social and political institutions has further decreased the opportunities for youth participation in formal processes.[[8]](#endnote-8) Not only has the crisis had widespread negative social effects in areas such as education and health, but also when it comes to young people’s participation in the job market. Young people, and especially young women, are many times the last to be hired and the first to be dismissed on the job market, and the youth unemployment rate is today the highest in history.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Young people’s right to participation in formal decision-making processes and in social, economic, environmental and political institutions remains limited and their potential, as a valuable resource to sustainable development, is often not recognized.[[10]](#endnote-10) In a survey conducted by the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development in July/August 2012[[11]](#endnote-11), a majority of the 13,000 respondents representing 186 countries from all regions in the world, noted that the main challenges for young people’s citizenship are limited opportunities for effective participation in decision-making processes; the lack of participatory structures for young people at the community and national level; lack of trust between youth and government institutions and political parties and the lack of capacity development for youth and youth organizations. In sub-Saharan Africa, a stunning 80 per cent of the respondents pointed to limited opportunities for participation in decision-making processes and limited structures for young people’s participation in their communities. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, around 77 per cent of the respondents highlighted their lack of trust between youth and governmental institutions and political parties. The findings of the survey further noted limited support and commitment to youth and youth branches of political organizations, ignorance and indifference of people in positions of authority and weak structures of existing political institutions due to lack of transparency and merit in accessing political participation. Additional challenges stressed in the survey was the lack of awareness about human rights, lack of mechanisms and legal frameworks that promote and protect human rights and human right violations, violence towards and among young people, including gender-based violence, and poverty. The survey results hence demonstrate that great challenges for young people’s right to meaningful participation in society persist and opportunities for young people’s capacity development remain strictly limited in many regions of the world.

With limited opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes and limited access to social, economical, environmental and political institutions in their societies, young people feel excluded and marginalized in their society. The social exclusion of young people is not only a lost resource for the betterment of society, but also presents the risk of young people engaging in negative behavior,[[12]](#endnote-12) making their transition to adulthood more difficult.

To realize young people’s meaningful participation and leadership, young people, and especially marginalized young people such as young women, need to be empowered through capacity development, skill development, and greater access to their basic human rights, such as quality education, youth-friendly and gender sensitive healthcare, poverty alleviation and productive and decent employment.[[13]](#endnote-13) Efforts to create a supportive environment for participation, engagement and volunteering for young people, including through youth-led organizations, need to be multiplied in order to allow them to contribute to their own livelihoods, and should aim to build their capacities and increase their employability. Efforts will also require the development of sustainable programmes that focus on long-term institutionalization of meaningful youth participation.[[14]](#endnote-14) In addition, existing social, political, environmental and economical institutions need to increase their efforts of preparing to work together with youth and youth-led organizations through sustainable partnerships.

**1.2 Political priorities to improve young people’s leadership and meaningful participation**

Participation is one of the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and young people’s right to participation has been deemed important in numerous international agreements.[[15]](#endnote-15) In 1994, 179 countries recognized the importance of ensuring young people’s “integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political process and in preparation for leadership roles”,[[16]](#endnote-16) by adopting the Programme of Action at the ICPD and later its Key Actions for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action of the ICPD.

In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly strengthened its commitment to youth development by adopting the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) as a framework to guide the United Nations youth agenda. The WPAY places youth participation at the centre of its fifteen priority areas[[17]](#endnote-17), recognizing that young people’s economic, social and political participation in their societies is of critical importance in development.[[18]](#endnote-18) The General Assembly has since reaffirmed its commitment and sees youth participation as a crucial mechanism to eradicate poverty, noting that youth participation is interrelated and crucial to achieving full employment, social integration and sustainable social and economic development.[[19]](#endnote-19) It has recognized young men and women as important actors in conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict processes, in the protection, preservation and improvement of environment and their important role in the HIV/AIDS response.[[20]](#endnote-20) The General Assembly has further encouraged Member States to establish national youth delegate programmes and include youth representatives in their delegations to relevant meetings and conferences at the United Nations to ensure young people’s participation in intergovernmental processes.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The existing challenges facing young people have further caught the attention of the United Nations Secretary-General, who in his five-year Action Plan announced that he would make youth one of his main priorities by working with and for youth. He made a commitment to deepen the focus of existing programmes by developing a system-wide Action Plan on Youth under the areas of employment, entrepreneurship, political inclusion and citizenship. Other issues of great importance that will be addressed are the protection of rights and education, including education on sexual and reproductive health. In addition, to meet these commitments, the Secretary-General has called for the creation of a youth volunteer programme.[[22]](#endnote-22)

To enable young people to better participate in their societies, the international community has progressively underlined the need of empowering young people through increased efforts of capacity development, including the development of young people’s leadership skills. As an example, the African Youth Charter and the EU Strategy for Youth both highlighted the necessity for increased information and capacity development to ensure that young people have knowledge and skills to become aware of their rights and responsibilities and to empower them to become active citizens and leaders in their communities.[[23]](#endnote-23) They have further linked it with the necessity to develop policies and programmes that enable youth volunteerism as a crucial form of youth participation and peer-to-peer training to empower young people.

As can be seen, commitments realizing young people’s right to participation have been reiterated in agreements and declarations both at the international and regional levels around the world. However, much remain to be done when comparing existing agreements and commitments with the current reality of young people. Young people are a divers group with different needs and realities, and concrete actions to meet those needs and realities should be reflected more in existing commitments. In particular, commitments regarding targeted efforts for empowering marginalized groups of youth, such as young women, indigenous youth, young migrants, youth in rural areas etc. is currently lacking. Few agreements state what kind of channels should be created in order to include meaningful participation of youth and youth-led organizations, and limited commitments outline how existing social, economic, environmental and political institutions should engaged, include and partner with youth and youth-led organizations. In addition, few concrete goals regarding youth participation have been formulated to date, with the implication that any progress made, or lack thereof, lacks accountability and transparency and is difficult to measure and evaluate.

**2. Progress made**

**2.1 Past and ongoing initiatives to improve young people’s leadership and meaningful participation**

The international community’s commitments and efforts in recognizing the importance of young people’s participation in the area of youth development have never been stronger, and youth-led organizations along with other civil society organizations are increasingly gaining recognition, support and opportunities for partnership with relevant stakeholders.[[24]](#endnote-24) During the recently commemorated International Year of Youth, civil society organizations were the main contributors to its success[[25]](#endnote-25), and the Year provided an opportunity for young people to demonstrate their leadership, commitment and determination to tackle development challenges and contribute to human development in their communities. This shows that young people are not just passive citizens in their communities, but active contributors and leaders in promoting positive change in their societies.

**2.1.1 Youth participation at the international level**

Young people are today more actively engaged and play a prominent role in intergovernmental processes, and Member States are increasingly including youth in their delegations to global meetings. When representing through a transparent selection process and with proper training, preparation and a clear mandate of the young representative to meaningfully engage in the work of the delegation, it gives young people a greater influence and voice on global issues.[[26]](#endnote-26) Ensuring the right of young people to participate in intergovernmental processes not only strengthen channels of communication and partnerships between young people and Governments; it can further support the development of more legitimate and responsive policies and programmes. In addition, it also allows young people to gain invaluable skills when it comes to leadership, diplomacy, international negotiations, overcoming cultural differences, and consensus building.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Various meetings are regularly organized by the United Nations system that gives young people opportunities to meet and discuss issues of concern to them, including, among others, the World Urban Youth Assembly, the Global UNiTE Youth Forum, the Conference of Youth to the UNFCCC and the UNESCO Youth Forum. Another example is the UN Habitat Youth 21 initiative that in partnership with youth and youth-led organizations outlines ways to increase accountability in the United Nations system towards young people and youth organizations as well as possible mechanisms for meaningful youth participation. In the ICPD process, youth participation is increasingly recognized, and youth groups have played an important advocacy role in the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Various international organizations have further realized the importance of youth participation to ensure greater impact and efficiency of their work. As an example, the International Planned Parenthood Federation Governing Council passed a resolution in 2001, stressing its members to include at least twenty per cent of young people in their decision-making bodies. A reality which today has been realized in a majority of the organizations member associations and regional bodies, hence enabling youth to flourish as leaders and influencers in the work of the organization.[[29]](#endnote-29)

**2.1.2 Youth participation at the national level**

Greater efforts of empowering young people to participate in political processes can be seen at the national level. In the 2004 review of national progress towards implementing the ICPD PoA, a majority of countries responded that they had taken actions to include youth in policy and programme development.[[30]](#endnote-30) National Youth Councils are increasingly providing a platform for young people to participate in decision-making processes, and young people themselves have been instrumental in their establishment.[[31]](#endnote-31) Several Member States have developed national youth policies, in some cases with the active participation of young people, such as in Bahrain. With the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Government of Bahrain undertook an 18-month nation-wide process to assess the situation and needs of young people to be used to develop a national youth policy. Around 16,000 young people were engaged in the process and many gained valuable leadership skills through discussions, consultations and training. It resulted in the formulation of an action plan that included the development of national youth parliament, a youth commission, a development fund and an inter-ministerial committee for youth affairs.[[32]](#endnote-32) Channels for young people’s participation in budget planning and analyzing have also been created. One example can be found in Argentina, where the Municipality of Rosario undertook an annual participatory youth budget that included the active participation of three thousand five hundred young people in 2008. Through the programme, young people received training to provide budget proposals and participated in the decision-making processes. The programme has resulted in the identification and addressing of gaps in the provision of budget allocations, inspired the development of new youth projects in budgeting processes, empowered youth with democratic leadership skills, capacity development and knowledge, and have built new partnerships between young people.[[33]](#endnote-33)

**2.1.3 Young people’s civic engagement in their society**

Civil society organizations and other actors, such as the World Organisation of the Scouts Movement or the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as well as thousands of local and national organizations and initiatives, provide millions of opportunities for young people to participate in development issues around the world. Youth-led organizations play a particularly important role in this regard, helping to ensure that programmes, policies and initiatives are responding to the divers need of young people, since they provide an opportunity to address issues affecting youth from the view of young people themselves. They further enable young people to exercise their right to participation in issues relevant to them and to develop useful leadership skills and capacities to empower themselves to become active citizens.[[34]](#endnote-34) Numerous examples of youth-led organizations working on a wide range of issues to tackle development challenges can be seen today. An example among many is the youth-led NGO Youth Action Nepal who works to engage thousands of youth to engage in SRHR issues, to establish youth friendly SRH services and to empower young people through capacity development to become active participants in their community’s development.[[35]](#endnote-35) In addition, there is an increased involvement of youth from all regions when it comes to volunteering.[[36]](#endnote-36) This trend is of utmost importance since young people’s civic participation plays a vital role in making Governments more responsive and effective in tackling poverty.[[37]](#endnote-37) Volunteerism can support young people develop their capacity and skills to become active leaders and citizens and serves as an important tool for young people’s participation. Studies show that young people engaged in volunteering develop positive social behaviors that can help reduce negative risk taking. Volunteering can also help young people prepare for employment and in their transition to responsible adulthood.[[38]](#endnote-38) However, volunteering should not discount the role of government to take their responsibility, as duty bearers, to satisfy the rights of young people. There is a need to find a healthy balance between giving an opportunity to youth to participate through volunteering and the role governments and civil society organizations to perform their duties with decently paid workers. The importance of volunteering is increasingly recognized. Examples are the upgrade of national and regional volunteer schemes and programmes in Africa, Latin America and Asia and online volunteering services where youth represent the key contributors.

**2.1.4 New channels for youth participation**

The widespread use of new media and communications technology have provided young people a space for new forms of civic and political participation, and increased opportunities in volunteering.[[39]](#endnote-39) Access to information and communication technologies (ICT), including social media, has enormous potential when it comes to young people’s civic engagement and participation,[[40]](#endnote-40) and it can further have positive effects in narrowing the gender divide in public participation. As witness in the Middle East and North Africa region, the increase in access to home computers and cell phones has allowed young women to participate in public discussions to a greater extent than in previous years.[[41]](#endnote-41) Given its cost effectiveness, ease of use, youth interest and ability to connect people in an unprecedented way, ICT represents an important current and future form of social participation, and its potential should be explored. Despite certain limitations, ICT has the potential to increase transparency by giving people the power of sharing and gain quick and easy access to information. It connects people to ideas in different parts of the world as well as to values, styles and desires regardless of geographical location. Many youth online activities are associated with volunteering and community work. Online participation via the Internet can be transformed into face-to-face civic engagement for development through volunteering, hence promoting positive change in society.

The potential of ICT and new media tools as a mean of ensuring young people’s participation and leadership in development was evident when UNAIDS used online crowd sourcing to develop recommendations to guide their work on HIV and young people. Over 5,000 young people from 79 countries provided their inputs, views and recommendations that will guide the work of the UNAIDS Secretariat for the next few years.[[42]](#endnote-42) The initiative allowed for increased youth leadership, ownership over the policy process and increased youth mobilization in the global work around AIDS issues. Another example is the international youth organization TakingITGlobal, an online community that works with over 190 000 young people from over 260 countries. Their efforts have led to an improved view of young people as active agents of change and have helped to create a sense of community inclusion.[[43]](#endnote-43)

**2.1.5 Developing knowledge for evidence-based programmes and policies**

In order to learn from previous experiences and to allow for monitoring of progress made in efforts to expand youth’s participation, increased efforts for research, data and developing indicators related to youth and youth participation are important. This was further called for during the ICPD-at-15[[44]](#endnote-44) and various initiatives are currently underway. In Cost Rica, a National Youth Survey has been carried out to evaluate existing programmes, projects and services for youth.[[45]](#endnote-45) UNICEF, through a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), has developed a Youth Model that collects internationally comparable data on adolescents and youth to allow for monitoring of countries’ progress toward national goals and global commitments, including the MDGs. To date, 24 countries have included specific adolescent and youth domains and indicators.[[46]](#endnote-46) In addition, efforts are currently underway in the United Nations to develop indicators linked to the priority areas of the WPAY as a means of allowing for monitoring and evaluating its implementation, including efforts on youth participation.[[47]](#endnote-47) In some cases, such as in Zambia and Afghanistan, youth-led participatory research has been used to include young people’s perspective in data collection,[[48]](#endnote-48) allowing young people to gain important skills when it comes to leadership and partnership building with Governments and other stakeholders. This positive trend in increased research on youth, including on youth participation, will support existing programmes, policies and initiatives to become more evidence-based and will help youth-led organizations and other stakeholders in their efforts to monitor progress made in a more transparent and accountable manner.

**2.1.6 Inclusion and empowerment of marginalized youth**

As emphasized in the ICPD-at-15 review, increased efforts to strengthen actions to reach marginalized and excluded groups of young people and especially young women need special attention. [[49]](#endnote-49) This is important since their voices and needs many times go unnoticed in the development of programmes and policies, making initiatives less likely to reach these groups. Actions to reach out to marginalized young people are taking place through various programs. The UN Indigenous Youth Caucus is a youth-led working group of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The group is comprised of indigenous youth from various countries and organizations and presents youth the opportunity to participate and take the lead on issues of concern to them at the global level.[[50]](#endnote-50) The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), a global voluntary movement for girls and young women, is working to empower young women to become strong leaders at all levels of society through their Leadership Development programme (WLDP).[[51]](#endnote-51) Another example of the positive role young people play in reaching marginalized young people in post-conflict settings is the NGO Empowering Hands in Northern Uganda that works with female returnees from the Lord’s Resistance Army. Through the establishment of peer support groups, the NGO provides young girls and women with counseling and a path to education. These opportunities provide marginalized and excluded young people the knowledge and skills necessary to become engaged and active citizens in their communities.[[52]](#endnote-52)

**2.2 Existing challenges/gaps for young people’s leadership and meaningful participation**

While a great number of agreements and commitments have been reached to ensure young people’s participation, uneven progress and limited success can be seen with regard to their implementation.[[53]](#endnote-53) In addition, channels that could provide youth and youth-led organizations with valuable capacity development, especially with regard to leadership development, and youth-adult partnership opportunities remain limited, especially for marginalized groups of young people such as young women.

**2.2.1 Legal and institutional barriers to sustainable and meaningful participation**

Although young people’s commitment to civic engagement is flourishing, realizing the meaningful participation of youth remains a challenge, and their activities in adult-organizations and political processes are often times only tokenistic or symbolic.[[54]](#endnote-54) The 10-year review of ICPD noted that there is support for young people’s participation, usually through youth organizations or groups, but the efforts tend to be limited to specific activities and not integrated in a sustainable way.[[55]](#endnote-55) Some studies show that existing legal frameworks pose barriers to young people’s participation. Youth and youth-led organizations face barriers to their legal establishment and laws often hinder the capacity development of organizations. This may limit the prospect of applying for funding and developing partnerships with other stakeholders and will limit their capacity to effectively operate and expand their activities.[[56]](#endnote-56) The need to review existing legal and structural frameworks that hinder the participation of young people, such as establishment barriers for youth-led organizations, national youth councils and similar structures should be addressed. Youth also face limited mechanisms for participation in national governments that is an additional effect of limitations in existing legal frameworks.[[57]](#endnote-57) While the need for increased capacity and leadership development of youth and youth-led organizations is important, improving and preparing the capacity of institutions to engage with individuals and organizations is of equal significance in order to move away from token gestures.[[58]](#endnote-58) Many international agreements fail to highlight this aspect, which in turn limits the prospect for stakeholders to address and overcome these challenges.

**2.2.2 Lack of tangible goals and research**

Few tangible goals regarding youth participation can be found in existing international and regional agreements. The lack of tangible goals makes it difficult to measure progress made and evaluate which initiatives and efforts have been successful. It further hinders the accountability and transparency regarding the implementation of existing agreements. The lack of tangible goals is further related to the limited access to research and data on youth. The ICPD-at-15 stressed the need for more quantitative and qualitative data, especially on youth, and called for the strengthening of databases with disaggregated information on youth in all regions to fill these gaps.[[59]](#endnote-59) Without a broader understanding of young people’s needs and situation, any agreed goal risks being ineffective and unresponsive to the needs of young people. Given that young people are a diverse group, increased research and data would allow for more responsive and effective policies and programmes. Additionally, little research and data focus on positive aspects of young people’s contributions to their societies[[60]](#endnote-60), including the impact of youth participation, youth leadership and new channels of civic engagement. Increased knowledge and understanding may help stakeholders and policymakers to take advantage of the commitment young people have to development. It may further help policymakers understand how the benefit of young people’s participation and leadership in civic engagement can be meaningfully integrated into other spheres of development efforts. Particularly important is the engagement of young men and women from various backgrounds in collecting and developing research on youth issues, which should take place through the training of young people in peer-research methodologies and data collection and the establishment of concrete mechanisms to include young people in research initiatives and data collection.

**2.2.3 Limited participation in policy formulation**

While significant progress towards formulating national youth policies has been made, challenges with mainstreaming them in the national policy agendas or inadequate funding for their implementation persist.[[61]](#endnote-61) In a study conducted by UNFPA in 2010, worrying trends in the decline of opportunities for young people’s participation in national development processes was noted. Only one third of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) available in 2010 had consulted youth in their formulation, compared to roughly one half back in 2003. Few of the PRSPs outlined the challenges and needs of their youth population in detail. The study also noted that thirty per cent of the PRSPs didn’t even identify youth as a group in poverty, less than seventeen per cent mentioned youth as a crosscutting issue, and little emphasis was placed on marginalized and vulnerable groups of young people, such as girls and young women.[[62]](#endnote-62) In Asia and the Pacific, youth are to a large extent excluded from participation in development policies and only a few of the existing national youth policies that have been implemented and developed respond to the specific needs of young people, including the most vulnerable youth.[[63]](#endnote-63) Similar challenges have been identified in the European Union, while a majority of the Member States have adopted national youth policies, challenges persists to ensure the meaningful participation of youth from all backgrounds in political and civic life.[[64]](#endnote-64) In combination with limited data and research on youth that could inform programs and initiatives to become responsive to challenges facing young people, this implies that a majority of PRSPs are not designed to addresses the needs of this group. It further indicates that young people have limited opportunities for capacity development and for developing their leadership skills in national policy processes.

**2.2.4 Limited and uneven access to the potential of ICT**

Large gaps further exist when it comes to Internet access and the divide is influenced by many factors including gender, education, income, age, access to information and a rural urban divide.[[65]](#endnote-65) This clearly shows that a large proportion of marginalized young people are left out of the potential that ICT can bring to empower youth. In both developed and developing countries, Internet usage has a higher proportion of male users, highlighting that the gender gap in Internet usage can not entirely be explained by the level of development. The lowest levels of Internet usage can be found among people who are not enrolled in school and have only completed primary education, as well as for people living in rural areas. For example, in many countries in Africa, less than one per cent of people living in rural areas were using the Internet in 2007-2008.[[66]](#endnote-66) If efforts to bridge this gap are not urgently taken, the potential of ICT to empower young people will be wasted and could instead contribute to deepening existing inequalities in the world.[[67]](#endnote-67)

**2.2.5 Lack of implementation of existing agreements**

Existing agreements have already noted the importance of youth participation and leadership in human development efforts, but increased efforts to ensure their implementation and enforcement are needed. In addition, global economic and environmental crises pose a threat to the willingness of governments to implement the ICPD as noted by the 15-year review of the ICPD.[[68]](#endnote-68) This could further hinder the engagement and participation of young people. This shows the need to find mechanisms to institutionalize participation less prone to be undone during economic downturns and external crises to ensure that young people, and especially young women while already being a marginalized and vulnerable group affected by poverty, unemployment, health issues and lack of education, are not further negatively affected.

**2.2.6 Low levels of engagement and trust in traditional institutions**

Young people’s participation in formal organizations attracts less engagement among young people today.[[69]](#endnote-69) Studies show high levels of distrust among young people in governmental and political institutions and low levels of engagement in political affairs and political activism. In Latin America, a study conducted in 18 countries in 2010 showed that only 14 per cent of young people 15-24 had some or high level of trust in political parties and only between 8-12 per cent of them participated in some sort of political activity.[[70]](#endnote-70) UNV’s mapping and consultation with youth groups in the five countries of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen, under its Youth Volunteering Programme for the Arab States, revealed a high degree of youth disengagement and/or exclusion from political and social processes. Youth feel as though they are not “full citizens” as they are not involved in decision-making processes at any level. Such negative feelings may in fact perpetuate a cycle of disengagement rather than act as a motivator to involvement.[[71]](#endnote-71) In the European Union, only 29 per cent of young people aged 18-24 voted in the European Parliamentarian elections in 2009 and studies showed that young people were less likely to engage in political parties over a longer period of time.[[72]](#endnote-72) In sub-Saharan Africa, voting apathy is a strong feature and cynicism towards the parliament exists among almost half of the young population.[[73]](#endnote-73) All of the aforementioned challenges for young people’s meaningful participation in this section could be contributing factors, however, more research is needed to establish deeper knowledge and understanding to why young people distrust traditional institutions. Rebuilding young people’s trust in traditional institutions will be an important issue for policy makers to ensure young people’s meaningful participation at all levels of society, and to support young people’s successful transition into adulthood.

**3. Recommendations**

Integrating and including young women and men to meaningfully participate and become active leaders in global efforts to achieve sustainable development is a long-term investment, as this generation of young people will grow up to witness and live with the consequences of today’s choices. Policy makers have an enormous opportunity to take advantaged of young people’s passion, creativity, enthusiasm, knowledge and capacity by empowering them to become an integral part of ICPD 14 and the Post-2015 development agenda. Ensuring equality in all dimensions of human development requires that young people be empowered to meaningfully participate and take the lead in all aspects of society to enable policies and programmes to become more effective and responsive to young people’s divers needs. As demographic pressures continue to challenge various dimensions of development[[74]](#endnote-74), realizing all young people’s right to meaningful participation at all levels of society will increase their likelihood of a successful transition into a responsible adulthood and will increase the likelihood of success of the Post-2015 development agenda. While the prospect for sustainable development is confronted by environmental challenges, young people, when empowered to meaningfully participate in efforts to ensure a greener and fairer globalization, have showed an enormous potential to overcome those challenges.[[75]](#endnote-75)

To build upon existing efforts of ensuring young people’s leadership and meaningful participation at all levels of society, the following recommendations should be considered;

1. The United Nations, Governments, the private sector, academia, civil society organizations and other stakeholders should develop inclusive, gender sensitive, transparent, and accountable participatory mechanisms to ensure the meaningful participation and leadership of youth and youth-led organizations in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Special emphasis should be placed on building sustainable partnerships with youth and youth-led organizations from marginalized groups, including young women.

1. The ICPD Beyond 2014 and the Post-2015 Agenda should aim to develop, in meaningful partnership with young women and men from various social backgrounds, tangible goals and indicators for youth participation, including on the local, regional, national and international level, to allow for: improved monitoring of progress made; increased incentives for actions among stakeholders to include youth participation in development policies and programmes; to create a more transparent and accountable evaluation process in efforts to include youth participation; to enable for capacity development and meaningful participation of youth and youth-led organizations. Developing concrete goals could further allow for increased knowledge building through the sharing of good practices when it comes to meaningfully engage youth and develop their leadership skills.
2. Invest in research targeting youth from various backgrounds and build upon existing initiatives to develop youth indicators to monitor progress made, in partnership with youth and youth-led organizations. More research is needed to analyze the impact of youth participation, including young people’s civic engagement, in policies and programmes. This knowledge could further help change negative attitudes and social norms that hinder young people’s, and especially young women’s meaningful participation in society. In order to involve young people in the evaluation and improvement of programmes, policies and initiatives targeting youth, as outlined in the ICPD Programme of Action, monitoring and auditing mechanisms, including online and offline tools, should be developed. Particularly important is the collection and analysis of age and gender disaggregated population data, including social, economical and geographical background that reflects the different needs of young people. This can serve to create effective channels for feedback on the impact and relevance of programmes and initiatives on young people’s needs.[[76]](#endnote-76) Efforts to engage and build partnerships with young people from marginalized groups, including young women, youth with disabilities, young migrants, youth from rural areas, young refugees and internally displaced young people, street youth and youth affected by conflict should be made a priority.
3. Increase commitments and focus on preparing and developing existing social, economic, environmental and political institutions, in partnership with young women and men from all backgrounds, to institutionalize sustainable mechanisms for young people’s meaningful and sustainable participation at all levels. In order to meaningfully engage youth in institutions and move away from token gestures, preparing and developing the capacity of institutions to engage with individuals and organizations is of utmost importance.[[77]](#endnote-77) Capacity development includes the development of knowledge regarding the importance of meaningful youth participation. It further requires knowledge in how these institutions, through accountable and transparent processes, can create a safe participatory space for the inclusion of youth from various backgrounds, including youth from rural areas. These efforts could further act as a mechanism to rebuild young people’s trust in traditional institutions.
4. Increase capacity development and support the formation, development and scaling up of youth-led organizations, at the local, national, regional and international levels. To ensure that youth participation is sustainable, inclusive, equitable, gender sensitive and meaningful, increased sustainable efforts to develop the capacity of young people and youth-led organizations, through education, including non-formal education, volunteering, vocational training, leadership training and access to resources, funding, information and the adoption of sustainable mechanisms for young people from marginalized and vulnerable groups, is needed.[[78]](#endnote-78) In addition, review; in partnership with young people, existing legal frameworks to increase institutional access to meaningful participation of young people and youth-led organizations should be made.
5. Prioritize the development of national action plans on youth in partnership with young people from various backgrounds, to ensure that development efforts respond to the need of this generation of young people. National action plans need to adopt a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach given that many issues facing young people and limit their empowerment to meaningfully participate in their societies, are interrelated and interlinked with one another. In addition, establish national and regional youth councils, youth volunteering schemes and similar bodies, as these can serve as an effective tool for Governments and other stakeholders to consult with young people in political and decision-making processes[[79]](#endnote-79), and can allow young people to meaningfully engage in their societies and develop their leadership skills. Mechanisms ensuring that young people from marginalized groups such as young women, are included in a meaningful way should be prioritized. In addition, facilitating youth engagement in dialogue with parliamentarians and other key decision-makers through regular workshops and meetings could further strengthen young people’s voice and develop their leadership skills.
6. Increase efforts to provide access to ICT and social media, that have proven to be a powerful resource for empowering youth and facilitating their participation, by providing education, information, employment opportunities and channels for civic engagement. This should be done by promoting access to non-discriminatory, affordable and safe access to information and communication technology, including smart phones, especially in schools and public places.[[80]](#endnote-80) Programmes and initiatives should aim to expand mechanisms for meaningful e-governance, including the establishment of transparent, accountable and inclusive mechanisms for young people’s participation and integration of their contributions. The use of ICT as a mechanism to increase young people’s participation at all levels of society can further contribute to accelerating young women’s equal participation if combined with efforts to increase access to education and income opportunities. These efforts need to be developed in combination with offline initiatives to ensure that young people without access to ICT are not excluded in order to guarantee that the potential of ICT do not act as a multiplier of existing inequalities of marginalized groups.[[81]](#endnote-81) ICT should also facilitate the use of assistance technology to enable young people with disabilities to access ICT.[[82]](#endnote-82)
7. Social norms and perceptions that view youth participation and leadership negatively, especially regarding young women, and may cause social reluctance to include young people in decision-making processes, should be addressed through increased space for dialogue and partnership building.[[83]](#endnote-83) Efforts to generate greater awareness regarding the benefits of youth’s, and particularly young women’s civic engagement, leadership and participation in decision-making processes in sustainable development and post-conflict and peace-building processes should be strengthened in order to positively transform social norms and perception.[[84]](#endnote-84)
8. More channels for young people’s participation in intergovernmental processes should be created. As the ICPD process moves forward, including youth representatives with a mandate to engage equal to that of other representatives, and who have been selected through a transparent and accountable, gender sensitive process, could serve as an opportunity to incorporate young people’s right to meaningful participation and develop their leadership skills.[[85]](#endnote-85) Any youth representative need to have a genuine mandate to represent the voices of young people in their country, and need to be provided essential training and preparation to meaningfully participate in the work of ICPD. To increase the representation of youth representatives from developing countries, additional funding opportunities to support their participation should be considered.

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3. Page 8, Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005, “Participation in the Second Decade of Life: What and Why?” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Para 20, Outcome Document of the High Level Meeting on Youth of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding, A/RES/ 65/312 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The United Nations uses the categorization of ‘young people’ as people aged 10-24. While there is no agreed definition of youth, the United Nations for statistical purposes defines youth as young people aged 15-24. The term ‘adolescent’ is often referred to as young people aged 10-19. However, various Member States and United Nations entities might use a different definition, and it is important to note that young people are a highly diversified group. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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9. See for example ”Global Employment Trends for Youth 2012”, ILO [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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11. The United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development conducted an on-line survey in July/August 2012, to seek inputs from youth and other relevant stakeholders for the development of a system-wide Action Plan on Youth. The survey was conducted in French, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, English and Chinese and generated over 13,000 responses from 186 countries. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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14. See for example ”Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide”, UNDP, 2012. Upcoming [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Various agreements have highlighted the importance of young people’s participation, including; Para 2 g, The Beijing Declaration of the Ministers Responsible for Youth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the People’s Republic of China on ASEAN China Cooperation on Youth, 2004. Available at: <http://www.aseansec.org/ASEANChinaYouth.pdf>; Article 21, Organización Iberoamericana de Juventud, *Ibero-American Convention on Young People's Rights*, October 2005, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b28eefe2.html>[accessed 22 September 2012]; Article 12, African Youth Charter, African Union; Article 4.2.2, Field of Action 5, Objectives, ”An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering. A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities”, Commission of the EuropeanCommunities, 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Para 6.13, Programme of Action, International Conference on Population and Development, 1994 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
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18. Article J, Para 105, World Programme of Action for Youth, A/RES/50/81 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Para 6, Policies and programmes involving youth, A/RES/66/121 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Policies and programmes involving youth, A/RES/64/130, 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Para 19, Policies and programmes involving youth, A/RES/66/121 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. “The Secretary-General’s Five-Year Action Agenda”, United Nations, 25 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.un.org/sg/priorities/sg_agenda_2012.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. see Article 10 and 11, African Youth Charter and Article 4.2.2, Field of Action 5, ”An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering. A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities”, Commission of the European Communities, 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. xxxvii, ”World Youth Report 2007”, UN DESA [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Para 32, ”International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding”, Report of the Secretary-General, A/66/129 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Page 244 World Youth Report 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See for example; ”A Guide to Youth Delegates to the United Nations”, UNDESA, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Page 63, ”Investing in People: National Progress in Implementing the ICPD Programme of Action 1994-2004”, UNFPA, 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
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