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

**Youth Consultations | East and Southern Africa
Report**

Dates: The consultation was launched with an online questionnaire to participants on 10 June, followed by two online sessions, held on 20-21 June 2022.

Participants: The consultation brought together a total of 26 participants from the East and Southern Africa regions, including 12 women and 14 men. The event was co-facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – Regional Office for Eastern Africa and Regional Office for Southern Africa, in partnership with Youth Advisory Board Members Petrider Paul and Sicelo Shange.

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

The key areas in which young people face discrimination, as identified during the group brainstorm, as well as the outcomes of the breakout group discussions in terms of:

The specific challenges participants identified in each area

Education
- Education is not affordable for many young people in Africa, which particularly affects pupils and students from marginalized communities, and is also exacerbated by the general costs of living, such as costs for transportation needed for going to school
- Intellectual suppression, particularly of the freedom of academic expression
- Poor educational infrastructure, such as schools and facilities they offer
- Lack of authorities who could track the progress in the implementation of the policies and agendas in the educational sector
- High percentage of school dropouts
- Internet is very costly and inaccessible for many pupils and students in the region
- Difficulties in accessing education on digital and internet skills as the tools are online and the access to Internet is limited
- The issue of child marriage – many young girls quit education because they have to focus on the family
- Adolescents and youth with disabilities are faced with challenges in accessing education as there are few schools that cater to their educational needs, for example, there is lack of teachers trained to work with students with disabilities. In addition, there are generally segregated schools offering education for the people with disabilities, with few of them combining them with other learners who are not living with a disability.
- Educational curricula are not preparing young people to be self-reliant but rather focusing on employment, with outdated content which does not give young people the skills necessary for the 21st century
- Long distances with few schools in rural parts of the country making girls give up their education due to a number of cross cutting issues
- The education systems are too theoretical rather than practical, reducing the ability of learners to be innovative and engage with advanced technology due to less exposure
- Despite ICT being integrated in the curriculums, ICT infrastructure and equipment are not provided enough to meet the innovation demands of this technological era

Employment

- High level of unemployment in the region
- Lack of access of young people to formal employment
- The government employment programmes are politicized, and young people don't have real access to them
- Deprivation of a decent wage for young people, especially for students and recent graduates, and unpaid internships
- Lack of employment opportunities for youth with disabilities

Political participation and access to funding

- Age-based discrimination and age stereotypes by older generations who hold decision-making positions: young people perceived as unprofessional and as lacking political experience
- Often youth organizations don't receive funding as donors lack confidence in youth-led organizations, especially those which have been recently established. One solution would be for donors to offer support for organizational development to youth-led organizations, instead of focusing only on programme implementation (for example, the financial management could be held on the donor's side in the beginning)
- Because of the lack of inclusion of young people in political participation the specific needs of young people are not paid attention to

Sexual and reproductive health rights

- There is a lack of investments to make sexual and reproductive health services available to young people
- The lack of access to safe abortions and discrimination based on cultural and religious beliefs
- Lack of access to contraceptives in hospitals, medical centers, etc.
- Implementation gaps in terms of the SRHR policies
- Information sharing is a big challenge: many people are unaware of their sexual and reproductive rights, especially in rural communities
- Lack of information on sexual and reproductive rights accessible for youth with disabilities

How the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted young people's rights, in the different areas:

Education

- Existing challenges persisted but were even further exacerbated during the pandemic
- Many schools shut down and many young people had to give up their education because they don't have access to internet, which was needed to continue education online

Employment

- Shutdown of the informal sector caused increase in unemployment of young people

Health

- Because of the pandemic, governments focused their resources on providing health services to COVID-19 patients, and young people with disabilities have restricted access to healthcare
- With the pandemic, less attention is paid to the provision of sexual and reproductive services in medical institutions

Recommendations and solutions to promote human rights for youth

- Increase funding for youth organizations and youth programming
- Ensure sufficient budget allocations to the Ministry of Youth
- Promote academic freedoms in educational institutions
- Introduce free education and provide better learning infrastructure
- Ensure employment by merit and provide decent remuneration for young people
- Include youth rights in national policies, and update national youth strategies in collaboration with youth stakeholders, to translate political commitment into actionable programmes
- Reinforce Human Rights Education for youth, including on various human rights mechanisms, and make young people aware of their role in promoting their rights
- Increase capacity building of youth leaders and youth institutions on human rights, and reporting on violations and holding government accountable (international committees)
- Develop documents to be used by advocates to raise awareness on human rights (e.g. small pamphlets for distribution)
- Review different human rights mechanisms and instruments so as to simplify them to a relatable language and context for all youth to be able to effectively comprehend and utilize
- Ensure access of young people to SRHR services and information, including for young people with disabilities
- Provide organizational development support for recently established youth-led organizations focusing on youth rights and development
- Introduce empowerment programmes for young people on governance and accountability
- Prioritize mental health service provision to young people
- Increased research to find out critical challenges in regions to influence youth participation in decision making
- Introduce quotas for youth participation in civic and political platforms as decision makers at local and national level
- Streamline youth rights across all ministries and ensure that young people have positions of influence in those ministries based on merit
- Get rid of wrong narratives used by donors and governments that youth entities do not have capacity
- Increase the number of campaigns to raise awareness on youth rights and host talk shows using media (radios, newspapers and tv shows) to make youth understand their rights, including SRHR
- Increase efforts and investments to involve young people living with disabilities and address challenges they face in terms of access to various services
- Stakeholders to align their youth support with regional and global frameworrks on youth emancipation: the Security Council Resolution 2260 and 2419 (2018), Article 25 of the ICCPR, article 21 of UDHR, the African Youth Charter, the World Programme of Action (WPA), and strengthen coordination between UN, AU RECs, youth CSOs, and national governments
- Align short-term emergency responses with investments into long term economic, social and environmental objectives to ensure the well-being of future generations

Good practice examples of youth rights advocacy

Some of the good practice examples that participants shared:
- Initiative to establish male champions working to combat gender-based discrimination in Zambia
- Initiative implemented in Zimbabwe that resulted in the establishment of the youth quota for political participation of young people
- "Not too young to run" campaign in Nigeria to promote participation of young people in elections and the introduction of the bill – the outcome was that the increased the number of young people who could participate as candidates. The "Not too young to run" bill was also incorporated in legislation and established quotas for young people to participate in elections
- Protest movement of young people to reduce educational fees in South Africa
- "Youth decide" campaign in Malawi: young people came up with the manifesto for the candidates of the elections in Malawi to integrate youth in their political positions. As a result, six young people are now members of parliament
- Project to build capacity in civil society leadership for human rights defenders in Malawi, consisting of four components: training, mentorship, networking, apprenticeship
- Initiative in the Seychelles to develop a policy on young people, according to which the government should listen to the aspirations of youth in different sectors
- Campaign to promote youth participation in decision-making platforms in Lesotho, which resulted in the creation of a National Youth Parliament
- Project to educate marginalized young people, particularly women, on their SRHR, especially in rural areas
- Safe spaces initiative for young girls and women in Uganda to organize meetings of groups of young women every week where they can discuss various topics

The commonalities/similarities between successful actions for promoting youth rights:
- All initiatives aimed at protection and promotion of human rights of youth
- Utilizing a multi-sectoral approach in ensuring that everyone in the community is aware of the initiative or an advocacy effort
- Strategic engagement: engaging parliamentarians, beneficiaries of these initiatives, and the general public
- Adequate understanding of the legal environment before engaging on the advocacy efforts
- Commitment from the participants, active participation and engagement of young people in the campaigns
- Awareness of young people about their rights when they participated in the activities – they knew what they were advocating for and that it was the right thing to do

'Top tips for youth rights advocacy' which the groups have come up with:
- Utilize multisector approach and lobbying to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and aware of what's going on
- Develop an advocacy strategy that would clearly define the logical framework to be able to measure the success of the initiative
- Do strategic litigation to ensure that the advocacy effort will result in a sustainable legislation reform
- Engage the general public to gain their support
- Utilize digital space, including social media (TikTok, Facebook, Twitter)
- Inform your advocacy work by empirical evidence

- Develop far-reaching advocacy efforts – reach rural populations and diverse groups of youth
- Regionalize and globalize campaigns beyond national borders to gain support from abroad and coordinate interventions in countries with similar issues
- Be clear with your vision and the objectives of the campaign
- Make sure that the initiative is led by youth at all stages
- Be mindful of which actors support you and your cause, and which do not
- Make advocacy not a one-time effort, but your lifestyle
- Mobilize as many people as possible
- Do enough research to be aware of the issue you're advocating for – you have to be well informed on the topic and understand the particular needs of the beneficiaries
- Campaign both online and offline to reach a wider audience (even if the campaign is primary digital, some resources should also be developed for distribution offline)
- Engage trained people who can advise you on how to do an advocacy campaign
- Ensure fundraising for transportation (e.g. in case transportation to hospital is needed for people injured during peaceful protests)

Challenges for youth rights advocacy

The main challenges for youth in advocating for/defending their human rights:
- Limited knowledge of young people in terms of their rights
- Lack of centralized information-sharing on youth rights: there are different departments and they all communicate through different channels
- Problem of distributing information at the grassroots level
- Lack of a legal framework for advocacy and information sharing
- Lack of resources - not only in terms of funding but also in terms of capacity, knowledge and understanding
- Many youth-led organizations fail to comply with the requirements of the government or donors to receive funding because they lack technical resources
- Lack of a specialized national agency on youth
- Lack of youth inclusion in the policymaking process - tokenistic approach to the involvement of young people. Often young people are not included at all stages, and sometimes they are engaged to review the implementation of initiatives which were developed without their involvement
- Intergenerational conflict between duty bearers and rights holders - lack of understanding that they should collaborate instead of competing
- Intergenerational gap between older human rights defenders (HRDs) and young HRDs; older HRDs sometimes think that young HRDs are coming to take their place, which can create negative attitudes instead of fostering knowledge transfer
- Threats, intimidation and killing by authorities of young HRDs
- Backlash from religious and cultural leaders, especially at community level, who prevent youth form speaking up
- Lack of trust towards youth by government stakeholders or those in power and lack of political will from mandated institutions to work with youth
- Inadequate resources to educate youth on their rights
- Difficulties in mobilizing stakeholders
- Young people lack confidence in themselves and their peers
- Heightened criminalization of the work of youth activists and organizations, for example, by applying anti-terrorism laws to them, which result in extended periods of arbitrary detention, restrictions on foreign funding
- Many young people are not motivated to report violations of their rights

What did participants identify as key actions for duty-bearers, and for rights-holders?

<u>Duty-bearers</u>
- Co-create solutions together with young people and have trusting relationship with them
- Engage young people meaningfully to find out about their needs

<u>Rights-holders</u>
- Be proactive and seek information on their rights
- Network with individuals who work in the institutions
- Make use of the social media to share messages about youth rights

How can youth be better supported and empowered to advocate for their rights? What is the role of different stakeholders?
- Collecting evidence-based information on the needs of different groups of youth what kind of support different youth require
- Applying consolidated and collaborative approaches to make all the information needed available to young people
- The legal frameworks should be simplified and adapted to youth/user-friendly language and for people from rural areas and areas with low literacy rates
- Provision of capacity-building for young people
- Imposition of sanctions on violators of youth rights
- Development of better mechanisms for protection of and support for young HRDs
- Introduction of Human Rights Education in schools

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.