

Chapter 7

Transformational Youth Participation for Youth Mainstreaming

This chapter looks at:

- the primacy of youth participation in all policy spaces and in development planning to achieve youth self-empowerment and social equality
- the need to re-evaluate existing participation mechanisms to ensure they are meaningful, and not tokenistic, and are delivering results for young people, particularly the most marginalised.

7.1 Participation as expressed in human rights and development frameworks

Institutionalised youth participation in driving youth empowerment and development is not an option, but a necessity, for responsive policy-making. It is an important means to transformative youth mainstreaming practices.

Youth participation is enshrined in human rights instruments, such as through Articles 12–15 of the UNCRC and Articles 18–21 of the UDHR. In the SDGs, participation is best articulated within Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, through Targets 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making) and 16.10 (public access to information and fundamental freedoms) (see monitoring indicators below in section 7.9). Youth participation is also recognised in the World Plan of Action for Youth (WPAY).

7.2 What is transformational youth participation?

In general, youth participation spans three broad dimensions of change: 1) enhancing young people's confidence and self-esteem through the process of participation, 2) changing power dynamics between young people and adults and, eventually, 3) impacting on policies and services.¹ These dimensions apply

to multiple domains, ranging from personal domains such as family and friendship groups to public domains such as schools, universities, work places and public institutions. This chapter focuses on enhancing young people's engagement with the public domains of policy and planning in all sectors and national planning spaces. This could be through party political participation, through youth social movements or engagement in public policy-making spaces directly, as partners in planning.

Youth participation in decisions that affect their lives is the right of young people irrespective of contributions to a larger good; the positive personal and collective developmental benefits of participation should never be under-estimated and should be supported unconditionally, particularly at the local level. However, if young people's interests are to be meaningfully integrated into development planning, their ability to influence policy in a climate of powerful contending interests (some such interests working against youth empowerment), should be an important focus. In fact, this is a key responsibility of broad, representative youth networks and councils.

Transformational youth participation therefore refers to:

1. The self-empowerment of individual young people participating in processes that contribute to developing their self-esteem, protagonism/agency, and interconnectedness with others, including demonstrating co-shared leadership qualities, ability to respect diversity of identity and ideas, and to enriching their knowledge and critical thinking skills. (See also Table 6.1 on contributions of the profession of youth work.)
2. This self-empowerment leading to their role in all policy spaces as informed and legitimate representatives of well-defined groups of young people in transforming youth rights dialogue, policy, practice and outcomes for *all* young people.²
3. Solidarity among youth social groups, where adults and more privileged youth groups with access to decision-making domains ensure support for less privileged groups in accessing and influencing these domains.
4. Solidarity among youth age groups, where adults and older youth enable younger youth to enter and influence these spaces.

5. Free and voluntary participation, where young people choose whether to participate *or not*. Meaningful youth participation is hard won and young people will be motivated to invest their time and energy in public policy spaces only if there is a genuine offer of power-sharing, and where their voice can influence change.

For the end-goal of youth mainstreaming (i.e. equitable outcomes of development for young people) to be achieved, it is imperative that young people's participation eventually result in their ability to:

- influence equitable social relations within policy spaces in the social, political and economic spheres;
- influence equitable policy formulation; and
- influence processes of effective policy implementation to ensure this equity, including ensuring the allocation of budgets and transparent expenditure.

7.3 Why transformational youth participation?

Transformational youth participation transforms young people themselves, and that is a critical outcome. However, it also transforms society and enables social equality for youth and adults. Young people's unique perspectives on their development, based on their own experience, strengthens responsive programming for young men and women. Their grounded understanding and experiences as students, healthcare recipients, employees, labourers, young mothers and fathers, young refugees, immigrants and so on can dramatically transform the thinking behind, and approaches to, programmes that affect them.

As the Commonwealth document *Professional Youth Work* puts it, '...The motivations, desires and passion of young people will likely be the richest seams of their future accomplishments and social contribution.'³ The relationship between youth participation and the quality of programmes for them must not be underestimated.⁴ Work towards attaining the SDGs is, in fact, a useful framework for which participation structures can be aligned and be responsive.

From a political and economic perspective, the likelihood of donor investment in youth participation initiatives increases if initiatives demonstrate not only the benefits of participation to young people themselves, but also this link between youth participation practices and policy and practice outcomes.

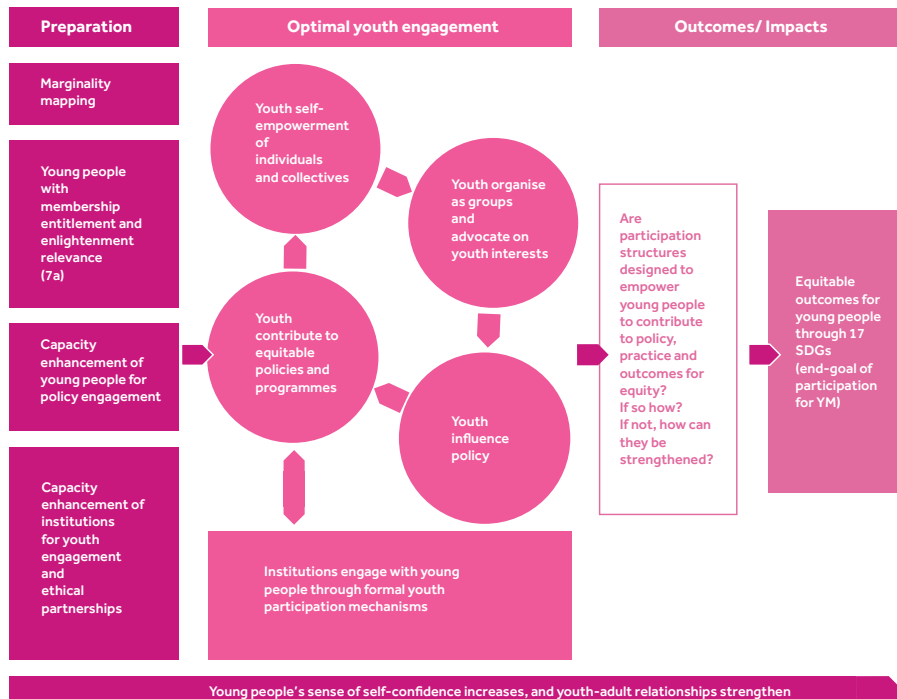
7.4 Translating participation principles into practice

Youth participation is clearly a subset of general participatory institutional cultures and good governance, and will be difficult to achieve where broader participatory planning environments do not exist.

The principles of participation need to be embedded at the policy level, and at the levels of the young people, youth workers, the community, directors, managers and advisers in all participating agencies. Figure 7.1 suggests processes that can enable this in all sectors and national and subnational planning spaces.

Figure 7.1 refers to optimal youth participation in governance, where genuinely representative young people participate in

Figure 7.1 Optimal youth participation for equality and sustainable development



enabling institutions driving ethical youth partnerships and youth leadership, through youth-led research and evidence, in order to create change for all youth.

Not all of these components are required for beneficial youth participation, but this can be seen as optimal youth engagement.⁵

7.5 How do we enable transformational youth participation in our organisations?

Figure 7.1 has several implications for organisational governance in those agencies working on youth mainstreaming approaches. Below are possible steps an organisation can take to ensure this:

- Organisational policies that ensure youth participation at all levels.
- Organisational valuing of young people's knowledge and experience, and acknowledging this in designing responsive strategies and programmes for young people.
- Developing organisational guidelines for minimum standards in youth participation and support of youth networks/coalitions (see Annex 3).
- Developed and implemented marginality mapping processes (Annex 4) to identify those most marginalised and who will be the most affected by policies in your sector/organisation.
- Capacity building of staff and organisations to enable youth engagement (see also section 17.5).⁶
- Establishing formal participation structures in institutional decision-making processes to ensure systemic, rather than random, participation. This includes considerations of youth participation at:
 - the level of organisational decision-making in all sectors where youth participation best sits – i.e. within staff structures, on boards, in interview panels where staff are being recruited for youth-focused areas of work etc.; and

- all levels of the policy and programme cycle in all sectors – from assessment and planning to implementation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).
- At the recruitment level, developing candidate assessment methods for attitudes towards young people and marginalised groups.
- Involving young people in recruitment panels to factor in their perceptions of candidates and their views on candidates' openness to youth and other marginalised groups.

While not all these criteria need exist to make an organisation youth-friendly, it is critical that we work towards achieving these targets.

Box 7.1 is an example of how youth participation was factored into the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC).

Box 7.1 Youth participation at the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition⁷

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is the advocacy group for 4.3 million Australians aged 12–25 and the hundreds of thousands whose work it is to support them. At the time of writing, the body was no longer receiving state funding. The following involves principles and practices that it embraces in relation to youth participation, much of which is now disbanded to because of defunding.

One of AYAC's core roles is to create an effective link between decision-makers and young people, and also to play an advisory role to government and non-government organisations on the value of mechanisms for meaningful youth participation. A 2010 AYAC research report titled *Where Are You Going with That? Maximising Young People's Impact on Organisational and Public Policy* (2010)⁸ investigated young people's participation and its impact in policy decision-making. The report demonstrated that young people can affect policy change, and need to be seen as such – as agents of change.

For AYAC, **empowering youth participation practices** involve:

- a. simplifying policy development processes and clearly articulating opportunities for young people to contribute;
- b. helping young people understand consultation and policy development processes;
- c. using non-traditional methods of engagement and designing consultation mechanisms that are suited to young people;
- d. creating solutions to barriers faced by young people in accessing consultation mechanisms;

(Continued)

Box 7.1 Youth participation at the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (cont.)

- e. providing feedback and evidence to young people of the impact of consultation;
- f. embedding effective youth consultation in all public policy decisions; and
- g. using consultation strategies that also engage young people not traditionally engaged by the usual consultation mechanisms.

From a youth mainstreaming perspective, and before defunding, AYAC supported a range of Australian government departments – in education, health, the prime minister and the cabinet, political parties, sustainable development, the youth sector, human services and the taxation office – to build in youth participation mechanisms to policy dialogue.

At the institutional level, before defunding, AYAC actively engaged young people at all levels of decision-making and planning. Young people provided regular feedback and support for the work and approach that AYAC undertakes, through membership on AYAC's Policy Advisory Council, on the AYAC Board, on research reference groups and that project advisory groups. As a member says, at AYAC, 'youth participation is not simply "lip service" or jargon, but rather a genuine, practiced commitment across all areas of our work that any task begins by valuing, including and promoting the voice and perspective of young people'.⁹

7.6 How do young people participate?

How meaningful is young people's participation and how are they able to move beyond tokenism to having a voice, and so influencing policies and processes? The following outlines a few key ways of looking at the qualities of youth participation:

1. **Are young people's interests served?** Sarah White's youth participation framework 'interests in youth participation' outlines forms (from nominal to transformative) and functions (display to means/end). The framework discusses interests of participation of the originators of the initiative (top-down) and communities (bottom-up), of which the combined interests form the 'function'. Transformative participation in White, as in our case, refers to participation being both a means of empowerment and an end of social good (Annex 5).¹⁰
2. **Are young people invited to policy spaces or do they 'claim' spaces?** Gaventa's Power Cube (Annex 6), further discussed in Chapter 8, also helps us

understand different forms of participation, which can be through a) invited spaces or b) claimed/created spaces. Invited spaces often incorporate more mainstream youth voices, frequently represented by organisation-led youth participation structures, while claimed/created spaces represent less mainstream, alternative voices. These include independent youth movements, protests or, importantly, participation won through systematic lobbying for access to policy domains. Incorporating both forms of voice and influence is important for responsive policy-making.

3. **Is it informed participation?** The more informed and evidence-based the participation, the greater the likelihood of strategic policy influence. Informed participation can range from participation supported by information received from adults to information created by young people themselves. Youth-led information becomes the most robust form of knowledge young people can wield for influence. To enable this, young people can engage in their own knowledge creation through youth-led research (see also Chapters 9 and 17), where young people, often in partnership with adults, design, implement and analyse their own findings to produce grounded knowledge for policy change.¹¹
4. **Are young people seen as partners/protagonists?** Successful youth participation is built around ethical youth–adult partnerships, in which both parties engage with and respect each other as equals, listen to each other’s opinions, and everyone’s contribution is acknowledged and valued. Building intergenerational partnerships helps us address power dynamics between adults and youth and build respect across generations. There are different conceptions of the notion of youth as leaders and agents, well articulated in the DFID–CSO guide *Youth Participation in Development*, which outlines the three-lens approach to youth participation where young people can move between being beneficiaries, partners and leaders.¹² It also proposes minimum standards for youth mainstreaming. The idea of children/youth

as protagonists, and adults as partners in the case of children and young people leading research, is further elaborated by Nuggehalli.¹³

Young people are aware of the complexity of meaningful participation processes, and the responsibilities it places on them, including adapting participation initiatives to the evolving capacities of, and opportunities for, different youth groups in their specific contexts (see, for example, Box 7.2).

7.7 Which young people participate, and what are the outcomes?

All young people's voices need to influence policy and practice. This often occurs through legitimate channels that enable all youth voices to be heard. Representation, particularly of the most economically, socially, culturally and geographically marginalised,¹⁴ and of actual service users, will be the most practical and effective form of participation for all.

Indeed, research has demonstrated how privileged groups with access to decision-making arenas can help more marginalised groups reach these spaces.¹⁵ In this way, solidarity among privileged youth/adult groups and marginalised youth groups means that those youth in positions of influence and with access to decision-making arenas facilitate the self-representation and self-empowerment of those with less influence in national and global policy domains.

This applies equally to older youth/adults ensuring the access of younger youth to policy spaces. Youth in the younger age brackets are often left out of decision-making domains because

Box 7.2 Meaningful youth participation

There is no country that get fixed like magic ... it is hard work, it is tedious and has to be consistent. In terms of young people, what I am really interested in is helping 15-year-olds improve local areas, helping 18-year-olds to engage in local government, helping 25-year-olds to engage with local political parties, engage in policy-making and in decisions that happen in local areas. Young people will not get involved in governance just because they decide because we are young you have to put us on the table, they will get involved because they are actually making a change. That's the thing we need to think, how do I as a young activist mobilise people in my street local area, mobilise people in my village, town to actually make a difference?

– Young woman from a Commonwealth member country in Africa¹⁶

of the complexity of adhering to parental permission regulations and safeguarding determinants. All these should be a key focus for youth networks.

7.7.1 Legitimate representation

It is those groups that are directly affected by a given policy, or those who represent such groups in meaningful ways, which serve impactful youth participation in policy domains. Amartya Sen identifies two useful criteria for deciding how representation works effectively. These are set out in Box 7.3.¹⁷

These may be useful criteria for policy-makers in working with young people on decisions of youth representation.

7.7.2 Distance from policy spaces/platforms/ acceptance

Who participates, and whose participation should be enabled, is also defined by:

- the distances from policy spaces of different youth groups (Figure 7.2); and
- their levels of acceptance within policy domains.

Box 7.3 Forms of youth representation

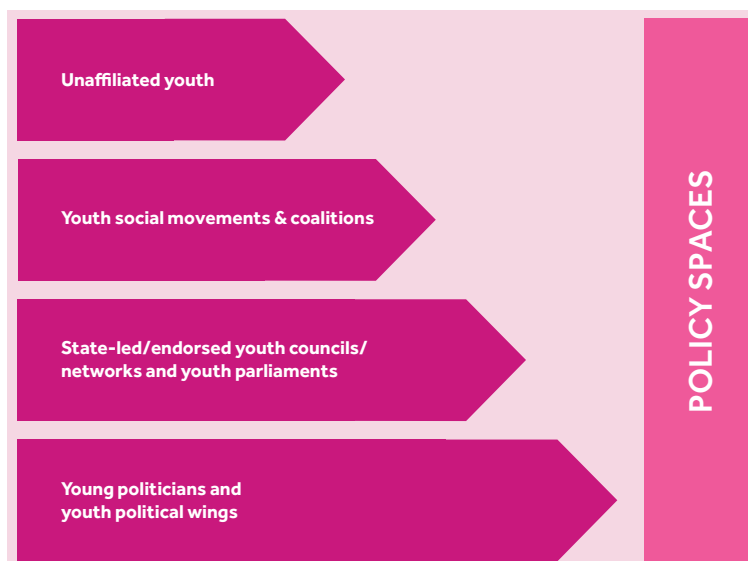
Membership entitlement: 'A person's voice may count because her interests are involved'. This would mean the membership of that person in a group affected by a development trend/policy.

In a broader sense, this means all youth as a social cohort marginalised due to age. Yet more specifically, considering how policies mostly affect **marginalised** youth groups, this could be young people in agriculture, those in blue collar labour, low-income urban migrants (both international and national), poor young girls and boys, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, young people in locations of armed conflict and transition states, and so on. These young people would also represent other members of their group.

Enlightenment relevance: 'The person's perspective and the reasons behind it bring important insights and discernments into an evaluation, and there is a case for listening to that assessment, whether or not the person is a directly involved part'.

Representation is best when it is self-representation. However, this does not prevent visionary/enlightened individuals, often youth leaders or adults from more privileged backgrounds, who themselves are not affected by the issue/issues, but have a particularly unique, transformational point of view, from participating as leaders/lobbyists. This would mark solidarity with marginalised groups.

Figure 7.2 Youth groups and distance from policy spaces



Young politicians (see Section 10.3.3), youth political wings and state-led or state-endorsed youth groups such as national youth services councils, youth club federations and youth parliaments might have the greatest levels of access to, and acceptance in, policy-making domains (even though there is a clear possibility of youth–adult tensions *among* politicians or mainstream institutions). Youth social movements/coalitions may have a more tenuous, and strained, access to and a greater distance from policy domains. Yet access to planning meetings/community hearings etc. is still possible through dialogue and negotiation.

The most marginalised group in this context becomes unaffiliated youth who are not organised, such as migrants, refugees, poor youth in informal employment and so on. So, while greater efforts must be made to bring youth social movements into decision-making processes compared with the incorporation of state-supported groups, even greater efforts need to be made to involve unaffiliated youth.

Of course, policy distance does not necessarily correlate with levels of acceptance of social groups. For example, it is likely that unaffiliated youth groups will be more readily accepted within policy domains than organised youth movements whose lobbies may significantly challenge the status quo. Box 7.4 explores ways in which governments can engage with young people on policy-making.

Box 7.4 How can governments seek to engage youth social movements and self-organised marginalised youth?

Youth social movements fall outside the agency-led forms of youth participation that this section mostly addresses. Many young people that join movements do so because they don't believe in the efficacy of mainstream processes and/or they fear that their agendas will be co-opted and led by adults. In some instances, they may view the formal structures for youth engagement (parliaments, councils) as spaces for elite youth. In this regard, it is important that departments strive to reach out by:

- a. Ensuring that public consultation spaces visibly call for young people to participate via civil society groups and targeted media outlets.
- b. Considering using digital ways of connecting with young people; for example, see the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) U-report: a social messaging tool,¹⁸ which allows young women and men to respond to polls and report issues. In Uganda, this tool has proved to be a promising way to monitor education and child protection efforts, as well as be a catalyst for more responsible and responsive governance.

During the World Conference on Youth held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2014, ministers pledged to support youth organisations and NYCs 'to reach out to self-organised groups of marginalized young people'.¹⁹ In practice, however, the evidence worldwide is that the links between independent groups and the state are widening, rather than narrowing.

7.8 Building capacity for participation²⁰

Capacity building for participation involves building the capacity of young people for informed participation, and building the capacity of institutions to be able to attitudinally and structurally integrate youth participation into their structures (see Box 7.5).

7.9 Reporting the impact of youth participation

The interagency document *Critical Agents of Change in the 2030 Agenda: Youth-Inclusive Governance Indicators for National Level Monitoring*²¹ sets out indicator development and monitoring guidance for Targets 16.6 (institutions), 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making) and 16.10 (public access to information and fundamental freedoms) with a specific focus on youth, which enables the monitoring of youth participation processes and their impact. It proposes three types of indicators: structural (the existence of institutions and policies), process (activities, resources or initiatives; actions

Box 7.5 Enhancing youth participation capacity

1. **Information provision and youth-led information creation:** Informed participation is not possible without access to relevant and reliable information (UNCRC Article 17, UDHR Article 19, SDG Target 16.10). This, of course, includes supporting young people to create their own information and knowledge through youth-led research processes, which is an often overlooked component of information and knowledge creation (Chapters 9, 17, 22).
2. **Skills, confidence and influence:** Participation is essentially an interplay of power – that between adults and youth. The more marginalised the youth groups, the greater the power distance. Therefore, ensuring that marginalised groups are adequately capacitated to participate in policy domains is a fundamental role of a functioning democracy. Skills for evidence gathering and advocacy often need to be advanced to contend with different interests that are brought to the table, including the confidence to engage in the formal spaces where many young people feel uncomfortable. Issues of language and translation are also critical factors to consider in enabling the participation of the most marginalised.
3. **Organisational capacity:** How do institutions reflect on their own capacity to support youth participation and enhance such capacity where required, including building attitudes, knowledge and skills, building safe spaces for participation, and implementing facilitative participation mechanisms (see Box 7.1 above and the Commonwealth's Youth Participation Practice Standards,²² Annex 3).
4. **Managing 'positive disruptions':** Genuine youth participation also means potential positive disruptions to adult–youth power relations and the questioning of received wisdom around development planning. Organisational capacities should be enhanced to respond to these 'disruptions' in constructive ways, whereby the best interests of young people²³ are at the core of decision-making.

taken to achieve change) and outcome (change in the lived experience of the target) indicators. Box 7.6 elaborates on this.

7.10 Conclusion and reflections

Youth participation is a prerequisite for youth mainstreaming. Meaningful, transformational youth participation requires setting up criteria that acknowledge youth participation as an outcome in itself in enhancing young people's self-esteem, confidence and meeting their developmental rights, but also as a means to attain social equality between youth and adults. In our case, this is particularly for young people, with a focus on marginalised groups.

Deep, reflective processes must occur, and clear criteria should be set for how youth participation is defined and implemented

Box 7.6 Youth-Inclusive Indicators process for Targets 16.7 and 16.10

Proposed process indicators:

- Target 16.7 example: Existence of national, subnational and local-level policy that requires public bodies to consult with citizens in decision-making (include youth);
- Target 16.10: Existence and implementation of constitutional and structural guarantees for public access to information available in accessible formats (including for youth).

Proposed outcome indicator:

- Target 16.7 example: 'The number of cases where public policy has been developed, changed or revised based on civil society/youth feedback'.

within international and national agencies in all sectors. Otherwise, we all face the danger of implementing heavy, expensive and elite participation structures that reinforce the very inequality we are trying to combat.



Box 7.7 Reflections on Chapter 7: Transformational Youth Participation for Youth Mainstreaming

- Are the institutions you work with open to youth participation in decision-making?
- Do they have formal mechanisms to enable this participation?
- Even when we are working with young people, are we only working with those young people whose views we are 'comfortable' listening to?
- Do we allow youth voices that are legitimate and often challenge our assumptions of development planning?
- Are youth social movements and young politicians able to significantly influence the realisation of youth interests? If so, how?
- How do we enable ourselves to exert such influence in healthy and constructive ways?
- What needs to be done to strengthen youth participation in institutional and planning contexts?

Notes

- 1 Crowley 2014.
- 2 Refer also to Sen 2008, Capabilities Framework, in Chapter 1.4.
- 3 Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre, 2012.

- 4 The Youth-Inclusive Indicators document (Plan et al. 2016) suggests indicators that measure the influence of youth groups on policy and practice change throughout processes for selected targets of SDG 16.
- 5 See also DFID-CSO Youth Working Group 2010.
- 6 Commonwealth Youth Programme and UNICEF 2005.
- 7 This is adapted from the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) document *Youth Participation and AYAC's Work* (N.D.).
- 8 AYAC 2010.
- 9 AYAC N.D., 4.
- 10 White 1996, 6–15.
- 11 Several Commonwealth-supported tools for youth workers and young people have modules that facilitate youth-led research: India, *Co-Creating Youth Spaces* (Commonwealth Youth Programme 2014); Sri Lanka, *Ocean in a Drop Youth Workers' Training Manual* (Patel et al. 2013).
- 12 DFID-CSO Youth Working Group 2010, 3.
- 13 Channels Television 2013.
- 14 A marginality mapping tool is available from the Commonwealth Secretariat et al. 2013.
- 15 White 1996, 9.
- 16 Nuggehalli 2014.
- 17 Sen 2009.
- 18 UNICEF N.D.
- 19 World Conference on Youth 2014, 8.
- 20 The Sustainable Governance Index indicator on 'citizen participatory competence' is instrumental in assessing this.
- 21 Plan et al. 2016.
- 22 Commonwealth Youth Programme and UNICEF 2005.
- 23 The best interest principle is at the core of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is a critical concept for planning with and for all young people, not just those below 18.

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