

## Human Rights 75 Pledge

### Youth Empowerment through Human Rights: A Call for Youth Meaningful Participation and Systematic Mainstreaming

*Submitted to the OHCHR on November 24, 2023*

**IIMA - Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice Salesiane di Don Bosco** is an international NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. IIMA is present in 97 countries where it provides education to children, adolescents, youth, and vulnerable groups to build up strategies for youth empowerment, participation in decision-making processes, as responsible, honest citizens, defenders of human rights, and promoters of the common good.

**VIDES International - International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education, and Development** is an NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council working in 49 countries. It was founded in 1987 to promote youth volunteer service at the local and international levels for ensuring human rights, development, and democracy. Through its network of young volunteers worldwide, VIDES promotes best practices on active citizenship among youth.

**IIMA and VIDES pledge** to continue working for the empowerment of young people worldwide, not only by reporting existing protection gaps in the implementation of human rights with regard to youth, but also by greatly valuing the crucial role of youth in the promotion of human rights for society at large. Accordingly, both NGOs have been active in calling the attention of the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights bodies on the specific situation of youth in order to ensure that the rights of youth are placed high on the list of priorities.<sup>1</sup>

The present joint pledge is submitted in the framework of the Human Rights 75 initiative.

The data and information obtained for this contribution came from the advocacy work carried out by IIMA Human Rights Office and VIDES International in the framework of the UN in Geneva and in collaboration with members and partners on the ground, including young people.

#### A. Preliminary Remarks: The Definition of Youth

While the UN age-range of 15 to 24 years is often used for statistical purposes, this is not always appropriate to tackle the reality of youth worldwide and, more importantly, it is not consistent with the existing international legal framework.<sup>2</sup>

In accordance with the definition of the CRC, both IIMA and VIDES support the definition provided by the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (December 2015) according to which “**the term youth is defined [...] as persons of the age of 18-29 years old**”<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, the following sections of this submission apply to this specific target group.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on IIMA and VIDES work in promoting human rights is available at [www.iimageneva.org](http://www.iimageneva.org)

<sup>2</sup> The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) considers “every human being below the age of eighteen years” is a “child” and, as a result, benefits from the special protection ensured by the CRC.

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) notes that “the term youth is defined in the context of this resolution as persons of the age of 18-29 years old”.

## B. Main barriers to effective, active, and meaningful youth participation, including in climate change and global environmental decision-making processes

According to the information received by our members in the field, the **main challenges faced by young people** can be typified as follows:

- i. **Lack of motivation from young people to engage due to distrust in public political institutions and local authorities.** The main barrier that prevents youth activism is the feeling of impotence: when they try to have their voice heard, they see that policymakers ignoring them and leaving them aside. *“In the few occasions where they take us into consideration, it is never in an genuine way and active listening, but rather in an attempt to gain youth’s votes and consensus to win the elections. This constant finding of deaf hearing demoralizes us young generations from taking the matters in our own hands”* (Sofia, from Italy).
- ii. **Lack of participation in the public and political life,** and when formal participation is ensured, they lack real influence on decision-making processes.
- iii. **Lack of interest from young people towards global actions.** Youth care about environmental challenges but struggle to relate to suggested actions. More efforts should be undertaken to share information on the environmental crisis and provide youth with opportunities to engage not only on the individual level, but through joint actions. *“We need to find ways to motivate and make youth understand how important it is for them to get involved in the first person”* (Rocío, Youth animator and University student, Spain). *“Indeed today there is much more information about how we should take care of the environment, but I think that it is urgent to make people aware that this problem is really a serious risk for the survival of humanity. Communication in this regard is still not so strong.”* (Laura, 27, Spain)

### Youth’s right to participation in decision-making processes is a must

Despite the fact that most countries offer several formal spaces for youth participation, particularly through the provision of the right to vote, youth participation worldwide remains very limited at different levels.

Firstly, **those youth who are not affiliated with any political party or other organization are almost automatically excluded**, except to exercise their right to vote. While youth-led organizations constitute a great added value for ensuring youth participation, they only represent a small portion of the youth population.

Secondly, **the ‘quality’ of the participation is also crucial.** In most cases, young people are not truly educated to develop their critical thinking skills or, in fewer but significant cases, they are obliged to adopt a particular ideological affiliation in order to have access to better opportunities. The increased use of the Internet and social media has certainly opened up a full range of opportunities, offering a new platform for sharing and participation. These tools, however, are often used to influence the public opinion of the younger generations, without being accompanied by an equal development of the critical and independent thinking of young actors. **The provision of holistic education, Human Rights Education, ongoing formation and training play a crucial and important role.** In this regard, it is fundamental to keep in mind what **Article 1 of the UDHR** underscores: *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”*

Thirdly, whenever spaces for participation exist, **the influence that youth participation exercises generally in the decision-making process, is very limited.** The issue of formal participation versus substantial, **transformative participation remains critical.** In fact, youth participation can produce positive outcomes only if youth are given the possibility to constructively influence and change the existing *status quo*. This can only be done by providing youth with the necessary space and allowing their views to be heard and taken into account when decisions are made.

**Lack of involvement of youth organizations or youth-led structures.** Although there are regional differences both in the development and implementation of policies and programs for youth, however, **youth, in general, are not involved in developing, implementing, monitoring and/or evaluating these policies and programs.**

## C. Systematic Mainstreaming of the Human Rights of Youth

Since the adoption of the first HRC resolution 32/1 (2016) on **Youth and Human Rights**, it was clearly recognized that “[...] *young people face specific challenges that require integrated responses by States, the United Nations system and other stakeholders*”<sup>4</sup>

The need of systematic mainstreaming of the implementation of the rights of youth through existing international human rights mechanisms was then explicitly affirmed in the HRC resolution 35/14 (2017), which “*Urges Member States to consider addressing, through the universal periodic review and the treaty bodies, issues pertaining to the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for youth, and to share the best practices that they have developed in dealing with the realization of human rights for young people*”.<sup>5</sup>

The subsequent report of the OHCHR issued in 2018 pursuant HRC resolution 35/14 (2017), states that “*Yet the mainstreaming of youth issues is not systematic in the overall context of international human rights mechanisms*”.<sup>6</sup> And it recommends to the Human Rights Council to assess the extent of the barriers and discrimination faced by young people through several measures, including the “*Mainstreaming the human rights of youth through existing mechanisms, policies and programmes*”<sup>7</sup> and “*Introducing a mechanism that would ensure permanent, structured youth participation in the Council’s work, such as an annual youth forum as an ongoing component of the Council.*”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the full-day intersessional seminar focused on the challenges and opportunities of young people in the field of human rights, was organized by the OHCHR following HRC resolution 41/13 (2019) and held online on 12 April 2021. One of the four sessions of the seminar was devoted to the youth mainstreaming in human rights mechanisms, as reflected in the subsequent report issued by the OHCHR in December 2021. Potential next steps on youth and human rights at the international level discussed during the intersessional seminar included improved youth mainstreaming in existing human rights mechanisms, *inter alia*, through: **a greater focus on youth in resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly; the inclusion of recommendations on youth in the context of the universal periodic review process and treaty body reviews; and increased attention to youth by special procedures mandate holders.**<sup>9</sup>

Some specific suggestions also included ***the establishment of a youth forum under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, an annual dialogue on intergenerational inclusion and human rights and the development of working modalities, including virtual participation, enabling diverse youth voices to be heard and broader engagement of the treaty bodies with youth organizations; youth-friendlier processes; the inclusion of youth rights-related questions in the list of issues.***<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the mainstreaming of youth rights has been identified long ago as a needed step to improve the enjoyment of the human rights of youth, much still needs to be undertaken to **make such a mainstreaming truly systematic and widespread among Member States while addressing the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms (e.g. the Universal Periodic Review and the Special Procedures) as well as the Treaty bodies.**

How can we adopt adequate measures for meaningful youth engagement, if we do not know youth reality on the ground? How can we ask them to commit, if youth-related issues are often kept out of the country’s human rights reviews?

To adequately address these challenges and unlock youth potential as human rights advocates and promoters of the common good, we call upon Member States to:

- **Ensure effective and transformative participation of youth in decision-making processes;**
- **Systematic mainstream youth rights through existing UN Human Rights mechanisms, especially the UPR and the Treaty Bodies.**

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<sup>4</sup> A/HRC/RES/32/1.

<sup>5</sup> A/HRC/RES/35/14.

<sup>6</sup> A/HRC/39/33, § 20, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> A/HRC/39/33, § 89, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> A/HRC/49/32, § 55.

<sup>10</sup> A/HRC/49/32, § 45.