



General Assembly

Distr.: General
30 August 2023

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fourth session

11 September–6 October 2023

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Youth participation and engagement in intergovernmental bodies: challenges and opportunities

Report of the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, Livingstone Sewanyana*

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/11 and General Assembly resolution 77/215. In the report, the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, Livingstone Sewanyana, focuses on the opportunities and challenges faced by youth in participating and engaging in intergovernmental forums. The Independent Expert explores promising practices and the need for young people to be involved internationally, both in terms of engagement in the public sphere in decision-making processes and in the civic space as young human rights defenders.

The Independent Expert also makes recommendations to address those challenges, in particular concerning the economic, social and political empowerment of youth, promoting the role of youth in local and international decision-making structures and processes, and adopting laws and strategies that enhance the presence and participation of youth in various areas that affect their future.

* The present report was submitted after the deadline in order to reflect the most recent information.



I. Introduction

1. The present report of the Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, Livingstone Sewanyana, is submitted to the Human Rights Council pursuant to Council resolution 51/11 and General Assembly resolution 77/215.

2. It is estimated that there are over 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 in the world today, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of the global population.¹ By 2030, the number of young people is projected to grow by 7 per cent, to nearly 1.3 billion. Most young people live in developing countries and it is estimated that some 500 million young people aged 15 to 24 live on less than \$2 a day.²

3. The decisions and outcomes of intergovernmental forums have an impact on international and national policymaking, including policies targeting youth. Effective youth participation and engagement in intergovernmental forums is therefore necessary in order for them to express their views on issues touching their interests and needs, identify the challenges and obstacles they face and enable them to be agents of positive transformative change. Their contributions to society understood in a broad sense, including in international forums, are crucial to the advancement of human rights and the establishment of a democratic and equitable international order. Such intergovernmental forums include those under the auspices of the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, as well as other global and regional bodies.

4. Since 2015, the Security Council and the various relevant organs of the Secretariat have formulated a number of resolutions on youth, peace and security, emphasizing the important and significant role that youth can play in achieving sustainable development by preventing crisis and advancing peace.³ Youth participation constitutes a main component of the key pillars of those resolutions, namely protection, prevention, partnerships and reintegration. In the resolutions, the various bodies urge that the voice of youth be amplified in decision-making processes at the local, national, regional and international levels, encouraging Member States to create and implement mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes.

5. In 2018, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Youth Strategy, formulated by the Office of the Secretary-General to promote the effective and meaningful participation of youth in international forums organized by the United Nations, usually with other relevant entities. The strategy as formulated aspires to: “A world in which the human rights of every young person are realized; that ensures every young person is empowered to achieve their full potential; and that recognizes young people’s agency, resilience and their positive contribution as agents of change.”⁴ A recent United Nations policy brief prepared ahead of the Summit of the Future, to be held in 2024, notes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes targets related to youth in all its 17 Goals, amounting to 90 out of the total of 169 targets. That represents a real motivation for young people to participate in achieving and benefiting from the Sustainable Development Goals and underlines the importance of ensuring that youth play a major role as partners and participants in their implementation. The policy brief also details how critical the participation of youth is to the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and how many Governments have taken steps to promote meaningful youth participation since the adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth.

6. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has played an important role in promoting the participation of young people. Its work in that area provides useful insights and guidance in promoting youth engagement. Since 2013, OHCHR has organized several meetings and consultations, bringing together youth

¹ Several definitions of youth are used by the United Nations system, with World Youth Reports referring to young people as aged from 15 to 24. The present report does not aim to define a particular age. For an overview of different definitions see [A/HRC/39/33](#), paras. 13–15.

² See <https://www.unfpa.org/youth-participation-leadership>.

³ See all relevant resolutions on youth involvement, available from Youth Resolutions United Nations For Youth and <https://youth4peace.info/UNSCR2250/Introduction>.

⁴ See *Youth 2030. Working with and for Young People*.

representatives from different backgrounds and from different regions of the world,⁵ a process that led to the adoption of Human Rights Council resolution 32/1 in 2016 on youth and human rights. To date, the Council has adopted three further resolutions relating to youth and human rights.⁶ In resolution 32/1, the Council reaffirmed the need for the international community to develop and implement strategies that aim to give young people meaningful opportunities for their full, effective and constructive participation in society. In its three other resolutions relating to youth and human rights, the Council underscored the need to promote youth participation in political and public affairs and mainstream the rights of young people into the work of the United Nations human rights mechanisms, as well as advocate for youth participation in human rights intergovernmental forums.

7. The human rights treaty bodies have also made observations on youth involvement and have called for special measures of protection and assistance to be taken on behalf of all children and young persons, including in their general comments,⁷ while special procedure mandate holders have also made youth a focus of their thematic work and/or country visit reports and formulated relevant recommendations.⁸

8. The present report aims to identify some of the main opportunities for youth involvement in the international sphere, both within and outside the United Nations system, and to explore the different challenges and opportunities that young people are facing while engaging and participating in intergovernmental forums. The Independent Expert also formulates relevant recommendations to overcome these challenges. Such recommendations are primarily targeted at Member States, but also at civil society organizations, international organizations and other relevant stakeholders who have a vision to promote youth engagement in relevant spheres.

9. The preparation of the present report has benefited from a comprehensive desk review and submissions made by relevant stakeholders who responded to the call for inputs, which will be available on the web page of the mandate.⁹

A. Youth participation and engagement at the international level

10. Youth participation in intergovernmental forums is an important aspect of the advancement of democracy, equality and rights, as it allows young people to participate in political processes and be involved in decisions that affect their lives and future. It is based on the principle that everyone, regardless of age, should be able to participate in the formulation of policies and in governance. The basis for youth participation in intergovernmental forums is rooted in the recognition that youth have unique perspectives and experiences that deserve to be taken into account and also a human right to participation. Their voices and opinions are invaluable in finding solutions to complex issues and making inclusive and representative decisions for the whole of society, such as the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals and action on climate change, peace and security, and the environment. A key principle of youth engagement is to create accessible and inclusive spaces for young people to engage with intergovernmental entities. That includes providing opportunities for young people to participate in meetings, discussions and decision-making processes, in both the civic space and the political sphere. It also includes the need to remove barriers that may prevent young people from participating, such as language barriers, lack of information or limited resources.

⁵ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/youth>.

⁶ Resolutions 35/14, 41/13 and 48/12.

⁷ See, for example, [A/HRC/39/33](#), para. 20.

⁸ Special procedure mandate holders have issued over 142 thematic and country visit reports containing over 288 recommendations concerning youth rights or involvement. In 2023, they have issued a number of recommendations involving youth. See, for example, [A/HRC/52/33/Add.2](#), [A/HRC/53/28/Add.1](#), [A/HRC/53/28/Add.2](#) and [A/HRC/53/35 Add.1](#).

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/call-input-thematic-report-youth-participation-and-engagement>.

1. Intergovernmental forums and youth engagement

11. Intergovernmental forums play an essential role in nurturing international cooperation, dialogue and coordination. Such forums provide a platform for countries to discuss and address global challenges, such as climate change, economic development and security. They also facilitate the sharing of promising practices and the development of joint solutions to complex problems.

12. Intergovernmental forums are instrumental in fostering diplomatic exchanges, enabling policies to be coordinated and assisting in the process of developing universally accepted norms and standards. There are also a number of international forums designed specifically for youth that are organized by regional organizations, such as the African Union Youth Humanitarian Forum, the Islamic Cooperation Youth Forum, the European Youth Event, the European Youth Parliament and the Global Youth Forum, to mention but a few.

13. While a majority of intergovernmental forums are convened under the aegis of the United Nations, there are also a plethora of forums convened by other intergovernmental bodies, including regional bodies. Each forum concentrates on a particular topic, such as peace and security, commerce and economic cooperation, human rights, health or environmental protection. These forums play a crucial role in promoting international cooperation and resolving global issues that require global solutions, such as climate change, poverty reduction, human rights and conflict resolution, through diplomatic means. They also provide a platform for Member States to discuss and address common challenges and those efforts have contributed to significant progress in various areas of global concern.

14. International law, norms and principles, as well as the dissemination of shared values, all benefit from the discussions that take place in intergovernmental forums because they give Member States an opportunity to coordinate their policies and actions. Intergovernmental forums frequently conduct research, produce reports and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices among Member States, promoting mutual learning and capacity-building. Unless Member States expressly consent to being legally bound by intergovernmental decisions and resolutions, they are not legally binding. Nonetheless, the agreements reached and the norms established within such forums frequently have a substantial impact on national policies and practices. They have an effect on the international setting in which Governments function and can provide guidance for domestic policymaking.

15. Intergovernmental forums are indispensable venues for multilateral diplomacy, negotiation and international cooperation. On regional and global issues, they promote dialogue, facilitate consensus-building, and cultivate collaboration. Through these forums, countries can collaborate to address shared problems, establish shared norms and pursue global peace, security, prosperity and sustainable development.

16. Tackling the question of young people's involvement in intergovernmental forums requires a clear understanding of what is expected from their involvement more generally on the international scene. Youth can be defined as the period of time in which a person develops from a dependent child to an independent adult. That period of transition, regardless of a specific age definition, differs from country to country, based on certain factors, such as cultural, social and economic factors.

17. In recent years, youth participation and engagement in national and international forums have garnered considerable attention and significance as young people have become more engaged in addressing global concerns and crafting the future. Their engagement in these forums has poured much-needed energy and new ideas into discussions on a worldwide scale. The United Nations recognizes the uniqueness of today's youth and the wide range of contributions they can make to society. Young people are therefore urged to take part in intergovernmental forums and decision-making processes to have their voices heard and their needs met. This not only empowers them but also helps to create more inclusive and effective policies. As such, it is important to continue to provide opportunities for young people to engage in these forums. Through their participation, the international community can work towards a more inclusive and sustainable world for generations to come. Young people are not only the future leaders of society but are also the present drivers of change who can propose concrete solutions to global issues. Their ideas and perspectives are essential in shaping policies that affect them directly and beyond. Investing in youth engagement and

empowerment is therefore a key investment in the future. In its resolution 2250 (2015), the Security Council acknowledged the contribution young people could make to peacebuilding and countering violent extremism.

2. Different models and opportunities for youth engagement in intergovernmental forums

18. The United Nations has had long experience in engaging young people in the international sphere, promoting their participation through a number of initiatives. Some of these were initiated within the Secretariat, with specific frameworks dedicated to youth that are aimed at increasing and promoting youth participation in decision-making as a means of achieving peace and development.

19. United Nations specialized agencies have also launched specific programmes encouraging youth leadership and involvement, promoting entrepreneurship and encouraging young people to become changemakers by putting their vision and plans into practice.

20. Other international platforms also enable youth to take part in global discussions on trade, finance, investment and sustainable development. Such global forums allow young people to exchange experiences, ideas and perspectives on how to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and give them the opportunity to engage with policymakers, civil society organizations, academia and other relevant stakeholders.

21. By way of example, the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, the United Nations Youth Strategy and the annual Economic and Social Council Youth Forum are just some of the United Nations youth engagement platforms that give young people a voice in shaping international policy and priorities. One of the main aims of the United Nations Youth Strategy is to open new ways to engage with youth, involving them and amplifying their voices, increasing the United Nations focus on their access to education and health services.

22. There are several other international youth-led forums, such as the World Youth Forum, One Young World, the Model United Nations and the World Bank Group Youth Summit, which give young people from all over the world the opportunity to learn about global issues, share their perspectives on those issues, network with their peers and develop their potential as leaders.

23. As far as their main contributions to such forums are concerned, the involvement of youth represents an important tool for advocacy, enabling them to amplify the voices of young people globally and encourage policymaking. Young people also use technology and social media to organize their activism and create positive change, bringing new views to problem-solving and offering inventive solutions to difficult global concerns.¹⁰

24. Such involvement also serves to promote social entrepreneurship projects managed by young people and encourages them in particular to find long-term solutions to current social issues.

25. With their ability to promote sustainable development, social progress and peace, the participation and empowerment of young people have emerged as essential tenets of global decision-making processes.

3. Participation in intergovernmental forums in the aftermath of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic

26. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the holding of conferences and events around the world and many intergovernmental forums had to be cancelled or the participation in person in such events postponed. During the past two years, due to restrictions related to COVID-19, the United Nations and other international organizations have had to pivot to online modalities of working and holding conferences.¹¹ That situation has evolved today and many large-scale events have been organized in hybrid format.

¹⁰ See Elaine Ho, Amelia Clarke, and Ilona Dougherty, "Youth-led social change: topics, engagement types, organizational types, strategies, and impacts", *Futures*, vol. 67 (March 2015).

¹¹ See, for example, <https://www.ungm.org/Public/Notice/189571>.

27. The COVID-19 pandemic considerably affected youth participation in international forums, but also provided new opportunities. Events conducted in hybrid format have provided a great alternative to traditional in-person events. Since the lack of funding for youth-led organizations is one of the main reasons for the poor representation of youth in intergovernmental forums, online participation gives young people with limited financial resources the opportunity to participate in meetings and avoid the costs of travel. Participants from different backgrounds and cultures can access hybrid events in different geographic regions. Nevertheless, hybrid and online events come with challenges such as Internet connectivity issues and costs.

B. Challenges faced by young people in engaging and participating in intergovernmental forums

28. A main purpose of the present report is to identify some of the challenges and opportunities encountered while engaging with intergovernmental forums. The findings set out below are based on submissions received from relevant stakeholders and on a desk review.

29. The concerns and efforts of the United Nations in involving young people in its work, and in addressing national and global challenges that intersect with the needs and concerns of young people require the difficulties and challenges faced by young people all over the world to be overcome, so that they can participate effectively in influencing the international decision-making process.

30. The submissions received from stakeholders indicate that, in spite of the several initiatives that exist at the international level, there is still limited representation of young people from the Global South, in particular in global intergovernmental forums. Lack of financial resources, restricted access to decision-making processes in their own countries and limited opportunities for involvement at the international level are cited as major hindrances to young people's participation. It is also noted that gender stereotypes and minority status contribute to the challenges young people face in accessing such forums.

31. In addition, youth participation in global governance is hindered by age limitations and ageism, while the involvement of young people below the age of 18 in matters of global governance remains a contested issue in some forums.

32. Furthermore, misperceptions of youth create barriers to youth representation and result in the contributions and efforts of young people, including as peacebuilders and human rights defenders, being overlooked. In some countries, unfortunately, young human rights activists may be subjected to attacks and reprisals and be in need of protection.

33. Young women face particular challenges. As noted by the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls in its report on girls and young women's activism: "In general, children and young people are confronted with adult-centrist and paternalistic attitudes. They are often treated as incapable of making decisions about their lives because of a perceived lack of maturity or experience, or are considered 'troublemakers', unable to constructively contribute to public debates and thus addressed with hostility." The Working Group also pointed out that girls faced additional challenges, as they were often discouraged from speaking their minds and engaging outside the domestic sphere. Their chances to engage in activism were considerably limited, they were told that their place was at home and very limited time was available to them to devote to activism, given the disproportionate duties they shouldered in the home. The Working Group further noted that parental authority and overprotective approaches were often exercised to limit the freedom of children and young people and that in the case of girls and young women, those barriers were dramatically compounded by predominant gender stereotypes and patriarchal social norms.¹²

34. While it is commendable that the Security Council, the General Assembly and other United Nations bodies have passed a number of resolutions on youth, peace and security

¹² [A/HRC/50/25](#), paras. 28 and 29.

since 2015,¹³ there is no global framework for youth participation at the international level, in particular in areas where young people are the most involved, such as sustainable development or climate change.

35. There is a risk that youth will have few opportunities to shape policies and international agreements because political institutions do not adequately recognize their political participation.¹⁴ For young people, that can lead to a lack of representation and a lack of opportunities to raise their voices, ultimately hindering progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁵ It is crucial for Governments and international organizations to actively engage with and empower youth in decision-making processes to ensure that their perspectives are heard and valued.

36. Keeping young people involved in international forums is difficult because of time constraints, a lack of genuine political will and competition for limited resources.¹⁶ However, it is crucial to find ways to sustain their engagement as they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to the table. One solution could be to provide mentorship and leadership opportunities for young people to take on active roles in decision-making processes.

37. The vast majority of initiatives led by youth are self-funded or function on a voluntary basis. While their participation in conferences and forums at the regional or international level is promoted and encouraged by international organizations, without adequate funding the equitable representation and participation of young people at the global level will remain problematic.

38. The political marginalization of youth is a major obstacle, which results in a lack of representation and risks silencing the voices of many young people across the globe. The Independent Expert considers that it is crucial for Member States and international organizations to actively engage with and empower youth in decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and valued.

39. Since the period of youth is a sensitive age, the Independent Expert calls for global understanding of the behaviours and specificities of young people in facilitating their participation and designing targeted policies, strategies and channels.

40. Weak participation in civil and political life is considered one of the most important obstacles that prevent young people from exercising their right to make decisions that affect their future and also prevent them from acquiring relevant experience in the issues and challenges that are addressed in international forums. Such forums often require young people to have experience in humanitarian and/or development work, which they should be able to acquire through their active involvement in civil and political life at the local level. If avenues for youth engagement and participation are not available, this may result in loss of confidence in the effectiveness of policymaking bodies to bring about the desired changes for the youth population and in their disengagement from civil and political life.

41. Economic constraints, exacerbated by high rates of poverty and unemployment among the youth in different regions prevent them from engaging with or having access to opportunities to attend and engage in discussions in global forums.¹⁷

42. The situation of precarity and extreme poverty for youth in the Global South is made evident by the digital divide and illiteracy in dealing with new technologies, depriving many young people of knowledge and awareness of the channels of engagement in international forums and of the opportunity to interact with their peers in other countries.

¹³ See, for example, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/youth-resolutions.html>.

¹⁴ Kate Offerdahl, Alicia Evangelides and Maggie Powers, “Overcoming youth marginalization”, Columbia Global Policy Initiative (March 2014).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization Bangkok, “Breaking down barriers holding back young people on International Youth Day”, 22 August 2019.

¹⁷ See International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022* (2022).

II. Conclusions and recommendations

43. In the light of the analysis presented in the present report, it is clear that further efforts are needed to facilitate the participation and engagement of youth in global intergovernmental forums.

44. Whether convened by the United Nations or other global or regional bodies, intergovernmental forums must actively promote youth participation. The participation of young people in decision-making processes at the international level is one of the main pillars of good governance.

45. Involving youth in decision-making processes enables them to demand accountability and concrete actions from their Governments to address the issues which directly impact them, such as youth unemployment and youth economic empowerment.

46. The Independent Expert recommends that Member States:

(a) Provide training, mentorship and capacity-building opportunities to equip young people with the necessary skills, knowledge and networks to effectively engage in international forums and decision-making processes;

(b) Ensure that such capacity-building opportunities are gender-sensitive and accessible to young people from diverse backgrounds and regions. That will help to promote a more inclusive and representative youth voice in global decision-making;

(c) Provide resources, including financial and technological resources, and platforms for youth-led projects and groups, giving young people a voice in finding solutions to global problems;

(d) Prioritize initiatives run by young people, including young women, from marginalized communities and include access to funding, because such young people frequently face greater obstacles to accessing resources and opportunities than their peers;

(e) Provide long-term mechanisms for youth engagement through fostering collaboration between youth-led groups, international institutions and national Governments. That can create a platform for young people to voice their opinions and concerns, and work together towards achieving common goals. Partnerships with private sector organizations can also provide valuable resources and expertise to support youth-led initiatives;

(f) Encourage youth participation in decision-making processes, ensuring that all voices from different backgrounds and marginalized communities are heard. By taking such steps, the involvement of young people in international affairs can be increased and work for a more equitable and sustainable future for all people undertaken;

(g) Formulate inclusive development policies that accommodate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in government plans, while ensuring that youth and youth-led organizations are engaged in their formulation and execution;

(h) Conduct systematic studies on communication, participatory behaviour and youth characteristics to design and execute government communications policies and youth-oriented participation strategies;

(i) Provide an appropriate and safe environment for youth participation and empower youth to participate in civil and political life by enacting laws and adopting procedures that empower them to express their needs and aspirations and define their framework for action. Provide legal protection, financial support and training on advocacy tools to ensure the effectiveness of youth participation and promote their role in decision-making;

(j) Encourage a culture of voluntarism and people-centred engagement among organizations that express the needs of youth and youth-led organizations, while providing financial and technical support to such organizations;

(k) **Develop youth capabilities in the field of communications and information technology, facilitating safe and easy access to the Internet for young people, especially in rural areas, and develop governance of the communications and information technology sector so that young people can obtain information and data that facilitate and enhance their participation in decision-making on issues of concern to them;**

(l) **Conduct substantive studies, based on data and evidence, of the needs and concerns of youth, with their participation and that of youth-led organizations, and develop national strategies that accommodate those needs and define frameworks and areas for youth participation in such a way as to promote the role of youth and their effective participation;**

(m) **Adopt national programmes for youth delegates that allow young people to compete and be creative in the political and civic sphere and enable them to participate in the United Nations system;**

(n) **Promote gender equality and diversity in all programmes that promote youth participation in intergovernmental forums;**

(o) **Refer to the guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs, in particular the guidelines on participation at the international level:**

(i) **The right to participate in public affairs for youth constitutes a reflection of the exercise of the rights to equality and non-discrimination, to freedom of opinion and expression and to peaceful assembly and association and should be fully respected and enjoyed by all individuals;**

(ii) **States should create and maintain a safe and enabling environment that is conducive to the exercise of the right to participate in public affairs, including the work of international organizations;**

(iii) **States should respect, protect and facilitate the rights to freedom of expression and to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in connection with the exercise of the right to participate at the international and regional levels;**

(iv) **States should facilitate the timely issuance of visas and other administrative papers required for youth wishing to attend and participate in international forums and conferences.**
