

Advancing Youth-Centered Health & Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

Background Information:

The Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September 2023 presents a critical opportunity for member states to review progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and recenter their actions to address the needs and demands of future generations.

Young key populations, including adolescents, face numerous challenges in accessing essential health services, with restrictive laws and policies posing significant barriers. Indeed, young people continue to be disproportionately impacted by HIV, with those aged 15-24 accounting for almost 27% of new HIV infections, despite making up only approximately 16% of the global population. In the Asia-Pacific region, young people accounted for almost on quarter of new HIV infections in 2022. In some countries, over 45% of new HIV infections were among young people.

Youth Access to Health:

The World Bank and the World Health Organization's data highlights that at least half of the world's population lacks full coverage of essential health services. Among them, young people, particularly those marginalized (such as young people who use drugs) or living in low and middle-income countries, face greater challenges in accessing healthcare. A survey conducted by Youth RISE in 2021 showed that 33% of respondents accessed healthcare services through out-of-pocket expenses, and many had been denied healthcare due to financial constraints.

Young people still lack access to mental health care, comprehensive Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), harm reduction programs and non-coerced non-forced substance dependence recovery. **Obstacles to accessing these essential health services are the result of laws and policies that promote stigma, discrimination, and criminalization based on age, identity, or other status.**

For instance, criminalization of sex work, same-sex sexual activity, being transgender, and drug use and possession continue to pose barriers to young key populations accessing HIV services, as well as acting as methods of excluding them from enjoying other rights such as education. This also has knock-on effects on life development due to criminal records being a barrier to employment, housing, education, and mobility.

Youth Representation & Participation in Parliaments:

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing challenges for young people, underscoring the need for their representation in public institutions. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's report on Youth Participation in National Parliaments (2021), the global proportion of Members of Parliament aged under 30 has increased to 2.6% in recent years. While this represents a positive trend, it remains insufficient given that 50% of the world's population falls under this age group. **Youth quotas have proven effective in increasing youth representation, similar to gender parity quotas.** When well-designed, these quotas can further enhance youth representation.



Young people aged 15-24 accounted for 27% of new HIV infections in 2022. In some countries, this number exceeded 45%.

Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development:

The latest UNAIDS data highlights that many countries still have restrictive laws and policies surrounding the "age of consent" laws prohibiting access to SRHR services, harm reduction and related services. **Such limitations unleash harmful outcomes in various aspects of young people's lives.** For instance, an estimated 250,000 Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) were newly infected with HIV in 2021, with 82% of them from Sub-Saharan Africa. Such numbers might indicate the reason why adolescent girl schooling completion rates remain low, with only 44% completing lower secondary school and 26% completing higher secondary school.

As the SDG Summit marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, it is essential to address policy coherence for sustainable development. Advancing sustainable development requires a focus on synergies through systemic approaches that consider interlinkages of human-planetary systems and subsystems. Policymaking should integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions, considering cross-boundary spillover effects. Policy coherence for sustainable development goes beyond "doing no harm" and aims at "doing good" by maximizing synergies and mitigating trade-offs. It emphasizes multi-sectoral linkages, multi-actor partnerships, and institutional and governance mechanisms to achieve the SDGs.

Key Message for the Political Declaration:

Within the political declaration arising from the SDG Summit, member states should:

- 1 Recognize Young People's Right to Health:**
Member states should recognize that laws and policies preventing young people from accessing healthcare and other services based on age, identity, or other status act as barriers to their right to health and must be removed. **This includes removing punitive laws that criminalize sex work, drug use, LGBTQ+ identities, and gender-affirming care** and engaging communities in inclusive processes for decriminalization, legalization, and regulation.
- 2 Empower Young People as Leaders & Partners:**
The political declaration should acknowledge and support young people as leaders and partners of Agenda 2030. **Member states should back this recognition with adequate funding for youth-led interventions** aimed at achieving SDG 3.3 and other sustainable development goals.
- 3 Include Language & Support for Adolescents:**
It is crucial to ensure that the political declaration **includes specific language addressing the unique issues faced by adolescents and young people in all their diversity.** Member states must commit to providing adequate holistic support during their critical life changes.
- 4 Promote Youth Representation & Participation:**
As part of the modalities for the SDG Summit, member states should place a strong emphasis on civil society and youth engagement. **This includes encouraging the inclusion of youth in their delegations, providing opportunities for young people to speak at the summit, and allocating specific slots for civil society to address the assembly alongside member states.**

Conclusion

The SDG Summit presents a vital opportunity for member states to renew their commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. **The political declaration resulting from the summit must address the challenges faced by young key populations, empower young people as active participants in sustainable development, and foster youth representation in decision-making processes.** Youth RISE, in partnership with UNITE - Parliamentarians for Global Health and supported by UNAIDS, call upon member states to prioritize youth-centered health policies and policy coherence in their discussions and commitments during the Summit. By recognizing and addressing the specific needs and challenges young people face, we can ensure inclusive and sustainable development that leaves no one behind. ***We stand ready to support member states in achieving these crucial objectives.***

FOR INQUIRIES, CONTACT:

Ruby Lawlor,
Executive Director, Youth RISE
ruby@youthrise.org

Rebeca Marques Rocha,
Communications & Advocacy Officer, Youth RISE
rmarques@youthrise.org

Beatrix Vas,
Policy Coordinator, UNITE
beatrix.vas@unitenetwork.org