**Submission to OHCHR report on**

**Human Rights Council Resolution 35/14 on Youth and Human Rights**

**Plan International Inc.**

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation with no religious, political, or governmental affiliations and isin Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest child rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s and youth rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. We work with children and young people, especially girls and young women in more than 70 countries around the world to tackle the root causes of inequality.

Plan International welcomes the forthcoming report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the implementation of human rights with regard to young people, and hope that the below information will be useful. This submission focuses on a select number of issues that we would like the report to address including the challenges faced by young people in realising their rights; examples of policies and practices that have proven successful in engaging young people meaningfully and key considerations that should be taken to support young people at the international level.

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| **Plan International’s key recommendations:**1. Step up efforts to ensure the situation for young human rights defenders including the increased attacks and threats of violence against young activists is monitored, investigated and becomes a priority for the UN and Member States.
2. Recognise the distinct needs of adolescent girls and young women and take active steps to promote their leadership and participation in decision-making processes from the family, community, national and international levels.
3. Policies and programmes aimed at youth are co-designed with young people, engaging them from the very beginning of the process. These are more likely to secure long-term success as do those where stakeholders have regular contact.
4. Any human rights instrument or policy that aims to promote youth rights must cover the full age range of young people, 15-24 years, as defined by the United Nations so as to ensure all young people equally benefit from these efforts.
5. The Human Rights Council should continue to give due attention to the issue of the human rights of young people in its processes, debates and mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review. States should ensure the meaningful participation of youth in all established national mechanisms for reporting on the implementation of their obligations under international human rights law.
6. Ensure engagement with young people at the international level is meaningful. Work with young people to create and co-design safe avenues to participate in policy development. Ensure youth have timely information in a language and format that is accessible to them. Decision-makers should be prepared to share their spaces and decision-makers must commit to recognising young people as civil society actors in their own right with their opinions considered on equal weighting.
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1. **Challenges faced by young people and examples of discrimination in the exercise of their rights**

Plan International believes that international human rights law should be implemented for every individual throughout the life cycle: from childhood to youth to adulthood to old age. However, young people around the world face significant challenges in realising their rights. Cultural norms, difficulties in accessing quality education and youth-friendly services, lack of employment opportunities, threats of violence and limited access to civil and political rights are all barriers that limit their potential. Adolescents and young people, particularly girls and young women experience distinct barriers that should be recognised and properly addressed.[[1]](#footnote-1) Critically, these barriers exist and young people are denied their rights, explicitly due to their age. The barriers need to be removed but this must be driven by an unwavering and urgent need to address the damaging narrative that continues to surround young people. More often than not, young people are seen as the problem and potential perpetrators of disruption, not as valued citizens and contributors to society. Plan International is calling for a paradigm shift in the way the international community talks about, engages and partners with young people. Listening to young people is not only a moral imperative, it’s essential to ensure decision-makers are creating a world fit for purpose for those who will inherit it. Realising young people’s civil and political rights is a prerequisite for building sustainable and peaceful societies.

In Plan International’s experience, young people continuously raise this as a priority issue. For example, Plan International conducted consultations with young men and women aged 14 to 30 from 14 countries in March 2017.[[2]](#footnote-2) In every country, young people reported a sense of “citizen responsibility” and an interest in public life, yet identified the lack of platforms to meaningfully engage with decision-makers and inability to ensure their opinions are taken seriously as key barriers. Young women in particular, have called for the removal of gendered norms that so often silence their voices.

Although constituting almost half of the world’s population, young people are dramatically under-represented in political decision making: less than 2 per cent of the world’s parliamentarians are aged under 30 years and fewer than 6 per cent are under 35. Furthermore, only 22 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide are women, meaning that young women are among the least adequately represented social groups worldwide: collectively, across the world’s youngest parliamentarians, there is still a gender divide where 60 per cent are male and 40 per cent are female.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, adolescents and young people are consistently excluded from public budgeting processes.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Our experience has shown that involving adolescents and young people in public decision-making processes plays an important role in ensuring the realisation of their rights. In most parts of the world, young people’s participation in formal political processes and institutions is declining.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is not surprising given that those who decide on their behalf do not represent their interests. In a third of countries, eligibility for national parliament starts at 25 years or older.[[6]](#footnote-6) Since 2010 many countries have introduced youth policies[[7]](#footnote-7) that contribute theoretically to a better enabling environment for young people’s civil and political engagement.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, formal participation structures for young people often remain ineffective channels for their involvement in decision making. While globally 133 countries have national youth[[9]](#footnote-9) organisations, very few of these are consulted about policies affecting children and young people.[[10]](#footnote-10) Furthermore, youth parliaments tend to be politically weak, they are chronically underfunded and in reality, have limited direct access to decision-making processes.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Although meaningful gains have been made towards gender justice over the past years, transformative change has remained slow and fragile. Indeed, everywhere that Plan International works, young women are still disproportionately affected by poverty, injustice, and discrimination. Whilst all young people face challenges in exercising their rights due to their age, young women face double discrimination also due to their gender. Social norms and beliefs about what girls or boys of different ages should say or do influence the way that adults let children and young people participate in decisions. When of young age, they are often not allowed to express their views at home, school or in the community. Adults often do not believe it is appropriate or beneficial for them or for the children involved to share information or power with them, whether in family or formal “politics”.[[12]](#footnote-12) These dynamics are often highly gendered: social norms and power relations particularly discriminate against girls and young women whose role is seen to be in the family rather than in the public sphere. From an early age, they are often discouraged from speaking their minds and once of voting age, from engaging in politics, which are considered generally a “male domain”.

Prevailing social norms and cultural attitudes reduce girls’ and young women’s confidence and curtails girls and young women’s mobility and their ability to develop broad social networks and access resources. They deprive them of access to the financial resources[[13]](#footnote-13) needed to pay for transport to meetings or membership fees to associations. With little encouragement from within their direct environments and few strong female role models in public decision-making positions, levels of engagement in party activism among young women throughout much of the world, for example, are about two times lower than young men’s.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When young people do decide to come together and speak out on human rights violations, they are often met with hostile reaction. Young human rights defenders are reporting their increasing fear and real experiences of threats and violence to their physical and mental wellbeing when participating in activism. In a report recently released by Rhize, of the 1100 activists interviewed across the world, the main finding was that young people’s activism is under threat[[15]](#footnote-15). In 2016, FRIDA reported that over half of the 1500 young women, girl and trans-led organisations who participated in their research regularly felt unsafe because of the work they do[[16]](#footnote-16). Conditions are worsening with fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and assembly increasingly being restricted. Although the perpetrators of intimidation and violence may vary in different contexts; whether it’s the government, other groups with opposing views or disapproving families and community members, the result is the same. Young people’s voices are being silenced and their right to participate in public life is violated. Whilst the critical role of young human rights defenders and the reports of increased attacks, including gender-based violence targeted at young people have been raised at the international level[[17]](#footnote-17), more concerted effort is needed to protect young human rights defenders against violence, abuse and discrimination.

1. **Examples of policies and programmes aimed at supporting young people to realise their rights**

Plan International supports active and meaningful youth participation that is a fully collaborative process between adults and young people, whether initiated by adults or by young people themselves. Rather than token participation where young people are involved merely to claim “youth participation”, Plan International`s approach is one that sees young people as full and equal citizens and participants in society. Starting with this approach is critical to supporting young people to realise their own rights.

Plan International has developed an innovative and comprehensive programme to engage young men and empower young women, called “*Champions of Change*”.[[18]](#footnote-18) This programme seeks to engage adolescent boys and girls and young people in critical reflections on gender dynamics and realisation of their rights. The programme recognises the importance of working with girls and boys as a key strategy and entry point to changing gender norms and behaviours for the promotion of gender equality and for ending all forms of violence and discrimination against girls and women and ensuring their active participation in society.

The Champions of Change Programme is innovative in its holistic approach. It emphasises that in order to be sustainable, change must occur in knowledge, attitudes and practices at three levels of society: the individual, families/communities, and the institutional level. Through the “Champions of Change” programme, Plan International seeks to catalyse a youth-led social movement that challenges existing social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls' and young women’s rights. As a first step, girls and boys build their own safe spaces where they can unpack gender inequality and visualise change through a comprehensive set of curricula. As a second step, young people work together to involve their peers and ultimately to engage duty bearers with their demands. This model presents consistent strategies to bring about change at the individual, collective and society-wide levels, and to build momentum at community, national and regional levels on gender equality and youth rights.

In the communities we work with, we have found that a focus on supporting intergenerational dialogue with parents and others who have an influence in young people’s lives is also an important strategy. It raises awareness of young people’s rights with key stakeholders but more importantly, offers the opportunity to understand and transform social norms around the perception of young men and women as change-makers and active contributors at family, community and institutional levels.

Outside of Plan International’s own approach, there are other positive examples of policies and programmes aimed at supporting young people to realise their rights. One such example includes a recent joint initiative by the UN Interagency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) and UN Women to work with young people from the IANYD’s working group on youth and gender equality to translate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women into “youth-friendly” language. The *CEDAW for Youth[[19]](#footnote-19)* publication has enabled young people to easily access and digest the complexities of the international human rights framework. Demystifying such legal instruments is a critical first step in empowering young people to understand and then exercise their rights, including holding their governments accountable for respecting and protecting those rights. Plan International would encourage all relevant human rights instruments, treaties and other policies to be translated into a format that is more accessible to the wider public and specifically adolescents and young people.

1. **How youth organisations and youth-led structures are involved in developing, implementing, monitoring and/or evaluating policies and programmes on youth**

Over recent years, we have seen the move by key actors to increasingly engage young people, youth organisations and/or youth-led structures within policy and programme development. Plan International’s experience has found that engaging young people in policy processes has been indispensable to achieving positive and sustained outcomes that both benefit young people personally and collectively, as well as the wider community as a whole. Below are some key examples of what this looks like in practice.

In Brazil, Plan International has supported young people to engage with the government on the national implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality. As the result of a joint two-year initiative by Plan International and the Nike Foundation, 20 young women were supported to advocate for their priorities to be enshrined in the SDG framework. The young activists, together with youth from three other countries received advocacy training and skills development to be able to effectively and confidently enter into SDG negotiations from the local to the global UN-level. The youth group has since entered into regular dialogue with the national government on the design and implementation of Brazil’s national action plan on Goal 5. The Brazilian Government has welcomed and championed this engagement and have supported a further 200 young women to be trained in advocacy and the SDGs. A key factor to the success of this project is the government’s recognition of the young activists as formal civil society actors. This enabled the activists to stand on equal footing with other civil society organisations with the knowledge that their views will be taken into equal consideration.

Another example can be drawn from Plan International’s *Safer Cities* programme, jointly developed with partner organisations UN-Habitat and Women in Cities International. Grounded in six cities[[20]](#footnote-20) around the world, the programme is focused on supporting young women to meaningfully engage in dialogue with government officials and transport service providers around urban development and making cities safer for girls. For example, in Hanoi, Vietnam where over 40% of girls report feeling seldom or never safe whilst travelling via bus, Plan International supported a youth group to lead a media project and raise awareness against harassment on public transport. The youth group hand out their comics at bus stops and ticket offices across the city to help keep girls safe on public transport. So far, 40,000 comic books have been distributed to passengers. In addition, 4,600 bus drivers and ticket collectors have been trained by Plan International to stop girls being abused on buses. In Australia, as a result of recommendations from Plan International Australia's youth ambassadors, the company, Metro Trains is developing a public safety app meaning girls and women will have a discreet way to report harassment and call for help. The app is expected to be linked up with police and other public transport providers and will be rolled out in 2018.

From Plan International’s experience, policies and programmes that engage young people in their development and implementation should aim to engage young people from the very beginning. Policies and programmes that are co-designed with young people are more likely to secure long-term success as do those where stakeholders have regular and continuous interaction. However to get to that point, investments in building young people’s knowledge, skills and leadership capacity to engage need to be made. International NGOs such as Plan International can facilitate this process. Importantly, engaging young people in the development and implementation of policies and programmes should not be limited to those that are specifically targeted to youth alone. Plan International believes that young people should have the right and space to engage in all policy processes that produce economic, social and political outcomes for all citizens.

1. **Measures at the international level that would facilitate/support the realisation of young people’s rights**

Several efforts have been made to increase the provision of youth voices and realisation of young people’s rights at the international level. The increase in the number of UN Member States endorsing a youth delegate scheme; the adoption of UNSCR 2250 by the UN Security Council; the creation of the UN Special Envoy on Youth position and the launch of UNDP’s Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace are all commendable and welcomed actions.

Nevertheless gaps remain at the international level and if not addressed, will hamper the realisation of youth rights. A review[[21]](#footnote-21) conducted by Plan International in 2015 found that “youth” were not very visible in human rights instruments, with very few explicit mentions. Additionally, the research found a lack of agreement on the terms of discussion.[[22]](#footnote-22) Protection under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) extends until the age of 18 however the multiple definitions of youth used by different UN agencies, treaties and frameworks means that discrepancies occur and more often than not, sub-categories of young people fall between the cracks in rights protection and specific attention. A prime example of this is UNSCR 2250. Whilst the United Nations officially defines ‘youth’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24[[23]](#footnote-23) the UNSCR 2250 sets the parameters of its articles to those aged 18 to 29.[[24]](#footnote-24) This leaves young people aged 15-18 unrecognised as key contributors to peacebuilding and security, although their right to participate in relevant decision-making processes as enshrined in the UN CRC applies in all settings and contexts.

* **Plan International recommends that any human rights effort and policy documents that aims to promote youth rights must cover the full age range of young people as defined by the United Nations so as to ensure all young people equally benefit from these efforts.**
* **Plan International recommends that the Human Rights Council continues to give due attention to the issue of the human rights of young people in its processes, debates and mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review. It is also important that special procedures of the Human Rights Council and treaty bodies also consider these issues within their respective mandates.** **States should ensure the meaningful participation of youth in all established national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up on the implementation of their obligations under international human rights law.**

Discrimination against young people is rarely seen solely as a function of their age, but other identities as well and specifically for young women, their gender adds another level of discrimination. Whilst this is recognised to some extent within global strategies and frameworks for youth empowerment, concrete measures to elevate the position and condition of young women in society is absent. International instruments promoting women’s rights also fall short of addressing the distinct needs and participation rights of adolescent girls and young women, instead focusing on those over the age of 18. Indeed, UN Women’s mandate only begins for females at the age of 18 by which time, young women have already experienced and been impacted by gender-based discrimination.

* **Plan International calls on all international actors to recognise the distinct needs of adolescent girls and young women and take active steps to promote their leadership and participation in decision-making processes from the family, community, national and international levels.**

Specifically, numerous measures can be taken to ensure that adolescent girls and young women are more visible in international initiatives:

* **Adapting the UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth’s mandate to prioritise gender equality and young women’s political empowerment would be a critical measure taken by those at the international level to facilitate this.**
* **Increasing interaction between the CRC and CEDAW Committees would ensure that girls and young women would not fall through the cracks of children’s rights and women’s rights.**
* **Strengthening inter-agency cooperation between UN Women and UNICEF would help ensure that the gender-based discrimination faced by adolescent girls and young women under 18 is adequately addressed.**

Whilst the worsening conditions and increased attacks targets at young activists and human rights defenders have been somewhat commented on by international bodies, including the Human Rights Council, more concerted effort is needed to ensure this pressing issue is monitored, investigated and becomes a priority for the UN and Member States to take affirmative action on. Plan International welcomes the forthcoming Day of General Discussion on children’s human rights defenders to be organised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in late 2018 and hopes this day will be used to truly highlight both the empowerment and protection elements within the activism of the younger cohort of youth aged 15-18.

Lastly, despite recent progress in increasing the space for young people to engage at the international level there remains a question on how truly meaningful the engagement is. Appearing to listen to young people is relatively unchallenging but providing a youth-friendly space; giving due weight to their views and tracking their influence in policy processes requires additional effort. Working with young people to create and co-design safe avenues and mechanisms to participate in policy development will overcome current issues of young people feeling intimidated by adult-dominant platforms. Ensuring that youth have access to timely information in a language and format they understand will also help young people to realise their rights. On the other side, adults including civil society and decision-makers at the international level have a role to play in championing the right for youth to participate in public life. Adults need to be prepared to share their spaces and decision-makers must commit to recognising young people as civil society actors in their own right with their opinions considered on equal weighting.

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1. Plan International (2015) Human Rights and Youth: A review of international standards [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Countries include: Egypt, Guatemala, US, Canada, Finland, Uganda, Sweden, India, Afghanistan, Syria, Norway, Netherlands, Senegal and Germany [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) [*Youth participation in national parliaments*](http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/youthrep-e.pdf) (online). www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/youthrep-e.pdf (accessed: 10.07.2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plan International and Queen’s University Belfast (2016). Child-Participatory Budgeting: A Review of Global Practice. (online) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Commonwealth (2016) *Global Youth Development Index and Report.* Commonwealth Secretariat [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. UNDP (2012) *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle* (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to youthpolicy.org, of 198 countries, 127 countries (64 per cent) have a national youth policy, up from 99 (50 per cent) in January 2013 and 122 in April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Commonwealth (2016) *Global Youth Development Index and Report.* Commonwealth Secretariat [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While these include young people aged over 18, they defend the interests of an important part of the child population of a country, i.e. adolescents. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Statistics disaggregated by sex or age are unavailable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Inter-Agency Working Group on Children’s Participation (2008) *Children as Active Citizens.* ECPAT International, Knowing Children, Plan International, Save the Children Sweden,

Save the Children UK, UNICEF and World Vision [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2016) *Compendium of good practices for advancing women’s political participation in the OSCE region* (online) www.osce.org/odihr/224206?download=true (Accessed: 10.07.2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. UN DESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) (2016) World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement (online) <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/world-youth-report-on-youth-civic-engagement.html> (accessed: 10.07.2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rhize (2017) Understanding Activism: How International NGOs, Foundations and others can provide better support to social movements (online) <https://www.rhize.org/understanding-activism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. FRIDA (2016) Brave, creative, resilient: the global state of young feminist organising [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Threats to young human rights defenders was raised as a key issue at the UN Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in November 2016 and highlighted in the Report of the Co-chairs to the Human Rights Council A/HRC/34/46, 31 January 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Plan International is currently implementing or rolling out its flagship Champions of Change programme to engage men and boys in the promotion of gender equality in all regions in which it works. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. UN Women and IANYD (2016) CEDAW for Youth <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2016/12/cedaw-for-youth> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cairo, Egypt; Delhi, India; Hanoi, Vietnam; Kampala, Uganda and Lima, Peru; Melbourne, Australia [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Plan International (2015) Youth and Human Rights: A review of international standards [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This definition was made during preparations for the International Youth Year (1985), and endorsed by the General Assembly (see A/36/215 and resolution 36/28, 1981). All United Nations statistics on youth are based on this definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. UN Security Council Resolution 2250: Youth, Peace and Security, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)