

## **Building towards a Sustainable Future using Synergies with, and among, Youth**

NGOs in formal partnership with UNESCO, Position Paper on Youth and Advocacy Guidelines<sup>1</sup>

### **Vision**

Young people have potential and an increasingly important role to play through advocacy and intervention for achieving meaningful change and progress in educational, scientific, social and cultural avenues, as change-makers and leaders of tomorrow, as there is an urgent need to create more space and opportunities for them to contribute to decision-making through non-tokenistic leadership roles and global youth mobilization, within NGOs and beyond.

### **Background**

The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to call for ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring that people across the world enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 [1-6]. To achieve these goals, young people not only have the right to a voice but also disparate platforms to advocate for causes they believe in and network with individuals they relate to [7-10]. The world in its present circumstances faces new challenges that are emerging, even as we find that old ones are changing in their forms, to thereby present difficulties over and above any mitigation strategies utilized against them. These challenges vary from climate change, resource depletion, poverty, and malnutrition to illiteracy, deculturalization, conflict, changing disease patterns, as well as gender, racial and ethnical inequalities.

Non-governmental organizations have played a pivotal role in not only supplementing the governmental responses to these challenges, but in also taking the initiative in eradicating these challenges based on their capacities and involvement at the grassroots [11-13]. Within such organizations, youth participation has become imperative to initiate policies and programs for sustainable change. However, there is still a lot to be done to encourage and increase youth mobilization and involvement in the work and decision-making of NGOs and social movements for positive change in the world. The United Nations defines ‘youth’ as individuals aged between 15 and 24, although this definition is flexible. ‘Youth’ is a rather fluid category, with the experience of being young varying substantially across the world, between regions and nations, and therefore, context is always an important element in one’s definition of youth. This contextual approach to engaging with, and encouraging, youth participation and mobilization is important.

In the past, access to opportunities and leadership positions and experiences for the youth in various non-governmental organizations and social movements have been limited. Young leaders can help in building on their individual and organizational values and processes, and establish effective modes of contributing to the operations of their organization(s). Furthermore, it is commonly seen that top-tier leaderships are not always connected with the youth members in the organization in a regular and systematic manner. It is pertinent to address this communication gap, and facilitate intergenerational

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dialogue, mentoring and capacity building exercises in order to facilitate youth contribution to activities and decision-making within the organization in an informed and comprehensive way. Addressing the needs and interests of the youth, which constitutes a community in itself and must be regarded as such, requires us to realize that ours is a world that is increasingly recognizing and respecting the diversity of individuals, within and across generations.

When young people are given the opportunity to stand for what they believe in and understand that their voices can foster positive change in the world, especially when equipped with knowledge, opportunities, and tools to undertake proactive initiatives to address challenges faced by our world, they can stand for their beliefs and causes with courage, pride and ability. Youth have the ingenuity, the potential, and the capacity to make meaningful change happen – for themselves, for their communities, and for the world at large. We believe that we must encourage engagement of youth in NGOs' actions from design and strategy to implementation and follow-up, with the creation of spaces for youth within organizations, in their communities by scaling up youth-led initiatives, by promoting partnerships and in policies by integrating youth concerns, issues and interests.

## **Recommendations**

### *General Recommendations*

As youth-representatives associated with a myriad of NGOs and movements around the world, we posit and propose points of interest and relevance to promote youth participation and leadership for meaningful change in educational, scientific, social, and cultural directions. We believe that:

1. young people are best placed to determine the interests of youth and should be given ample space, opportunity, and support to pursue their issues of interest.
2. it is essential to create spaces for youth within NGOs and beyond, wherein youth-members can proactively discuss and initiate actions to contribute towards the aim of their respective organization.
3. young people must be recognized as both individuals and members of a community with distinct interests, objectives and tendencies, which have to be harnessed, in synergy with the thinking and functioning of the senior members and leadership.
4. it is of utmost importance to facilitate non-tokenistic leadership opportunities for youth-members, particularly at the very highest levels of the organizational structure.
5. specific responsibilities, clear communication channels and prioritizing awareness-building exercises relating to various deliberations and policy-steps (especially of and by the organizational leadership) can be helpful in enabling the youth to make informed and proactive contributions to the organization.
6. modularity and a decentralized engagement process of the organizational leadership with the youth-members will encourage their involvement and participation.
7. youth-participation in NGOs can be encouraged and promoted with comprehensive mentoring and capacity-building of the youth-members within the organization that facilitate value-addition and increase in knowledge and competence of youth-members, thereby equipping them with the requisite resources to contribute to the work and decision-making processes of the organization.
8. a 'bottom-up' structure within organizations helps feed information on activism and advocacy undertaken by young people at the grassroots to the top tiers of the organization and recommend a collaborative spirit within the organization and beyond, among the youth-members and between the youth-members and other stakeholders, particularly the organizational leadership.

9. inclusivity and diversity must be encouraged by organizations in their youth membership and leadership. We believe that intersectionality must be considered in the formulation of ways to engage with, and encourage the participation of, youth with diverse identities, in the work and decision making of the organization.
10. there needs to be independence of assessment by organizations based on distinct conditions in various countries of origin and/or operation to ascertain the strategies for encouraging youth advocacy as well as the basis for greater inclusivity and diversity in their organization.

### *Specific Recommendations*

1. effective and regular dialogue and engagement with and among youth members can be undertaken with the creation of intra-organizational and widely representative youth modules that can conduct regular discussion groups and propose policy/program suggestions to the organizational leadership.
2. non-tokenistic leadership positions and specific roles for youth-members can be facilitated by ensuring young people have chances to have ownership and leadership over processes, regularly incorporating suggestions and points by the youth leaders in minutes of meetings, policy, and position papers, as well as strategy plans for the organization.
3. simulation exercises (particularly with case-studies) can be used to build empathy and give youth an experience taking difficult action-steps in real time, while reflection activities can help the youth to personally engage with the organization's work and think more critically and deeply on what they are engaging with.
4. a central hub of information and resources, relating to the work and decision-making of the organization, that is easily accessible to all youth members (online and/or offline) should be created.
5. opportunities within organizations should be created for capacity building and value addition of youth-members, with both 'hard skills' (such as organizational management and modes of outreach) and 'soft skills' (such as communication skills and management of interpersonal conflict).
6. opportunities for youth-members and leaders to interact with senior members and leaders in organizations could be in the form of shadowing schemes, mentoring programs or buddy schemes (especially for mentors-mentees who do not have a big difference in age).<sup>2</sup>
7. there must be an emphasis on creating opportunities to provide more exposure to young leaders, helping them network and find new and innovative opportunities to express themselves.
8. the existing youth-leaders within organizations can be encouraged to reach out to their communities through outreach programs to inspire and motivate more young people to join the organization and cause.
9. a variety of technologies can also be utilized to spread the word about the work of the organization and engage with the youth beyond the organizational membership.
10. the prioritization of collaborations between different cross-sections of the membership is recommended, particularly with and among youth-members, as well as collaborations with external bodies and organizations such as grassroot youth-movements.

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<sup>2</sup> In this, one must be careful to account for different structures of the organizations while discussing intergenerational dialogue and mentoring. For instance, a more hierarchical structure may have lesser accessibility of youth members to the senior-most rungs of the leadership and therefore buddy schemes may be preferable to shadowing schemes.

11. inclusivity and diversity within an organization can be promoted by ensuring that young people of varying backgrounds and identities are given equal and equitable chances at assuming leadership roles.
12. organizations must promote greater inclusivity for young persons with disabilities and other under-represented identities or intersection of identities in the work and decision-making of the organization(s). Promotion of inclusivity should be followed by annual intersectionality reviews and associated reports to ensure accountability.
13. paid internship programs and international voluntary service for the youth will provide a good opportunity to youth non-members to get acquainted with the fundamentals of the functioning, work and decision-making of the organization. We consider that student exchange programs are also beneficial in this regard.

## Conclusion

After discussing the contemporary realities of youth involvement in advocating for disparate social causes, we believe the above recommendations will facilitate the promotion of youth participation and creation of more space for youth leaders in non-governmental organizations and beyond. In this, clarity of roles, access to information and opportunities, inclusivity in approach, capacity-building, and mentorship, as well as inter-generational dialogues and a collaborative spirit for functioning within the organization are seen to be primary. We hope that these policy-suggestions will be considered and implemented by the organizations and our position can help build a sustainable tomorrow using synergies with, and among, young people.

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