Brief introduction

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality and YouAct, two European youth-led SRHR organizations, have collaborated together since July 2018 on the Evidence-based Advocacy: Championing SexEd in Europe (CSE) project. CHOICE and YouAct, in collaboration with other youth organizations, facilitated consultations held in Bulgaria, Georgia, Macedonia, Romania, and The Netherlands. The key messages from these consultations were presented to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with a request to address these issues. MEPs were encouraged to support the campaign to translate the research findings into tangible policy reform at the EU level, which was particularly relevant given the expected parliamentary elections between the 23-26 of May 2019.

Description of key activities

Activity 1: Kick off meeting
To kick off the second phase of the Unite4CSE project, the youth advocates in the group came together for a project planning meeting in the Netherlands from August 24-26, 2019. During this meeting, the youth advocates developed a framework and strategies for lobby activities to be conducted, as well as focused on key skill building activities in order to successfully execute the project. At the end of the meeting, a project planning document had been developed, as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework for the project activities. An analysis of European Parliamentarians was done to provide the basis for Activity 3 of the project. Lastly, the youth advocates developed a timeline and methodology for youth-led focus group discussions at the national level.

PMEL Indicators
- A project timeline and PMEL framework were developed
- 5 youth advocates attended a vlog training. The quality of the vlog training was sufficient, however the advocates wished that more time was spent on vlogging as it was a mayor part of the external communication strategy.

Activity 2: Youth Consultations
With the support of our local partners, youth consultations were held with young people (under 30 years old) in five European countries: Bulgaria, Georgia, Macedonia, the Netherlands, and Romania. They discussed the sexuality education provision in their country and developed messages for various targets groups (parents, teachers, decision-makers, other young people etc.), expressing their desires and needs when it comes to CSE. The facilitators have received guidance on methodology, and they were provided with a reporting form that they sent back to the project group after the sessions. The information in these youth consultations reports was used to develop key messages for MEPs and the social media campaign. The key messages include issues like the existence, quality, comprehensiveness and sustainability of sexuality education programs, cultural barriers, service provision and knowledge about rights.

Indicators:
- 67 Youth, between 15 and 30 years old, attended the consultations in 5 European countries: 15 in Georgia, 10 in Macedonia, 14 in Bulgaria, 20 in Romania and 9 in the Netherlands.

Activity 3: Media campaign in support of CSE (European/ National)
To raise the visibility of our project, we launched a social media campaign which was broadcast on YouAct’s and CHOICE’s Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube channels, using #Unite4CSE (from the project’s first phase) and #AdvanceSexEd. The social media campaign lasted for 3 months (Nov. 2018 - Jan. 2019) in total and consisted of a series of throwback posts, sharing resources, live tweeting, two newsletters, and five vlogs. The throwbacks (#ThrowbackThursday) were mainly used to re-share the 5 infographics and the desk research, two main outcomes of the first phase of the project.

Live tweeting was mostly done on YouAct’s channels in November, and on CHOICE’s channels in December. We used the EuroNGOs annual conference, as well as our meetings with the MEPs as inspiration, and made sure to highlight what was going on at the moment. As a way to recap all our meetings in Brussels, we also created two newsletters, where we mentioned all the MEPs, and promoted our webinar in January.

Last, but certainly not least, our team also shot and edited five one-minute vlogs: the first one was an introductory one, the second one covered our EuroNGOs presence, the third and fourth one elaborated on our meetings with the MEPs, and our fifth vlog concluded our project with a short overview of our activities, as well as snippets from our webinar.

At the annual EuroNGOs conference, YouAct and CHOICE organized an interactive workshop on CSE, where we elaborated on both phases of our project, and discussed on possible ways in which young people can get meaningfully engage in SRHR advocacy. Beside the workshop, YouAct also made a Youth Message Wall with contributions from all over the world, urging the decision-makers to involve more young people in meaningful initiatives, and most importantly - to advance sexuality education.

As a result, a catalogue of posts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, easily found under #Unite4CSE, and #AdvanceSexEd, have been created. All of which ensure the sustainability of the project, and future dissemination of information.

**Indicators:**
- 5 Vlogs were developed, which were in all together viewed 85 times.
- 29 Messages were shared across the CHOICE and YouAct Facebook platform, informing their following of the project implementation.
- 19 twitter updates were shared across the YouAct and CHOICE platforms. Additionally, youth advocates themselves tweeted three times, and retweeted several messages of the corporate accounts, during the meetings with MEPs.
- 2 MEPs retweeted the messages in which they were mentioned.
- The posts on Facebook via YouAct had a total reach of 11,044 and an engagement rate of 609. The posts via the Facebook page from CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality had a total reach of 10,718 and an overall engagement rate of 456.

**Activity 4: Implementing European advocacy & policy influencing strategy**

Aiming at influencing policy through advocacy activities, youth advocates from CHOICE and YouAct met with the MEPs at the European Parliament in Brussels. The two-day policy-influencing meetings took place in November and December. Youth advocates managed to meet 10 MEPs and 2 parliamentary assistants representing various political parties. During the meetings, they delivered messages from the youth consultations and advocated for the importance, and necessity of CSE. The outputs from the Unite4CSE project such as infographics and desk-research on “The Current state of Sexuality Education in Cyprus, Georgia, Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands: A Youth Perspective” have been used as basis for the discussions.

The rounds of two-day influencing meetings contributed noticeably to realize the main objectives of the project. The youth advocates gained valuable experience in advocacy through
meetings with MEPs, as well as received important resources and contacts. That prepares a relevant ground for them to continue European advocacy, particularly when the new elections are fastly approaching. For the majority of the youth advocates, that was the first time of advocating on such high-level platforms. All of them reviewed as a fruitful experience which enhances their capacity in professional advocacy.

Though, not being able to secure an invitation at the Global Education Meeting in December, the project team managed to maximize meeting opportunities with the MEPs instead. The two-days of December round of Brussels visit were fully packed with the meetings, which is indeed a success of the project.

Indicators:
- 10 MEPs were met during 2 rounds of meetings. Additionally, one meetings was planned with a MEP assistant.
- 2 out of 6 of the mentioned MEPs on Twitter shared (retweeted) the messages of the youth advocates/corporate accounts.
- 100% of the youth advocates agreed that the meetings with the Members of the European Parliament contributed to an increase in their advocacy capacity.

Activity 5: Workshop on Youth-led CSE advocacy at EuroNGOs conference
During this activity three project team members from CHOICE and YouAct joined the European conference on SRHR; EuroNGOs where we organized a youth-led pre-conference/workshop. The aim of this workshop was to draw attention to the importance of CSE and the role of young people in advocacy for CSE. Youth participants attending this workshop increased their capacity in evidence-based advocacy through participating in three consecutive group exercises where they had to gather data on three different topics amongst their group. During the last 30 minutes of the workshop we held an open discussion on their findings and best-practices and lessons-learned from the field. The advocates facilitating the pre-conference were very satisfied with this activity because it allowed them to gather valuable data and do evidence-based advocacy at the European Parliament. Additionally, we improved the youth participants’ capacity in doing evidence-based advocacy and they will spread our messages and take the data gathered in the workshop on CSE with them in their work as well.

Indicators:
- 25 youth participants joined the workshop about evidence-based advocacy.
- 1 UNFPA representative was present during the workshop about evidence-based advocacy. Additionally, there were participants from youth-serving organizations from Africa, Asia, the US, Caucasus, and Europe.

Activity 6: Webinar on best practices
At the end of the project, youth advocates from YouAct and CHOICE shared the project’s outcome and their acquired best practices through a webinar. An overview of the activities was shared, as well as highlights on policy influencing and mobilizing young people for the uptake of CSE through regional advocacy.

Indicators:
- 13 - 15 participants joined the webinar
- 3 out of 5 partner(countries) attended the webinar, one partner presented the outcomes of the youth consultations held.
- By February 3rd, the Webinar was viewed 34 times on YouTube.
Key Learnings from the Unite4CSE project

During the evaluation of the project a number of key learnings became apparent.

- First, it was easier to reach MEPs that agreed that comprehensive sexuality was important, and that it was harder to approach MEPs with other perceptions or priorities. So, future outreach to less supportive or non-supportive MEPs requires more effort.
- Secondly, in order for the youth consultation’s key messages and the other results of the project to have long-standing results, a stronger investment in substantive follow-up with MEPs outside of the occasional interactions is needed.
- Furthermore, exploring strategic collaboration with networks within the EU along with other civil-society organizations, could have bolstered the project outcomes.
- In addition, exploring other forms of media communication, such as traditional media outlets, could have strengthened the visibility of the project.
- Moreover, utilizing online (social) media as an accountability mechanisms for MEPs support for the campaign, remained a challenge worth further exploration.
- Lastly, a key remaining question was how to improve cross-country recommendations which can link the findings from the consultations to the broader regional level. The group was satisfied with the consultations, because of the data generated. The data, however, could have been put to better/more use. In line with this, also strengthening the underlying reasoning to choose these five countries specifically, remains something that deserves more attention.

How this ShareNet grant contributed to our continued work on CSE

After the first round of the meetings with MEPs in November, MEP Sirpa Pietikainen (Finland) invited us to work together on a letter she would send to the Romanian Presidency (holding the rotating Council Presidency from January-June 2019) about the alarmingly high rate of sexual violence and violence against girls and women Romania. A first draft has been created and is awaiting feedback.

Since the MEPs were very open to discussions with youth advocates on topics regarding their health and well-being, YouAct is implementing another project, “The European Parliament, Our Ally” aiming to bring together, face-to-face youth advocates to strategize on how to advance CSE in Europe. This project is funded by the Generation Now: Our Health, Our Rights partnership.

An article about this project was shared with the Inspire network, of which YouAct is a member of and will be disseminated in the next issue if their newsletter.