

YOUTH ACTION PLAN:

A unique opportunity to ensure healthy and self-determined lives for all young people



The largest generation of youth in history

Globally today there are 1.8 billion people between the ages of 10-24¹—they are the largest generation of youth in history. Around 90% of them live in low- and middle-income countries, where they make up a large proportion of the population. Africa is the 'youngest' continent, with currently around 60% of its population² younger than 25 years³.

1 United Nations website. *Youth and the SDGs* | 2 Ibid | 3 Mo Ibrahim Foundation. *Africa's Youth: Action needed now to support the continent's greatest asset*


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1.8 billion
YOUTH GLOBALLY


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IN LOW- AND
MIDDLE-INCOME
COUNTRIES


CHALLENGES

Young people around the world face important challenges, harmful social and cultural norms, and barriers hindering them to fully realise their potential. These include inadequate access to:

 quality education and health services

 sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

 decent employment opportunities

 opportunities to contribute to the political life

THE YOUTH ACTION PLAN:

A KEY OPPORTUNITY

By the end of 2022, the European Commission will adopt a Youth Action Plan (YAP), with the aim of ensuring EU external action contributes to youth empowerment, leadership and participation at political, social and economic levels. This represents a key opportunity to make sure young people globally can lead healthy and self-determined lives, contributing positively to their communities.

→ Drawing from DSW's experience working with young people, this factsheet outlines some areas it would be crucial for the YAP to focus on, providing concrete examples and recommendations.





“ Young people worry about going to health facilities because of fear of judgement from the service providers who are nearly their parents’ age, so they do not feel free to tell them about their issues and are discouraged from seeking out services.

This has led to a rise in teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among other challenges. ”

Kevin, Youth Champion, Kenya

YOUTH FACE MANY BARRIERS TO THE ENJOYMENT OF THEIR SRHR

SRHR ARE THE BEDROCK OF GENDER EQUALITY



In low- and middle-income Countries (LMICs) **43%** of adolescent girls aged 15–19 who want to avoid pregnancy have an unmet need for modern contraception⁴



82% of new HIV infections among young women in 2019 were in sub-Saharan Africa⁵

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Good health is the prerequisite for youth to thrive, attend school, realise their full potential, and contribute positively to their communities. Youth, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, face many barriers to the enjoyment of their human right to health, in particular to the realisation of their SRHR. Too often, health services, including for SRHR, are not appropriate and safe to access for young people, who risk being stigmatised and can face discrimination, e.g. when matters of SRHR cannot be addressed discretely. Youth often cannot access SRHR services without parental or partner consent and do not get adequate information. Girls in particular face additional barriers in accessing SRHR services due to harmful social and gender norms and stereotypes.

When youth have full control over their bodies and their sexuality, they are empowered to lead healthy and self-determined lives. Moreover, SRHR are the bedrock of gender equality: ensuring young people, in all their diversity, have full control over their own bodies and can decide if, when and with whom to have sex or children, is a prerequisite to achieving gender equality.

⁴ Guttmacher Institute (2020). *From bad to worse: the COVID-19 pandemic risks further undermining adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health and rights* | ⁵ UNAIDS (2021). *Young People and HIV*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Youth Action Plan, the EU should:

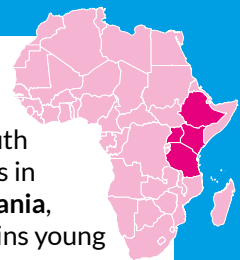
- **Promote universal access for all young people to youth-friendly SRHR services** that are equitable, accessible, affordable, responding to the specific needs and challenges of young people
- Through the political dialogue with partner countries, **champion the fight against any forms of discrimination**, including on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Work with partner countries to **eliminate the social and legal barriers that still prevent young people to fully enjoy their SRHR** (e.g. age of consent laws, abolition of Female Genitale Mutilation)
- **Scale up its support to organisations** (i.e. youth, grassroots organisations) working specifically to foster equality among young people in all their diversity.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT SRHR?

Click [here](#) and check out a useful resource explaining what SRHR are



BEST PRACTICE



In youth clubs and youth empowerment centres in **Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda**, DSW trains young people in in-depth courses to advise their peers on reproductive health, sexuality and contraception. In 30 years, DSW has built a network of 295 youth clubs and around 40 youth empowerment centres, providing training to countless young people and opening up new prospects for their future as a result.

The clubs also serve as a protected space for young people who have been victims of sexual violence. In groups, they can share their experiences, strengthen each other, and develop future prospects together.



130 million girls worldwide are not in school. In many countries, including Uganda, social and cultural norms still exist that reinforce gender stereotypes, preventing girls from attending school. This has to change!
An extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10 to 20%.

Peace, Youth Champion, Uganda

CSE IS KEY TO EMPOWER YOUTH AND PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

CSE IS CRUCIAL TO REDUCE SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Education and the key role of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Ensuring access to quality education is crucial to empower young people and promote gender equality. However, to be successful, efforts to promote education must fully incorporate Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), both through official curricula and in informal settings that can provide a safe space for youth to access relevant information.

CSE aims to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to lead healthy and self-determined lives, forming safe relationships free from discrimination, coercion and violence. A rights-based approach to CSE contributes to the advancement of gender equality and the rights and empowerment of young people.

The high rates of girls' school dropouts in sub-Saharan Africa are closely linked to sexual and reproductive health issues, including forced and early marriage, teenage pregnancy, HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). CSE can help prevent these challenges and contribute to changing harmful social gender norms and stereotypes.



In sub-Saharan Africa, more than **1 in 4 girls** gave birth before turning 18⁶



7 in 10 young women in sub-Saharan Africa do not have comprehensive knowledge about HIV⁷

⁶ UNICEF (2021). *Early childbearing* | ⁷ UNAIDS (2018). *Women and girls and HIV*



To tackle unintended pregnancies, we need more education, more awareness-raising. Young people are unaware of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and this needs to change in order for young people to fulfil their potential!

Habiba, Youth Champion, Tanzania

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Youth Action Plan, the EU should:

- Fully recognise CSE as a key component of quality education, which is fundamental to ensuring youth empowerment
- Through the work of EU Delegations in partner countries, work to ensure CSE is incorporated in national curricula
- Promote the delivery of CSE in non-formal settings, including through peer education programmes

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT CSE?

Click [here](#) and check out a useful resource



BEST PRACTICE

With the 'Holistic Action Project for young Adolescents' project, DSW is supporting more than 7.000 young adolescents in the regions of Kilifi and West Pokot in Kenya, to increase access to adequate youth-friendly SRHR information. The project is implemented in 14 school clubs, where trained youth pass on their knowledge to their peers and trained staff from the health sector support the peer-to-peer education. The project clearly showed the importance of including CSE in school curricula: in the 14 project schools, school dropouts declined from 172 to 51 between 2018 and 2021, with a considerable reduction also in dropouts due to teenage pregnancy.



Youth participation

A country cannot be prosperous and foster sustainable development without including the needs and wishes of its young people in the creation and implementation of policy at the local, national, and global level. Young people need to be able to be their own drivers of change.

In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, social and cultural norms make it harder for young people to actively participate in political life and decision-making processes. Because of harmful practices (e.g. child marriage) and gender norms, girls and young women face additional barriers that discourage or hinder them from contributing to decision making, or even from receiving the needed education to fulfil their potential as empowered citizens. The difficulty in accessing political spaces is even greater when youth are part of marginalised groups (e.g. LGBTQ+, youth living with disabilities, ethnical minorities, living in remote and rural areas).

In addition, political processes (global, regional, national, or sub-national) are often complex and difficult to navigate. It is key to provide youth with the knowledge and information needed to engage with the political space, so that they can meaningfully contribute by sharing their views and recommendations. To this end, it is key to ensure youth have the adequate skills to be involved in decision-making processes, in particular in the area of advocacy.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IS NECESSARY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

HARMFUL PRACTICES CAN HINDER YOUTH PARTICIPATION

GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES



“ If we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we have to ensure that youth are empowered to raise our voices and advocate for policies that ensure a bright future for our generation! ”

Charles, Youth Champion, Tanzania

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Youth Action Plan, the EU should:

- **Support youth organisations in providing trainings** for young people, to strengthen their skills in the field of advocacy, so to enable them to be engaged and act as watchdogs around relevant political processes (i.e. adoption of local and national budgets).
- **Promote youth political participation**, by working with partner countries to ensure adequate mechanisms and structures are in place to allow youth participation.
- **Encourage the creation of national youth sounding boards** by EU Delegations, to transfer the welcome initiative of a global Youth Sounding Board launched by the European Commissioner for International Partnerships to the local level.

BEST PRACTICE

In DSW projects in east Africa, we provide training for young people to become youth activists so they can draw attention to their needs and demands in their communities and in local politics. This enables them to advocate for more youth-friendly services and better implementation of existing youth protection measures, and to convince decision-makers to prioritise young people's needs.

For example, since 2016, DSW has trained and supported around 400 young people from 11 counties in **Kenya**, to strengthen their capacities to advocate for their family planning needs in the creation and implementation of health policies and budgets at county and national levels. Some of the young people trained by DSW now sit in their County Budget and Economic Forums, where they can raise their voices about priorities and budget needs for their respective counties.





“ No nation can enjoy a sustainable and inclusive economy if young people do not have access to decent jobs. Too often youth - especially young women - are not able to avoid unintended pregnancies, cannot access child care and suffer from violence such as forced marriage. They need to understand their rights and have access to sexual and reproductive health to be economically independent. ”

Yordanos, Youth Champion, Ethiopia

Promoting youth economic empowerment

If youth are to contribute to sustainable economic development, all aspects of empowerment, capacity building, and skill development must be taken into account. Providing decent job opportunities alone is not enough. In particular, investments in human development, including health and education, are key for youth economic empowerment and to make sure youth can positively contribute to their communities.

Access to youth-friendly SRHR services, including family planning and CSE, is fundamental as it equips young people to better understand their rights, counter harmful gender norms, and engage in economic and social life. When youth have access to health services that meet their specific needs, they can avoid potential economic hardship and prevent disease and unintended pregnancies, which can often lead to school dropouts. The promotion of SRHR is crucial to ensuring youth can be actors of positive change and contribute to sustainable economic development.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING SRHR AND EDUCATION, IS KEY FOR YOUTH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT'



RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Youth Action Plan, the EU should:

- Provide young people with training and capacity development to foster their economic and social resilience.
- Fully incorporate human development, including education, health and SRHR, in the youth economic empowerment strategies developed with partner countries.

BEST PRACTICE

The TeamUp project (Mityana District, **Uganda**) applies a holistic approach that integrates socio-economic, health, including Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH), educational and infrastructural aspects to empower 50.000 youth. It is implemented by a consortium of organisations which includes Action 4 Health Uganda, and aims at enhancing the cross-sector collaboration between different stakeholders from public, private and non-profit sectors. With the set-up of and support to Youth Empowerment Centres, TeamUp aims at ensuring young people's access to SRH services and to clean and safe water, and at improving their livelihoods through strengthening their agricultural and entrepreneurial skills, and through supporting them to access financial services.



