

**SUBMISSION: UN INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON THE PROMOTION OF A
DEMOCRATIC AND EQUITABLE INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

YOUTH SUBMISSION

15 MAY 2019

CHOICE FOR YOUTH AND SEXUALITY

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CHOICE FOR
YOUTH &
SEXUALITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality is a youth-led and youth-serving organization based in the Netherlands, implementing programs on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all young people across 9 countries in Africa and Asia, and the Caribbean sub-region.

As the OHCHR does not have a consensus definition on youth,¹ we wish to highlight that the information reflected in our submission below is in line with the CHOICE definition of youth, namely persons from 18-29 years old.

As youth are minimally discussed in the Council, with only 34% of Special Procedures addressing youth in more than 1 sentence in their 2018 reports to the Human Rights Council, the objective of this report is to submit information pertaining to your call specifically from a youth perspective.

The submission is built upon CHOICE's 21 years of experience conducting international advocacy at the UN in both Geneva and New York. The submission will highlight the experiences of young people connected through our programs in their efforts to meaningfully participate in UN spaces.

The submission addresses questions 1-7 of the call for input.

2. KEY STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES FOR YOUNG PARTICIPANTS

Visa issues

Visas are a large obstacle to the participation of young human rights defenders, as young people might not have the support of established organizations that endorse them or provide the necessary assistance if their applications are rejected. In addition, even with visa letters, financial guarantee letters, flights and hotel confirmation, we have still seen several of our programmatic partners from the global south be rejected for numerous visa applications without justification, which has hindered their participation in UN processes like Human Rights Council, the High-Level Political Forum, Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Population and Development.

Accreditation to UN

Most youth organizations rely on 'adult-led' organizations to grant them access to UN spaces, as they generally do not have ECOSOC status. Acquiring status takes years and a huge investment of time and resources, which often is difficult for (newly established) youth organizations. Particularly for organizations working on more 'controversial' issues, such as Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, the process can seem endless. CHOICE has been under consideration for the last 4 years and none of our programmatic partners have secured ECOSOC status in the years that we have worked with them.

Discussions are not youth-inclusive.

Today, youth are the largest living population on this planet, accounting for 1.8 billion of world's population. Yet our unique vulnerabilities are rarely recognized by the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms. In 2018, only 34% of Special Procedures spoke about youth for more than one sentence in their reports. For human rights council resolutions, this percentage decreases to a slim 14%. In the UPR, youth face most neglect, with less than 1% of more than 64.000 recommendations explicitly addressing our needs.

Financial obstacles

With New York and Geneva being among the most expensive cities in the world,² the associated cost to travel to UN spaces can be a large obstacle to youth participation.

Technical/knowledge barriers

¹ [A/HRC/39/33](#) – OHCHR report on 'Youth and human rights' page 4-5

² <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/19/paris-singapore-hong-kong-named-worlds-most-expensive-cities.html>

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With all the different terms and acronyms used, at times it can feel like the UN has its own special language. Participation in UN processes requires technical expertise, with few actors paying special attention to how young activists can keep up with all the acronyms and other UN lingo being used. UN processes are therefore hard to understand for less experienced persons, and are similarly not always transparent.

CHOICE actively tries to open up UN spaces for youth by trying to break down the processes in a youth-friendly manner:

- A youth-friendly guide to UN Language³
- A youth-friendly guide to UN Advocacy⁴
- A youth-friendly guide to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)⁵
- A youth-friendly guide to the Human Rights Council (HRC)⁶
- A youth-friendly guide to the Commission on Population and Development (CPD)⁷
- A youth-friendly guide to SRHR advocacy through the 2030 agenda⁸

Non-meaningful / tokenistic youth participation

Young people are often invited to participate in spaces to serve the interest of states, rather than for their own benefit or agenda. This participation is often tokenistic.

Youth tokenism is when young people are invited to participate, but only in a superficial manner. In such situations, young people do not have a voice and their opinions are not listened to or respected. Tokenism compromises their ability to participate on an equal footing, resulting in an inability to hold any decision-making power or responsibility.

In practice, we see this most often with young people being 'invited' to speak on panels where their speeches are written for them, their topics of discussion are restricted, or their position is limited to providing concluding remarks thereby participating on an unequal footing with their adult counterparts.

3. WHY MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IS IMPORTANT

Right to meaningful participation

Young people are entitled with rights to meaningfully participate in all decisions that concern them, as outlined in the CRC art 12 (the right to meaningful participation) and the ICCPR art 25 (the right to political participation). To deny youth their meaningful participation is to deny them their human rights.

Young people are most knowledgeable of what concerns them

Young people are key experts in their own health and wellbeing, and are best able to voice their own priorities.

Policies better respond to the needs of Young People

It is well understood that interventions designed to address the needs of young people are most effective if young people meaningfully participate in their design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.⁹ Without young persons at the policy table, policy makers will not be informed by their target group how policies can best reach them in the highest quality. It is therefore essential that young people participate in international policy dialogues, particularly those on key issues that concern them (healthcare including SRHR, military conscription, political participation, (un)employment, and autonomy in 'vulnerable situations').¹⁰

4. HOW TO SECURE MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

³ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/UN-Language-Tool-2017.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/AdvocateAtTheUN-DEF2.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/CSW-Factsheet-DEF-04-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/CHOICE-HRC-Factsheet-1.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/CHOICE-CPD-Factsheet-1.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/171130-effective-srhr-advocacy-2030-agenda-web2.pdf>

⁹ https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_4447.html

¹⁰ [A/HRC/39/33](https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_4447.html) – OHCHR report on 'Youth and human rights' page 8-13

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For youth participation to be meaningful, it is essential that young people have:

- **Freedom of choice:** The extent to which a young person can decide if they participate, or not, in a program/activity/organization.
- **Information:** The extent to which young people get and/or have access to comprehensive information about the goals, different elements and timeline of the program, activity or organization, and their role within it. It also links to information about the different possibilities/ opportunities that young people have within the program/activity/organization.
- **Decision-making power:** The extent to which a young person can make decisions about (parts of) the program or activity or within the organization.
- **Voice:** The extent to which a young person can voice their views and opinions, and the extent to which other people listen to and respect these views and opinions and integrate them into the program, activity or organization.
- **Responsibility:** The extent to which young people have the opportunity to act independently within a program, activity or organization that they participate in.

Further information about meaningful youth participation and associated best-practices available at the CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality – Meaningful Youth Participation position paper.¹¹

In addition, it is essential that states:

- Recognize youth and their human rights at national, regional and international level
- Ensure protection of youth participants' safety and security and provide guarantees for non-reprisals
- Provide capacity strengthening to young activists participating
- Put in place mechanisms to secure input from young activists who might struggle acquiring a diplomat's time
- Put in place formalized to structurally incorporate youth in decision making spaces
- Dedicate efforts to ensure a diverse group can participate (not just most privileged, cis-gendered, heteronormative youth)
- Make sure there are youth spaces that are not parallel structures but meaningfully feed into decision making processes (and offer a safe space for young people to meet)

For questions about this submission please contact the CHOICE office

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¹¹ Attached as an annex to the email, and available on:
<https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/MYPpositionpaper.pdf>