

Human Rights of Youth: Working with and for youth in vulnerable situations including conflict, violence and insecurity

Youth Consultations | Europe Report

Dates: The consultation was launched with an online questionnaire to participants on 23 May, followed by two online sessions of two hours each, held on 30-31 May 2022.

Participants: The consultation brought together a total of 11 participants from the European region, including five young women and six young men. The event was co-facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in partnership with the project Youth Advisory Board Members Zi Han Xuan and Virginia Barchiesi, and with the support of the European Youth Forum.

Human rights barriers and obstacles for youth and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants highlighted the following areas in which young people face discrimination:

- Political participation and lack of awareness of rights
- Employment, including access to entry level jobs
- Education
- Access to loans, credits and housing

Youth fleeing war and conflict as well as young human rights defenders were mentioned as groups that face added barriers.

Participants discussed key challenges, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the areas of political participation, employment and education.

Political participation

Challenges

- While it was acknowledged that there are a number of institutional processes for dialogue with young people, it was underlined that the set-up of political institutions is not conducive to promoting youth participation; for example the fact that those who are in power are not young
- Lack of funding to support youth participation, for example including expenses such as travel and accommodation for events and conferences
- With regards to youth participation at the global level, the persistence of language barriers was underlined as a challenge to inclusion; young people and especially those in vulnerable situations may not always speak the working language of international or intergovernmental organizations
- Young people may know the challenges but are not aware of how to address or mitigate them
- Exclusion of third genders
- Precarious employment situations, including in international organizations such as the UN, where internships are unpaid
- Precariousness of work contracts

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

- Loss of physical, face-to-face learning experience, resulting in a loss of educational quality and learning not being fulfilling
- Job opportunities for young people were negatively impacted. Working and living remotely had various effects on professional development and youth with “COVID-19 degrees”, i.e. who received their education during the pandemic, may be seen as inferior to others
- Impact on work-life balance in the context of remote work, and in some cases longer working hours
- Young people are often in precarious working conditions and employed in sectors that were strongly impacted by the pandemic, such as hospitality, tourism, etc.
- Uneven resources for remote learning and the digital divide; countries with poorer IT/online infrastructure were not able to adapt as easily as others

Employment

Challenges

- Greater uncertainty in the job market, making the transition from education to employment more difficult
- Lack of recognition of educational qualifications for youth who have emigrated in search of better employment opportunities
- Groups in vulnerable situations, such as Roma youth, faced added challenges

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

- Transition from pandemic to post-pandemic world: hybrid work and in-person work transition with young people being an experimental generation
- Inequality gaps when accessing digital infrastructure or in digital literacy: while a wide range of young people could adapt to the online job market, it was and is harder for those with limited access to internet or IT equipment to adapt to the digital workplace
- Barriers to social life during the pandemic resulted in increased anxiety amongst youth after long periods of isolation at home. In-person social skills lost, and now affecting mental health
- Young people from conflict backgrounds, e.g. young Ukrainian refugees in Romania or Poland whose mental health has been impacted by war, report an increase in anxiety and depression. Feelings of helplessness: too much help at a time when young people want to be independent and have their own space, especially in a new culture and to have the space to express themselves.
- Young people are trying to be active to not feel the aftermath of conflict, while others are more despondent due to the impact.
- Found many barriers for inclusion in the workplace
- Many young people are starting their career, but have been impacted by armed conflict.

Education

Challenges

- Financial and geographical barriers: in some countries (e.g. UK) the expense of education is prohibitive for many young people

- The rural vs urban divide and how that impacts access to higher education, for example youth living in rural areas wanting to pursue studies in urban areas and vice versa, may be encouraged not to do so
- Lack of alternative options, as well as information on or awareness of alternatives to higher education, to help guide students on what options are available to them and what paths they can follow. Not all young people who have gone to higher education feel it was the right choice, and in some cases they may have accumulated student debt in the process.
- Lack of social support such as mental health services in schools, due to lack of resources. The pandemic exacerbated the situation, resulting in a mental health crisis.
- Lack of diversity in subjects/topics of study in different regions: creating more opportunities for young people should be a priority, in order to encourage youth to follow their passion rather than being pressured into following a path that is not suitable for them
- Lack of financial education i.e. home economics: many young people want financial education and practical skills but they are not always provided through education. Some youth in more privileged situations receive such financial education through other means, but it should be available to all in order to ensure that no one is left behind.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

- The digital divide: households without technology to participate in educational programmes and without support were left behind
- Lack of adapting lesson plans: lower quality of lecture material/content. Exams became harder as it was easier for people to cheat when taking exams from home. This had severe impacts on mental health and sent the wrong message to youth; rather than placing additional pressure, trust should be placed in young people
- Lack of human connection and lack of social networking had significant repercussions, many students are only just meeting their peers for the first time after two years, with many young people feeling as though they have lost two years of their life
- There were also some positive impacts, for example flexibility, opportunities for online learning and supplementary learning, e.g. language learning. In some regards, people were given the opportunity to take hold of their lives.

Recommendations and solutions to promote human rights for youth

Participants brainstormed measures required to promote youth rights in a post-pandemic world. Inputs included:

- Investment in job market training and employment opportunities
- Programs for young professionals, as well as legislation aimed at addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Introducing paid internships that are remunerated at a decent living wage; this can allow youth to be more politically active and to participate in extracurricular activities.
- Legislation on remote work and entry level jobs to provide meaningful and secure professional opportunities for youth, while ensuring a work-life balance. Most positions are precarious, as they are on a temporary or fixed-term basis. The proliferation of short-term contracts has resulted in difficulties for young people to

obtain a secure, long-term position in a large organization, making it very difficult to plan important life decisions in advance. For example, starting a family may be delayed until maternity leave/parental leave is provided by the employer. While young people do want flexibility, security and stability are also important.

- Creating youth ecosystems at the local and national level, where youth workers can help integrate young people into the workforce.
- Transparent and affordable housing plans in order to enable young people to enter the housing market
- Improving the connection between education systems and the labor market
- Addressing geographical barriers for students and youth by providing scholarships for young people from rural areas, to ensure that they are able to access education in larger cities on an equal basis as youth living in urban areas.
- Ensuring access to education systems for young migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees so that they are not excluded while their claims are being processed.
- Governments should commit to improving youth representation within educational spaces, so their voices are adequately represented.
- Recognition of gender diversity in education
- Promoting increased awareness of rights and opportunities
- Inclusion of youth in all formal decision-making processes. This should encompass socio-political inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations through the provision of dedicated spaces, tools and resources to empower them to advocate for their rights on an equal footing, regardless of their background.
- The impact of legislation on young people should be assessed once a new law is proposed, for example through a 'Youth test'
- Political scholarships for youth and minorities to enter politics
- Co-creating consultation processes for youth together with young people
- Ensuring opportunities for youth participation in political processes is accompanied by financial resources, e.g. for meetings, conferences or political events where travel is required; this could include providing scholarships, covering accommodation, travel and subsistence costs as well as establishing a solidarity fund. When this is not the case, only young people with financial resources are able to participate and be represented.
- Changing the culture and the way in which the non-young/adult population sees or perceives youth.

Good practice examples of youth rights advocacy

Participants discussed good practice examples of youth rights advocacy from their own experience, considering main objectives and whether they were achieved, key outcomes, key strengths and weaknesses, etc.

- Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) which focuses on preventing youth radicalization; the Network takes a holistic approach, using non-formal training and providing networking opportunities to put young people in touch.
- Two-day workshop on collaboration between local municipalities and youth; young people were involved in co-designing a guidance manual for local youth councils in three municipalities, for youth to have their voice heard. While the National Youth Agency and local municipalities helped to implement the guidelines and policies, different municipalities faced different problems and challenges, underlining that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach may not always be suitable.

- Joint cooperation among youth organizations and National Youth Councils in Europe to support young refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. The initiative resulted in several direct outcomes including the creation of an informal cooperation platform among youth and other stakeholders, as well as the development of a needs assessment and advocacy points.
- The ONE campaign was mentioned as an example of a youth-led initiative with funding, that is focused on poverty eradication. The fact that it has staff increases the sustainability and durability of youth advocacy work; in general, organizations with staff or institutionalized funding are better placed to realize successes than those with few resources.
- Fridays For Future and Black Lives Matter were cited as good examples of grassroots, youth-led campaigns

Successful actions for promoting youth rights had some of the following elements in common:

- Working with vulnerable youth and involving young people that are directly affected by a particular situation or human rights violation(s) (for example in different contexts: sex trafficking, conflict, climate, refugees)
- Holistic and transdisciplinary approach
- Networking and strong cooperation with different stakeholders (organizations, companies, institutions, etc.)
- Connecting youth from different countries and formalizing such connections
- Partnering with local entities to help in drafting policies for youth, with youth
- Actions that are backed by a strong/good campaign, including with regards to communications
- Support for youth activists from youth organizations

If given the chance, some of the things participants would do differently when advocating for youth rights included:

- Pressing for youth participation during policy-making
- More external communication about the actions, campaigns or initiatives
- Greater outreach to include (vulnerable) youth from different backgrounds, in order to avoid a top-down approach and promote shared and equal participation

Tips for successful youth rights advocacy included:

- Ensuring inclusion of youth from diverse backgrounds, who can bring fresh and different perspectives
- Having a clear vision and concrete objectives
- Fostering youth organization ecosystems through networking
- Capitalizing on the multiplier effect provided by non-formal education and training
- Having staffed youth organizations; for the European region, based in Brussels ideally

Challenges for youth rights advocacy

Participants discussed the main challenges for youth in advocating for/defending their human rights.

- Young people are not always familiar with their rights; more knowledge and information on this is needed

- Young people and youth organizations do not always have a seat at the decision-making table; even big youth organizations can have limited wider influence if they do not meaningfully participate in decision-making
- Disregarding or diminishing young people's views and ideas when they contradict those of other stakeholders or older generations
- In some cases, governments are unlikely to provide support to initiatives or organizations working on youth rights that are not directly affiliated to the government
- Human rights are not always treated as a fundamental principle within political and legal discourses, making it difficult to lobby governments to champion the rights of youth.
- Threats towards young human rights defenders and youth activists
- Entry-level or junior-level jobs that require a Masters degree and/or several years of work experience

Participants provided suggestions and ideas on what needs to change and how youth can be better supported and empowered to advocate for their human rights.

- Working with influencers to promote human rights knowledge and awareness amongst young people
- Creating a course or voluntary programme that is widely available (across Europe and beyond) focused on rights of youth, which also counts towards semester/university credits
- Encouraging involvement in student associations and clubs supporting different human rights causes
- Improving networking and cooperation, including through regular meetings, between organizations across different countries that are working on similar topics
- European Union representatives and governing bodies to better portray key challenges affecting youth and to advocate for policy making that protects young people's rights
- Involving youth in content creation for media, for example through a regular youth page or column, in order to increase visibility of young people and raise awareness of young people's rights
- Building skills of youth to pursue political careers

The present report summarizes key discussion points and topics raised by participants; it does not reflect the official positions of OHCHR, Education Above All or Silatech.