



IIMA – Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice is an international NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. IIMA is present in **95** countries where it provides education to children, adolescents and youth, building up strategies for youth empowerment and participation worldwide.

VIDES International – International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education, and Development is a NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, which works in 44 countries worldwide. It was founded in 1987 to promote youth volunteer service at the local and international levels for ensuring human rights, development and democracy. Through its network of young volunteers worldwide, VIDES promotes best practices on active citizenship among youth.

Suggestions on the topics to be discussed during the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, focusing on “Widening the Democratic Space: the role of youth in public decision-making”, to be held on November 21-22, 2016 in Geneva.

Key message:

Youth are called to be initiators of change in society; Youth participation is the key to unlock youth’s potential. However, true and transformative youth participation cannot be achieved without **continuous and progressive education and awareness-raising interventions focusing on human rights starting from childhood**, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Methodology:

Panel discussions focusing on specific sub-topics should give insights to the public on best practices and challenges facing youth today while participating in decision making, namely providing inputs on: (i) what is youth participation; (ii) how to fully realize youth participation; and (iii) what are the possible outcomes of youth participation.

Panel 1: Youth Empowerment – How to contribute to the full realization of Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law

Although efforts continue towards ensuring the human rights for all persons, young people are often left aside in human rights based-policies and interventions. They are not recognized as a key resource and driving force, but are rather portrayed as problematic, both locally and globally. As they are often perceived as the cause of such tension, they are frequently treated as a threat to security and the socio-political *status quo*.

On the contrary, the young feel **excluded from decision-making processes and deprived of their fundamental rights**. Frustration and disaffection among the youth has become more and more widespread worldwide, especially in terms of a generalized distrust towards their own governments and institutions. **Why should they participate in a society in which their rights’ claims are not recognized or taken seriously? Why should young people participate if they are not entitled to citizenship or do not have access to social and cultural rights?** In fact, the interdependence of human rights also implies the interdependence of barriers to the exercise of rights. As a result, young people often refuse

to engage with traditional political and social institutions and consequently may be more easily seduced by extreme politics.

Moreover, lack of trust and a lack of civil engagement have a **strong impact on society** at large. As highlighted in the Report of the Advisory Committee at its ninth session (Geneva, 6–10 August 2012), “[...] young people are an important human resource for development, given that they are fundamental actors in social change. However, to achieve development, the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is a necessary precondition, since it makes possible the political participation that will allow young people to effectively participate in development and social change.”¹

In this regard, **access to quality education** is a major challenge since “the lack of education affects not only labour, but also has a significant impact on the exercise of citizenship by the young population”² and, in the long term, on durable peace and reconciliation.

By their very nature, young people are called to be **initiators of change** in society. In continuity with the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, full recognition and implementation of youth rights is necessary to adequately prepare them to assume their responsibility in society. **The empowerment of young people in the exercise of all their rights will allow for their proper political and civil engagement.** If empowered through human rights, youth will find ways to help make those rights a reality for the rest of the society. The support of governments is crucial to create new spaces for youth as key actors for the promotion of human rights for all.

This panel would focus on identifying the **conditions** necessary to allow young people to fulfill their potential as human rights promoters and to fully participate in the decision making.

Suggested issues for the panel discussion:

- What **strategies best empower young people** as active and responsible citizens? What are the **conditions** that allow young people to fulfill their potential as human rights defenders and promoters?
- How to ensure **participation by all young people** regardless of their affiliation to political parties or social movements?
- What is the **role of young people in the promotion of Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law**?
- What **gaps exist in the protection of the human rights of young people, in particular their right to participation**?
- What are the **best practices** for removing barriers to the implementation of youth’s right to participation?
- What **concrete measures** could be adopted at the **international and national level** to avoid discrimination against young people in the exercise of their right to participation?

Panel 2: Transformative participation

This panel should address the issue of formal participation *versus* substantial and transformative participation. In fact, youth participation can produce positive outcomes only if given the possibility to constructively influence and change the existing *status quo*.

- How to **constructively impact the existing *status quo***?
- The importance of **intergenerational dialogue**: how to learn and benefit from the experience of previous generations? Is there a need to join forces?
- **Exclusion and radicalization of youth**: the role of social media in reflecting disaffection and disillusion among youth.

¹ See A/HRC/AC/9/6.

² *Ibidem*, p. 23.

Panel 3: Spaces for Youth Participation in all environments

This panel should offer examples of existing spaces for youth participation in different contexts and societies. From one context to another, youth participation can be shaped in unique and original ways in accordance with specific situations and environments (e.g. formal and informal education system, youth organizations, indigenous communities, and according to cultural specificities). Creativity in envisaging the most adequate and effective process for youth participation should be valued in order to multiply best practices experienced worldwide. For instance, the important contribution of youth to the protection of the environment in the past years could provide a great example of how youth can successfully use those spaces for participation.

Panel 4: Youth as actors for change: the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals

This panel should address the role of young people as privileged **partners** in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Thanks to their energy and creativity, youth can greatly contribute to the implementation of SDGs. Local and international **voluntary service** provides a best practice on how youth can actively promote and contribute to peace and development through concrete actions carried out locally and jointly by young people across the world.