

Meaningfully engaging with youth

Guidance and training for UN staff



Endorsed by the Interagency Network on Youth Development (IANYD)

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Overview

This toolkit is designed to promote meaningful youth engagement practices across the UN's work relevant to youth. It will take users on a journey from knowledge through to application by:

- Facilitating an understanding of who is youth
- Promoting the value of meaningful youth engagement at the UN
- Encouraging reflection on the principles and practices of meaningful engagement
- Reviewing current youth engagement practices and identifying good practice models
- Developing action plans for youth engagement initiatives
- Identifying measures of success for meaningfully engaging with youth
- Highlighting challenges and providing support and guidance for implementation

How this toolkit came about

This toolkit was first designed by the UNESCO Youth Programme and a young youth development consultant in 2017, in line with UNESCO's Operational Strategy on Youth (2014-2021), to build staff capacities to meaningfully engage with youth. The tool was developed following a literature review, with inputs from staff and youth CSOs and networks. Numerous workshops have been organized using this tool since 2017, both at UNESCO Headquarters and in the field, training until today more than 350 UNESCO staff ranging from interns to assistant directors-general. An interactive on-line version was also developed in 2019.

In 2019, responding to the UN Youth Strategy – Youth 2020 and following a pilot UNCT training in Viet Nam, the UN Interagency Network on Youth Development decided to adapt the initial tool and make it accessible to all UN staff working across the UN's programmes and activities relevant to youth. The present version was thus adapted from the original and finalised with inputs from members of the IANYD.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit can be used for building a common understanding of meaningful youth engagement practices for all UN staff working across the UN's programmes and activities relevant to youth. Youth-relevant programmes and activities include those that are specifically for youth, as well as those that impact on youth.

Where and when to use this toolkit

This toolkit can be used in order to:

- Develop the technical capacity of UN staff who are interested in developing programmes and activities that are relevant to youth and/or that engage youth at different levels;
- Enable and prompt meaningful youth engagement activities and programmes at headquarters and in field offices of UN System entities;
- Raise awareness and build the capacities of peer UN staff within respective organizations, to strengthen the organizational buy-in for youth mainstreaming or youth engagement.

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1. Youth and the UN

This section contains elements to help you define “youth” when working on relevant projects at the UN as well as key principles underpinning the UN-wide approach to working with youth.

1.1. Who is youth?

ACTIVITY 1.1 – Remember your ‘youth’

Think about what it was like to be a young person. You may or may not consider yourself – or be considered by others – as a young person now, but you certainly have some thoughts about how you remember your youth.

- ☐ Share a personal experience of having your voice heard or ignored as a youth;
- ☐ Identify the age bracket you associate with being youth.

Discussion points

- ☐ Did the group experience agency in youth in different ways?
- ☐ Did the group identify different ages that represent youth?
- ☐ Do the identified age brackets accurately reflect the UN's definitions?

The UN definition of ‘youth’ is someone from 15 to 24 years old. There is also a definition for ‘young people’ (10-24 years old) and for ‘adolescents’ (10-19 years old). There is, however, no universal definition. Many agencies adapt their definition to the national/ regional context depending on their operations.

The following components can be considered together to define youth from a holistic perspective:



Flexibility is essential when seeking to reflect the diverse constructions of youth in a given country or region in line with the transitions that youth experience. Flexibility allows to better include traditionally underserved¹ youth and professionals or experts up to 35 years old.

1. THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH: The experience of ‘being youth’ is influenced by a number of factors. Different generations will experience youth differently.

Youth of the same generation will also experience being youth differently. Different groups and sub-groups at the same life stage will have different experiences based on their demographic, social and cultural characteristics.

2. THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH AND THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THEM: Demographic, social and cultural characteristics shape the experience of being youth. These include but are not limited to gender; cultural and religious background; socio-economic status; disability; sexual orientation; geographic location.

These characteristics are not experienced in isolation from one another. To understand how they inform the experience of youth you must also explore the intersections between them.

3. THE TRANSITION STAGES YOUTH GO THROUGH: In global policy to date, there has been some work to understand the transitions youth experience from childhood into adulthood. In 2007, the World Development Report “Development and the Next Generation” (World Bank) suggested five generic types of transitions: Continuing to learn; Starting to work; Developing a healthy lifestyle; Forming families; Exercising citizenship. These transitions are not exhaustive. They do not reflect the experience of all youth. They instead provide a basic framework to reflect on the transitions experienced by youth in a specific context.

Not all youth will experience each of the identified phases, nor will they experience the transitions in the same way. The phases do not necessarily follow a sequential order. Different groups and sub-groups of youth will also experience the transitions at different times.

4. THE AGE OF YOUTH: Defining the age bracket associated to youth from a holistic perspective involves recognising all of the above. It is also necessary to consider the nexus between childhood and youth and the legal rights and protections attributed to youth in relation to this.

When defining the age of youth, it is important to consider that it is socially constructed and that context-specific age brackets are identified to help design and monitor targeted interventions. Existing national or local policies or laws must be considered, as well as historical, cultural and societal perceptions of what and who youth is.

1.2. Key principles of the UN's work with youth

ACTIVITY 1.2 – Agency approach to engaging youth

There is a wealth of youth-relevant and youth-focused work happening within the UN system. In some instances, this is formalised through a youth strategy, whilst in others it is an informal approach.

- Identify the youth strategy or approach to engaging youth within your Agency;
- Share the top-level objectives or highlights from the youth-relevant work at your Agency.

The UN recognizes and involves youth as partners, stakeholders and changemakers in its work. However, each Agency will have different priorities and objectives for its youth-relevant work.

These priorities, and the specific initiatives in which they are reflected, will shape and inform how youth are engaged. The following principles underpin the UN-wide approach to working with youth:

- 1. Agency of youth:** Youth are heterogeneous societal actors in their own right and with their own value. They have agency in society, manifested through their choices and actions, even those that are not always conscious. This agency influences society and is in turn influenced by the relationship of young people with other groups.
- 2. Youth as actors, knowledge holders and innovators:** Recognizing their agency means recognizing that young people take actions in the transformation of society. As such, they are actors, knowledge holders and innovators. The UN recognizes the capacity of youth as the leaders of today, and sees them not just as beneficiaries, but also as actors and partners in its work.
- 3. Holistic youth development:** Holistic youth development respects young people as whole individuals who change within their contexts. The UN recognizes the need to leverage resources, networks and expertise to address the diverse needs of youth.
- 4. Multi-stakeholder approaches:** The multi-stakeholder approach ensures the engagement of multiple stakeholders in youth-relevant, including youth and their structures¹, authorities and cross-sector partners.
- 5. Youth as rights-holders:** The UN recognizes youth as rights-holders. It promotes and facilitates transparency, accountability and responsiveness from duty bearers toward them.

These principles are interlinked and should be viewed holistically.

¹ A youth structure includes all formal and informal groups, organizations, networks and representative bodies that work on behalf of youth or who are youth-led.

2. Meaningful youth engagement with the UN

For engagement to be meaningful – and not tokenistic - it has to respect a series of principles and parameters. In this section you will find the different elements that will ensure that engagement is meaningful. This includes building your understanding of:

- ➔ The triple value of engagement with the UN
- ➔ The different ways the UN engages with youth
- ➔ How to make engagement meaningful and not tokenistic through a practical list of “Do’s” and “Dont’s”.

2.1. The triple value of youth engagement with the UN

ACTIVITY 2.1 – The triple value of meaningful youth engagement with the UN

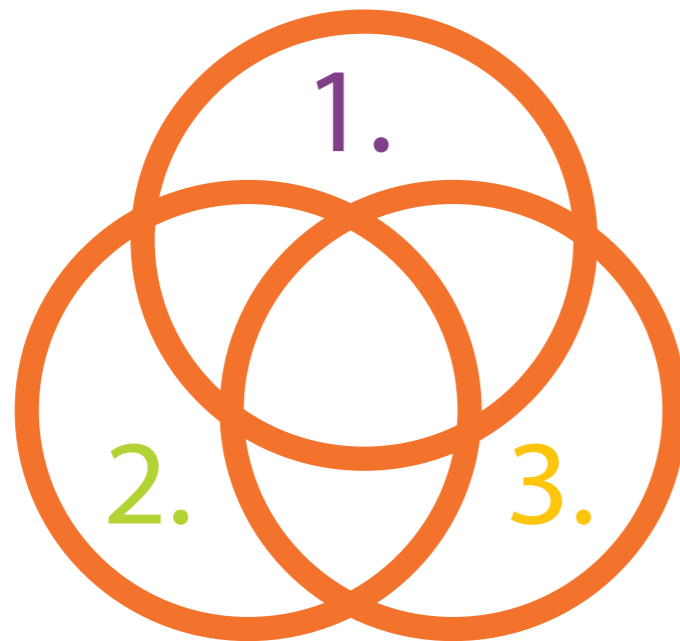
Engaging youth in the UN's work relevant to or focused on youth has value in different ways.

- Using creative resources, in groups discuss the question below and create a visual response that reflects ideas from your discussion:

'What is the value of engaging with youth?'

- Present your visual response with highlights from your discussion.

Harnessing the potential of youth



Addressing societal needs and challenges

Enhancing UN's work and institutions

Nine reasons why

Harnessing the potential of youth

1. Youth engagement is a process that empowers and enables youth to understand, realise and claim their rights. Participation is a fundamental human right. Meaningfully engaging with youth is a pre-requisite to ensure that young people and their structures can exercise and fulfil this right.
2. Youth engagement helps youth develop their agency towards active citizenship and express their voices and ideas. It also encourages youth-to-youth organising and builds the capacities of the structures through which youth engage.
3. Youth engagement contributes to identity-building of youth and to strengthening a number of life skills that are key in all aspects of their lives.

Addressing societal needs and challenges

4. Youth have innovative, creative and sustainable solutions to address societal needs and challenges.
5. The Agenda 2030 identifies youth as critical agents of change, with every Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) requiring youth action and participation to succeed. Youth engagement is vital in translating the Agenda into local, national and regional policies.
6. Investing in the engagement of this large demographic group strengthens democracy.

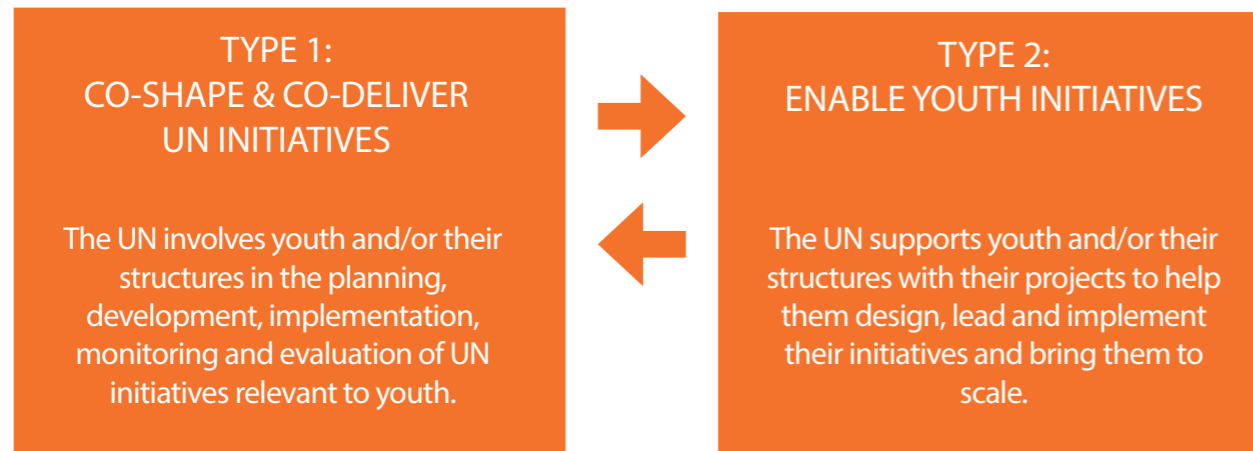
Enhancing UN's work and institutions

7. Youth keep the UN's work reality checked. Engaging with youth ensures that UN programmes stay informed, relevant, appropriate and responsive both to the needs of young people and to transforming societies.
8. Engaging with youth helps build support for the UN's work among a group that is an increasingly influential actor in today's societies and will constitute the world's future leaders.
9. As an inclusive system with a humanistic mandate, the UN has an obligation to fulfil its role as duty-bearer and remain at the forefront by engaging this important cohort and priority group.

2.2. Types of youth engagement

There are two ways in which the UN can engage with youth. The first type of engagement involves collaborating with youth to co-shape and/or co-deliver all or stages of UN-led work.

The second type of engagement provides opportunities and/or enabling conditions to support youth-led initiatives and action on UN priorities, such as Agenda 2030, or priorities within the specific fields of competence of specialized agencies.



These two streams are mutually reinforcing. By engaging with youth and their structures in Type 1 activities, the UN supports them in developing knowledge and skills that can enable them to lead their own initiatives, while supporting them to have a key role in shaping UN-led action. In turn, supporting Type 2 youth-led initiatives enhances youth agency while also enriching the scope and diversity of youth and of youth-led actions that can contribute to addressing the UN's priorities and objectives.

The UN has an opportunity and responsibility to facilitate Type 1 activities. This tool focuses on these activities as an effort to shift the organizational cultures and transform the way in which youth are considered and involved in shaping UN-led initiatives. The purpose is to make Type 1 youth engagement in the UN's work meaningful, becoming a sustained part of the UN's operations and culture. As for Type 2 activities, the UN has a responsibility to engage with youth in a way that creates or sustains enabling conditions for them to create, implement or scale their own ideas, solutions and initiatives.

ACTIVITY 2.2 – Types of youth engagement

- Review these examples from a UN agency youth engagement initiative:

EXAMPLE 1: A UN agency competition on social entrepreneurship was developed and adjusted by a youth organization. The youth organization led key elements of the initiative, including selecting competition winners.

EXAMPLE 2: The competition gave support and visibility to innovative proposals from youth within the framework of the SDGs. The competition winners received financial and technical support to implement their initiatives.

- Identify which type of youth engagement activity each example represents.

2.3. Making youth engagement meaningful

ACTIVITY 2.3 – Make it meaningful

There is a big difference between 'meaningful engagement' and 'tokenistic engagement'. The latter can have negative impacts on both the young people engaged and the initiatives they are engaged in.

- Identify and share ideas on how to make youth engagement meaningful.

	DO	DON'T
SAFE	Ensure the physical and emotional security of the youth engaged. Always follow national or organizational safeguarding procedures as well as child protection rights and responsibilities for youth under the age of 18.	Assume all youth are safe and free to express themselves when the circumstance and context of their contributions could be politically or culturally sensitive.
RESPECTFUL	Respect youth as contributors, innovators and knowledge-holders on the basis of their perspectives and experiences.	Request youth to engage when their contribution is likely to remain unheard or manipulate their responses to align with a predefined agenda.
VALUED	Value youth capacities and contributions as you value those of adults. Encourage youth to express views and ideas freely.	Presume that youth inputs are less valuable than those of others and undermine them on the basis of age. Assume you know what is best for youth engaged or speak on their behalf.
INCLUSIVE	Provide equal opportunities for all, regardless of cultural and social backgrounds, education, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, context, political and economic status, or other characteristics. Provide opportunities for traditionally underserved youth to engage, including those not members of any structures. Where relevant, encourage engaged youth to self-organize in inclusive, democratic structures that are informed by diverse views and experiences.	Only engage youth from well-represented groups. Only engage youth who are already well-known to the Agency. Assume that the views of one or few young people are representative of all youth in a similar situation or youth more broadly introduced to your Agency.

VOLUNTARY

DO

Give youth the opportunity to choose the most appropriate area or form of engagement, or to discontinue at any stage of the process.

DON'T

Take decisions about their involvement on their behalf.

TRANSPARENT

Clearly set expectations at the outset.

Set unrealistic expectations on the requirements and limitations of engagement.

INFORMATIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE

Provide engaged youth with clear, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about their role.

Provide engaged youth with no or unclear information on their role and the use and influence of their contributions.

Explain to youth how their inputs are used, interpreted and have influenced outcomes with transparency, establishing a communication feedback loop.

Ask youth to be engaged without follow-up or feedback on the use and influence of their inputs.

YOUTH- FRIENDLY

Invest in youth-friendly and age-appropriate environments, processes, structures, mechanisms and materials. E.g. Use participatory and inclusive methodologies and tools to support youth engagement. Ensure there is adequate time and resources

Assume conventional processes, structures and mechanisms will be sufficient for youth to access and engage regardless of what this means for the quality of their engagement.

SUPPORTIVE

Enable engaged youth and their structures to build their own capacities. Pay special attention to the capacity needs of traditionally underserved youth and organizations and networks that work with them.

Only consider how engaged youth will add value to your work without considering the value-exchange for them.

ADVOCATIVE

Sensitize non-youth actors engaging with youth to value and adopt the principles of meaningful engagement.

Challenge unequal power dynamics between youth and non-youth.

Assume that all actors engaging with youth will have prior knowledge or experience of meaningful engagement without a need to advocate for or build external capacities on this topic.

Assume that power relations are always balanced.

3. Meaningful youth engagement in action

In this section you will find the different elements that will help you apply youth engagement in your initiatives. This includes building your understanding of:

- ➔ The 'How' – The four degrees of youth engagement
- ➔ The 'Where' - The stages of the programme cycle where youth engagement can take place
- ➔ The 'What' - The types of youth engagement in youth-relevant interventions
- ➔ The 'Who' - The types of youth and their structures that can be engaged

3.1. The 'How' – The four degrees of youth engagement

The degree of youth engagement depends on the context and the nature of the work undertaken within a project or programme. One degree may be more applicable than the others.



There can be a combination of degrees of engagement along the different stages or aspects of a project or programme.

ACTIVITY 3.1 – The 'How'

Across the UN there are numerous examples of youth engagement initiatives for each degree of engagement.

- Identify and share an example of a youth engagement activity or initiative for each degree of engagement.

3.2. The 'Where' – Youth engagement in a programme cycle

Now that you are familiar with the different degrees of youth engagement, the next step is to see where these can be applied in a programme cycle. There are four stages where youth engagement can take place within a programme cycle:



One initiative can combine different degrees of engagement at its different stages.

ACTIVITY 3.2 – The 'Where'

- Think of a youth-relevant or youth-relevant initiative with a youth engagement dimension;
- Record the initiative in the appropriate boxes in the matrix on the following page according to the youth engagement degrees and programme cycle stages.

Discussion points

- Are some degrees of youth engagement more frequent?
- At which stage of a programme cycle is youth engagement currently happening most frequently?
- Where in a programme cycle is there currently limited youth engagement?
- Is youth engagement taking place at the appropriate degree during each stage?

	YOUTH CONSULTED	YOUTH CONTRIBUTING	YOUTH AS PARTNERS	YOUTH AS LEADERS
Strategic level (governance and decision making)	All types of youth consulted on issues relevant to the strategic orientations of UN's action	All types of youth needs, views and ideas considered for strategic orientations of UN's action	Strategies, operational frameworks, action plans, or programmes co-designed with young experts, professionals, researchers, leaders, youth NGO and networks	Young experts, professionals, researchers, leaders, youth organizations and networks fully initiate, design and monitor the implementation of a workplan
Initiative planning	Young experts, researchers, professionals, leaders, youth organizations and networks consulted on research needed to build evidence for the preparation of initiatives. All types of youth consulted to identify their needs, views and ideas for the planning of specific initiatives	Young experts, researchers, professionals, leaders, youth organizations and networks help collect information used in initiative planning, including in evidence building, or plan specific aspect of the initiative.	All types of youth have significant influence on decisions at the planning stage, e.g. determining the evidence base, when, where and how the initiative should be undertaken	All types of youth determine issues to be addressed and shape the initiative at its planning stage
Initiative implementation	Views of all types of youth obtained on the implementation of the initiative or some of its dimensions or outputs	All types of youth take part in implementing an initiative or a specific dimension of it	All types of youth have a partnership role in implementing an initiative, including a decision-making responsibility	Young experts, professionals, leaders, entrepreneurs, youth organizations and networks lead the initiative, with support from UN
Initiative monitoring, reporting and evaluation	All types of youth consulted on the advancement of an initiative, on its impact on their lives and/or on how it can be improved	All types of youth help collect information on the progress, results and/or effectiveness of the initiative	Young experts, professionals, researchers, leaders, entrepreneurs, youth organizations and networks, have influence on how the monitoring, reporting and evaluation are carried out, and participate in the analysis of data gathered in such processes	Youth experts, leaders and youth organizations substantially shape the monitoring, reporting and evaluation processes of the initiative, with support from UN

In this table 'Initiative monitoring, reporting and evaluation' refers to internal processes within a UN Agency. When evaluation is being managed externally, advocate for youth engagement in the process.

3.3. The 'What' - The types of youth engagement in youth-relevant interventions

Now that you are aware of the stages where youth engagement takes place, let's see the different types of interventions that can integrate youth engagement.

Youth-relevant initiatives can be broadly classified into the following six types of interventions. Examples of each intervention will vary depending on country context, nature of project and the degree and scope of youth engagement.

1. Providing policy advice and technical assistance
2. Providing education and training
3. Producing knowledge and generating innovation
4. Managing knowledge and awareness raising
5. Establishing networks and partnerships
6. Providing and accessing services

ACTIVITY 3.3 – The 'What'

Now it is time to stop reflecting on what has been done in the past and start thinking about what could be possible in the future.

- For each of the listed types of interventions, identify a new idea for a youth engagement activity that could be initiated;
- For each new idea identify which of the four degrees of engagement it represents.

3.4. The 'Who' - The types of youth and their structures that can be engaged

Let's now have a look at the types of youth and youth structures who can be engaged in youth-relevant activities.

A youth structure includes all formal and informal groups, organizations, networks and representative bodies that work on behalf of youth or who are youth-led.

Youth experts and professionals	Students
Young leaders	Youth with lived experiences of issues within the Agencies' field of competence
National youth representatives	Youth groups
Young entrepreneurs	Youth organizations and networks
Young reporters, bloggers & influencers	Young researchers
Young UN staff	Young artists
Young athletes	

The numbers and types of youth and youth structures engaged depends on the programme or project delivered and the degree of youth engagement therein.

For instance, consultative processes tend to involve larger and more varied groups of youth, whereas processes with a greater depth of youth engagement tend to involve fewer youth. Remember that inclusiveness and representation of youth is needed as well as representation of both rural and urban youth.

ACTIVITY 3.4 – The 'Who'

- Choose one of the youth engagement initiatives developed in the previous activity;
- Review the types of youth and select which youth or youth structures would be most appropriate to engage for the chosen initiative.

Outreach: Engaging youth, youth-led organizations, initiatives and movements

The guiding questions below serve as a starting point to think about different youth and youth structures that you could engage. While you may already work with some youth or specific groups, the questions can support you to identify other relevant actors and broaden your network:

1. What representative youth structures exist? Is there a local/national youth council or representative body?
2. What youth-led initiatives, movements or organizations exist? E.g. student groups/ organizations/informal youth groups.
3. What other youth structures exist that work on behalf of youth? E.g. Civil-society/ grass-roots organizations.
4. What are the main issues they prioritize? What are the most relevant priorities that you can collaborate on?
5. What additional support is required / can you provide to support their engagement?

Remember to also engage youth who are traditionally underserved. This group of youth is not always well represented and cannot always be found among the young leaders, youth experts and elected youth representative bodies.

Identify and work with grass-roots organizations that are already working with this group. Engaging youth beneficiaries as partners and actors in an initiative can also ensure youth that are underserved are well represented in UN initiatives.

When considering the 'Who', think also of the geographical scale and context:

1. How has geographical representation been considered to ensure inclusion? Is youth engagement taking place at a global, regional, national or local level?
2. Are all regions/provinces/cities concerned by the scale/scope of the initiative properly and equally represented?
3. How has geographical context been considered to ensure inclusion? Are both urban and rural youth engaged?

4. Implementing youth engagement initiatives

This section will help you plan actions integrating youth engagement. It will help you think about how to measure success as well as how to identify and address challenges related to meaningful youth engagement.

4.1. Action plan

Before designing and implementing any youth engagement initiative, complete a situational analysis and use the results to inform the design. This will support you to build a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and limitations and ensure the initiative is actionable.

ACTIVITY 4.1 – Pitch for youth

Now that you know what meaningful youth engagement entails, why it is important, and how, where and with whom it can be implemented, this activity will help you plan a youth engagement initiative. It combines all of the elements you need to create an action plan. Using the questions below:

- Develop a 5-minute pitch outlining a Type 1 youth engagement initiative;
- Pitch your idea to the group;
- Peer review each pitch.

- What:** What youth engagement activity will you deliver?
Which of the 6 types of interventions does this sit under?
How is the activity relevant to your area of work?
- How:** How will you engage youth based on the four degrees of youth engagement?
Why have you chosen this degree or these degrees of engagement?
- Where:** Where in the programme cycle will youth engagement take place?
Why have you selected youth engagement for this stage in the programme cycle?
- Who:** Who will you engage in the initiative and why?
How will you take into account diversity, gender equality, geographical context and the engagement of underserved youth?
- Scale:** At which geographical scale(s) and context will the activity take place?
- Why:** How will the initiative reflect the triple value model?
- Challenges:** What challenges may present themselves when planning, implementing, monitoring and/or evaluating the youth engagement initiative?
How can you address these challenges?

The structure outlined in this activity could be used when developing future youth engagement initiatives.

4.2. Addressing challenges

Questions and answers on some specific challenges can be found in the Support and Guidance section. However, remember that there are no readymade solutions for all contexts. It is important that you think of specific solutions based on your experiences.

ACTIVITY 4.2 – Addressing challenges

Review the internal and external challenges that were identified in the pitch for youth activity.

- Review the challenges and consider possible ways of mitigating or addressing them.

4.3. Ensuring success

ACTIVITY 4.3 – Ensuring success

- Building on from your action plan, develop three questions that could inform a set of indicators to measure the success of youth engagement within your initiative.
- When developing the questions, consider the 'Do's and 'Don'ts' of meaningful engagement as well as reflections from the 'how', 'where', 'what' and with 'who' activities.

Identifying measures of success before implementing youth engagement actions provides you with a framework to monitor progress. It also ensures that you record information for continued learning.

The questions on the following pages can support you to develop a check-list to assess whether youth engagement within your project has been meaningful.

For each of the four levels of engagement there is a set of guiding questions. This is not comprehensive. It can be used to reflect on your approach and develop bespoke outputs, outcomes, indicators and targets relevant to your initiative.

If you wish to consult youth for/in/throughout/after your project:

What did I engage youth for?

Have I consulted youth on issues relevant to the strategic orientations of my project? For instance, have I gauged the needs that the project responds to? Have I consulted them on how my project as a whole can respond to such needs?

Have I consulted youth on how to build my project (partners, specific actions, national or local focus, etc.)?

Have I consulted youth on the specific actions that my project should implement?

Have I consulted youth to know, once the project is concluded, how effectively it has responded to their needs?

Have I consulted youth to know how the project can be improved in the future, scaled up or replicated?

Who did I engage?

Which young people and which organizations have I engaged?

How many of them?

Did they need to be representative of national/regional youth needs and views, or have I engaged them based on their personal experiences?

Have I ensured that I have been inclusive when identifying the young people and their organizations, including different youth profiles, comprising those who are traditionally under-served?

How did I engage youth?

Have I openly and transparently informed young people of the purpose, limitations and nature of their engagement in my project?

Did I consult them in a way that enabled them to provide safely, freely and in an unbiased manner their views and inputs within the context of the project?

How have I ensured that the needs/views/ contributions of the traditionally under-served youth have been included?

If needed, have I planned to develop the capacities of the youth and youth organizations engaged, so that they are empowered to engage in my project?

How did I manage the input by youth?

Have I effectively taken into consideration the ideas/proposals of the youth I have engaged with?

Have I informed them about how these have been taken into consideration and integrated in my project?

If you wish to have young people contributing for/in/throughout/after your project:

Did young people or youth organizations contribute to my project's decision-making structure or process?

Are there specific stages of my project or aspects of it that have been designed or implemented by youth?

Are there specific activities within my project that have been designed or implemented by youth?

Which young people and which organizations have I engaged?

How many of them?

Did they need to be representative of national/regional youth needs and views, or have I engaged them based on their personal experiences?

How have I ensured that I have been inclusive when identifying the young people and their organizations, including different youth profiles, comprising those who are traditionally under-served?

Have I openly and transparently informed young people of the purpose, limitations and nature of their engagement in my project?

Did I engage them in a way that enabled them to provide safely, freely and in an unbiased manner their views and inputs within the context of the project? What types of mechanisms and processes

How have I ensured that the needs/views/contributions of the traditionally under-served youth have been included?

If needed, have I planned to develop the capacities of the youth and youth organizations engaged, so that they are empowered to engage in my project?

Have I effectively taken into consideration the ideas/proposals of the youth I have engaged with?

Have I informed them about how these have been taken into consideration and integrated in my project?

If you wish that young people are partners to your project:

What did I engage youth for?

Have I, from the first moments of thinking about my project, identified young people or youth organization(s) to dialogue with to develop the project and implement it together?

Have young people or their organizations been fully-fledged members of my project's decision-making structure or process, in equal numbers with those of other partners?

Have youth been engaged in an open dialogue with the Agency and other relevant partners if any, in all stages of strategic decision-making, project planning, implementation and evaluation?

Have they been fully responsible for any of these stages of my project's implementation?

Who did I engage?

Which young people and which organizations have I engaged?

How many of them?

Did they need to be representative of national/regional youth needs and views, or have I engaged them based on their personal experiences?

How have I ensured that I have been inclusive when identifying the young people and their organizations, including different youth profiles, comprising those who are traditionally under-served?

How did I engage youth?

Have the young people been involved in establishing the purpose, limitations and nature of their engagement in the project, as well as of the project's evolution?

Did I engage them in a way that enabled them to engage safely, freely and in an unbiased manner within the context of the project?

How have I ensured that the needs/views/contributions of the traditionally under-served youth have been included?

If needed, have I planned to develop the capacities of the youth and youth organizations engaged, so that they are empowered to engage in my project?

How did I manage the input by youth?

Have the ideas/proposals of the youth I have engaged with been effectively taken into consideration?

Do the youth engaged know how these have been taken into consideration in the project?

If you wish that young people act as project leaders:

Have youth come up themselves with the idea for the project and identified the needs it responds to, within the Agency's fields of competence?

Have they fully designed and implemented the project? In other words, have young people or youth organizations been responsible for the project, from its planning, through its implementation, to its monitoring and evaluation?

Which young people and which organizations have been engaged?

How many of them?

Did they need to be representative of national/regional youth needs and views, or have they been engaged them based on their personal experiences?

How have I ensured that I have been inclusive when identifying the young people and their organizations, namely including different youth profiles, comprising those who are traditionally under-served?

Did I sufficiently, openly and transparently inform young people of my Agency's fields of competence and their contribution therein through project?

Were they engaged through their project in a safe, free and unbiased manner? What types of mechanisms and processes did I develop to that end?

How have I ensured that the needs/views/contributions of the traditionally under-served youth have been included?

If needed, have I planned to develop the capacities of the youth and youth organizations engaged, so that they are empowered to engage through their project?

Has the Agency been playing the role of a facilitator, enabling youth to pursue their goals within programmatic objectives, intervening when asked for?

How have I effectively facilitated and supported this?

Note that these guidance questions are to assess the meaningful engagement of youth, not the specific outcomes relevant to the project that youth are engaged in.

5. Support and Guidance

In this section you will find tips to help you further advance UN's culture towards meaningful youth engagement as well as a few questions and answers to address identified challenges or frequent misconceptions.

5.1. Top Tips

By following these Top Tips you will play a significant role in working towards advancing the UN's culture towards meaningful youth engagement!

Believe in youth capacities. Remember that they are experts, professionals, researchers, leaders, youth representatives, entrepreneurs, public opinion influencers, and have first-hand experiences on issues relevant to your Agency's mandate. Think about engaging them both in relevant programmes and project structures (advisory boards, steering committees, drafting committees) and specific activities and events (round tables, conferences, expert panels).

Pay attention to **age balance** in your activities. **Identify the youth relevant to the programmes delivered.** Start by mapping relevant youth and youth organizations within your field of competence.

Reach out to young people. Go to where youth already are. Use social media to engage them and amplify their voices. Support the virtual participation of youth where physical participation is not possible.

Facilitate dialogues with youth including in Agency meetings, boards, committees and events.

Ensure diversity. Ensure inclusiveness, pay attention to gender balance and engage youth who are traditionally underserved.

Apply a human rights-based approach throughout your work. Recognise that young people are rights-holders and work with them to promote the realisation of their rights.

Avoid tokenism. Give youth an active and responsible role in initiatives. Don't manipulate or influence youth contributions to meet pre-identified requirements. Keep them informed on how their contributions are used.

Engage youth at all stages of the development, planning, delivery, implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of your programme or project.

Develop the capacities of youth and youth organizations to support their meaningful engagement considering the value exchange for them.

Facilitate access to information and resources. Adapt information and resources related to programmes. Make materials available in non-institutional, user-friendly and age-appropriate language.

Advocate with Member States and non-youth partners to engage youth. Support them to engage youth in joint activities and to establish their own youth representation mechanisms.

Address unequal power dynamics between youth and non-youth through advocacy and capacity building with non-youth actors.

Partner with youth-led organizations.

Consider how you can **sustain** the engagement of youth.

5.2. Q&A: Addressing challenges or frequent misconceptions

Participatory approaches can be time-consuming and complex. They require considerable effort, resources, time and follow-up, as well as adequate administrative procedures. Flexibility in processes is essential when implementing youth engagement initiatives.

This Q&A proposes some solutions to some of the most frequently asked questions by UN staff implementing youth engagement initiatives. However, they are not exhaustive and can be enriched based on colleagues' experiences. They will continue to evolve as youth engagement practices are further understood and embedded across the UN's youth-relevant work.

Inclusivity and representation

Q How can I ensure the representation and participation of under-represented youth?

A Identify and work with grass-roots organizations that work with and/or represent the group of youth you wish to engage. Remember to consider the value exchange for their participation and adjust processes, structures, and materials to ensure they are youth-friendly and age-appropriate. Support online participation when geographical limitations might prevent inclusivity.

Mobilization

Q I have tried to reach out to youth and youth-led organizations to ensure their engagement, but they are not very responsive. What more can be done if they are not interested or don't have the capacity to engage?

A If you are not receiving immediate or regular responses, that does not necessarily mean that they are not interested or do not have the capacity. Provide sufficient time for communication. Clarify the aims, scope and expectations of your initiative, inquire about their capacity to engage and remain flexible and responsive to their needs.

Operational

Q There is limited time to undergo informed consent processes for engaging youth under eighteen and adapting processes, materials and environments to support meaningful engagement.

A Complete a situational analysis at the start of any youth relevant initiative to ensure there is adequate time for planning and implementation. Consider partnering with relevant youth structures with experience in adapting and implementing youth-friendly processes to support meaningful engagement.

Political

Q What should be considered when working with government authorities on youth-relevant initiatives?

A If your initiative is aimed at influencing law or policy, consider reaching out to relevant government authorities locally or nationally. Identify if there is a national youth law or legislation concerning youth or a national youth policy. Identify the line ministry/ministries responsible for youth and any representative youth bodies such as a youth parliament where they exist. Take an active role in facilitating the relationship between youth, youth-relevant civil society and government.

Cultural

Q How do I respond to a cultural context that promotes hierarchal structures and respect for elders so the value of youth engagement is not always understood or fully realised? How do I support youth who don't always consider themselves capable due to this?

A Capacity development before and throughout the duration of a youth engagement initiative can both support youth to understand and believe in their capabilities as well as sensitize non-youth actors to understand and value meaningful youth engagement.

The ARC resource pack includes a useful guide to respond to common objections raised by parents, caregivers, adolescents, teachers, community elders, government officials or by staff. This may or may not depending on context, also apply to youth beyond the age brackets that define adolescents.

"Adolescents lack competence." In different contexts, including humanitarian scenarios adolescents have demonstrated their competency to act responsibly and effectively to protect themselves, their family members, their peers and communities. Many girls and boys make ongoing important contributions to family life, to the care of siblings or parents, to household, agricultural or income-generating work. Adolescents' competence varies individually (just as it does among adults) and varies in accordance with different aspects of their lives. However, adults need to open their eyes and ears to recognise and value the competency that girls and boys are exhibiting.

"Adolescents should learn responsibilities first." Participation is an effective means for adolescents to take, accept, learn and understand responsibility. Participation is not the opposite of responsibility but a fundamental part of it. Listening to adolescents and taking them seriously is an important aspect of giving responsibility and creating an environment of learning to respect and understand others. Adolescents making decisions and taking action together develops accountability to each other. Learning responsibilities as adolescents helps prepare them for adulthood; many adults have not had experiences in childhood that prepared them for adult forms of citizenship.

“Adolescents participation is too complicated and too expensive.” Above all, facilitating and supporting adolescents participation requires openness on the part of [UN Agencies] and their partners across the range of socio-cultural economic political contexts, including in humanitarian settings. It requires competence on behalf of the adults and organizations involved – but so, too, do other sectoral responses. It is only because adolescent participation is sometimes considered an ‘optional extra’ that limitations and prohibitions based on complexity and cost arise. The reality is that participation benefits adolescents, families and communities, therefore suggesting that it is an ‘optional extra’ or an additional burden is unhelpful, unrealistic and not properly responding to adolescent’s circumstances, protection and development, especially in humanitarian settings.

“Children and adolescents will lose their childhood and not respect parents.” Participation is a voluntary process and should not be burdensome. The notion of adolescents ‘losing their childhood’ rests on a perception of children and adolescents being entirely dependent. But adolescents make decisions and take action every day; for example, in their communications and relationships with family, peers, schoolteachers and other adults in their community. Some adolescents who are carers for parents or who are working make life-surviving decisions every day – and not only for themselves. The processes of participation only enhance and improve the quality and capabilities of what is already there.

“Participation is not part of ‘traditional’ culture.” Although adolescent participation may not be recognised as active decision-makers in many traditional cultures, many adolescents are active agents in their own lives and contribute to their families and communities. Furthermore, societies, cultures and environments are not static but dynamic; they change over time. Changes in the position of women in many societies have demonstrated the benefits of shifts in values, beliefs and practice, for example, with greater recognition of women’s rights to protection from domestic violence. Children’s rights to protection and participation and their benefits are also increasingly recognized.

“Adolescent participation puts them at risk.” In general, adolescent participation serves to enhance their protection by gaining a better understanding of their circumstances, by enabling environments in which they can speak out about problems and because participation promotes resilience. There are occasions, perhaps media events and public conferences, where children’s best interests are not served through them speaking out or being identified because of later repercussions. But systematic risk assessments and risk mitigation involving adolescents can help to prevent and protect children from participation that is determined not to be in their best interests. Systematic use of the nine basic requirements for effective and ethical participation supports planning, implementation and monitoring of adolescent participation with careful consideration of children’s best interests.

“Adolescents can be manipulated by adults”. Adults may control the processes of participation and manipulate adolescents through poor quality and unethical processes to achieve outcomes for themselves. It may superficially appear to be participation, but this is because there needs to be greater experience and critical understanding of participation definitions, processes and outcomes. Such manipulation must be prevented, by ensuring common understanding of adolescent participation, different modes of participation, and the nine basic requirements. Attention to basic requirements for quality participation, transparency within and among agencies and processes of accountability work against manipulation.¹

¹ Action on the Rights of the Child (2009). ARC resource pack: A capacity building tool for child protection in and after emergencies; UNICEF (2007). The Participation of Children and Young People in Emergencies: A guide for relief agencies, based largely on experiences in the Asian tsunami response; Lansdown (2001). Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic Decision Making. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

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