

How to get youth to participate in decision making?

Have you ever wondered why some children and youth are very active in making decisions in their communities and in politics, while others are not? Is this something that you would like to change? This is a topic Equitas explored during an online conversation we hosted with human rights educators from around the world. We wanted to understand what was needed to get youth to participate, and then reflect on good practices for youth participation in decision making. In this article, we will share with you what we learned in the online conversation.

What is youth participation in decision making?

Youth participation in decision making means that youth have a meaningful voice in matters that affect their lives. There are many different contexts, levels and ways of participating; for example, planning the activities at a local community center, acting as a mentor to younger children, getting involved in local politics or participating in a youth forum.

Why is youth participation important?

Because when youth participate there is creativity and innovation, and most importantly because youth understand best what youth need. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General explained the importance of youth participation: "No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline."

How can you encourage youth to participate in decision making?

Equitas hosted an online conversation on our website with human rights educators around the world to discuss how to encourage youth to participate in decision making. We posted key questions on the topic and we learned from the discussion that there are important elements that need to be present for youth to participate. When these elements are not present, youth may seem disengaged. This is not because they are not interested, but rather because the necessary conditions are not present for them to participate. The elements that came out of this discussion can be categorized into three components: capacity, motivation and opportunity. All of the components are interrelated, and in this article we will explain how each one works and share examples from our online conversation of how they are put into practice.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Participation is a fundamental right recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other international human rights standards and mechanisms.

In order to promote youth participation, three main components need to be present: capacity, motivation and opportunity.



CAPACITY

What is it?

Capacity includes the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that youth need in order to participate effectively. Capacity will, of course, vary according to the inherent strengths of individual youth, but it will also be shaped by the individual's life experience, by opportunities afforded to him/her to express thoughts and ideas, to work in teams, to address challenges, and develop self-esteem.

How can you build youth's capacity to participate?

One of the main barriers that youth face to participation is that they lack the appropriate training, knowledge or skills to do so. During the online conversation, human rights educators expressed that there is a need to provide learning opportunities to facilitate the involvement of youth. Furthermore, the earlier this is done, the more likely they are to actively participate in their society as they grow. Below are a couple examples where capacity building is included in projects for youth.



Provide training to prepare youth to participate

One example which was shared during the online conversation was of a radio project in Tanzania which aims to build the capacity of children and youth to advocate for children's rights. In this project, youth chose the issues they wanted to discuss on the radio and they helped plan the recording and airing of live shows. During the radio shows, youth led the broadcast using questions they prepared in advance with the radio staff. The children and youth actively participated in the radio project because they were supported throughout the process and were well prepared. They learned about children's rights in order to have relevant content to discuss, and they were trained on how to use radio equipment, how to record and how to broadcast. This project demonstrates how children and youth can become empowered as they build their knowledge and confidence to speak about issues that are important to them.

Train youth to build capacity of other youth

Another example of building capacity was from Canada, where youth were recruited to educate younger children on human rights and to promote positive change in their communities. At the beginning of the project, few of the youth understood the context of human rights; however, the youth got the opportunity to participate in three trainings on human rights, children's rights, and facilitation skills, and by then end of these trainings the youth were motivated and prepared to host a conference on children's rights. Youth participated in the planning process for the conference and took on leadership roles. A human rights educator explained that "this experience demonstrated how not only did the youth promote human rights values to the children in attendance, but also greatly developed their own skills and sense of self-worth."

MOTIVATION

What is it?

Motivation is the desire or willingness of individual youth to participate, and possibly to commit to involvement or action over the longer term. Motivation varies according to the personality, preferences and interests of individual youth, but is also influenced by his/her own experience and the opportunities afforded to him/her to change things in his/her own life or community.

How can you motivate youth to participate?

When youth are not motivated, it is a barrier to their participation. In the online conversation, human rights educators explained that lack of motivation is generally because the issues youth are offered to participate in are not relevant to their lives. In some cases, youth may be discouraged from participating because of cultural or traditional practices which limit their participation. For youth to participate it is important to include youth in the decision making process from the beginning, by asking them what is important to them and by fostering a sense of belonging. Below are two examples from our online conversation which illustrate creative ways of motivating youth to participate.

Ask youth what is important to them

A human rights educator from Cameroun discussed the growing involvement of youth in local decision making in his city and explained that this happened because youth were consulted directly about their participation. The organization implemented a strategy to reach out to youth by travelling to communities and contacting youth in areas where youth already congregate (e.g.: sports fields, theatres, pools, parties). During these visits, they asked youth simple questions about youth participation, such as what their interests are, what they think about participation of youth in local politics, why they would want to participate in politics and what would allow them to participate in politics. Understanding the point of view of youth enabled the organization to plan for how best to engage youth in the local decision making processes.

Give youth responsibilities

Giving youth responsibility motivates them to participate. A human rights educator from Afghanistan shared his example of a youth-led organization, which works to improve the lives of vulnerable people. In this organization youth are responsible for making strategic decisions about the future direction of the organization, as well as the implementation of the strategic plans. He noted that “once youth are given the opportunity to make decisions, they develop ownership and they act responsibly and with commitment.”

OPPORTUNITY

What is it?

Opportunity refers to any situation where youth can participate effectively. Opportunities vary according to local capacity to recognize the needs and interests of young people and to create spaces, events or circumstances favourable to youth participation.

How to create opportunities for youth participation?

Often youth do not participate in decision making because they do not have the opportunity to do so. Sometimes they are limited in their participation because of traditional norms and sometimes they do not have opportunities because youth are perceived as “problems” rather than as active members of society who can effectively participate. In order for youth to participate, it is important to provide them with accessible and safe opportunities to participate and to be leaders. The following examples demonstrate a couple ways of doing so.



Involve family members and traditional leaders

A human rights educator from Senegal, shared an example of how youth made real changes in their communities by involving actors who in the past had limited their participation. In this example, young girls often had to quit school young for early marriages. The organization decided to work in partnership with the teachers from the local schools to meet with youth to find out why this was happening. Following these meetings the youth were motivated to change this situation. With the support of the organization and the teachers, youth organized public awareness events where they shared their concerns about early marriage with their families. When the parents understood the concerns of the youth they got involved as well. Then, together with the youth, they raised awareness among traditional and local leaders and got them involved in working toward change. By including everyone in their project youth avoided having to go against traditional norms. The result was that a convention was signed to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 years old. The youth also created a local council which meets regularly with the village council for youth to give input on important decisions that affect their village and their lives.

Provide safe and welcoming space for participation

Providing youth with a space to build their capacity, become leaders and get involved in variety of projects are other important factors for encouraging youth to participate in decision making. A human rights educator from Albania shared an example from his organization which provided opportunities for youth to do internships and also offered a welcoming space where youth have the opportunity to develop their own initiatives. In this example, the youth began their internship and soon felt the need to do more work to improve their community. They decided to draft a “Social Contract” and “Youth Priorities” for the local government. They took initiative because they had the space to do so, and this proved very successful as their project grew from 8 youth to 120. The human rights educator noted that youth “ took ownership of the initiative from the beginning and then each one invited their friends, sharing their ideas ... young people got informed and expressed their interest to join the project”. Because they had a safe and welcoming space the youth were motivated to work together, get involved and participate in political decisions that affect their lives.

What lessons can we draw from this?

The fundamental lesson from the online conversation is that given the appropriate conditions, youth are capable of being active decision-makers in their communities. Although we discussed the three components separately in this article, it is important to note that capacity, motivation, and opportunity are inter-related and should all be developed simultaneously in order to encourage youth to participate. The following are some key lessons which can be pulled from our conversation to help get youth involved in decision making:

- ✓ Start from where the youth are at, and progressively build on their skills and knowledge.
- ✓ Train youth so that they can become youth role models.
- ✓ Use a bottom up approach, where youth identify issues that are important to them and come up with solutions that make sense to them.
- ✓ Give youth real responsibilities and they will perform.
- ✓ Involve different actors in their communities, such as their families, decision-makers, and traditional and religious leaders.
- ✓ Provide youth with a safe space where they can build their skills and take initiative.

Finally, we have to keep in mind that although there is no one perfect recipe, genuinely engaging with youth and really involving them in decision making is something that can work in any context.

Thank you to all participants of the online conversation for contributing their insights and examples to this knowledge building and sharing activity on youth participation.