Session 3: The key role of youth and adolescents

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OVERVIEW

Last September, we marked two years since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ They are products of a process that took several years, and which was hailed as transparent, inclusive and participatory, involving various stakeholders, including the academia, civil-society organizations and young people. Indeed, youth played a key role in advocating for the formulations of the new Development Agenda. They were seen by the then UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon (2007-2016) as “torch bearers,” and the generation that will be leading the world towards a secure, cohesive and peaceful future.

While the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs do not focus specifically on the sexual and reproductive health of young people, elements of the 2030 Agenda related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) are central to the agenda of young people’s health and well-being, particularly as captured in Goals 3 (health), 4 (education) and 5 (gender). It is crucial to ensure young people’s meaningful involvement in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of programmes and policies that have an impact on their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including access to SRH services. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a vital means to do so.

CSE is a means to empower young people to protect their health, well-being and dignity. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action explicitly calls on governments to provide education on sexuality in order to promote the well-being of adolescents and specifies key features of such education.

According to the updated UN International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE), CSE should be based on a human rights approach and aim at promoting an understanding of universal human rights – including the rights of children and young people – and the rights of all persons to health, education, information equality and non-discrimination. CSE can be used as an instrument to raise awareness among young people, encouraging them to recognize their own rights, acknowledge and respect the rights of others and advocate for those whose rights are violated. It is important to provide young people access to CSE and exercise the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including safe, responsible and respectful sexual choices free of coercion and violence, as well as their right to access the information that young people need for effective self-care.

Meaningful youth engagement in the dissemination of CSE should be further expanded. Young people are constantly advocating for their full involvement in the CSE curricula development and also in the implementation and monitoring of CSE. Young people should not only be seen as beneficiaries of CSE related programmes but as equal stakeholders in the development, implementation and monitoring process

THE ISSUE

Meaningful youth involvement in CSE curricula development is essential to ensuring that the curricula will directly respond to the needs of each young person. Young people are the key rights holders of CSE and therefore crucial in programme design and delivery. In many contexts, young people are leading and shaping decisions and actions relating to their own access to CSE, including through policy dialogue and political advocacy; peer learning, exchange and networking; community mobilization; programme design and delivery; research and strategic information; coordination, monitoring and accountability.

Young people are increasingly demanding sexuality education, as evidenced by the 2011 Mali Call to Action; declarations at the 2011 International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA); the 2012 Bali Global Youth Forum Declaration; the 2014 Colombo Declaration on Youth; youth delegates’ inputs to the post–2015 development agenda through the ‘Have you seen my Rights?’ coalition; as well as the advocacy efforts of the PACT coalition of youth organizations.2

The importance of CSE for young people’s health, well-being and development is clear in the challenges they face and the information they so often lack:

- Young people aged 10–24 years constitute one-quarter of the world’s population, and they are among those most affected by the global epidemic of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)3
- Young people, 15 to 24 years old, account for 40% – and in certain countries up to 60% – of all new HIV infections among adults4
- Only 24% of young women and 36% of young men in developing countries responded correctly when asked five questions on HIV prevention and misconceptions around HIV transmission5.
- Adolescent girls and young women make up 40% of all unsafe abortions worldwide, and 2.5 million unsafe abortions occur every year among this age group.

Additionally, it is important to equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to help them make responsible choices, particularly in contexts where new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media play an increasingly important role in their lives.

Young people are not a homogeneous group. Their family situation, socio-economic status, sex, ethnicity, race, HIV status, geographical location, religious and cultural beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity, and many other factors affect their SRH, access to education and life opportunities, and their

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2 http://www.advocates4cse.com/CSEOverview
4 WHO, Fact Sheet on Adolescent health, 2015, http://goo.gl/iASMK1
general well-being. Many young people are marginalized and vulnerable and face stigma and discrimination, including young people who are incarcerated or who live in institutionalized care, indigenous young people, and those who lack access to vital CSE, SRH and other health services. Refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant children are especially vulnerable to child, early and forced marriage, violence and trafficking. Each of these population groups has different CSE needs and requires information that is relevant to their respective realities.

There are several evidence-based principles on young people’s involvement in CSE curricula formulation and delivery that are crucial to achieve the aims of CSE:

- **Youth leadership in engaging with policy formulation at different levels.**
  Youth inclusion in curricula development and delivery of CSE in both formal and non-formal settings helps to ensure quality. For instance, advocacy by young people for CSE has resulted in the adoption of the Ministerial Commitment on comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents and young people in Eastern and Southern Africa. This kind of political action and commitment has to be achieved in other regions as well. Another key example is a direct outcome of the ACT!2030 youth-led and youth-oriented advocacy campaign, implemented in 12 countries globally: in Bulgaria, youth engaged effectively with decision makers in the Ministry of Education and managed to ensure access to CSE in school settings after legislative changes. Young people also played a crucial role in the process of updating the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE), facilitated by the UN.

- **Youth as political and policy advocates for CSE and key providers of CSE**
  Effective youth-led policy advocacy has resulted in the recognition of young people as valuable partners when formulating, implementing or monitoring programmes and laws linked to their human rights, including access to SRH services and CSE. This is evidenced in recent international and regional campaigns and processes, such as: *Have You Seen My Rights Campaign; Youth Voice of EECA Campaign; ACT!2030 Campaign, Youth Action Days.*

- **Working with young people to understand and implement CSE and mobilizing community support and action.**
  It is crucial to work with all parts of the community including but not limited to parents, faith based organizations. Young people could play a major role in designing manuals and toolkits related to CSE (Y-PEER Manual, IPPF CSE Manual, etc.)

- **Innovation in delivery of CSE** is crucial given the major role that information technologies are playing in young people’s daily life. Recent examples include the development of the Global Online Hub for CSE Advocacy, online blogs and social media campaigns crowdsourcing for funding, research and technical feedback.

**Recommendations**

- Facilitate implementation of innovative practices, such as access to CSE in formal and non-formal settings, and additionally advocacy on CSE, via online instruments and tools;
- Provide platforms for meaningful youth involvement in the formulation, delivery and monitoring of CSE related programmes;
- Provide direct instruments for youth engagement in CSE curricula implementation in both formal and non-formal settings, including but not limited to: online platforms, participatory mechanisms, inclusion activities, global strategies and programmes;
Ensure non-discriminatory processes and involvement of young people from all walks of life, to ensure that no one is left behind, in the formulation and dissemination of CSE programmes.