**OHCHR Intersessional session on youth rights**

**12 April 2021**

**Anya Gass (Plan International) speaking points**

1. Introduction

* Thank you for the invitation for Plan International to speak on this panel.
* Plan International is an international NGO working globally to promote children’s and young people’s rights, with a particular focus on gender equality.
* Through our campaign called Girls Get Equal, we are advocating to ensure that girls and young women in all their diversity are able to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes at all levels – from local to global.
* Over the last few years we’ve seen more and more young people mobilizing for social change – from climate change to racial justice to gender equality.
* Part of this is because young people are often excluded from formal political or other decision-making processes, and informal activism is chosen as an alternative.
* To begin, I wanted to share with you two quotes shared recently by two young women supported by Plan International:
  + - Imogen: “We can’t just be consulted then left behind in the rest of the process. We’ve got to acknowledge that girls and marginalized groups know our stuff about policy and structural change and what we need to overcome our own barriers.”
    - Greta: “I’m not here so you can check youth participation off your list… We demand that youth participation becomes a part of governmental institutions…I’m sick of not being taken seriously…I don’t need people to be happy about me having an opinion. I need them to take it into account.”
* What young people are asking for is *meaningful* participation. They are asking for their participation in decision-making processes not to be simply ad hoc, but systematic and institutional.
* We see that there are many barriers to ensuring meaningful participation. Girls and young women in particular often struggle to overcome gender stereotypes that say that girls shouldn’t be too outspoken or publicly visible. These gender-related barriers intersect with other factors such as ethnicity, language, disability, socio-economic status or education level.
* Compounding these barriers is the fact that policy- and decision-making spaces are not adapted to young people in all their diversity and we as adults are not doing enough to change our mentality and ways of working.
* I believe the UN (and its Geneva-based mechanisms) has an opportunity to be a leader in this regard.
* So I would like to talk a little bit about what this look likes in practice.

1. What does meaningful youth participation mean?

* So what does meaningful youth participation mean?
* One of the important elements is ensuring inclusive and safe spaces, meaning spaces that are adapted to young people (not just adult-centric).
* I think the important question we need to ask ourselves today is what needs to change in *our* spaces (that is, the UN system) to make them more responsive and inclusive of the voices and experiences of young people, including young women.
* A colleague of mine once used the analogy of a car. It has 4 wheels, each of which has important functions to make the car drive (steering, transmission). You can add a 5th wheel but it doesn’t change anything unless you’ve built important functions into that additional wheel.
  + - The idea is that if we do youth participation as an add-on, without important functions for decision-making built into it, it doesn’t change anything and remains cosmetic.
* This requires a shift in our mindset on how we do youth participation.
  + - It is about moving from mere youth participation and youth engagement to youth leadership and co-ownership.
    - This requires that young people are given real power: both decision making power and agenda setting power.

1. Current good practices

* I do believe that there is a need to reform our ways of working in order to facilitate meaningful youth participation.
* But there are a lot of things that can be done and are already happening today. There are numerous under-exploited avenues for engaging meaningfully with youth in human rights processes.
* For example, we are supporting young people to engage with human rights mechanisms, starting at the national level.
  + - Girl/youth-led CEDAW reports from Nepal and Ecuador, and the UPR of Sierra Leone
    - In both cases, girls and young people were trained and then were able to run their own consultations and draft their reports with the inputs and conduct follow up advocacy at the national level.
    - This approach ensures representation and diversity. It allows for engagement of many more young people (in some cases hundreds of adolescents and young people) from more marginalized backgrounds than would be able to travel to Geneva.
* You might argue that this is something that civil society should do, but Member States have an important role to play in facilitating this type of engagement in human rights mechanisms:
  + - Providing flexible, multi-year funding to youth-led groups, especially girl- and young women-led groups
      * Funding comes up again and again as a significant barrier for young people, as many funding opportunities are not accessible to them.
    - Engage consistently with young people at the national level in human rights processes, importantly throughout the entire cycle!
      * Pre-review: Some countries are already inviting children and young people to support the drafting of certain sections of State reports for human rights mechanism reviews.
      * Follow-up (area that is largely missing across the board): Meeting with youth-led civil society groups after reviews and HRC sessions to discuss recommendations and how to implement them.

1. What should change or what new measures should be put in place to ensure meaningful youth participation in UN human rights processes?

* I’ve just spoken about how Member States and civil society can better use human rights mechanisms by engaging with young people at the national level throughout the whole cycle.
* So what should change or what new measures should be put in place to ensure meaningful youth participation in UN human rights processes?
* Many things could change but, in the interest of time, I will give you three recommendations.
* Recommendation 1: The HRC should mandate the OHCHR to include a youth speaker at every HRC panel
  + - The HRC has made a lot of efforts to ensure gender parity within its mechanisms, including IGC with their gender parity pledge. We would encourage the Council and UN agencies to take the next step beyond gender parity, taking an intersectional approach by adding age and diversity to the gender dimension.
    - This is a relatively easy measure to put in place, and may be tokenistic if done simply to tick the youth participation box. But this type of measure can really push us to think differently about youth participation by encouraging us to see young people as experts in their own right (not simply to “bring he youth angle”).
    - It is a first step that may lead to broader change in other areas.
* Recommendation 2: Modify SP mandates to include an age dimension
  + - This is a very good (and also relatively easy) way to institutionalize young people’s meaningful participation in human rights mechanisms and processes.
    - When SP mandate holders are required to take into account an age dimension in their work but also consult systematically with young people, it means that their engagement with young people becomes ongoing and sustainable, rather than one-off or tokenistic.
    - There are already a few good examples within the Council over the last few years:
      * WGDAWG
      * SR on environment, who is now mandated to consult with children/young people
* Recommendation 3: Strengthen representation of youth in policy-making processes of the HRC
  + - One potential way to do this is through a Youth Delegate programme, where national delegations to the HRC include one young person, as some Permanent Missions are already doing. But it could be expanded and guidance could be developed on what is needed to make those programmes more meaningful and diverse, including how to ensure that the Youth Delegate participates in relevant processes on an equal footing with adult delegates.
    - Another idea in this regard is to establish an annual Youth Forum in advance of one of the regular HRC sessions. Again a number of elements would need to be in place to ensure that this type of Forum is meaningful, including making sure it feeds into existing policy-making processes and is not a separate/parallel space with no connection to the policy discussion. For example, this Forum could provide recommendations and language on specific resolutions that are upcoming, or secure commitments from Member States to champion certain issues or language during negotiations.
* I bring these ideas from our perspective, but at the end of the day, it is imperative that we take a human-centered design approach, asking young people themselves what *they* feel would be most useful and meaningful. They may have completely different ideas, and we need to be ready to listen to those and adapt accordingly.

1. Conclusion

* To conclude, we need to be bold and think creatively about how to create inclusive and safe spaces for young people within the UN and its processes, that address barriers related to gender, ability and other factors.
* If we are serious about promoting young people’s right to participate in decision-making, we need to be willing to cede our power to them and bring them on board co-leaders in decision-making processes.
* Thank you.