



IPPF/WHR Spotlight on Youth



Youth Participation: Youth in Decision-Making Processes

Why should youth participate in decision-making?

The vision of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Western Hemisphere region (IPPF/WHR) is that youth should be empowered to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives, both in the present and the future. For this reason, IPPF/WHR works to ensure the sexual and reproductive rights of all youth, investing in their potential and their capabilities.

Youth participation is a key element in IPPF's strategy to address the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs of youth, and it is an important mechanism to design programs that are truly based on young people's needs. This participation is not just a right; rather, it is also a crucial element in designing attractive and adequate programs for youth and in offering better services to them. The participation of youth in all of the activities developed by IPPF/WHR—both at the local and global levels—helps IPPF/WHR to renew its ideas and to offer programs that youth need and use.

Youth Participation in IPPF/WHR

Youth participation can be beneficial both for organizations as well as for youth. IPPF/WHR seeks youth participation in all aspects of its work—from the design and implementation of SRH programs, to their participation as members of the Board of Directors. Youth are considered to be a key piece in the mission and functioning of the organization. A large part of IPPF/WHR's activities are carried out by volunteers from different parts of the region, and many of these volunteers are youth between 10 and 24 years old. The youth members work as peers in IPPF/WHR, as educators, promoters, counselors in communities, and members of the Board of Directors at the international level.

Youth participate in the programs and activities of IPPF/WHR and its member associations in different ways. In recent years, various resolutions have been approved to expand the participation of youth in IPPF/WHR's decision-making bodies and to encourage the member associations to incorporate young people in their boards of directors. In 1997, Resolution 22/97 encouraged the associations in the region to send a youth delegate to the meetings of the Regional Council of the Western Hemisphere. In 1998, IPPF adopted new bylaws to regulate the governing structure and the role of volunteers. These require that at least one

young person (under 25 years old at the time of election) be one of the nine members of the Board of Directors of each region and one of the five representatives that each region sends to the IPPF Governing Council.

Furthermore, in 1998, a group of youth from different parts of the world produced the worldwide IPPF Youth Manifesto, which reflects those aspects that young people consider to be essential to satisfying their needs and rights in relation to SRH. The rights of youth to participate in the planning of youth programs, to participate in meetings and seminars, and to influence the governing process through the appropriate means, are mentioned among the fundamental rights of youth as sexual beings.

In 2001, the IPPF Governing Council in London revised the youth representation in the regional Boards of Directors with the objective of institutionalizing 20% youth participation in these governing bodies of the Federation. Finally, in 2002, the Regional Council of the Western Hemisphere approved Resolution 7/2002, which similarly encourages its member associations to have 20% youth membership on their Board of Directors and to integrate youth as associates of the organization. The main objective of these decisions is for each organization to have at least one young member in its Board of Directors. Gradually, the Boards of Directors of the member associations are incorporating youth in their ranks and including a youth member as a substitute delegate.

Experiences of Youth Members

To date, almost half of the IPPF/WHR member associations have young people on their boards of Directors. The following are testimonies of youth members from the boards of Directors from Colombia, Mexico and Paraguay.

“I think that an important lesson for the organization is that young people can be an active part of the decision-making process in all aspects of the association, and not only in youth programs, without having to behave like adults or put aside our perspectives as youth. The most important point is that the members of the Board of Director should be conscious of the fact that the young person is not familiar with some of the topics that are addressed in the Board, such as budgets, donors, the situation of the organization in the social context, the role and participation of the organization in IPPF, among others, and it is therefore

necessary to hold a talk that will inform the young person about these aspects, and this will make the young person's attendance in the meetings more productive."

—*Marcela Rueda, youth member of the Board of Directors, PROFAMILIA Colombia*

"Having a space to discuss and analyze the problems and needs of young people gives us the opportunity to make decisions and present certain recommendations or lines of action to face these problems and/or needs. In other words, we no longer allow the 'experts' to decide what is best or convenient for young people. We handle this instead and we provide the institution, its work, and its mission with a fresh and youthful perspective.

"Young people are NOT a problem group, as some have thought; in fact, we constitute a very valuable resource for the economic, political, social and cultural development of the country. And knowing this, appropriating this idea, definitely DOES motivate us to continue participating in a program where our ideas and opinions are taken into consideration."

—*Héctor Alexis Hernández, member of the Youth Committee, MEXFAM Mexico*

"Being part of a Council is a great responsibility, a challenge for someone my age; in some cases, it implies small sacrifices, which are amply compensated through recognition and the fruit of the work. It is important to remember that youth and capability are not mutually exclusive. The young person should be able and prepared to understand the organization, the responsibilities and faculties needed, and the importance of his or her intervention and decisions.

"The fact that the young person is tied to the organization to a greater extent through the youth programs guarantees good performance and commitment. If this is complemented with a system to supervise and provide feedback from peers, it is possible to guarantee representativeness and add a dose of democracy to the youth representation.

"The best way to achieve participation at the regional level is starting from the bottom, from each organization, and climbing up to the regional and global levels."

—*Karen Rivas, youth member of the Board of Directors, CEPEP, Paraguay*

STEPS TO FOLLOW

- *Integrate youth in project design, planning, implementation and evaluation.* Young people must actively participate in the organization's processes, understanding that the right to participation is framed within sexual and reproductive rights. Participation means including youth as peer educators and in project planning, training, implementation and evaluation.
- *Ensure that the organizations and youth are prepared to collaborate.* Organizations, including the adult members of the Board of Directors, and youth should jointly identify objectives and expectations for the collaboration in advance.
- *Develop mechanisms for youth to familiarize themselves with all of the organization's authorities and staff.* Youth involved in programs should be familiar with the organization's principles, mission, vision and objectives, as well as the programs and services that it offers. This helps them to identify with the institution, avoids the disarticulation of the youth program, and sensitizes staff to the importance of youth participation.
- *Integrate young people as associates.* The Associates' Assembly is often the most important decision-making body of an organization. It is here where decisions are generally made about institutional strategies and priorities. It is important for young people to actively participate in this body, as they have the ability to give opinions on a variety of topics, not just youth issues. Young people should feel comfortable and free to speak from their point of view as youth, and they should not be expected to behave as a "mini-adult." Furthermore, the youth associates should be chosen by their peers through mechanisms that they design, thus guaranteeing that he or she is seen as legitimate by peers.
- *Integrate young people as active Board members with the right to give opinions and vote.* The next step is to include young people on the Board of Directors. At least 20% of the Board should be youth belonging to the organization.
- *Nominate a youth as one of the two representatives to the Regional Council.* Annually, each association is asked to send two delegates to the Regional Council, and it is suggested that one of these be a young person from the association's Board of Directors. The youth delegates can be nominated as members of the Regional Board of Directors to occupy the 20% quota assigned for young people. They can participate in all of the Regional Council's discussions and votes.
- *Nominate a youth to be a contact person with IPPF/WHR.* Having a youth contact in each association makes it possible to create a communications network where youth can share local experiences about youth participation in decision-making bodies. A youth contact can also seek feedback on his or her work and clarify doubts about IPPF/WHR and youth programs, among other things.



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