



MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Transformative change depends on young people

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Meaningful Youth Engagement: Why and How?

The foundation for transformational social change depends on the meaningful inclusion and continued engagement of young people. What does that look like? Meaningful engagement happens when **young people (ages 10 to 24) have opportunities to safely express their opinions and have influence over the decisions that affect their lives.** When we create space for young people to share and act on their ideas, they gain confidence, increase their status and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults. There is tremendous benefit and opportunity when young people engage with their communities, understand their potential influence in the public sphere, and are equipped with the skills and resources needed to earn a living. Communities benefit from their bold ideas and openness to change. Mercy Corps also benefits because it helps us ensure that our programming responds to young people's needs and leverages their strengths, so that we achieve transformative change. Around the world, Mercy Corps works with young people to build resilient communities by expanding their engagement and influence with local actors; building broader community demand for their participation; and facilitating their active engagement in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs.



The world is younger than it ever has been or ever will be. The median ages in the countries where we work compel us to engage youth.

Niger: 15 years

Mali: 16 years

Gaza: 18 years

Guatemala: 23 years

Ethiopia: 18 years

Uganda: 16 years

Somalia: 18 years

Afghanistan: 19 years

Haiti: 24 years

Chances are you are already engaging young people in your programming—whether or not it is youth-focused. Mercy Corps implements many of our Food-for-Peace funded programs in countries where the median age is under 20 years. For example, Apolou operates in northern Uganda, where 70% of the population is under the age of 24 years. Apolou participants are new mothers and fathers; they are adolescents open to trying new things; they are young farmers and entrepreneurs. Our program design and interventions must reflect their voices, ideas and realities.

The Ladder of Participation

The concept of meaningful engagement is informed by sociologist and child rights scholar, Roger Hart. Hart created the **ladder of participation model**, with eight levels of participation. We should strive to be at Levels 4 through 8. However, it is important to note that higher levels of participation are *not* always better in all contexts. Instead, as

the research supports, there are real-life situations where different circumstances could call for different levels of participation. **The strength of the model is that it constructs participation as a process of negotiation rather than a deliverable product, where numerous psychosocial and contextual factors play a key role.** Levels of participation can look like this (from top to bottom):

8. Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults. Young people initiate action (interventions, programs, strategy), and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people, while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. Youth/ adult partnerships embody this rung of the ladder.

7. Young people-initiated and directed. Young people initiate and direct a project or program, while adults are involved in a supportive role. Youth-led activism is an example of this rung of the ladder.

6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. Here, adults initiate projects or programs, but the decision-making is shared with young people. Participatory action research is an example of this engagement.

5. Consulted and informed. Here, young people give advice on projects or programs that adults have designed and oversee. An example would be youth advisory councils as part of a program.

4. Assigned but informed. Adults may assign young people a specific role and inform them on how and why they will be involved. An example would be community youth boards.

3. Tokenism is when young people appear to be given a voice, but have little or no choice about how they participate. **2. Decoration** is when young people are used to support a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people. **1. Manipulation** is when adults use young people to support their own causes and falsely purport that they are inspired by young people.

How Can We Better Engage Young People in Our Work?

How do we ensure that young people have the space and opportunity to help inform how we design or implement a project, conduct an assessment or draft a strategy? You can start with Mercy Corps' **Readiness Assessment** to help your team assess strengths and identify gaps as they relate to engaging young people. The assessment will help spark conversation among team members and chart a way forward. From there, we have tools to support you in reaching young people. Our **Action Plan** tool will help your team identify its strengths and weaknesses in reaching youth, as well as a specific objective for how you hope to engage young people and supporting activities to do so. To better understand who you want to engage, you can use the **Understanding Different Youth Personas** worksheet. You can also try the **Where are You(th) on the Ladder** worksheet to focus on a program, portfolio or strategy and identify how to improve the engagement of youth. If you want to learn more about the *whys* and *hows* of engaging youth, make sure to listen to the Young People and Protection team's **webinar**. You can find all of these resources [here](#).



The Y-ENGAGE Campaign will engage young people in our culture, strategies, operations and programs. The campaign, a cross-agency collaboration led by the Young People and Protection (YPP) Technical Support Unit, will raise awareness on the value that engaging young people adds to our work, create a network of Y-ENGAGE Champions that can share their experiences that help us practice partnership with young people of diverse backgrounds and identities.

CONTACT

Technical Support Unit

The Young People and Protection team works to increase and improve opportunities for young people in crisis- and conflict-affected settings to safely and meaningfully engage in building secure, productive and just lives and communities.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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