

Meaningful Youth Participation – CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality

Meaningful Youth Participation is a human right that enables young people to have a say in matters that affect their lives.

Barriers:

- Age – Most of the time, youth is not represented or meaningfully included in the discussions on their own reproductive health or rights. Young people are, therefore, experiencing ‘constricted environments’ most times when trying to influence the formation, implementation or evaluation of policy processes.
- Experience – Since most youth-led (SRHR) organizations base their work on meaningful youth participation (MYP) and the notion of ‘learning-by-doing’, every youth advocate is given an opportunity to gain new skills, whether that is practical ones like HR tasks and public speaking, or most elaborate ones like networking or advocacy knowledge. Youth is a group in society which is highly adaptable and creative, who learn fast, but that still means that, for example, a youth advocate cannot have the same amount of experience in advocacy as an adult lobbyist.
- Funding – SRHR organizations in general are struggling with finding adequate funding; and youth SRHR organizations are an even smaller subsection within that group. Nowadays, funding often means direct opportunities and more outreach, and is therefore naturally a crucial precondition for progress of any SRHR organization.
- Abortion/SRHR not a priority – It is no secret that the topic of abortion and SRHR issues in general are accompanied by stigma and sensitive discussions. On top of this, however, the progress of SRHR is always dependent on the fact that it gets pushed aside as a non-urgent issue. Unemployment, economic issues and urgencies like the refugee crisis, terrorism and drug trafficking are usually prioritized instead. CHOICE want to emphasize that if SRHR are highly developed within a country, most often, this means that that country has that much higher standard of living and economic development.
- Many others, such as education, national background, political apathy/disinterest, etc.

Strategies & Best Practices:

- Connecting with similar organizations – It’s a very common and useful practice for youth (SRHR) organizations to connect with organizations working on similar issues. This can result in partner or network formation, because most often, a network of several organizations is likely to get more access to policy discussions than a single SRHR organization, which can also be viewed as too ‘radical’ or ‘activist-y’ by the policy-makers.
- Lobbying Middle-Ground MEPs (Members of European Parliament) – While lobbying in the European Parliament (EP) during CHOICE’s joint project on abortion rights in Poland (along with organizations: YouAct, ASTRA, ASTRA Youth), we quickly learned that cooperating with like-minded policy-makers doesn’t always lead to proactive and progressive new action. Even though forming new contacts within the EP is crucial for gaining access and spreading awareness of select issues, real progress lies in requesting meetings with middle-ground or even borderline conservative MEPs. They are the group which needs to be moved and influenced, in order for SRHR issues to come to the forefront.

- Spreading awareness nationally among ‘disinterested’ citizens – It is not a surprise to anyone working in this field that political apathy or disinterest is becoming more and more prevalent within today’s global society. This brings about numerous challenges, and one of them is the issue of reaching out to citizens and spreading knowledge about the most pressing social or political issues today. One of CHOICE’s ‘lessons learned’ is to gain as much knowledge on the national context as possible, tied to the particular issue at hand. CHOICE is mostly focused on the challenge to reach out to youth in the Netherlands, and with initiatives like awareness-raising campaigns, marches (such as the Women’s March), university capacity-building sessions and peer learning, etc.
- Social Media & Digital Advocacy – With challenges like the lack of funding and political disinterest, CHOICE is strong on developing its social media strategy and doing digital advocacy. Social media is one of the most commonly used sources of acquiring information, especially for youth today; therefore, being active on this platform is of utmost importance when it comes to awareness-raising.

Additional tips from round-table discussion members:

- National Parliamentary Groups work – One of the recommendations that was agreed upon by all members of the discussion tables was to reach out to national parliamentary groups, youth parties, consultancy agencies and similar existing networks, and build support this way. Even youth SRHR networks have to work quite hard to get access to the EP, for example – so, connecting with different groups delivers more influence.
- Personal relationship building – When it comes to lobbying or connecting with new contacts within the EP or in general, CHOICE has learned that maintaining strong individual personal relationships is of importance. Building professional ties with either MEPs or partner organization members by sharing intel and sending regular updates on each other’s work is a way to maintain that line of influence and assure future projects.