



CALL TO ACTION

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



ADDRESSING: UN System, Member States, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, Young People, Conference of State Parties, and the Committee to the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD)



United Nations
Office of the Secretary-General's
Envoy on Youth



Permanent Mission of Finland
to the United Nations

unicef
for every child



GOBIERNO de
GUATEMALA

MINISTERIO DE
RELACIONES
EXTERIORES



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

IDA
International
Disability Alliance



International
Labour
Organization



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER



World Health
Organization





INTRODUCTION

Ensuring equal rights and the full engagement and participation for all persons with disabilities is a cornerstone of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), while the [2030 Agenda](#) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also broadly underscore the importance of disability-inclusive development. At the same time, [Youth2030](#) – the UN’s first-ever systemwide youth strategy – prioritizes the participation of the most marginalised youth constituencies, including young persons with disabilities. Further, the [United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy \(UNDIS\)](#) provides the foundation for sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the UN’s work – peace and security, human rights, and development – enabling the UN system to support the implementation of the [CRPD](#) and other international human rights instruments, as well as the achievement of the [SDGs](#), the [Agenda for Humanity](#) and the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#).¹

Yet, despite these frameworks, young persons with disabilities remain one of the most excluded communities with little to no representation at national, regional, and international levels particularly in the Global South.² Further, marginalization of young persons with disabilities is compounded as young persons with disabilities find it challenging for their perspectives to be considered and included due to the lack of leadership opportunities and the intersectional discrimination based on their disability and their youth identity.³

Persons with disabilities are up to three times more likely to experience physical, sexual, and emotional violence. Women and girls with disabilities face many additional barriers as well; up to ten times more likely to experience sexual violence and abuse.⁴ Young persons with disabilities living in forced displacement face heightened protection risks, including violence related to armed conflicts, exploitation, abuse, as well as high levels of stigma in host communities. Further, young persons with disabilities living in forced displacement face numerous barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance and may be denied certain legal rights, such as the right to a nationality.⁵

These intersectional inequalities and discrimination have become even more challenging during COVID-19. The pandemic itself, as well as the resulting impacts of Government measures put in place to contain the pandemic, have disproportionately impacted young people in a multitude of ways. More than 850 million young people, or nearly half the world’s student population, have been kept away from schooling in more than 100 countries. While many countries moved to online and distance learning, other countries are facing the harsh reality of the digital divide. At the same time, nearly 200 million young persons with disabilities around the world have been hit particularly hard amidst this crisis. The digital divide further compounds these challenges, with technology at times deepening inequalities for young persons with disabilities, through barriers such as a lack of access to inclusive learning technology, a stable internet connection or assistive devices and technology.⁶

To ensure that young persons with disabilities have equal access to all services, policies and programmes should be inclusive of and accessible to young persons with disabilities, while also accounting for further

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability>

³ https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/Fact_Sheet_Children_and_Young_People_with_Disabilities_-_2013.pdf

⁴ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Global_Study_English_3_Oct.pdf

⁵ [Refworld | Need to Know Guidance: Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement](#)

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/news/half-worlds-student-population-not-attending-school-unesco-launches-global-coalition-accelerate>



intersectional youth identities including but not limited to gender, sexual orientation, indigenous communities, and young persons with disabilities in armed conflict. It is important to bridge the data gap and to create

awareness of the requirements of young persons with disabilities across various sectors, ultimately combating stigma and harmful social norms surrounding disabilities and youth. Young persons with disabilities must be part of all stages of the policy and programming process – from design to implementation to monitoring and evaluation. They must also be meaningfully included in the decision-making process through interactions with key disability stakeholders and disability rights mechanisms. This is especially important in terms of ensuring that youth with disabilities can better understand and meaningfully participate in the current disability rights movement while also directly applying the lessons drawn from their own youth specific experiences to support this movement.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

On 23 November 2020, the Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, supported by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN and in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Secretary-General’s Disability Inclusion team organized a global virtual consultation with young persons with disabilities.

The online consultation was attended by 75 young persons with disabilities from more than 50 countries⁷, representing a diversity of intersectional youth identities, which included gender diversity and sexual orientation, race, religion, young persons with disabilities in armed conflict, refugees, and young women and girls. The participants were individual youth activists as well as those affiliated with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and youth organizations. The event was planned entirely by youth with disabilities in partnership with other young people and provided a platform to highlight the diversity of their activism, ranging from climate change to inclusive education to human rights and LGBTIQ+ rights. The event served as a space for peer-to-peer interaction, both in plenary and breakout formats, generating insights into the most impactful issues for young persons with disabilities.

During the event young persons with disabilities shared their lived experiences and discussed the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers they face while also identifying strategic solutions to common challenges. The discussions demonstrated that young people with disabilities do not currently have any sustainable platforms where they can share their concerns and needs, or where they can advocate for their rights from a position of leadership. Youth leadership was a prominent and recurring theme in the consultations. Youth participants agreed that there is a strong and urgent need to continue widely highlighting this issue. They also called for urgent action to be taken by relevant stakeholders, with an emphasis on establishing meaningful partnerships with youth with disabilities so that their youth-specific disability requirements are adequately considered. This Call to Action is a response to these needs.

⁷ The consultations included young people from: Nigeria, South Africa, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Argentina, Croatia, Canada, Afghanistan, The Czech Republic, Cameroon, Syria, Ireland, United States of America, United Kingdom, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Jordan, Guatemala, Germany, Spain, Lebanon, Ecuador, India, United States, Malaysia, Peru, Uganda, Tanzania, Korea, Brazil, Singapore, Bangladesh, Australia, Italy, Ghana, Latvia, Palestine, Israel, Philippines, Georgia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, People’s Republic of China, France, Bolivia, Guyana, Belgium, and Turkey.



SITUATING THE CALL TO ACTION

Young persons with disabilities are under-represented in discussions and decisions-making processes at all levels. It is critical that young persons with disabilities be provided the opportunities for meaningful participation to ensure that UN listens to and includes the perspectives of young people in all their diversity.

In this respect, young persons with disabilities are calling for all UN Funds, Agencies and Programmes, Member States, and OPDs to galvanize momentum for the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities and to recognize and understand the specific challenges faced by young persons with disabilities within the larger disability rights and youth rights movements. To strengthen the participation in decision-making processes as well as policy and programme formulation, implementation and accountability for results, young persons with disabilities call attention to:

1. Marking the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.
2. Contributing to meaningful inclusion of young persons with disabilities at the Conference of the States Parties (COSP) to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
3. Embracing the Youth2030 strategy as a framework for meaningful engagement of young persons in all their diversity.
4. Supporting the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Disability Inclusion Strategy; suggest the following priorities and associated actions and outline concrete ways these objectives can be achieved with a specific emphasis on the unique requirements and leadership potential of young persons with disabilities.

THE CALL TO ACTION

PRIORITY 1: ESTABLISH A PLATFORM THAT ENSURES INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE YOUTH AND DISABILITY RIGHTS AGENDAS WITHIN THE UN SYSTEM

Young persons with disabilities are smart, capable, intelligent, and active. They have the potential to be key agents in driving progress for both the youth and disability rights agendas if given more systematic and organized support and opportunity, and if the existing barriers to leadership and participation of young persons with disabilities are overcome. Barriers to active participation and fulfilment of human rights of young persons with disabilities include issues such as: compromised bodily autonomy, a lack of access to services (i.e., education) and water, sanitation, and hygiene (i.e., in refugee camps), an inability to make small decisions on basic lifestyle, and a lack of access to participation in decision-making in the policy space.

One of the main barriers to participation in public and political life is the lack of communication platforms for informing young persons with disabilities of various opportunities for engagement, which in part could be



addressed by institutionalizing participation to guarantee a seat at the table. Advocacy is very difficult as long as the perspectives of young persons with disabilities remain invisible and dispersed within the larger disability advocacy space. Too often these agendas focus on “architectural” accessibility, which should have been solved a long time ago. Young persons with disabilities experience limited leadership and decision-making opportunities as different gatekeepers tend to make decisions for them. Often the decisions taken by agencies and institutions on their behalf are not truly representative of the requirements and demands of young persons with disabilities. A platform or designated advocacy space that ensures the leadership and inclusive

participation of young persons with disabilities in the youth and disability rights agendas within the UN system will be a first step towards bridging this gap.

ACTIONS

- The UN system and Member States to support a youth-led network launched by young persons with disabilities, with an emphasis on amplifying their perspectives and leadership on issues that directly impact them.
- The UN system and Member States to connect and engage with young persons with disabilities in an open and transparent dialogue on how to accelerate progress towards the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities, implementing strategies to provide dedicated support and opportunities for the participation and engagement of young persons with disabilities in the broader UN system-wide work.
- All stakeholders to ensure, acknowledge, support, and invest in capacity building platforms for young persons with disabilities to equip them with accessible and flexible resources to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, including youth-specific requirements and be able to effectively participate in advocacy spaces.
- The Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth to issue a recommendation to Member States to consider appointing young persons with disabilities as youth delegates and opening up spaces for participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making and political processes at national and global level, including in the official delegations to the COSP to the CRPD.
- This includes establishing a dedicated space for young persons with disabilities at the COSP to the CRPD, and other high-level disability rights related events, in addition to ensuring increased representation for young persons with disabilities across all human rights mechanisms and events.

PRIORITY 2: ADDRESS THE GAPS IN THE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES IN THE BROADER YOUTH RIGHTS AND DISABILITY RIGHTS AGENDA

There is disregard for disability rights being basic human rights around the world. There are existing biases to and lack of awareness on the recognition of basic rights such as access to reasonable accommodations in education, employment, and healthcare. At the same time, young persons with disabilities often have additional unique needs from other youth demographics, and their human rights as persons with disabilities are often overlooked.



As stated by a young person at the youth with disabilities consultations on 23 November 2020, during the most formative years of their lives, young persons are placed in a “human rights limbo” – they are perceived as too old to qualify for the many services designed for children and too young to be eligible for the employment schemes and advocacy initiatives tailored to older persons. Youth experiences are shaped by the intersectionality of their multiple identities. During teenage years and early adulthood, young persons are stuck in a state of “suspended animation” where the services they so desperately need are non-existent and their rights as persons with disabilities are not upheld. In order to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities, the programmes, policies, and initiatives currently focused on supporting children with disabilities and older

persons with disabilities must be expanded to include and encompass the specific requirements of young persons with disabilities.

Young persons with disabilities currently do not have enough global advocacy opportunities or the capacity required to effectively advocate for their rights as persons with disabilities. In response, Governments need to urgently address the unique inequalities and barriers that young persons with disabilities face in accessing rights such as education and information, job training, employment opportunities, and disability-inclusive social protection systems.

ACTIONS

- The UN system and the Member States to recognize and support in upholding the rights of young persons with disabilities as part of the broader human rights agenda.
- All stakeholders to strengthen policies that are inclusive of the requirements of young persons with disabilities through legislation and budget allocation.
- The Committee on the CRPD to consider review mechanism and country reports to consider having a specific youth indicator to report on progress on implementation of the convention.
- All stakeholders to respond to accessibility of emergency, safety, health instructions and relevant resources that are clear, easy to understand and accessible for all persons with disabilities, and in particular young persons with disability, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- All stakeholders to support in developing school-to-work programmes targeting young persons with disabilities with a focus on disability advocacy for professional success.
- All stakeholders to invest in the empowerment of young persons with disabilities, which includes provision of quality education (including in STEM fields), training opportunities for young persons with disabilities, skills development opportunities, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship.
- Ensure and support active political participation and leadership of young persons with disabilities.
- All stakeholders to ensure disability-inclusive social protection systems that provide flexibility of disability-specific benefits and incentives to seek and stay in employment.



- All stakeholders to ensure access to rights at work such as occupational safety and health, working conditions, and freedom of association and right to collective bargaining.

PRIORITY 3: RECOGNIZE THE INTERSECTIONALITY AND LEADERSHIP OF THE MOST MARGENALIZED YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Young persons with disabilities with multiple intersectional identities – including LGBTIQ+ youth, armed conflict survivors, refugees, young indigenous people, and young women and girls – face unique challenges. These types of intersectional identities are often compounding, meaning young persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted when it comes to issues of access and participation. For example, these challenges manifest themselves in terms of access to physical and psychosocial safety, the ability to exercise bodily autonomy, safe access to a toilet and a lack of access to an education. Many stakeholders are still struggling with realization of disability rights, thus intersectional issues often remain invisible. Young persons with disabilities experience being treated as naïve because of their age while simultaneously being treated as incapable or burdensome because of their disabilities. In order to respond to such social and cultural representations with a counter narrative, it is important to recognize and strengthen the leadership of young persons with disabilities.

ACTIONS

- All stakeholders to support the collection of data on young persons with disabilities and intersectional identities to be able to recognize the specific requirements and challenges they face.
- All stakeholders to provide specific disability sensitization and training to service providers and programme implementers who work with youth with diverse backgrounds and identities (i.e., race, religion, sexual orientation, indigenous people, refugees, and asylum seekers, LGBTIQ+ youth).
- All stakeholders to prioritize intersectionality and leadership of the most marginalized young persons with disabilities – including those with invisible psychosocial disabilities and those marginalized on the basis of sexual orientation – in strategy development, based on principles of wholeness, sustainability, interdependence, and collective access.

PRIORITY 4: INVOLVE YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AS EQUAL PARTNERS TO REALIZE SYSTEMIC CHANGE



Young persons with disabilities need allies across the board, including from mainstream youth movements, to ensure meaningful impact. Closer collaboration between young persons with disabilities and the UN system, youth movements, youth mainstreaming agencies, youth organizations, and OPDs is urgently needed. The biggest barrier to this collaboration is that young persons with disabilities often struggle to mobilize due to lack of a dedicated accessible platforms that supports capacity building and advocacy opportunities.

Young persons have views on a wide range of topics ranging from climate change to employment to mental health, among many other areas. To ensure that the views of young persons with disabilities are not marginalized in these broader youth-led conversations, and more specifically to ensure the views of young persons with disabilities are actively considered and included, reasonable accommodation and provisions need to be made. Any change for improving the lives of youth with disabilities requires mobilizing like-minded individuals, young persons with and without a disability, uniting to participate in campaigns and advocacy efforts. The leadership of young persons with disabilities and their inclusion at the inception of any partnerships that impact them is required. It is not enough to tokenistically engage a single young person with disability; the views and inputs of a diverse range of young persons with disabilities is generally required to ensure meaningful outcomes.

ACTIONS

- The UN and Member States to act as a source of protection and support for young persons with disabilities by opening up their current convening spaces and programming to partner with and engage young persons with disabilities to the full extent, particularly in a leadership capacity.
- The UN to work with other stakeholders in creating forums and partnerships with youth in all of their diversity on various agendas that are important for young people. In establishing these spaces, the same commitment, support, and opportunity should be offered for young persons with disabilities.
- The UN and Member States to ensure reasonable accommodations and accessibility (such as sign language interpretation in international and localized signed language, close captioning, and simultaneous language translations) to achieve inclusive and representative engagement of young persons with disabilities in mainstream youth movements, civil society, and UN decision-making bodies and making such accommodations core requirements for planning and implementation of all events convened by the UN.
- The UN to work with private sector, and in particular large technology companies, to promote accessibility innovation by realizing the potential of technology to further the rights of young persons with disabilities and address the gap between mainstream technology and assistive technology.
- All stakeholders to foster systematic and consistent networking and information exchange actively and intentionally between organizations representing persons with disabilities (with or without a youth secretariat) and mainstream youth organizations.
- Civil society, especially OPDs, to promote the role of young persons with disabilities in encouraging their communities to explore and participate in non-disability related advocacy initiatives related to issues such as climate change, sexual and reproductive health rights, refugee protection, and peace and security, among other relevant topics.