

Forum: Special Conference on Democracy

Issue: Promoting participation of adolescents in decision-making

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INTRODUCTION

Never before have so many adolescents been included in developments for change around the world. They are utilizing the help of online social networks and communities to connect, express their voices and opinions, and campaign for change. They are dissenting against dictator administrations, debasement, and disparities. They are fighting for the improvement of the future and lasting developments for current and future generations.

However, the political representation of young people remains greatly restricted. They are progressively requesting greater and more significant involvement and representation in decision-making situations, so they can have greater jurisdiction over how their lives and futures are formed. In spite of the fact that adolescents are often involved in activism within the digital space, protesting, volunteering to evolve and improve their communities, and enhancing for social good, their influence and representation in formal politics are restricted. Voter turnout is decreasing in all democratic states and is concentrated among youth. Adolescents are underrepresented in political decision-making situations, thus making their involvement in political parties decrease and that much more important.

There are still many barriers hindering adolescents from participating in decision-making processes. These can be limited access to information, lack of concern by the governments, and many others. These obstacles also discourage adolescents from wanting to participate in decision-making situations, thus leading to them losing confidence in themselves and trust in their governments, adding more hindrances to the list. To each of these problems, there are solutions. Bearing in mind that each of these beforestated boundaries has a specific solution, delegates should take those into serious consideration while resolution writing.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Adolescent¹

“Adolescents are defined as children and young adults who are growing into adults. They are usually around the age of 12 to 19”.

Voting age²

“The voting age is the minimum legal age, which qualifies someone to be able to cast their vote in public elections”.

Voting qualifications policy

These policies describe the qualifications one must meet in order to be qualified to legally vote in public elections. In this topic, the most important one is concerning age.

Youth Parliament

Youth Parliaments are educational programs focusing on the support of adolescents' involvement in decision-making by volunteering, campaigning, and leading. Some Youth Parliaments are the European Youth Parliament³ (EYP), the British Youth Council⁴ (BYC), the Sri Lanka Youth Parliament⁵ (SLYP), and the Youth Parliament of Pakistan⁶.

¹ "Definition of ADOLESCENT." *Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-trusted Online Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adolescent.

² "Voting Age." *TheFreeDictionary.com*, www.thefreedictionary.com/voting+age.

³ *European Youth Parliament | Welcome to Young Europe!*, www.eyp.org.

⁴ *British Youth Council*, 8 Apr. 2021, www.byc.org.uk/.

⁵ "Youth Parliament." *Welcome |* www.nysc.lk/aboutParliament_e.php.

⁶ *Youth Parliament of Pakistan*, www.youthparliament.org.pk/.

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)

As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, an NGO is “an organization that tries to achieve social or political aims but is not controlled by a government⁷”.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The importance of promoting the participation of adolescents in decision-making

Keeping in mind that adolescents are being considered future leaders, they should have access and be able to take part in decision-making. In the future, they will have to be prepared and experienced to lead future generations. This can only happen if adolescents can have full access and be involved in decision-making affairs. In the following part of this Study Guide, some of these significant reasons for promoting youth participation will be analyzed.

Youth participation as a civil right

As stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adolescents’ views and opinions are to be formed and expressed freely and then respected and protected by any other person and government. This article will also be further analyzed in a future section of this guide.

Undoubtedly, this right must be taken into consideration and be further promoted due to the fact that adolescent’s and adolescents’ views often do not get the amount of attention they should be. Their opinions are overlooked and ignored when it is clearly a basic human right for a child to have their beliefs recognized and heard. Active participation of citizens in politics is an important part of democracy, so it is obvious that the fair treatment and representation of adolescents are equally as important in democratic political systems.

Accurate and relevant representation

Due to the fact that adolescents do not enjoy the right to vote, in most countries, they are not equally represented. This distances adolescents even further from politics, which can lead to them losing interest from an early age. When young people vote, their voices are being heard and they are being represented by political parties they have chosen in governments. These political parties that were voted, also represent adolescents fairly and accurately, which is very important considering being able to vote, have your voice heard, and correctly represented is also a human right.

⁷ Quoted from: "NGO." *Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ngo.

Skill development

Adolescents develop many different helpful skills when participating in decision-making processes, which can lead directly to improved educational performance and better employment prospects. These next few subtopics divide these skills into categories and analyze them and their specific importance further.

Individual development

Adolescents can develop individually when taking part in decision-making processes. They can develop an experience of being part of something that matters and feel included. Their educational presence will evolve and will most likely want to attend more important events to make changes in the school. This can also help in choosing their future careers and continue to make great and positive changes for the future generations of the world.

Organizational development

Participation includes youth in processes that bring individuals together and educates them on how to set needs and make choices and empowers them to arrange programs that contribute to their organizational capacity. In contrast to youth who don't see themselves as a grouping, these members play parts that contribute to collective action and prepare them to be and make a difference.

Community development

Youth participation additionally contributes to community development. While adolescents evolve themselves, by taking part in decision-making situations, they also contribute to the evolution of their communities and society as a whole.

Barriers to the inclusion of adolescents in decision-making

There are various restrictions and complete barriers that hinder the important inclusion of adolescents in decision-making processes. These are problems that should be acknowledged, tackled, and fought against. Such are to be further analyzed.

Limited access to information

Access to information is very important in this topic. There are many reasons for access to information being limited. Undemocratic political systems or Regimes have the obvious reason of not wanting their citizens to be as informed and educated or do not support the right to information at all, thus they withhold information or make it unobtainable to the public. Moreover, in other Regimes or Undemocratic political systems, there might be fear from the public when wanting to obtain information, leading to citizens, who legally do have the right to information, not even want to make

research and acquire information. The limitations may also be caused by its root, meaning insufficient research and support to even create information, which can be due to inadequate funding for research or complete ignorance on the matter.

Lack of concern by governments

This lack of concern can be shown by the way governments support or do not support the representation and involvement of youth in decision-making processes. Usually, governments will act with ignorance and oppose the idea of adolescents taking part in decision-making situations and processes.

Negative social attitudes towards young people

Young people are often seen as inexperienced and uneducated when it comes to their participation in decision-making processes. This is a direct result of young people not being allowed to participate in these processes, making them said inexperienced and uneducated.

Adolescents' views, voices, and opinions are being repeatedly ignored by ignorant adults, with the reasoning of the adolescents lacking the skills and abilities of leadership, communication, social awareness, and psychological/social development.

This creates a so-called vicious cycle, while all of the aforementioned lead to a lack of confidence to speak up. Adolescents often do not have the confidence to speak up for themselves, that is why facilitating access to information is so important. Adolescents educate themselves on their own, gain confidence and speak up. If gaining confidence is not possible, having accurate representatives is equally as important.

Lack of role models

This barrier is slowly being lifted, but then again still exists. Even though there are many exceptionally important adolescent role models, such as Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai, there still is a lack of recognition for young people as role models. This problem is also connected with the problem explained above.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Austria

Adolescents' participation at all levels of legislative issues and society is respected as pivotal in Austria. The Department for Families and Youth at the Federal Chancellery acts as a critical central point on the issue. For the Austrian youth approach, the support of youthful individuals is of specific significance. Like the youth approach in common, support could be a

cross-sectorial point and requires execution in all zones of politics. Currently, Austria stands as the first country in the European Union to change its voting-age policies to 16.

Austrian Youth Strategy⁸

The Youth Strategy of the Federal Chancellery is a pre-designed plan to fortify and create youth approach and policies all through Austria. The objective of this procedure is to bring together policies and measures for adolescents, to form them orderly, and to evolve their effectiveness. It moreover points to find modern areas of activity, participation, and involvement, to form unused calls for activity, and to support these with measures that can be promptly implemented.

Electoral reform of Austria

In 2007 Austria had a great electoral reform, which also included the change of voting age requirements. Other measures such as absentee voting and the extension of the legislative period for the National Council were also implemented at the same time as part of the electoral reform. The Austrian Social Democratic Party and The Greens-The Green Alternative Party were the first to promote the idea of lowering the voting age. It was opposed by the center-right People's Party and the right-wing parties the Freedom Party and the Alliance for the Future of Austria. Changing the electoral law required an alteration to the Austrian Federal Constitution, a two-thirds majority within the National Council, and the comparing endorsement by the Government Council. The only party to vote against this amendment was the Freedom Party.

Nicaragua

In November 1984 Nicaragua made great progress in its voting policies when the decision was made to lower the voting age to 16 for both genders. Nicaragua was the first country to lower its voting age to 16 and make it possible for younger people to make their opinions heard. Prior to 1984, the voting age requirements were 21 years of age. This action triggered a chain reaction of other countries trusting, allowing them to participate and represent their community of adolescents in the public voting process.

India

⁸ "Austrian Youth Strategy." *Youthpolicy.org*, www.youthpolicy.org/national/Austria_2013_Youth_Strategy.pdf.

Both adolescent girls and boys lack access to information considering issues influencing their lives and have constrained spaces to create competencies vital for dynamic support. Young girls, in particular, are uncovered to numerous layers of powerlessness due to vindictive social standards influencing the esteem of young girls, which in turn influences their capacity to move unreservedly and to create choices influencing their work, instruction, marriage, and social connections.

Indian Youth Parliament (IYP)

The Indian Youth Parliament (IYP)⁹ is a national organization focusing on helping young people freely share and express their opinions. This helps a great number of adolescents in India strive for the best in their future and make their true dreams come true. The IYP yearly hosts a 1-day Youth Assembly and a 3-day Indian Youth Parliament Session.

Wales

At the beginning of May 2021, the Welsh Parliament elections took place, in which adolescents from the age of 16 were able to vote in. Nevertheless, according to BBC, only 46% of young people in Wales had registered to vote. The decision to change voting age requirements was influenced by the same decision taken by Scotland in 2015. In March 2020, research was performed by analysts from Beaufort Research. As a result, it was discovered the participants, who were mostly 14 to 17-years-olds, could not recognize the Welsh Prime Minister and had little to no understanding of what the Welsh Government did. Furthermore, the very same research found out that 72% of 16 to 17-year-olds wanted to enjoy the right to vote.

World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)¹⁰

The WPAY guides the United Nations' youth agenda and was adopted by the General Assembly in 1995. They focus on fifteen priority aspects concerning youth, a few of them being, education, health, environment, employment, globalization, and many more. Their goal is to improve, enhance or tackle all of the fifteen aspects in order to ensure that the lives of young people around the world are improved.

⁹ "Indian Youth Parliament." *Indianyouthparliament*, www.indianyouthparliament.co.in/.

¹⁰ "United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth | United Nations For Youth." *United Nations Youth*, 8 June 2015, www.un.org/development/desa/youth/world-programme-of-action-for-youth.html.

The WPAY document¹¹

Although the WPAY is stated above as a major organization involved, it has also published a major and significant document analyzing and tackling all of the fifteen previously mentioned priority topics, proposals for action, and several means of implementation.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)¹²

The main mission of the UNFPA is to assure safety to women when pregnant and when giving birth. They strive to make sure that all adolescents fulfill their potential to its greatest and they support all mothers and children around the world.

UNFPA Youth Participation and Leadership¹³

Promoting youth leadership and participation is an important part of the work UNFPA does. UNFPA has several sub-programs all of which aim to make youth participation in decision-making greater. They make every effort to help adolescents build and develop their skills to eventually get involved in policymaking and decision-making. This program is called "A seat at the table". Even the UNFPA involves adolescents directly in its work, while also promoting youth involvement. Other programs the UNFPA has established, which concern the topic at hand, are "Y-Peer"¹⁴, which is a youth-to-youth initiative and consists of more than 500 NGOs and governmental institutions, "Focus on adolescent girls", which focuses on the opportunities given to young girls and women in leadership roles, and "Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals"(SDG)¹⁵, which is a program that provides education and medical support to the young people living and will eventually live under the results of the SDG.

¹¹ "World Programme of Action for Youth." *Welcome to the United Nations*, www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf.

¹² UNFPA - *United Nations Population Fund*, 12 Nov. 2020, www.unfpa.org/.

¹³ "Youth Participation & Leadership." *UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund*, www.unfpa.org/youth-participation-leadership.

¹⁴ "Y-PEER: Empowering Young People to Empower Each Other." *UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund*, www.unfpa.org/news/y-peer-empowering-young-people-empower-each-other.

¹⁵ "THE 17 GOALS." *Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, www.sdg.un.org/goals.

United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF)¹⁶

UNICEF is an internationally known Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). They defend and fight for children's rights. They help young people throughout early childhood up until adolescence. Last year they created Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement¹⁷ on the reasoning and the ways young people can engage in adolescent participation in decision-making situations. Furthermore, UNICEF has a great amount of Youth Ambassadors and Advocates, helping adolescents directly participate in significant decision-making worldwide.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
November of 1984	Nicaragua lowers its voting age from 21 to 16.
1988	Brazil changes its voting age to 16 years of age. Voting is not compulsory until the age of 18.
1995	Adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY).
11th of July 2006	The Isle of Man lowers their voting age to 16.
1st of July 2007	Austria becomes the first country in the European Union (EU) to change their voting age to 16.
19th of December 2007	The voting age in Guernsey is decreased to 16.
1st of April 2008	Jersey lowers their voting age to 16.
28th of September 2008	Ecuador’s voting age is changed to 16.

¹⁶ "UNICEF." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/.

¹⁷ "Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." *UNICEF*, www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf.

December 2009	Resolution A/RES/64/134 ¹⁸ , adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, announces the International Year of Youth, commencing on the 12th of August 2010.
22nd of June 2011	East Timor lowers its voting age to 17.
1st of November 2012	Argentina decreases its voting age to 16. Voting for people between the ages of 16 and 18 is voluntary.
6th of May 2015	Estonia lowers its voting age for local elections to 16.
18th of June 2015	Scotland lowers their voting age to 16 years of age.
9th of December 2015	Security Council resolution S/RES/2250 (2015) passes unanimously.
21st of July 2016	The voting age in Greece is lowered to 17 years of age.
5th of March 2018	Maltas voting age is lowered to 16.
6th of June 2018	The Security Council unanimously passes resolution S/RES/2419 (2018).
6th of May 2021	Wales lowered their voting age to 16 for the Senedd Cymru elections (the Welsh Parliament, formerly known as the National Assembly for Wales).

¹⁸ "Proclamation of 2010 as the International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding." ODS, www.documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/469/87/PDF/N0946987.pdf?OpenElement.

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Security Council resolution S/RES/2250 (2015)¹⁹

The Security Council unanimously adopted resolution S/RES/2250(2015) on the 9th of December 2015. This Resolution focuses on the participation and representation of youth in decision-making on a local, national, regional, and international degree. It emphasizes five major aspects namely, Participation, Protection, Prevention, Partnerships and Disengagement and Reintegration and then followed by the Next steps.

Security Council resolution S/RES/2419 (2018)²⁰

On the 6th of June 2018, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution S/RES/2419(2018), similarly to the resolution mentioned above. It talks about the positive and important part adolescents can have when discussing and executing peace agreements and conflict prevention. Furthermore, the resolution calls for reports which would be submitted by the Secretary-General concerning the execution of both resolution 2419 (2018) and resolution 2250 (2015) before May 2020.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)²¹

The UDHR is an international document that states the basic human rights and privileges of humans worldwide. In Article 21²² of the UDHR, it is recognized that “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”. Meaning that being able to fully participate in political and electoral procedures is a basic human right for all humans, including adolescents.

¹⁹ "United Nations Official Document." *Welcome to the United Nations*, [www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2250\(2015\)&referer=/english/&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2250(2015)&referer=/english/&Lang=E).

²⁰ *Youth4Peace Portal*, www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2019-11/S_RES_2419%282018%29_E.pdf.

²¹ United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

²² Quoted from: "Article 21 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *Universal Declaration of Human Rights Campaign: What Are Human Rights? Definition*, www.humanrights.com/course/lesson/articles-19-25/read-article-21.html.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)²³

The UNCRC is a document that focuses on the rights of children. It consists of 54 articles, which protect the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children around the world. Furthermore, it discusses the ways adults and governments can collaborate to ensure all children can enjoy their given rights.

Article 12 of the UNCRC²⁴

This specific article assures that all children have the right to be provided with the opportunity to form an opinion, be able to express said opinion freely and be heard and respected. Moreover, it assures the right to an appropriate representative, to make themselves heard.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

In the past, there have been numerous attempts to enlarge the significant engagement of adolescents in decision-making. In the following part, a few of them will be presented and analyzed shortly.

Aforementioned Resolutions, documents, and articles

Both resolution 2250 (2015) and 2419 (2018) have been groundbreaking towards the larger and more significant engagement and representation of adolescents in decision-making. Both resolutions stress the importance of participation and including the opinions of adolescents in decision-making. These resolutions have done the greatest legal changes in United Nations and international policies. Moreover, article 21 of the UDHR and Article 12 UNCRC both assure the right to vote for all and for adolescents to form a view and an opinion and that opinion to be heard and respected.

Lowering voting ages

Countries that have changed their voting qualification policies and lowered their respective voting age have allowed adolescents to begin playing a significant and impactful part

²³ "OHCHR | Convention on the Rights of the Child." www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.

²⁴ "Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12." *OHCHR*, www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf.

in society from a young age. These changes have allowed more young people to make a direct change in the decision of their lives and futures. This has turned out to be very a successful solution when trying to engage adolescents in decision-making as it has increased voter turnouts significantly, thus making the actual turnout a more accurate representation of what the communities want. This solution can also be proven effective with statistics. For example, Nicaragua's voter turnout in the last parliamentary election they held before lowering their voting ages was 69,43%. Then in their next parliamentary election, which also allowed all 16-year-olds to vote, the voter turnout jumped to 75,48%. Similarly, Ecuador's voter turnout of the last parliamentary election that was held before the voting age change was 63.50%. While in the first parliamentary election they held, which allowed 16-year-olds to vote, the voter turnout grew to 75,72%.

Programs

Programs such as the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) or Youth Parliaments play a very important role in the participation, involvement, and representation of adolescents in decision-making. These programs help adolescents develop their abilities to express their opinions on political, social, economic, and other topics. Youth Parliaments, for example, offer the chance to participate in events, develop opinions on current affairs and build intercultural understanding and then use these skills to shape and positively change the world from a young age, thus directly positively contributing to the topic of this guide.

Youth Parliaments

Although there are Youth Parliaments that work great in favor of getting adolescents involved in decision-making situations and would in theory be significant solutions, there have been other not-so-successful attempts made by Youth Parliaments. Lots of these Youth Parliaments have been proven to be much less effective than expected, and are thus considered to be a failed attempt to solve the issue at hand. Some other Youth Parliaments were just established for "showcase". This means that they did not have any actual say in real decision-making processes. They were just created by Governments for showcasing that their country had a Youth Parliament, which in reality did not affect anything. Now, Youth Parliaments can either be developed and monitored more strictly in order to reach that expected effectiveness or get completely written off as failed attempts to the issue.

Global Youth Call

The Global Youth Call “reflects an emerging global consensus on concrete proposals for target areas on youth in the post-2015 development agenda”²⁵. It is important for Member States to enforce this paper for the betterment of their adolescent community, their important representation, and active involvement in decision-making situations.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In the following part of the guide, you will be presented with a number of potential solutions for the matter at hand. You are encouraged to research these, elaborate upon them in a matter that agrees with your country’s or organization’s policies and turn that into a resolution.

Raising awareness

First and foremost, raising awareness, as in many other serious topics, is of major significance. For adolescents to know what opportunities they have to be able to express their opinions and voices clearly is of utmost importance. A lot of young people have great opinions, want their opinions to be heard but do not know how to make themselves heard. Raising awareness by hosting and organizing gatherings and speeches by local, national, and international representatives of organizations focusing on the representation and involvement of adolescents in decision-making in middle schools, high schools, even colleges, and universities can make remarkable developments for a lot of young people. Raising awareness is also important for adults, as a lot of adults still are ignorant of adolescents’ abilities. By showing adults what adolescents can contribute as future leaders, they will show them greater respect and recognition. This can be done by organizing parent meetings in schools in which the students themselves can raise awareness, thus directly showing adults their abilities as important members of society despite their ages.

Facilitating access to information

Without a doubt, it is important for adolescents to have easy access to information about what they can do to get involved in decision-making processes. This solution also ties in with the solution above. As a lot of countries/governments/political parties have their own official websites, it would be extremely easy for them to add a section where they only talk

²⁵ Quoted from: "The Global Youth Call." *Welcome to the United Nations*, www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The_Global_Youth_Call.pdf.

about youth, youth representation, and youth involvement. Furthermore, it is important for these countries/governments or NGOs to be open to actually sharing and advocating for the information. It is also worth noting that this information should be accessible to all people, meaning creating information accessible for people with disabilities and translating papers, documents, websites, and articles in several languages.

Lowering voting ages

By changing voting qualification policies and lowering voting ages to 16 or 17 years of age, adolescents have a greater chance of getting their voices heard and their opinions implemented. This can establish a habit in adolescents of educating themselves about electoral affairs and voting as often as possible, and thus making their voices and opinions heard. Their interest in political affairs will grow to make them suitable and functional future members of society. Urging additional Member States to change their voting age requirements would make this possible.

Value and recognize young people's contribution

Adolescents' opinions should be considered of great value. They will be the leaders of the future and by respecting and recognizing their voices from early on, their future performance as leaders will be substantial. This can be done by either raising awareness, as mentioned in the first example above, or encouraging skeptical adults to perform informative dialogue with adolescents and become more educated on the matter. Mainly, this solution can be constructed and organized by adolescents, in order for them to have a direct impact on those who still do not value their contributions.




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