



Review article

Ensuring Youth's Right to Participation and Promotion of Youth Leadership in the Development of Sexual and Reproductive Health Policies and Programs

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Article history: Received May 14, 2014; Accepted July 29, 2014

Keywords: Youth; Participation; Sexuality; Reproductive health; Human rights

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this article was to reflect on the concepts of adolescence and youth, summarize models and frameworks developed to conceptualize youth participation, and assess research that has attempted to evaluate the implementation and impact of youth participation in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). We searched and critically reviewed relevant published reports and “gray literature” from the period 2000–2013. “Young people” are commonly defined as those between the ages of 10 and 24 years, but what it means to be a young person varies largely across cultures and depends on a range of socioeconomic factors. Several conceptual frameworks have been developed to better understand youth participation, and some frameworks are designed to monitor youth development programs that have youth participation as a key component. Although none of them are SRHR specific, they have the potential to be adapted and applied also for adolescents' SRHR programs. The most monitored and evaluated intervention type is peer education programs, but the effectiveness of the approach is questioned. There are few attempts to systematically evaluate youth participation, and clear indicators and better methodologies still need to be developed. More research and documentation as well as the adoption of innovative practices for involving youth in sexual and reproductive health programs are needed. Participation is a right and should not only be evaluated in terms of effectiveness and impact. Youth participation in program and policy development should still be a priority.

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CONTRIBUTION

Findings from this review highlight the need to further develop indicators and methodologies for the evaluation of youth participation, both in terms of process and outcomes. Participation is a right and involving young people in a meaningful way in program and policy development should continue to be a priority.

Twenty years from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), youth participation in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) policies and programs have flourished worldwide, operating at different levels from international advocacy to local interventions. The Programme of

Action, adopted after the ICPD in 1994, gave some initial steps in the recognition of young people's participation. Some of these considerations are the encouragement of girl-children's participation in societies' development; the integration and promotion of youth participation in all spheres of society, including political

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

Disclaimer: Publication of this article was supported by the World Health Organization (WHO). The opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of WHO.

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processes and leadership roles; the participation of young people in reproductive health programs; and the need for youth participation in the development of educational projects related to the ICPD Programme of Action [1].

After ICPD+5, there was a proliferation of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programs for youth, in part because of the flow of resources from international donors after the commitment to investing 20% of the total funding in youth-related programs. Although youth participation is part of international development agendas and recognized as a human right, there is still a need for conceptual clarifications and to address a range of practical challenges for its operationalization as a regular practice in program development and management. One of the major ongoing discussions is related to how to conceptually define “youth” and “participation” [2].

In this article, we reflect on the concepts of adolescence and youth, we highlight the key international agreements related to youth participation and SRHR, and summarize models and frameworks developed to conceptualize youth participation, both from a human rights perspective and a program implementation perspective. Next, we present a critical review of the research that has attempted to evaluate the implementation and impact of youth participation in the field of SRHR, before we finally describe some approaches to move forward on the adoption of youth participation as an essential practice in policy and program development.

Methods

A systematic search was performed using the databases PubMed, Education Resources Information Center, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Global Health, and Sociological Abstracts. Terms searched included youth participation, youth involvement, meaningful participation, youth programs, consumer participation, social participation, peer group, peer education, leadership, community engagement, reproductive health, sexual health, sexual behavior, process evaluation, youth and community engagement, citizenship, and youth participation for social change.

Additional publications on youth participation were identified from reports and gray literature, with searches done through Google and Google Scholar, as well as through searches at Internet sites for youth-led or youth-focused organizations; adult-led nongovernmental organizations and programs working on SRH and/or youth; United Nations (UN) official reports; and youth SRH forum minutes and official statements. The timeframe for the search was limited to 2000–2013. The final number of documents selected for review was 57.

Results

Definitions of adolescence, youth, and young people

The concept of youth is relatively new. It gained strength at the international level in the second half of the 20th century, derived mainly from the economic and political need to engage young people as a separate stakeholder group [3]. For statistical consistency and comparisons across countries, the UN defines “young people” as those between the ages of 10 and 24 years. Included in this definition is the classification of adolescence, which comprises the ages of 10–19 years old. This operational definition allows the UN system to monitor and document

activities regardless of the definitions adopted by Member States in their national youth-related legislation and policies, as well as in any local definition of youth.

When defining youth, however, it is imperative not to assume that the process of aging is universally the same. Young people are subject to power dynamics that respond to their age, gender, social and economic class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status, and other dimensions that shape their personal identity [4]. The boundaries of childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood evolve constantly and may become blurry. As Furlong et al. [5] have pointed out, it is difficult for some sections of the population to identify into which phase a person is transitioning through, especially when the usual benchmarks have been postponed indefinitely or were never present at all. Although age provides a reference for personal transitions from one life stage to another, and having a standardized youth definition is practical from a program's point of view, the process of moving from child to youth and finally adulthood is an experience profoundly ingrained in the cultural, economic, social, and political contexts where people live and grow [4,5].

In areas of the world with high-income levels, the demarcation of childhood, youth, and adulthood may be less clear-cut. Young people delay marriage, childbearing, and extend their student status while living in a separate household from their parents but are not always economically independent from them or State welfare. At the other end of the development continuum, a large proportion of age-defined young people are affected every day by poverty, unemployment, lack of education, conflict, migration, violence, HIV, and other difficulties that force them to move directly from childhood to adulthood, without the possibility of experiencing their youth as a period of experimentation, preparation, and/or transition [4,6].

These different social and political factors are key determinants of what role young people see for themselves in society and the ways in which young people participate in programs and policies. Interventions and policies need to be sensitive and tailored to the local cultural and social expressions of being young in addition to key SRHR indicators for this population.

What is youth participation?

Many international organizations and agencies concur that youth participation should not be regarded solely as a component that will improve the health or development outcomes of a given program or intervention but, rather, as a human right that needs to be monitored and evaluated with the use of specific policy and program indicators [7]. Participation can be regarded as a civil and political right (i.e., participation in political elections) and as an economic, cultural, and social right (i.e., the participation in the design and implementation of development agendas, including health, education, housing policies, and poverty reduction strategies such as youth employment). Children's and adolescents' right to participation in all matters related to their own lives has been recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. States party to Convention on the Rights of the Child, with attention to the principles of the best interest of the child [8] and evolving capacities [9], must guarantee the conditions that are conducive for the inclusion of their opinions and concerns.

Some UN documents define participation as seeking information, expressing ideas, taking an active role in different steps of the process of creating a policy or program, being informed and consulted on decisions concerning public interest, analyzing

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