

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

Youth Consultations | West Africa Report

Dates: The consultation was launched with an online questionnaire to participants on May, followed by two online sessions, held on 20 May and 24 May.

Participants: The consultation brought together a total of 12 participants from the West African region, including nine women and three men. The event was co-facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in partnership with Youth Advisory Board Member Sylvain Obedi Katindi.

Working language: French

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:

- Right to education
- Right to employment
- Right to health
- Right to participation

Participants discussed key challenges, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in each of the above areas.

Right to education

The right to education was identified by participants as one of the most affected human rights for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged areas or belonging to minorities and groups in vulnerable situations. Young people consulted identified challenges in accessing quality education and scholarships. Young people mentioned a lack of access to drinking water in educational settings and highlighted the importance of a safe and caring educational environment.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, these violations of the right to education were exacerbated notably by a series of pandemic-related restrictions or measures. Barriers to education included:

- School closures;
- Transition to the digital world and the requirement to have technology and internet for distance learning. Young people lacked access to digital technology and often had poor or limited internet coverage;
- Lack of adequate space for working or learning remotely from home; and
- Teachers and students were not prepared for distance learning.

Due to the difficulties, many young people, especially students, were unable to complete their school programmes. Others were unable to stay in education because they were unable to adapt to the new realities of education.

Other young people have had to deal with safety issues within their own households. Indeed, rates of violence against girls and unwanted pregnancies were particularly high during the COVID-19 period, particularly during lockdowns.

Travel restrictions have also prevented young people from going to their universities and training schools abroad and other young people studying abroad from being able to go on holiday in their home country.

Right to employment

The young people consulted also mentioned that one of the major challenges facing youth in West Africa is employability and youth employment. The region has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. With COVID-19 and the impact of restrictions on the economy, in particular, there has been an increase in unemployment, under-employment, job losses, and reduced working hours and incomes.

With the difficulties of access to formal employment, the vast majority of young people are employed in the informal economy sector, particularly in the small-scale business sector. Thus, with the restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have had to face the partial or total cessation of their activity due in particular to difficulties in sourcing or selling products. This situation has led to uprisings or demonstrations by young people in several countries in the region. It has also led to some youth engaging with terrorist groups due to a lack of employment.

Young people also mentioned the low security and social protection coverage, particularly for youth.

Similarly, with the closure of borders, young migrant workers who had come on holiday to their country of origin were stranded there, with adverse consequences for their jobs.

Right to health

Young people face significant barriers to accessing the highest sustainable standard of health in West Africa. It can be difficult to access medical and nutritional care and services, which affects young people and their health, including free consultation in health facilities before reaching the age of majority. Youth also experience barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services. This includes a considerable lack of information regarding sexual and reproductive health, particularly regarding unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections. Young people identified the lack of protection from social inequalities and harmful practices as a barrier to their right to health.

In addition, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure on health structures have considerably reduced care capacities, particularly for patients affected by other pathologies or in an ongoing treatment. Young people thus struggled to access health services and some faced discrimination when accessing healthcare.

Maternal health has also been reported as a challenge, particularly in disadvantaged areas where young women have not been able to receive adequate care.

Right to participation

An important challenge that was mentioned in the discussion concerns the participation of young people, particularly in decision-making bodies and processes and participation in

public life. Young people also identified challenges in participation in the field of public administration, justice, and health sectors.

Indeed, young people are particularly discriminated against in the area of employment, particularly in accessing positions of responsibility and decision-making, but also in advisory and representative bodies in all areas of governance. The absence of young people around decision-making leads to a lack of management and appropriate management of youth problems, notably laws, policies, and programmes for young people.

Furthermore, the participation of young people in the civic and political space remains a major challenge for the realization of the human rights of young people.

These challenges were exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, young people faced restrictions on their freedoms of movement and peaceful assembly and association and access to information.

Overall, young people were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic and this affected their ability to realize their human rights.

Recommendations and solutions to promote human rights for youth

- Strengthen human rights education for young people, and build the capacity of young people on human rights issues so that they can know their rights and claim them;
- Support youth and youth-led organization in training in substantive research;
- Facilitate access to funding for organizations, particularly those working to promote human rights.
- Strengthen the capacity of young people in project development and implementation and in fundraising;
- Establish a monitoring and alert system to prevent and deal with victims of human rights violations, particularly gender-based violence;
- Ensure that young people have access to social and legal protection, particularly in emergency situations;
- Facilitate access to menstrual hygiene for girls, particularly in schools. This includes facilitating access to sanitary towels or offering reusable sanitary towels;
- Develop appropriate law, policies, and practices to address the needs of young people holistically and provide multi-sector, multi-level support;
- Facilitate young people's access to quality information on their human rights and citizenship duties;
- Ensure that the most marginalized youth are considered in laws and policies;
- Advocate for the improvement of education programs and teaching methods to make them more relevant to the needs of young people;
- Establish mentoring programs for young people;
- Strengthen the participation of young people in the civic and political space, including through re-considering the voting age, and strengthening the participation of young people in decision-making bodies;
- Ensure that governments work with young people to advance the human rights of young people; and
- Ensure that governments are prepared for future public health emergencies and consider the human rights of young people in these responses.

Good practice examples of youth rights advocacy

- Work on strategies to mobilize young people around their human rights, ensuring young people know their human rights and responsibilities, and approach young people as partners and not as beneficiaries;
- Take into account community realities and dynamics and involve communities in the protection and promotion of rights. For example, involve religious and customary leaders as well as parents in awareness-raising approaches on sexual violence;
- Strengthen young people's access to information technology and use Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to promote human rights and combat hate speech and online harassment;
- Develop appropriate activities that take into account the socio-cultural realities of young people;
- Consider and address the question of any potential power imbalance;
- Address different stakeholders in trainings and awareness-raising; and
- Collaborate with governmental entities and develop strategic partnerships with organizations in charge of promoting youth rights.
- As one young person said, "Mix things up."

Challenges for youth rights advocacy

- Lack of access to documentation, information and knowledge about young people's rights, particularly in the context of national, regional and international legislation and policies;
- Lack of participation of young people in decision-making bodies and processes;
- Challenges regarding security, particularly with regard to the protection of human rights defenders. Indeed, few countries in the region have laws to protect human rights defenders, and when they do exist, they are not applied;
- Restricted access to employment; and
- Lack of recognition of the work and role of young people defending human rights.

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.