

Urgency for transformation: youth engagement in global health



Global leaders at the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference were powerfully reminded by Greta Thunberg that, “You say you love your children above all else. And yet you are stealing their future.”¹ In less than 7 months, the 16-year-old environmental activist mobilised a global movement of young people in over 120 countries calling for urgent action to address climate change.² Young people elsewhere are catalysing important conversations on crucial issues, such as Malala Yousafzai on global education and March for Our Lives on reforming gun control in the USA. The potential of youth engagement is striking, but how can their power be effectively amplified to address the most pressing and interconnected challenges in global health?

Achieving the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be possible without the meaningful engagement of young people.³⁻⁶ The world currently has the largest generation of youth in its history, with more than half the global population younger than 30 years.⁵ Perhaps just as noteworthy, among the 1.8 billion young people aged between 10 and 24 years, close to 90% live in low-income and middle-income countries, where health and social systems are often the most vulnerable.⁵ This cohort represents a magnitude of human potential, with massive unrealised benefits for both socioeconomic growth and health. In fact, the 2016 *Lancet* Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing⁴ concluded that investing in adolescents will yield a triple dividend—in the present day, into their adulthood, and through to the next generation of children. Finally, with young people’s unique ability to cut through the status quo and hold leaders accountable, they are today emerging as the most vocal advocates on complex issues in global health, such as gender inequality or sexual and reproductive health and rights. Their unparalleled fluency in social media and digital technology makes this generation the most likely to make solutions a reality.

Awareness and efforts by many organisations to engage and enable young people to participate in decision making and policy dialogues in global health are increasing. Examples include the launch of the Global Health Workforce Network Youth Hub, the crowd-sourcing of obesity policy solutions from adolescents

through CO-CREATE, the crowd-sourced NCDFREE social movement, or the inaugural African Union Youth Advisory Council. However, governance structures and a silo mentality prevent the creation of opportunities that are effective or fast enough to meaningfully tap into their potential. Quite simply, by failing to include the next generation of young leaders as equal partners in policy and practice, the Sustainable Development Goals will remain just that—important, yet ultimately unrealised, goals.

The transformative potential of young people can only be achieved through participatory leadership; development of the necessary partnerships and resources to enable young people to fully engage as leaders are urgently needed.⁷ Recognising the need to ensure its work reflects the lived reality of young people’s experiences and solutions, WHO commissioned the report *Engaging Young People for Health and Sustainable Development*.⁸ Launched in September, 2018, in conjunction with the UN Youth Strategy,⁹ the WHO report provides areas of strategic opportunity for WHO and its partners to transform the way it engages with young people in achieving its “triple billion” targets.⁴ Furthermore, the WHO Knowledge Action Portal offers an innovative opportunity to bring communities together, including young people, on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. In addition, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, in collaboration with The International Youth Alliance for Family Planning and Family Planning 2020, created the Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement,¹⁰ defining it as an inclusive, intentional partnership between youth and adults. Importantly, the consensus notes that power must be shared, respective contributions must be valued, and young people’s perspectives and skills must be integrated into both the strategic design and delivery of health and related programmes and policies, particularly when they affect young people’s lives and communities.

While we applaud this progress, much more must be done to position young people as equal stakeholders in the realisation of global, regional, and national goals in health. Notably, there remains substantial underinvestment of both intellectual and financial



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For the WHO Knowledge Action Portal see <https://extranet.who.int/knowledge-action-portal/>

For Global Health Workforce Network Youth Hub see <https://www.who.int/hrh/network/en/>

Panel: Recommendations for strategic opportunities to transform youth engagement with WHO and partners^{8*}

Leadership:

- Create a fully resourced WHO strategy for engaging with young people
- Modernise WHO culture to orient the organisation towards young people, ensuring that none are left behind in the Sustainable Development Goals era

Country impact:

- Engage all young people, taking into account their diverse backgrounds and characteristics, in health and sustainable development planning and implementation
- Strengthen the capacity of organisations to engage safely, effectively, and meaningfully to enable young people to augment their knowledge and lead on health and rights

Focusing global public goods on impact:

- Engage young people throughout the design and delivery of global public goods, particularly on issues that affect their health and rights
- Establish an innovative partnership and technology-driven platform so that young people can share their experiences and ideas to monitor and drive change on health and the Sustainable Development Goals

Partnerships:

- Forge innovative partnerships with diverse organisations that engage with young people
- Mobilise resources for a comprehensive, coherent global movement that engages the power of young people for health and sustainable development

*Report commissioned by the WHO and led by two of the authors of this Comment (BB and RR).

resources for the development and implementation of tangible and meaningful youth engagement strategies. The key to achieving meaningful youth engagement is the active investment in youth, particularly by governments, foundations, and the private sector. Furthermore, global institutions, such as WHO (panel), must act as leaders in engaging young people if they are to achieve health for all. To do this, such institutions must first critically reflect on themselves and commit to transforming their own ethos and organisational cultures by placing young people at the core of their strategy.

Young people not only want to be involved in actively achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as evidenced through youth initiatives globally, but they are necessary partners in shaping and implementing effective policies and programmes in their own communities. The exclusion of young people at all levels of health and social systems delays progress at best and costs lives at worst. We are calling on all leaders in global health to actively dedicate resources to youth engagement and to urgently rethink approaches to enable young people to have the space, voice, audience, and influence that they need to shape and implement agendas, particularly on issues that affect their own health and wellbeing.

Such a shift in framework and in mindset is necessary and will lead to new forms of powerful partnerships that will profoundly change the direction of health and sustainable development for a shared future.

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