

# Annual 2025 Report



**YOUTH RISE**

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Reviewed by Rebeca Calzada  
Graphic design by Elena Keller

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



|                                                         |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS                                | 01 |
| OPENING LETTER                                          | 02 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS                                        | 04 |
| WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO                               | 05 |
| STRATEGY & ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT                   | 14 |
| 2025 AT A GLANCE                                        | 17 |
| EVENTS                                                  | 22 |
| EDUCATION                                               | 29 |
| PUBLICATIONS, RESEARCH, AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT       | 32 |
| CAMPAIGNS AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENTS                       | 34 |
| IWG 2025 ENGAGEMENTS                                    | 37 |
| PARTNERSHIPS, COALITIONS, WORKING GROUPS AND COMMITTEES | 38 |
| FUNDRAISING                                             | 41 |

# ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

- **AIDS:** Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
- **ayKP:** Adolescent and Young Key Populations
- **BIPOC:** Black Indigenous People Of Colour
- **CAMH:** The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- **CND:** Commission on Narcotic Drugs
- **CSO:** Civil Society Organization
- **EATG:** European AIDS Treatment Group
- **EHRA:** Eurasian Harm Reduction Alliance
- **EJAF:** Elton John AIDS Foundation
- **ESWA:** European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance
- **FSHR:** Full Spectrum Harm Reduction
- **GAS:** Global AIDS Strategy
- **GCDP:** Global Commission on Drug Policy
- **GDPR:** Global Data Protection Regulation
- **Global Fund:** Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- **HIV:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus
- **HLM:** High Level meeting
- **HRI:** Harm Reduction International
- **IDPC:** International Drug Policy Consortium
- **IFMSA:** International Federation of Medical Students' Associations
- **INCB:** International Narcotics Control Board
- **INPUD:** International Network of People Who Use Drugs
- **IWG:** International Working Group of Youth RISE
- **MENAHRA:** The Middle East and North Africa Harm Reduction Association
- **NGO:** Non-Governmental Organization
- **NYNGOC:** New York NGO Committee on Drugs
- **OHCHR:** Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **OSF:** Open Society Foundations
- **PCB:** Programme Coordinating Board
- **PEPFAR:** The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
- **RCF:** Robert Carr Fund
- **SANPUD:** South African Network of People Who Use Drugs
- **SDG:** Sustainable Development Goals
- **SCG:** Strategic Coordination Group on Drug Use
- **SRHR:** Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- **SSDP:** Students for Sensible Drug Policy.
- **SWOT:** Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
- **TanPUD:** Tanzania Network for People Who Use Drugs
- **TGEU:** Transgender Europe
- **UHRN:** Uganda Harm Reduction Network
- **UN:** United Nations
- **UNAIDS:** Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
- **UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund
- **UNODC:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
- **VNGOC:** Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs
- **WHO:** World Health Organization
- **WHRIN:** Women and Harm Reduction International Network
- **YPWUD:** Young People Who Use Drugs

# Opening Letter

*Written by Ruby Lawlor, Executive Director*



Two contradictory stories defined 2025 for us at Youth RISE.

The first unfolded at the 68th session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), where the historic decision was made to establish an independent expert panel to review the international drug control system. It is one of the most significant openings in decades, and one our movement has been pushing towards for many years.

The second is that the very people needed to inform the panel about the harms and failures of the current system are being defunded, disrupted and criminalised. In a consultation convened by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) alongside partner organisations, we sat with colleagues documenting threats to their organisations, interruptions to their services and essential advocacy, driven by political pushback against civil society and severe funding cuts.

Youth RISE spent 2025 working in the space between these two realities: between a system finally willing to be questioned and communities losing the capacity to question it. That space is one of the many reasons this organisation still matters. We carve out room for youth engagement in new and emerging dialogues while building the capacity of young people worldwide to advocate for their rights.

We did this work under real pressure, as in early 2025, we too suffered severe funding cuts as a direct consequence of US funding cuts to international HIV and AIDS funding. Despite this, Youth RISE remained active in more than 20 countries and engaged in over sixteen international events, policy processes and advocacy campaigns. The pages that follow in this report tell that story in full, so here I want to share what stood out to me most as I look back on the year.

The first thing is our International Working Group members (IWGs) carried that work all around the world. Time and again in 2025, in rooms where drug policy was being debated, one of us was there, usually saying something the room needed to hear. Elena Keller took our “Connecting Theory and Practice” report to the Youth Side Programme of the World Health Summit in Berlin, introducing a rights-based, intersectional understanding of harm reduction to young medical and public health professionals, many of whom were meeting it for the first time. Juliana Shoko and Saidy Brown carried youth-led harm reduction priorities into the UNAIDS East and Southern Africa Regional Youth-Led Organisations Engagement Forum, placing them at the centre of regional discussions on HIV and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) financing. Teresa Castro represented us at a Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs side event during the United Nations High-Level Political Forum in New York, arguing that Sustainable Development Goal 3 and 17 cannot be met without decriminalisation and the formal integration of harm reduction into the Sustainable Development Goals framework. Dinah MacMillan joined an international panel in Rome organised in direct response to the Italian government's increasingly repressive drug policies. Rebeca Calzada challenged abstinence-focused definitions of treatment from a cross-sector panel at the Reform Conference in Detroit. Teresa co-facilitated a participatory session at Stadt Nach Acht in Berlin surfacing structural barriers inside harm reduction itself. Walter Osigai worked with Uganda Harm Reduction Network and the International Drug Policy Consortium to assess Uganda's engagement in international drug policy and map concrete ways to strengthen it.

The second is the long-haul work of embedding that message in the frameworks that will govern the years ahead. At CND we co-organised a side event with over twenty-five organisations and United Nations (UN) agencies, including OHCHR, the World Health Organisation, United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF. Titled "I Wish They Had Told Us How to Be Safe" it was built on research by André Belchior Gomes –commissioned by Youth RISE, which made the case that moralistic, abstinence-based and fear-driven drug education fails young people, and that culturally sensitive, participatory approaches do not. With UNAIDS, through the Adolescent and Young Key Population Steering Committee, we spent the whole year making sure the perspectives of young people who use drugs shaped the 2026 to 2031 Global AIDS Strategy, the 2026 High-Level Meeting and Global Fund Grant Cycle 8: youth consultations in April, a Youth Statement launched at the CND Thematic Meeting on HIV and Hepatitis C in October, and that same Statement formally presented to the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board in December. That arc, from consultation to the highest governance table in the global HIV response, is what meaningful participation actually looks like.

New doors opened too, some in spaces where young people who use drugs have rarely been invited. We ran two youth consultations for our collaboration with the Global Commission on Drug Policy (GCDP) for their project titled "Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth", and I attended the World Congress on Justice with Children in Madrid for the first consultation in the series designed to engage the child rights sector. The Council of Europe's Drafting Committee on Human Rights and Drug Policy invited us to help shape the scope of a forthcoming Recommendation to member states. Our submission on the draft EU Drugs Strategy called for a full-spectrum harm reduction approach, youth advisory structures across EU bodies, and a decisive shift away from supply reduction efforts that have proven ineffective. We were active throughout the Harm Reduction International Conference in Bogotá, where we co-organised the photo exhibition "Meeting People Where They Are At", contributed to the OHCHR consultation on gender backlash, and opened partnerships with the Global Campus on Human Rights, the Brazilian government and the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, while joining the Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

None of this holds together without an organisation strong enough to carry it, and this year forced us to look hard at our own foundations. We strengthened monitoring, evaluation and financial management systems, integrated comprehensive new policies into our core Human Resource Policy, and rebuilt grievance and mediation procedures around safety and accountability. A needs assessment with our Board and wider membership produced a Governance Improvement Plan for implementation in 2026. In the first quarter of 2025, we began developing a new organisational Strategic Plan in response to the funding crisis that we were met with. By the end of the year, we designed and piloted "The Advocacy Playground", our landmark curriculum supporting young people to build advocacy skills and craft strategic action plans contextualised to the environments they work in.

Surviving the funding crisis took fierce perseverance, hard fundraising and painful downsizing. Support from the Robert Carr Fund through bridging grants, emergency funding from Open Society Foundations, a sub-grant from Fondation Botnar through our partnership with the GCDP, and backing from UNAIDS and the Global Fund Community Engagement Strategic Initiative through our partnership with INPUD kept this organisation standing. That we absorbed the loss of a major multi-year grant and still delivered everything described in this report is a testament to our team, our IWG members and our funders. But survival is not the same as security, and the environment for harm reduction remains hostile, and building longer-term financial resilience is one of our central priorities for 2026 and beyond. To our funders: thank you for backing a youth-led organisation in a year when backing anyone at all was difficult. For the first time in decades, the global drug control system is up for review. "Protecting" young people from drugs has been the justification for that system for long enough, while in reality causing immense harm to young people and to everyone. In 2026, we intend for young people to be among those deciding what replaces it.

Ruby Lawlor, Executive Director

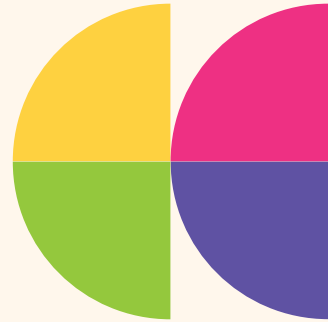
# Acknowledgements

Youth RISE is grateful to its donors and funding organisations, whose enormous support has made the work presented in this report possible. Their commitment to human rights and the trust they place in the communities and organisations that Youth RISE serves, have been instrumental in moving towards a more just world.

THANK YOU:



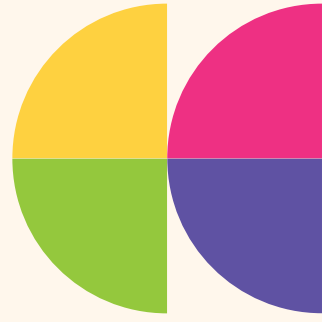
# Who We Are And What We Do



Recognizing youth as a Key Population disproportionately impacted by systemic barriers, stigma, and discrimination, Youth RISE (Resources, Information, Support, and Education) works to amplify their voices and drive change. Through capacity building, evidence-based initiatives, advocacy, and the development of tools and resources, Youth RISE empowers youth leadership and promotes inclusive, human rights-based drug policies and youth-led and tailored harm reduction. It also engages key stakeholders, such as other youth-led and youth-focused organisations, UN bodies, PWUD networks, wider civil society organisations, and national, regional, and international decision-makers, to challenge and dismantle harmful narratives.

*Youth RISE assumes an important role in addressing the challenges faced by young people as a result of punitive and unsupportive policies and laws by combining lived experience with expertise in drug policy and harm reduction.*

# Board of Directors



*The Board of Directors was established in 2020 and meets quarterly with the Executive Director, Management Team, and an IWG representative to provide strategic oversight and guidance, discuss initiatives, review progress, and ensure alignment with the organisation's strategic plan.*

## **Youth RISE's Board of Directors:**

Zara Snapp (Mexico). Chair  
Director of Instituto RIA

Oluwafisayo Amiola (Nigeria)  
Executive Director at Youth RISE  
Nigeria

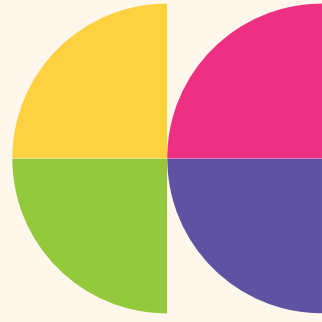
Phoenix Mohawk Kellye (United  
States)  
Harm Reduction Specialist

Ananda Maudy (Indonesia)  
Young Activist | Chair of WHRIN  
Board of Directors

Caitlin Padgett (Canada)  
Co-Founder of Youth RISE |  
Director of Development of ñuu  
communities

Natalie Ginsberg (United States)  
Global Impact Officer at  
Multidisciplinary Association for  
Psychedelic Studies

# Management Team



*Guided by peers and members directly connected to the communities it serves, Youth RISE is led by a Management Team of young professionals, many of whom were former IWG members themselves. Bringing together expertise in advocacy, project management, research, community engagement, and capacity building, the team oversees daily operations and programme development. Youth RISE's work is informed by the experiences, expertise, and perspectives of IWGs from different countries and regions. Through their involvement, members help us better understand the realities faced by young people who use drugs in different contexts. This information often helps shape our programmes, advocacy priorities, and engagement strategies. By actively involving IWGs in these processes, the team ensures the organization delivers on its strategic objectives while remaining committed to its core purpose.*

## **Youth RISE's Management Team:**

### **Ruby Lawlor - Executive Director**

*(Ireland, based in Spain)*

- Bachelor's in International Development (University College Cork), specialized in Public Health
- Drug policy and harm reduction expert, specifically focused on youth-led advocacy



### **Rebeca Calzada - Knowledge Management Programme Lead**

*(Mexico)*

- Master's in Politics and Society (Maastricht University)
- Experienced in drug policy and harm reduction, both in academia and CSO in Mexico
- Co-founder and coordinator of La Testería (harm reduction programme)



**Carolina Ahumada** - Deputy  
Director and Youth Engagement  
Programme Lead

*(Argentina)*

- Sociologist specialised in drug policy and human rights (Universidad de Buenos Aires), currently pursuing a postgraduate diploma in International Relations (Universidad de San Martín).
- Senior Advocacy and Projects Officer at Intercambios Asociación Civil



**Rebeca Marques Rocha** - Former  
High Level Communications and  
Advocacy Programme Lead (until  
2026)

*(Brazil, based in Austria)*

- Doctoral candidate and researcher in Public Policy (Central European University, Vienna)
- Experienced in harm reduction and public policy in NGO's worldwide



**André Gomes** - High Level  
Communications and Advocacy  
Programme Lead (from March 2026)

*(Portugal)*

- Master's in Politics and Communications (London School of Economics)
- Experienced in drug policy communications, reporting, and policy analysis
- Editor of TalkingDrugs.org, global news platform on drug policy



**Humberto Rotondo** - Human  
Resource Manager | Admin  
Assistant

*(Peru)*

- Lawyer and Fundraising Director at Proyecto SOMA



**Marialba Quesada (Costa Rica, based in the US)** -Former Social Media Manager (until mid-2025) | Communications and Advocacy Officer

*(Costa Rica, based in the United States)*

- Afro-Latina Anthropologist specialized in drug policy, harm reduction, graphic design, and community work.
- Harm Reduction Specialist at First Call KC



**Isaac Olushola (Nigeria, based in the UK)** - Former Global Fund Project Manager (until March 2025) | Programme Assistant | Capacity Building Officer

*(Nigeria, based in the UK)*

- Current Global Fund Programme Manager at the International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD)
- M.Sc University of Oxford, Phd(c) University of Bristol

**Alan Bevan**  
(Ireland)

*(Ireland)*

- Finance Manager
- Accountant

# IWG Team

*The International Working Group (IWG) is a team of voluntary young regional representatives, whose lived experiences shape and define Youth RISE's mission and advocacy. As the heart of the organisation, IWG members contribute to the network's strategy, support projects, co-author reports, and represent youth voices and perspectives in key advocacy spaces. Their invaluable contributions ensure that the voices of young people remain at the centre of Youth RISE's work.*

## **Youth RISE's IWG Team:**

**André Gomes  
(Portugal)**

*IWG member since 2022*

Experienced in drug policy communications, reporting, and policy analysis. Communications Lead at Release and Editor of TalkingDrugs.org, a global news platform on drug policy.

**Beatrix Vas  
(Hungary, based  
in Austria)**

*IWG member since 2020*

Drug policy and harm reduction researcher and activist, with expertise in the securitization of substance use and bridging academia and policymaking. Treasurer on the Board of the VNGOC, Secretary on the Board of the NYNGOC and Programme Coordinator at the GCDP.

**Aden Joshua Zane  
McCracken (United  
States, based in  
Thailand)**

*IWG member since 2025*

Medical Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Arts student at Stanford University, researcher at Correlation - The European Harm Reduction Network, and co-lead of Labor of Love, a global harm reduction oral history project centring BIPOC, trans, and queer people who use drugs. Her work focuses on trans/queer drug user advocacy and Opioid Agonist Maintenance Treatment reform.

**Atika Juristia  
(Canada)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Founder and Executive Director of the J Healthcare Initiative, part of the Broadbent Institute's 2025 Emerging Leaders cohort, and advisor at CAMH on substance use and psychosis. Named one of BC Business's 30 Under 30 in 2025 for her impact on health policy affecting over 7 million Canadians.

**Brayan Alvarado  
(Puerto Rico)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Case manager and outreach worker at Intercambios Puerto Rico, conducting street and nocturnal rounds since 2016 to promote drug use safety and harm reduction among young community members. Holds a Master's Degree in Psychology and a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice.

**Carolina Arredondo  
Sanchez Lira  
(Mexico, based in  
the US)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Public health professional and harm reduction advocate with experience in communicable disease case management, community outreach, and Latinx health equity. Northern Care Coordination Manager at HIV Alliance and recipient of the 2019 World AIDS Day Award.

**Chidera Precious  
Anyanwu (Nigeria)**

*IWG member since 2024 (until 2026)*

Harm reduction advocate with over six years of experience in drug policy and human rights, beginning as a volunteer with SSDP. Currently serves as Advocacy Lead at YouthRISE Nigeria, working towards rights-centred solutions for people who use drugs.

**Claire Nassolo  
(Uganda)**

*IWG member since 2025*

Harm reduction advocate and Peer Navigator at the UHRN, also serving as Project Coordinator and Task Force Member. Her work focuses on promoting the rights, health, and wellbeing of people who use drugs.

**Daniel  
Kumasewu  
(Ghana)**

*IWG member since 2025*

Based in Accra, Ghana, Daniel works with Hope For Future Generations (HFFG) as a Community Systems Strengthening Officer, supporting community-based approaches to health and development.

**Dinah Kate  
Macmillan (Italy)**

*IWG member since 2023*

Harm reduction worker with 8 years of peer experience, based at Isola di Arran Obv, Lab57 Alchemica, and the feminist collective Chemical Sisters, with a focus on human rights, gender minorities, and drug policy. Member of international networks including SisterWUD, NewNet, LEAP, and ItanPUD.

**Elena Keller (US,  
based in  
Switzerland)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Public health worker with a background in harm reduction, housing support, case management, and research on health outcomes for incarcerated individuals with Opioid Use Disorder. Her current work is within a housing first programme in Switzerland.

**Estefanía Villamizar  
(Colombia)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Political scientist and researcher in Full Spectrum Harm Reduction with a gender focus. Volunteer with the Échele Cabeza drug checking project since 2019.

**João Barbosa  
(Brazil)**

*IWG member since 2022*

Brazilian human rights activist focused on drug policy and justice reform. Global Coordinator and South America Team Leader at Incarceration Nations Network, Harm Reduction Supervisor at Groupe de Recherche et d'Intervention Psychosociale (GRIP), and member of the International Coalition on Drug Policy Reform and Environmental Justice.

**Juliana Shoko  
(Zimbabwe)**

*IWG member since 2025*

Passionate advocate for young people and women who use drugs in Zimbabwe. She actively promotes evidence-based harm reduction strategies, guided by the motto: "Harm reduction saves lives. Period."

**Marie Schneider  
(Germany)**

*IWG member since 2023*

Holds a Master's Degree in Political Science and is currently writing their thesis in Gender Studies, with a focus on sex work and harm reduction.

**Maruf Islam  
Purnima  
(Bangladesh)**

*IWG member since 2023*

Young transgender activist and diploma engineer, serving as Executive Member of Diner Alo Hijra Songho, a community-based organization working to empower transgender communities in Bangladesh. She is actively involved in advancing the rights and wellbeing of marginalized populations.

**Mohamed  
Amine Gahfez  
(Algeria)**

*IWG member since 2022*

Medical doctor and activist with over 12 years of experience in HIV/AIDS and harm reduction in the Middle East and North Africa region, working with key populations including YPWUD. Human rights advocate and FSHR practitioner.

**Saidy Brown (South  
Africa)**

*IWG member since 2025*

Queer HIV activist dedicated to community-driven advocacy and storytelling, leading initiatives in ItsoSeng focused on HIV education, mental health, and youth empowerment. She champions the rights and voices of queer and HIV-positive individuals through grassroots action and national platforms.

**Sara Monsalvo  
(Mexico)**

*IWG member since 2022*

Feminist researcher and harm reduction advocate with a focus on Latin American drug policy, access to justice, violence reduction, and the rights of women who use drugs. Holds a Bachelor's Degree in Latin American Studies from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

**Teresa Castro  
(Portugal)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Social worker, activist, researcher, and peer collaborator at Kosmicare, working with marginalized communities including people who use drugs, sex workers, and migrants. With living experience as a person who uses drugs, her work focuses on social determinants of health, stimulants, new psychoactive substances, and the meaningful inclusion of people who use drugs in research and policy.

**Walter Osigai  
Etepesit (Uganda)**

*IWG member since 2024*

Founding Director of VijanaAid Africa and Youth Advisor for Uganda's Youth Sounding Board of the European Union. Human rights and youth inclusion advocate, committed to building equitable futures for marginalized young people, guided by the principle of leading with inclusion, inspiring with action.

**Vincentius  
Azvian  
(Indonesia)**

*IWG member since 2023*

Youth researcher at Inti Muda Indonesia working on HIV, harm reduction, and drug policy reform, with a focus on developing better national regulations for people who use drugs.

# Strategy and Organizational Development

Throughout 2025, Youth RISE continued to strengthen its governance, internal systems, and long-term strategic direction amid major shifts across the global funding and policy landscape. The organisation prioritised improving internal processes to foster a safer working environment and ensure its structures and advocacy work were firmly aligned with the core values of meaningful participation, accountability, and human rights.

## Organisational Strengthening:

Building on internal improvements initiated in previous years, Youth RISE continued to strengthen its organisational systems and policies throughout 2025. Following improvements to monitoring, evaluation, and payment systems, the organisation integrated comprehensive new policies into its core Human Resource Policy, while updating grievance and mediation procedures to focus on safety and accountability.

Developed by Ruby Lawlor and Humberto Rotonodo in consultation with an international law firm Ogier, the new bullying and harassment policy aligns with Irish legal standards while remaining practical for YPWUD in diverse international contexts. The disability and neurodivergence policy was created alongside specialists Francesca Brivio and Dr Ernesto Reaño. This policy introduces important workplace accessibility guidelines and addresses the intersection between neurodivergence, disability, mental health and drug use, intersections that are central to Youth RISE's work.

# Governance Improvements:

During the year, Youth RISE conducted a review of its systems surrounding leadership and decision-making to explore mechanisms for effective oversight and long-term organisational sustainability. To achieve this, Ruby Lawlor conducted a needs assessment with the Board of Directors and the broader membership to identify areas of need.

A Governance Improvement Plan was developed in response, with implementation set for 2026. The plan includes a restructuring of the Board of Directors to allow for broader participation in the organizational decision-making processes. An Advisory Board will also be established to provide technical expertise and strategic guidance while maintaining compliance with Irish and EU regulations. Additionally, a standalone General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Image Use Terms of Reference will be introduced, alongside revised contract templates to enhance confidentiality and protection measures for minors and other vulnerable key populations.

# New Organisational Strategy Development:

During the first quarter of 2025, Youth RISE initiated the development of a new organisational Strategic Plan to navigate a rapidly changing external environment. The strategic change came at a critical time. The organisation faced the withdrawal of PEPFAR funding, the reversal of a three year RCF grant, and shifting donor priorities driven by a global de-prioritisation of multilateralism and the rise of far-right political agendas. To continue advancing its mission and effectively supporting its target populations, Youth RISE had to adapt its operational model and funding approach.

The Executive Director conducted a rapid assessment to map funding trends, policy shifts, internal capacity, and advocacy gaps where Youth RISE is best positioned to lead. The assessment involved key stakeholder interviews across Youth RISE's internal bodies: the IWG team, the Management Team, and the Board of Directors, as well as partners including UN agencies and organisations operating at global, regional, and national levels. An internal survey was also deployed to gather further insights. Following a SWOT analysis, the organisation defined several clear strategic priorities and finalised a transitional 2025 workplan in April. This successfully aided Youth RISE in engaging new partners and donors throughout the year. The comprehensive, long-term Strategic Plan is being finalised for approval by the Board and IWGs in 2026.

# Advocacy Goals

Youth RISE continued to use the advocacy strategy as a framework to ensure all projects and activities aligned with its mission and vision.

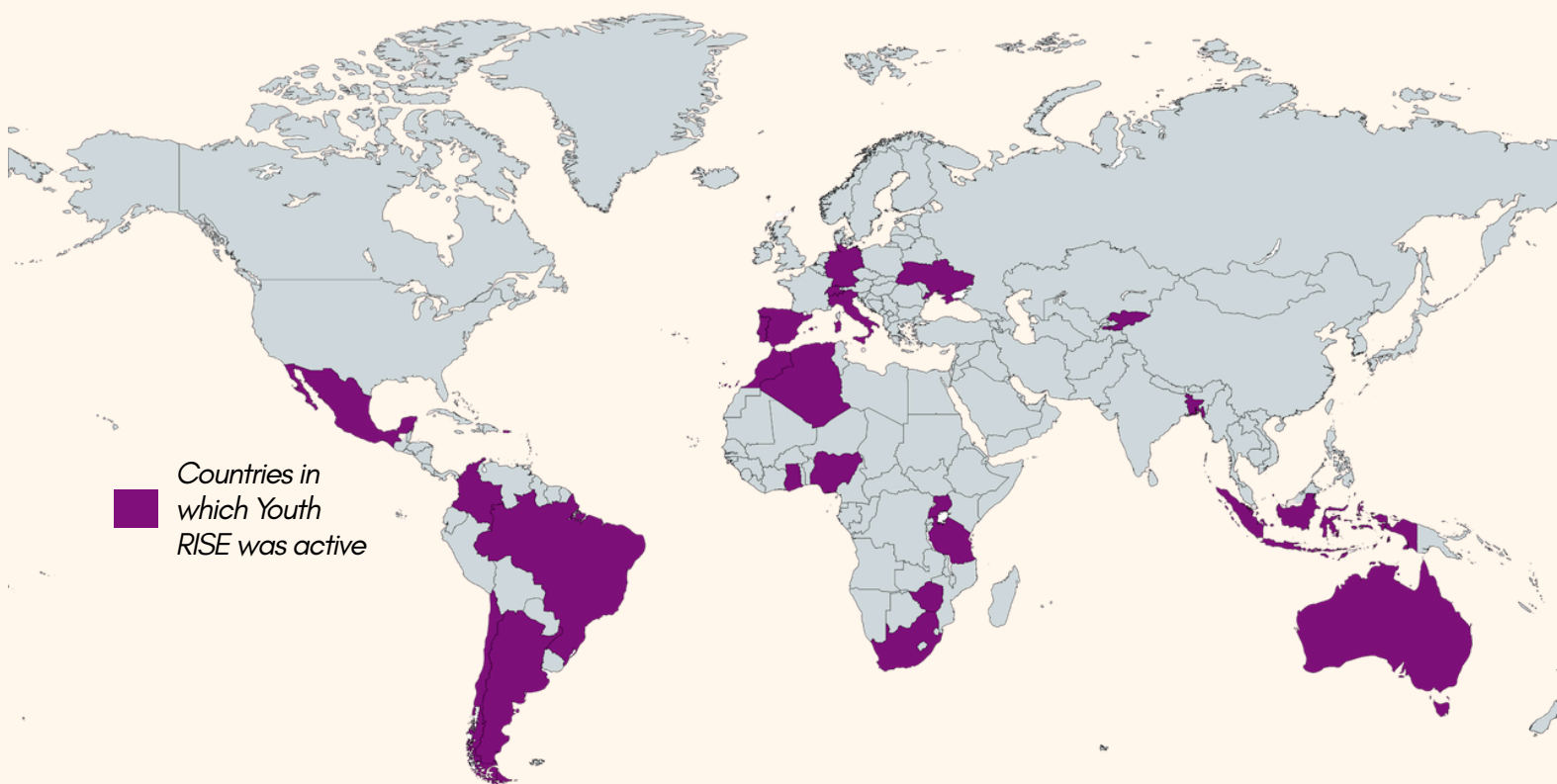


# 2025 at a Glance

*In 2025, Youth RISE participated in various international events, policy processes, and advocacy campaigns, ensuring the voices and realities of YPWUD were meaningfully included in diverse spaces.*

## Here's our 2025 at a glance:

**Active across 20+ countries**



Algeria , Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Portugal, Puerto Rico, South, Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania, Uganda, Ukraine, Zimbabwe

## Participated in 15+ international events

CND 68: Youth RISE side event “I Wish They Had Told Us How to Be Safe” and Skoun’s Side Event on Gender Inequalities – CND, Vienna March

2025 Harm Reduction International Conference – Bogotá, April

World Congress on Justice with Children – Madrid, June

OHCHR Hybrid Consultations on Protecting Civil Society Organizations Working on Drug Policy – Online/Hybrid – June

European AIDS Treatment Group SCOPE Workshop – Berlin, June & July

VNGOC Side Event at UN High-Level Political Forum – Online, July

EU Drugs Strategy – Online, September

OHCHR Consultation on Gender Backlash in Drug Policy Debates – Online, September

UNAIDS Multistakeholder Consultation on Global AIDS Strategy – Online, October

World Health Summit Youth Side Program – Berlin, October

Drug Policy Alliance Reform Conference 2025 – Detroit, November

Stadt Nach Acht – Berlin, November

National Counter-Conference on Drugs – Rome, November

Council of Europe Drafting Committee Meeting – Online, December

LAC Youth Consultation (GCDP project) – Online, December

Global Youth Consultation (GCDP project) – Online, December

# Youth RISE IWG and Management Team Members per regions

## AFRICA

### ALGERIA

- Mohamed Amine Gahfez

### GHANA

- Daniel Kumasewu

### NIGERIA

- Chidera Precious Anyanwu
- Isaac Olushola ( based in the UK)

### UGANDA

- Claire Nassolo
- Walter Osigai Etepesit

### ZIMBABWE

- Juliana Shoko

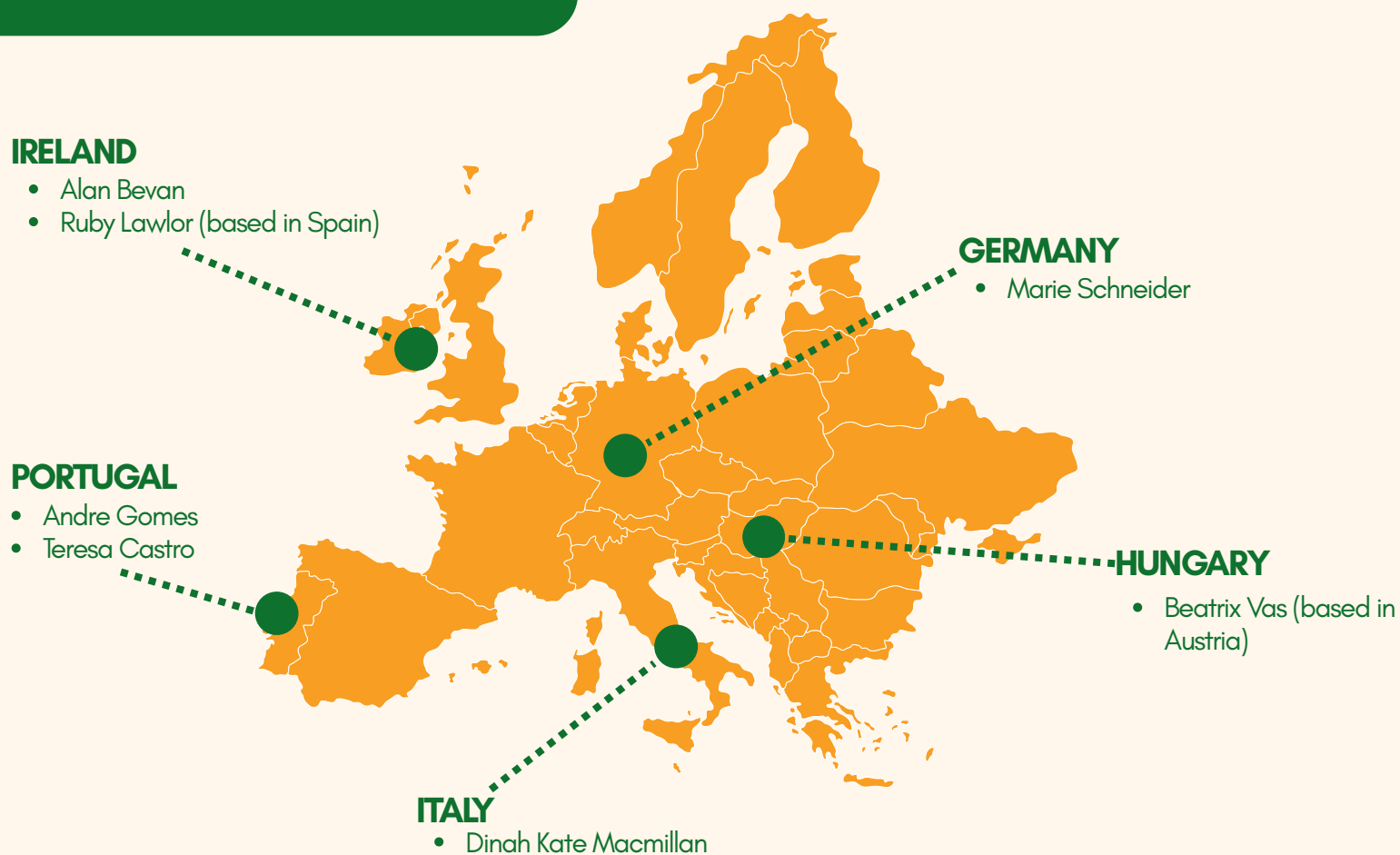
### SOUTH AFRICA

- Saily Brown

# ASIA



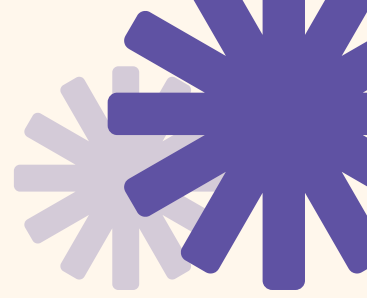
# EUROPE



# THE AMERICAS



# Key areas of our work



*The scope of Youth RISE's core activities and outcomes in 2025 can be found within the following thematic areas:*

**Events**

**Education**

**Publications, Research & Knowledge Management**

**Campaigns & Digital Engagements**

## Events

*This section showcases the key events that Youth RISE actively engaged in throughout 2025. These spaces provided vital opportunities to drive global drug policy discussions, advance youth-led advocacy, and collaborate with key stakeholders to amplify the voices of YPWUD.*

### United Nations

#### The 68th Session of the CND

At the 68th Session of the CND in Vienna, Youth RISE monitored key negotiations, including the historic decision to establish an independent expert panel to review the global drug control system, and contributed analytical insights into the IDPC's Vienna After Consensus report. During the Plenary, Youth RISE delivered a statement urging governments to redirect resources from punitive measures toward community-led services, while highlighting the global impact of PEPFAR funding cuts.



During CND, Youth RISE co-organised a hybrid side event with over 25 organisations and UN agencies, including OHCHR, WHO, UNDP, and UNICEF. Titled “I Wish They Had Told Us How to Be Safe”, the event drew on research by IWG member André Gomes to highlight how abstinence-based, criminalised drug education fails students, advocating instead for culturally sensitive, participatory approaches.



Additionally, IWG member Teresa Castro contributed to a panel discussion in the side event hosted by Skoun, titled “Addressing Gender Inequalities and Compounding Vulnerabilities in Drug Policy”. Alongside experts from MENAHRA, SANPUD, and Justice Project Pakistan, Teresa drew on her experience to call for intersectional, gender-responsive approaches that go beyond mere decriminalisation.

## Advancing Sustainable Development at the High-Level Political Forum

Expanding on its global drug policy advocacy, Youth RISE also engaged with the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York. Teresa Castro represented the organisation at a VNGOC side event, where she explored the intersection of drug policy and the SDGs. Her statement challenged dominant narratives that blame individuals for health outcomes, arguing instead that health indicators are profoundly shaped by structural and political determinants.

She called for a decisive shift away from punitive drug laws toward rights-based approaches, emphasizing that true sustainable development requires the formal, structural integration of harm reduction into core SDG frameworks.

## Shaping the 2026–2031 Global AIDS Strategy

Throughout 2025, Youth RISE collaborated closely with UNAIDS and ensured that the perspectives of YPWUD were embedded in the new 2026–2031 GAS, the 2026 HLM, and GC8. Operating through the UNAIDS-led ayKP Steering Committee, Youth RISE supported the design and implementation of dedicated youth consultations in April to gather global youth perspectives and priorities.

**Webinar**

**Youth Voices, Impactful Choices: Leading the Future of the AIDS Response**

A Webinar on Youth Priorities for the 2026–2031 Global AIDS Strategy and the 2026 High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS

**TIME**  
07:00 (EST) | 12:00 (WAT)  
13:00 (CET) | (CAT) | 18:00 (ICT)

**DATE**  
Tuesday, Oct 21, 2025

**DURATION**  
90 minutes

**REGISTRATION LINK**  
[bit.ly/4q53X6V](https://bit.ly/4q53X6V)



This consultative process drove a strategic advocacy arc across the remainder of the year. In October, Youth RISE delivered a statement at the CND Thematic Meeting on HIV and Hepatitis C transmission, launching the resulting Youth Statement as a benchmark advocacy tool. That same month, Youth RISE participated in the Multistakeholder Consultation on the GAS, where a partner colleague delivered a statement grounded entirely in the Youth Statement’s priorities. This timeline concluded in December when a colleague from a partner organisation formally presented the Youth Statement to the UNAIDS PCB.

## IWG Representation at the UNAIDS East and Southern Africa Forum

To ensure these global frameworks translate effectively to regional levels, Youth RISE supported the participation of two IWG members, Julia Shoko from Zimbabwe and Saidy Brown from South Africa, at the UNAIDS East and Southern Africa Regional Youth-Led Organisations Engagement Forum. Their involvement successfully placed youth-led harm reduction priorities at the forefront of critical regional discussions on HIV and SRHR financing.

## Conferences

### Harm Reduction International Conference (Bogota)

Youth RISE was present and active at the HRI Conference 2025. Members of the Management Team participated as panelists across various sessions, addressing full-spectrum harm reduction, youth engagement, participatory research, and the intersections of drug policy and human rights. The team also supported a closed consultation convened by the GCDP, which brought together youth advocates, UN representatives, and civil society to discuss the impact of current drug policies on children and young people. Additionally, the team visited several local harm reduction services, deepening connections with regional practitioners and service providers.



### World Health Summit Youth Side Programme (Berlin)

In October, IWG member Elena Keller presented Youth RISE's "Connecting Theory and Practice" report during the Youth Side Program at the World Health Summit. This side programme brought together young global health professionals for two days of advocacy training, leadership workshops and interactive sessions prior to the Summit. Elena's presentation introduced a rights-based, intersectional perspective on harm reduction to an audience largely composed of young medical and public health professionals, many of whom were encountering the broader applications of harm reduction beyond drug use for the first time.



*In November, Youth RISE engaged in several key international events:*

## National Counter-Conference on Drugs (Rome)

IWG Dinah MacMillian participated in an international panel organised by Italian and European civil society. The event was convened in direct response to the Italian government's increasingly repressive drug policies, bringing grassroots youth perspectives alongside international experts.

## Drug Policy Alliance Reform Conference (Detroit)



Rebeca Calzada joined a cross-sector panel at the Reform Conference, examining the divisions between prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. Drawing on the Connecting Theory and Practice report, she challenged abstinence-focused definitions of treatment and highlighted the need for approaches that reflect the full diversity of people who use drugs.

## Stadt Nach Acht (Berlin)



At this international nightlife and public health conference, Teresa Castro co-facilitated an interactive, participatory session supported by Jeugd van de Nacht and Erasmus+ funding. The session gathered critical insights into the structural barriers within harm reduction and identified key areas for improvement.

## Workshops

### Community in Scope: HIV Combination Prevention Workshop

The Community in Scope workshop on HIV Combination Prevention was held in June as part of the SCOPE project, organized by the EATG. Teresa Castro participated in the workshop, which brought together community workers, advocates, and activists from across Europe and Central Asia. Many identified as members of key populations, including PWUD, young people, trans and gender-diverse people, sex workers, and migrants alongside partner organisations including ESWA, TGEU, the Safe Trip Project, and AIDS Action Europe.

Through expert-led sessions, working group discussions, capacity-building, and a site visit to Casa Kuà, participants explored biomedical, behavioural, and structural approaches to HIV prevention, with particular attention to the political and social determinants of health.

# Consultations

## World Congress on Justice with Children - GCDP Consultation Project

In June, Ruby Lawlor attended the World Congress on Justice with Children in Madrid. This was part of Youth RISE's ongoing collaboration with the GCDP on the joint project "Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth". A consultation in the series specifically designed to engage and collaborate with the child rights sector took place here.

## OHCHR Consultation on Gender Backlash in Drug Policy Debates

In September, Youth RISE participated in a hybrid consultation jointly organised by the OHCHR Women's Rights and Gender Section and the OHCHR Drug Policy Team (ROLDs). The session focused on the growing phenomenon of gender backlash in drug policy debates at the UN and beyond, bringing together civil society representatives, UN bodies, and advocates to discuss how human rights frameworks can be applied to drug policy work to counter this trend.

Youth RISE contributed critical inputs from Algeria and Portugal, developed by IWG members Mahomed Amine Gahfez and Teresa Castro, respectively. Their interventions provided concrete recommendations and examples of best practices, emphasizing the necessity of intersectionality and the meaningful participation of women who use drugs and gender-diverse individuals in the design, development, and implementation of national services and policies.

## EU Drug Strategy Submission

In September, Youth RISE submitted formal feedback on the draft EU Drugs Strategy. The submission raised critical concerns regarding the draft's overemphasis on supply reduction and called for a rebalancing towards public health, human rights, and meaningful youth engagement. Key recommendations included the adoption of the FSHR approach, and the expansion of youth advisory structures across EU decision-making bodies.

## Joint OHCHR and Civil Society Consultation

Additionally, in September, Youth RISE provided data to a specialized hybrid consultation facilitated by the OHCHR in partnership with Eurasian Harm Reduction Alliance (EHRA), HRI, IDPC, and INPUD. The forum served as a high-level mechanism for CSOs intersecting drug policy, harm reduction, and human rights to identify systemic institutional risks, map protection methodologies, and coordinate international civic space advocacy. Youth RISE submitted evidence from operational contexts in Mexico, Canada, and Portugal, documenting localized legislative threats, operational service disruptions, and acute funding deficits undermining youth-specific harm reduction infrastructure.

## International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy

On the 20th of October, until the 10th of November 2025, Youth RISE management team members and IWGS submitted inputs to two online discussions hosted on the [UNDP SparkBlue platform](#) as part of a global consultation reviewing progress on the [International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy](#). The review process offered an opening for civil society and affected communities to shape how these guidelines evolve. Youth RISE's contributions focused on how punitive drug policies violate the rights of young people and the need for youth-inclusive, evidence-based approaches.

## GCDP Consultation on Transforming Drug Policies

In December, Youth RISE conducted two online youth consultations with the goal to gather direct youth perspectives for the collaborative project with the GCDP “Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth”. To capture a wide range of experiences, Youth RISE structured one consultation with a global focus and a second session specifically centered on young people based in Latin America and the Caribbean. Together, these forums brought together youth cohorts spanning Africa, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Australia, successfully documenting how punitive drug policies and laws directly impact children and young people within their local contexts. Additional to these online consultations, Rebeca Calzada and Carolina Ahumada co-facilitated an in-person consultation during the Reform Conference in Detroit.

## Council of Europe Human Rights and Drug Policy

Concluding the annual cycle, Youth RISE was formally convened by the Council of Europe's Drafting Committee on Human Rights and Drug Policy during its second plenary assembly in December. Youth RISE engaged in a high-level exchange of views intended to delineate the scope, legal definitions, and content of an upcoming regional recommendation. This statutory instrument will serve as a framework to guide member states in harmonizing national drug architectures with human rights principles.



# *How Our Events Worked Towards Our Advocacy Goals*

## **1. Representation and Elevation of YPWUD:**

YPWUD meaningfully engaged in decision-making spaces by participating in regional workshops and forums, delivering statements at CND 68 in Vienna, participating in the development of the new 2026–2031 GAS with UNAIDS, as well as joining panels and conferences such as the International Harm Reduction Conference in Bogotá and the Reform Conference in Detroit.

## **2. Knowledge Management: Education, Research & Data Collection:**

Youth RISE's network contributed to research activities by disseminating findings of the Connecting Theory and Practice Report, co-facilitating participatory activities, supporting youth consultations in the "Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth" project, and presenting research at conferences and other decision making spaces.

## **3. Full Spectrum Harm Reduction:**

Throughout the year, the Connecting Theory and Practice report on FSHR was presented in different advocacy spaces, such as the World Health Summit Youth Side Programme and during the Reform Conference findings from the research were highlighted. The research "I Wish They Had Told Us How to Be Safe": Youth-Centred and Drug Harm Reduction Education was presented at Youth RISE's side event at CND 68. Furthermore, the FSHR approach was promoted during the EU Drug Strategy consultations.

## **4. Criminal Justice Reform:**

Youth RISE contributed to the OHCHR consultation on civic space, discussing the threat that harm reduction providers face. At the Women's Rights and Gender Section at the ROLDS, Youth RISE focused on the growing phenomenon of gender backlash in drug policy debates at the UN. Additionally, Youth RISE engaged with the Council of Europe on integrating a harm reduction approach to national drug policies.

# Education

*In 2025, Youth RISE's educational work focused on building capacity and creating opportunities for YPWUD to engage meaningfully in the spaces and processes that shape drug policy and harm reduction.*

## The Global Fund Elevating Youth Voices Project

From July to December 2025, Youth RISE implemented the Elevating Youth Voices project to strengthen meaningful youth participation within the Global Fund ecosystem across eight countries: Bangladesh, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Delivered in partnership with local civil society organisations, the initiative mobilised YPWUD in national contexts where harm reduction advocacy had historically been limited.

Through a community-centred approach, the project combined peer-led capacity building, research, and small grants to support locally driven advocacy. A dedicated Youth Task Force pioneered the Youth Engagement Scorecard to evaluate tokenism versus genuine inclusion in policy design. While findings highlighted systemic barriers like criminalisation and limited awareness of Country Coordinating Mechanisms, they also demonstrated a powerful capacity for scalable youth leadership. To sustain this momentum, Youth RISE produced and translated practical Country Guides to prepare young advocates for the upcoming GC8 processes.

## The Advocacy Playground: A Training to Engage Young Leaders in Drug Policy

Building on the foundation of the Elevating Youth Voices project, Youth RISE developed and piloted "The Advocacy Playground" curriculum in September 2025. Created in collaboration with TanPUD, Attica Public Foundation, and Youth RISE Nigeria, the curriculum translates the guidelines on youth-friendly harm reduction into practical advocacy action. Structured around four thematic areas: international drug policy; youth-led research; full-spectrum harm reduction; and youth rights, the guide equips young people with concrete tools to document human rights violations and better navigate national drug laws. The project follows a train-of-trainers model, providing selected individuals with mentorship and translated materials to deliver the training within their own local networks. Looking ahead to 2026, Youth RISE aims to adapt this curriculum into a publicly available digital advocacy toolkit.

## Full Spectrum Harm Reduction Webinar

In September 2025, Youth RISE hosted two webinars, one in English and one in Spanish, to disseminate "Connecting Theory and Practice Report". The authors and contributors presented key findings, and provided space for dialogue to discuss challenges and innovations to harm reduction practices from different regions.



## UNAIDS Workshops and Webinars

Supported by funding from UNAIDS, Youth RISE launched a series of targeted capacity building initiatives in 2025 to equip its network with practical advocacy tools. In February, Youth RISE conducted two workshops focused on drug policy reform. Building on Youth RISEs Decriminalisation and Young People Who Use Drugs' Rights Report, these sessions provided members with actionable strategies to engage in local policy debate. As a direct output, Youth RISE developed and distributed a resource toolkit on decriminalisation to sustain network-led advocacy.

In October, Youth RISE, along with other YKP networks, coordinated and co-delivered a webinar designed to explain key aspects of the new 2026–2031 GAS, the 2026 HLM on HIV and the GC8 replenishment cycle. This webinar served as a tool to enable young activities to successfully engage with these processes.



# *How Our Education Worked Towards Our Advocacy Goals*

## **1. Representation and Elevation of YPWUD**

The Elevating Youth Voices project supported young people from eight countries to better equip them and provided tools for a significant engagement in advocacy policy places. The Youth Engagement Scorecard, also represented an effort to improve youth participation in different settings. The Country Guide was an advocacy tool developed to prepare young people for the Global Fund GC8 processes.

## **2. Knowledge Management: Education, Research & Data Collection:**

Youth RISE publicly disseminated the findings from the Connecting Theory and Practice report through bilingual webinars, developed resources and conducted webinars on decriminalisation with UNAIDS funding, and piloted The Advocacy Playground curriculum. Additionally, the workshops conducted by Youth RISE on decriminalisation and the webinar on the new 2026-2031 GAS supported capacity building and engagement in policy processes.

## **3. Full Spectrum Harm Reduction:**

The Advocacy Playground curriculum integrated the FSHR approach as one of its four modules, which supports practical advocacy action.

## **4. Criminal Justice Reform:**

Through various efforts, Youth RISE's educational activities identified and addressed barriers derived from punitive drug policies. The Advocacy Playground curriculum included a module that documents human rights violations.

## PUBLICATIONS, RESEARCH, AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

In 2025, Youth RISE contributed to research and publication work that centered on young people's voices and realities regarding drug policy and harm reduction.

### **Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth**

Since April 2025, Youth RISE has collaborated with the GCDP's project "Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth". Grounded in reforming drug policies to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this initiative addresses the severe and often overlooked impacts of punitive drug laws on young lives, ranging from direct criminalisation to indirect harms such as family separation and justice system exposure.

Serving as the lead for youth engagement, Youth RISE coordinated IWG members and strategic allies to embed meaningful youth participation throughout the project. The network contributed directly to key consultation reports, policy briefs, and advocacy campaigns. Additionally, Youth RISE facilitated two dedicated youth consultations, one global and one focused on the Latin America and Caribbean region, to ensure diverse youth perspectives were accurately captured. This partnership also initiated a vital line of engagement with the OHCHR Child and Youth Rights Unit to identify entry points for integrating progressive drug policy into global human rights mechanisms.

### **Youth RISE Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions**

In June, Youth RISE responded to a call for input from the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions regarding their upcoming report on unlawful killings by law enforcement. Developed and researched by IWG member Teresa Castro, the submission analysed Portugal's compliance with international human rights standards on the use of force, highlighting systemic gaps between national legal frameworks and practical implementation.

### **Uganda's Engagement in International Drug Policy**

From July to August, IWG member Walter Osiagi, partnered with the UHRN and the IDPC on a project evaluating Uganda's participation in international drug policy processes and identifying pathways to strengthen this engagement.

Based on desk research, bilateral meetings with the UNAIDS Country Office in Kampala, and surveys with cross-sector stakeholders across the country, the research revealed that Uganda's global drug policy engagement remains cautious, reactive and heavily donor driven. The project culminated in the report "Opportunities for Uganda's Engagement in International Drug Policy". This publication outlines a clear roadmap for national reform, explicitly calling for the decriminalization of personal drug use, expanded harm reduction services, the development of a national drug policy grounded in human rights, and the formal inclusion of civil society within international policy delegations.

# *How Our Publications, Research, and Knowledge Development Worked Towards Our Advocacy Goals*

## **1. Representation and Elevation of YPWUD:**

As the lead organisation for youth engagement in the GCDP project, Youth RISE coordinated IWG members and partners to participate directly in consultations that fed the reports and policy brief of the project “Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth”. Two dedicated youth consultations were conducted with both global and a Latin America/Caribbean focus.

## **2. Knowledge Management: Education, Research & Data Collection:**

Youth RISE contributed to building the evidence base by collaborating with the GCDP on research addressing the impacts of punitive drug laws on young people, supporting IWG member research on Uganda's engagement in international drug policy processes, and the IWG contribution on Portugal's compliance with international human rights standards on the use of force to the UN Special Rapporteur's report.

## **3. Full Spectrum Harm Reduction:**

The Uganda project stressed the need for expanded harm reduction services as part of its roadmap for national reform, while the GCDP collaboration addressed structural and social harms of punitive policies, such as family separation and justice system exposure.

## **4. Criminal Justice Reform:**

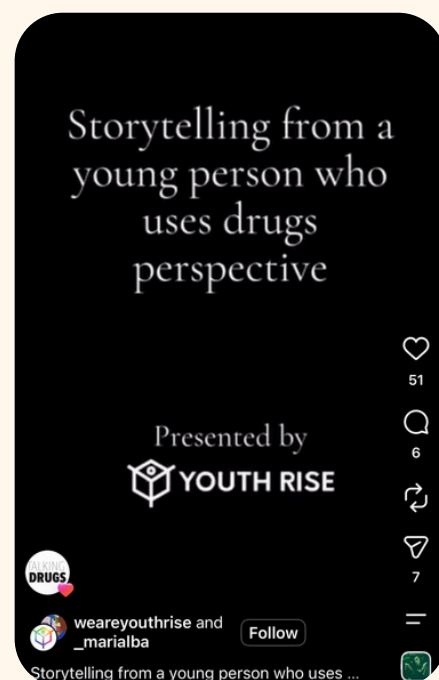
The “Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth” project challenged punitive drug laws through a child and youth rights lens. The Uganda report also highlighted the decriminalisation of personal drug use and the development of a human rights-based national drug policy, and the IWG's submission to the UN Special Rapporteur examined unlawful killings by law enforcement and systemic gaps in Portugal's legal framework.

# Campaigns & Digital Engagements

In 2025, Youth RISE utilised campaigns and digital engagements to meaningfully challenge dominant narratives around YPWUD by turning digital spaces into tools for advocacy and community building. Through storytelling, online platforms, and strategic coalitions, Youth RISE ensured that young people's voices remained present in global conversations.

## Storytelling Campaign: Youth Perspective on Drug Use

Developed in collaboration with several IWG members, this campaign launched at the end of 2024 and continued into 2025. The campaign invited YPWUD from Mexico, Portugal, Uganda, and Nigeria to develop short videos grounded in their own lived experiences, exploring themes of stigma, discrimination, safe spaces, and reproductive health. Each IWG member received a small grant and creative support to develop their content. By mid-2025, three videos had been completed and published to Youth RISE's Instagram. Two from Mexico and one from Portugal with further content from Uganda and Nigeria still in development.



## Meeting People Where They Are At: Harm Reduction Stories from Around the Globe

Running alongside the HRI Conference, Youth RISE co-organised a photo exhibit “Meeting People Where They Are At: Harm Reduction Stories from Around the Globe” with Dr. Lisa Williams and Alfonso Chávez of Prevencasa Tijuana, Mexico. This exhibit was a collection of young people's contributions to share what harm reduction means to them, shown through photography and testimony. This project was part of the divest/invest campaign which calls on governments and donors to divest from the drug war and invest in programs that prioritise community health and justice. The exhibition was also presented during the international course on harm reduction by and for Latin America, organized by CESED-Universidad de los Andes, taking place from July 29 to August 1, 2025, in Villa de Leyva, Colombia, where it was shared with the participating students.

### I Am The Impact Campaign

Youth RISE joined the working group of the I Am The Impact Campaign, a global advocacy initiative led by YOUNITE Global promoting youth-led and youth-focused funding in global health and drug policy. Youth RISE's participation ensured that findings and recommendations from its Global Fund Elevating Youth Voices project fed directly into the campaign's messaging and activities. This included contributing to explainer videos and advocacy briefs, as well as speaking at and moderating campaign webinars. A key engagement took place during the I Am The Impact Campaign Launch Webinar, where IWG members from Zimbabwe and South Africa participated as speakers to share their own small grant advocacy projects.

### Anyone's Child Lobbying Event

In July, Youth RISE helped co-sponsor the Anyone's Child 10th Anniversary Lobby event in London, where a group of activists, policy makers and families collected to advocate for drug policy reform that centered on health and human rights. This event was organised by Transform Drug Policy Foundation as part of the Support. Don't Punish campaign, a global grassroots-centred initiative in support of harm reduction and drug policies that prioritise public health and human rights.

# *How Our Campaigns and Digital Engagements Worked Towards Our Advocacy Goals*

## **1. Representation and Elevation of YPWUD:**

The "Youth Perspectives on Drug Use" storytelling campaign gave YPWUD and young advocates from Mexico, Portugal, Uganda, and Nigeria a platform to share their own stories through short videos. IWG members from Zimbabwe and South Africa represented Youth RISE's work at the I Am The Impact Campaign launch webinar, while the photo exhibition brought youth perspectives on harm reduction to both an international conference audience and students across Latin America.

## **2. Knowledge Management: Education, Research & Data Collection:**

Youth RISE contributed to the UNDP SparkBlue consultation on how punitive drug policies violate young people's rights in a global review of the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy. Participation in the "I Am The Impact Campaign" promoted the findings from the Global Fund Elevating Youth Voices project to a broad audience.

## **3. Full Spectrum Harm Reduction:**

The photo exhibition "Meeting People Where They Are At" brought harm reduction stories from diverse communities across Latin America and beyond to an international and academic audience, and finding a permanent home at CAMBIE represented a full-spectrum harm reduction action.

## **4. Criminal Justice Reform:**

Youth RISE's inputs to the UNDP SparkBlue consultation addressed how criminalisation violates young people's rights, and co-sponsoring the Anyone's Child 10th Anniversary Lobby event stressed the call to move away from punishment-based drug policy.

# IWG 2025 Engagements



## Multilateral and policy spaces

IWG members brought youth and lived experience perspectives into high-level international processes, participating in the CND, engagements linked to the INCB, and a side event organised by the VNGOC on the occasion of the UN High-Level Political Forum.

## Events and conferences

IWG members participated as speakers and facilitators at Stadt Nach Acht in Berlin, the National Counter-Conference on Drugs in Rome, and the Reform Conference in Detroit, representing youth and harm reduction perspectives across movement and policy spaces. They also participated in the Community in Scope workshop on HIV combination prevention, organised by the EATG, and represented regional priorities at the UNAIDS East & Southern Africa Youth-Led Organisations Engagement Forum on HIV and SRHR Financing.

## Human rights consultations

IWG members contributed to two OHCHR consultations - (1) gender backlash in drug policy debates (2) protecting civil society organisations working on drug policy - providing localised inputs from Algeria, Portugal, Mexico and Canada. Members contributed to two online consultations hosted on the UNDP SparkBlue platform reviewing progress on the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy, and led the development of a written submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions.

## Storytelling and Knowledge Management

IWG members shared their experiences through storytelling initiatives and the Full-Spectrum Harm Reduction webinar. Furthermore, they provided core inputs to The Advocacy Playground curriculum and supported a national research and advocacy initiative in Uganda, developed in collaboration with the UHRN and the IDPC.

## GCDP project “Transforming Drug Policy: A Focus on Children and Youth.”

Actively supporting this initiative, IWG members participated in and helped drive a global consultation as well as a regional consultation specifically tailored for the Latin America and the Caribbean region.

# Partnerships, coalitions, working groups and committees



Throughout 2024 and 2025, Youth RISE strengthened its presence through diversifying their network in a range of international coalitions, partnerships, working groups, and committees focused on drug policy, harm reduction, HIV, and human rights, to participate in influential spaces and coordinate with partners and allies.

## Recent Partnerships

### • ➡ Brazilian Government

Youth RISE developed an engagement with the Brazilian government around its full-spectrum harm reduction work, translating the recent report “*Connecting Theory and Practice*” into Portuguese to better inform national drug policy and harm reduction strategies. Consequently, the Brazilian government invited Youth RISE to present at their UN CND side event in March 2026.

### • ➡ International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations (IFMSA)

By the end of 2025, Youth RISE partnered with the IFMSA—a global body comprising around 130 member organisations from 25 countries focused on health advocacy, SRHR, access to medicines, and gender equity. This partnership focused on developing joint advocacy for a side event at the UN CND in 2026.

### • ➡ Global Campus of Human Rights

Youth RISE partnered with the Global Campus of Human Rights, a network of over 100 universities training human rights professionals, through collaboration on the GCDP project “Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth”. The Global Campus conducted three dedicated regional consultations exploring youth experiences and perspectives on drug policy.

### • ➡ BOOST Mentorship Program

Through the BOOST Mentorship Program, which strengthens community-led organisations expanding accessible harm reduction services, youth RISE was paired with the Re-Generation team to receive tailored strategic guidance on developing a digital educational project.

## Support. Don't Punish Leadership Network

Youth RISE holds membership in the Support. Don't Punish Leadership Network, a collection of 15–20 organisations guiding one of the most well-known drug.policy.reform.campaigns. Alongside partner organisations, Youth RISE meets regularly to provide strategic guidance, troubleshoot challenges, and amplify successes across the global campaign network.

## Coalitions

### UNODC-CSO Group on Drug Use and HIV

Youth RISE continued its longstanding participation in the UNODC-CSO Group on Drug Use and HIV – an informal coalition of global and regional networks of PWUD, alongside leading harm reduction and drug policy organisations. Beyond regular participation in this group, Youth RISE has historically led and supported targeted activities for YPWUD. In 2025, the group convened multiple times to develop the new 2025–2026 joint work plan, review the UNODC High Priority Countries for HIV and Drugs, and address the mounting challenges of global funding cuts affecting both UN agencies and civil society.

### Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

In late 2025, Youth RISE joined the Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. This civil society body safeguards the participation of non-governmental organisations in multilateral discussions on crime and justice. Joining the Alliance broadens Youth RISE's footprints in high-level spaces where drug policy directly intersects with criminal justice reform.

## Working Groups

### UN Strategic Coordination Group on Drug Use, HIV, Health and Human Rights (SCG)

Since joining the SCG in 2024, Youth RISE has actively engaged in this multisectoral platform, which facilitates information sharing, strategic discussion and informal coordination among stakeholders working on the global HIV, health, and human rights response. The group brings together the UNAIDS Secretariat, WHO, UNDP, leading drug policy, and community-led organisations, and bilateral and philanthropic donors to collectively advance the targets of the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and the GAS 2021–2026. Youth RISE serves as the vital representative voice for YPWUD and young harm reduction practitioners, ensuring youth priorities are firmly embedded in high-level strategic discussions.

### VNGOC Ad-Hoc Youth Working Group

Youth RISE continued its engagement with the VNGOC Ad-Hoc Youth Working Group. Established in March 2023, this group unites youth-led and youth-focused member organizations across the full spectrum of drug policy positions—from abstinence and prevention to harm reduction and reform—to advance meaningful youth engagement in Vienna UN organizing. In 2025, Youth RISE participated in an in-person meeting during the CND in March. By September, IWG Beatrix Vas stepped up alongside a small group of organizations to take on a co-lead role, ensuring sustained momentum and shared coordination responsibility. The group subsequently met online to collaborate on youth engagement regarding the panel established by Resolution 68/6 to review the global drug control machinery.

## Committees

### IDPC Members Advisory Council (MAC)

In 2025, Youth RISE's Executive Director was elected as the youth representative to the IDPC's Members Advisory Council (MAC). In this role, she ensures the IDPC Secretariat remains closely connected to and informed by the needs of youth organizations within its membership. The MAC plays a critical role in keeping the consortium's broader work aligned with member priorities and coordinating rapid responses to emerging country-level developments.

### ayKP Steering Committee

Through its seat on the ayKP Steering Committee, Youth RISE launched and circulated a survey capturing the impacts of PEPFAR funding cuts on young people, youth-led organizations, and essential services. Additionally, Youth RISE partnered with the committee and its broader networks to cross-promote an INPUD data collection effort, ensuring YPWUD were accurately represented in the data. Youth RISE subsequently spearheaded a social media dissemination campaign to raise awareness of the findings.



# Fundraising

In 2025, Youth RISE operated with a total budget of **USD 186,028**. The organization's work was made possible through the vital support of key partners, including the **RCF, OSF, Fondation Botnar, the Global Fund Community Engagement & Strategic Initiative**, and **UNAIDS**.

The financial year was significantly impacted by a major global funding contraction. As a member of both the Harm Reduction and 4Youth consortia, Youth RISE had originally been selected to receive USD 452,995 across the 2025–2027 Robert Carr Fund grant cycle. However, in early 2025, this funding was abruptly rescinded as a direct consequence of U.S. administration cuts to international HIV/AIDS funding, a loss that reverberated deeply across the entire global health and harm reduction sectors. In response, the Robert Carr Fund provided reduced bridging grants to the affected consortia, which served as critical stopgap funding that enabled Youth RISE to maintain its core operations while actively pivoting to pursue new, diversified revenue streams.

Despite this, Youth RISE successfully sustained and expanded its high-level strategic engagements. Youth RISE was officially confirmed as a partner on the GCDP Transforming Drug Policies: A Focus on Children and Youth initiative, supported via a sub-grant from Fondation Botnar running from March 2025 to February 2027 to secure long-term youth representation in policy reform. Additionally, following the dissolution of a separate coalition partnership that impacted internal organizational priorities, Youth RISE swiftly re-engaged with OSF to refocus a pending funding request. Following a successful presentation of Youth RISE's new strategy in April 2025, OSF approved one year of emergency funding spanning June 2025 to June 2026, providing a crucial investment that is currently being used to drive organizational strengthening, structural resilience, and robust future fundraising efforts.



# THANK YOU!

