



# Youth Engagement and Empowerment

**Meaningful youth engagement and the empowerment of youth is an intentional participatory process in which young people's ideas, expertise, experiences, and perspectives are integrated throughout programmatic, policy, and institutional decision-making structures so as to best inform outcomes. This Tools discusses the importance and benefits related to engaging youth in water governance processes, highlights key challenges and consideration relating to youth engagement, identifies approaches that can be used to further promote meaningful participation of youth, and highlight noteworthy youth water action networks.**

## Rationale for Youth Engagement

About 450 million children live in areas of high and extremely high-water vulnerability (UNICEF, 2021). This means that 1 in 5 children worldwide does not have enough water to meet their needs. The limited accessibility to consistent, clean water heavily impacts young people's future prospects as well as their lives here and now. As the water crisis continues to worsen, wells dry up forcing children to bear the heavy burden of fetching water thus reducing time spent in school, drought diminishes food production, and the young suffer from malnutrition and in some cases (UNICEF, 2017). These impacts also create long-term inequalities as not having basic education can affect their accessibility to employment continuing the cycle of poverty, and limiting future participation in decision making processes.

Far from being mere beneficiaries of a water secure world, youth have been active architects and partners in the development and promotion of improved water management strategies. Young people have always been drivers and influencers for social change through advocacy and on-the ground mobilisation and action, in a variety of areas from environmental injustice to human rights, through street protests, social media, national debates, research and journalism, leading to behavior changes, innovative solutions and increased knowledge and awareness in the wider public. Youth voices, actions and solutions, as well as their reach, courage and willingness to act, have all been essential for the achievement of sustainable development where water is at its core.

Understanding and recognising the importance that water has on the lives of young people, illustrates the need for them to be meaningfully engaged and empowered to influence water decisions. The inclusion and participation of young people is not meant to be a "nice thing to do" but their participation is a right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) it is also included in the 2030 Agenda and many other convention and declarations, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250.

Institutions who listen to and include young people in their decision-making are more likely to develop programmes and policies that reflect young people's experiences, making those programmes more effective while also more efficiently using resources ([OECD, 2018](#)). In addition, experience shows that engaging young people as researchers, evaluators, advocates, and program designers can improve the quality and relevance of data collected and can increase program accountability and support ([Women Deliver, 2016](#)). Recognising the centrality of the role of young people opens the door for meaningful participation from traditionally marginalised people more broadly.

## Barriers to Youth Inclusion

The benefits of youth engagement are substantial, however developing, implementing, and continuing youth engagement strategies while, also measuring their success can be diminished, inhibited or interrupted by a range of barriers. Knowing what these are can assist in reducing their impact and lead to a more effective strategy. These barriers can be grouped into three areas, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional, which themselves can be divided into different elements:

- **Socio-cultural:** (i) Stereotypes: Prevailing societal perception towards youth are often classified on being inexperienced or not knowledgeable, troublesome and naïve. Some other negative attributes commonly attributed to youth include being emotionally driven, uninterested, inconsistent and a lack long-term commitment. (ii) Discrimination: Young people are a heterogeneous group with multiple elements of identity. Even their age may limit their participation in some spaces they can also be excluded based on gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion ([OECD, 2017](#)). (iii) Distrust from repeated tokenistic participation: Young people are often excluded from traditional political engagement platforms, however when they are consulted and their inputs are not acknowledged or it does not shift the result, young people may lose interest and feel disenfranchised. This can foster distrust in various processes and may avoid conventional avenues of engagement ([Women Deliver, 2016](#)).
- **Economic:** (i) Income inequality restricts the participation: Voluntary, non-renumerated engagement of young people's time also comes with opportunity costs. Young people usually forego the opportunity of paid activities when engagement in development work, usually accepting visibility and networking as a good return of their time. Not all young people can afford this resulting in the involuntary exclusion of poorer young persons, which distorts the representation of active youth ([OECD, 2017](#)). (ii) Financial constraints: This also inhibits and endangers the sustainability of youth associations and groups as they are mainly based on volunteer time. There is usually a high turnover of youth as they move from school to the work.
- **Institutional:** (i) Processes: Some processes do not create formalized pathways for youth engagement due to their lack of will or the knowledge on how to involve young people in the processes effectively. (ii) Organisational structure: There can be conflicts with organized cultures e.g. very formal settings perceived to not be apt for young people and procedures where the steps of policy design and planning are held behind closed doors ([OECD, 2017](#)).

## Defining Meaningful Youth Engagement and Empowerment?

Meaningful youth engagement and the empowerment of young people is an intentional participatory process in which young people's ideas, expertise, experiences, and perspectives are integrated throughout programmatic, policy, and institutional decision-making structures so as to best inform outcomes. The process of youth engagement requires young people to be involved in all levels and stages of programme, policy, campaign, and project development, including all stages of design, implementation, and evaluation. Therefore, engaging and empowering young people can be thought of as moving up a ladder with the base of the ladder representing non-participation of youth, the mid-section represents low level of inclusion in the form of one way information sharing and consultation while the top levels describes high level of partnership and empowerment through two-way interactive dialogues, all the way to co-designing and co-decision making (Figure 1).

### Ladder of Participation



Figure 1. Ladder of Participation. Source: [SIWI, 2021](#)

## Approaches to Youth Engagement and Empowerment

There are a number of approaches that can be used to improve the effective and meaningful engagement of youth in water governance:

- **Acceptance and trust of young people's role at the decision-making table:** To further meaningful youth engagement, it is important to acknowledge and identify the negative perceived stereotypes reflected on youth and provide a space that is free of judgment and stigma. For real change to take place, open communication without fear

of repercussion is necessary. This can take a long time as it focuses on a change in behaviour and thinking ([Tool C5.02](#)).

- **Partnerships and opportunities for intergenerational dialogue:** Effective partnership and dialogue, which focus on both the exchange of wisdom and insight between young people and older allies or mentors, as well as building capacity through learning, information-sharing, and movement-building opportunities, is needed ([Tools B4](#)). Formalised structures with clear opportunities for iterative dialogue and open lines of communication are necessary to gain their insights and contributions.
- **Allocation of technical and financial resources to enhance young people's capacity to effectively fill their seat at the table:** In some cases, young people may need additional technical and soft skills training or access to knowledge to position themselves as effective advocates. The need for capacity building does not mean however that young people should be unpaid for their work; their time is worthy of compensation like anyone else's.
- **Data, evidence, and youth-friendly research:** There is a need for research (and the funding it requires) to generate evidence about what is and isn't working when it comes to meaningful youth engagement. To reflect young people's lived realities, young people themselves need to be consulted in the development of research questions and the analyses of findings. Similar to the gender indicators ([Tools B5.02](#)) monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be designed to demonstrate the impact of youth policies and programs, including financial tracking, keeping in mind that youth is not a homogenous group and that there are areas of intersectionality ([Tool B5.03](#)) which also need to be considered when evaluating results.
- **Media and communications support, including creative, social and digital media:** Communication is a two-way street and young people have realised that utilising both traditional and digital media can better inform general audiences across generations about the issues they face and make sure young people's priorities are a part of the conversation. Organisations that wish to engage youth must also adapt how they communicate based on the target audience and also provide spaces and be open to different ways of advocacy communication, such as through artwork, poetry, spoken word and performance art. Building and strengthening the capacity of young people to use media will support their advocacy and engagement efforts. Social media tools and platforms can support young people in the creation of a range of digital materials. Editorial writing, key message development, and relationship building with the media can also be the subject of media training and skill-building workshops.

## Youth Water Action Networks

International and regional youth networks have been making waves and ensuring that youth are visible, vocal, and taken seriously in global processes, on climate change, water security, peace and transboundary cooperation, disasters risk reduction, and biodiversity. At the international level, few key networks that have led to meaningful change include the such as the [Water Youth Network](#) and the [World Youth Parliament for Water](#). At the regional level, youth organisations such as the [Central Asia Youth for Water \(CAY4W\)](#), Southern Africa Youth Water Innovation Network (SAYWIN), and [Caribbean Youth Environment Network \(CYEN\)](#) have been creating spaces and platform for the voices of the global south



to reach the international stage with the support of regional decision makers. Moreover, there are many organisations that have created spaces for youth to be engaged, empowered, and recognised for their work in water, such as the SIWI Junior Water Prize and the International Water Association (IWA) Youth Leadership Award.

These networks have been collaborating with each other to create new platforms and opportunities for youth to lead water and climate action. For instance, CAY4W have been working with Blue Peace and other partners to ensure that youth participate in political decision-making and contribute to a more equitable and peaceful society. The Water Academy for Youth (WAY), a capacity building initiative jointly developed by SAYWIN and GWP, is another concrete example of a collaborative platform focusing on youth innovation and entrepreneurship. CYEN Grenada established a strong connection with their government to by creating a young professional programme tailored to connect young people with senior consultants as mentors with the final goal of establishing a pool of junior level consultants to work on climate finance related activities. Similarly, the International Secretariat for Water (ISW) in collaboration with GWP established the Youth for Water and Climate (YWC) Platform, which aims to connect youth with the relevant knowledge, financial and technical support for the implementation of youth-led water and climate projects (it has already supported over 40 projects since 2018).

#### Featured Image



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Youth

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