

Global Youth Council Guide

PROMOTING
YOUTH VOICES IN LOCAL
DECISION-MAKING

MAKE YOUR
VOICE HEARD

#YOUTHTOPOWER

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Acknowledgements

This guide was prepared by the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) with generous funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The guidance was developed based on NDI's experiences conducting youth programming globally, expanded from an original resource produced by NDI's Morocco office. This project was conducted by NDI's Democratic Governance team, in partnership with NDI's Citizen Participation team, and with significant contributions from NDI's Kosovo, Morocco, and Sierra Leone offices and NDI's Gender, Women, and Democracy team. Additional research and case studies were produced in partnership with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and Restless Development. Portions of this guide were adapted from the National League of Cities' (NLC) Institute for Youth Education and Families and GenerationOn resources.

Special thanks are given to the following individuals from the National Democratic Institute: Slobodan Milic, Youssef Ajnah, Zineb Lahbabi, Mahpari Sotoudeh, and Aditi Patil for developing the original NDI Morocco resource and case study; Nikola Djakovic, Aida Bejta, and Nenad Andric for developing the Kosovo case study; and Alyson Beermann, Victoria Welborn, Kristen Sample, Rachel Mims, Whitney Pfeifer, Tamar Eisen, and Ferdaouis Bagga for their contributions and edits to the expanded guidebook.

It is with deep gratitude that we acknowledge our institutional partners at ICMA, Berna Öztekin-Günaydın, Tad McGalliard, Harleen Kovala, and Isabelle Bully-Omictin, for their assistance in expanding the global guidebook and producing the Belgium, Costa Rica, and Turkey case studies; and our partners at Restless Development, Owen Doel, Corina Pickering, and Alfred Navo, for producing the Sierra Leone case study.

We also acknowledge the following individuals for generously contributing their time in interviews to inform case study development: Karen Porras Arguedas, Eugenia Aguirre Raftacco, Colin Beheydt, Borchert Beliën, Hylke Damien, Ellen De Grauwe, Mireille Helderweirdt, Stijn Missiaen, Dries Van Daele, Rocky Zutterman, Zeynep Tuğçe Çiftçibaş Güç, Erdal Şimşek, Emir Duran, Mustafa Onur Kaygusuz, Çağlar Yenilmez, Hasan Oğuzhan Aytaç, and Ela Serpil Evliyaoğlu.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This guidebook was developed for youth, youth development practitioners, and elected officials around the world who are seeking to counter trends of youth political disengagement by forming local youth councils: citizen advisory bodies composed of young people who engage with local political leaders in government decision-making processes. NDI generally defines youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 30, but adapts this range to fit different country contexts. NDI recognizes the diversity of the global youth population, and any use of the words “youth” or “young people” refers to equal numbers of women and men, and includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) youth, youth with disabilities, ethnic and religious minority youth, and youth who are members of other marginalized communities.

Drawing from prior programmatic experiences and good practices and models from around the world, this guide defines and describes the value of youth councils, and provides step-by-step instructions for youth, elected officials, and development practitioners to establish effective and high-functioning youth councils. Research findings demonstrate that if youth councils are established in an environment with decision-maker buy-in, community support, inclusive pathways for involving diverse youth populations, and adequate resources, then a group of dedicated youth and supportive officials can collaborate to produce a youth engagement mechanism that results in meaningful participation in government decision-making processes. Youth councils are further strengthened if they capacitate youth to engage in research and seek input from their constituencies, develop strategies to engage elected officials to better represent the interests of youth, and serve as policy advisors on issues in their community.

However, there are numerous legal, financial, political, and cultural obstacles to establishing youth councils that provide continuous political engagement opportunities for young people. This guide identifies common barriers and pitfalls experienced by youth councils around the world, provides tools to design sustainable council structures and operating models that respond to these challenges, and describes good practices for building peer networks to share experiences and knowledge across communities and around the world.



INTRODUCTION

Global Youth Engagement Trends

According to the U.N.'s 2020 World Youth Report, there are 1.21 billion young people between the age of 15 and 24 around the world, or approximately 15.5 percent of the global population.¹ Additionally, the number of young people not in employment, education, or training was 267 million (1 in 5 youth) in 2019.² Across the globe, young people between ages 18 and 35 face barriers to political and civic engagement, particularly young women and youth from marginalized groups such as youth with disabilities, young LGBTI communities, youth from ethnic and religious and minority groups, and Indigenous youth. Their systematic exclusion results in rampant youth disaffection and low levels of participation in formal political avenues. Young people are often excluded from decision-making processes, mainstream politics, and policy development, resulting in an inability to have a voice or agency in formal political life. For example, young people only make up 2.6 percent of world parliamentarians, and of this group, only 40 percent are young women.³ When engaged, they are often given symbolic or tokenistic roles and limited responsibilities, such as leading marketing activities or note-taking in meetings/conferences. Young women are further excluded, as studies have found that female parliamentarians are more likely to be appointed to less influential and prestigious committees.⁴ Young people struggle to gain the respect of government leaders, such as public officials and political party leaders, and are rarely viewed as legitimate or capable leaders themselves within their communities. Underscoring this trend, continued marginalization of youth voices, combined with high rates of inequality, youth unemployment and underemployment, can leave young people both idle and frustrated with the status quo and feel socially, economically, and politically excluded. This sense of alienation is magnified given the context that young people comprise up to half of the population in many countries.

Youth contribute to positive change in their communities and demand and defend democracy when they are given an opportunity to contribute, organize, voice their opinions, and engage in political decision-making processes.

Windows of Opportunity for Youth Political Participation

While these demographic realities are sometimes viewed as a development liability, they also represent an enormous opportunity for positive social and political change. Informal youth political participation is on the rise, taking the form of civil disobedience and social movements led by young people from diverse identity groups. NDI has found that youth contribute to positive change in their communities and demand and defend democracy when they are given

an opportunity to contribute, organize, voice their opinions, and engage in political decision-making processes. When young people channel their talents and serve as leaders and activists in their communities, they play an active role in building strong and vibrant democratic societies and contribute to community life.⁵ It is through meaningful participation that young people gain and sustain an underlying belief in the value of democratic processes and political and civic participation, starting in their communities.⁶ These principles are reflected in NDI's Unified Theory of Change for Youth Political Participation,⁷ which provides recommended approaches for fostering youth agency and an enabling or supportive environment for meaningful participation.

In furtherance of these principles, NDI has endeavored to identify and support mechanisms that provide sustained opportunities for meaningful youth participation, despite the challenges identified above. Through research and programming around the world, NDI identified the youth council structure as one such model for continuous youth engagement with elected officials in government decision-making processes. Recognizing that most opportunities for young people still exist at the local, rather than national, level, developing structures for political participation locally can enable youth to gain skills and experience working directly within their communities. Additionally, formal mechanisms for participation in government, particularly those with legal backing, can create opportunities to demonstrate to political leaders the value and capacity of young people, which can lead to social norm and expectation changes around youth participation.

Goals of the Guide

The guide is designed to serve as a tool for youth, youth development practitioners, and elected officials who want to create and/or sustain a youth advisory council linked to their district or constituency. For youth and youth practitioners, this guide outlines steps on how young people can organize themselves and leverage support from elected and administrative officials in order to formalize a mechanism to provide input on decision-making processes. For elected officials, this guide will explain the benefits of youth input and list steps to identify and recruit youth council members and create an inclusive space that empowers youth to share their perspectives. Finally, the guide provides a list of good practices and common pitfalls to avoid throughout the process of creating a youth council. While the focus of this resource is on youth council structures, it may be possible to formalize aspects of the council model that provide young people with sustained opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes, even without an official council body. This resource draws on lessons learned and good practices identified by the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute), International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and Restless Development through programmatic experiences and research on models of successful youth consultative structures around the world, including country case studies and examples of local youth councils.

WHAT IS A YOUTH COUNCIL?

Definition of a Youth Council

Youth councils represent one of many mechanisms through which young people and democratic governments can collaborate in political and decision-making processes. A youth council is composed of a group of youth, either elected or selected by other means, whose primary function is to serve as an advisory body for government agencies or officials by providing insight and recommendations from the youth perspective. Youth councils can exist on a national level as an independent body or within the government structure through a ministry or the office of a member of parliament, and at regional and/or local levels. Youth voices can elevate policy conversations both around issues that primarily concern youth and those that have a broader impact on other community members. Most countries have youth policies at national and local

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levels, and youth councils can be involved in developing these policies, monitoring the implementation of the policies, or providing feedback. Youth councils can also be involved in organizing events or advocacy campaigns related to politics and policy issues, as well as social events and capacity building training for their youth constituents. Each council is responsible for identifying the priorities of its

constituents and the focus of its activities, and developing a working relationship alongside its corresponding municipal or local council. As the definition of youth varies across social contexts, in some countries, youth council members may be below voting age. The age range for youth defined by national governments or international organizations generally varies between 15 and 35, though in some countries the lower limit might be 9 or 12 years of age and the upper limit 30.

Youth Council Structures in Differing Legal Environments

Many countries have national laws regulating youth-related issues and create a national youth policy or strategy guiding governmental and/or nongovernmental agencies on youth programs and activities. According to the State of Youth Policy Report, 122 countries (out of 198) had a national youth policy as of April 2014.⁸ Among OECD countries, 27 of them (out of 37) have an active youth policy or strategy.⁹ However, the absence of a youth law or policy does not necessarily mean there is less attention or action toward youth issues by governmental institutions. Youth programs and policies can be covered under various national laws and acts, such as laws for children's care or rights, and national, state, or municipal laws on education or social services. For instance, there is no youth law in the Netherlands, but there are many acts addressing youth

empowerment. Norway does not have a youth law, but youth rights are maintained through children and social care regulations. In countries with strong centralized government structures, youth programs and policies are mainly regulated by national laws and agencies, whereas in countries with decentralized structures, youth programs and policies are regulated at local or regional levels. For instance, in Belgium, each regional government has a Minister responsible for youth programs and a regional youth policy. Similarly, in the U.S. there is no national youth policy, but youth programs and policies are managed at state and local levels. Some U.S. federal departments and agencies have youth programs as well, and the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs¹⁰ maintains collaboration among them.

Youth councils exist in many countries. Although not necessary, it is common to see youth councils at the national or local level in countries with a national or local youth policy or strategy. For instance, all OECD countries with a national or local youth council have a national or regional youth policy or strategy. Some countries have only local or regional youth councils, whereas some have both national and local youth councils. 30 OECD countries (out of 37) have a national youth council, and New Zealand and Turkey are among those with no national youth council, but both have local youth councils.¹¹ Similarly, many cities in the United States have youth councils even though there is no national youth council.



Youth councils enable youth participation and engagement in decision-making processes. Through youth councils, young people can become active participants regarding programs and policies impacting them, rather than being passive recipients of services provided to them. The widespread interest in youth councils globally indicates the important role they can provide as a mechanism for political participation, however, the existence of youth councils alone does not guarantee effective participation and engagement. The social, political, and economic environment in which youth councils operate is also critical. Key elements of an enabling or supportive environment for youth councils include:

- legal frameworks formalizing youth participation and engagement in decision-making and policymaking
- inclusive, accessible, and equitable engagement pathways for young women, young people with disabilities, LGBTI youth, ethnic and religious youth, and youth from other marginalized groups
- financial and administrative support from government institutions
- sustained political support from decision-makers and the community on youth participation and engagement
- easy access to information and data on critical youth issues to make informed decisions
- legally protected civil, social, political, and economic rights
- differentiated communication channels that are widely available to and used by youth (e.g., social media and youth-tailored strategies and campaigns)
- active youth organizations and youth interest in civic and political participation

There are many examples of enabling environments created for youth participation and engagement globally. For instance, in Belgium, Finland and Estonia, national, sub-national or local authorities are required to work with youth councils on planning, implementing, and monitoring youth policies. Similarly, in Costa Rica, the national youth policy is created by the National Council of Young Persons in the Ministry of Youth, and it is approved by the highest level of youth representative body composed of universities, political parties, youth NGOs and local youth councils. In Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Slovenia and Slovakia, the national youth councils receive regular funding either from the profits of the national lottery or from national tax revenues. It is also common for governments to dedicate a percentage of youth-related Ministry budgets for youth programs and institutions, including youth councils. For instance, in Ireland, “Budget 2018” was released for public input on the Citizens Information website, and the National Youth Council in Ireland obtained relevant information for youth and disseminated it through its own communication channels, which highlights a good collaboration between the government and the youth council.¹² As an example of active youth participation, the Spanish Youth Council’s (CJE) extensive work on youth-friendly employment policies can be highlighted. CJE representatives attend different committee and governmental meetings to share their policy suggestions for more youth-friendly policies in the employment field.¹³

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VALUE OF YOUTH COUNCILS

For Youth and Youth Development Practitioners

Early engagement in the public sphere can have exponential benefits for youth, particularly young people with diverse identities. Research on the impacts of youth engagement reveals that it is a key factor linked to an individual's sustained involvement in democracy and governance.¹⁴ Through their participation on youth councils, youth can improve their core competencies in communication, organizing, leadership, qualitative and quantitative research, program and policy development, critical thinking, and analysis. Successes facilitated by these strengthened skills can also spill over into other areas of youth's lives, such as education and work. When youth build confidence in their own abilities, it can elevate their standings as community leaders and allow them to develop a sense of agency by taking a role in shaping policies that impact themselves, their peers, and others in the community and by witnessing the impact of their contributions.

Early opportunities for political engagement are particularly critical for young women and girls. Gaps in confidence and a decline in political ambition happen early for girls, which is why it is necessary to reach them at an early age and provide an enabling environment with exposure to political literacy, an understanding of their rights, and agency, which strengthens their belief in their abilities and their ability to have an impact. Research shows that early political engagement for young women helps to lay the foundation for future political empowerment and leadership.¹⁵

Participation in a youth council can fulfill young people's quest for purpose, self-worth, and belonging. When youth contribute toward the decision-making for their community, it instills deeper bonds between youth and their community and establishes them as valuable leaders. Youth report an increased awareness of the challenges that others in their community face along with a sense of duty to identify solutions which can improve their environment.

Lastly, with regards to policy, youth inevitably benefit from having a voice in how decisions are made and implemented. According to an NDI study on youth participation, young people equate meaningful participation with decision-making power.¹⁶ Given that youth are often absent from engaging in formal political and public institutions and processes such as elections, policy development and decision-making, political parties and decision-makers typically face little incentive to address their interests and priorities. Through the youth council mechanism, youth can amplify the voices of their peers in formal and conventional institutions, helping weave youth priorities—such as employment opportunities, climate change mitigation, gender

equality, health care, etc.—into policy. Access to avenues such as youth councils can serve as a healthy off-ramp through which youth can express and attempt to redress their societal grievances, a preferable alternative to counterproductive, isolating, or violent paths.

For Decision-Makers

Elected and appointed representatives also stand to reap benefits from establishing youth councils and gathering youth perspectives on policies. First, youth councils are relatively low-cost mechanisms for gathering information on young constituents' real needs, which can enable public officials to produce more responsive policies. By equipping and training their youth councils with communications, research, and policy development skills, public officials can build a skilled and trusted group of youth to whom they can delegate collecting and analyzing youth and community priorities and who can serve as a sounding board for crafting responsive policies.

These types of engagements can also result in stronger and more sustainable partnerships between youth and their public officials. After seeing the benefits and value of working with youth councils, public officials—and their successors—would be incentivized to continue to engage with these mechanisms, providing them with a durable and lasting pathway for building support among young community members and advancing better-targeted policies. This has the added advantage of bridging the generational divide that often exists between young people and those in government.

Beyond fostering responsive policymaking and youth inclusion, youth councils can also help to boost public officials' careers and/or political standing. By publicizing and building awareness of their youth council initiatives, public officials can build reputations for inclusive and responsive leadership and demonstrate their commitment to responding to community needs—which can be difficult to showcase when confronting longer-term economic challenges such as youth unemployment. Through establishing themselves as thoughtful, accountable leaders actively working to address public priorities, public officials would be better positioned to pursue re-election/re-appointment efforts.



HOW TO CREATE A YOUTH COUNCIL

Enabling Environment

A key factor in the establishment of an effective youth council is the presence of an enabling environment for young people's engagement. Through research and interviews with municipal and youth council representatives, the research team observed several key factors in the local community that demonstrably contributed to the success of youth councils:

- legal regulations;
- decision-maker buy-in;
- community support;
- prior youth engagement;
- inclusive and accessible pathways; and
- financial resources.

If a supportive legal framework does not exist, or one or more of the other conditions is absent in a community in which you seek to establish a youth council, seek creative avenues to build and nurture an enabling environment.



Legal Regulations: A codified legal regulation of voluntary or required youth councils (national, regional and/or municipal level) would enable the streamlined establishment and formalization of youth participation in decision-making and policymaking processes. Supportive policies would also mandate or obligate a defined space for youth to gather and raise their collective voice. However, it is important to support youth councils with financial and administrative resources. The council's role, resources and access to decision-makers should be defined in the legal regulations. Such legal frameworks do not work effectively without other factors of the enabling environment and can be in danger of remaining as a token of youth participation on paper without supporting meaningful and sustainable youth participation.



Decision-maker Buy-in: Without a codified legal requirement to establish a youth council, which does not exist in most contexts across the globe, decision-maker buy-in is a crucial element in creating an enabling environment. In Morocco, youth councils are not legally mandated at the municipal level. In some municipalities where NDI piloted its youth council program, elected officials were receptive to and enthusiastic about the idea of establishing youth councils. In others, where the municipal president was unable or unwilling to commit to partnering with NDI on this initiative, the efforts to establish

a youth council were ultimately aborted. While there is no infallible technique to securing decision-makers' buy-in, youth can request meetings with their elected representatives to introduce themselves, form relationships with their elected officials, and begin to socialize the idea of youth councils. For points to share during these meetings, please refer to the section titled "Value of Youth Councils for Decision-Makers." Youth can form informal youth councils in the interim and share reports of their activities and successes with their decision-makers to pique their interest and demonstrate the impact youth councils can have.



Community Support: Growing community support for youth councils can serve the dual function of rallying decision-makers into formalizing youth councils and priming the councils' operating environment. Having a community that understands and supports the goals of a youth council will greatly facilitate the achievement of those goals. Youth council members can reach out to local figures and leaders in academic, civil society, and other community organizing spheres. Youth councils can create social media accounts to keep their community abreast of their activities and bring wider attention to and engagement with their initiatives. Content such as short videos, facts and figures about youth engagement, and stories of the council's success can attract more youth to the council and help local communities embrace youth council projects.



Prior Youth Engagement: Pre-existing youth engagement in civic and political life can lay the groundwork and ease the transition to more formal engagement initiatives such as youth councils. In NDI's experience, this factor can be an indicator of greater success for youth council efforts. For example, in Morocco, soliciting support from youth organizations during the recruitment phases of youth council development led to the recruitment of youth who had demonstrated strong levels of engagement and leadership within civil society organizations (CSOs), and who were well-qualified to establish structured, high-functioning youth councils. Similarly, in Belgium, half of the municipal youth council representatives come directly from youth associations. Collaboration and/or formal partnership with youth associations or other CSOs can strengthen and sustain the participation of youth in the youth councils.



Inclusive and Accessible Pathways: Youth councils should prioritize recruitment of young people who face additional barriers to participation, which will be different groups based on the local context. Recruitment efforts that only seek to engage young people through existing mechanisms may lead to the overrepresentation of young people who are already active in multiple platforms and limit the representation of youth populations that are traditionally excluded. Different factors can negatively impact prior levels of youth engagement, such as identity (gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other characteristics), location, experience, and other personal circumstances. Youth of all demographics seek channels through which they can actively engage in changing their circumstances, and youth councils should be proactively inclusive of diverse groups. Prioritizing and centering members from diverse and traditionally marginalized backgrounds can help to build more inclusive and resilient communities and democratic processes.



Financial Resources: Access to financial resources, such as government grants or private donations, is one of the more practical determinants of an environment's ability to host this form of youth engagement. Financial resources can fund or subsidize the costs of training and meeting spaces, lunches, advisors, materials to conduct research, activities for youth (overall), and other logistical elements. While there are always low-cost alternatives to the steps of forming a youth council detailed below, financial constraints could pose a cost barrier to participation in a youth council, thus preventing access to youth who cannot afford to participate in this type of engagement.

Steps for Youth and Youth Development Practitioners

Creating a youth council requires patience and dedication from a group of committed young people. Listed below are the steps that Moroccan youth councils in NDI's programs followed, which can be applied by councils across the world. These steps can be altered or reordered to better suit different operating contexts, as long as the core goal remains the same: to provide relevant recommendations to elected representatives on youth priority issues.

In most circumstances, these steps will require significant time to complete and may require adjustment along the way. It is often not possible to complete each step at once or in quick succession; the process can and should be iterative, becoming an ongoing cycle that continues to adapt based on research and feedback from government officials and youth in the community. By applying the principles of adaptive management,¹⁷ youth councils, their constituents, and government counterparts can collaborate toward policies that are both citizen-centered and feasibly implemented.

- Step 1:** Identify a team of young people and youth-led or youth-serving organizations in your community, prioritizing young people who are traditionally excluded, such as young women and youth from marginalized groups
- Step 2:** Outline a strategy
- Step 3:** Draft internal bylaws or operating procedures
- Step 4:** Get to know the local government
- Step 5:** Build the youth council's capacity, taking into account the diverse backgrounds and skill sets of individual youth council members
- Step 6:** Conduct research
- Step 7:** Formulate evidence-based recommendations
- Step 8:** Reach out to decision-makers
- Step 9:** Present recommendations
- Step 10:** Monitor implementation

Step 1: Identify a team of young people in your community

To create an efficient youth council that can maintain a sustained connection with local decision-makers, you must first recruit a committed and motivated group of youth from your community. Recruiting this initial cohort of youth can take place prior to obtaining buy-in from decision-makers for the youth council's creation, since their primary goal will be to lay the foundation for a broader group to participate in youth council work. This team should be committed to representing the different ideas, priorities, and concerns of youth in the community, and should be composed of members with diverse backgrounds and experiences, including equal numbers of men and women, individuals of various sexual orientations and gender identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, religious and ethnic identities, and persons with disabilities.

Step 2: Outline a strategy

Convene your newly recruited youth council members to outline a shared overall vision and strategy for the council's goals and operations, ensuring that these are inclusive and equitable. For instance, you may conduct a brainstorming exercise to identify key principles, values and objectives that are shared by all council members, as well as initial gaps or opportunities for youth engagement in your community. Being on the same page on these core questions from the outset will equip your council to effectively fulfill your mission. Furthermore, when bringing together young people who have never worked together before, you will need to establish working norms and practices that ensure a safe space for all participants to contribute. Together, the council members should discuss and define what a safe equitable environment looks like for them, and design a strategy to ensure that everyone is comfortable participating and has an opportunity to contribute. Create a rough calendar of activities for your youth council to follow and set time-bound goals.

Step 3: Draft internal bylaws or operating procedures

Work with your fellow youth council members to draft internal bylaws or a set of operating procedures to codify the council's internal structure, rules and procedures, membership eligibility criteria, and goals. The bylaws should prioritize inclusive and equitable processes and procedures. This can be a time-consuming process that requires extensive discussion, so make sure to designate ample meeting time for this task.

In the Moroccan context, NDI worked with the youth councils to create two sets of bylaws, one that served as an internal charter for the youth council itself and a second set of similar bylaws that serve to codify and regulate the youth council. Municipal councilors must obtain approval from the Ministry of Interior to adopt this second set of bylaws, which is why NDI worked with its partner youth councils to draft these at an earlier stage of the process. (Please see the section on Organization and Structure under Youth Council Structure and Key Roles for more information on bylaws and internal youth council structure and refer to Annexes I and II for examples of formal bylaws.)

Step 4: Get to know your government

Before advising decision-makers on youth priority issues, gather relevant information about the government apparatuses to which they belong to ensure that your recommendations are relevant and within their jurisdiction. To access this information, you can solicit the help

of government staff, public records, local civil society organizations (CSOs) and the internet. Important information to gather includes government structure, roles of different departments, identities and political leanings of leadership, budgets and finance, current initiatives, and past youth engagement efforts. For example, learn about the responsibilities of local government actors and their policy outputs, such as local development and strategic plans, community action plans, etc., the current status of their implementation, and the associated budgets. Think about how including youth issues and priorities in these plans could strengthen them, and assess how these points could be articulated in future discussions with government representatives.

Step 5: Build the youth council's capacity

Seek out digital resources, experts in your community, or organizations like NDI to develop your council's civic organizing, policy analysis, advocacy, and research skills. In Morocco, NDI trained youth council members to conduct focus groups and analyze their results, equipping these youth to draft credible and relevant policy recommendations that they could present to elected officials. Be sure to consider the diverse backgrounds and skill sets of individual youth council members, understanding that each member may have a different starting point and that members will likely have a lot to learn from and share with each other. Take steps to identify and ensure needed accommodations to enable each member to participate in and contribute to the council's training activities. (Please see Annex I: Resources for additional information on focus groups and survey training.)

Step 6: Conduct research

Deploy skills gained from the previous step to gather data on the priority issues for your council's youth constituents. (Please see the section on Engaging Youth Constituents under Youth Council Structure and Key Roles for further information on research tools and techniques. Additionally, NDI's Youth Debate Manual has numerous recommendations for conducting research to inform priorities.)¹⁸

Step 7: Formulate evidence-based recommendations

Using the data gathered through your research on youth priorities, draft policy recommendations to present to decision-makers. Sift through the data to identify patterns and trends on your concerns. (Please see the section on Policy Development and/or Providing Feedback on an Existing Policy/Plan under Youth Council Structure and Key Roles for further information on policy development.)

Step 8: Reach out to decision-makers

It is crucial to initiate contact with decision/policy makers to convince them of the utility of a youth council for the community and the value of collaboration for government leaders. Instead of approaching officials with immediate requests or demands, consider framing outreach in terms of the support that the youth council can offer to government leaders by providing insight and access to various community constituencies.

If there is no youth council in your community, advocate for the creation of one by engaging your elected representatives and other local government leaders using a variety of methods,

including letter writing, in-person meetings, or press campaigns, or raising the issue at a public forum, such as a town hall meeting. If there is a youth council in your community, establish good and regular communication with government counterparts and demonstrate how youth councils and municipalities can work together to improve the community.

Throughout these efforts, make sure to demonstrate constructive intentions through positive engagements, in order to gain trust and support from decision-makers.

Step 9: Present recommendations

Organize a meeting or another form of engagement to present your policy recommendations to decision-makers. This presentation should be led by a diverse group of young people and demonstrate the value and insight youth councils have to offer, with the goals of securing commitment to formalizing or strengthening the mechanism. Below is a sample agenda used by Moroccan youth councils to structure their meeting:

- Introduction of youth council members and overall goal
- Brief overview of work thus far
- Presentation on youth priorities identified from research and corresponding policy recommendations
- Request decision-makers' backing

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH DECISION-MAKERS

- ✓ **Open with a positive.** Point out a recent, positive action by your decision-maker, as a form of positive feedback and recognition.
- ✓ **Segue to your issue.** Introduce your decision-maker to another opportunity for engagement.
- ✓ **Illustrate the issue.** Provide people-centered examples of the negative impact of an issue.
- ✓ **Propose a solution.** Propose a remedy to the issue, painting a picture of your remedy's potential impact.
- ✓ **Describe your team.** Introduce your team and the constituent groups that they represent. Offer the decision-maker an opportunity to improve their reputation among these groups.
- ✓ **Make your ask.** Present your decision-maker with a specific, well thought out request. Consider the motivations and priorities of the decision-maker in crafting persuasive arguments to generate support.



Advocacy messages should always be informed by an understanding of the incentives of their audience, in this case government decision-makers. Recommendations should be framed in a way that responds to the interests of the policymakers. For instance, officials are often more open to supporting initiatives that may generate greater personal visibility and favorability, especially in the lead-up to elections.

Step 10: Monitor implementation

After securing feedback and commitment from decision-makers on your policy recommendations, monitor the introduction of new initiatives. NDI's political process monitoring tools¹⁹ can be used to monitor government follow-through.²⁰ As much as possible, youth councils should be engaged in implementing their policy recommendations to be better able to monitor its progress and maintain ownership over its direction. Throughout the implementation process, you can continually evaluate your policy to ensure that it is addressing the intended need. At the end of this process, return to Step 7 to research further constituent needs and repeat the steps that follow.

Steps for Decision-Makers

Elected officials and government leaders interested in garnering youth feedback and institutionalizing their input can also take the initiative to launch youth councils by following the steps outlined below:

- Step 1:** Identify youth organizations in the area, with a particular focus on organizations led by or whose main constituency are young women and other marginalized groups
- Step 2:** Organize an introductory meeting
- Step 3:** Present a strategy to key stakeholders
- Step 4:** Designate a coordinator or liaison for the youth council
- Step 5:** Establish membership criteria
- Step 6:** Socialize the opportunity
- Step 7:** Launch the youth council
- Step 8:** Draft internal bylaws and operating procedures
- Step 9:** Develop the youth council's organizational capacity and policy skills
- Step 10:** Map next steps

Step 1: Identify youth organizations in the area

Seek to engage established youth organizations and leaders, even those who critique or disagree with your government, to begin building support for the initiative. A common mistake politicians make is to exclusively reach out to youth from their own political party or existing networks; however, including youth from various segments of the community, including those with diverse backgrounds and experiences and those who have not traditionally participated in existing political mechanisms, can build greater support and a stronger coalition with which to collaborate. Prioritize outreach to organizations that are led by or whose main constituency are young women and marginalized groups such as disabled persons organizations, ethnic and religious minority groups, and LGBT+ organizations.

Step 2: Organize an introductory meeting

Organize an introductory meeting with youth organizations and leaders to better understand the needs of youth constituents, present the goals of the youth council initiative, and to convene a collaborative brainstorming session on the youth council structure. In some contexts, it may be important to consider organizing separate meetings so that young women and young people from marginalized groups feel more comfortable speaking and have the space to be heard. Prior to scheduling a meeting, ask prospective invitees about their needs regarding accessibility and how best to create a safe space where everyone can participate.

Step 3: Present a strategy to key stakeholders

It is important to build consensus around involving youth in decision-making. Work to outline a broader strategy for developing youth councils, perhaps using the steps outlined in this guide, and present this strategy to relevant stakeholders within your government. There may be political opposition to the initiative or actors who insist on only engaging youth from their circles. To these actors, emphasize the value of youth councils to decision-makers and the broader community.

Step 4: Designate a coordinator or liaison for the youth council

Best practice recommends appointing or hiring a dedicated staff member to support the youth council who has experience working with young people, specifically engaging young women and men as equals and working with young people from diverse backgrounds. The coordinator's responsibilities will include sharing resources and arranging logistics. If funding is an issue, a capable staff member willing to undertake additional responsibility—rather than hiring a full-time employee — can take on this role.

Step 5: Establish membership criteria

At the outset of the youth council formation process, establish clear council membership criteria, with an emphasis on inclusion, accessibility, and diversity. Consider age ranges; geographic representation; gender parity; ethnic, racial, and religious diversity; disability; and other demographic criteria. Determine specific terms and/or expectations of membership, as well as requirements to remain a member (e.g., attending a certain number of meetings).

Step 6: Socialize the opportunity

Ensure that awareness of the youth council initiative is widespread and accessible. Potential outreach strategies include publishing a call for applications in local newspapers or on social media, and sharing the opportunity with youth organizations, schools, higher education institutions, community organizations, and other relevant CSOs, with a focus on organizations engaging young women and marginalized groups. This should be done as early as possible to provide applicants with ample time to prepare their materials.

Step 7: Launch the youth council

Selecting from the group of applicants, based on the established membership criteria and principles of gender balance and diversity, assemble a new youth council. The staff member or steering committee board designated as the lead on the youth council initiative can organize the logistics of the selection process.

Step 8: Draft internal bylaws and operating procedures

In collaboration with the youth council, draft internal bylaws or a set of operating procedures to codify the council's internal structure, rules and procedures, membership eligibility criteria, and goals. Set the youth council up for success by finalizing these documents, and thus strengthening its internal capacity, shortly after the council's formation.

Step 9: Develop the youth council's organizational capacity and policy skills

Equip youth council members with the capacity to effectively operate their council and the skills to provide evidence-based policy recommendations to you, the decision-maker. This can be done by exposing them to strong models of internal bylaws, creating an inclusive and enabling environment for and fostering a productive relationship with the youth. Additionally, decision-makers should share their budget, strategic development plans, and any internal documents and procedures with the youth to inform the councils about financial realities, the policy cycle, and existing policies and initiatives. There are resources, such as sample training topics and descriptions of the key roles of youth councils, within this guidebook that can serve as a starting point for building these skills.

Step 10: Map next steps

Outline a calendar of meetings, training, and collaborative sessions with decision-makers to equip the newly formed youth council to begin to research youth priorities, draft and present policy to address youth concerns, and follow up on the implementation of its recommendations. With this roadmap, youth should be able to steer their council forward and build a sense of ownership over their recommendations and gain confidence in their own skills.

Resources

To provide elected officials and other decision-makers with tailored guidance on how to establish youth councils, NDI has included information from external resources below.

The National League of Cities' (NLC) Institute for Youth Education and Families produced a guide²¹ titled **Starting a Youth Council** from the perspective of decision-makers that outlines steps for government leaders seeking to establish youth councils can take. Although these steps refer to city leaders, they can be applied more broadly to members of parliament, town councils, and other elected officials. Steps include acting as a champion for youth participation, using a self-perception inventory to assess the enabling environment, and reaching out to other organizations or municipalities that could provide training or guidance on youth council establishment.

GenerationOn's toolkit, **Game Changers: Establishing a Youth Advisory Council**,²² provides further steps, along with points to consider while implementing each step, including establishing eligibility criteria and determining the composition of the council, launching an application and interview process, and leading an orientation process.



YOUTH COUNCIL STRUCTURE AND KEY ROLES

Organization and Structure

From the outset of the council formation process, special consideration should be given to decisions about the organizational and structural aspects of your youth council. Based on programming experiences in various countries, and further research, more details on council organization and structure that can guide both youth and decision-makers are outlined in this section.

Recruitment

One of the main challenges during these first steps is ensuring a transparent, inclusive and accessible recruitment process. To mitigate potential conflicts, establish clear criteria and an inclusive selection process in advance and develop an accessible application form for prospective council members that collects relevant information. In order to build community buy-in and support for the youth council, reach out to local universities, civil society groups—with a particular focus on organizations engaging young women and marginalized groups—and decision-makers as feasible and ask them to share the application with their networks; where possible, convene diverse representatives of these groups in a commission to review applications and select youth council members based on the selection criteria. Those involved in the youth council foundation process can opt to create an online application and disseminate it through social media. Any application process should be designed to ensure accessibility to all youth in the community, with accommodations available for persons with disabilities, and opportunities for individuals without internet access to apply in person or by mailing a hard copy of the form. Under its programming in Morocco, for instance, NDI assisted in developing an application for aspiring youth council members, then coordinated with CSOs, academic institutions, and local government in each of its target municipalities, to share the application among their networks, including through Facebook groups and posts on community bulletin boards. Ten participants for each council were then selected, in consultation with local elected officials.

Below are sample questions from the NDI-created application for youth seeking to serve as founding members of a local youth council. This form also included brief introductory information on youth councils.

- Personal information: first and last name, email, phone number, age, gender (with inclusive options to select female, male, other/write in, or choose not to disclose), occupation, and municipality
- Do you belong to any nongovernmental or civil society groups?

- What are the priority issues of youth in your municipality?
- Why do you think we should choose you to be part of the pilot youth council in your municipality?

Below is a sample set of criteria developed based on programmatic experience and country case interviews:

- Gender parity
- Age, with youth being defined as 30 years and under
- No overt political party affiliations
- Prior record of community engagement, including through civil society experience or volunteer work (e.g., involvement in a local youth organization or association)

Other recruitment considerations may include the number of council members, diversity of representation with regards to geographic distribution, academic and professional backgrounds, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, race, and inclusion of marginalized groups. On the application form (if there is one), include information on council members' term lengths and attendance requirements so that applicants are aware of the level of commitment required to fulfill the role.

Internal Structure and Processes

Before diving into research or policy development, members of youth councils should decide how to organize and/or adapt their council's internal structure and processes. Based on program experience and further research, best practice includes establishing an executive or steering committee—to be elected or nominated by their fellow youth council members—with the below-outlined roles and responsibilities. It is key that young women and marginalized groups are represented equally on the executive committee and have opportunities to contribute to decision-making.

Role	Responsibility
Chair	Leads meetings, manages relations with external contacts, coordinates policy reports, appoints leaders to additional committees
Vice President	Provides support to chairman and leads meetings in their absence, advises chairman on policy reports
Secretary	Manages administrative processes and keeps meeting records
Treasurer	Manages the budget, including keeping records of collected funds and in and outflow of money
Communications Lead	Leads internal and external communications

In addition to this steering committee, councils can establish functional or issue-based committees. Global examples include the following committees that work as a subgroup on a specific topic:

Committee	Function
Legislative Committee	Identifies relevant legislation for the youth council to provide feedback on, coordinates meetings with and submits written and oral testimony to elected and administrative officials
Publicity Committee	Drafts and distributes publications and facilitates community dialogue
Special Issues Committee	Researches specific issues as needed, provides policy or action suggestions, and/or identifies new project ideas

With regard to internal processes, here are some specific topics that youth should discuss and outline clear operating guidelines around. Please refer to Annexes III and IV for examples of formal bylaws:

Selection of the steering committee members

- Selection/election period and frequency
- Nomination process
- Threshold of votes required for elections (as applicable)
- Gender parity
- Representation of marginalized voices

Meetings

- Annual organizational or kickoff meeting—establish clear goals for this meeting, such as creating an annual work plan
- Regular meetings—establish frequency, determine convenient timings, decide on a procedure for creating an agenda
- Consider how far in advance notice should be given for irregular meetings

General laws

- Establish a code of conduct to guide debates on strategy or policy (See Annex IV for a sample code of conduct)
- Working hours for council members
- Guidelines on respect, inclusivity, professionalism, and ethics
- Rules to remain as a member in good standing (e.g., requirement to attend a certain number of meetings in a year, adherence to ethics guidelines, etc.)

Amendments to the operating procedures or bylaws

- Consider revising these regulations and processes once a year in light of policies revealing themselves to be either helpful or cumbersome in practice

As an additional resource, below is a tentative agenda that youth councils can follow in their first meeting to help guide discussions around the above-mentioned topics:

- Introductions
- Define the broader goals of the youth council to align everyone's understanding
- Transparent discussion on what criteria and recruitment process was used to select council members. This includes recognizing the contribution of CSOs, academic institutions, or other organizations that supported this process
- Discuss tools from this guide (which should be shared in advance of the meeting) and, if relevant, any achievements from peer youth councils
- Discuss issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and how the youth council will ensure these principles are upheld
- Discuss youth challenges and priority issues
- Create a plan for the year, including a timeline for discussing issues and planning activities
- Discuss roles and responsibilities for council members and form a steering committee
- Outline an outreach strategy to connect with decision-makers
- Next steps and wrap-up

Engaging Youth Constituents

As representatives of youth in their communities, youth councils should have access to accurate and up-to-date information on the priorities and needs of the young people they represent. Rather than relying on anecdotal evidence or personal impressions, council members should establish and institutionalize systematic processes for collecting data on their youth constituents' demands. To be accountable and responsive to the youth they represent, youth councils should regularly engage their young constituents to solicit their input and learn about their needs. Members of the youth council should gather information from diverse groups of young people, including young women and marginalized youth, and ensure all information gathering is done in an inclusive and accessible manner. Youth councils should also find opportunities to raise their young constituents' awareness of the council's existence and activities in order to promote broader youth political engagement.

Youth councils can pursue a number of different pathways for gathering information on their young constituents' needs:

- Creating social media and email accounts, publicizing their contact information, and responding to requests or questions on those forums;
- Establishing office hours for young community members to meet and engage with their youth councils;
- Convening town halls or other public meetings to keep attendees updated on the youth council's activities and to speak with attendees in a transparent and open forum;
- Conducting community needs assessments via surveys, interviews, etc.;
- Visiting schools, community centers or other locations where youth gather; and
- Organizing social and political activities such as concerts and political debates, where youth would attend, and having conversations with youth members during and after the event.



FIGHTING
FOR
EQUALITY

Through its programming in Morocco, NDI trained youth councils to engage their constituents using focus group methodology and online surveys. Using their newly gained skills, the Moroccan youth councils developed guiding focus group questionnaires, recruited focus group participants, and conducted sessions to investigate youth priorities. Some youth councils also developed online surveys, which they promoted through their social media accounts. In Bruges, Belgium, the youth council recently conducted a survey among youth constituents to collect feedback on the draft six-year municipal plan developed by the city council.

Below are guidelines that youth councils can follow to conduct focus groups on youth priorities in their communities:

- Draft a discussion guide aimed at investigating the issues youth face and gauging potential solutions.
- Depending on the size of your constituency and your council's capacity, decide the number of focus groups you will conduct, while maintaining an even geographic distribution.
- Recruit focus group participants from diverse backgrounds using inclusive recruitment methods and coordinate logistics for the session. Other CSOs or academic institutions can serve as partners during this phase.
- During the focus group session, at least three members of the youth councils must be present—one person to facilitate the group discussion using the discussion guide, a second to take written notes, and a third to record the discussion.
- Consider having separate focus groups for young women and youth from marginalized groups to ensure a safe and equitable space for them to participate and discuss their needs.

Youth councils interested in conducting focus group research or other forms of community needs assessments should identify additional resources or seek further training on conducting focus groups, since the above steps are not comprehensive.

Policy Development and/or Providing Feedback on an Existing Policy/Plan

The primary role of youth councils is to serve as a voice for young people in their community by providing their government bodies with input and recommendations on better addressing youth priorities. Youth can best fulfill this role by formulating, communicating and delivering evidence-based recommendations on youth needs. Best practice includes supporting the feedback and policy design with research and data.

Research and Data Collection

Periodically conduct general research on the issues and priorities of youth in your community, following the recommendations described above, in order to maintain connection with and understanding of your youth constituency. When feedback opportunities arise related to a specific local government policy or plan, youth councils can mobilize quickly by engaging the contact networks they've maintained and seek youth feedback via virtual or in-person surveys, focus groups or interviews. If time or resources are limited, youth council members can conduct independent research on the specific issue to understand it and learn about the practice in other municipalities and reference the data the council previously collected through general

surveying in order to inform their approach to representing the youth voice in their constituency and responding appropriately. Conducting research and gathering information and data on specific issues enables youth council members to provide facts and evidence that strengthen their case when making suggestions to their municipal leaders.

Extra effort may be required to ensure that data collection processes are inclusive of the perspectives of youth across the community, including those who may have obstacles to participating, such as youth located in geographically remote areas, youth with differing language requirements, youth without access to technology, etc.



Data Analysis

After conducting research as described in the above sections, youth can parse through data collected through community needs assessments or other forms of research to identify trends in the results. One way to organize findings could be to identify three main categories of youth concern, based on the data, and then to explore more specific concerns under these broad themes.

Policy Development

Council members should follow two golden rules while drafting their policy recommendations. First, youth councils should only make recommendations that fall within the purview of the government body they are addressing. One of the earliest steps of forming a youth council is researching the scope of power and authority of the government body to which the council is attached, because presenting recommendations that decision-makers cannot act upon endangers a youth council's credibility. Second, policy recommendations should be specific, actionable, and well-tailored to the problems they seek to address. Where possible, the recommendations should complement or build upon existing efforts. They can additionally benefit from being low-cost and centering youth action and agency as part of the solutions. Below are weak, medium, and strong versions of a sample policy recommendation to combat unemployment:

- **WEAK—The municipality should tackle unemployment:** This recommendation only identifies a gap in policy, which government leaders may already be aware of.
- **MEDIUM—The municipality should create jobs to tackle unemployment:** This recommendation lacks specificity, undercutting the value add of the youth council.
- **STRONG—To tackle unemployment, the municipality can organize an annual job fair at its cultural center to connect youth with employers:** This recommendation is specific. It suggests an innovative and low-cost way to leverage existing resources (the government's cultural center), and creates further openings for youth council engagement.

Political Analysis

Prior to presenting policy recommendations to government decision-makers, youth council members should analyze the political environment and relevant stakeholders, develop strategies for engaging with local officials, and prepare persuasive arguments to further the council's objectives. By thinking proactively about how various stakeholders can influence and benefit from a particular initiative, council members can achieve greater success in translating their recommendations into government policy priorities.

Providing Feedback

Youth councils may also provide feedback on the existing plans, policies or bills drafted by policymakers and decision-makers to ensure that they are responsive, inclusive, and gender sensitive. Using the data analysis techniques outlined above, youth should analyze policy through the frame of three key questions:

- What issue is the policy designed to address?
- Are the goals of the policy aligned with the interests of youth in the area?
- Does the policy address its stated intention?

The feedback mechanism role of a youth council is potentially its most sensitive. If not delivered in a professional manner, feedback can be interpreted negatively by the decision-makers. Below are guidelines that youth can follow to strengthen the efficacy of their feedback:

- Provide constructive feedback—rather than destructive criticism—that allows policymakers to improve their policies.
- Avoid accusatory language or personal critiques, which place recipients of feedback on the defensive.
- Acknowledge strengths of a policy to build trusting relationships with decision-makers.
- Provide the feedback in a timely manner and inform the point of contact if more time is needed.
- Follow up on feedback and any resulting recommendation to demonstrate commitment.

As a final note, when presenting policy recommendations or providing feedback on policy, youth should employ strong presentation skills. Practicing beforehand can help to organize thoughts and prepare for questions that policymakers may ask. At the beginning of the presentation, provide a succinct summary of the main points of feedback so the decision-makers know the topics to be covered. Throughout the presentation, maintain a confident posture, eye contact, and a steady cadence. Thank the audience at the end for their time and ask if there are any questions.

BUILDING MOMENTUM THROUGH CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Good ideas simply aren't enough to generate enthusiasm and effect change on their own; the most successful youth councils are able to harness the initial spark of an innovative idea or policy recommendation and build support by engaging youth constituents, community members, and government officials through a variety of communications approaches.

One good practice for youth councils to consider is establishing an overarching communications framework and/or a specific strategy for publicizing individual project ideas. An effective communications strategy would identify key axes for intervention, including establishing communications goals and objectives, identifying which community audiences and stakeholders to engage, articulating core principles and messages to convey, determining which communications channels and methods to utilize, and creating a timeline to map out communications activities over a specific period of time.

Additionally, making communications accessible, fun, and engaging is the best way to generate interest and enthusiasm. Instead of simply releasing reports, meeting summaries, and draft policies, incorporating an interactive element, such as a polling feature, can serve to capture community sentiment and also increase constituent investment in a particular initiative or idea. For instance, in Belgium, **Aanstekers** is one innovative communications tool that is used to crowdsource project ideas from youth in various municipalities, and allows them to upvote or downvote submissions through a virtual light switch. Youth councils can monitor which ideas garner the most support and strategize how to incorporate them into the council policy plans and priorities for the year.



SUSTAINING A YOUTH COUNCIL

Once initiated, sustaining momentum for a youth council can be challenging. In addition to capitalizing on buy-in from youth, decision-makers, and the community at the outset, the longevity of a youth council depends on its planning of specific projects and activities, and its ability to administer resources to implement its agenda. The first step to achieving long-term sustainability is to clarify the role of the youth council in its community, and its relationship with government agencies and nongovernmental stakeholders. Secondly, a youth council should receive dedicated resources for its operations and be prepared to develop a budget in order to allocate funds to planned projects and activities. Youth councils can function with moderate budgets and minimal staff support from government agencies, provided there is advanced planning. Where possible, youth councils can use existing community resources, such as youth centers, parks, and other public gathering areas, for their activities in order to be cost-effective in bringing value to youth, decision-makers, and the community. With clear roles and a sustainable budget and support, youth councils can dedicate attention to establishing a recruitment and retention plan, in order to encourage youth council members to continue working and incentivize new members to join, which is another key element of sustainability.

Additionally, legislating resources for youth councils through legal frameworks is a significant measure to ensure sustainability through changes in political leadership. Otherwise, administration turnover may result in loss of decision-maker support and funding. For instance, in Turkey, local youth councils are mandated by the Municipal Law, but no separate budget is allocated for them, and budget allocation authority is deferred to city councils. In some municipalities, due to turnover in municipal leadership, youth councils have lost political, financial, and administrative support; when this occurs, many are forced to cease operation and remain active only on paper until municipal leadership changes again.

Another important element for sustaining youth councils is monitoring and evaluation. Assessing the impact of youth council activities through reporting achievements (e.g., regularly via social media and annually, semi-annually, or quarterly in progress reports) would encourage both decision-makers and youth to continue engaging in youth council work, increase the visibility of the council among its constituents, and provide



accountability to the council. For instance, in Costa Rica, local youth councils release an accountability report each year indicating projects implemented during the year, budget spent, and number of participants in attendance. It is key to incorporate gender indicators into the monitoring and evaluation plan to ensure the approach of the youth council is gender transformative and not gender blind or negative. This should include a gender analysis during program startup, measuring changes in norms and attitudes, and a “Do No Harm” approach.

Lastly, youth councils achieve the greatest long-term sustainability when they are able to encourage youth mainstreaming and gender mainstreaming in all local government policies and activities. In addition to collaborating with local political leadership in the development of youth council plans and activities, youth council members should proactively seek engagement and participation in community meetings and policy discussions. For instance, youth councils can delegate members to attend town halls and public budget hearings on a dedicated or rotational basis, in order to raise questions about the impact of proposed measures on youth and propose the incorporation of youth-friendly policies into municipal planning documents. Youth councils can also seek representation on any community committees that may be established in their locality, such as citizen advisory boards on health and safety, education, etc. Additionally, youth councils can establish regular coordination meetings with their local council counterparts in order to discuss ideas, priorities, and concerns, as well as to keep government officials apprised of youth council events and activities.

Youth councils achieve the greatest long-term sustainability when they are able to encourage youth mainstreaming and gender mainstreaming in local government policies and activities.

In some places, youth councils may be legally allowed to attend non-public government meetings as observers or participants. For example, in Kosovo, local youth council representatives can attend

municipal assembly sessions, and can both participate in the discussion of agenda items concerning youth as well as disseminate information and updates of note for their youth constituents. When youth councils are able to maintain relationships with and access to government processes, they can more closely monitor and report out assessments of local leaders’ service to youth priorities. Leveraging connections, including the strategic use of social media, can go a long way to ensure that youth issues receive the attention and constituent demand required for government action on a given subject. This, in turn, reiterates the value of youth councils and incentivizes more young people to engage in a mechanism that can demonstrate tangible outcomes.



INCLUSIVE YOUTH COUNCILS

Youth policies and programs are critical to create a more inclusive society, and consultative structures such as youth councils can play an important role in increasing awareness around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in the community, not limited to concerns and ideas about youth participation socially, economically, and politically. Youth councils can also create equal opportunities for the participation of diverse youth, particularly young women and marginalized youth, who may not have access to political leaders, institutions, and processes, such as the youth wings of political parties. Structurally, youth councils can and should proactively make space for the participation of young women and youth with disabilities, youth with different economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, as well as different racial identities, sexual orientations and gender identities, and effect institutional change by advocating for the issues and priorities of a diverse constituency.

Youth councils can be more proactive by making small changes to promote accessibility and inclusion of all youth in membership, activities, and policy recommendations.

One direct mechanism that youth councils can control for a more inclusive society is increasing inclusiveness in their own ranks. However, many youth councils do not have specific policies or activities to enable representation of different youth groups in council membership. Some countries have a gender quota in their youth

council membership bylaws. In Kosovo, many municipal youth councils require that their membership reflects national quotas for women's representation (30 to 40 percent). In Costa Rica, local youth councils are obligated to achieve gender parity in their member election processes. However, many youth councils' membership criteria and recruitment strategies are not targeted, rather they attempt to encourage membership from a wide swath of different youth demographics through public events and activities, publicized on social media and/or by visiting schools, youth centers, sports events, etc.

Nevertheless, youth councils can be more proactive by making small changes to promote accessibility and inclusion of all youth in membership, activities, and policy recommendations. Firstly, youth councils should consider whether the composition of their membership reflects the demographics of their community. Women and girls make up more than half of almost all communities and should be represented as such in the youth council. In communities with multiethnic and multilingual populations, youth councils can invite guests from community cultural organizations to speak about respective priorities and activities, and can seek interpretation resources from their local government, community center, or library for members with different language capabilities. Similarly, youth councils can engage and partner with

civil societies led by or representing other marginalized communities such as persons with disabilities or LGBTI people to both understand these communities' priorities and identify young people to participate. Youth councils are also encouraged to establish links with local interest groups, including women's caucuses, interfaith councils, and religious bodies.

Additionally, ensuring the safety and security of council members, including women and members from traditionally marginalized groups, should be a top priority for all youth councils. Since youth experience, perpetuate, and are impacted by the sociopolitical norms in their society, it is important for council members to both recognize and actively counteract patriarchal gender norms and promote inclusion and parity in their youth councils' representation and participation. Through research on violence against women in politics, and the global #NotTheCost campaign and think10 safety planning tool, NDI is raising awareness of the violent backlash that many women, particularly young women, face to advance their political participation and is putting forward strategies to enhance women's safety when conducting political activities.²⁴ Young female members of the youth council should use the think10 safety planning tool when joining the council to understand their risks and develop plans to stay safe as they participate in politics. In addition to diversifying recruitment efforts, youth councils, and male members especially, also have a responsibility to take proactive steps to ensure that female members are able to fully participate without threats or intimidation.²⁵



Lastly, youth councils should consider the accessibility of both the physical and virtual spaces in which they hold meetings and events, including available audiovisual accommodations. Youth councils can engage with disabled persons organizations to identify accessible spaces, and if it is not possible to find a location that can accommodate individuals with different mobility requirements (with ramps, wide hallways and doors, elevators, and accessible bathrooms, for example), youth councils can endeavor to hold events at ground level and/or outside. In many communities, geographic location and access to reliable and accessible transportation may limit the ability of different youth populations to participate in youth council activities. In nonurban areas especially, it can be difficult to conduct frequent in-person meetings. Additionally, as some members may be parents, councils should proactively think about providing accommodations such as child care. Wherever possible, youth councils are encouraged to seek diverse avenues for participation, including hosting virtual meetings, recording and disseminating activities over social media, etc. In Belgium, one youth council regularly travels with a mobile trailer to hold its meetings in different locations throughout the community and talk to youth while they go about their daily activities; this method is best summarized as going out into the community to “meet constituents where they are.”

GOOD PRACTICES AND COMMON PITFALLS



Good Practices

Diversify recruitment sources so that the composition of the council can be more representative of the youth population.

- In Azrou, Morocco, calls for youth council applicants were circulated with local civil society groups, elected officials, and academic institutions, who then shared it among their networks.
- In Flanders, Belgium, the youth councils are composed of representatives of local youth associations and individual youth who do not have any organizational affiliation. Each youth association is required to send two representatives to the youth council as a stipulation for receiving funding from the municipality. Unaffiliated youth make up the other half of the council. Political parties can send observers, who do not have voting rights, to the youth council.
- In Nashville, Tennessee, United States, youth who led the recruitment process for the Mayor's Youth Council cast a wide net and shared the opportunity with every school within the district, community centers, and churches and faith-based organizations, to ensure that diverse youth leaders joined the council.
- In Tepebasi, Turkey, when forming the municipal youth council, the core youth group walked around the city door-to-door to deliver invitations for youth to attend the kickoff meeting. They also contacted different youth-related groups, including university students, high school students, the chamber of commerce, and youth NGOs as well as local government divisions such as district governorships, in order to include a diversity of youth voices on the council.

Include young women, youth with disabilities, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, LGBTI youth, and socioeconomically marginalized groups in youth councils.

- In France, the Parisian Youth Council mandates 50-50 gender parity among its members, ensuring equal representation of young men and women.
- In Morocco, NDI supported the establishment of youth councils in localities where youth had lower levels of access to education and job opportunities.
- In Northern Ireland, although the Belfast Youth Forum stipulates members must be between 13 and 18 years old, the age cap is raised to 21 for applicants who have disabilities or have recently left care.

- In the United States, the Southampton, New York, government provides free transportation to meetings for members of the Youth Advisory Committee to offset the cost of attendance and reduce financial barriers to participation.
- Also in the United States, the Philadelphia Millennial Advisory Committee lacks the funds to subsidize the transportation costs of its members, so it implements the low-cost solution of rotating the location of its meetings among different neighborhoods to equalize accessibility.

If funding is available, designate a coordinator or liaison for the youth council within the relevant government office who can access resources and share information and updates between the two groups.

- In Flanders, each municipality has one to two municipal staff, called youth officers, assigned to coordinate with the youth council. Each municipality has an alderman of youth, elected as a political point of contact for the youth council, who attends youth council meetings regularly as an observer.
- In Mexico, the Nuevo Laredo youth council liaises with staff from the U.S. Consulate to collaborate on issues of concern to both American and Mexican youth, such as preventing at-risk youth from joining gangs.
- In Tepebasi, the municipality has a designated staff member assigned as liaison to the youth council. Historically, the deputy mayor regularly meets with youth council members to listen to their needs and requests.



- In the United States, a member of Congressman Ted Lieu’s staff coordinates his Youth Advisory Council, which includes youth from across the 33rd Congressional District of California.

Secure decision-maker buy-in across government sectors and institutions.

- In Croatia, youth councils must submit and obtain approval for annual work plans from the local government bodies they advise.
- In Flanders, municipal youth councils are required to be consulted by government officials and given the opportunity to provide feedback and monitor the local youth policy plan designed and adopted by the city.
- In Florida, United States, local government officials appoint some members to the Miami-Dade Youth Commission, which helps to increase their buy-in and long-term commitment.

Form committees within youth councils based on priority policy areas.

- In Kosovo, one local youth council successfully raised the issue of soft drugs at its school and the municipality responded by increasing police presence and conducting an anti-drugs campaign. Another youth council raised the issue of a lack of sidewalks and street lighting on roads used by students. The response by municipal officials was to install both.
- In Pennsylvania, United States, the Philadelphia Millennial Advisory Committee forms committees based on the topics that applicants to the council suggest during their application process.

Invest in training and capacity-building for youth council members to equip them for success.

- Members of the Nashville Mayor’s Youth Council attend a training retreat at the start of each session, where they learn about topics such as civic education and advocacy.
- Members of Congressman Lieu’s Youth Advisory Council engage in debate on different policy issues at meetings, enabling them to strengthen their critical thinking and public speaking skills and develop their subject-area knowledge on different policies.
- Miami-Dade Youth Commission members attend career and life skills workshops, and receive budget training.
- Participants in a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization initiative to establish a national-level youth council in Lebanon received training on relevant laws and leadership skills.



Develop consistent internal operating procedures, such as internal bylaws, for youth councils to improve efficacy and streamline activities

- The Miami-Dade Youth Commission has a consistent deadline by which members must submit agenda items in advance of meetings. Each meeting follows a similar agenda format for consistency.
- The Lausanne Youth Council in Switzerland assigns specific members to lead public relations, communications, and commission management, helping to create accountability and establish clear lines of responsibility.
- Youth belonging to a pilot National Youth Council in Tunisia ratified an internal document to build group consensus on operating procedures related to membership, internal communication, and organizational structure.
- In Tepebasi, the youth council members created bylaws indicating who could become a member (youth between 13 and 30 years old, representative of a youth group identified by the council), conditions to remain a voting member (cannot miss three or more meetings consecutively), and election rules for the chair and co-chair of the council.

Draft tailored policy recommendations or implement targeted activities that respond to community needs.

- After survey results showed that youth in Southampton were facing higher levels of mental health and stress-related problems, the Southampton Youth Advisory Committee held a wellness fair to respond to its constituents' needs.
- The Belfast Youth Forum in Northern Ireland conducted research on young people's opinions on relationship and sexuality education, then developed a set of corresponding recommendations it shared through a public report.
- In Jordan, the Karak Youth Council launched an initiative to preserve historic sites in Karak as a means to promote tourism.
- The municipal youth council in Ballerup, Denmark, visits all schools and higher education institutions in the area annually to inform the youth on current youth-related issues and learn their concerns. The council passes the collected information to the City Board.

Have youth council members take the lead in organizing and conducting meetings with decision-makers to bolster youth leadership.

- The Nashville Mayor's Youth Council hosts an annual summit, which concludes with a briefing for city officials on its activities and accomplishments.



Common Pitfalls

Underestimating the level of commitment and effort required to successfully operationalize a youth council.

If youth or decision-makers working to establish youth councils are not realistic in their expectations of the level of effort required and potential barriers to success, they may become too easily disincenitized by setbacks.



Low funds and resources.

Without a base level of funds, time, or personnel, youth and decision-makers will not have the resources to operationalize a strong youth council. This pitfall can be offset by pursuing partnerships with organizations that can subsidize costs such as transportation, meeting space, and supplies.

Lack of political support.

Without buy-in from relevant political stakeholders, neither supportive policymakers and decision-makers nor youth themselves will be able to formalize and sustain youth council efforts and cannot meaningfully contribute to any policy or program development processes. Lack of political support may also negatively impact funds and resources allocated to the youth council initiative.

The youth council mechanism is not properly understood by the public.

If constituents within the community that the youth council is meant to serve and/or supporting youth organizations do not understand its goals or fail to see its value, they may view resources spent on the initiative as wasteful or may resist youth council constituency engagement efforts.

The youth council inadvertently reinforces existing exclusive structures and norms.

Youth councils that do not proactively seek diverse membership and provide training and accommodation to support the equitable participation of all young people may unintentionally reinforce existing obstacles and patriarchal norms that prevent women and youth from traditionally marginalized backgrounds from engaging in political processes.

The youth council has no authority.

If a youth council becomes siloed from government decision-making processes, through lack of legal backing or functional support, the group will have no power or authority to fulfill its consultative mandate and sustain meaningful engagement opportunities for its youth constituents.

Failure to follow through on even the smallest of gains, which can widen the space for sustained youth political engagement.

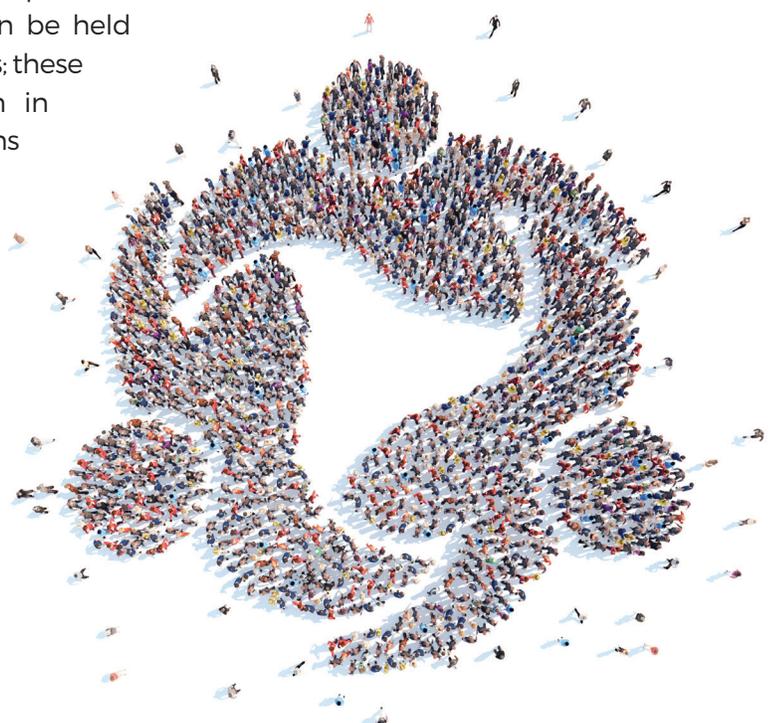
Any success that a youth council can achieve—whether setting a meeting with a decision-maker or securing funding—is positive momentum that can easily be lost. If youth and decision-makers fail to take advantage of these openings, they will not be able to grow and sustain avenues for youth engagement.

BUILDING GLOBAL NETWORKS

Value of Networks

Youth councils can benefit from connecting with peer youth councils domestically and globally to gather inspiration and ideas for effectively structuring their work and undertaking new projects. For instance, as part of its program to build the capacity of Moroccan youth council members, NDI facilitated exchange calls between Moroccan and American youth councils. Similarly, Bataljong, the umbrella organization for municipal youth councils in Flanders, Belgium, has organized in-person exchanges between youth councils in Flanders and those in other European countries. Through social media, youth councils can connect with counterparts virtually, share experiences, and exchange examples of successful initiatives and policy recommendations undertaken by their council.

Networking can assist youth council members in learning from each other's experiences by trading good practices and workshopping solutions to problems that many councils may face at some stage in their formation. Just as there are similarities in the trends of youth engagement across the globe, youth from different communities may face similar sociocultural and institutional barriers to participation. Youth can learn about the specific internal structures, diversity, equity and inclusion practices, activities, advocacy methods, and funding streams of their peer youth councils and adapt successful practices to suit their needs. Exchanges can be held between neighboring towns or across borders; these networking opportunities can assist youth in building their cross-cultural communications skills and develop global perspectives. Throughout the process of identifying networking partners and planning and conducting exchange activities, youth can establish bonds with peers from other communities, including those from different backgrounds, which can reinforce commitments to representing a variety of youth perspectives and recruiting members with diverse experiences to serve on their council at home.



Engaging with peers through virtual or in-person networking events can be energizing and motivational. In NDI's experience, after participating in the exchange calls, youth from both Moroccan and American councils gained the perspective that they were not alone in the challenges they faced and found inspiration in each other's advocacy efforts. Following the exchange, youth were reinvigorated in their efforts to implement activities to benefit their communities, conduct research, or provide feedback on policy. Having the opportunity to participate in an exchange also served to validate that the youth's efforts were admirable and deserving of a spotlight.

Youth networking can take several forms, each requiring varying levels of funds and efforts. Below are some options for conducting such activities:

- Video conferencing on platforms such as Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, Teams and Zoom
- Email correspondence or video exchange
- Informal chat groups using mobile apps and social media platforms, such as Facebook Groups, Google Groups, WhatsApp, and Twitter
- In-person exchanges or study missions, whereby one group travels and is hosted by the other in their community

Steps and Options for Holding Exchanges

Step 1: Identify Partners for Exchange

Find peer youth councils that could serve as strong partners for exchange. There are several criteria that could define a strong partner, depending on the goal for the exchange. A partner could be a successful council that has affected change in its community, or it could be based in a similar community. For example, NDI paired together youth councils from Azrou, Morocco, and Southampton, New York, because both are tourist destinations that experience seasonal patterns of employment. A preliminary conversation, over the phone or email, with the facilitator or members of a council could help determine the compatibility of councils as exchange partners. Gather information on how the council was formed, what internal organization techniques it employs, whether it conducts community needs assessments, and what its current initiatives and priorities are.

Step 2: Prepare for Exchange

Decide the format of the meetings, whether in-person or virtual. Then decide upon a date, time, and platform for the first meeting or call. Draft an agenda for each call/meeting and share potential discussion questions to allow the youth from both councils a chance to brainstorm responses in advance. In NDI's experience, sharing questions prior to the meeting enriched the experience as youth were prepared to provide detailed responses during the call, resulting in more animated dialogue and exchange. Anticipate challenges with logistics, technology, language, and cultural context, especially in cases that exchanges will be transnational.

If conducting in-person exchanges, plan them in advance, and take care to prepare group itineraries such as where to visit and which external stakeholders to meet with, and logistical arrangements, including lodging, transportation, etc. If budgetary constraints make in-person

exchanges difficult, virtual meetings are a worthwhile alternative. Many video and audio conferencing platforms are free to use, but require that users sign up and have internet access, with video conferencing requiring a stronger internet connection and higher bandwidth than audio. Because of the low cost of communication, exchange calls are an accessible activity in which more youth councils can engage.

Step 3: Conduct the Exchange

The partner youth councils hold their exchange via call and/or in-person visit. As an introduction, each council member shares their name, home community, and why they decided to join their youth council. One representative from each council provides a two-minute introduction to their council as background information for members who did not attend preliminary conversations. Council members then pose questions to their counterparts and share responses. In the flow of conversation, youth identify points in common, inquire about their counterpart's work or operating environment, and trade good practices.

Step 4: Follow Up

After establishing a rapport with a partner youth council during the exchange, continue to engage with them through follow ups to maintain the relationships. This sustained engagement can be through further video calls, emails, or can take other forms such as creating a group on social media so that youth council members can interact informally, or additional in-person meetings if resources allow. Moroccan and American youth councils participating in NDI's program recorded videos for each other. Continue to share useful resources, like this guide, and update the partner youth council on any recent successes and activities.

Networking can assist youth council members in learning from each other's experiences by trading good practices and workshopping solutions to problems that many councils may face at some stage in their formation.



LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: GLOBAL CASE STUDIES

FLANDERS, BELGIUM



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- National and subnational legal frameworks govern youth engagement and activities, including a government Youth Policy Plan updated every four years and a law mandating the establishment and funding for a youth council in each municipality
- Long-standing national and subnational youth council structures are composed of current secondary and university students and recent graduates, half of whom are representatives of youth associations and half of whom are unaffiliated
- Umbrella organization for Flemish youth services, Bataljong, coordinates with local youth councils, providing training and advisory services, and organizing exchanges

Key Takeaways

Local youth councils engage young people in politics and governance through initiatives such as:

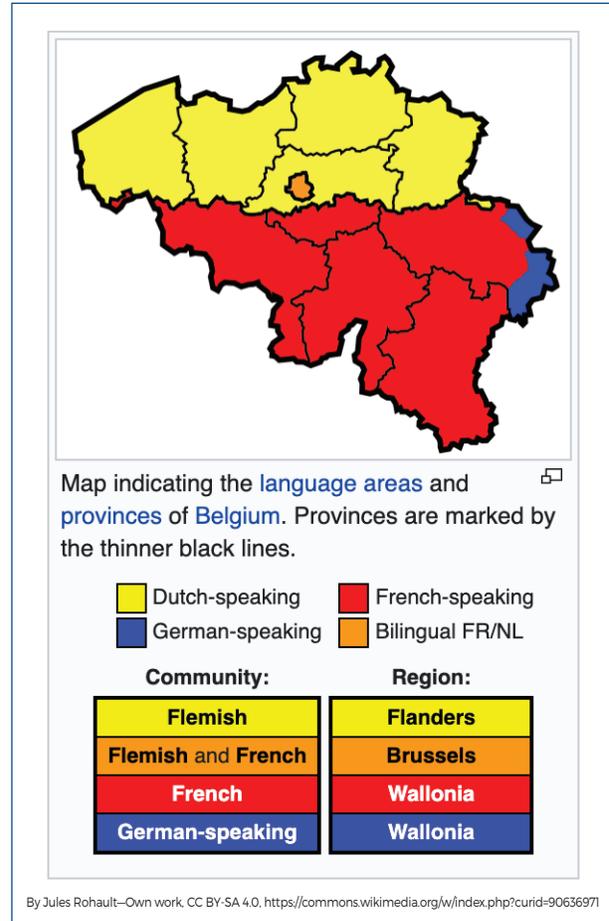
- Election information campaigns and candidate debates to equip and mobilize first time voters
- Coordinating input via social media from youth in the community on projects and policies related to their priorities and interests
- Promoting accessible participation and communications methods, including mobile trailers, hotlines, web pages, and radio channels to connect with youth constituents and provide them with information and services
- Well-established council mechanisms and feeder systems have contributed to the sustainability of local youth councils, while resulting in challenges to diversifying council membership



Background

Belgium is composed of two distinct types of federated entities: communities and regions. The communities refer to the population groups and are defined based on the main language spoken: Flemish, French, or German. Each community has its own legislative body and its own government. There are three independently operating regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital region. Each region has its own government and legislative body, and Flanders is the only region in which the community and regional institutions are merged.

On youth-related issues, there are national laws focused on youth; but most of the youth policy issues are regulated by the communities. Each community has a ministry responsible for youth and youth policy/plans. For instance, the Flemish Youth Ministry coordinates development of the Youth Policy Plan for the Flemish community in Flanders.²⁷



In Flanders, there are two main pieces of legislation that regulate youth activities. The first is the Youth Policy Plan (YPP) that requires the Flemish government to submit a YPP to the Flemish Parliament within the first 12 months of its term. The YPP lays out the Flemish government’s priorities, vision, and roadmap for youth for the next four years. At the end of the second year of implementation of the YPP, the Flemish government must submit a progress report to the Flemish Parliament.²⁸

The YPP is the main tool for the Flemish government to regulate youth activities in Flanders and most of the government’s funding for youth activities. The YPP is developed through participation of various stakeholders, including the Flemish Youth Council, experts on youth issues, youth associations, and local and provincial governments.

The Flemish Youth Council is the official advisory body to the Flemish government on all issues related to children and youth. The council prepares advisory statements and position documents that are developed by various committees and working groups. These statements are reviewed by an advisory council. Those that are approved are sent to the Flemish government. The youth council members are elected every three years at a public congress after a public call for application. Fifty percent of the council members come from youth organizations and the other half must be individuals without any organizational affiliation.

A second law, the Act on Municipal, Inter-municipal, and Provincial Youth and Youth Work Policy, regulates issues at the municipal level including a requirement for local and provincial authorities to develop youth policy plans. Provisions in this act also require that municipalities have a youth council to receive funding from the government for their youth policies, programs, and services.²⁹

To support youth work and the youth councils at local level, the Flemish government established an umbrella organization, **Bataljong**, the Association for Flemish Youth Services (VVJ). Bataljong is a member organization and Flemish municipalities are its primary members. For its member

Bataljong is the go-to organization for its members on youth work and youth policies including questions about how the youth council, alderman of youth and civil servants can work better.

municipalities, the association provides trainings, organizes exchanges and peer networking, implements projects, and answers questions via its helpdesk. One of Bataljong's trainings, entitled, "Basics and Functioning of the Youth Council," is a core module for the new youth council members to understand how the youth council works and collaborates with the municipality, and what the basic laws and decrees are related to youth work.



Structure and Operations

There are more than 300 municipalities in Flanders and most of them have a youth council. Municipal youth councils importantly serve as an advisory body to their municipality on youth plans, policies, programs, and services. After the council provides feedback to the municipality on policies or makes new suggestions, the municipal leaders provide feedback to the council. This enables two-way communication between the council and municipality.

The level of engagement of each youth council and the type of activities it engages in varies. While some focus more on organizing activities and special events for young people, others turn their attention to influencing policy and regulations that may impact their demographic.

Flemish youth council members are mostly current students or recent college graduates. By mandate, half of each youth council is composed of representatives of youth associations, while the other half are individuals without any organizational affiliation. The youth councils are led by a leadership team that consists of a chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer. This leadership team organizes meetings and puts together organizational strategies, project ideas, activities, and program or policy recommendations for the general council to consider. The core group meets once a month or more, while the full youth council typically meets five to seven times a year. In addition to the youth council's members, staff from each municipality responsible for youth policies and programs also attend meetings in an ex officio capacity.



Achievements

Youth councils in various cities have engaged their constituents in unique and creative ways. The youth council in Beernem transformed a trailer into a mobile radio station that visited schools prior to local elections and provided information about candidates and issues, in an effort to increase the political knowledge and awareness of youth of all ages, many of whom were first time voters. The program incorporated requested songs from the schools' students, helping to make the local election information fun and engagement in the political process appealing. Meanwhile, the council in Bruges helps to organize political debates before the local elections, so that young people can interact with candidates on the local ballot. Similarly, when the municipality was planning a skate park in Oosterzele, the local youth council used social media to collect feedback from young people and present design suggestions to the municipal councilors.

In Deinze, the youth council organized activities for youth mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. It established a hotline for the young people in Deinze to call or text if they needed to talk to someone. The council in Deinze also procured a mobile trailer that is being used as an outreach vehicle to talk to young people about the council's activities. Thanks to the mobile meeting space, the council can hold meetings in different locations throughout the community. It also has an engaging and user-friendly [website](#) and active Facebook page to keep its members informed and connected.

The council in Oudenaarde also developed a [website](#) to keep its youth members informed and engaged. It organized fun activities such as an online escape room and 24-hour radio channel to connect young people isolated during the pandemic.



Challenges

With a strong history of Flemish youth participation in youth councils, and long-standing collaboration between the youth councils and their municipal counterparts, many youth councils are not proactive in conducting outreach and recruitment activities and encouraging a steady influx of new members, and instead rely on youth associations to create a feeder system while remaining open to individual community members who are interested in joining. This has resulted in challenges to diversifying membership, particularly across socioeconomic and ethnic demographics. In select instances, councils such as the youth council in Deinze conduct mobile meetings in different parts of the municipality to reach a wider swath of youth, including minority and immigrant communities.



Lessons Learned

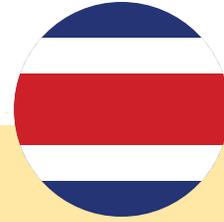
In Flanders, there are established legal policies, government programs, institutions, and norms that support successful youth council operations, management, and engagement, including a long history of national and Flemish policies focused on youth and youth engagement; a national association for youth councils that provides knowledge resources, training, events, and peer engagement opportunities for youth stakeholders; modest but sustainable financial support and administrative support from municipal governments to support the operations of local level youth councils; and federal and regional incentives

to encourage engagement between municipal policymakers and youth councils, such as established requirements for youth councils' feedback in municipalities' youth plans.

All of these activities provide an enabling environment for the youth councils because they connect the youth councils with policymakers; involve the youth council in policymaking processes; require that the youth council and decision-makers have a two-way relationship; empower the youth council to monitor local youth policy; enable financial sustainability of the council; and provide insight for council members into government processes by allowing them to learn how decisions are made at the local level.

Having an enabling environment for the youth councils legislatively, administratively, and financially is foundational for well-functioning youth councils. Through youth councils, youth can engage and work with the local policymakers, represent the interests and concerns of the youth in their community, and produce tangible outcomes. However, it is incumbent upon the youth councils and their municipal counterparts to make proactive adjustments to ensure that local government policies and activities are inclusive of and address the priorities of all constituencies.

COSTA RICA



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- National legal frameworks govern youth engagement and activities, including a government council on youth policy, a national youth consultative network, and a law mandating the establishment of a youth council and dedicated physical space for youth activities in each municipality
- The national youth consultative network, composed of a diverse cross-section of academic, political, and civil society representatives and one member from each municipal youth council, approves the national youth policy and selects members to join the government council on youth policy
- Local youth councils are composed of a municipal representative, two high school students, two members of local youth organizations, one representative of local sports organizations, and one representative of the local religious organizations
- Local youth councils are resourced and serve as policy advisors at the national level, with municipal level administrative coordination

Key Takeaways

- Local youth councils engage young people in politics and governance by contributing directly to the national youth policy formation and approval process and designing and implementing projects and trainings for the local youth in their community, including leadership development initiatives to prepare youth to work with elected officials
- Youth consultative structures have been designed to guarantee diverse, inclusive membership and effectively represent the priorities of various youth constituencies
- Nationally mandated financial and physical resources for youth councils ensure long-term sustainability, bypassing municipal authorities results in varying levels of political support from local government officials



Background

Costa Rica is a presidential democracy, where the central government makes decisions that are then implemented through responsible agencies and ministries. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports is the main state agency that regulates youth policies and programs, and the principles of youth policies and programs are explained in the 2002 General Law of the Young Person. The law aims to create opportunities and space for collective, political, social, and economic participation of the youth through public policies.³⁰ To achieve its objectives, the law enabled the formation of several youth agencies through which youth could participate in the development and implementation of public policies for themselves. One of these agencies is the National Council for the Public Policy for Young People (**Council of the Young Person**), a governing body attached to the Ministry of Culture and Youth. The council develops and implements public policies related to youth at the national and international level including the National Youth Policy.³¹ It is managed by a board of directors and chaired by the vice minister of youth, a specific ministry-level position for youth created by the general law.

Municipalities do not design or directly implement youth programs themselves; however, they support the local youth councils and empower them to fulfill the objectives of the [youth] law.

Another youth agency established by the general law is the National Assembly of the National Youth Consultative Network. The assembly is composed of universities, political parties, NGOs working with youth, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and a representative from each municipal youth council. It is the highest-level representative body of youth in the country. The assembly approves the National Youth Policy

developed by the Council of the Young Person and selects three members to join the board of directors of the Council of the Young Person.

The National Youth Policy is the main legislation guiding youth activities and programs in Costa Rica. The current policy is active between 2020 and 2024 and has four strategic objectives for youth: self-determination, active participation, economic autonomy in urban and rural ecosystems, and political leadership.³² The policy is implemented through an action plan which promotes the policy among state institutions working on youth issues.

In addition to the national level agencies, the General Law of the Young Person enabled formation of a youth council in each municipality (canton) in Costa Rica. These councils (Comités Cantonales De La Persona Joven) participate in the development and implementation of youth policies at the national level through their participation in the National Assembly of the National Youth Consultative Network. This ensures coordination and collaboration between national and municipal level youth agencies.

In the system created by the general law, there is not much room for municipalities to get involved in youth policies or programs. Municipalities do not design or directly implement youth programs themselves. However, they support the local youth councils and empower them to fulfill the objectives of the law. The local youth council is not an advisory body to the municipalities like it is in some countries, but instead it enables representation of local youth at the national level

(through the National Assembly of the National Youth Consultative Network), and it empowers local youth through projects that they design. The local youth council's relationship with its municipality is primarily administrative in nature (e.g., receiving approval for project ideas and support to conduct the approved projects, such as purchasing supplies for an event or using municipal vehicles for travel).



Structure and Operations

The General Law for the Young Person specifies the structure of the local youth councils and what resources are assigned to them. The councils are formed every two years in October and November and start working the following January. Each local youth council has seven members who are elected or appointed for two-year terms. Each council has a representative of the municipality (appointed by the Municipal Council), two high school students (elected by the municipal assembly of student bodies), two members of local youth organizations (elected by the assembly of the local youth organizations), one representative of the local sports organizations (appointed by the Municipal Sports Committee), and one representative of the local religious organizations (elected by the assembly of the local religious organizations). The member selection process is mandated to be transparent and should reflect the principle of gender parity. Once the council is formed, the council members elect a president and secretary at their first meeting, and then meet at least twice a month thereafter.

The local youth council's budget comes from the National Council of the Young Person and is managed by its municipality. The national council transfers a budget for each local youth council to its municipality to be used for the council's projects. The budget amount is determined in proportion to the population, territory, and social development index of the municipality. The council members submit their project ideas to their municipality to get approval, and only approved projects can be financed through the council's budget. At the end of the year, each youth council submits an annual report explaining how the budget and other public resources (if applicable) were used. There are many Costa Rican local youth councils that are quite active in organizing projects within their communities.

In 2012, the General Law for the Young Person was updated to add an article for establishment of local youth houses (Cantonal Houses of Youth) in each municipality. Municipalities build youth houses to provide youth councils physical space for their activities, including cultural events, sports activities, and trainings for local youth. In the law, the youth houses are described as a forum for collaboration between the municipalities and local youth councils.



Achievements

Municipal youth councils in Costa Rica have two main activities: 1) contributing to the national youth policy formation through their role at the National Assembly of the National Youth Consultative Network, and 2) designing projects for the local youth in their community. Designing projects and implementing them is a key priority for every youth council, as the council's budget is tied to the activities organized in a year. The types of organized projects vary, ranging from community projects to professional development trainings.

San Rafael de Heredia Youth Council is one of the active municipal youth councils in the country. Between 2017 and 2020, it organized many activities, including leadership training for the council members to learn how to effectively work with municipal leaders and gain leadership skills. It also organized several trainings for local youth on leadership and conflict resolution, how to create a résumé, and how to have successful job interviews. The council organized several art, dance, and theater projects as drug and violence prevention initiatives to support youth health and well-being, as drug abuse and violence are major issues for youth in the country. These projects aimed to teach local youth how to be leaders in their social circles, and how to express themselves through painting, dance, and gymnastics. Furthermore, they provided youth with a physical space to gather safely and peacefully while gaining self-awareness, and bonding with each other and their community.

The San Rafael de Heredia Youth Council tried to remain active during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue supporting the local youth. It has held its meetings on Zoom and has used social media quite actively during the pandemic. For instance, it organized a “Stay at Home Campaign” on Facebook to encourage youth to stay home and organized several virtual events including a virtual concert, a computer coding training to encourage girls to learn how to code, and a virtual workshop to learn how to compost in your backyard.³³ It also created a **YouTube channel** to support youth during the pandemic. On the YouTube channel, the council shares recipes and study tips, as well as videos on yoga and dance and staying active together.

The Atenas Youth Council is also very active in implementing projects to help its community, such as a garbage challenge, where local youth cleaned up local streams, and a planting activity, where youth planted 300 trees in the municipal forest. It organized these activities in collaboration with the municipality in order to promote a conservation agenda. Like the San Rafael de Heredia council, the Atenas council organized trainings for local youth, including a workshop on human rights, and training on how to express yourself through art and dance. At these events, the council members talked to the local youth to understand the issues faced by the local youth.

To support the local youth and community during COVID-19, the Atenas Youth Council modified its planned budget to purchase masks and antibacterial gels for schools and education centers. It also started using social media more actively to stay engaged with youth and provide social support during the pandemic.³⁴

Both the San Rafael de Heredia and Atenas youth councils use social media to engage local youth and get them involved with the council and have adapted to a primarily virtual format in 2020 due to COVID-19 challenges. Despite the pandemic, council operations continued, and local youth council elections proceeded on schedule.



Challenges

A broad challenge for youth councils in Costa Rica is garnering and sustaining political leaders’ buy-in and combating the perception of youth not being mature enough to make informed political or policy decisions or to implement policies and programs. Political leaders do not always see youth as valuable partners with important insight and capacity, and the general law does not guarantee the support of political leaders,

despite mandated structures, funding, and other provisions. Where local youth councils lack the confidence of their municipal leaders, it can be a major challenge to get support for their project ideas and implement them.

The main challenge for local youth councils in Costa Rica currently is sustaining their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite some excellent adaptive examples, youth councils across the country have struggled to organize activities, since most of their traditional activities require large in-person gatherings, and many councils have faced budget cuts from their municipality due to the pandemic.



Lessons Learned

In Costa Rica, there are many good practices for youth engagement in government decision-making. The municipal youth councils, along with other national agencies (e.g., the National Council of the Young Person) are intentionally diverse and inclusive, and they serve as important mechanisms guaranteeing meaningful youth participation in youth policies and programs. The General Law of the Young Person has provided significant space and support, both financial and administrative, for youth to raise their voices and get involved in policies impacting them. In particular, mandated funding has enabled Costa Rica's youth councils to operate without the sustainability challenges encountered in other countries. Continuous financial and administrative support, and the youth councils' mandated contributions in the National Youth Policy provide a permanent pathway for the youth councils to raise their voices, combined with the resources to turn their ideas into projects.

However, there is still room for improvement for youth engagement and participation in government decision-making. The processes for getting municipal approval for project ideas can be burdensome for the local youth councils and adds an additional layer of bureaucracy to the youth councils' actions, which can be discouraging and disincentivizing for council members. Moreover, if municipal leaders do not believe in the value of having a local youth council and in the contributions that the council can make to their community, they are able to hinder the work of the council. Thus, even in countries where funding and technical support is assured by law, buy-in from the municipal leaders is still crucial for local youth councils to fulfill their mandate. As demonstrated in Costa Rica, the most successful youth councils have members that are energized, proactive, and adaptive—by continuing to engage with their municipal leaders and show up for their constituents, even amid challenges such as a global pandemic, they are able to make progress in providing productive opportunities for youth participation in their community and in government decision-making across all levels.

KOSOVO



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- National legal frameworks govern youth engagement and activities, including a law mandating the establishment of national youth council and local youth council structures
- The national youth council is responsible for advising on the central government budget for youth activities and the Kosovo Youth Action Plan, as well as coordinating regional meetings with the local youth councils
- Local youth councils, open to youth community members aged 15–24, represent youth and youth-related issues to local government institutions and consult on the development of the municipal youth policy for their community
- Financial and operational responsibilities for each local youth council are devolved to their respective municipalities

Key Takeaways

- Local youth councils are intentionally designed to include multiethnic youth members and serve as a bridge across political and cultural divides
- Notably, local youth councils have fostered increased youth participation in small and rural areas where community bodies provide an accessible pathway to meaningful engagement without requiring travel to larger towns and population centers
- Devolved level administration of youth councils has yielded a significant level of cooperation between councils and their local governments, while resulting in varying levels of financial support that present long-term sustainability challenges



Background

With an average age of 30.2 years,³⁵ Kosovo has one of the youngest populations in Europe. Amid a broader context of limited opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, young people in Kosovo are often underemployed or unemployed, and many leave to seek professional opportunities abroad. Due to political, ethnic, and economic fragmentation and inequality in the country, which has persisted following armed conflict in the late 1990s and its declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, the risk of democratic disillusionment and social exclusion of young people across all communities is high. Furthermore, political parties are often slow to engage and sustain youth engagement in their ranks, with outreach to young people tending to occur just before elections in order to secure votes. Other government initiatives to increase youth engagement in democratic processes are frequently politicized and ineffective in providing meaningful pathways to participation. As a result, the opportunities for youth to engage in governance and participate in political and decision-making processes in Kosovo historically have been limited.

In an attempt to overcome these challenges, in August 2010, the government of Kosovo established a new mechanism for youth participation in government decision-making. Based on Administrative Instruction,³⁶ a legal document issued by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport (MCYS), and supported by the national Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation in Kosovo,³⁷ youth action councils were established in Kosovo. Per the Administrative Instruction, the council structure is divided in two: the Central Council for Youth Action in Kosovo (YACK) at the national level, and local youth action councils (LYACs) at the local level. The ministry also defined the responsibilities and procedures for establishing, registering, and operating the councils in Kosovo.



Structure and Operations

The YACK and LYACs are advisory organizations, serving as the voice of youth nationally and locally, and representing the interests of youth and youth organizations to government institutions. The guiding principles of the councils are equality and participation for all (Article 11, Law on Youth), and to support youth political development by providing meaningful opportunities to participate in government decision-making processes. The councils were also designed as spaces to promote inclusive participation for women, persons with disabilities, members of ethnic minority communities and other vulnerable groups who have traditionally been marginalized from political processes. This responsibility for youth inclusion is legally stipulated on all sides, across the national and municipal governments and the councils, and each government and council entity has lateral and vertical coordinating obligations.

The YACK is the central body responsible for representing youth to national government institutions, primarily the MCYS and the Assembly of Kosovo's youth caucus and Committee on Youth. This includes representing youth organizations' advocacy efforts toward government, offering guidance to government officials on legislation that affects youth, and participating in the development of a central level budget for youth activities and the Kosovo Youth Action Plan (Article 3, Administrative Instruction). The YACK coordinates regional meetings

with LYACs to inform them about recent and upcoming activities, and to solicit priorities and recommendations. Additionally, local councils are able to schedule meetings with and contribute individually to the central council's agenda.

LYACs are the community bodies that represent youth and youth-related issues to local government institutions, and participation is open to youth community members aged 15

Local youth action councils are legally obligated to contribute to the work of their local government by representing youth perspectives across all policy issues discussed in the municipality, not simply 'youth issues.'

to 24. Similar to its national counterpart, local councils are also registered legal entities that must adhere to the principles of nondiscrimination, equality, and representation for all. Every community across the country is included in the legal structure for the LYACs and is eligible to form a council. Upon formation and registration, each local youth council is obligated to draft a governing statute to define its internal structures and

regulations, including membership criteria and elections procedure, rules related to the structure and governance of its board of directors (the executive body for each LYAC, composed at minimum of a director, deputy director, and secretary), etc.

The LYAC Assembly is the coordinating body of the municipal youth councils and is required to meet at least annually to review the assets, liabilities, incomes, expenses, and council programs for all LYACs for the previous year, as well as to review and approve budgets and planned activities for the following year. Each local council's board of directors is accountable to the LYAC Assembly, and every LYAC sends two representatives to the assembly.

LYACs are legally obligated to contribute to the work of their local government by representing youth perspectives across all policy issues discussed in the municipality, not simply "youth issues." Through regular meetings with government officials, community organizations, and citizens, the local councils are required to participate in the creation, implementation, and assessment of municipal policies and budgets, including youth action plans and resolutions. The councils are also encouraged to plan, execute, and evaluate youth volunteer projects and other activities relevant to the priorities of youth community members.

The funding for each LYAC is the legal responsibility of its respective municipal government. Local councils are required to present semiannual reports to the Department of Youth in their relevant municipality, and the municipalities are obligated to cover all expenditures related to participation in the LYAC Assembly, as well as to budget for other expenses, considering the activities planned for the year and budget availability. In practice, it is up to each local council to secure funding through proactive outreach, advocacy, and planning with its local officials. At minimum, local governments are also required to provide meeting space for their LYAC, and to develop a municipal youth policy in consultation with the local council.



Achievements

All LYACs interviewed reported a significant level of cooperation with local government, not just in terms of fulfilling the mandates of the councils, but also in receiving technical and logistical support for activities. Two LYACs recently secured a unique budget line of 1 percent from their local governments for 2021-2022, following submission of a budget proposal to their municipalities and discussion in the local assembly. The local councils will use the funds to conduct advanced planning to develop and implement more complex projects in their municipalities, and therefore ensure better sustainability for their councils for the future.

Four LYACs interviewed from small and rural areas of Kosovo reported increased interest and engagement in their activities by area youth since establishing their councils, which is especially notable as geographic location away from larger towns and population centers can often be an impediment to youth participation. One local council reported collaborating with its community to organize youth-led humanitarian activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and successfully developed a schedule for youth volunteers to deliver food and medicine to elderly populations in their municipality.



Challenges

Almost a decade after the introduction of the law on youth action councils, several gaps have emerged in implementing youth council structures and translating the legal framework to a productive operating model. The most significant challenge is fluctuating levels of funding for local council activities, which are wholly dependent on municipal government budget allocation. Most councils receive small municipal grants for their operations and are not able to establish steady resource streams through established budget appropriations or donor fundraising. Even with an established legal framework and specific stipulations for youth council structures, in many cases, the form has been set without productive functioning, as a result of low municipal interest and investment.



Lessons Learned

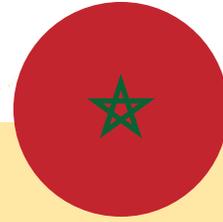
Kosovo's model for youth consultative councils provides lessons that can be drawn out for other contexts. In design and in practice, Kosovo's councils are true multiethnic participatory bodies and have been able to assemble youth across political and cultural divides. In other post-conflict countries with interethnic tensions, this mechanism can be effective in beginning to overcome entrenched barriers to societal integration. Engaging with youth presents opportunities to share and build out communal ideas of multiethnicity, reconciliation and cooperation. As local youth action councils gather representatives from all communities in a specific municipality, through this mechanism youth are incentivized to break stereotypes and cooperate, so they can collectively address the challenges and priorities of young people in their respective communities.

Additionally, Kosovo's LYACs have made great strides toward proactive inclusivity in their membership structures. The councils are mandated to seek representatives from all relevant institutions and organizations, such as student bodies, youth group community representatives,

NGO representatives, and more. In this way, the body is designed to capture a 360 degree picture of youth life in a given municipality. Having such a broad understanding is critical to properly assessing youth needs and priorities, strategizing for future steps, and coordinating efforts for their development across segments of the community. This coordinated approach can also provide useful lessons for donors and other stakeholders who work on youth development.

The most successful LYACs in Kosovo have been creative in their approach to achieving financial stability, by proactively lobbying their municipalities to institutionalize funding via the municipal budgets, as well as engaging in fundraising from external sources (e.g., NGOs and other donors). However, by legally mandating a defined budget, either from municipalities at the local level or from relevant ministries at the central level, all local councils can better achieve a measure of stability and sustainability for their members and operations. Additionally, Kosovo's establishment of youth council structures and coordinating efforts across all segments of the country is a positive example of enhanced coordinating power to amplify shared priorities and strategies on a broader stage. Further communication and cooperation between the YACK and LYACs can yield even greater advancement for youth priorities and participation in government decision-making and entrench a culture of youth council consultation on all youth development strategies, laws, and regulations at every level.

MOROCCO



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- Morocco's revised constitution includes two articles formally mandating the establishment of and outlining the role of a national consultative youth council to formulate proposals on any subject of economic, social and cultural relevance to youth and associative action, though the body has yet to be formed
- As part of national decentralization legislation, regional councils are required to establish youth councils to integrate young citizens' input into government decision-making and municipal councils are permitted to establish youth consultative councils
- Absent formal legal mandates, local youth councils formed in municipalities across the country are responsible for determining an appropriate structure, operating models, and securing political and financial support

Key Takeaways

- Local governments' broad authority to form youth councils results in ample opportunity for close collaboration and co-creation of the council mechanism alongside youth citizens and civil society
- Independently organized and motivated youth may coalesce around shared objectives and secure local level political backing, even where national level bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of clarity around legal mandates present ongoing challenges for the implementation of a robust council structure and network



Background

In 2011, Morocco saw a wave of mass protests across the country as citizens nationwide, led largely by youth, took to the streets to call for democratic reform and change. In response to the demonstrations, King Mohammed VI swiftly put forth a revised constitution, later approved by referendum, that, at least nominally, empowered the elected legislature and enshrined a series of principles for improving the government's responsiveness and accountability. Recognizing that young people had been at the forefront of the 2011 protests, the revised constitution and the subsequent reforms it ushered in include a number of specific provisions on youth participation, establishing a critical legal basis and framework for fostering young Moroccans' engagement. At the national level, Morocco's revised constitution includes two articles formally mandating the establishment of and outlining the role of a national consultative youth council to formulate proposals on any subject of economic, social and cultural relevance to youth and associative action. However, although the constitution was reformed in 2011, the Moroccan parliament did not pass legislation to officially establish the council until 2018. Since the passage of the legislation, little visible progress has been made on operationalizing the national council; as of late 2020, the council had still not been formed, and the media largely ceased to report on its establishment.

As part of its slate of decentralization legislation, the government mandated that each of Morocco's 12 elected regional councils establish three consultative bodies, including one on youth, in order to integrate citizen input into government decision-making.

The constitution also includes articles on Morocco's long-pending regionalization process, which the government began implementing in earnest in 2015. As part of its slate of decentralization legislation, the government mandated that each of Morocco's 12 elected regional councils establish three consultative bodies, including one on youth, in order to integrate citizen input into government decision-making. Municipal councils, meanwhile, were not legally required to establish youth councils, but were obligated to create a consultative council on equity and gender and were permitted to voluntarily form youth councils.

From 2018-2019, NDI worked with localities across Morocco to develop and build the capacity of consultative youth councils. Among the nine municipal youth councils that participated in NDI training sessions and follow-on work to initiate and strengthen the councils' structure, recruitment efforts, and ability to effectively fulfill their roles as advisory boards to elected local councils, the Azrou municipal youth consultative council stood out among its peers.



Structure and Operations

In partnership with participating localities, NDI developed an application for aspiring youth council members, and coordinated with local civil society organizations (CSOs), academic institutions, and local governments in each of its target municipalities to share the application among their networks, including through Facebook groups and posts on community bulletin boards. Local elected officials and NDI selected 10 applicants for each council, with care to ensure gender parity and political neutrality (members

could not be overtly affiliated with any party), diversity of geographical representation across each locality, inclusion of members of marginalized groups and individuals with diverse academic and professional backgrounds, as well as those with a demonstrated track record of community engagement. In Azrou, NDI met with municipal council members and local CSOs to assess the landscape and feasibility for youth political engagement. Tazghart, a local CSO in Azrou, played a vital role in identifying and recruiting the 10 participants from a diversity of neighborhoods and backgrounds for the Azrou youth council.

Each council subsequently established an executive or steering committee, elected by their fellow youth council members, consisting of a chairperson, vice president, secretary, and communications lead, and drafted bylaws to govern council operations, including meeting schedules, rules of order and debate, council elections, etc. NDI provided training to youth council members on how to engage their constituents using focus group methodology and online surveys. Participating youth councils developed focus group questionnaires, recruited focus group participants, and conducted sessions to identify and investigate youth priorities. Some youth councils also developed online surveys, which they promoted through their social media accounts. Subsequently, each council chose to form functional or issue-based committees, according to the priorities of its respective constituents, to analyze issues and develop policy recommendations for local government decision-makers.

In order to build cross-regional connections from the start, youth council members from Azrou met with their peers from other nascent youth councils and learned about Morocco's regionalization process and legal framework for youth engagement, allowing them to gain context on their role as youth council members.



Achievements

Building on the research that the Azrou youth council gathered through focus groups, council members received training on data analysis and policy development and worked to identify trends in the data, which they used to develop strong, specific, and responsive policy recommendations. In April 2019, members of the Azrou pilot youth consultative council presented their recommendations to the president of their municipality before an audience that included municipal councilors, journalists, and youth civil society groups. Based on their field research, the youth had identified three main topics—higher education and vocational training, youth training, and entrepreneurship—around which they centered their policy recommendations for the municipal council. As evidence of its success, the Azrou youth council secured a verbal commitment from the municipal president to legally adopt the council as an official government advisory body, and to implement the council's recommendations.

The youth council and municipal president conducted three rounds of meetings to follow up on the policy recommendations, discuss implementation, and consider the next steps on the president's commitment to formalize the youth council mechanism. During these meetings, the Azrou youth council shared its internal bylaws with the president and his councilors to demonstrate its internal capacities and commitment toward developing a sustainable mechanism. Furthermore, it established a timeline for the process to turn the pilot Azrou youth

council into an official council. As of early 2021, the cooperation between Azrou's mayor, youth council, and supporting CSOs remains strong.



Challenges

While local governments currently have broad authority to establish youth councils, due to a lack of clarity on new rights and responsibilities as detailed in the revised constitution, as well as broader issues linked to the central government's retention of control over resources, the number of functioning regional or municipal councils is still limited. Azrou is one case where youth have exercised influence in the decision-making process. Even in localities that voluntarily establish youth consultative bodies, because Morocco's Ministry of Interior must also approve the establishment of formal youth councils, the process can be lengthy.



Lessons Learned

Despite these challenges, throughout two years of work in Azrou and other participating localities, NDI found that the creation and sustainability of youth councils depends on the commitment of both municipal and youth leaders and can be further strengthened by robust CSO advocacy. The lessons drawn from Morocco may be applicable for youth and local government officials in other contexts who are looking to establish a working relationship and to initiate youth councils for the first time.

In Azrou, the willingness of municipal leaders to support the youth council was instrumental in its success; elected representatives were receptive to the idea of engaging youth in political decision-making, demonstrated genuine interest in the pilot from the outset, and established firm commitments to formalize the council and implement recommendations. The governing party in Azrou is well-structured and professional, whereas the political leadership in other municipalities is often less organized, and elected leaders exhibit less commitment to effective governance reforms. Furthermore, the advancements made in organizing the youth council in Azrou were supported by a strong CSO infrastructure.

Additionally, youth council members in Azrou consistently demonstrated their commitment through full attendance at trainings, group working sessions, focus group workshops and the youth forum. They regularly discussed internal strategy and next steps on the sidelines or during breaks at NDI-hosted events, and applied lessons shared by NDI's local trainers and foreign experts. Where an enabling political environment exists for meaningful youth participation, young people are the main drivers of their own success in developing and utilizing consultative mechanisms – there can be no substitute for intrinsic motivation and a desire to engage.

SIERRA LEONE



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- National government ministries and legal frameworks guide youth participation in political processes, including laws mandating the establishment of a national youth council and national youth policy, which is due for revision in 2021, along with a robust network of subnational youth councils
- Youth councils at the chiefdom, zonal, and district levels, open to any registered member of a youth organization, provide coordinated consultation to the Ministry of Youth Affairs and National Youth Commission on issues and priorities of youth constituents

Key Takeaways

- Well-defined hierarchies and reporting structures for youth councils across the country enable young citizens' priorities to be channeled through to national level policy discussions
- Proactive accommodations have yielded increased levels of young women's council membership, though entrenched barriers to equal participation remain
- Frequent touch points with government ministry officials have engendered close coordination on issues such as gender-based violence and COVID-19, though ad hoc resourcing and technical support present challenges for councils to meaningfully contribute at all levels of the youth development agenda



Background

In Sierra Leone, the issue of youth participation in governance has a powerful resonance because of its devastating association with the civil war from 1991 to 2002, during which time approximately 50,000 people were killed. In recognition that, on the one hand, youth political disenfranchisement had catalyzed and exacerbated the conflict and, on the other hand, the conflict had created a generation of excluded and disadvantaged young people, the post-war years saw several important developments aimed at addressing the specific needs of young Sierra Leoneans (with 8 out of 10 people in the population being under 35). The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports was established in 2003. This was later separated into a Ministry of Youth, Employment and Sports and in 2013 further divided into a dedicated Ministry of Youth Affairs (MOYA).

Two youth-specific legal instruments were also created. Eighteen years ago, one year after the end of the civil war and in the same year the first ministry was established, the National Youth Policy of 2003 gave government backing for the first time to the concept of youth as a national development priority. The policy outlined the roles and responsibilities of the youth themselves,

The post-war years saw several important developments aimed at addressing the specific needs of young Sierra Leoneans... two youth-specific legal instruments formalized the country's commitment to young people and their significance in the national development agenda, which was a major step toward developing sustained youth participation in governance

the state, and other actors, and created specific instruments for supporting and promoting youth issues at the district level through the creation of district youth councils (DYCs). Nine years later in 2012, a new policy was drafted.³⁹ However, it has remained a draft for the past eight years. A new National Youth Policy is due to be launched in 2021.

The second legal instrument was created through the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) Act 2009, which established

a commission with the responsibility of realizing the provisions of the National Youth Policy. NAYCOM's responsibilities include, among other things, creating employment opportunities for youth, initiating youth development programs, developing a national youth development plan, creating a network through which young people can access information about beneficial services, and coordinating the activities of youth groups. In the same year NAYCOM was formed, an act of parliament was passed that recommended there should be a body that regulates the activities of young people at the district and chiefdom levels.

These instruments formalized the country's commitment to young people and their significance in the national development agenda, which was a major step toward developing sustained youth participation in governance. However, the established youth councils report that they are not being provided all of the resources, support, or formal engagement necessary to meaningfully contribute at all levels of the national development agenda.



Structure and Operations

In Sierra Leone, a system of local, regional and national level youth councils was established in a tiered structure. Chiefdom youth councils (CYCs) are operational at the chiefdom level, with 190 CYCs nationwide, and three zonal youth councils (ZYCs) are run in Freetown (divided into West, East, and Central). Those local councils report to their district youth councils, with 16 DYCs nationwide representing each of the nation's districts. The DYCs report to the national youth council (NYC), which sits in Freetown. The NYC chairman liaises with MOYA and NAYCOM. Each youth council has seven executive members: chairman, vice chairman, secretary general, deputy secretary general, project officer, finance officer, and public relations officer.

Youth council members report generally working well with the councils above and below them, and they believe they are well structured for their context. The district councils work with the national council, NAYCOM at the regional and national levels, and MOYA through youth officers based in each district. The DYCs have regular conferences with the minister of youth affairs and other relevant directors. The district councils meet quarterly to discuss the successes and challenges of their respective area councils and how they can address some of the problems and priorities of young people in their districts.

All youth council members are elected to a five-year term and the National Electoral Commission conducts the elections. When a youth council member's term is complete, or they step down from their role, the MOYA advertises on the radio and in newspapers for interested and eligible candidates to apply. Only registered members of youth organizations are eligible to become council members. For the chiefdom and zonal councils, members of the local youth organizations elect the members. For district councils, members of chiefdom and zonal youth councils are the electorate, and at the national council, the electorate is composed of the members of the 190 chiefdom councils, the three zone councils, and the 16 district councils.

The NYC, DYCs, CYCs, and ZYCs currently all have at least one woman as a member of each youth council. However, youth council leaders would prefer more female council members and have identified barriers to entry for female youth. Youth council members cite the lower average education levels of girls as an obstacle to accessing and running for youth council membership. Youth councils have begun taking proactive steps to promote greater inclusion, such as removing the requirement to conduct a public address as part of the election campaign, as many young women have not had access to public speaking training.



Achievements

The national youth council and district youth councils have made strides in convening the youth sector in Sierra Leone. For example, the national council recently brought together more than 200 youth organizations in an online WhatsApp group, which they are using to collaborate, coordinate, and share knowledge across respective regions and districts in the country. Additionally, the youth councils have contributed immensely during the COVID-19 outbreak. Youth council members have taken responsibility for monitoring border crossing points, engaged with community members to promote the use of face masks and handwashing, and the national chairman has been placed

full time at the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC). More broadly, all district chairpersons are part of decision-making bodies in their districts. For example, DYC members are representing young people at district-level bodies of NaCOVERC in their respective districts.

Furthermore, the MOYA's youth officers, based in each district of the country, facilitate communication and engagement between the youth councils and the body. The tiered system of youth councils has made it possible to address development issues—the ministry engages the national council, and the national council then engages the district councils on the relevant issue. For example, there recently was a coordinated effort to address gender-based violence across districts, on which all youth councils had been engaged in and led sensitization on in 2020. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and other partners (including the United Nations Development Programme) have provided leadership training to the DYCs on a quarterly basis and have also provided other training, such as how to address gender-based violence and how to combat youth violence. The youth council members involved have valued this training, and these capacity-building opportunities build skills and confidence for members to develop, hone, and advance their advocacy strategies and engagement with government officials.



Challenges

Despite advancements, district council members report that young people's priorities are often not equitably addressed across all districts. They note that they have reported many issues that have not been taken seriously or tangibly addressed. For example, youth unemployment is high and a main priority for young people, as are high rates of allegations against young people of crimes such as violence and theft. DYCs are aware that some funds from the Ministry of Youth Affairs have been spent to create small businesses, such as farms and car washes, to boost youth employment opportunities, but this funding is only available in a few districts, so all districts are not benefiting from the program. In some regions, the roles of youth councils and their members have been highly politicized; for instance, in Kono and Karene, politicians were highly involved in the election process for the youth councils, which created conflict.

Additionally, a key challenge for the youth councils is the lack of a formal budget, with the councils lacking office space, materials such as stationery, and funds for quarterly meetings, transportation costs to allow for movement of members, and funds to provide a stipend or salary for council members. This is the case across the board, from the national level down to the zonal and chiefdom levels. The lack of resources also prevents capacity building for youth council members. The youth council members require key skills in order to fulfill their roles to a high standard, with the need for technical and administrative knowledge that members are eager to develop in order to improve their work. Some council members specifically highlighted that there has been no engagement with youth councils in other countries to learn from and share information.



Lessons Learned

Youth council executives in Sierra Leone cite their awareness of youth issues and their ability to act on those issues by creating opportunities and spaces to listen to young people and the youth organizations they serve as the most important aspects to their success. The structure of the youth councils in Sierra Leone is contextually appropriate for the chiefdoms, zones, districts and country they serve, and enables members to reach their constituencies and then to coordinate and elevate communications and priorities. The design of any youth council mechanism must be context-specific and established with consideration of the geographic and political realities that shape governing structures and impact youth in a given country.

As demonstrated in Sierra Leone, valuing the principle of gender inclusion is often not enough to ensure equitable access to the youth council mechanism. Eligibility and membership requirements should be designed through inclusive lenses, not simply to reduce barriers but to actively encourage the participation of women and traditionally marginalized demographics. Finally, in order for youth council members to be meaningfully included in decision-making structures at their respective levels and in their areas, they must be appropriately funded and supported with skill-building opportunities and technical support. This should include stipends or salaries for youth council members, office space, and dedicated funds for activities. Where such support exists, youth have shown tremendous desire and capacity to develop and follow through on initiatives to address young people's needs and contribute to youth development outcomes.

TURKEY



Case Study Snapshot

Legal & Political Context

- National and subnational legal frameworks guide youth participation in political processes, including a national youth policy and a law establishing local youth councils as advisory bodies to municipal governments
- Local youth councils are independently responsible for determining membership eligibility criteria, and are generally composed of current students or recent graduates of high school or university, with ex officio participation of municipal government representatives
- Local youth council funding is not mandated under law, and city councils are discretionarily responsible for budgeting and resource their respective youth councils

Key Takeaways

- Local youth council activity levels differ across the country, due to varying relationships with and funding received from respective city councils
- Robust outreach and inclusion efforts have yielded youth council projects that respond directly to a range of priority policy topics, including professional development training, dedicated academic study spaces, and coordinated natural disaster relief efforts
- Administrative turnover at the municipal level presents ongoing sustainability challenges for local youth council operations



Background

Under Turkey's presidential system, the central government makes decisions that are then implemented through responsible agencies and ministries. In Turkey, the main state agency regulating youth policies and programs is the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The ministry plans, implements, and monitors all youth services except formal education, which is regulated by the Ministry of National Education.

In 2013, the Ministry of Youth and Sports developed a **National Youth and Sports Policy** to guide youth programs and activities in Turkey. The policy was developed through the participation of various stakeholders, including an open call for universities, NGOs, youth and sports clubs, foundations, and young people to identify issues to be addressed in the policy. The National Youth and Sports Policy is a comprehensive document covering 13 themes including education, employment, democratic participation and civic consciousness, and culture. Each theme has a group of targets and defines stakeholders that should be involved in its implementation. It is an important youth policy document to guide Turkish state agencies and enable youth engagement and participation at the state level, but it has not been updated since 2013.

In addition to the national agenda, youth NGOs and international organizations working on youth engagement have been very active in Turkey since the late 1990s. The 1995 U.N. summit in Istanbul and Turkey's European Union candidacy in 1999 were significant for increasing local and international opportunities for youth programs and engagement. EU programs such as the EuroMed Youth Program and Erasmus Program provided substantial financial and programmatic support to local youth NGOs while the EU candidacy led the Turkish government to establish policies and regulations for youth engagement such as the National Youth and Sports Policy. Youth NGOs (domestic and international) worked hard to establish a national youth council that would represent youth at the parliamentary level and be an advisory body to the government on youth-related issues. Previous governments had made a commitment to form a national youth council but did not follow through. Similarly, the U.N.'s Local Agenda 21 Project, which started in 1997, led the government to establish local youth councils as advisory bodies to municipal governments. Subsequently, in 2005, the Turkish government included local youth councils in its new Municipal Law.⁴⁰



Structure and Operations

The 2005 Municipal Law is the main legislation regulating municipal and provincial responsibilities and activities in Turkey. This law mandates the establishment of local youth councils under city councils and services to youth. Although it guarantees youth activities, the Municipal Law does not guarantee funding for local youth councils. A youth council's budget is part of the city council budget and there is no regulation for minimum budget or resources that youth councils receive.⁴¹

Youth council members are mostly current students or recent graduates of high school or college, and the councils are led by a leadership team that consists of a chair and executive council. This leadership team organizes meetings and puts together project ideas for the city council to consider and approve. The leadership group usually meets once per week, while the

full council meets once every two to three months. In addition to the youth council's members, staff from municipalities who are responsible for youth activities also attend meetings in an ex officio capacity.

The membership to youth councils is voluntary and members are elected for a certain period. The duration of membership and eligibility criteria vary by youth council. For instance, the Izmir Youth Council's eligibility criteria states that the youth should be a representative of an organized group, such as a student club at a local university or high school, or be a member of a local NGO in order to join the council as a voting member. Individual and unaffiliated youth may attend meetings and work on council projects as volunteers, but they cannot vote to elect the chair or members of the executive council.

It is common for municipalities to allocate a physical space for the council at local youth centers, which are managed by municipalities and serve as gathering spaces for youth to interact, play sports and engage in various activities.

The resources received by youth councils also vary by municipality. It is common for municipalities to allocate a physical space for the council at local youth centers, which are managed by municipalities and serve as gathering spaces for youth to interact, play sports and engage in various activities. Municipalities may also have a staff position to support the youth council, as well as youth services that the municipality provides.

In addition to engaging with their municipal council, local youth councils organize various activities for youth and their community, ranging from professional development workshops to charity events. The type of activities it engages in and level of engagement of each youth council varies. The executive council members decide what project ideas to pass to the city council and may create sub-groups to work on project ideas.



Achievements

In Turkey, the youth council structure and operations are not defined in the Municipal Law, and each municipality has discretion in establishing its youth council mechanism. For instance, Tepebasi and Izmir youth councils developed their own bylaws indicating who could become a member (e.g., youth between 13 and 30 years old, representative of a youth group identified by the council), conditions to remain a voting member (e.g., cannot miss three or more meetings consecutively), how long a member can remain on the council, and election rules for the chair and composition of the executive council. Creating bylaws to operate enables these youth councils to have a consistent structure and constant inflow of new members.

However, Tepebasi's and Izmir's youth councils engage differently with their key constituents. The Tepebasi Youth Council set up a table at the youth center during the registration period for youth programs offered by the municipality. Here, members talked about what the youth council does and invited youth to attend council meetings. The council uses Facebook actively

to inform and invite the youth to its upcoming activities as well as meetings.⁴² By contrast, the youth council in Izmir reaches out to high schools, universities, local NGOs, and professional associations to inform youth about the call for applications for the council. It also uses Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups for youth engagement.⁴³

The Tepebasi Youth Council has designed and implemented various projects to address the needs of the youth in its community. It discusses new project ideas at its weekly meetings, which are open to all youth between 15 and 30 years old. Anyone can submit a project idea, even though the decision on which project to support and pass to the city council is made by the executive council. Being open to everyone helps the youth council come up with different projects and stay connected with area youth. For example, to address youth unemployment concerns and help youth with their job search and professional development, the council organized workshops on how to develop résumés and career planning, and it offered job interview simulations and trainings. It also worked with the municipality to transform the youth center to a 24/7 open study center with free drinks and internet during midterms and finals at a local university. The study center project has become very popular and has remained active since 2015.

In response to a desire for a civic initiative, the Tepebasi Youth Council organized a donation campaign with a local basketball team for children with leukemia. It raised money during a professional basketball game and purchased hundreds of new beds for the pediatric cancer center of the local university. The campaign received national media attention.

Izmir Youth Council members stepped up to support their community after a major earthquake in 2020. They joined the municipality's search and rescue efforts and volunteered for relief supply distribution work. The council members wore a council name tag while volunteering, which increased the visibility of the council among the local youth and the overall community. This collaboration improved the council's relationship and trust with their counterparts in the municipal council.



Challenges

The main challenge for youth councils in Turkey currently is sustaining their operations during COVID-19. Youth councils have struggled to organize activities for youth or even to meet regularly. For instance, the Izmir Youth Council has been holding meetings on Zoom and maintaining communication among members via WhatsApp since early 2020. However, it has been challenging to attract council members to online meetings to work on project ideas, and membership levels have dropped.

The overarching challenge for the youth councils in Turkey is sustainability, given the absence of legally mandated structures, operations, and financial support for the local councils. The Municipal Law mandates formation of local youth councils but does not guarantee the support of local policymakers nor any resource allocation for the councils. In many cases, obstacles posed by the municipal council can prevent the youth council from operating entirely and lead to youth disaffection with the council mechanism.



Lessons Learned

A combination of policies, regulations, and established norms support the political and civic engagement and participation of youth at the national and municipal levels in Turkey. These include a history of active youth organizations which receive support from international organizations and funders, and national legislation enabling formation of municipal youth councils and a National Youth and Sports Policy. However, the national legislation and presence of active youth organizations are not sufficient to create an environment for effective youth councils. The Turkish case especially highlights the importance of municipal leaders' buy-in to create a well-functioning relationship between the city council, municipality, and youth council. Once the support of the municipal leaders is secured consistently, the municipal youth councils can operate more effectively. For instance, the Tepebasi Youth Council established a clear communication with the municipal council when it first formed, leading to swifter approvals and stronger municipal support for its project proposals. However, when that connection is lost, due to changes in leadership or in the willingness of policymakers, the effectiveness of youth councils can quickly deteriorate. On the other hand, political stability can enhance and further promote the relationship and collaboration between a youth council; for instance, the Izmir Youth Council has sustained a well-functioning relationship with the city council for the past five years, as political leadership has stayed consistent across the municipality. The youth council members can join the city council meetings regularly, pass their project proposals to the city council, which then are reviewed and approved. The youth council also receives moderate but sustainable annual funding from the city council's budget.

Youth councils in Turkey have also been successful in their efforts to engage with the local youth in their municipalities through a variety of engagement channels, such as organizing live or virtual events, and meeting youth where they are, especially on social media platforms or in local schools. Accordingly, youth councils have achieved a level of trust from their constituencies and remain engaged with local youth, understand their concerns and issues, and increase the awareness and visibility of the youth council among youth. Lastly, youth councils in Turkey have enabled greater engagement and participation in council activities by granting completely open access to council initiatives and opportunities for everyone to submit and work on their own ideas and proposals, and this decentralized operating model can be useful in other contexts where there is limited legal mandate governing the structures and operations of youth councils.

ANNEXES

Annex I: Resources

Change My Community: Beginner tools for taking action, being heard and improving your world.

Confidence, Capacity, Connections: A Young Woman's Guide to Leadership: This guidebook includes charts and exercises to help young women with all aspects of leadership, from balancing personal and professional responsibilities to planning and implementing advocacy projects.

NDI Youth Guide: Guidance for Youth Political Participation Programs

Youth Lead: Resources and networks for and by young global changemakers

Youth Leading Debate: This guide provides tools for youth to develop political skills through the art of debate

Political Process Monitoring Guide: Activist tools and techniques for political process monitoring and accountability

NDI #Think10 tool: An innovative safety planning tool for politically active women

Changing the Face of Politics: NDI's innovative podcast series dedicated to accelerating the pace of change on women's political empowerment

Engaging Men to Promote Socio-Cultural Norm Change in Politics: NDI's Technical Guidance for masculinities programming works across these themes and provides processes and tools that can be used to raise awareness of and respond to patriarchal masculinities in politics.

Annex II: Larache, Morocco Youth Council Bylaws

The foundational document that will establish a youth council as a formal structure is the bylaw. The bylaw contains all the relevant information on the structure, the workings and the day-to-day organization of a youth council. It also serves as a reference and a guiding rulebook for procedures such as electing members, commissions, members' attendance and similar matters. In Morocco, the bylaw must be reviewed by all the elected representatives of the council once introduced by the president and either adopted by consensus or vote.

Below, a bylaw of the city of Larache, a small city in the north of Morocco that established and operationalized a youth council. Its structure can serve as a sample for aspiring youth councils, who should review and discuss the details of each bylaw provision.

Subject 103:

The Youth Committee consists of:

1. Eighteen young people obtaining secondary education qualification.
2. Four young people, including at least one woman, obtaining higher education, including graduate students.
3. Three young people, including at least one woman, obtaining vocational training.
4. Four young people, including at least one woman, from the House of Youth Council.

Subject 104:

It is limited to the total number of representatives of the Youth Council based on the regulations reached by the group of representatives of the above-mentioned institutions which are entrusted with selecting representatives of these institutions with how to ensure the realization of the principle of parity and the requirement of academic excellence and excellence component of democracy.

Subject 105:

Every young man and woman has the right to gain membership to the local youth council, provided the following eligibility conditions:

- To be at least 16 years of age and no more than 25 years of age
- To abide by the purposes and principles of the local Youth Council stipulated the provisions of its rules of procedure
- Be a resident in the city of Larache
- To be affiliated with one or more of the institutions described above.

Subject 106:

Membership ends of the youth group of the Council in the following cases and circumstances:

- If the age of a member exceeds the legal affiliation of the membership of the Council, whereby the member must provide resignation to the Council two weeks before reaching the age of twenty-six
- Administrative resignation of the Council
- A loss of the membership conditions set forth the provisions of the internal procedure of the Council

Subject 107:

Youth local council seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Raise awareness of young people by means and methods of democratic governance practices
2. Show young people the various procedural aspects of electoral processes and the management of local affairs
3. Develop abilities in leadership and give them entirely positive, the opportunity to exercise leadership functions
4. Define the role of youth in local government bodies and their functions and their relationship with citizens
5. Provide a forum for young people to express their opinions and aspirations and interests, and allow them to identify the problems facing young people and to encourage volunteer work to contribute to the development of society.

Subject 108:

Youth Council will hold a meeting during two sessions per year, which is devoted to the study of youth issues and the needs of these groups. At the invitation of its President, the Council may call for a meeting whenever necessary, so necessitated by two-thirds of its members who must be recalled at least 10 days before the date of the meeting as attached to the agenda.

Subject 109:

- Office of the Council and the President of the Collective of three deputies and decision, and committees composed according to the needs of young people with the need to respect the principle of equal sharing.
- Chairman of the Youth Council and his deputies are elected and scheduled according to the modalities of which are elected by the heads of the standing committees.

Subject 110:

Youth meetings are considered a valid collective board in the presence of half of its members. If this is not possible, quorum shall be postponed until one hour after the scheduled time of the meeting, at which time the meeting is valid whatever the number of attendees.

Subject 111:

Youth Council meetings are not open to the public.

Subject 112:

The President of the Youth Council may invite experienced individuals and all those who believe that it is useful for expressing an opinion on the issues of young people to attend if additional input would be valuable in adopting the appropriate decision on the issue before the Council.

Subject 113:

The Youth Council expresses its opinion at the request of the head of a group of Larache or from the Community Council on issues and projects related to youth and higher education, secondary and vocational, and all issues pertaining to youth. The Youth Council collects data that are relevant to these fields in order to study and prepare recommendations on them and lifting the head of the group.

Part IX

Participatory mechanisms for dialogue and consultation

Subject 114:

Pursuant to the provisions of Article 119 of the Law of communes, the Community Council must provide participatory mechanisms for dialogue and consultation to enable citizens and associations to contribute to the preparation of the work program of the group.

Subject 115:

The President of the Community Council, in cooperation with the members of the Bureau, hold public meetings at least once per year with citizens and business leaders, and two meetings with associations of civil society for the study of general topics within the terms of reference of the group and to seek their opinions on them, and have the duty to inform citizens concerned by programs of development of their completion or process of completion. These meetings regulate the initiative of the President of the Council or the group of actors involved or by bodies representing citizens and citizens. The President of the Council of the group that calls for the heads of the standing committees concerned or their deputies or the head of equality bodies, must provide equal opportunities and an inclusive gender approach to attend these sessions.

Subject 116:

The Chair of the Community Council determines the location and date and time of the convening of this meeting, and directs the call to the parties concerned will be suspended and the date of the meeting at the headquarters of the group of ten At least 10 days prior to take place, the President of the Community Council of the region tells workers to the venue of the meeting and its subject.

Subject 117:

Community members can attend these meetings, the Council, appointed by the President of the Community Council, a member or a group staff to prepare a report on the work of this meeting and its recommendations.

Subject 118:

The President of the Council groups offer meetings and reports of the meetings referred to in the above material, the Bureau of the Council for inclusion in the agenda of the pro sessions of the group for deliberation.

Subject 119:

Meetings cannot referred to the above material political or electoral character, or be at the request of a party or a party association or union. The members of the Council shall bear about their actions committed during the meetings mentioned. Also, these meetings merely preparatory work can not be challenged in its records.

Annex III: Do No Harm, Conflict Sensitivity and Safeguarding

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of democracy as groups and individuals with different interests, perspectives and needs compete for resources, power and status. As such, every country has conflict cleavages. However, it is a hallmark of democratic strength and resilience when a country's institutions, processes and norms are committed to the non-violent resolution of social conflict and when it drives political and social evolution, including movements for greater justice and peace.

NDI's work builds the capacity of institutions and civil society to manage political competition and conflict through democratic norms and processes. This work is focused on dismantling or reforming the systems of political and social exclusion that are often at the heart of societal conflict, which can lead to violent conflict.

Any intervention, by virtue of its attempt to change the status quo, has the potential to create or exacerbate conflict dynamics. However, democracy and governance programming that is sensitive to conflict dynamics can have profound democracy and peace effects. As such, NDI integrates Do No Harm (avoiding unintended consequences and negative conflict outcomes), conflict sensitivity (an understanding of how democracy and governance programs can play into conflict dynamics), and safeguarding (promoting the health, well-being, and rights of individuals to live free from abuse, especially children, young people, and members of other vulnerable populations) principles into programming. This approach ensures that programs do not unintentionally reinforce existing barriers to inclusion, exacerbate underlying social or identity-based tensions, endanger participants physically or subject them to emotional or psychological harm.

NDI incorporates Do No Harm, conflict sensitivity, and safeguarding into the full program cycle: baseline/conflict analysis, program design, program implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This is an adaptive process and NDI consistently engages with partners to monitor and evaluate the political, social and conflict environment to make program adjustments in terms of Do No Harm as well as opportunities for peace and conflict resolution. The Institute also conducts training for staff, partners and beneficiaries on conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm principles.

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