



**FROM
RIO+20
TO BEYOND
2015**

**BEST PRACTICES IN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WITH
INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS: A CASE STUDY
FROM THE RIO+20 PROCESS**

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**VOLUNTEERISM, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE POST-2015
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INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, sustainable development has been one of the most prominent development paradigms. The world is going through great changes and challenges, which include climate change, environmental degradation, resource scarcities, demographic change, urbanisation, migration, the rise of new technologies, enduring poverty, economic crises, increasing political and social unrest and global power shifts. These changes can expose humans and nations to great security risks and prevent them from reaching their full potential. Further, ecosystems are threatened. In the face of this, sustainable development offers a model of development that addresses imbalances and conflicts between economic and social development and environmental protection.

Twenty-one years after the adoption of Agenda 21, the development agenda for the 21st century – and 13 years after the Millennium Declaration – we are still far away from reaching developmental goals, as well as addressing the needs and protecting the rights of billions of people, especially women and young people, who are most exposed to the consequences of unsustainable development. Given this, it is not surprising that many young people in different parts of the world are agitated with their social, economic and environmental situations. This has led to a surge in social movements, which unfortunately cannot, on their own, bring about lasting changes in our societies.

The emergence of youth issues on the international agenda is closely related to the emergence of sustainable development, to the extent that it could be said that a concern with young people is at the core of sustainable development. On one hand, the term sustainable development introduced the concept of future generations, which can be interpreted both as generations to come and the current generation of young people,¹ and on the other hand, through sustainable development processes, youth and youth issues came into the focus of decision-makers.² Stability and sustainable development cannot be achieved without taking into account the voices of young people and without addressing fundamental aspects of their wellbeing. The aim of this contribution is therefore to

present the challenges and good practices in the engagement of youth with intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), particularly the United Nations (UN), through analysis of the Rio+20 process and to provide broader recommendations for improving global governance. Although the recommendations for engaging with youth are aimed at IGOs, they are equally applicable to CSOs.

THE RIO+20 PROCESS

In 2009, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution³ to organise the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 in Brazil.⁴ This conference was commonly known as Rio+20, as it came 20 years after the Earth Summit,⁵ which put sustainable development high on the international agenda. According to the resolution, the objectives of the conference were to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, to assess the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of previous major summits on sustainable development, and to address new and emerging challenges. The thematic focus was on a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development.

In addition, the resolution set minimum standards for the participation of civil society that

included active participation of all nine Major Groups⁶ of the Agenda 21⁷ at all stages of the preparatory process and also sought the contributions of civil society to a working document that served as the basis of the outcome document of Rio+20 entitled “The Future We Want.”⁸ In this resolution it was stated that Rio+20 would result in a focused political document. It also resulted in many unofficial and less visible outcomes, such as the Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments⁹ and new partnerships. In addition, it can be argued that one of the “invisible” outcomes of Rio+20 is an advancement of the youth agenda, which was perhaps best reflected in the fact that youth became one of the priorities of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Overall, regardless of the challenges, obstacles and critiques of the Rio+20 process and its outcomes,¹⁰ one could say that indeed Rio+20 represented a benchmark in sustainable development. However, it is still too early to judge the outcomes as they still need to withstand the test of time, especially regarding to the transformation of the global governance.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE RIO+20 PROCESS AND BEYOND

The importance of youth has been formally acknowledged in the international agenda for many decades. In 1965, UN member states for the first time recognised the role of youth.¹¹ However the engagement of youth with the UN

was established in the Earth Summit. Agenda 21 recognised children and youth as one of the most relevant parts of civil society for achieving sustainable development.¹² This political statement was materialised in 1993 by the establishment of the Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY)¹³ at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD).¹⁴

The focus of the MGCY is two-fold: it aims to facilitate youth input into sustainable development processes and to foster information sharing and communication between a diverse network of youth organisations, groups and individuals who share a common interest in sustainability. The vision of the MGCY is the advanced participation of young people at all levels, locally, nationally, regionally and internationally, in the protection of the environment and the promotion of economic and social development. Its mission is to ensure that the interests of children and youth are taken into account in planning and decision-making processes and that youth in particular can participate meaningfully in sustainable development processes.

The MGCY offers an entry point for the participation and engagement of young people in sustainable development deliberations, and as such it aims to provide different and new forms of engagement that are based on the identified needs, interests, capacities and resources of young people. The MGCY’s participation takes place within the participatory

regime of the Major Groups that is shaped, but not entirely limited, by the UNCSD’s rules, procedures and established practices for participation and engagement of major groups. This means that the MGCY participates on an equal footing with the eight other major groups identified by Agenda 21, as part of a participatory regime that shows an innovative approach¹⁵ to engagement with civil society.

It is important to recognise that youth participation is additionally but somewhat subtly shaped by ongoing youth related initiatives and processes, such as Youth 21,¹⁶ the Official Youth Delegates Programme,¹⁷ the work of Interagency Network on Youth and Development (IANYD)¹⁸ and development of the UN System-wide Action Plan on Youth (SWAP).¹⁹ Similarly, working with and for youth is one of the priorities in the UN Secretary-General’s (UNSG) five-year action plan,²⁰ as part of which a UNSG Special Envoy on Youth has been appointed.²¹

The MGCY, as a mechanism for youth engagement, has been fairly successful²² in addressing the needs of youth and advocating for youth interests within the sustainable development process, but it has mostly failed to secure continuity and sustainability in youth initiatives. The failure is a direct result of the lack of strategic, systematic and continuous engagement and empowerment of youth, in addition to the lack of resources allocated for youth. Young people have worked hard to

neutralise or minimise negative trends, but from a long-term perspective, engagement practices are not sustainable, and ultimately they result in the disempowerment of youth. Therefore, it is of great importance to ensure that for the youth constituency – which is, among other things, characterised by a high level of turnover – there is professional support²³ that will empower and facilitate²⁴ youth engagement in global governance.²⁵



Youth engagement and participation can take different types and forms. In general, four types of youth engagement with the UN can be identified:

- youth participation in processes;
- youth engagement in policy-making;
- youth engagement in programme and activity design and implementation;
- youth engagement within the UN system in general.

In the Rio+20 process, youth engagement had many facets, including those related to policy development and advocacy, campaigning, development and implementation of participation and communication strategies, facilitation of youth inputs and participation, organ-

isation of Rio+20 related activities at local, national, regional and international levels, capacity-building, capacity development and knowledge management. Youth from more than 20 countries also had an opportunity to engage with the process by becoming official youth delegates of their respective countries at Rio+20.

The experience of youth engagement in Rio+20 underlines serious weaknesses and challenges in the current practices of engagement, but it also showcases how engagement can be an empowering and transformative experience when organised and facilitated properly.

GOOD PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT

The advancement of youth participation in the international arena cannot be disregarded as an invisible outcome of Rio+20. Good practices need to be distilled, shared and applied further.

While the MGCY is one of the UN mechanisms for the engagement of youth, it is completely run by youth on a voluntary basis. The key to the success of this mechanism was the

commitment of youth to the process and to setting up a governance structure. The MGCY constituency developed an internal governance document on the mandate, organisation and decision-making processes of the group. In its work, the MGCY is then led by principles that are founded in human rights and democracy. Also, a clear step-by-step process of decision-making was established. In order to ensure that the group is representative and open, most decisions were made online and by consensus. As for its structure, the MGCY has Organising Partners (OPs) who are tasked with disseminating relevant data and information in order to facilitate activities and inputs that maximise youth participation. In addition to the OPs, the following structures were established:

- a facilitation team mandated as the MGCY's main decision-making body;
- policy task forces tasked with the preparation of policy inputs into the process;
- working groups established to enable young people with different interests to be involved according to their own level of capacity.

In spite of the commitment of youth and established structures, throughout the Rio+20 processes the MGCY faced numerous challenges and obstacles. The MGCY was able to overcome those by ensuring democratic decision-making,²⁶ by which the constituency had a fuller ownership of all decisions; this

was a sometimes tedious, but ultimately fruitful, process.

Engagement in policy discussions on the themes and objectives of Rio+20 was of great importance to the MGCY, both from a process and substance perspective. One of the innovations introduced at Rio+20 was an ability to contribute to the Zero Draft outcome document. From a process perspective, this represented a significant advancement of engagement, as it ensured that civil society, including youth, were able to contribute actively – to some extent – to the shaping of the Rio+20 outcome document.²⁷ This also meant that all contributions made to the process were documented in a transparent manner.

While disappointed with the overall outcome document of Rio+20, the MGCY was

successful in lobbying for specific MGCY policy points to be included in the text.²⁸ This policy success of the MGCY was in large part due to ability of youth to build relationships and partnerships with representatives of the member states and the UN. Similarly, increasing the visibility and reputation of youth as well as ensuring the consistent, committed and focused engagement of the MGCY in the Rio+20 process greatly contributed to the perception of youth as relevant partners in the process.

Another good example of youth engagement was offered by the Sustainable Development Dialogues organised by the Government of Brazil with the support of the UN.²⁹ In order to ensure youth participation, Brazil and United Nations Development

Programme mobilised youth facilitators for the process and ensured that youth voices were represented in the panels.

Because young people may be inexperienced in engagement or not used to having their voices heard and taken into account, empowerment is a key to the meaningful participation of young people. With the scale of Rio+20, many young people were new to the process and had no prior understanding or knowledge of intergovernmental processes. Hence, building their capacity was crucial. The MGCY organised numerous capacity-building sessions, supported by the UN. One of the biggest achievements of the MGCY was co-hosting, with Brazil and in partnership with the UN, “Youth Blast – Conference of Youth for Rio+20.” The focus of the conference was to build capacities of youth, strategise for youth engagement at Rio+20 and plan activities for post-Rio+20 and post-2015. Youth Blast was attended by more than 1,800 young people from 123 countries across six continents.

CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD TOWARDS GREATER ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH

In 2012 and 2013, there were significant improvements in youth engagement with the UN, especially in the context of post-2015 processes that eventually converged with the Rio+20 processes: the profile and credibility of youth was raised during Rio+20, youth became one of the UNSG’s priorities,

“Young people have worked hard to neutralise or minimise negative trends, but from a long-term perspective, engagement practices are not sustainable, and ultimately they result in the disempowerment of youth.”

a UN Envoy on Youth was appointed, the UN Youth SWAP was developed and a discussion on youth human rights was initiated. Unfortunately many challenges remain, but there is a strong urge from different sectors and stakeholders to have a strategic focus on youth and to build upon already established good practices of youth engagement. Hence, some of the recommendations for the greater engagement of youth – both in processes and content – are as follows.

Strengthen youth civil society through:

- empowerment activities such as capacity building and capacity development, knowledge management and experience sharing;
- investment in youth structures – both mid-term and long-term – to improve the sustainability of youth initiatives, build resilience in youth and create an enabling environment for innovations;
- monitoring and evaluation of youth engagement, especially through documenting challenges, experiences, lessons learnt and best practices. Special attention should be given to the quality and outcomes of youth participation.

Advance a legal and policy framework on youth by:

- ensuring a human rights-based approach to youth and youth issues, and recognising the specific rights of youth;
- developing political and administrative

capacities to engage with youth through capacity development and activities focused on addressing institutional and structural inequalities faced by youth;

- conducting reforms based on research and evidence, particularly with regard to access to information and participation opportunities;
- adjusting institutional arrangements to be youth friendly³⁰ and efficient in responding to the rights and needs of youth.

Build partnerships with youth, including:

- partnerships for fostering innovations and supporting youth leadership. Additionally, efforts should be made to pilot innovative programmes and activities;
- using non-traditional means of engagement, such as ICTs;
- the creation of an enabling environment for continuous and constant engagement of youth in law and policy, development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

¹This interpretation is heavily dependent on the social and cultural, but also on legal norms that impose the inability and incapability of young people to participate in society. In addition, there is a still dominant public discourse of young people as leaders of the future, but not leaders of today, that is reaffirmed through the institutional, legal, social and economic obstacles to young people's participation.

²It must be noted that young people have been on the international agenda since the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. However, without the emergence of the sustainable development agenda, it is very probable that youth would still not be high on the political agenda.

³Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/236, 26 November 2012, available at: <http://www.unep.org/resourceefficiency/Portals/24147/scp/10yfp/document/A%20C.2%2067%20L.45%20eng.pdf>.

⁴For more information, please visit the Rio+20 website: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/>.

⁵For more information on the Earth Summit, please visit: <http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html>.

⁶According to Agenda 21, broad public participation is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development. In order to facilitate broad public participation, the creators of Agenda 21 agreed that this should be done through the creation of nine major groups, which would ensure representative engagement of the public in the sustainable development process. In order to do so, nine major groups were established, each one representing one part of society. These groups are: Business and Industry; Children and Youth; Farmers; Indigenous Peoples; Local Authorities; NGOs; Scientific and Technological Community; Women; and Workers and Trade Unions.

⁷Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development, United Nations Sustainable Development, UN Doc A/Conf.151/26, 3-14 June 1992, available at: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>.

⁸"The Future We Want" - Outcome document of Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 20-22 June 2012, available at: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf>.

⁹Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development available at: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/voluntarycommitments.html>.

¹⁰A video of the Major Group for Children and Youth's Rio+20 Declaration entitled, "Something To Believe In" is available at <http://vimeo.com/47381594>.

¹¹Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Rhyperlink.17. Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples, United Nations General Assembly, UN Doc A/RES/20/2037, 7 December 1965, available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/a20r2037.htm>.

¹³For more information on the Major Group for Children and Youth, please visit: <http://uncsdchildrenyouth.org/> and <http://childrenyouth.org/>.

¹⁴For more information on UN Commission on Sustainable Development, please visit: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/csd.html>.

¹⁵This innovative approach reflects in the changes in the governance landscape where civil society as non-state actors are engaged in the decision-making process, programming and decision implementation. Before Agenda 21, these were exclusively reserved for member states.

¹⁶Youth 21 is a process for building a framework for youth engagement in the UN system. For more information, see: <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=680>.

¹⁷The Official Youth Delegates Programme is a programme of the UN DESA, Division of Sustainable Development for the inclusion of youth in the official delegations to the UN. For more information, see: <http://undesadspd.org/Youth/OurWork/Youthdelegateprogramme.aspx>.

¹⁸Interagency Network on Youth and Development is a network consisting of UN entities, represented at the headquarters level, whose work is relevant to youth. For more information, see: <http://undesadspd.org/Youth/UNInterAgencyNetworkonYouthDevelopment.aspx>.

¹⁹Youth SWAP is a framework to guide youth programming for the UN system. For more information, visit: [http://www.undg.org/docs/13099/UN%20System-wide%20Action%20Plan%20on%20Youth%20\(3\).pdf](http://www.undg.org/docs/13099/UN%20System-wide%20Action%20Plan%20on%20Youth%20(3).pdf).

²⁰B Ki-moon, Working with and for women and young people, The Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda, available at: http://www.un.org/sg/priorities/women_youth.shtml.

²¹For more information, please see: <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/>.

²²For more information, please see: Major Group for Children and Youth Rio+20 Final Report, UNMGCY, September 2012, available at: http://uncsdchildrenyouth.org/pdfs/MGCY_Rio20_Final-Report_final.pdf.

²³The youth constituency is one of the rare constituencies, if not the only constituency, that does not have paid staff for the coordination and facilitation of its participation and inputs and is entirely dependent on the enthusiasm, free time and resources of its members.

²⁴Empowerment here could be understood as support in administration, capacity building and strengthening youth accountability and follow-up initiatives.

²⁵Professional support should not by any means be perceived as a limitation to youth autonomy in the process. It rather should be seen as a support for the creation of an enabling environment for meaningful participation of young people, as well as some sort of mechanism aimed at neutralisation or minimisation of the challenges of youth participation that are particularly the result of the social, cultural, and legal norms.

²⁶Due to the challenges facing the MGCY, and in order to ensure that engagement is empowering, as well as to ensure a learning and youth-friendly experience, several styles of leadership had to be combined, such as democratic and laissez-faire leadership styles. In addition, all decisions were made by consensus, which could be critiqued as putting more focus on the process than on the outcomes of engagement. However, especially within the youth constituency, it was noticed that the advocacy and implementation of the outcomes are dependent on the process put in place.

²⁷Above fn 22.

²⁸For more information, see MGCY Youth Blast Report: <http://uncsdchildrenyouth.org/pages/youthblast.html>.

²⁹For more information, please see the programme for the sustainable development dialogues: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=13&nr=596&menu=23>.

³⁰Youth friendly in this article means suitable for young people and young people's rights, needs and capacities.