unicef
for every child

Wave Makers: Pacific Youth Participation

Exploring what meaningful engagement really means

UNICEF Pacific

Contents

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Kirsten Anderson of Coram International for UNICEF Pacific, which managed and facilitated the research process. The author would like to extend her sincere thanks to Talei Cama, Yumiko Shinya, Debbie Gray and Zoraya El Raiss Cordero at UNICEF Pacific Multi Country Office for their continued, hands-on and invaluable support throughout the research process, and to Jun Fan for his supervision and support. Appreciation is extended to Cromwell Bacareza, Pius Attandoh and Marson Rosario from the UNICEF North Pacific Field Office; Nick Rice Chudeau from the UNICEF Pacific Kiribati Field Office; Khin Moe Aye and Blanche Tuileala Kioa from the UNICEF Pacific Samoa Field Office; and Eric Durpaire, Sonya Sagan and Rebecca Olul from the UNICEF Pacific Vanuatu Field Office.

Special thanks go to the following government and other partners for assisting with the in-country data collection and for their ongoing support for the research project:

- Philip Hereniko and Kavinesh Sami from the Fiji Ministry of Youth and Sports (Fiji)
- Maiaa Iona from the Kiribati Local Government Association (Kiribati)
- Minister Ngiraibelas Tmetuchl and Kiruu Kanai from the Ministry of Youth, Human Resources, Tourism and Development, and Sharon Sakuma, United Nations Country Coordination Officer (Palau)
- Andre T. Tipoki, Loretta Ta'ake and May Palataru from the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (Solomon Islands)
- Linda Filiai from the Office of the Legislative Assembly (Tonga)
- Rebecca Borugu from the Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (Vanuatu)
- Afioga Aeau Chris Hazelman from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Samoa)

A sincere thanks goes to all the youth, government and NGO research participants who contributed their time and shared valuable experiences and insights.

Executive summary

1 Introduction

Young people have the skills, creativity and insights to drive significant economic, social and political development within their communities, if they are provided with the right opportunities and support.

Youth participation is a fundamental right and should be fostered wherever decisions are made that affect youth, including in their communities, within institutions such as schools, and at all levels of government. The United Nations states that meaningful youth participation requires:

- Resources, in particular funding, education and information
- Institutionalization to ensure that participation is constant and formalized rather than ad hoc
- Accessibility, with participation open to all young people, without discrimination or coercion[1]

Not only do young people need opportunities to express their views, but those views must also be listened to and, importantly, acted upon to ensure participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic.

This report presents the findings of research into youth participation in the Pacific Island countries of Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. It describes the various opportunities for, and barriers to, youth participation in community and government decision-making, and examines the factors that support meaningful participation.

The purpose is to inform policy and programmes so they can support meaningful youth engagement and participation across the region.

2. The research

The objectives of the study were twofold:

- To conduct an analysis of the enabling environment for youth participation – including policies, laws, institutions and practices
- To map the existing structures and opportunities for youth participation within institutions, the community, subnational government and national government

The research involved:

- A desk review of key laws and policies relating to youth participation across the eight countries
- Consultative in-person and online interviews with 171 individuals from governments, NGOs and youth-led organizations across the eight countries, with the aim of gathering information about youth forums and initiatives and the enabling environment for youth participation
- Focus group discussions with youth in all countries except Samoa to collect in-depth data on young people's perceptions about the opportunities for and challenges to youth participation. Participants were recruited from community youth groups and youth organizations and initiatives.

[1] United Nations, *Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes*, April 2023, p. 9, available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf

- An online survey of young people's views in FSM, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The aim was to collect objective, measurable data on youth perceptions, including how much they feel they can participate in and influence decision-making at various levels. The survey received 709 responses.
- An online mapping form to collect details of the various youth participation platforms, institutions, forums, clubs and initiatives, including information about members, areas of engagement and funding sources.

3. Key findings

The research found that youth in the eight countries face considerable barriers to meaningful participation, and these barriers are compounded for those who are already marginalized or in vulnerable situations.

Only around a quarter of the young people in our survey felt that youth in their country were able to take part in or influence community or national decision-making. Opportunities for meaningful participation are even more scarce for young people from marginalized groups and those in vulnerable situations.

3.1 Youth participation at the community level

> "Each village has a youth group but it's not like they're decision makers. Youth are involved but they are the tool of what the *matai* [chief] tells them to do."
>
> – Representative of UN Women

Youth across the eight countries are highly engaged in their communities, typically through community and church youth groups. However, engagement in these groups does not usually equate to having a voice or influencing decision-making on important community matters. The hierarchical nature of traditional communities in the Pacific, in which youth typically have a lower status, can act as a barrier to meaningful youth engagement. Church and community youth groups typically involve youth collectively working towards a common goal, often performing physical tasks and usually directed by older members of the community.

The research did find some examples of meaningful youth engagement forged through community groups, and of youth-led initiatives that benefit the community as a whole. Youth were often allowed greater autonomy where community leaders respected young people's education and skills, such as their ability to navigate complex digital funding applications. A community youth group in FSM, for example, decided to address the lack of clean water in their community, and worked with the support of the community chief to develop a successful funding application.

Such success stories demonstrate that, when given the space to lead and with the right supportive environment, youth can identify important community issues and develop effective, youth-led initiatives.

Another way that youth can seek to influence decision-making in their communities is through access to community leaders and community decision-making forums, such as village meetings. Some of the countries have established roles for youth representatives in their community governance structures. However, research participants had mixed views about the influence of youth representatives on community decision-making. As decision-making is directed by village leaders, the degree of meaningful youth engagement depends on leaders' views and practices.

The results of the survey in FSM, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu confirm that youth play only a minor role in community decision-making processes. Only 26 per cent of respondents said youth could take part in community decision-making 'most of the time' or 'all of the time', and just 25 per cent said youth are able to influence community decision-making.

The survey also found a general perception that adults typically do not listen to the views of youth within their communities. Across the three countries, 64 per cent of respondents felt that adults listen to the views of youth 'not at all' (16 per cent) or 'sometimes' (46 per cent), and only five per cent felt that youth were listened to 'all the time.' Perceptions that adults listen to young people's views were higher in Vanuatu, which has youth representative positions at community governance level.

3.2 Youth participation in local and national governance structures

> "Elders won't tell us to come to meetings; they will just expect us to go. But, if we come and ask too many questions, they get irritated or annoyed. They want us to help and just follow suit."
>
> – Youth leader, Palau

Several countries have youth representatives at state, provincial and local levels, but these roles tend to have limited influence. In several cases, youth representatives are appointed by government bodies, rather than elected by youth, and in Palau, there is no requirement for the youth representative to be within the youth age range. Both factors may undermine representatives' ability to fully represent the views of young people.

Participation can be further hindered by a lack of confidence or skills, and by social norms and expectations. Youth representatives are not always supported with training to help them meaningfully engage in these forums, and the degree to which they are consulted and listened to appears to vary.

In countries with no established positions for youth in subnational governance, youth engagement is informal or less direct. Again, cultural expectations that youth remain deferential to elders may create a disincentive for youth to speak out or get involved.

National government

We found no formal programmes to engage young people in decision-making at a national level, although governments sometimes seek young people's views on particular policies. The development of the new National Youth Policy in Fiji, for example, involved extensive youth engagement. Ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliaments and youth takeover days take place in some countries but have little meaningful influence on national policies.

Nonetheless, the research identified several examples of youth developing initiatives that were directly inspired by their participation in national youth parliaments. The Fakaloa Community Organization, for example, which supports vulnerable youth in Tonga, came about as a result of one young person's engagement in the national youth parliament.

Survey respondents confirmed that youth have few opportunities to get involved in national decision-making. Across the three countries, just 24 per cent stated that youth could get involved in national decision-making either all the time or most of the time, and only 18 per cent felt that youth could influence national decision-making all the time or most of the time.

National youth councils

> "They know that if they talk to the president of the NYC, we can speak to all youth across Vanuatu through our network."
>
> – Representative of Vanuatu National Youth Council

National youth councils (NYCs) are important structures for youth participation across the Pacific Islands, advocating for young people's needs and supporting youth-focused activities. They often work closely

with the youth ministry or division to support community youth initiatives and youth groups. The Vanuatu NYC has been particularly successful in mobilizing support from youth across the country to campaign on important issues.

NYCs in some countries have been inactive for several years, following periods of insufficient funding and high turnover of youth office holders (who are usually unpaid). However, some of these NYCs are in the process of reactivation.

NGO youth participation initiatives

> "We want to create a space where all have a voice and it's not just one-sided. If everyone has the same kind of approach, we're going to see youth taking leadership roles in the community and organizing and participating."
>
> Member of Dreamcast social enterprise, Solomon Islands

Youth across the Pacific Islands demonstrated their considerable drive and talent through their engagement with opportunities offered by various NGOs. The research also identified some local, regional and national initiatives that were developed by young people themselves and are genuinely youth-led. These groups, which tend to focus on particular issues such as climate change action or human rights, demonstrate that youth have the ability to drive meaningful change. Pacific Students Fighting Climate Change, for example, is a Pacific-wide, youth-led organization established in 2019 by law students from the University of South Pacific. Initially, it campaigned for Pacific Islands leaders to take the issue of climate change to the International Court of Justice, and now also works to raise awareness of climate change and encourage climate action.

4. Barriers to participation

The ability for youth to meaningfully participate in decision-making and initiatives may be affected by age, gender, socioeconomic position, location, sexuality, gender identity, disability and ethnicity.

Social hierarchies based on age are reproduced in the youth space, meaning that older youth (those in their 30s) often lead youth initiatives, while younger youth are expected simply to follow instructions.

Girls and women typically occupy a marginalized position in community, subnational and national participation structures. This is largely due to social norms and cultural beliefs that view men as leaders and decision makers, and women as homemakers. These beliefs permeate participation spaces, limiting the opportunities for girls and young women to participate and influence decision-making.

According to key stakeholders, youth with disabilities face additional challenges when trying to access participation platforms and youth activities. Stigmatization and lack of understanding, as well as physical accessibility issues, can create barriers to full engagement.

Limited social acceptance and discrimination also present barriers to the full and open participation of youth with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) youth.

5. The enabling environment

Meaningful participation requires a strong enabling environment. Not only must the right spaces and opportunities exist, but they must also be supported by a robust legal, policy and operational framework, be adequately resourced, and provide opportunities for young people to gain skills, knowledge and confidence.

Our analysis of the enabling environment in the Pacific Islands revealed a mixed picture. We uncovered some highly supportive practices, but also several gaps in the key factors needed to support youth participation.

Laws and policies

Most countries have a national youth policy with a focus on strengthening youth participation, although these policies are not always effectively implemented, resourced or monitored.

Governance and coordination

Governance frameworks to support youth participation vary considerably across the eight countries. In all countries, there is a dedicated ministry, division or advisory board with a youth development mandate. Several countries have staff, typically at subnational levels of government or in regional offices of national ministries, to support the implementation of youth programmes at the local level. However, insufficient human and financial resourcing, poor accountability and a lack of coordination across ministries have greatly curtailed the effectiveness of these structures.

Resources

Common issues, which exist to varying degrees across the eight countries, include poor resourcing of youth participation structures and limited support for youth organizations. Small government grant programmes support youth activities in some countries, but there appear to be no dedicated government funding sources to support youth actions and initiatives in FSM, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu.

Knowledge, skills and confidence

For meaningful youth participation to take place, youth must be aware of their rights to participation and of the avenues and opportunities for meaningful participation at all levels. Research participants noted that the limited availability of accessible, youth-directed information was a barrier to youth understanding and engaging with decision-making processes.

It is also important to invest in youth skills to enable young people to exercise their rights to participation. The research did not identify any comprehensive, sustained, systemic programmes to provide youth with knowledge, skills and confidence to support their effective engagement, although several government and NGO-led initiatives are working to provide this type of support. Take the Lead Tonga is a youth-led NGO that provides leadership education and resources to empower the youth of Tonga. Meanwhile, the Solomon Islands Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs, which oversees traditional governance and leadership structures, provides training and workshops for youth in good governance and leadership.

Communication and technology

The research found that youth are increasingly using social media as a communication and mobilizing tool to support youth engagement and participation. Youth who feel unable to engage in face-to-face settings due to social structures and cultural barriers are often more confident participating in online forums.

6. Conclusion

Youth in the Pacific Islands are highly engaged in many aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life, particularly through community groups. However, many such groups are heavily directed by community leaders. In general, there is an absence of sustained engagement opportunities at the national government level, although ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliaments enable selected youth to gain important knowledge, skills and confidence in national governance.

While each country has certain elements of an enabling environment for youth participation, some gaps remain. Barriers to participation include social, age and gender-based hierarchies; limited coordination among key government agencies; funding gaps that limit the ability to support all youth groups; a lack of sustained initiatives to develop young people's skills, knowledge and confidence to participate meaningfully; and limited initiatives to support meaningful participation for marginalized youth and youth in vulnerable situations.

Nonetheless, the research found that, when youth have the necessary space and support, they demonstrate considerable skill and motivation to engage. With the right enabling environment in place, youth in the Pacific Islands could be supported to engage more meaningfully in ways that bring great benefits to themselves, their communities and their nations.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to strengthen the enabling environment for youth participation and to improve the opportunities for engagement in communities and beyond.

Develop further avenues for participation

- Introduce elected youth roles in government and community decision-making bodies.
- Enhance youth engagement in community decision-making, for example through youth meetings with community leaders.

- Ensure that Youth Councils have the resources they need to be effective, for example, by providing salaries for officers and elected members, and running capacity-building programmes for members.
- Promote young people's involvement in developing and monitoring state and national policies, for example via youth boards supported by national youth councils.
- Support a youth learning exchange, in which successful young leaders visit communities and youth groups to share ideas.
- Develop a youth leadership mentor programme, appointing expert mentors in key fields such as climate action, disaster risk reduction and mental health to provide potential youth leaders with the knowledge and connections they need to develop their own initiatives.
- Identify a sustainable funding source to enable a national youth parliament to take place every two years. The parliament should involve youth from a diverse range of locations, with an even gender split and specific positions for representatives of marginalized groups. National parliaments should consider NYP recommendations and report back on how they will be addressed.

Increase access to youth participation avenues and platforms

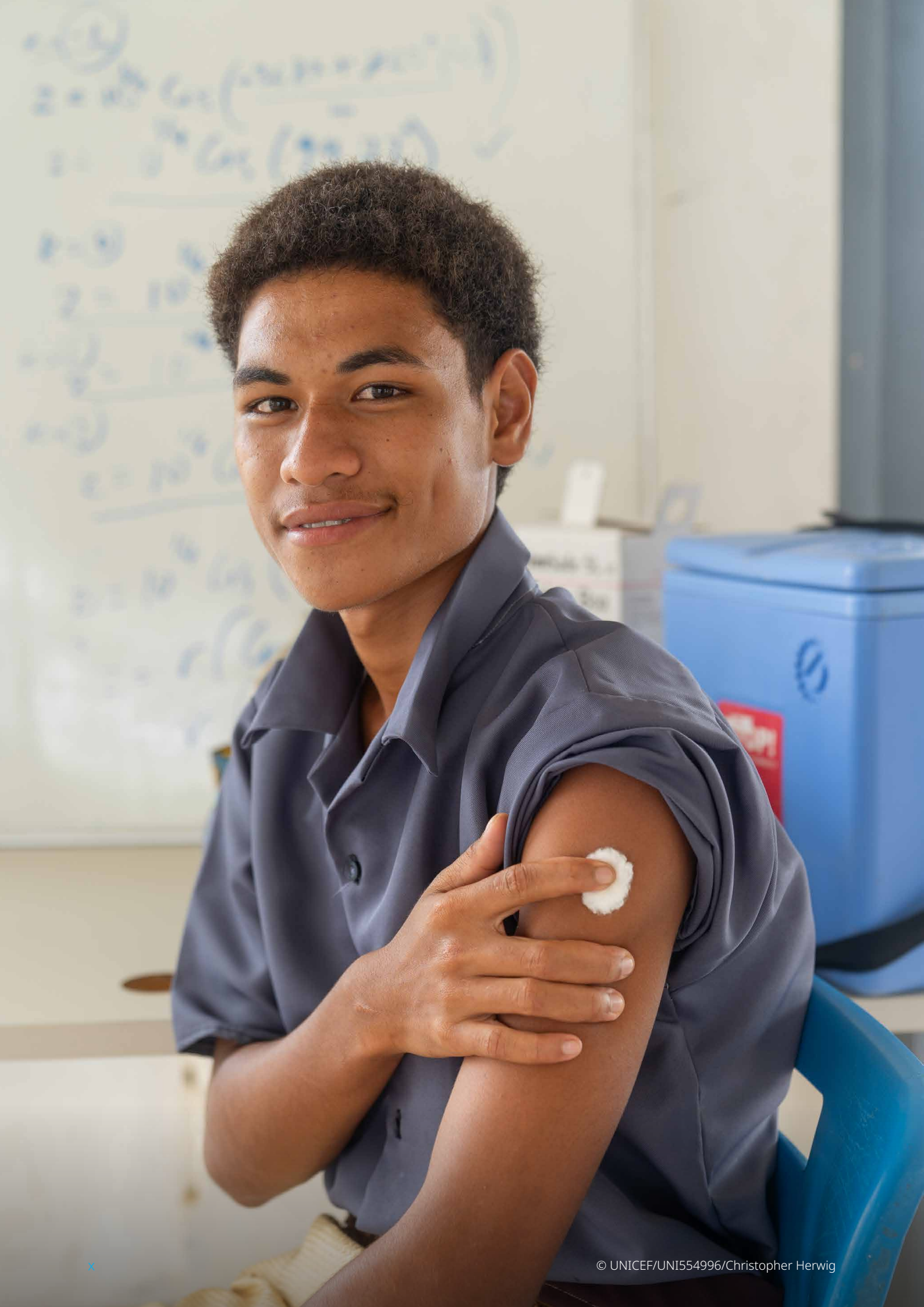
- Develop safe spaces for young women to meaningfully engage in decision-making at all levels, for example, through community discussion groups for young women.
- Support leadership programmes and mentoring for young women leaders.
- Develop dedicated positions for young women in national youth council leadership and youth representative roles.
- Provide funding and training to support initiatives developed by young women, youth with disabilities, those who have dropped out of school, and youth with diverse SOGIESC.
- Support youth-led initiatives that address barriers to participation faced by marginalized groups of youth.

Improve the enabling environment

- Educate community leaders and national government members about the importance of meaningful youth participation in decision-making forums.
- Ensure young people have the cultural competency to enable culturally appropriate methods of engagement at the village level.
- Develop a multi-sector national youth policy and a fully costed implementation plan.
- Ensure national youth ministries and divisions are adequately resourced and appoint youth officers to support community-based youth-led initiatives and actions.
- Provide a bottom-up funding mechanism, potentially delivered through youth officers, to support youth-led initiatives.
- Develop a central register of youth groups, youth service providers, and funding and support opportunities, in order to coordinate programmes and signpost youth groups to support.
- Support young people to pursue training in leadership, programme development, technical knowledge and technology skills.

Acronyms

AYO	Assistant Youth Officer
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DOHSA	Department of Health and Social Affairs (FSM)
FGD	Focus group discussion
KII	Key informant interview
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs (Tonga)
MWYCFA	Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (Solomon Islands)
MYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports (Fiji)
MYSD	Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (Vanuatu)
NGO	Non-government organization
NYC	National Youth Council
NYP	National Youth Policy
PIC	Pacific Island countries
PYDF	Pacific Youth Development Forum
UNICEF	United National International Children's Emergency Fund
YO	Youth Officer



© UNICEF/UNI554996/Christopher Herwig

1. Introduction

Youth[2] comprise a large proportion of the population in the Pacific Islands, and have the skills and enthusiasm to drive economic, social and political development in their countries, provided the right environment and opportunities exist. To realize the immense potential of youth across the Pacific, it is crucial that a strong enabling environment is in place to support youth to meaningfully engage in decisions that affect them; to direct and lead initiatives that can improve their lives; and to drive social, economic and cultural development in their communities and nations. A recent United Nations briefing emphasized the importance of involving youth in decision-making: "Young people are deeply concerned about the future and frequently demonstrate a greater willingness to think big, innovatively and with a long-term perspective – a clear synergy with efforts needed to secure the rights and interests of future generations."[3]

Participation is a fundamental human right that should be afforded to youth regardless of its impact. Nonetheless, it is widely recognized that youth participation also brings a range of benefits to youth, their communities, institutions and society more broadly. Meaningful participation provides an important opportunity for youth to gain knowledge, skills and confidence; promotes their capacity for civic engagement, decision-making and conflict resolution; and can foster qualities such as tolerance and respect.[4] It also enables young people to "take ownership of their issues and lives"[5] and feel "better connected to family, friends and their community and have better health and mental health status as adults".[6]

Ensuring that young people are able to speak up and have their concerns heard and acted on is also important in developing more informed and better targeted policies and programmes. Youth can play an important role in strengthening their communities, finding innovative solutions, ensuring greater accountability of duty bearers, and building strong democratic societies.[7] The value of listening to young people's voices in the context of addressing climate change and environmental threats was recently recognized by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.[8] The Committee noted that child participation can enhance the quality of environmental solutions and provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of response mechanisms.[9]

Despite the importance of youth participation, youth across the world continue to face considerable barriers to meaningful participation, and these barriers are compounded for those young people who are already marginalized or in vulnerable situations. Key obstacles include:

- tokenism, in which youth consultation leads to no discernible impact on decisions
- limited feedback, meaning young people do not know what their contributions have achieved
- limited access to participation forums or limited opportunities for certain groups, for example, youth with disabilities

---

2 This report uses the definition of youth that is generally used in Fiji (15–35 years). This is wider than the international definition (15–24 years). Please see section 1.2 for further details.

3 United Nations, *Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes*, April 2023, p. 9, available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf

4 UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation,* p. 3.

5 Vakoti, P, *Mapping the landscape of youth participation in Fiji*, Australian National University, SSGM Paper, 2012/06.

6 Burns et. al. in Vakoti, P, *Mapping the landscape of youth participation in Fiji*, Australian National University, SSGM Paper, 2012/06.

7 UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation,* p. 3.

8 CRC Committee, General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, 22 August 2023, CRC/C/GC/26, para. 28.

9 CRC Committee, General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, 22 August 2023, CRC/C/GC/26, para. 26.

- the use of ad hoc, one-off activities rather than sustained dialogue
- marginalization of youth voices where participation is not integrated into governance systems
- limited sustainability, due to short-term funding of youth participation actions[10]

Not only do these barriers create practical challenges for youth, but they also lead to feelings of exclusion, frustration and dissatisfaction, and disengagement from political life.[11]

Meaningful youth participation requires strong efforts on the part of governments and other duty bearers. Adults and societies must actively create spaces in which children and young people can be empowered to participate. However, space alone is not enough for participation to be meaningful.[12] Decision makers must also ensure that participation is open to all youth, including those who may otherwise be excluded from participation processes. Youth participation should also:

- be underpinned by a strong legal, policy and operational framework
- be adequately resourced
- provide opportunities for youth and those who work with them to gain the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to enable youth participation
- be supported and guided from within social and governance structures

1.1 Purpose and objectives

This report presents the findings of a mapping of the landscape for youth participation and an analysis of the enabling environment to support youth participation in eight countries in the Pacific Islands: Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. It describes the various opportunities for, and barriers to, youth participation, and examines different aspects of the enabling environment The purpose is to inform policy and programmes so they can support meaningful youth participation in the region.

There was previously very limited knowledge about the extent to which Pacific Island countries ensure a positive enabling environment for youth participation, and there is no central repository for information on different youth forums, avenues for participation and youth-driven initiatives. The specific objectives of the research were therefore to:

- conduct an analysis of the enabling environment for youth participation (policies, laws, institutions, practices, etc.) at different levels of decision-making
- map the existing child, adolescent and youth networks, platforms and initiatives

This report presents a synthesis of the findings, identifying common themes across the eight countries and drawing lessons from a comparative analysis. It is hoped that the findings will offer helpful insights into opportunities and barriers to meaningful youth participation in the Pacific region, and guidance on the steps needed to strengthen the enabling environment.

[10] Tidstall, E Kay M, 'The transformation of participation? Exploring the potential of "transformative participation" for theory and practice around children and young people's participation', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 2023 3(*2*), pp.183 – 193.

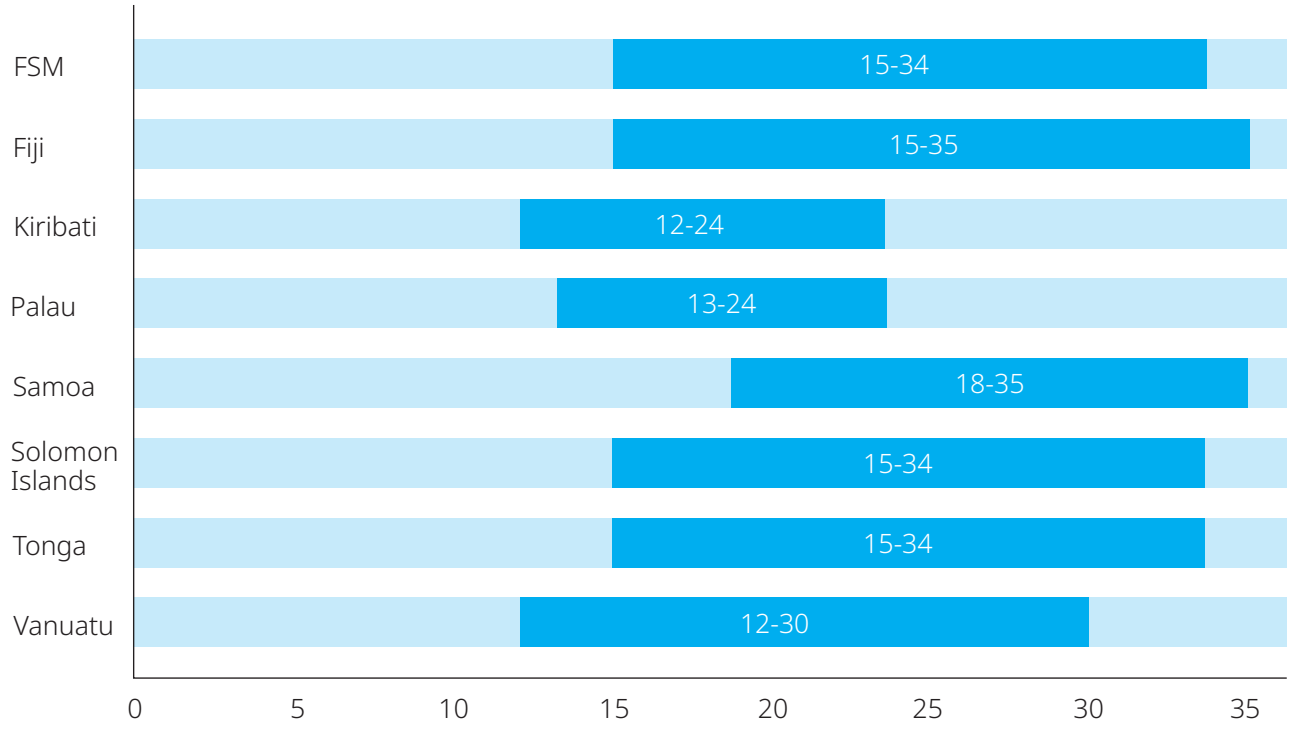
[11] United Nations, *Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes*, April 2023, p. 9, available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf

[12] UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation.*

1.2 Who are the youth?

The term 'youth' refers to the period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood, which may be marked by the completion of formal education, entry into the labour force, marriage or starting a family. Definitions of youth in the Pacific are fluid and contested;[13] the stage of moving from childhood through to independence varies between countries, and culture appears to be the determining factor as to whether someone is considered youth, rather than a specific age category.[14] Relevant cultural factors include taking on adult responsibilities, such as getting married, having children or starting employment.[15] Nonetheless, many Pacific Island countries (PICs) have adopted concrete, operational definitions of youth for the purposes of targeting policies and programmes (see Figure 1). Typically, this definition is broader than the international definition of youth (which is 15–24 years). The reason for adopting a wider age definition is associated with social and cultural norms that see youth as a wider/older age group and the need to embrace community participation and avoid excluding older youth from participating in community-based youth programmes and activities.

Figure 1: Age definitions of youth in FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu[16]



[13] United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *State of Pacific Youth 2017*.

[14] Craney, A, 2022, *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, leadership and civic engagement*, Australian National University Press. Cultural understandings of youth in relation to participation are discussed further in sections 3.1 and 4.1.

[15] Craney, A, 2022, *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, leadership and civic engagement*, Australian National University Press.

[16] FSM National Youth Policy 2017–2023; Fiji National Youth Policy 2023–2027; Kiribati National Youth Policy 2018–2022; Palau National Youth Policy 2023–2027; Samoa National Youth Policy 2011–2015; Solomon Islands National Youth Policy 2017–2030; Tonga National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2021–2025; Youth Authority Act 2018 (Vanuatu) and Vanuatu National Youth Policy 2019–2024. Note that it is difficult to apply age-specific definitions of youth in practice in Samoa, due to the cultural context, in which understandings of youth in traditional communities are associated with village-based committees of 'untitled men', regardless of their age.

Several of the focus countries explicitly recognize the need to retain quite fluid definitions of youth and/or to ensure that programmes are targeted to different segments within the youth age range, according to the different needs of different ages. For example, FSM's National Youth Policy applies a flexible definition of youth, in recognition of the practice of community participation, in which firm age-based definitions of youth are difficult to apply.[17] The Fiji National Youth Policy recognizes that the needs of youth in the younger and older age ranges differ, and it urges key government stakeholders to "target programmes and resources to meet the unique needs of youth at different ages and life stages," in particular, distinguishing between those aged 15–24 years and those aged 25–35 years.[18] The Vanuatu National Youth Policy recognizes that, for the purposes of targeting programmes, it may be necessary to break down the youth definition into different stages: 12–18 years (formative years, where the focus should be on protection but also equipping youth with skills and knowledge to take the next step into adolescence); 15–24 years (in which young people must be empowered to use knowledge and skills to make decisions about their own future); and 25–30 years (in which youth should be empowered to be leaders within the youth space and in their communities).[19]

What is youth participation?

At its core, youth participation is where youth (individually or collectively) "form and express their views and influence matters that concern them directly and indirectly".[20] Youth participation is a fundamental right: the right to child participation is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see section 1.4 for further details). Guidance on the meaning of participation and state party obligations for ensuring child participation are set out in General Comment No. 12 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) and has been used in the study to define the obligations of duty bearers to support youth participation. According to the CRC Committee, child participation is an ongoing and systematic process that includes "information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes".[21] It further states that participation should not be a "momentary act, but the starting point of an intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives".[22] Youth participation should be fostered wherever decisions are made that affect youth, including within their families, in their communities, within institutions such as schools, in justice systems and organizations and at all levels of government.

Opening spaces for youth participation is not sufficient; states must also ensure that participation is a **meaningful practice** for all youth. Not only do young people need opportunities to form and express views, this must be facilitated in a number of inclusive mediums, and views must be listened to and, importantly, acted upon to ensure participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic.[23] The Lundy Model for Child Participation offers practical guidance on meaningful youth participation, through the use of four elements: space, voice, audience and influence (see Figure 2).

[17] FSM National Youth Policy, para. 3.4.

[18] Fiji National Youth Policy 2023–2027, para. 1.1.

[19] Vanuatu National Youth Policy 2019–2024, p. 20.

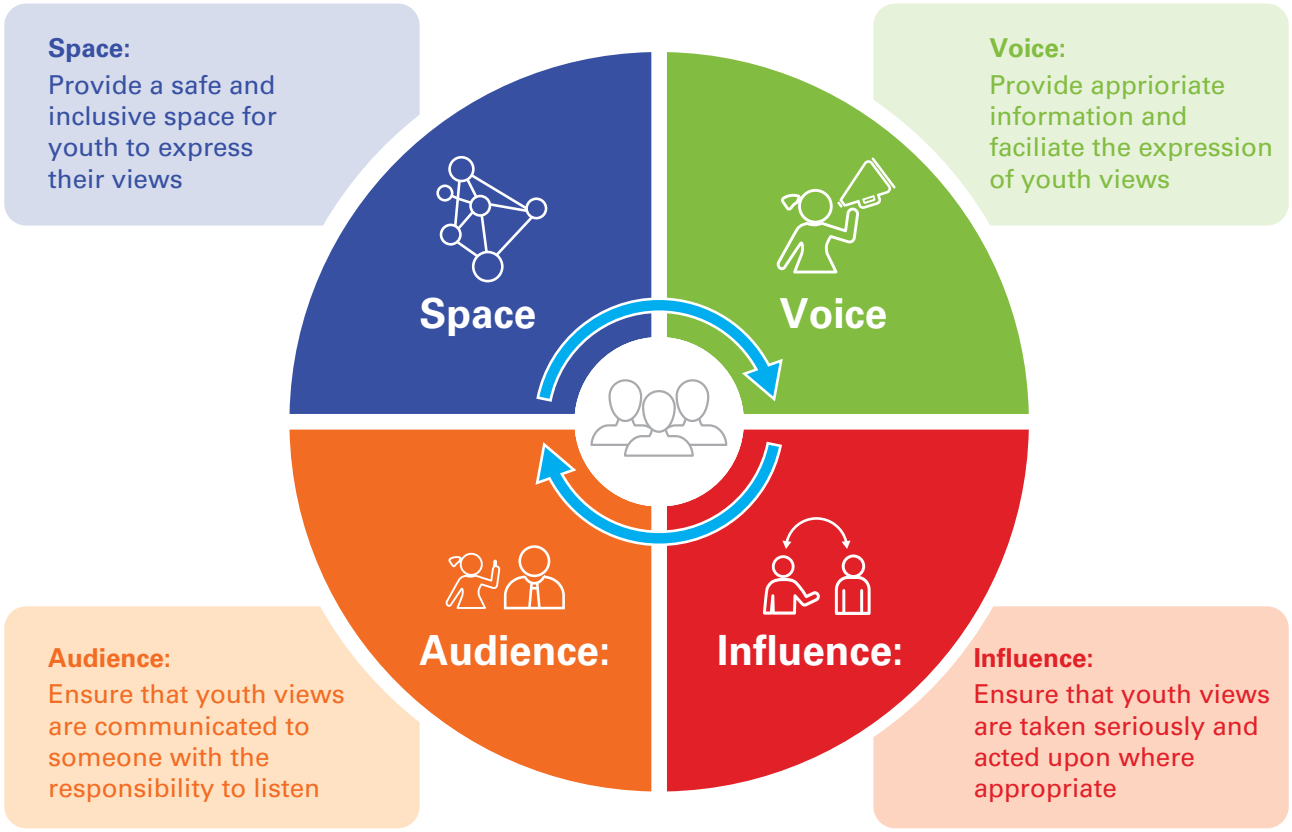
[20] UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation,* p. 3.

[21] CRC Committee, *General Comment No.12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard,* CRC/C/GC/12, 2009, para 3.

[22] *Ibid.*, para 13.

[23] *Ibid.*

Figure 2: Lundy model for meaningful child participation

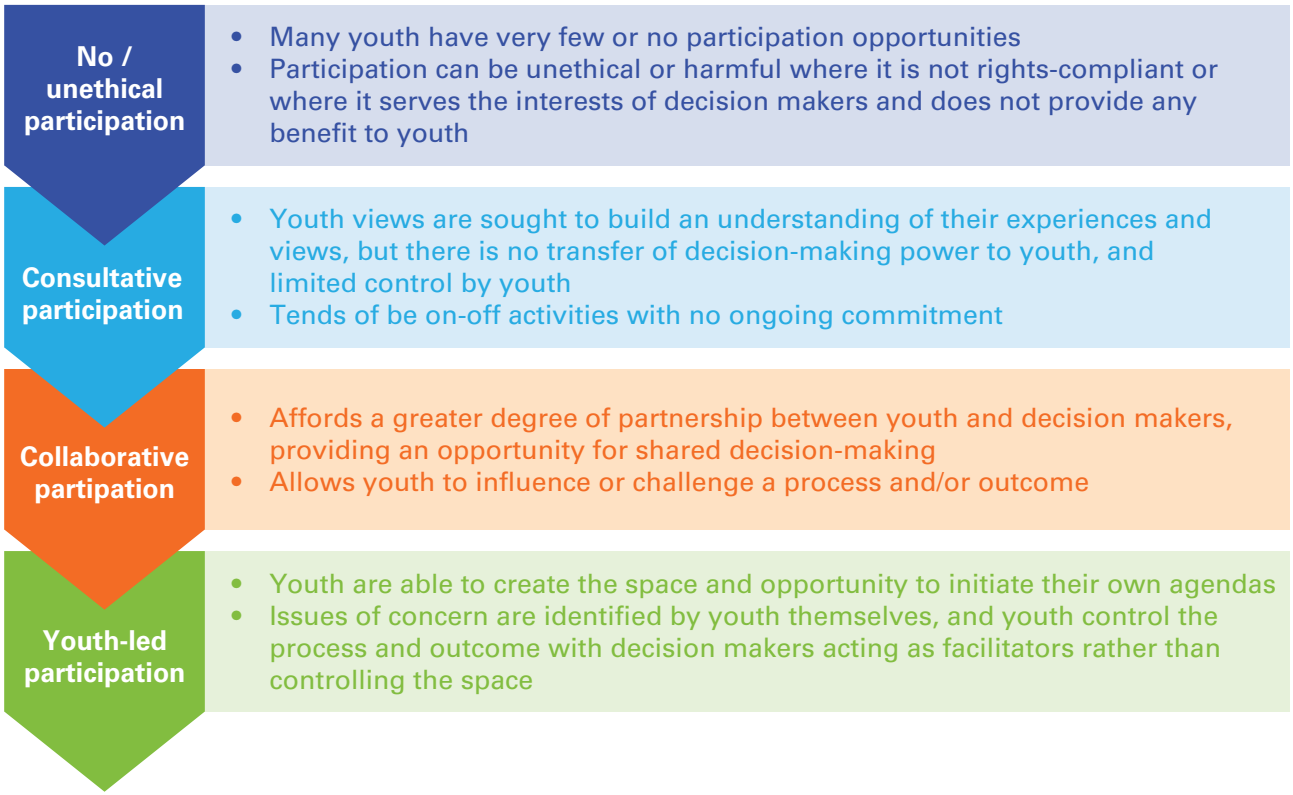


Source: Adapted from Lundy L., '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualizing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 2007.

Experts have attempted to define meaningful participation through the use of spectrums that typically set out degrees of participation, ranging from harmful/unethical or 'absent' forms (no participation opportunities) to 'good' forms, which offer genuine and meaningful engagement.[24] UNICEF's 2018 conceptual framework for adolescent participation defines four modes of adolescent participation, as set out in Figure 3. While youth-led participation may be considered the end goal of meaningful participation, other modes (with the exception of unethical participation) may be appropriate, depending on the context or circumstances.

[24] Cornwall, Andrea, 'Unpacking "participation": Models, meanings and practices', *Community Development Journal*, 2008, 43(*3*), pp. 269 – 283.

Figure 3: Modes of adolescent (youth) participation, UNICEF 2018



Source: Adapted from UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation.*

Meaningful participation requires a strong enabling environment, involving efforts from above (wider institutional accommodations and political will resulting in tangible action) and from below (strategies to support youth actions), and these efforts require time, investment and persistence.[25]

The recently published United Nations policy brief on youth participation maintains that youth participation should move towards the genuine positioning of youth as equal partners in decision-making. It states that meaningful youth participation requires:

- Resources, in particular funding, education and "timely, clear, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information" on the world's current and future trends and the role of youth within them
- Institutionalization, in which participation moves beyond ad hoc approaches to ensure constant, formalized and institutionalized mechanisms of engagement
- Accessibility, in which participation spaces are available to all young people, without discrimination or coercion[26]

Much of the youth participation literature focuses on participation in 'invited spaces', that is, where decision makers create spaces for youth engagement within adult-controlled institutions or forums.[27] However, it is also important to examine initiatives that are created by youth themselves through community or virtual networks. These youth-led initiatives tend to focus on issues that youth are passionate about, such as climate change and environmental issues, equality and human rights.[28]

---

25 *Ibid.*

26 United Nations, *Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3: Meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes*, April 2023, p. 9, available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf

27 Cornwall, Andrea, 'Unpacking "participation": Models, meanings and practices', *Community Development Journal*, 2008, 43(*3*), pp. 269 – 283.

28 Harris, Anita, 'Critical perspectives on child and youth participation in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa', *Children, Youth and Environments*, 2006, 16(*2*), pp. 220 – 230.

International and regional standards on youth participation

The international community has long recognized the importance of child, adolescent and youth participation, and guidance on how to implement meaningful youth participation is set out in a range of policy instruments. More generally, the principle of participation in public life is recognized in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Other conventions also recognize and elaborate the right to participation. The importance of youth participation specifically was recognized in the 1995 United Nations 'World Programme of Action for Youth to Year 2000 and Beyond' resolution, which called for "the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making".[29] This has been re-emphasized in numerous resolutions since.[30] Most recently, youth participation was recognized as crucial in the 'Youth 2030: United Nations Youth Strategy', which adopts as one of its priorities "engagement, participation and advocacy" in order to amplify youth voices for the promotion of a peaceful, just and sustainable world.

The key United Nations documents that aim to guide youth policy development in the Pacific are the 2017 State of Pacific Youth (SOPY) report and the Pacific Youth Development Framework 2014–2023 (PYDF). The PYDF's vision is*:* "a sustainable Pacific where all young people are safe, respected, empowered and resilient". Its mission is "to increase investments in youth across development sectors by strengthening development accountability, the evidence base and improving development effectiveness through engagement, coordination and strategic communication between all youth stakeholders, including key populations of young people". Two of its priorities are that "governance structures empower young people to increase their influence in decision-making processes" and that "environmental action is increasingly led and influenced by young people".

As noted above, **child participation** (which applies to those under 18 years of age) is recognized as a fundamental right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 12 of the CRC establishes the right of children to express their own views freely in all matters affecting them, and the right to have those views given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity.[31] This was further expanded upon by the CRC Committee in General Comment No. 12 (2009), which emphasizes the fundamental nature of the right.[32] Article 12 imposes an obligation on states to "introduce the legal framework and mechanisms necessary to facilitate opportunities to express views and thereby support the active involvement of the child in all actions affecting them, and to give due weight to those views once expressed".[33] It sets out that participation must always be: transparent and informative; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive; supported by training for adults; safe and sensitive to risk; and accountable.[34]

The CRC Committee highlights that Article 12 should be used in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights in the Convention.[35] The right to freedom of expression (Article 13) grants the right to hold and express opinions and to seek and receive information through any media. As such, the obligation it imposes on governments is "to refrain from interference in the expression of those views, or in access to information, while protecting the right of access to means of communication and public dialogue".[36] Articles 14 and 15 respectively protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and to freedom of assembly free from interference or control by the state. These freedoms of expression and

[29] United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/81, annex.

[30] E.g., Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies (*1998*) and Lisbon +21 Declaration, adopted by Ministers of Youth around the world.

[31] United Nations General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 12, November 1989,.

[32] CRC Committee, *General Comment No.12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard,* 2009, section D23, CRC/C/GC/12.

[33] UNICEF, *Conceptual framework for measuring outcomes for adolescent participation*, March 2018, p. 7.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] CRC Committee, *General Comment No.12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard,* 2009, section D23, CRC/C/GC/12.

[36] UNICEF, Conceptual framework for measuring outcomes for adolescent participation, March 2018, p. 7.

association also impose active duties on states to create conditions in which adolescents can form and express views, meet friends and form their own associations.

Children and youth are often at the forefront of action relating to **climate change and environmental issues**. The CRC Committee's General Comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change, states that children's voices should be proactively sought and given due weight in relation to measures aimed at addressing the "significant and long-term environmental challenges that are fundamentally shaping their lives".[37] Specifically, it recommended that states ensure that age-appropriate, free, safe and accessible mechanisms are in place that enable children's views to be heard regularly and "at all stages of environmental decision-making processes for legislation, policies, regulations, projects and activities that may affect them at local, national and international levels".[38] To operationalize this recommendation, the Committee provides that states should ensure children have access to information, adequate time and resources, and a supportive enabling environment.[39]

Adolescence is a significant period of developmental change and, as such, it is recognized as a time when children should be particularly encouraged to exercise their right to participation.[40] The CRC Committee's General Comment No. 20 (2016) calls for states to ensure that "adolescents are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant legislation, policies, services and programmes affecting their lives, at school and at the community, local, national and international levels".[41] The General Comment also encourages states to support adolescents in forming organizations through which participation can occur, to adopt policies to increase opportunities for engagement, and to invest in awareness-raising among adults about the right to participation – an important element in ensuring adolescents' enjoyment of this right.[42]

Participation rights are also recognized in international human rights law, specifically for **people with disabilities**. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes participation as a cross-cutting principle, and it enshrines the right to participation in political and public life, directly or through "chosen representatives" (Article 29), and in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport (Article 30). Chosen representatives can be organizations and they must be led, directed and governed by people with disabilities.[43] The Convention also contains a specific provision on the participation of children with disabilities, recognizing their right to be provided with disability- and age-appropriate assistance when expressing their views, and stating that their views must be given due weight (Article 7). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' General Comment No. 7 recognizes that persons with disabilities are often not consulted about decisions that affect them, with decisions frequently being made on their behalf. It emphasizes that states should support the decision-making of children with disabilities by, among other things, equipping them with, and enabling them to use, any mode of communication necessary to facilitate the expression of their views.

---

37 CRC Committee, 2023, *General Comment No. 26 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change*, 22 August 2023, CRC/C/GC/26, para. 26.

38 *Ibid.*, para. 27.

39 *Ibid.*

40 UNICEF, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation,* 2018.

41 CRC Committee, *General Comment No.20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence,* CRC/C/GC/20.

42 *Ibid.*

43 United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention*, 9 November 2018, CRPD/C/GC/7, Para. 11.

2. Summary of research methods

The research adopted a rights-based approach to map and analyse the enabling environment for youth participation. It involved an examination of the unequal realization of youth participation according to gender and other categories (e.g., disability, age, socioeconomic context, and care status) and an analysis of how these inequalities impact on the realization of participation rights.

The study used a mixed-methods approach, which included both qualitative and quantitative methods. The following methods were used (not all methods were used in every country):

- A desk review of key laws and policies, and available data relating to youth participation across the eight countries. This information provided the basis for the study's comprehensive mapping, data-collection tools and analytical framework.
- A series of consultative in-person and online interviews with a total of 171 individuals from governments, NGOs and youth-led organizations across the eight countries. The aim was to gather information to support the mapping of youth forums and initiatives, and to collect in-depth information about the enabling environment for youth participation.
- A series of focus group discussions with groups of youth in all countries except Samoa, involving a total of 187 young people. The aim was to collect in-depth data on young people's perceptions about the opportunities for, and barriers to, youth participation. Participants were recruited from community youth groups and youth organizations and initiatives.
- A short online quantitative survey of young people's views in FSM, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The aim was to collect objective, measurable data on youth perceptions, including the extent to which they feel they can participate in and influence decision-making at various levels. The survey received a total of 709 responses.
- An online mapping form to collect details of the various youth participation platforms, institutions, forums, clubs and initiatives, including information about members, areas of engagement and funding sources. In total, 70 youth organizations and groups responded to the mapping form.

For further details of data collection, analysis, limitations and ethics, please see Annex A: Methodology.

3. Youth participation in the pacific: A landscape analysis

The research explored the opportunities for, and barriers to, youth participation at various levels of government in the eight countries. All eight countries have plural governance systems, with traditional community governance systems operating alongside more modern state governments. Powers and responsibilities are typically set out in a constitution.

At the state level, each country has a democratic system with a national parliament comprised of elected members. Each country also has subnational governance units, such as state, provincial or municipal/town councils, which have responsibility for a range of services within their local areas.[44]

Traditional governance systems retain an important role in local life in the Pacific Islands, and youth are expected to respect traditional leaders (chiefs) and follow their directives. Traditional governance systems are based on kinship ties and connections to land. Each community has some form of traditional leadership authority, which is typically hereditary or derived from personal achievement or status in the church. Most of the communities are patrilineal, with land and leadership positions passing through male relatives, although in Palau and parts of FSM and Solomon Islands, communities are matrilineal, with traditional chiefs inheriting their position through their mother.

The degree to which traditional governance systems are integrated with more modern state systems varies between countries. Traditional leaders in Fiji, Palau and Vanuatu have a formal role in national governance through a council of chiefs, which acts as an advisory body to the national government.

3.1 Structures and avenues for youth participation

The various governance structures at national, provincial and local levels provide some opportunities for youth participation, but opportunities are typically constrained by cultural expectations of deference to elders, or limited to specific issues determined by leaders.

Other opportunities for young people to participate are provided by NGOs, either through youth-specific programmes or youth-led enterprises. These initiatives typically focus on particular issues or population groups, such as environmental issues; disaster risk reduction and response; human rights; or youth with diverse SOGIESC.

At the community level, avenues for youth participation include church-affiliated and community youth groups.

Table 2 provides a summary of participation forums and avenues at different levels across the eight countries.

[44] In Samoa, local (village) government is based on traditional structures and the application of custom, rather than a state system, as set out in the Village Fono Act 1990.

Table 2: Summary of youth participation forums and avenues at national, subnational and community levels

Country (and governance structure)	National level	Subnational level	Community level
FSM Constitutional federation with national congress, four state governments and traditional local governance	National Congress: candidates must be over 30 years Ad hoc initiatives such as take-over days National Youth Council (currently inactive) NGO youth programmes; few youth-led NGOs	State congress: candidates must be over 25 years State youth councils Youth development association in Kosrae	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance: limited, ad hoc participation
Fiji Democratic republic with national parliament, 14 provincial governments, 13 municipal governments and traditional local governance	National Parliament: candidates must be over 18 years Ad hoc initiatives National Youth Council (in the process of reactivation) NGO youth programmes; some youth-led NGOs	Provincial councils with youth representative positions Town and city councils with youth representative positions Provincial youth councils	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance (*Turaga-ni-Koro* and *Tikina*) with youth representative positions
Kiribati Unitary republic with national parliament and local government (three town/urban councils and 23 island (rural) councils)	*Maneaba ni Maungatabu* (House of Assembly): candidates must be over 21 years Ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliament National Youth Council (currently inactive) NGO youth programmes	Town and island council youth officers: limited, ad hoc participation	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance (*unimane*): limited, ad hoc participation
Palau Democratic republic with a national legislature and 16 state governments	*Olbiil Era Kelulau* (National Congress): candidates must be over 25 years National Youth Council (currently inactive) NGOs with youth programmes; few youth-led NGOs	State youth representatives Hamlet youth representatives State youth groups	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups (*senandung*) Traditional community governance: limited, ad hoc participation
Samoa Democracy with a unitary national legislature, 11 political districts, and traditional local governments based on the application of custom	*Samoan Fono* (Parliamentary Assembly): only registered *matai* (traditional leaders) are able to run for parliament; most are elder men National Youth Council Samoa Youth Advisory Board chaired by Minister NGOs with youth programmes; few youth-led NGOs	National youth council Village representatives	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance (*fa'amatai*): limited participation through committees

Country (and governance structure)	National level	Subnational level	Community level
Solomon Islands Constitutional monarchy (King Charles is head of state, represented by a Governor-General), with three levels of government: national, provincial and local	National Assembly: candidates must be over 21 years Ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliament National Youth Congress NGOs with youth programmes; few youth-led NGOs and enterprises	Provincial assemblies: candidates must be over 21 years Provincial youth councils Honiara City Youth Council	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance: limited, ad hoc participation
Tonga Constitutional monarchy, with local government representatives (town and district officers) and villages governed by 33 hereditary nobles (estate holders)	Legislative Assembly: candidates must be over 21 years Ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliament National Youth Congress	Town and district officers (varied access and participation across different communities) Constituency youth councils in a few constituencies only	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance: limited, ad hoc participation
Vanuatu Democratic republic with national assembly and local (six provincial and three municipal) governments	National Assembly: candidates must be over 25 years Ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliament and youth forums National Youth Congress National Youth Authority NGO youth programmes; few youth-led NGOs and enterprises	Provincial and municipal authorities: candidates must be over 25 years (youth representative position) Area/ward councils with youth representative position Provincial and area youth councils Provincial and area youth groups	Church-affiliated youth groups Community youth groups Traditional community governance (*nakamal*): youth representative position in some

All countries have some supportive frameworks designed to enable youth participation, although levels of coverage and efficacy vary. Support is typically implemented through youth officers in national government youth ministries or within local governance structures. National youth councils, which operate in some countries, also have a role in supporting youth initiatives and enabling participation in governance.

3.1.1 Youth participation at the community level

According to research participants across the eight countries, church, family and community life are central to the experiences of youth, who are highly engaged in these dimensions of life. Youth engagement in community and church groups and the importance of collective action are embedded in social structures in Pacific Island communities, although specific traditions and practices vary between and within the countries.

Social life in Pacific Island countries (PICs) is organized around dispersed kinship groups that maintain social hierarchies based on lineage, gender and age. These hierarchies typically set out the roles that each member of the community is entitled to perform, and define the degree of influence that youth can have within their communities.[45]

[45] Lee, H and Craney, A, 'Pacific youth: Local and global' in Lee, H., *Pacific Youth: Local and global futures*, 2019, ANU Press, p. 11

When asked about the best aspects of living in their countries, youth participants tended to mention the benefits of community living, including being able to work together to meet basic needs and generate livelihoods, along with feelings of freedom, being safe and supported. This communal culture provides a strong basis for youth engagement at the local level.

> "Everywhere you go, you have people you know that can lend a hand. It makes us feel safe."
>
> – Member of Red Cross youth group, FSM

> "It's obvious that young people think the Solomon Islands communities make them feel valued; they have a sense of being helped…You can move around and do what you want to do…We have the traditional culture of looking at each other as family."
>
> – Member of disability advocacy organization, Solomon Islands

> "Some of the positive things in the community are the families we have which take care of everything that we need; the community we live in; the relationships we have with the neighbours and people around the community. They are open to everyone, so there is freedom to express yourself and enjoy yourself without fear. You feel open to do whatever you want to do."
>
> – Community youth group member, Vanuatu

> "We are all living together – doing things together as a group, we have the community feeling. Everything is free – water, food, etc. We don't have to pay."
>
> – Community youth group member, Fiji

Community and church-affiliated youth groups

Community and church-affiliated youth groups across the eight PICs vary in terms of size, specific activities (which largely depend on the group's location), connection to community governance structures, and degree of formality. Community youth groups are generally formed within a kin/community group. Some groups are quite informal while others may be registered as youth groups or NGOs and may have elected or designated office holders. In some countries, community youth groups are quite embedded into community governance structures, though their role tends to involve implementing actions as directed by community leaders, rather than actively participating in governance. Traditional villages in Samoa, for example, have youth groups (*aumaga*) whose role is to support the *matai* (chiefs) [46]

Many churches have attached youth groups, and these groups are quite active in urban areas. For example, in urban settlements in Fiji, where families have been removed from their ancestral lands, churches are important in fostering a sense of community, including for youth. Church-affiliated youth groups are typically centred on spiritual development and engaging youth in church functions and outreach. However, it is often through church youth groups that youth engage in actions and initiatives within their communities more generally.

Church and community youth groups typically involve youth collectively working towards a common goal, often performing physical tasks such as community clean-ups, building infrastructure, and contributing to subsistence food sources, including through collectively farming agriculture plots and fishing. Community youth groups also help to organize recreational activities for youth in the community, as well as running

[46] Group members are not necessarily youth, as these groups are formed of all men and teenage boys who are not *matai* and this can encompass a wide range of ages.

sporting teams and competitions, and environmental actions. They often engage in collective income generation – for example, through providing maintenance services to families in the community, or through commercial farming and fishing. The research identified only a few examples of community youth groups engaging in broader actions such as campaigning on particular social or environmental issues that youth have identified as important.

The mapping data (from youth groups in FSM and Kiribati) indicates that community youth groups are not typically very structured or formalized. In most cases, the vision, mission and goals of the groups tended to be expressed in vague terms, and concrete results were not able to be reported. Of the 60 youth clubs and organizations captured in the mapping, only three (in Kiribati) had received external funding. Many clubs mentioned limited resources and a lack of technical support and training as key challenges.

To improve the effectiveness of youth participation, it is important to provide youth clubs with technical assistance to set clear goals and results, and to monitor and report on specific results and achievements. Not only would this help the organizations to more effectively target their activities, but it may also improve their ability to apply for funding and report to donors successfully.

While youth in the Pacific Islands are highly engaged in various activities at the community level, taking part in these groups or activities does not equate to having a voice or influencing decision-making on important community matters. The hierarchical nature of traditional communities in the Pacific, in which youth typically have a lower status, can act as a barrier to more meaningful youth engagement. In many communities, community and church leaders direct the actions that youth groups take.

> "Each village has a youth group but it's not like they're decision makers. Youth are involved but they are the tool of what the matai [chief] tells them to do. The matai will say: 'You will go out and plough the fields', and that will be done. Where there is an individual who is talented or really educated, they will be given more of a role, but it is not systematic."
>
> Representative of UN Women

> "Mostly in the village, they use youth to do the work. The youth come to the leaders when it comes to sport – for example, for the rugby club, but generally they feel shy and can't open up and express their views. That is a big challenge for them. If someone comes and taps them on the shoulder though, then they will do it."
>
> Village youth group adviser

Even where youth are given the space to develop their own initiatives and ideas, this process is often not youth-led in a meaningful way, as programmes and activities must be approved by church or community leaders. This level of direction reflects the entrenched social structures, which place the responsibility for community decision-making with chiefs (who are typically elder males), and the community beliefs that make it taboo to challenge leaders (see section 4.1).

> "In my church, there's a programme set by the leaders, not the youth, so it doesn't come from the bottom up, it's top-down. The leaders sit together and they plan out activities they think are best for the youth. The majority of churches are like that. If your youth group decides they want to do something else, it has to go back up the line for approval and there is a big person at the top who has to approve before the activity can go ahead."
>
> Tonga Red Cross representative

> "From my experience in a church setting, youth decide what to do by themselves. Most times, of the things they decide, they can only carry out a few things. Even when they agree as a youth group, then they have to follow the church process and take it to the church board. This is where they find some challenges. The church board is made up of the elders. Sometimes, they will agree for people to proceed with what they want to do but sometimes the youth can't sell it."
>
> Youth officer, Vanuatu

The research did find some examples of meaningful youth engagement forged through community groups, and of youth-led initiatives benefiting the community as a whole.

- In **Honiara, Solomon Islands**, a youth leader formed a youth group with girls in the community out of concern that they were dropping out of school. With the support of the Honiara City Council youth desk, the group arranged workshops about healthy relationships and assisted group members to access grants and opportunities to engage in positive activities. Following the workshops, most of the girls went back into formal education and developed the confidence to seek out opportunities for themselves.[47]
- In **Port Villa, Vanuatu**, a community youth group developed a proposal to install solar lights in a dimly lit park as they recognized that women and children in the community did not feel safe walking through the park at night. The youth organized a local fundraising drive to support the project.
- In **Vava'u, Tonga**, several youth groups use money from kava sales to organize 'scholarship clubs' that provide buses and fuel to transport children to school. The funds also pay for teachers to provide extra classes for children in their communities.[48]
- A youth group in **Kosrae, FSM,** identified poor educational attainment as an issue of concern in their community. They examined information from annual standardized school tests and identified that scores were quite low in some areas. They collectively organized a tutoring programme for the youth in the village, using alternatives to the more traditional/rote learning approaches used in their school. This led to the youth becoming more engaged in learning and performing better in school and in the standardized tests.[49]
- A community youth group in **Pohnpei, FSM,** wanted to take action to address the lack of clean water available in their community. They worked with the community chief and developed a successful funding proposal to address this problem.[50]

These successful initiatives were typically connected to: allowing greater youth autonomy in directing community actions; support from community leaders; and funding and/or technical support (for example, through government youth officers). Youth are often given more responsibility when community leaders value their education and skills – for example to navigate the increasingly complex and digitized registration and funding application processes needed to support community development.

Government support often takes a rather top-down approach to youth participation, using youth clubs to support the implementation of predetermined national government initiatives, rather than giving them the space to develop their own priorities, ideas and actions. Nonetheless, the above examples, along with the case study of the Tonga youth group (see 'Tonga youth group leads community climate response'), demonstrate that, when given the space to lead and with the right supportive environment, youth can work collectively to identify issues at the community level, and develop effective, youth-led initiatives with positive results.

---

47 Focus group discussion with nine youth members of TokSpot Project (five females and four males), Honiara, Solomon Islands, 13 July 2023.

48 Interview with representative of Youth Development Division MIA regional office, Vava'u, 5 September 2023.

49 Interview with former office holder of KYDA, Kosrae (virtual), 2 June 2023.

50 Interview with representative of DOHSA, Palikir, Pohnpei, 7 March 2023.

Tonga youth group leads community climate response

Members of a youth group in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, used their skills, talent and determination to devise and implement an action plan to increase their community's climate resilience.

In 2017, the church-based group organized a community meeting about the urgent need for climate action. Speakers from the University of South Pacific presented the community integrated vulnerability index (CIVA) – a framework that enables communities to identify the areas most at risk from climate change and natural disasters, and to devise a local plan to boost climate resilience.

The youth group members were eager for their community to benefit from a tool like CIVA but needed support to make this happen. They presented their ideas to the Anglican Church Pacific Diocese in Fiji, which agreed to arrange training workshops for two youth members of the community who had a background in GIS and mapping. The next step was approaching the Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications, which provided the necessary technical support to enable the youth to carry out detailed assessments and develop a community resilience action plan.

The framework and resulting plan are used to plan activities, identify funding and determine how the community can prepare for and respond to disasters. Since the process is community-led, the plan is very localized and responsive to the needs of the community, as a representative of the youth group explains:

"That is the difference with the framework – it is community-based and community-driven, and solutions will be community proposed. The youth sit down and talk with the community members and draw out a way forward in terms of how they see it. So, it's a community-based framework. And we can see the actions and the way forward, and how it can be achieved. It's not high-level activities where you need millions of dollars. It's a community-based solution which they can themselves implement with support from the church."

The youth leaders won a Commonwealth Award for leading the community response following Cyclone Gita in 2018. They are now working with the Ministry to improve the framework, make it more user-friendly with better use of new technologies, and adapt it to other communities in Tonga.

The success of this youth-led initiative shows the enormous value of providing opportunities for young people to identify and develop initiatives, and the importance of providing support from community and government leaders.

Participation in community governance

Another way that youth can seek to influence decision-making in their communities is through access to community leaders and community decision-making forums, such as village meetings – although the degree of influence depends on social structures within the communities.[51]

Social structures vary across and within the focus countries, but most adhere to egalitarian principles and emphasize consensus decision-making, with community members participating in meetings in which issues concerning the community are discussed and decisions are made. For example, in Vanuatu, the *Nakamal way* is a dialogue process in which different parts of the community come together to comment on and contribute to decision-making for their communities.[52] In Palau, the contributions of community

[51] Lee, H and Craney, A, 'Pacific youth: Local and global' in Lee, H., *Pacific Youth: Local and global futures*, 2019, ANU Press, p. 11

[52] Huffer, Elise and Molisa, Grace, 'Governance in Vanuatu', 14(*1*) *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 1999, available at: https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/157547/1/141_governance.pdf

members within council meetings are low-key (described by Palauans as "whispering"[53]) but the ability to engage with public opinion is considered "a vital element of competent leadership".[54] However, while community members can engage in decision-making, it is the chiefs – typically older men – who make the final decision.

> "Youth don't come to the community meetings as they feel like their ideas will be overridden. They think people will be like, 'What do you know?' Another thing is that the elders won't tell us to come to meeting, they will just expect us to. But if we come and ask too many questions, they get irritated or annoyed. They want us to help and just follow suit."
>
> – Youth leader, Palau

Social norms and traditions that minimize the role of youth (and women) in decision-making also present a significant barrier to youth engagement in community governance (see section 4.1).

> "Mostly, the chiefs make the decisions. Decisions come mostly from elders. Youths do not take part. Only if it is a youth issue, then they will involve youth to hear what they have to say, but apart from this, every other meeting or decision they take, youth are not involved, it's just the men."
>
> – Young female member of Vanuatu Family Health

Younger community members do not typically have a role in community decision-making and are expected to remain quiet during discussions where elders are present.

> "It is challenging for us young people to discuss issues with our leaders, especially our community leaders. Youth don't usually have the freedom or confidence to actually have this kind of talk with the 'big men' – the elder people, chiefs, community leaders. This is quite challenging in my community. These kinds of issues [community-wide matters], they are to be addressed by the elders, not the young people. For youth to share their opinion, it is not a thing in the culture."
>
> – Member of Dreamcast social enterprise, Solomon Islands

There are, however, established roles for youth representatives in community governance structures in some of the PICs. In Fiji, the community youth group reports on youth issues to the *Turaga-ni-Koro* (traditional leaders) at weekly/monthly meetings. Usually, the youth group meets prior to the village meeting and proposes items for the group leader to raise at the village meeting.

> "At the youth meeting, we plan what to do in the month and we have to take it up to the village meeting and they will have the last say on what we do. Sometimes they support us and sometimes they say, 'It's just the youth'."
>
> – President of community youth club, Fiji

In Vanuatu, a youth representative is typically present during community meetings to report on and represent the needs of youth in the community. The representative is elected by youth and may also be the local representative of the National Youth Council. In Palau, elected hamlet youth representatives report to the state youth representatives about any matters affecting youth in their hamlet.

---

[53] Peterson, Glenn, 'At the intersection of Chieftainship and Constitutional government: Some comparisons from Micronesia', 2015, 141 *Journal de la Societé des Océanistes*, pp. 255 – 265.

[54] *Ibid.*


© UNICEF/UNI806148/Stephen/Infinity Images

Having a recognized position for a youth representative is an important avenue for youth engagement in community decision-making. However, not all youth representatives are within the youth age range, which limits their representativeness. Also, the role of the community youth representative is often limited: they participate only on matters that the community leaders consider as "youth issues" or matters for which the community leaders require manual labour. Even when chiefs/community leaders take on board the views of the youth, they may not raise these issues at higher levels of government.

Research participants had mixed views about the influence of youth representatives in community decision-making. As decision-making is directed by village leaders, the degree of meaningful youth engagement depends on leaders' views and practices. In Fiji, for example, the mandate of village leaders is to govern according to the interests of the community. If the interests of youth are viewed as being inconsistent with the 'community intent', the youth voice may be sidelined.

> "They don't usually have youth within the council meetings of the church but when there are things on the agenda to do with youth, that is when they go back to the youth reps or officers to join. So, there is no mechanism for youth to be involved in all decision-making. It's only for specific issues relating to youth."

Member of Red Cross youth group, FSM

In Tonga, where there is no youth representative position, the nature and extent of youth involvement is at the complete discretion of community and church leaders, which poses a significant barrier to youth engagement in practice. Similarly, research participants in Solomon Islands felt that the absence of a youth representation structure at the community level meant that youth in many communities were completely unable to engage in community governance. Traditional social structures and norms, and expectations that youth should be deferential to elders create barriers to participation.

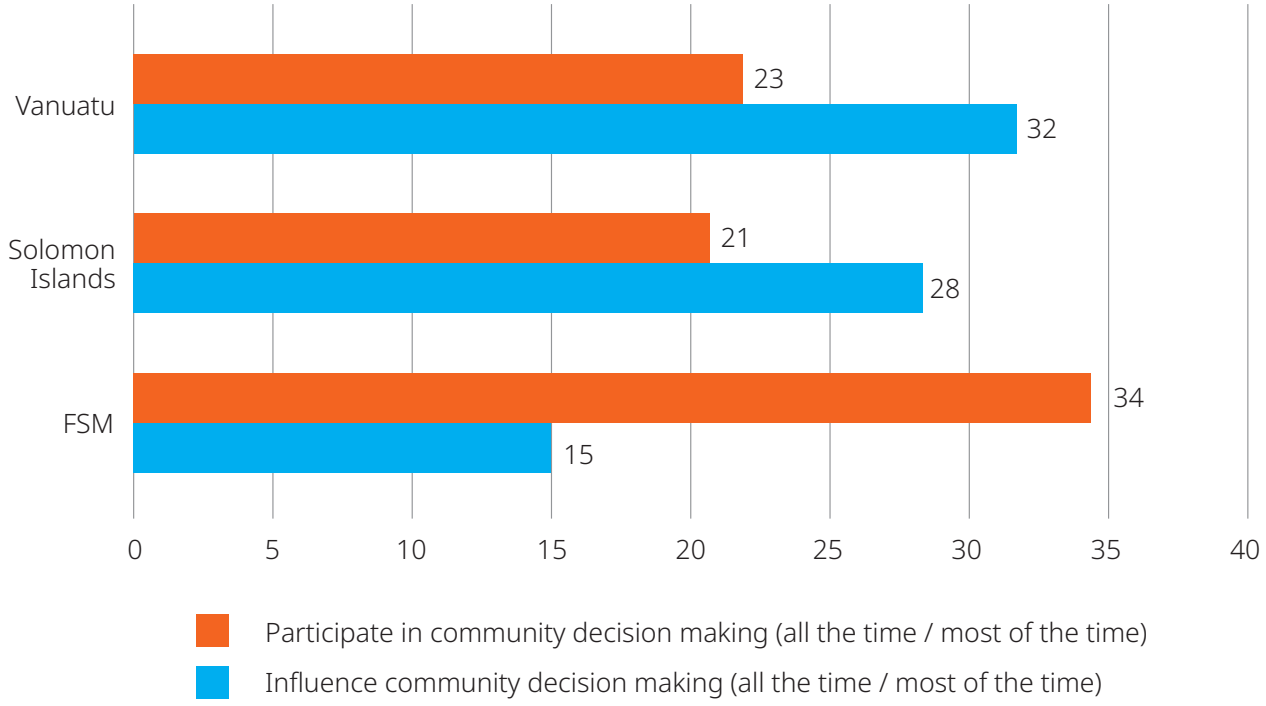
In Kiribati, youth are sometimes involved in community decision-making, but this appears to be at the request of the traditional leaders, rather than as a youth-directed initiative, and relates to leaders' reliance on youth to implement their decisions.

Participants in several countries explained that youth are expected to (or may prefer) to influence decision-making in a less direct way. In Samoa, for example, where it is difficult for youth to engage directly with village governance structures, youth tend to explore established roles within these structures to enhance their influence, or sometimes try and influence community decision-making 'behind the scenes'. Typically, this involves raising an issue with parents or family heads who sit on the council or with church leaders, who will then decide whether to take the matter up to the village council.

The results of the survey in FSM, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (see Figure 8) confirm the view that youth play only a minor role in community decision-making processes. Only 26 per cent of all respondents said youth could take part in community decision-making 'most of the time' or 'all of the time', and just 25 per cent said youth are able to influence community decision-making.

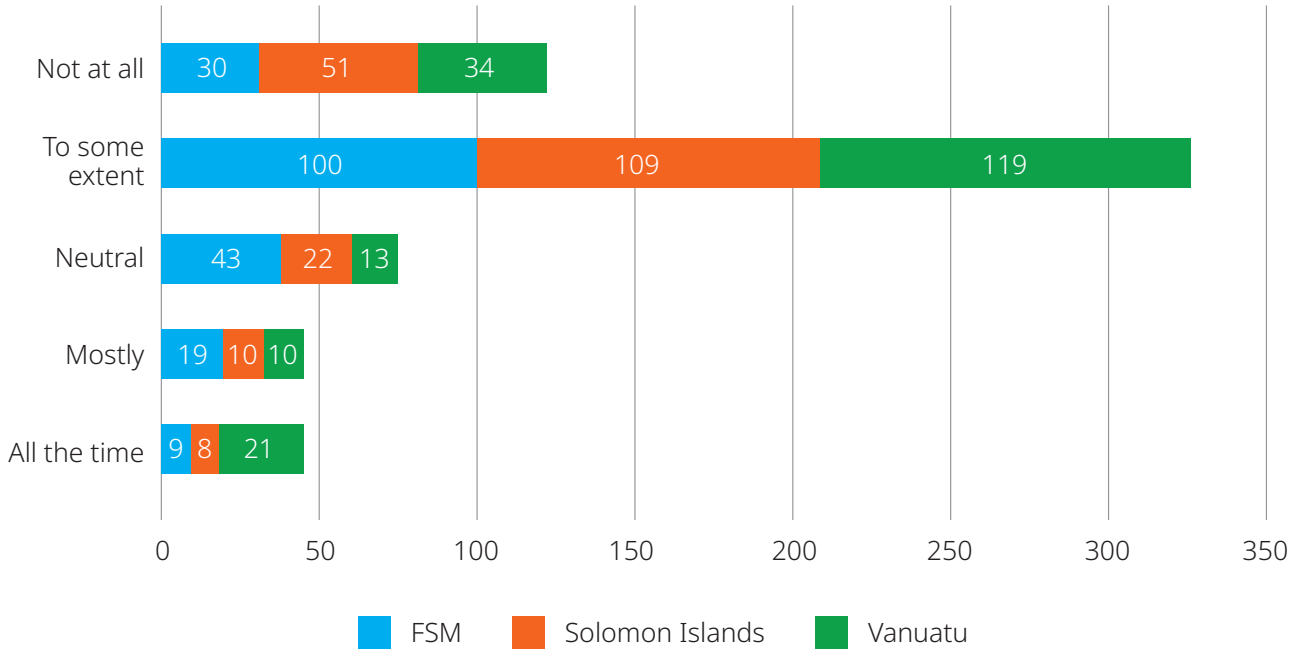
In FSM, 34 per cent said that youth were able to get involved in community decision-making, but only 15 per cent said youth could influence decision-making. This indicates that, while respondents felt that youth were able to have a presence in community decision-making forums, decision makers do not always take the youth voice on board.

Figure 8: To what extent can youth participate in and influence community decision-making? (percentage responding all the time or most of the time)



The survey also found a general perception that adults typically do not listen to the views of youth within their communities (see Figure 9). Across the three countries, 64 per cent of respondents felt that adults listen to the views of youth 'not at all' (16 per cent) or 'sometimes' (46 per cent), and only 5 per cent felt that youth were listened to 'all the time.' Perceptions that adults listen to young people's views were higher in Vanuatu, which has established youth representative positions at community governance level.

Figure 9: To what extent do adults listen to the views of youth in your community?



Beliefs about how much people in power value youth views were also fairly negative. Almost half of all respondents (49 per cent of females and 46 per cent of males) felt that people in positions of power (community leaders, religious leaders, government leaders) either never or only sometimes value the views of youth. Again, respondents in Vanuatu were more positive: just 30 per cent felt that people of positions in power never or only sometimes value the views of youth, while 50 per cent agreed that these people value the views of youth all the time (20 per cent) or most of the time (30 per cent).

3.1.2 Youth participation in subnational governance structures

Youth engagement at the level of subnational government (state, provincial, municipal, town and sometimes village) varies between the eight countries.

In several countries, established youth representative positions enable youth to engage at this level. In Vanuatu, for example, youth representatives are legally enshrined under the Decentralization Act 2006, which requires local government councils to appoint youth representatives (along with chiefs, representatives of women and representatives of churches).[55] The youth (and other) representatives should be "consulted on any matter, question or issue coming before the local government council for its decision," though they are not entitled to vote at local government meetings.[56] Having a legally enshrined right to youth representation in provincial and municipal governments creates an important mechanism for the youth voice to be heard at this level. However, the youth representatives are appointed by government, rather than elected by youth. This may undermine their ability to represent youth, and may also undermine young people's confidence that their views are being represented. Youth representatives' level of engagement and activity in local council decision-making bodies appears to vary, and may be limited by lack of confidence, experience or skills, or by social structures and the cultural expectation that elders lead and youth remain quiet. Youth representatives are not always supported with training or confidence-building to ensure that they are able to meaningfully engage in these forums.

[55] Section 7(*1*), *Decentralization Act 2006* (Vanuatu).

[56] *Ibid.*

In Fiji, youth representatives sit in provincial council meetings. However, again, the youth representatives are appointed by a government ministry (the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs), rather than voted for by youth. In Palau, each state has a paid youth representative, whose role is to support the Governor in identifying and responding to the needs of youth, and in promoting youth services and organizing youth events. Hamlet youth representatives (who are unpaid) report to the state youth representatives about any matters affecting youth in their hamlet. Once again, the youth representatives are not elected by the state's youth. Instead, they are appointed by state governors. Moreover, there is no requirement that the youth representative must be within the youth age range (13 – 24 years). The degree to which the state youth representatives are actively consulted about state policies, priorities and programmes appears to vary across the country.

In other countries, where there are no established positions for youth in subnational governance units, youth engagement is informal or less direct (e.g., engagement through a community leader or church leader) or essentially non-existent. Again, cultural expectations that youth remain deferential to elders may create a disincentive to youth speaking out. In Kiribati's island and town councils, there are no established youth representative positions, and no youth participated in the two town councils involved in this study. Direct youth engagement at council meetings and decision-making forums appears to be non-existent, and no systematic or sustained avenues for direct engagement – such as regular consultations – were identified.

In FSM, although there is no established mechanism for youth engagement at the state level, a state leadership conference takes place once a year in the state of Kosrae, involving representatives from different populations (including youth and women) along with the State Governor. The youth representative is appointed by the Kosrae Youth Development Association – an NGO committed to the development of youth consisting of elected youth representatives from each of Kosrae's four municipalities. At the leadership conference, the youth representative can put items on the agenda and speak on all issues. In recent years, youth representatives have called for the development of a state youth policy, dedicated spaces for youth activities, and the creation of a youth office/secretariat to provide support to youth on a day-to-day basis. However, the influence of youth representatives in this forum is unclear: none of these measures have been taken up by the state government, and, according to several research participants, asking the state government to fund youth initiatives remains challenging.

In Tonga, town and district officers are often approached by youth groups for support or to raise issues of concern within the community or at the national level. However, the willingness and capacity of town and district officers to promote and facilitate youth engagement appears variable. In some communities, town officers appear to proactively ensure that youth are engaged, regularly attending community youth group meetings and raising their requests directly with the Prime Minister's office and during constituency visits. However, in other communities, town officers are quite disengaged and not open to hearing the views or supporting initiatives of youth groups.

Some members of parliament are quite active in engaging with youth and youth groups at the local level, although this type of engagement typically requires existing connections. Several youth research participants told us they had directly approached their local MPs when they needed support for a community initiative or wanted to raise an issue of concern.

MP partnership helps build youth participation platform

In Nuku'alofa, Tonga, a youth group partnered with a local MP to create a new way of engaging with local youth and supporting youth initiatives throughout the constituency.

The scheme began when a youth leader from the Tonga National Youth Congress worked with a parliamentary candidate – a keen supporter of youth group activities – to carry out grass-roots awareness-raising. "She laid a lot of the groundwork," explained one youth leader. "She educated a lot of people in the constituency about parliament and engaged people together."

The candidate was unsuccessful, but the incoming MP built on her work to develop a youth engagement structure and used constituency funds to employ three local youth leaders. The youth team now visit a different village in the constituency every week to gather feedback from young people about the issues they are facing and their ideas for improving their communities. The youth in each village also elect a youth leader, who joins a constituency-wide youth committee.

The current youth leader for the constituency explains what happens after the village visits: "The youth committee collects information about the issues raised and reports to the MP, saying: 'This is what we should look at'. We think about how we are going to address the issues in general – not just in one village but in the whole of the constituency."

The structure has supported a range of initiatives, all based on feedback and ideas from youth across the constituency. Activities include promoting cultural knowledge through traditional dance and gatherings; educating families on proper hygiene and sanitation practices; providing grab bars in outdoor bathrooms to enable safe access for elderly village residents and those with disabilities; a project focused on climate change advocacy and plastics use; and a clean-up project following the 2022 tsunami.

The project's success in engaging youth and achieving positive community outcomes underlines the value of ground-up structures to support youth participation.

3.1.3 Youth participation in national governance

The prescribed age to run for parliaments varies considerably across the countries – from 18 years in Fiji to 30 (at national level) and 25 (at state level) in FSM. In Palau, the age of candidacy is 25 years, which excludes youth within the national definition of 13–24 years. In Samoa, only registered *matai* (chief) title holders are able to run for parliament. As the vast majority (92 per cent) of *matai* are aged over 40, few young people are able to run for parliament.[57] This is a particular barrier for young women as only around 20 per cent of registered *matai* are women, and in 21 villages or sub villages, women are not permitted to hold *matai* titles.[58]

A Fiji MP who was elected at the age of 29 is the only MP in the youth age range across all eight countries.[59] This indicates that, while youth are lawfully able to stand for election in national parliaments, they face considerable barriers in doing so. This inevitably means national and state governance structures are less able to consider, respond to and represent the youth voice effectively, and undermines the political will to address issues relating to youth. Young women face additional barriers in being elected

[57] In 2025, Samoa is exploring the introduction of roles for youth representatives in decision-making bodies to enhance the influence of youth in community and national governance.

[58] UN Women, *Gender equality brief for Samoa*, 2022, available at: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022–11/UN_WOMEN_SAMOA.pdf Samoa has recently introduced a quota system to increase the number of women in Parliament.

[59] There is also one state youth MP in Kosrae, FSM.

to national and state congresses: currently, political representation of women in national parliaments in the eight countries ranges from just 2 per cent (in Vanuatu) to 10 per cent (in Samoa).[60]

The research did not identify any systemic or sustained programmes for direct engagement of youth in national government decision-making in any of the countries, either through ongoing forums such as a youth advisory board or through routine youth-focused consultations on government laws, policies or programmes. This lack of systematic engagement applies even within the government ministries that hold the mandates for youth development.

However, youth have been engaged, on an ad hoc basis, in consultations relating to specific policy developments, in particular in the development of national youth policies. For example, in the development of the recently adopted National Youth Policy (NYP) in Fiji, extensive youth engagement was carried out through face-to-face workshops in locations across the country. The NYP is designed to inform policy and programme development across many of Fiji's ministries and government bodies, so the youth voice should ultimately influence government policy. While one-off initiatives can have positive outcomes, youth should have the opportunity to participate in all matters that interest or affect them – not just those deemed appropriate by decision makers.

Several other ad hoc or irregular initiatives aim to engage youth in national government decision-making. Youth parliaments, which have been held in several of the PICs, typically involve bringing a group of youth representatives to a central location and providing them with knowledge and skills about national political systems and processes, followed by a series of debates in parliament.

Five youth parliaments have been run by the Office of the Legislative Assembly of Tonga, the most recent in 2021. The initiative engages 26 youth aged 16–35 from around the country, aiming to inspire them in leadership and decision-making. The youth are involved in three days of orientation, including practice debates and deliberation, before spending two days sitting in parliament. The youth themselves determine which issues are debated in these two days. Youth are selected based on an application process. There are no reserved places for youth who are from marginalized groups or in vulnerable situations, although in the most recent youth parliament, UNICEF supported two seats that were reserved for youth under 18 years old. Research participants valued the national youth parliament, which they saw as an effective mechanism for promoting knowledge and awareness among youth and encouraging their ongoing engagement in communities and national governance. However, while the youth parliament debates lead to an outcome statement addressed to the legislative assembly, there is no follow-up process or feedback mechanism and no system to continue engaging the youth participants. There is, therefore, no way for youth to know whether, how or to what extent their recommendations are taken up by parliament. This may make the national youth parliament appear tokenistic, rather than a platform for meaningful youth engagement in national governance.

Nonetheless, the research identified several examples of youth developing initiatives that were directly inspired by their participation in national youth parliaments. One former youth parliament representative, for example, went on to organize a youth panel at the annual Climate Change Week and to develop youth environmental initiatives such as tree and mangrove planting in schools.[61] Several interviewees mentioned that youth councils had been established in their constituencies following discussions at a national youth parliament. The Fakaloa Community Organization is another successful initiative that directly resulted from a young person's engagement in the national youth parliament (see 'Youth parliament representative founds NGO to support vulnerable youth').

---

[60] Political representation of women in parliament in 2022 was: FSN: 7 per cent; Fiji: 9 per cent; Kiribati: 9 per cent; Palau 7 per cent; Samoa: 10 per cent (note that there is a 10 per cent quote system in place in Samoa); Solomon Islands: 8 per cent; Tonga: 4 per cent; and Vanuatu: 2 per cent. See UN Women, Gender Equality briefs for Pacific Island Countries, 2022 (country and regional reports): https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/12/regional-gender-equality-brief-for-14-pacific-island-countries-and-territories

[61] Interview with youth leader and former youth parliament representative (*2019*), Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 31 January, 2023.

Youth parliament member founds NGO to support vulnerable youth

Taking part in the Tonga national youth parliament gave one young man the confidence and skills to develop a community NGO to improve the prospects of young people in challenging circumstances. The young man's wife encouraged him to apply to the 2020 national youth parliament and, even though he felt unqualified and had previously been expelled from school, his application was successful.

During the youth parliament session, he put together a proposal to tackle the interconnected issues of school-based gang fighting and young people dropping out of school. His proposal impressed the Lord Speaker, who became his mentor and provided funding to help him to develop the project. In 2021, the project – the Fakaloa Community Organization– was registered as an NGO.

The project initially worked with youth who were out of school due to involvement in gang fighting, bringing together youth from different gangs in a series of camps led by Salvation Army counsellors. The camps provided sessions on life skills, conflict management and communication – helping the youth from different schools and gangs to mix with each other peacefully.

The organization's reach has since expanded to include youth with a range of challenges, including those who misuse drugs and alcohol; those who have come into conflict with the law; those not in education, employment or training; those who have experienced bullying; and those who have conflict within their families.

Young people are referred by schools and the police, and the Fakaloa committee of experts assesses their needs and links them to a range of service providers. In addition to the camps, support could include counselling, employment and skills programmes, sporting and other community-based youth programmes.

One member of staff gives an example of how Fakaloa can transform individuals' lives: "There was a 13-year-old boy who was a school dropout, and he was selling meth. His parents knew, but they were unemployed and needed the money. He came to meet with me and we worked with him. He is now back in school – he went back after attending one of the camps."

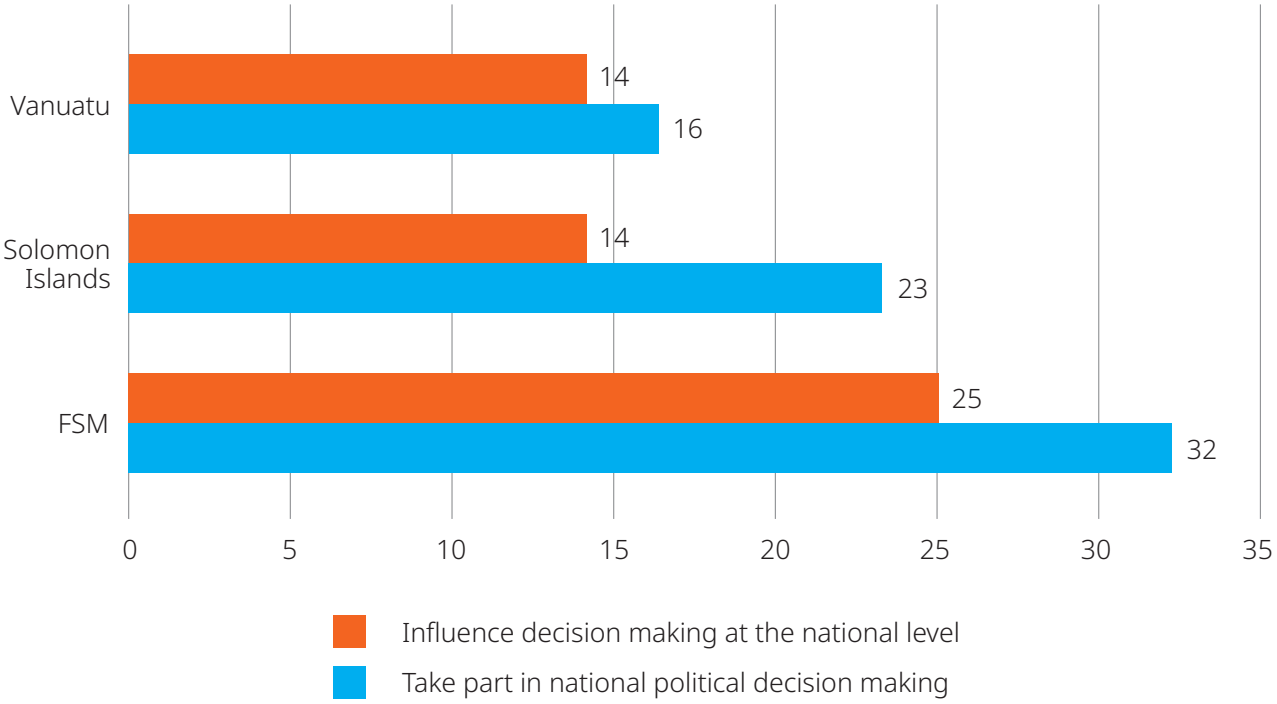
A representative from the Tonga Ministry of Education and Training confirms the organization's positive impact: "There is a change in the students … there are a lot of good stories from youth involved in this programme."

Take-over days have been held regularly in FSM and Kiribati, allowing high school students to 'take over' government departments for the day. However, this appears to be a learning exercise, rather than a forum to enable regular, meaningful engagement of youth in national governance. There is very limited follow-up with the involved youth, making these initiatives appear quite tokenistic, with very limited commitment on the part of national government decision makers to take on board the views and ideas of youth.

Other national initiatives include a climate change summit involving more than 100 youth from across Fiji. The summit ran for two days and brought together youth and climate change-focused NGOs to exchange information. Actions around International Youth Day, such as the 2022 climate boot camp, have also sought to engage youth in Fiji. However, again, there was no meaningful follow-up to the discussions and ideas that arose from the summit or boot camp. Moreover, ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliaments and youth summits have relied on donor funding and have not proved to be sustainable.

Survey respondents confirmed that youth have few opportunities to get involved in national decision-making. Across the three countries, just 24 per cent stated that youth could get involved in national decision-making either all the time or most of the time, and only 18 per cent felt that youth could influence national decision-making all the time or most of the time (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: To what extent can youth take part in and influence national decision-making? (percentage responding all the time or most of the time)



3.1.4 National youth councils

National youth councils (NYCs) are important structures for youth participation that exist across the Pacific Islands. They are typically constituted as registered NGOs, with elected office holders. They usually act as a consultative and coordinating mechanism for members to advocate for the needs of youth and to support the implementation of youth-focused activities. NYCs often work closely with the youth ministry or division to support community youth initiatives and youth groups.

While NYCs are quite active in some countries, others have been inactive for several years, following periods of insufficient funding and high turnover of youth office holders (who are usually unpaid). However, some of these NYCs are in the process of reactivation. In Fiji, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is working on re-establishing the NYC as a more democratic model (formerly, office holders were appointed by the Minister of Youth) with two arms: a Provincial Youth Council, which will be an umbrella group for all youth clubs registered in the provinces, and the Youth Assembly of Fiji, which will be an umbrella body for the youth clubs that are not registered at province level, including nationally constituted NGOs (which typically focus on particular issue) and some faith-based youth groups. In November 2023, the Fiji NYC held a week-long national conference involving around 150 youth from across the country. The aim was to identify challenges facing youth and to provide a forum for youth to discuss ways to address these challenges.[62] The Samoan NYC, which was established in 2011 but has been inactive in recent years, has recently received funding from the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development to reactivate, including developing its strategic plan and membership base.

In FSM, the NYC, which acts as an umbrella organization for the four state youth councils, has been largely inactive in recent years, mainly due to lack of sufficient funding or support from the Government. The accepted mandate of the FSM NYC is to support youth organizations, rather than to act as a forum to enable direct engagement in government decision-making. However, the state youth councils are quite active, particularly in supporting some youth-related (if not necessarily youth-led) initiatives, through their ability to reach out to and mobilize youth populations. The state councils have worked together

[62] UNODC, 'Young voices speak up at National Youth Council of Fiji', 30 November 2023, available at: https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/pacific/2023/11/national-youth-council-fiji/story.html

with NGOs including the Red Cross to initiate some large-scale programmes, which have driven very positive outcomes for communities (see 'Youth participation in FSM COVID-19 response', for example). However, youth are typically involved in these programmes to implement actions that are decided and largely designed by older decision makers and stakeholders. It is important that avenues exist for youth to participate more meaningfully in the prioritization, design and decision-making stages of these initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of youth.

Youth participation in FSM COVID-19 response

The youth of Chuuk state in FSM played a key role in the Government's education, testing and vaccination programme during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, Chuuk State Youth Council, together with Red Cross FSM, brought together 150 youth to assist the Government in implementing its COVID-19 response across the state. The initiative was supported by UNICEF Pacific, and youth were mobilized through community youth groups and the use of social media.

Youth-led teams were dispatched to the islands across Chuuk Lagoon to set up tents and equipment for testing and immunization, and to carry out outreach and awareness-raising through radio programmes. They also designed and disseminated communications materials and conducted household visits.

A youth leader describes how the young people's enthusiasm and hard work benefited both health professionals and the community at large: "When I put up the initiative [on social media], everyone jumped on it. Schools were out at the time, so youth got really involved. Everyone got together and prepared test centres and distributed tests. They were doing home visits too to get to the frail – youth volunteers were trained to do the testing. It was a lot of work, but it was fun; we had competitions on who got the most people vaccinated. We saw ourselves as a support to the existing government system which was overstretched. What benefited the health team was the manpower – youth were putting up tents and signs, translating papers, and so on."

The young people themselves also benefited from the opportunity, as a Youth Council representative explained: "The youth saw it as a learning opportunity and most hadn't been out to the islands before. It was an opportunity for me to practise leadership and we created team leaders so others could practise leading. There were disappointments and we had to use skills to diffuse problems, but we learned a lot."

The NYCs in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have decentralized structures, with provincial youth councils (Solomon Islands) and elected youth committees (Vanuatu) at area and provincial levels. In Solomon Islands, the NYC is an umbrella body for the provincial youth councils (PYCs), which are currently in the process of revitalization. The structure appears to enable ground-up youth engagement – PYCs are supported by the NYC, and members of the PYCs are represented on the NYC board. The PYCs also provide support to ward youth committees and community youth groups. The structure is democratic, with executive members elected by youth. However, most of the elected youth representatives are in their 30s, and some are outside the youth age range, which limits their ability to represent the full range of youth voices. Also, while the NYC is registered as an NGO, it relies heavily on government funding, which may compromise its (perceived) independence.

In Vanuatu, the NYC effectively mobilizes youth around particular issues, as well as promoting advocacy and supporting the implementation of government initiatives, such as disaster responses. In particular, it has successfully mobilized members at local levels to represent the youth voice in national debates and to advocate for issues of concern to youth. It engages and mobilizes youth through area councils, which are headed by ward youth presidents, and also through social media and chat groups. In these ways, it

has successfully gathered support for campaigns for a youth-specific ministry and for the passage of the National Youth Authority Act 2018 and various climate-related actions (see 'Vanuatu NYC: youth activism in action').

Vanuatu NYC: youth activism in action

The Vanuatu National Youth Council (NYC) mobilized support from youth across the country to successfully campaign for the retention of the country's Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (MYSD), which was threatened with closure in 2020.

One of the campaign's most powerful elements was the six provincial youth presidents' appearance on a Radio Vanuatu talk show to discuss the threatened closure of the MYSD. The six presidents contacted other youth leaders from their provinces and encouraged them to call in to the show, allowing the youth to control the narrative.

NYC members were also heavily involved in a campaign to encourage parliament to adopt a National Youth Authority Act. Youth representatives in each province were encouraged and supported to speak to their MPs and try and convince them to table a Bill. The NYC president had a strong presence in parliament, which increased MPs' accountability to young people.

A representative from the NYC explains the organization's power stems from its wide network of support: "When they passed the act, all 52 MPs clapped their hands and the youth celebrated! So, we can organize right from the area council up to the national level. At the national level, if the [NYC] president talks to any minister or secretary, they have to listen to us. They know that if they talk to the president of the NYC, we can speak to all youth across Vanuatu through our network."

While the active NYCs in the focus countries can effectively mobilize youth and can sometimes ensure that the youth voice has an influence, their ability to forge a sustained role in governance is limited. In Vanuatu, for example, the effectiveness of the NYC is somewhat restricted because it is a distinct body that is not well integrated into the country's general governance structure.

3.1.5 Youth participation initiatives of NGOs

While opportunities for youth to engage in decision-making at community, provincial and national levels can be constrained, youth across the Pacific have nonetheless demonstrated considerable skill and entrepreneurship through the engagement opportunities offered through NGOs. The research also found some examples of youth-developed and youth-led organizations and enterprises that support youth engagement. According to a recent study on youth participation in Fiji, a growing number of youth are finding ways to engage that are outside the "dominant perceptions of youth involvement".[63] Youth have been active in forming their own interest groups, influenced by "rights-based and youth involvement approaches" that differ from the "typical church, sports and village youth groups". These groups tend to focus on particular issues, such as climate change action and human rights, and demonstrate that youth have the talent and drive to achieve meaningful change.[64]

This study identified several youth-focused programmes within general NGOs, including:

- National chapters of the **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies** are very active in the focus countries, with a large number of youth volunteers engaged in their youth-specific programmes. For example, around 800 youth volunteers participate in the youth-specific initiatives of the Fiji Red Cross (FRC) across its 16 branches.[65] The initiatives include YAdapt (Youth adapting to

[63] Vakoti, P, 2012, *Mapping the landscape of youth participation in Fiji*, Australian National University, SSGM Paper, 2012/06.

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] Interview with two representatives of Fiji Red Cross, Suva, Fiji, 13 September 2023.

climate change), which involves climate adaptation initiatives developed by youth and funded by FRC. FRC also carried out capacity-building for emergency responses, provided through tertiary institutions in partnership with the Fiji Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS).[66] FRC has integrated the youth voice within its governance structure through a board-level youth representative and the establishment of youth commissions in each of the organization's 16 branches across Fiji. Their purpose is to ensure that youth perspectives are integrated into the Red Cross organizational planning and decision-making processes.[67] Youth officers in communities can raise issues to branch level through the youth commissions.[68] FRC also runs an annual national youth forum, which provides a platform for youth to articulate issues and concerns and contribute to the organization's ideas and innovations.[69]

- The **Micronesian Conservation Trust and Micronesian Conservatory** supports biodiversity and conservation through awarding small grants to strengthen leadership and capacity among Micronesian communities and decision makers. While it is not youth-led or focused on youth-specific issues, the organization provides technical (project management, training, internship programmes, etc.) and funding support for community-based environmental initiatives. It also supports the Micronesia Challenge Young Champions internship programme, which was launched in 2009 to support young conservation champions (aged 17–25 years) in FSM, Kiribati, Palau and other countries in Micronesia. Interns receive a small grant and work with a host organization and capacity-building officer to develop and implement environmental projects. Activities have included working with youth groups to map out biodiversity in communities in Palau; a summer youth employment programme, in which youth organizations were matched with states to work as 'conservation experts'; tree-planting initiatives led by youth; and the restoration and preservation of historical fishing sites in Angaur, to ensure that fishing is accessible and that the community has a sustainable source of food.
- **Further Arts** is a not-for-profit organization based in Port Villa, led by Ni-Vanuatu[70] and Oceanian women. Its main objective is "to empower Ni-Vanuatu to develop long-term social and commercial enterprises in creative arts, communications and agriculture that are culturally, socially, environmentally and financially sustainable."[71] While it is not a youth-specific or explicitly youth-led organization, it actively engages youth in its programmes. In particular, it provides free media training to youth and offers a multimedia facility (Nesar Studio) that functions as a space for community members to share and learn alternative methods of storytelling via creative digital arts (art, film and photography). According to representatives of Further Arts, these programmes have directly led to youth being offered positions in Vanuatu television and other media outlets.[72] Further Arts has also provided youth with training in participatory research, which has enabled them to engage in research on the loss and damage to culture caused by natural disasters, and on traditional land rights and evictions.[73] The organization also runs the Wivin Nasem Tugeta (Weaving Nation Together) programme, which aims to increase the participation of women in the Vanuatu national parliament, and provincial and municipal government councils. This programme engages women, particularly those in rural locations, in leadership training through weaving, providing a safe space for women to talk and learn about leadership.
- **Youth Challenge** was founded in Vanuatu in 2001 as part of an international initiative – Youth Challenge International, which aimed to support youth leadership. While the international programme ceased in 2008, Youth Challenge Vanuatu registered as a charitable NGO to deliver programmes throughout Vanuatu to upskill and empower youth in leadership, employment, education and small business development. It is now a locally led organization with five staff members, the majority of whom are under 30 years of age, and is funded mainly through grants from the New Zealand Government. Since 2017, Youth Challenge has offered four programmes for youth. Ready for Work offers a four- to

66 *Ibid.*

67 Fiji Red Cross, Youth programme, available at: https://fijiredcross.org/what-we-do/youth/

68 Interview with two representatives of Fiji Red Cross, Suva, Fiji, 13 September 2023.

69 Fiji Red Cross, Youth programme, available at: https://fijiredcross.org/what-we-do/youth/

70 Ni-Vanuatu is a term is used to describe the people of Vanuatu, who are largely Melanesian.

71 https://www.furtherarts.org

72 Interview with two representatives of Further Arts, Port Villa, Vanuatu, 18 October 2023.

73 *Ibid.*

five-month training programme to increase the ability of young people to access employment and generate livelihoods. The training focuses on life skills, job-seeking skills, basic communication skills, customer service, administrative and computer skills. Training about leadership and gender-based violence is also included. The training is followed by an internship placement with a host organization. Youth Challenge has integrated youth into its governance structures, with a youth representative on its board and a monitoring and evaluation framework that involves youth. All youth who have been involved in the Youth Challenge programmes are able to attend the annual general meeting, where they can elect the board of directors, including the youth representative. Youth participants are also involved in outreach and community engagement activities, including volunteering in emergency response efforts (though these requests typically come from government ministries and NGOs outside the organization).[74]

Youth-led organizations

The research also identified several youth-developed and youth-led local, national and regional organizations, initiatives and actions. In the following examples, youth have demonstrated considerable skill and entrepreneurship in addressing priority issues for youth and have brought considerable benefits to their communities and countries.

Regional youth-led organizations include:

- **Pacific Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC)** is a Pacific-wide, youth-led organization with chapters in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. It was formed in 2019 by 27 law students from the University of South Pacific in Suva.[75] The initial aim and focus of PISFCC was to campaign to persuade the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum to take the issue of climate change to the International Court of Justice. PISFCC successfully advocated for the Government of Vanuatu to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice and, in March 2023, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution formally requesting an advisory opinion from the Court,[76] setting out the obligations of, and legal consequences for, states with respect to climate change. The advisory opinion is pending, but it is expected to guide future international climate law.[77] PISFCC members are involved in a number of other actions, including advocating for other states to support the request for the advisory opinion (to date, 105 states and organizations have supported the request and proceedings, making it the largest ever court hearing in international law), persuading organizations in Pacific Island states to work on climate change action, and raising awareness on climate change among youth across the Pacific.[78] According to a research participant from Tonga who has been involved in PISFCC since its formation, discussions among student activists during an international environmental law class, along with a supportive lecturer (who is now involved in the organization), were key catalysts to its formation.[79]
- **350 Pacific (Pacific Climate Warriors)** is a youth-led network of organizations involved in fighting climate change in the Pacific Islands and its diaspora (in Australia, New Zealand and the USA). It is connected to the 350 global movement, in which volunteers engage in locally led or regional advocacy campaigns focused on combating climate change.[80] 350 Pacific has engaged in direct advocacy efforts aimed at leaders and has also facilitated protests, the largest of which was directed at the fossil fuel industry and involved blockading Newcastle harbour (the largest coal port in Australia) using traditional canoes. 350 Pacific actively targets young leaders to lead actions across the PICs.[81] In Tonga, 45 youth volunteers meet regularly to plan advocacy and actions, and carry out local environmental initiatives, including planting trees and collecting plastics (with the No Plastics Campaign).[82]

---

74 Interview with representative of Youth Challenge, Port Villa, Vanuatu, 27 October 2023.

75 https://www.pisfcc.org/who-we-are

76 Resolution A/77/L.58.

77 International Court of Justice, 'Extension of time limits for the submission of written statements and comments', available at: https://www.icj-cij.org/index.php/node/203377

78 Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change, 'Who we are', available at: https://www.pisfcc.org/who-we-are

79 Interview with PISFCC member and office holder, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 3 February 2023.

80 Carney, Aidan, *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, leadership and civic engagement*, 2022, p. 141.

81 *Ibid.*

82 Interview with youth representative of Tonga Letis Association, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 26 January, 2023.

National youth-led initiatives include:

- **Youth 4 Change**: a youth organization in FSM that carries out peer-to-peer education, primarily on public health issues. The Public Health Division of the FSM Department of Health and Social Affairs supports the organization, providing resources and training for youth volunteers.
- **Island PRIDE** (Promoting Resilience through Involvement, Development and Education): an organization established in 2017 in Chuuk, FSM, by a youth environmental activist. It aims to empower Micronesian communities to respond to the adverse impacts of climate change by combining indigenous knowledge and modern adaptation strategies.[83]
- **Tunguru Youth Action (TYA)**: an organization in Kiribati that was developed in 2020 through the actions of five young people who were involved in community service and church youth work. It became a registered NGO in March 2022. The founders have since mobilized 61 members through youth-to-youth training initiatives and outreach. TYA lists eight priorities in its constitution, though currently, the focus is on three: climate change; technical and vocational training; and youth unemployment.[84] The organization is planning to recruit youth volunteers across Kiribati, so that a youth representative/volunteer in every community can feed local information to the executive committee. In 2023, TYA organized for the first youth delegation from Kiribati to attend COP28. In partnership with Loyola University in Canada, it is currently working on a project to provide youth in Kiribati with training and support to make a video documentary about the climate change impacts experienced by youth in Kiribati. The project is currently crowdsourcing funding through a dedicated web page: https://www.thekiribatiproject.com

Bangikoi Society: Tackling substance abuse and supporting youth organizations

Bangikoi Society, or Youth to Youth Coalition for a Drug Free Palau, is an umbrella youth organization founded in 2020 by two youth leaders in Koror. Its initial aim was to use peer-led methods to address the rising number of youth who are misusing substances, and the connection between substance use and mental health issues. The organization's founder explains the importance of being led by young people: "It wasn't the council trying to put it together; it was actual youth. We became a genuine youth-to-youth model. Bangikoi is Palauan word for butterfly – it's a symbol of youth, who are constantly changing and it's also a great representation for mental health."

To develop the organization, the founders used a small grant from the government NCD fund to pay an international consultant to provide training on behavioural health and organizational governance. The founder describes the value of gaining an outside perspective: **"**Mental health has a stigma in Palau, and we are not comfortable speaking about it. We thought, 'How do we approach that?' In Palau, you need to be someone or reach a certain age to speak about these things. This consultant was recommended, and we flew him out [from Guam]; it was costly but was worth it. He started off the training talking about intergenerational trauma and put the Micronesian lens on it. This gave us a good perspective. We don't tend to think about trauma in terms of our history and in a Micronesian context."

The Bangikoi Society's members include school, community and faith-based organizations, and its governing body is composed of youth, who receive a small stipend. The organization has carried out a range of consultative exercises with youth and youth organizations to identify key priorities and gaps. As a result, the focus of the organization has broadened somewhat, and one of its main activities is now providing capacity-building and technical support to youth organizations across Palau.

[83] 'Island PRIDE': https://youngfeministfund.org/grantees/island-pride/

[84] Interview with two representatives of Tungaru Youth Action (TYA), South Tarawa, Kiribati, 2 May 2023.

Bangikoi Society: Tackling substance abuse and supporting youth organizations (cont.)

"We approach training in practical way – getting them from the community group level into becoming an NGO," says the founder. "Palauans tend to start off strong – we are action-oriented, but we struggle to do the reporting and other requirements. We do training on team building and accounting, and how to build an organization where you're working with different people with different perspectives and personalities. We did ethics training as well, which is important in Palau where everyone knows everyone."

The success of Bangikoi is driven by the commitment, knowledge and resourcefulness of its founders, along with the availability of grants (in particular through the NCD fund) to help cover the costs of establishing the organization and providing programmes. Another key enabling factor was the support of the Palau Behavioural Health Advisory Council, which helped guide the youth founders through the processes of organizational development, programme design and funding applications: "We had mentors from the Council to help us navigate through the difficulties in the process," explains the founder. "There are lots of benefits to working with them – we can tap into resources to get access to the right knowledge."

Dreamcast: Youth-led group supports engagement in creative arts

Dreamcast is a youth-led social enterprise that was formed in Solomon Islands in 2018. It began when a community youth theatre group invested resources (human resources, in-kind community support, financial donations and materials) into redeveloping an old theatre space into a youth-led arts hub. Dreamcast's vision is: "one where, under a big umbrella, exhibitions of all sorts are always in place, where musicians can compose, rehearse, record and perform their compositions, where enlightened debate can reclaim its place among the arts".[85] It aims to be a community-driven centre for creativity and collaboration led by young artists.

The Dreamcast team includes three 'strategic producers', who are in charge of advocacy (including safeguarding); business impact (including the management of a social enterprise café and other income-generation streams) and finance. The leadership team rotates every quarter to promote youth involvement in governance, meaning "everyone has the chance to bring ideas".[86] The organization is funded through its own income-generation projects, including the café, public arts performances (the organization stages four public shows each year), and renting out studio and theatre spaces. It has also partnered with Strongim Bisnis – an Australian government initiative that works with the private sector to promote income generation in Solomon Islands.

According to one of the organization's founders, the majority of youth involved in Dreamcast have dropped out of high school and/or are unemployed and facing challenges generating an income. The organization provides a space for them to develop their own income-generation ideas.

Dreamcast participants clearly value the organization, not only for the opportunities to participate in arts programmes, but also due to its youth-led, collective governance structure. One participant describes the importance of giving everyone a voice: "When we have programmes and get-togethers, we have to collect everyone's views – even the young ones can share ideas – and we have to have time to receive them. We want to create a space where all have a voice and it's not just one-sided. We want to give space for everyone to have their voice heard. With the relationship we have, giving people ways to express themselves, we have a close relationship with everyone. If everyone has the same kind of approach, we're going to see youth taking leadership roles in the community and organizing and participating within the communities."

[85] https://www.dreamcastsolomons.com/about-1

[86] Interview with representative of Dreamcast, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 15 July 2023.

3.2 Access to and representation in youth participation spaces

The presence of participation forums, spaces and opportunities does not guarantee that young people have a voice or influence in decision-making. It is important to assess access to these spaces and examine how representative they are of the diverse voices of youth. The ability for youth to meaningfully participate in decision-making and initiatives may be affected by age, gender, socioeconomic position, location (especially rurality/remoteness), sexuality and gender identity, disability and ethnicity. These factors must be understood and addressed to ensure participation spaces are truly inclusive.

3.2.1 Age and experience/background

In many PICs, the definition of youth is quite broad and can include those aged up to 35 years. This can be a barrier to adolescents and younger youth from participating in a meaningful way. Social hierarchies based on age appear to be reproduced within the youth space: older youth (those in their 30s) often occupy participation forums and lead youth initiatives, while younger youth are considered 'leaders in waiting' and are expected simply to follow the instructions of older youth. In several countries, research participants reported that younger youth – particularly those under the age of 18 years – are viewed within a protectionist framework, in which adults lead and make decisions for, rather than with, children. This may have the effect of marginalizing the younger people's voices and excluding them from actively participating in decision-making and other activities. The expectation that older youth will lead may also discourage younger youth: if they feel that their voices will not be heard, they may feel little interest in participating. However, several research participants noted that spaces are opening up within youth movements and organizations to enable the participation of younger youth.

> "In certain places, you might still have youth from 25 – 35 years in executive roles, but in some instances, you will see those from 15 – 20 years. Before, it was mostly the upper age range, but things are changing. We are trying to strengthen the involvement of younger youth. We're trying to get information out to the younger youth nowadays, so it is a mix of different ages. It's changing slowly."
>
> – Senior Youth Officer, Fiji

Youth may also self-exclude from participation if spaces they are not inclusive of those with more limited education or experience. Several research participants felt that leadership positions in youth participation forums are typically occupied by 'high achievers' – that is, youth who have a high level of education, and who have developed the necessary skills and confidence.

> "One of the issues is engaging all the youth from all of south Tarawa. For the moment, it's only the youth who are from the High School or Kiribati Institute of Technology. The school dropouts or the unemployed – they don't engage; they don't attend. There are a lot of issues where I'm from – a lot of youths drinking and all of this…It's the ones that have left school early – it's about finding a way to attract them; that is an issue."
>
> – Representative of Tungaru Youth Action, Kiribati

> "It can be a barrier if you're not as educated. You may feel not confident to apply [to the national youth parliament]. Most youth feel they are not good enough and it's probably those youth that are already excluded by society."
>
> – Representative of Fakaloa youth organization, Tonga

3.2.2 Girls and young women

While cultures, traditions and social structures vary across and within the different focus countries, girls and women typically occupy a marginalized position in community, subnational and national participation structures. This is largely due to social norms and cultural beliefs that view men as leaders and decision makers, and women as homemakers.

> "It is very challenging as in rural communities, girls have to do this and this and this and the boys are the boss. Most of our parents say: 'Girls, this is your responsibility', and then you start to see an imbalance of genders. For boys, you will see that they are treated like the boss and girls have a different role. And children grow up like that and it becomes part of the practice."
>
> – University of South Pacific student

> "I think it's more different if you are a woman. The women are there to listen. The men are the ones who make the decisions…It's tradition, it has been there for years. Before, according to the Fijian customs, it is the belief that the women just listen, and men make the decisions."
>
> – Community youth group member, Fiji

> "Where I grew up, I learned that the culture is that a woman just listens to whatever the man says. Somehow, they say that the man is always right…women are not saying anything, they are just there to provide support."
>
> – Member of Youth Challenge, Vanuatu

These views shape expectations within communities about who can speak out, become involved in decisions and have influence, and youth internalize these expectations. This results in community members not being open to the views of girls and women, and girls not seeing themselves as legitimate decision makers or change agents. Traditional gender norms and beliefs permeate different participation spaces, limiting the opportunities for girls and young women to participate and influence decision-making.

> "Women becoming a leader is not really accepted – most parliamentarians are men. Guadalcanal province is a matrilineal province, so women have ownership of land and can talk more. But in traditional societies, it is quite likely for men to dominate; even in the matrilineal societies, men are always dominating."
>
> – Representative of Guadalcanal Provincial Youth Desk, Solomon Islands

> "It's hard for women to get into parliament – people don't trust women as leaders (including women themselves). Men don't want women to have a higher status than them. Men are challenged by women coming into a 'male space' that they think should be reserved for men. So, the social status for women is lower than for men."
>
> – Representative of the Office of Legislative Assembly, Tonga

The research identified that traditional gender norms and beliefs are slowly becoming more flexible, particularly in urban areas, with community members becoming more open to women engaging in decision-making. This change was typically attributed to the increased educational attainment of women in younger generations, a willingness among young women to challenge social norms, and awareness-raising initiatives on gender equality.

> "Men are considered head of the family because they have a job. They have responsibility as providers to the family and that's why they're identified as head of the family. Nowadays, if you have a job and contribute, people will pay attention to you. If a woman provides for the family, it gives her more opportunity to be listened to."
>
> – Member of Youth 4 Change, FSM

Participants gave examples of active young women leading change in their communities. particularly through involvement in NGO initiatives. Given the challenges in influencing more formal decision-making forums, supporting girls and young women within other spaces (such as NGOs and youth community initiatives) is an important way to build girls' and young women's confidence and to enable them to influence decisions.

Several initiatives already exist to support women's leadership skills. The NYC in Vanuatu, for example, runs a grant-funded initiative that provides advocacy tools and support to young women to help them devise project proposals and enterprises.[87] It also requires that one of the two-member leadership team of the NYC (president and vice-president) must be female.

3.2.3 Youth with disabilities

According to key stakeholders, youth with disabilities face additional challenges accessing participation platforms and youth activities. Children and youth with disabilities enjoy basic rights and (at times limited) access to key services such as education, However, stigmatization and lack of understanding can encourage parents and caregivers to keep youth with disabilities away from gatherings and meetings.

> "There is a stigma in the families who have children with disabilities and the idea is that they are not capable of making decisions. They are usually left out and it's considered that their opinions don't count at all."
>
> – Representative of Youth Office, Fiji

Some people view youth with disabilities as incapable of making decisions or as requiring protection. Both attitudes create barriers to full engagement. Physical accessibility can also be a challenge: youth with disabilities may be unable to engage in initiatives and actions due to a lack of inclusive spaces in their communities.

> "We have heard from some communities that when there is a meeting, people with special needs are kept outside. They are not included – they don't even bring them to the hall so that they can participate... they are not involved in community halls in villages. During sporting days, athletes were invited to the village but it's not a fruitful discussion, they are just invited for the social part. We should educate village headmen to ensure that youth with disabilities can have a voice and they can contribute."
>
> – Representative of Fiji Disabled People's Federation

[87] Interview with three representatives of the National Youth Council (NYC), Port Villa, Vanuatu, 18 October 2023.

> "Inside the community, especially for the chief, when they look at people with disabilities, they discriminate against them. They are not including them in working groups and plans in the community. There are important issues inside our own community. They see their disability but don't see their abilities and skills that they have."
>
> – Member of disability advocacy organization, Solomon Islands

> "Some people look down on us, and the lack of information and knowledge and misunderstanding from community members means they always discriminate against people with disabilities…Because I am a blind person, the challenges that I am faced with is the lack of technology devices that I can use during my studies. Also, the attitudes from the students – they are always looking down on me. They think 'you can stay in your home and your brothers and sisters can assist you.' But I make them understand that we have the same rights and no one can discriminate against us…Our community is always discriminating against people with disabilities because they think they cannot do something for the community. They cannot get involved in what the community decides."
>
> – Youth Officer, Kiribati

Several organizations in the focus countries work to support and empower people with disabilities through the provision of direct services, alongside advocacy for empowerment and equal opportunities. However, there do not appear to be any specific initiatives within participation platforms to engage youth with disabilities and to make these spaces more inclusive.

3.2.4 Youth with diverse SOGIESC

Limited social acceptance and discrimination against youth with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)[88] were mentioned as barriers to their full (and open) participation. While diverse gender identities and sexualities have historically been culturally accepted in much of the Pacific, colonialism and conservative interpretations of Christianity from the late eighteenth century led to less accepting attitudes and laws that criminalize sexual activity between men.[89] Even where diverse gender identities and sexualities are socially accepted, discrimination and a lack of social acceptance in some communities and spaces can hamper their full and open participation in all social and cultural spaces.

> "When it comes to gender, some communities do not accept diverse gender identities. They say, 'there are two genders, that's it' … Some villages don't have the acceptance and they are always criticized in terms of how they are, for example, if they are male but have a feminine identity."
>
> – Samoa Red Cross representative

[88] In the Pacific, people with diverse SOGIESC refers to LGBTQIA+ youth, as well as *mahu, vakasalewalewa, palopa, pina, fa'afafine, akavahine, faka'fifine* and *faka'leiti* people.

[89] E.g., Section 136–142 Criminal Offences Act (Tonga).

> "They [youth with diverse SOGIESC] are accepted into the community – the acceptance is there. They get around the village, they talk in village meetings, but there are barriers when it comes to certain topics – like same sex marriage or 'cross dressing' in the village – they will not be able to be a man and wear a dress to church. Only their character is accepted, but if you want to cross-dress, you get the hiding of your life."
>
> – Representative of National Employment Centre, Fiji

> "For youth who are part of the pride community, when they start to speak, others keep teasing them. Discrimination against LGBTQ youth means that it is difficult for these youth to speak out."
>
> – Member of Youth Challenge, Vanuatu

> "Culturally, it's taboo to talk about it. When I speak to some elders, they know there have always been gay people in the community, but you don't talk about it or show it in public. It's considered shameful towards your family or clan."
>
> – State youth representative, Palau

> "Trans women and gay men have been out a long time; it is more acceptable. For lesbians and trans men – high level members of our organization still don't accept that they exist. Stigmatization and discrimination within the community itself is a problem. I face it every day – I have to remind the members we need to empower and advocate for lesbians and trans men."
>
> – Youth representative, Tonga

Several organizations in the eight countries provide support to, and advocate for, the rights of people, including youth, with diverse SOGIESC. However, there do not appear to be any specific initiatives within participation platforms to support the full and open participation of youth with diverse SOGIESC.

© UNICEF/UNI806084/Stephen/Infinity Images

4. The enabling environment for youth participation in the Pacific

To support a meaningful culture and practice of participation, it is vital to have a strong enabling environment, including:

- supportive social structures, social practices and gender norms
- effective laws and policies
- strong governance frameworks and well-resourced implementation and funding mechanisms
- opportunities for youth to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate
- a range of communication platforms

The research found that the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of these features vary considerably across the focus countries, although key themes emerged in terms of gaps and challenges.

4.1 Social structures and sociocultural norms

Social structures across the focus countries can support but also create barriers to youth participation, particularly for young women. As described in chapter 3, community structures and cultural practices across the Pacific Islands support collective action, community-mindedness and organization among youth, particularly at the community level, as demonstrated by strong, collective youth engagement in various activities with their communities. The culture of consensus decision-making, in particular, is a strong tradition that aligns well with youth engagement in community governance structures. As part of this culture, community members are consulted on issues that affect them, and their views are considered within decision-making processes. Ultimately, however, decision-making power is wielded by chiefs and community leaders.

On the other hand, social structures that ascribe particular roles to community members embed age- and gender-based hierarchies, which can prevent youth from participating more meaningfully as decision makers and change agents. For youth, this can mean that "the roles that are socially acceptable for them to occupy are quite restrictive, relegating them as observers to decision-making with an eye to being future leaders in an undetermined time frame".[90] According to a publication summarizing Pacific Islands practices: "The influence of hierarchy in Oceanic societies can scarcely be overstated. Social roles are generally well established and align with an individual's lineage, gender and age … For youth, such hierarchy underscores the roles and influence they can have in their communities. This is commonly marked by an expectation of deference and a lack of deliberative participation."[91] This marginalization of youth has been likened to youth being viewed as "adults in waiting" rather than as fully realized social agents with views, experiences and ideas to contribute.[92] Youth are expected to be "obedient to their elders and wait patiently on the sidelines to be invited into decision-making processes and institutions".[93]

[90] Carney, Aidan, *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, leadership and civic engagement*, 2022, p. 141.

[91] Lee, H and Craney, A, 'Pacific youth: Local and global' in Lee, H., *Pacific Youth: Local and global futures*, 2019, ANU Press, p. 11

[92] *Ibid*, p. 12.

[93] *Ibid*, p. 9.

> "Because of their upbringing, they were maybe not taught that their opinion mattered. Part of the cultural beliefs is that when you are a child, you are not asked your opinion."
>
> – Chief Executive, Palau Parents Empowered

> "Youth are brought up with the understanding that they can't talk to the elders; they just have to listen. It's a new thing that they are being encouraged to talk, but it's still hard…They grow up with that mentality; they're taught not to talk when they're kids. They're taught not to talk when meeting with elders."
>
> – Urban council youth officer, Kiribati

These social structures and cultural expectations define different spaces, limiting opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful decision-making. Research participants frequently stated that these social structures create considerable barriers to youth participation. Even where youth are invited into decision-making spaces, they are often reluctant to raise their voice out of a sense of respect for elders and cultural expectations that they remain quiet and passive and do not challenge authority. This may work as a disincentive to participation: when youth feel their views are not being heard by people in power, they are likely discouraged from entering participation spaces or speaking up when they are in community meetings and other forums. These social structures and cultural traditions also discourage critical thinking among youth, who are encouraged to 'sit back' and take directions from older members of the community.

> "According to our customs, how we have been brought up, in a meeting youth cannot speak. It is only the men who speak in many villages. This has been gradually changing over the years, but youth are very reserved and cannot speak up to and against the elders…We're conditioned to be quiet until we're asked a question as this is our custom – it forbids us to speak as this is a sign of respect for the elders. During our youth functions, when the officials are there, we have a session where we ask: 'What do you really need?' We expect the youth to speak, but the youth will not speak. It will be the elders speaking on behalf of the youth. The youth won't speak because the elders are there."
>
> – Youth Office representative, Fiji

> "It's how teachings are from our culture. Only elder people talk. It doesn't mean that we ignore the youth, but it's a question of respect. Everybody looks up to the elders to give direction to us and make decisions. That is one of the things that contributes to youth not speaking up."
>
> – Member of community youth group, Vanuatu

> "There is always a hierarchy of who is allowed to speak and who isn't. It is quite complicated with our cultural practices in Tonga. It's hard trying to voice your opinions if you know there are elders in that particular setting. You have to respect them and rephrase your opinion in a way so as not to disrespect or offend them."
>
> – Youth leader and former youth parliament representative, Tonga

However, participants in all countries, typically more in urban communities, noted that these cultural roles and expectations are beginning to become more flexible, with more space available for youth to voice their opinions and community leaders being more receptive to these views. This was often attributed to increased educational attainment among young people, and their ability to navigate complex and digitized grants and reporting systems.

4.2 Laws and policies

Most of the focus countries have a comprehensive national youth policy, which typically prioritizes strengthening youth participation. These policies are summarized in Table 3. National youth policies typically take a 'whole government' approach, which recognizes youth development and participation as a multi-sector and cross-cutting issue that necessitates a coordinated approach among government and partners. Two countries, Kiribati and Samoa, do not have current youth policies (although the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development in Samoa has recently initiated the development of a new national youth policy).[94]

Table 3: Youth participation objectives and strategies of national youth policies

Country	National youth policy	Youth participation objectives and strategies
FSM	FSM National Youth Policy 2017–2023	The policy includes youth participation as a key priority and a core purpose. It states: "This Policy serves as a tool for enabling young people to actively contribute to national development and improve their quality of life in the process." It also states that youth have the right to "participate in decision-making processes in matters that affect them." While the policy does not include strengthening youth participation as a specific stand-alone objective, other relevant objectives include encouraging the active participation of young people in the realm of economic development (objective 3), and the strengthening of youth organizations (objective 9). Youth participation is also included as a strategy in relation to objective 6: "To promote and implement educational awareness programmes and practical projects focusing on the conservation and protection of the environment and sustainable use of natural resources." A key strategy for realizing this objective is to "promote community participation in environmental and sustainable development practices and awareness initiatives". In relation to implementation, the policy states that young people are encouraged to participate in the planning, monitoring and evaluation exercises to be carried out as part of the implementation process, to enable them to contribute to the refinement of the policy.
Fiji	Fiji National Youth Policy 2023–2027	The policy has seven priority areas, each of which contains several specific strategies and actions relating to youth participation. Priority area five is "participation and empowerment". The desired outcome is that "all youth have the knowledge, skills and inclusive spaces to actively and meaningfully participate in and contribute to dialogue (youth and sports development and diplomacy), policy development and planning, implementation and service delivery, within their communities and in educational and other institutions". One of the strategies for priority area seven ("strengthening the enabling environment for youth participation") is (re)establishing the Fiji National Youth Council.

[94] Samoa has completed a youth policy review that will be submitted to cabinet in 2025.

Country	National youth policy	Youth participation objectives and strategies
		The policy includes the strengthening of meaningful youth participation in a number of other priority areas, including priority area four (environment, climate change and disaster risks). The objectives for this area include "youth are supported and empowered in the development and implementation of initiatives to protect, preserve and improve the environment, to address climate change and environmental issues" and "youth have the skills and knowledge to champion climate change adaptation, mitigation and resilience to other disaster risks in their communities, with the support of community leaders and other stakeholders". Priority area 6 (inclusion and non-discrimination) includes a specific objective of removing barriers to the engagement of youth in vulnerable situations in health, learning, employment, sporting and cultural programmes.
Kiribati	No current national youth policy	
Palau	Palau National Youth Policy 2023–2027	One of the policy's five priority policy areas is "meaningful engagement of youth in politics, culture, sport, the arts and environmental protection". The desired outcome is that "all youth have the knowledge, skills, forums, opportunities and support to participate meaningfully in political decision-making and develop and participate in actions and initiatives to address climate change and environmental issues, sports activities and cultural and arts programmes and activities". Another priority is strengthening the enabling environment for youth, with the objective: "Youth are supported by effective coordination, strong institutions and evidence-based programmes and services." Priority area 3 (justice, protection and social inclusion) includes a specific objective on strengthening the participation of youth who may be marginalized or in vulnerable situations. Each of these areas also contains concrete actions relating to strengthening youth participation.
Samoa	No current national youth policy (one is in development)	
Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands National Youth Policy 2017–2030	One of the policy's core objectives is to "foster genuine participation of and partnership with young people in all aspects of national and provincial development". Among the policy's guiding principles is "ownership and active participation", which "recognizes ownership, participation and involvement of young people as key to ensuring that development initiatives respond to their specific needs and that they are positively engaged in activities that affect their lives and build positive and quality relationships in their social and work environments". The policy's priority outcomes include governance, peacebuilding, social inclusion and citizenship. It also integrates youth participation and empowerment throughout other policy areas.

Country	National youth policy	Youth participation objectives and strategies
Tonga	National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2021–2025	One of the policy's guiding principles is participation, which recognizes that youth participation is crucial and that "youth rights and obligations to take part in the decision-making process which affects their existence and life journey in any way or form shall be understood and performed" and "the best person to make necessary positive and sustainable change in their lives are youth themselves". Strategic policy area 5, which focuses on the enabling environment at national level, includes "improved knowledge on economic, social, political and environmental challenges and their impact on youth" as a key output. Specific outputs include strengthening partnerships between youth stakeholders and village and constituency councils, and the empowerment of youth to support resilience, disaster risk reduction and preparedness. The policy does not include any specific actions on strengthening youth participation platforms or ensuring a strong enabling environment for youth participation.
Vanuatu	Vanuatu National Youth Policy 2019- 2024	The policy includes youth participation as a core principle, as well as a strategic goal. In its rationale statement, it states that "a youth policy is a visible way for the government to recognize the importance of young people in the community and the contributions that young people make to society," and that "having a youth-focused document allows us to respond to the needs of young people in all decision-making and planning processes". One of the policy's core visions is that "youth are actively participating and included, enabling them to express themselves and become social change leaders". One of the six strategic objectives is civic engagement, which has the objective statement: "Youth are empowered through a strong sense of identity, to build their own relationships and actively participate in society as citizens." Concrete actions to realize this goal are included in the policy.

While these key national policies recognize the importance of youth participation and incorporate actions to strengthen youth participation, the implementation challenges in several of the focus countries have been considerable. FSM's National Youth Policy, for example, has not been effectively operationalized. It lacks a detailed action plan with dedicated activities assigned to particular duty bearers, it has no governance mechanism or accountability framework, and it does not have a monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework. It was clear from the research that many key government stakeholders who have responsibility under the policy are not aware of its contents, and many could not provide the researcher with a copy of the policy. The main issue appears to be that, while the policy was developed at the national level, implementation of the policy areas and objectives is within the jurisdiction of the states. The policy provides that the four states will develop state action plans to operationalize the policy. However, this did not take place and, therefore, no implementation framework was ever put in place.

The Tonga National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2021–2025 also lacks a detailed action plan with activities assigned to particular duty bearers. Nor does it have a detailed governance mechanism, accountability framework, or monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework. Due to lack of monitoring and reporting, it is unclear to what extent the policy has been implemented . Likewise, the Vanuatu youth policy has no governance mechanism, accountability framework, or monitoring, evaluation and reporting framework. It is unclear to what extent the policy is being effectively implemented, as no review or evaluation has been published. While government commitment to youth participation is recognized (in part and at least on paper), and has a footing in key policy documents, the lack of operational frameworks for these policies leaves a gap in the enabling environment for youth participation.

The NYP for Solomon Islands, on the other hand, contains a detailed operational framework, but it is unclear to what extent the policy is being effectively implemented. In general, Solomon Islands faces considerable challenges in resourcing policy implementation and providing services, particularly in more remote locations.[95] Implementation of the NYP depends on the development of Provincial Youth Policies to support its implementation at the provincial level. Currently, many of the Provincial Youth Policies are quite outdated and have not been renewed to align with the new NYP. One exception is Guadalcanal Province, which has developed a renewed youth policy that is currently at the review stage.[96]

The National Youth Policies in Fiji and Palau include detailed implementation frameworks, setting out specific actions, responsible ministries and partners, coordination and oversight mechanisms, monitoring frameworks and costing plans. These steps are important in enabling effective implementation. However, implementation will also be dependent on the ability of key government agencies to budget for and implement the necessary activities, and for the coordinating bodies to function effectively.

4.3 Governance and coordination

The comprehensiveness, coverage and effectiveness of governance frameworks to support youth participation vary considerably across the focus countries. In all countries, there is a dedicated ministry or national body with a youth development mandate, although Samoa's Youth Advisory Board was not established until October 2024.[97]Several countries have staff, typically at subnational levels of government or in regional offices of national ministries, to support the implementation of programmes at the local level. Fiji's youth programmes are delivered on the ground through youth officers (YOs) and assistant youth officers (AYOs), who work under the MYS divisional offices to support youth at the provincial and community levels. The AYOs provide a variety of support to community youth groups, including training and technical support, help in devising activities and initiatives, and information about funding and other support sources (including the MYS small youth grants – see section 4.4, below). The YOs and AYOs appear to work in a coordinated way with key government ministries and service providers to deliver sectoral programmes and services to youth within and through their youth clubs. To receive this support, youth clubs undergo a registration process, which is managed by MYS. Recently, MYS introduced a digital youth dashboard, which allows clubs to register and report on activities online. The dashboard has the potential to enable more effective coordination of youth club activities and to facilitate more organized and targeted outreach and support to youth clubs.

In Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, youth coordinators are based in each of the provinces. Their role is to implement government policies and programmes at the provincial level, to support community youth groups to develop plans and programmes, and to link them to funding opportunities and technical support. In Kiribati, the town and island councils employ youth officers, while in FSM, one national youth coordinator and one in each of the states address youth issues, coordinate programmes and provide funding and technical assistance to support youth. In Tonga, each region has a youth division representative, whose role is to deliver training and workshops to youth to promote youth development.

On the surface, these governance frameworks appear to support meaningful youth participation, enabling grass-roots or ground-up, youth-designed and youth-led initiatives to receive technical support (e.g., project management, training, proposal drafting and reporting) and funding. However, insufficient human and financial resourcing and a lack of accountability frameworks have greatly curtailed the effectiveness of these structures.

---

[95] Evans, Daniel, "Things still fall apart: A political economy analysis of state-youth engagement in Honiara, Solomon Islands', in Lee, H., *Pacific Youth: Local and global futures*, 2019, ANU Press, p. 85.

[96] Interview with two representatives of Guadalcanal Provincial Youth Desk, Honiara,13 July 2023.

[97] In 2024, the Samoa cabinet endorsed the establishment of the Samoa Youth Advisory Board, which is chaired by the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD).

Youth officers in Vanuatu and youth coordinators in FSM do not have operational budgets, which limits the work they can do, particularly with youth and youth groups in more remote areas.

> "All of the time, the youth officers are waiting in the office because there are no funds. There are lots of activities they should carry out but they can't, so they stay in the office. People in the community come to them, but they need to get out to see the real issues happening in the community."
>
> – Ministry of Health representative, Vanuatu

In Kiribati, there is only one youth officer in each town/island council, and they are also responsible for sports development. A lack of operational funding is also a significant limitation. In Solomon Islands, the annual budget for youth in one example province was only SI$2,000 to SI$5,000 (US$236 to US$592), which is severely inadequate to cover youth organizations and youth-related programmes for an entire province.[98] The provincial youth councils are also very under-resourced and rely on volunteers. There does not appear to be an operational budget to support their effective functioning. The lack of resources allocated to subnational support structures for youth participation and development renders these structures quite ineffective.

> "They should increase the funding [for youth coordinators]. Otherwise, all they can do is be employed to sit – they can't actually do anything…they have no operational budget. They are given a butter knife to slice through a large tree. It's not really assisting. So the youth coordinators know what is needed but can't really function properly."
>
> Government representative, FSM

[98] Interview with representative of Youth Entrepreneurship Centre Solomon Islands (YECSI), Honiara, Solomon Islands, 13 July 2023.

More generally, the research found limited coordination among government departments and agencies in relation to youth issues across the focus countries. Siloed working in government ministries has somewhat impeded national level work to support youth participation and development, and has created fragmentation across youth programmes.

To help coordinate youth groups' initiatives and support, and to connect youth to opportunities, it is important that information on youth initiatives is held centrally. Currently, Fiji is the only focus country with a national registration process specifically for youth groups and initiatives, although registration systems are being developed in FSM, Kiribati and Vanuatu. Mapping of youth groups and services is carried out at the local (city or province) level in several countries. Youth groups can register as NGOs, which gives them legal status and opens up more funding and other opportunities. However, information about NGOs is not held in a way that allows for easy identification of, and outreach to, youth initiatives. This inevitably creates challenges in coordinating youth service provision and makes it hard to connect youth and youth groups with each other and with support systems and services.

4.4 Resourcing

Lack of resources for youth participation structures and limited financial and operational support for youth and youth organizations were, to varying degrees, key gaps in the enabling environments of the eight countries. As noted above, while youth officers/coordinators perform an important function in supporting youth groups at the local level, they are greatly under-resourced.

Three of the eight countries have dedicated government funding sources to support youth-developed initiatives. In Fiji, the MYS manages a small grants programme for youth and youth clubs to support a range of initiatives. The grants are worth up to FJ$5,000 (US$2,181) and around 100 are awarded across the country each year. They typically support small business development and other livelihood generation initiatives. The AYOs/YOs are available to support youth in developing proposals and business plans before they submit their application to an internal grants team. The AYOs/YOs also connect youth clubs to funding initiatives from other government ministries and NGOs, and youth activities and initiatives at the community level are sometimes funded through the resources allocated to the implementation of village development plans, which are overseen by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. However, according to the MYS, funding initiatives are currently fragmented, limiting the ability for youth to tap into these opportunities. There are plans to integrate the different youth-related funding initiatives into the youth dashboard to make them easier to access.

In Palau, youth may apply for a grant from the Government's non-communicable disease (NCD) fund, which is managed by the Ministry of Health and Human Services to address the risk factors and drivers of NCDs. It was established in 2015, following a Presidential Executive Order (Order 295 of 2011), which declared a state of emergency related to NCDs and mandated a government-wide response.[99] NCD grants are not youth-specific but can be used to fund youth-developed and youth-led initiatives up to a value of US$5,000. Funds have been granted to a range of youth-developed initiatives. However, as NCD grants are quite small and project-specific, the fund has limited ability to support multi-year projects that focus on sustained or long-term outcomes. There is no specific or ring-fenced budget for youth-focused programmes.

In Tonga, The Youth Development Division, part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), manages a small grants programme for youth and youth clubs to support a range of initiatives. The grants are worth up to TOP5,000 (US$2,141) each, with a maximum yearly allocation of TOP200,000 (US$84,000). They tend to support income-generating activities for youth groups, for example, by funding lawnmowers, BBQ facilities to enable the selling of cooked food, sewing machines, equipment for harvesting vegetables, etc. The MIA

[99] Pathway to 2030: First Voluntary National Review on the SDGs, Republic of Palau, June 2019.

has a separate grant to support community sports development.[100] To access the funding, the youth group is required to have a formal committee and office holders, and must prepare a workplan and cashflow plan, and detail how youth will benefit from the funding. [101] The regional youth officers support youth in developing their proposals. Once the application is approved, the group signs a written agreement with the MIA. The MIA youth officers will follow up with the youth groups three months after the funding is granted and the group may then request additional funding to further the project.[102] MIA allocates the funding based on particular priorities, which may vary between funding rounds (e.g., a recent funding priority was projects that addressed youth drug misuse). The funding is quite flexible, which supports the development of locally led initiatives, and MIA appears to support youth groups to access the funds, making the MIA grant an accessible option (though the funding amount is quite small).

There do not appear to be any dedicated government funding sources that youth can access to support the development of actions and initiatives in FSM, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu.[103] The absence of funding, together with the limited technical support available to youth due to the limited resources of youth officers and coordinators, has meant that youth who do not have useful connections (e.g., to members of parliament, NGOs or donors) go largely unsupported.

NGO and donor funding is available where youth have the connections or knowledge to tap into specific initiatives, but this funding is typically limited to particular issues and focus areas that are not necessarily derived locally. This leads to a very top-down system, rather than something that is shaped by youth at the local level. The question of whether donor-led initiatives are sustainable in the longer term was also a matter of concern to some research participants.


© UNICEF/UNI806147/Stephen/Infinity Images

[100] Interview with representative of Youth Development Division, MIA, Nuku'alofa, 25 January, 2023, and interview with representative of Youth Development Division MIA regional office, Vava'u, 5 September 2023.

[101] Interview with representative of Youth Development Division, MIA regional office, Vava'u, 5 September 2023.

[102] Interview with representative of Youth Development Division, MIA, Nuku'alofa, 25 January, 2023.

[103] In Samoa, there are limitations on the availability and allocation of government and non-government funding for youth engagement, but improvements are being sought to support youth-led projects.

4.5 Knowledge, skills and confidence

For meaningful youth participation to take place, youth must be aware of their rights to participation and of the avenues and opportunities that support and provide for their meaningful participation at all levels. Investment should also be made to build the skills and capacities of children, adolescents and youth to enable them to exercise their rights to participation. As noted above (see section 4.1), the exclusion of youth – particularly adolescents, younger youth and young women – from decision-making forums due to traditional social-cultural structures and norms makes it difficult for youth to acquire the necessary experience, confidence and skills for successful participation. Research participants also noted that the limited availability of accessible, youth-directed information was a barrier to youth understanding and engaging with decision-making processes.

The research did not identify any comprehensive, sustained, systemic programmes to provide youth with knowledge, skills and confidence to support their effective engagement, but several government and NGO-led initiatives aim to provide this type of support.

In Fiji, a number of training programmes, delivered by MYS, focus on building young people's leadership and other skills to support them to engage in decision-making forums, and to develop and lead youth initiatives and organizations. The Seeds of Success training package, delivered through youth clubs, focuses on empowerment, leadership, confidence-building, self-esteem, and personal growth and development to "encourage youth to come out of their shell."[104] The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs runs a three-month leadership programme focused on future clan (hereditary) leaders, which covers good governance, conservation and climate change, economic empowerment, and vanua (land ownership issues).

In Solomon Islands, the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs, which oversees the country's traditional governance and leadership structures, provides training and workshops for youth in good governance and leadership. Strengthening of community governance structures is viewed as important in terms of peacekeeping and conflict management.[105]

The national youth parliament (see section 3.4) is another ad hoc initiative that helps build the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in governance. Also, as noted above, youth officers provide technical support to youth groups, including in project development and reporting, though under-resourcing has limited the degree of support they can provide.

In Pohnpei, FSM, children gain knowledge and understanding of the impacts of climate change through taking part in school environmental clubs. Research participants explained that, through these clubs, children and their parents were becoming more involved in environmental actions in their communities.[106]

[104] Interview with two representatives of Youth Office, Western Division, Nadi, 14 September 2023.

[105] Interview with five representatives of the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs (MTGPEA), Honiara, 13 July 2023.

[106] Interview with representative of FSM Department of Environment, Climate Change and Emergency, Palikir, Pohnpei, 7 March 2023.

Handing power to the youth at climate change youth summit

A youth summit on climate change at the College of Micronesia gave young people the resources and confidence to devise innovative solutions to pressing environmental challenges.

Supported by the FSM Department of Environment, Climate Change and Emergency (DECEM) and the International Organization of Migration, the summit involved a week-long workshop on leadership, project development and marketing. At the end of the week, students were given a budget of US$300 to design an environmental project to help their community, with a focus on locally available materials and traditional knowledge and processes.

The winning project – a sustainable water catchment system for the college – was built with the US$300 funding and a matched US$300 grant. A DECEM representative praised the way the students had harnessed their enthusiasm, skills and knowledge to lead and deliver lasting change: "For youth, the first step is to have the youth summits – they feel empowered and they are the ones running the show. We provide tools for them, but they are the ones to come up with the final ideas."

"We just need to convince the Government to trust in the youth. They think they're young and don't know much, but now, with social media and Google, youth have all the information at their fingertips. When they speak, they speak with authority and confidence and have done their research. They are very passionate and knowledgeable. The Government just needs to give them the opportunity to express themselves – to be a representative on climate change."

Several NGO initiatives also aim to build skills and confidence among youth to encourage their meaningful participation. Take the Lead Tonga, for example, is a youth-led organization that provides leadership education and resources to empower the youth of Tonga. Established in 2017, it is Tonga's first youth-led registered NGO.[107] Take the Lead runs a range of programmes, including:

- She Leads Fale Alea 'O Tonga – an annual programme for young Tongan women who are interested in pursuing a career in politics; participants learn about leadership and service and the roles of government and parliament, and involves a three-day mock parliament
- Youth and Politics – Tonga's first civic education programme for schools, which delivers an interactive programme to educate students across the country about the structure and role of the Tongan government and parliament, and their role and rights as citizens
- Take the Lead Talanoa – a networking event that connects Tongan leaders from different fields with future leaders through a discussion forum
- A mentorship programme that connects youth and emerging leaders with mentors in key industries[108]

4.6 Communication and technology

The Pacific telecommunications sector has undergone substantial change in recent years, resulting in lower access costs and increased uptake of information and communication technology (ICT).[109] Youth have been fast adopters of new ICTs, with a proliferation of youth users on social media sites in the Pacific. The increased use of ICTs, particularly social media platforms, has enabled the creation of new virtual communities, offering a new tool and platform for youth participation. Across the Pacific region, "activists are increasingly recognizing the potential of the internet and social media as a force for social change and

[107] Take the Lead Tonga: https://www.taketheleadtonga.com/home

[108] *Ibid.*

[109] Titifanue, J., Tarai, J., Kant, R., & Finau, G. (*2016*). From social networking to activism: The role of social media in the free West Papua campaign. Pacific Studies, 39(*3*), 255–281.

a vehicle for the inclusion of marginalized groups".[110] For youth, social media offers "the chance to join borderless communities and engage in political activism and talk away from the reach of media censorship and adult control".[111]

> "Social media is a real change maker. Social media is the one way youth have been able to be more active. But it means they are active on social media, and people are not seeing this at the village level. People in the village will say they are not active, but the young people are active but in a different way."
>
> – Representative of UN Women

> "The popularity of social media, it means youth in Fiji can make up their own minds, make their own decisions. In the past, it was the parents who decided everything for their kids, but now things have changed. There is more access to information and they can get more involved in decision-making; they are more opinionated, when in the past they would be more silent. It's because of social media … It has brought about that opportunity and allowed the students to get together and discuss things."
>
> – Representative of Fiji National University

The research found that youth are using social media as a communication and mobilizing tool to support youth engagement. Platforms such as Viber, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp enable them to connect and form virtual groups.

> "Most of the youth nowadays are accessing social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube – so we need more awareness-raising through social media. A lot of youth in the provinces are accessing social media – we should use it as a platform to raise awareness."
>
> – University of South Pacific student

Online forums are also being used by youth who may feel unable to engage in political advocacy and decision-making in face-to-face forums, due to social structures and cultural barriers that may prevent them from engaging meaningfully. One research participant in Solomon Islands, for example, is a well-known youth climate activist who developed her profile on social media, bringing national and international attention to the impacts of climate change in Solomon Islands.

> "It started when I got to university, and part of that was not having the knowledge of how to come out and use my voice. It started out of my climate advocacy work. One of my grandparents' islands was submerged. [A lecturer] helped to get my story out into the media and I found my voice and used different platforms that I was a part of. Mostly, I was using my social media to put out communications on health issues, the environment, etc."
>
> – Youth leader and climate activist, Solomon Islands

The evidence suggests that social media and other online platforms could be harnessed to mobilize, engage and support youth and youth-led initiatives. However, more research is needed to understand the use of online spaces and their safety. While communication and technology can bring opportunity, they can also expose children and young people to online risks and harm.

---

[110] *Ibid.*

[111] Patrick Vakaoti (*2017*), Young people's participation in Fiji: Understanding conceptualizations and experiences, *Journal of Youth Studies,* 20:6, p. 700.

5. Conclusion

Youth in the Pacific Islands are highly engaged in many aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life, particularly through collective actions as part of their community or church-affiliated youth groups. While this engagement brings great benefit to youth and to their communities, young people's role in leading and directing these actions is variable, with some groups heavily directed by community leaders.

In some of the focus countries, structures for youth participation are in place at community and subnational level, while in other countries there are no established youth representative positions. Even where youth are invited into governance spaces, these opportunities are at times limited to specific issues or constrained by cultural expectations of deference to elders.

There is an absence of direct and sustained engagement opportunities at the national government level, though ad hoc initiatives such as youth parliaments enable selected youth to gain knowledge, skills and confidence in national governance. National youth councils provide an important forum for youth mobilization and engagement, though they have been largely inactive in some countries in recent years, having suffered from a lack of funding and support.

While each country has certain elements of an enabling environment for youth participation, some gaps remain. These include social, age-based and gender-based hierarchies; limited coordination among key government agencies; funding gaps that limit the ability to support all youth groups; a lack of sustained initiatives to help youth develop the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to participate meaningfully; and limited initiatives to support the meaningful participation of marginalized youth and youth in vulnerable situations.

Nonetheless, the research found that, where youth have been given the necessary space and support, they have demonstrated considerable skill and motivation to engage in meaningful ways and to lead actions that have brought considerable benefits to youth, to their communities and to state and national governments.

With the right opportunities and a positive enabling environment in place, Pacific Island youth could be supported to engage and participate in more meaningful ways that bring even greater benefits to themselves, their communities and their nation.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to strengthen the enabling environment for youth participation, and to improve the forums and avenues available for youth to meaningfully engage in their communities and beyond.

6.1 Participation structures and avenues

- Where it does not already exist, advocate for and support a recognized youth representative role in decision-making bodies, including in community, subnational and national government. Ensure that the role is an elected role, that there is even gender representation, and that representatives are within the youth age range.
- Consider advocating for separate meetings with community and youth leaders to create a safe space for youth engagement in community decision-making. Also consider the development of a space specifically for young women to promote more direct engagement of young women in community decision-making.
- Ensure that national (and subnational, where they exist) youth councils are adequately resourced and supported to be an effective avenue for youth participation. Consider providing a salary or stipend for elected executive members and office holders and providing capacity-building opportunities for members.
- Develop a youth-friendly process or youth board (perhaps through the national youth council) to promote sustained youth engagement in state and national policy developments, programme development and monitoring, particularly in areas that youth are interested in.
- Support a learning exchange, in which youth who have led effective actions and initiatives in their communities or states visit other youth groups to share ideas about how to develop and run effective youth-led actions. A regional learning exchange could also be supported.
- Develop a youth leadership mentor programme in each country. Identify expert mentors from government and other institutions in key fields of interest to young people (e.g., climate action, disaster risk reduction, mental health or social issues.). These mentors can provide potential youth leaders and youth groups with access to knowledge and connections to enable them to develop platforms and initiatives.
- Identify a sustained funding source to support a national youth parliament every two years. The national youth parliament model could be strengthened to ensure:
  - the involvement of youth from a diverse range of locations, with specific positions set aside for youth representing marginalized groups (youth with disabilities, youth with diverse SOGIESC, youth who are /out of school, youth who have been in conflict with the law, etc.).
  - a roughly even gender representation
  - representation of youth from a range of ages
- The model should bring youth together in one location for several days and include training/capacity-building and confidence-building. It should conclude with debates on topics selected by youth and the development of a series of recommendations or road map to be presented to parliament. A follow-up mechanism should be developed, in which parliament consider the recommendations and report back to youth members about how these will be addressed. Individual MPs could be identified to provide ongoing follow-up and support to potential youth leaders.

6.2 Increasing access to youth participation avenues and platforms

- Develop safe spaces for young women to meaningfully engage in decision-making at all levels, including, for example, community discussion groups for young women.
- Develop and deliver (or support, where this is already being carried out effectively by an NGO) a leadership or mentoring programme for young women leaders.
- Develop dedicated positions for young women in key participation spaces such as NYC leadership and youth representative roles.
- Ensure targeted support (such as funding, training and technical support) to address the needs of specific initiatives developed by and for young women, youth with disabilities, adolescents/younger youth, youth who have dropped out of school and youth with diverse SOGIESC.
- Support emerging youth-led NGOs and initiatives that are addressing barriers to the participation of marginalized groups of youth.

6.3 Enabling environment

- Educate community leaders and national government members about the importance of meaningful youth participation and including youth representatives in decision-making forums. This could include presenting the examples identified in this research of effective youth leadership and effective development of community initiatives by youth.
- Ensure youth have the necessary cultural competency to enable culturally appropriate methods of engagement at the village level.
- In countries in which they are not currently in place, support the development of an updated multi-sector national youth policy, in partnership with youth (e.g., through the national youth council), along with a concrete implementation plan with actions, assigned duty bearers, costing and budget sources, and a monitoring, reporting and governance framework.
- Ensure national youth ministries/divisions are adequately resourced and staffed with youth officers whose role is to support community-based youth-led initiatives and actions.
- Develop or strengthen access to a 'ground-up' funding mechanism to support youth-led local and national initiatives. The funding could be delivered through youth officers.
- Develop a register (ideally in the form of a digitized, centralized system) of youth groups, youth service providers and funding and other support opportunities to help coordinate youth programmes and connect youth and youth groups to financial and technical support.
- Link youth to existing training programmes focusing on leadership, programme development, technical knowledge and technology skills.

Annex A: Methodology

A.1 Conceptual frameworks

The research adopted a **rights-based approach** to map and analyse the enabling environment for youth participation. Participation was understood through a rights-based lens, and this included framing the assessment in terms of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a central provision. However, the mapping and assessment also include other key, related rights contained in the CRC and other international instruments, as set out above (section 1.4). Advancing gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, and creating inclusive environments is essential to realizing the rights of all children. A rights-based approach also necessitates a **gender-responsive approach** as these approaches are complementary and mutually reinforcing (for the latter, it is important to focus on the different situations experienced and roles played by men and boys and women and girls in a given society; and for the former, it is important to apply a normative framework based on entitlements and obligations). The research involved an examination of the unequal realization of youth participation according to gender and other categories (e.g., disability; age; socioeconomic context; care status.) and an analysis of how these inequalities impact on the realization of participation rights.

Landscape analysis

To examine the landscape for youth participation, we adapted the Lundy Model for Child Participation (2014) (see section 1.3). While it is focused on children, this model offers a practical understanding of how meaningful youth participation can be conceptualized, with a focus on four features of meaningful participation: space; voice; audience; and influence, as shown in Figure 1.[112] The research examined the structures and opportunities for youth participation at different levels of a youth's social ecology: family; institutions (schools, workplaces, NGOs, etc.); community; sub-national government (division, province, state etc.); and national government. While youth participation also concerns the ability for youth to engage in matters concerning them individually (e.g., within legal proceedings or decisions about their care and education as an individual), this is beyond the scope of the present study, which is focused on collective participation platforms and how youth devise and engage with them.[113]

Enabling environment analysis

The research adopted an enabling environment framework (see Table 1) to examine the support systems in place to enable youth participation. An enabling environment includes "those factors within adolescents' environments that serve to support, strengthen, and sustain meaningful participation".[114] We aimed to identify the gaps, barriers and opportunities created by the enabling environment.

[112] *Ibid.*

[113] Participation platforms within schools and other education institutions were not the primary focus of the study.

[114] UNICEF, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation, 2018.*

Table 1: Enabling environment framework

Enabling environment component	Description	Key research questions
Social norms and power structures	Social norms and practices that support youth participation are an important part of the enabling environment. Dominant social norms in political and social power structures can serve to impede youth participation. Hierarchies of power and control within societies may result in the view that adolescent and youth participation is unnecessary or threatening. These hierarchies may be justified in terms of "adolescent incapacity, need for protection, traditional gender role expectations, fear of disruption and need for discipline".[115] Other forms of oppression and discriminatory power structures and social norms can compound these barriers for particular groups of children, for example, younger youth, youth with disabilities, or girls. Measures to engage with, challenge and potentially change these norms, and to demonstrate the individual, familial and societal benefits of greater democratic engagement with adolescents, will help to create a positive enabling environment for youth participation.	• (How) is youth participation understood and valued among those in positions of power and authority? • What power structures at the family, community, institutional (e.g., schools) and broader political level create barriers to youth participation? • What power structures at the family, community, institutional and broader political level support youth participation? • What social norms and beliefs create barriers and provide support or opportunities for youth participation? • What gender role norms and expectations exist at the family, community, institutional and broader political level that create barriers or opportunities for youth participation? • What challenges do youth in vulnerable situations face in engaging in youth participation (e.g., youth with disabilities, youth living in remote areas, youth with diverse SOGIESC, including LGBTQIA+ youth).
Legal, policy and operational environment	The right to youth participation should be underpinned by a comprehensive legislative and policy framework. Setting out legislative rights and an operational environment for youth participation in legal and policy frameworks helps to ensure that youth participation is not a one-off, tokenistic exercise, but is institutionalized and integrated into decision-making processes at all levels.	• (How) is youth participation enshrined in key laws and policies? How comprehensive and rights-compliant is this legal and policy framework? • Does the legal and policy framework for youth participation recognize other connected rights – e.g., non-discrimination, right to information, right to association, right to freedom of expression?
Supportive governance structures	Robust governance structures that support the right to youth participation through a strong government mandate are also key components of the enabling environment. Governance structures and mandates for youth participation should be institutionalized, including within ministries for youth, interministerial and coordinating bodies and legal entities such as youth councils. Processes for the recognition of youth initiatives as legal entities such as NGOs also support a strong environment for youth participation.	• Is there a government institution or body that holds the (legal) mandate for supporting youth participation and youth institutions? How well resourced and supported is this institution? • Is there a legally constituted youth organization to support participation? • Is there a process for legal recognition or institutionalization of youth-led bodies and initiatives?

[115] Ibid.

Enabling environment component	Description	Key research questions
Operational environment (avenues for youth participation)	Adolescents must be provided with the time and opportunities for their opinions to be heard, and to be able to influence decisions affecting them. Opportunities for individual adolescents to be heard should be 'institutionalized' – that is, built into in key institutions and processes. Support should be provided for adolescents to organize, identify issues of concern, and gain access to relevant policymakers. This might involve providing opportunities to undertake research, develop strategies for action, provide mutual support, and campaign and advocate for change, either online or through more traditional routes.	• What avenues exist for youth to be heard within institutions (schools, community governance structures, workplaces, courts, national political processes, regional and international forums)? • What strategies are in place to support and enable youth-led initiatives?
Awareness of the right to participate	Youth must be aware of their right to participation and of the avenues and opportunities that support and provide for their meaningful participation at all levels. Professionals working with and for youth need to understand the implications of those rights for their day-to-day practice and the institutions in which they work, and begin to transform the cultures within those institutions. There is a need to strengthen human rights education in schools and colleges, and to provide education on human rights for adult professionals.	• (How) do youth learn about their right to participation? • (How) do youth know about the different avenues and opportunities that exist to support youth participation? • What education is available (both formally and informally) to raise awareness and knowledge of youth participation rights and opportunities?
Skills and capacities	Investment should be made to build the skills and capacities of children, adolescents and youth to enable them to exercise their rights to participation. This can only happen if adults are simultaneously provided with the knowledge, skills and capacities to enable them to work with adolescents in a participatory and inclusive manner, consistent with their human rights.	• What programmes are in place to ensure children, adolescents and youth are able to realize their right to participation? • What measures are in place to upskill and support adults to work with adolescents and youth and support their participation?

Source: UNICEF, 2018, *Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation.*

A.2 Data-collection methods

The research used a **mixed-methods approach**, which included both qualitative and quantitative methods. A mixed methodology was used to enable the collection of data that was both in-depth (qualitative) and objective/comprehensive (quantitative), and to ensure the validity of results through data triangulation. It also enabled a wider cross-section of youth and other stakeholders to be involved in the assessment, including those in more remote locations. Data collection took place in: FSM (Pohnpei and Chuuk); Fiji (Nadi, Labasa and Suva); Kiribati (South Tarawa); Palau (Koror); Samoa (Apia); Solomon Islands (Honiara); Tonga (Tongatapu and Vava'u); and Vanuatu (Efate and Espiritu Santo). The following methods were used (not all methods were utilized in each country):

Desk review

The team carried out a desk review of key laws and policies, along with available data and reports on the youth participation landscape in the eight PICs. The purpose of the desk review was to inform the development of the methodology, finalize the research questions, and provide the basis for the study's comprehensive mapping, data-collection tools and analytical framework.

Consultative key informant interviews

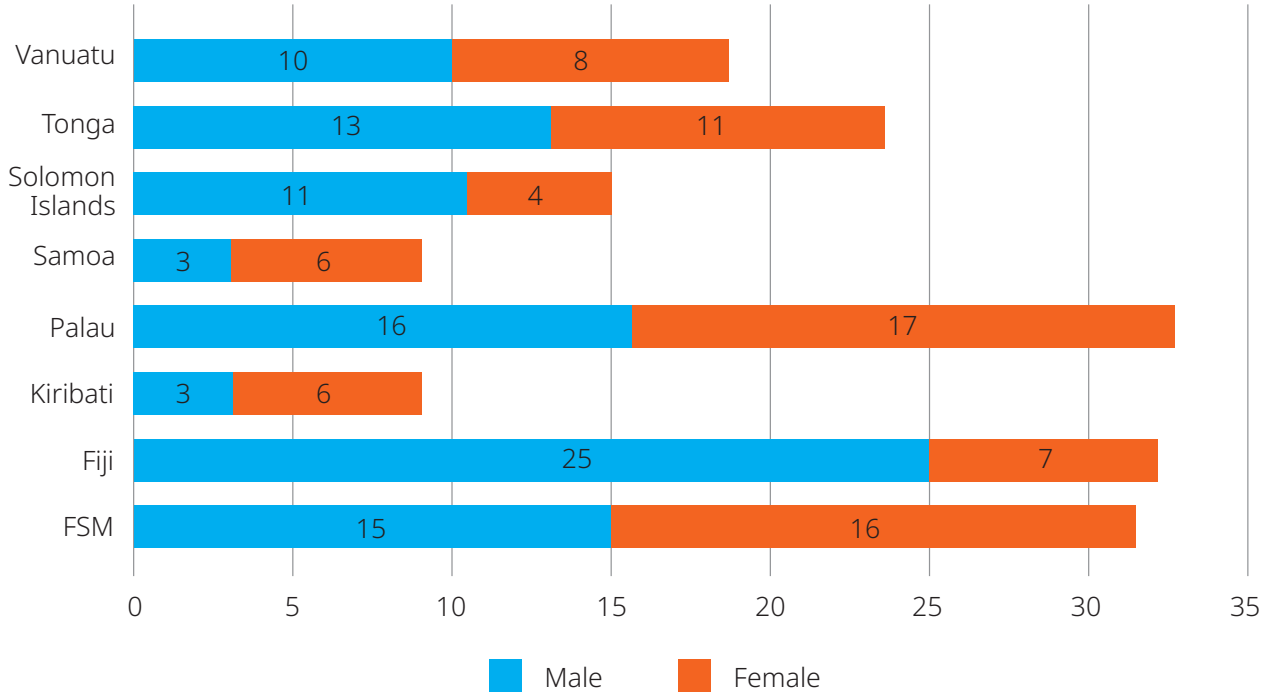
A series of consultative in-person and virtual interviews were carried out with key informants from relevant government ministries, departments and agencies; non-government organizations; and youth-led organizations and initiatives. Participants were identified and recruited through key government ministries, UNICEF Pacific and other partners in each of the eight countries, and through a snowball technique in which participants were asked to nominate other key stakeholders who they felt would provide valuable contributions to the research topics. The purpose of the key informant interviews (KIIs) was to gather information to support the mapping of youth participation forums and initiatives, and to collect in-depth information on the enabling environment for youth participation from those in key positions or with in-depth knowledge of the enabling environment. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a data-collection tool (attached at Annex B.3).

In total, **118 consultative KIIs were carried out with 171 participants** (governments, NGOs and youth leaders) in FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Palau,[116] Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, as detailed in Figure 5.

© UNICEF/UNI521910/Martin San Diego

[116] 18 of these interviews were carried out for the purpose of informing Palau's National Youth Policy development, for which the author was engaged as a consultant.

Figure 5: Research participants involved in key informant interviews by country and gender (n = 171)

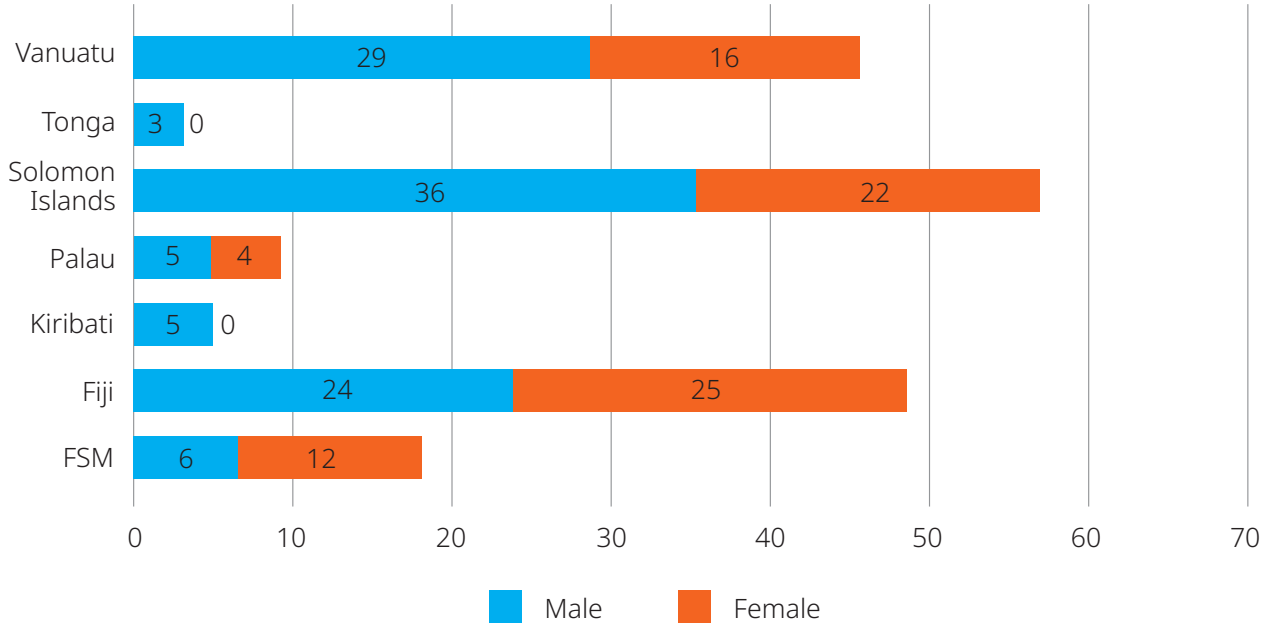


Focus group discussions with groups of youth

A series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with groups of youth in all countries except Samoa. The aim was to collect in-depth data on community perceptions, including the opportunities for and challenges to youth participation, from the perspective of youth. Participants were recruited from community youth groups and youth organizations and initiatives through contacts provided by UNICEF Pacific, key government ministries and partners, NGOs and service providers. Discussion guides were developed for the FGDs (attached at Annex B.4).

In total, **23 FGDs were carried out in with 187 youth,** as detailed in Figure 6**.**

Figure 6: Research participants involved in youth FGDs by country and gender (n = 187)



Enabling environment survey

A short, online quantitative survey was developed and, where possible, disseminated through UReport – an open-source mobile messaging programme managed by UNICEF Pacific and partners. The aim was to collect objective, measurable data on youth perceptions of the strengths of, and challenges for, youth in each country, as well as the extent to which youth feel they are able to participate in decision-making at various levels. While not representative in the technical sense, the survey provided a snapshot of perceptions about the extent of meaningful youth participation in communities. As dissemination of the survey was limited to countries in which UReport was active, responses were collected in FSM, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.[117]

In total, **the survey received 709 responses** across the three countries (286 in Fiji, 313 in Solomon Islands and 110 in Vanuatu). Responses were roughly even by gender in Fiji and Solomon Islands, though more responses were received from females (68 per cent) than from males (32 per cent) in Vanuatu. In total, 65 per cent of responses were from those in the youth age range.[118]

Mapping form

An online form was developed to enable a detailed mapping of youth participation platforms, institutions, forums, clubs and initiatives. The form collected data on locations, members, areas of engagement, registration status, funding sources and so on. The purpose was to provide a comprehensive picture of the different youth-focused and youth-led initiatives in the focus countries. Given the time limitations for the study, it was possible to disseminate the mapping form only in those countries in which a government-led process was already under way (FSM and Kiribati). The mapping form is attached at Annex B.1.

In total, **70 youth organizations and groups** responded to the mapping form.

[117] The survey was also disseminated to registered U-Report users in Kiribati; however, the response rate was quite low, so responses were not analysed.

[118] Using national definitions of youth in each country.

Figure 5: Summary of data collection in FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu

A.3 Data analysis

Data analysis, which involved reviewing and coding qualitative data to identify key themes, connections and explanations relevant to the research questions, was carried out at the country level in each of the focus countries. A basic descriptive analysis was carried out on data collected through the enabling environment survey and mapping form, and disaggregated data (e.g., by gender, location, age range) are presented where relevant. Data was triangulated to provide a multidimensional picture of the enabling environment for youth participation, and to ensure a comprehensive mapping of forums, initiatives and activities. In particular, the analysis sought to draw out specific findings related to gender dynamics, and the differing experiences of girls and boys, along with the specific challenges and opportunities for more marginalized and disadvantaged youth. This report presents a synthesis of these country-based analyses.

A.4 Validation

A first draft of several of the country reports was circulated among UNICEF Pacific key specialists and government and NGO partners. Written comments were collected and revisions were incorporated into this report accordingly.

A.5 Limitations and mitigation

Across all countries, it is possible that the data were affected by reporting bias, particularly among government and NGO research participants. In examining the enabling environment, the research addressed aspects of the professional experience of some participants, and it is possible that some may have attempted to present their role and experience in a more positive light. To mitigate against reporting bias, the researcher carefully explained to all participants that this was a learning-based exercise, that the anonymity of research participants would be protected, and that no negative personal or professional consequences would result from the information they shared.

Several country-specific limitations were encountered. In Kiribati, the researcher was unable to carry out data collection with national government stakeholders as a Bill to introduce a registration and regulatory process to govern research in Kiribati was before Parliament, meaning there was a freeze on national government partners taking part in data collection. This created a significant gap in the research and limits the ability for the findings to reflect national government information, priorities and perceptions in Kiribati. In Samoa, the researchers were unable to carry out focus groups discussions with youth as planned, owing to limited availability of key stakeholders to recruit participants and organize the discussions. In Vanuatu, planned data collection in Espiritu Santo was cut short due to the impact of Cyclone Lola, which landed during the data collection period. This limited the amount of data collection carried out in Espiritu Santo and in Port Villa, due to the unavailability of key stakeholders who were redirected to response efforts.

A.6 Ethics

The research was guided by the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis,[119] along with Coram International's Ethical Guidelines for Fieldwork (attached at Annex C). In summary, the following principles and ethical criteria guided the data collection process:

- Participation in data collection was voluntary, and participants were required to give informed consent to researchers in order for data collection to take place. Consent was given verbally and recorded by the researcher.
- The identity of all research participants was kept confidential throughout the interview and consultation process, as well as in the analysis and writing of reports. Strict data protection standards were followed (these are detailed in Coram International's Ethical Guidelines for Fieldwork, attached at Annex C). All participants were informed of their rights to anonymity throughout the research process, and were informed of any ways that their confidentiality could be compromised (e.g., through the use of specific job titles and institutions).

© UNICEF/UNI489216/Lasse Bak Mejlvang

[119] UNICEF, *Procedure for Ethical Standards, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis*, 1 April 2015, available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/54796/file

Annex B: Data-collection tools

B.1 Mapping survey/catalogue

The Ministry of [INSERT], together with UNICEF Pacific, is in the process of mapping out the different youth organizations and institutions and youth-led initiatives in eight Pacific Island countries, including [INSERT COUNTRY]. The purpose of this is to inform UNICEF Pacific's engagement with adolescents and youth in the different areas of its work, including health and nutrition; education; protection; water, sanitation and hygiene; social protection; climate and environment; human rights; gender and equity. The purpose is also to support the Government in strengthening youth engagement and youth-led initiatives more generally as part of their youth and other development policies and priorities.

Please take the time to answer the following questions, which should take around 15 minutes. Thank you!

Please complete the form by [ADD DATE]

Section A: Contact information		
1	**What is the name of your organization /initiative?**	
2	**What is your organization's office address (if applicable)?**	
3	**What is your organization's website (if applicable)?**	
4	**Can you please provide a contact person for your organization/ initiative?** *[This should be a senior member/decision maker who is able to answer enquiries about your organization]*	Name: Phone number: Email address:
Section B: Questions about youth organization/initiative		
5	**When was your organization/ initiative established?** *(Please write year)*	
6	**Please describe how it was established/formed?**	
7	**How would you best describe your organization/ initiative?**	☐ Government body/agency ☐ Registered non-governmental organization (NGO) or community service organization (CSO) ☐ Church-affiliated youth group ☐ Not-for-profit club (e.g., sporting club, activity group etc.) ☐ Informal member organization/collective ☐ Other (please specify)
8	**Does your organization/institution work at the national or subnational level** *(e.g., in the community/state/village etc.)?*	☐ National ☐ Subnational ☐ Both Please list location(s)

Section B: Questions about youth organization/initiative (cont.)		
9	**Does your organization/institution work at the regional (Pacific) level or in collaboration with organizations in other Pacific countries?**	☐ Yes Please list other organizations and describe partnership(s): ☐ No
9	**How many members of staff does the organization/initiative currently have?** *(Please include paid staff and volunteers)*	Total number: Number of men/boys: Number of girls/women: Number of persons who are gender-diverse/ third gender:
10	**How many members/participants/beneficiaries have been involved with your organization in the past 12 months?**	Total number: Number of men/boys: Number of girls/women: Number of persons who are gender-diverse/ third gender:
10	**Does your organization work specifically with any vulnerable groups of youth?** *(This may include youth with disabilities, youth with diverse SOGIESC, including LGBTQIA+ youth, youth who live in remote locations, youth who have been in conflict with the law, deprived youth, single parents, etc.)*	☐ Yes Please list/describe which groups and how you work with them: ☐ No
11	**How do the members/participants become involved in the organization/initiative?** *(Please describe)*	
12	**Please list the vision, objectives and/or goals of your organization/initiative?** *(If the organization/initiative does not have any documented vision, objectives and goals, please describe the general purpose of the organization/ initiative)*	
13	**Please list or describe the strategies or work of the organization/initiative.** *(i.e., how does the organization/initiative seek to achieve its purpose or goals?)*	

14 **Does your organization collaborate or partner with any other organizations or institutions?**

☐ No
☐ Yes

Please list institution(s)/organization(s) and describe nature of partnership/collaboration

15 **What are the funding sources, if any, of your institution/initiative?**

☐ Government funding sources

Please list amount(s) and relevant government institution/fund(s) over the past 12 months

☐ Other funding sources

Please list amount(s) and relevant institution(s)/fund(s) over the past 12 months

☐ No external funding sources

Section B: Questions about youth organization/initiative (cont.)

16 **What results has the institution/initiative achieved for youth?**

(Please describe, and support with data if possible, e.g., number of youth involved in programmes, outcomes for these youth etc.)

17 **What are the biggest challenges for your institution/organization in achieving its goals?**

(Please describe)

Thank you!

B.2 Enabling environment survey

[To be disseminated through UReport if possible]

The Ministry of [INSERT], together with UNICEF Pacific, is in the process of mapping out the different youth organizations and institutions and youth-led initiatives in eight Pacific Island countries, including [INSERT COUNTRY]. This process will also include an examination of the opportunities and challenges for youth to be involved in political action and decision-making, and other activities and initiatives. The purpose of this is to inform UNICEF Pacific's engagement with adolescents and youth in its work on climate and environment programming and other programming areas, and to support the Government in strengthening youth engagement and youth-led initiatives more generally.

We are very interested in your views on how youth engage in decision-making and how they are supported to lead initiatives in your country. Please take the time to answer the following questions, which should take around 10 – 15 minutes. Thank you!

Section A: Introductory questions

1 **Which state/island do you currently live in?**

(Please write)

2 **What is your gender**

(Please write)

3 **What year were you born?**

(Please write)

SECTION B: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUTH IN [INSERT COUNTRY]

5 **What do you think are the top three problems facing youth in [INSERT COUNTRY]?**

*(Please circle **three options only** from the list)*

(a) Mental health issues
(b) Poor nutrition (e.g., overweight/obesity)
(c) Sexually transmitted infections and risky sexual behaviours
(d) Limited education or training opportunities after high school
(e) Unemployment
(f) Financial problems
(g) Violence in the family
(h) Bullying
(i) Economic and social inequality
(j) Problems participating in political decision-making
(k) Environmental disasters and risks
(l) Challenges caused by climate change
(m) Disconnection from cultural heritage
(n) Other/s [*please write*].....
.....

SECTION B: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUTH IN [INSERT COUNTRY] (cont.)		
6	**What are the top three strengths of the [INSERT COUNTRY] youth population?** *(Please circle **three options only** from the list)*	(a) Well educated (b) Motivated (c) Healthy (d) Happy (e) Family-oriented (f) Community-focused (g) Entrepreneurial (h) Culturally aware (i) Socially conscious (j) Other/s [please write]..... .....
7	**Which youth populations face the most challenges in [INSERT COUNTRY]?** *(Please circle **three options only** from the list)*	(a) Youth with disabilities (b) LGBTI+ youth (c) Youth living in remote areas (d) Migrant youth workers (e) Single youth parents (f) Youth living in poverty (h) Other/s [please write]..... .....
8	**On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do adults listen to the views of youth in your community?**	Where 1 = not at all; and 5 = All the time/often
9	**On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent can youth get involved in community decision-making?**	Where 1 = not at all; and 5 = All the time/often
10	**On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent can youth get involved in national political decision-making?**	Where 1 = not at all; and 5 = All the time/often
11	**On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do people in power value the views of youth?**	Where 1 = not at all; and 5 = A lot
12	**On a scale of 1 to 5, to what extent do you think there are sufficient opportunities for youth to get involved in activities that interest them?**	Where 1 = not at all; and 5 = A lot

Thank you!

B.3 Question guide for key informant interviews

Participant job title:
Name of researcher(s):
Date:
Time:
Gender of participant:
Notes:

Introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview.

Section 1: Introduction

1. **Please can you introduce yourself and provide a brief explanation of your professional roles and responsibilities in relation to youth?**
   a. *[If relevant] Where does your mandate for youth derive from – law, policy, circular etc.*
   b. *Which (other) ministries, divisions or non-government entities do you collaborate with in your work on youth?*
   c. *What are your ministry's/organization's main priorities relating to youth?*
2. **What do you see as the main problems facing youth [in your area of work]?**
   a. *Prompt: Major trends or issues, drivers of youth problems, connection of youth problems with youth participation*

Section 2a: Youth participation initiatives (for government ministries, departments and institutions[120])

3. **What decision-making bodies or forums exist in your ministry/institution/organization etc?**
   a. *Can you please explain how these bodies can influence decision-making? How do youth get involved? What do they do?*
   b. *What feedback is provided to youth participants (if any)?*
   c. *What mechanisms exist for ensuring youth participation is incorporated into decision-making and outcomes are monitored and reported back to youth?*
4. **(How) can youth be involved in these decision-making forums?**
   a. *How are youth recruited?/How do they 'sign up'?*
   b. *Do you have spaces reserved for particular groups of youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, LGBTI+ youth)?*
   c. *(How) do you ensure an even gender mix?*
5. **Can you tell me about any (other) youth-led or youth-run initiatives that you are aware of?**
   a. *What other avenues exist for youth to participate in decision-making?*
   b. *In your view, are these initiatives effective in ensuring meaningful youth engagement? If not, why not? if so, how?*

Section 2b: Youth participation initiatives (for representatives of youth initiatives)

6. **Can you tell me more about your work for/with youth?**
   a. *What are your goals, objectives etc., and what strategies do you use to achieve these objectives?*
   b. *What are the main challenges in achieving these objectives?*
7. **Can you tell me about your members or the youth you work with?**
   a. *How did they get involved?*
   b. *How many do you have?*
   c. *Can you give me a profile – age range, gender, any vulnerabilities, location etc.?*

[120] For example, schools, courts / justice service providers, health service providers etc.

Section 2b: Youth participation initiatives (for representatives of youth initiatives) (cont.)

8. **Can you please tell me how your initiative supports youth engagement in decision-making?**
   a. *Does your work help youth to be better informed about and/or support youth participation? If so, how?*

Section 3: Enabling environment

Social norms and power structures

9. **(How) is youth participation understood and valued among those in positions of power/authority?** *(parents, schools/teachers, community leaders, local government leaders, national leaders)*
   a. *What awareness is there of the value of youth participation?*
   b. *What barriers or opportunities does this create for youth participation?*
10. **(How) do power hierarchies in society create challenges for youth participation?**
    a. *Within the family, schools, political processes etc.*
    b. *What about gender hierarchies? What is the position and role of women in society? How does this support or hinder participation for young women?*
11. **What social norms and beliefs create barriers and provide support/opportunities for youth participation?**
    a. *What gender norms and expectations exist at the family, community, institutional (e.g., schools) and broader political levels that create barriers or opportunities for youth participation?*
12. **What challenges do youth in vulnerable situations face in engaging in youth participation? (e.g., youth with disabilities, youth living in remote areas, youth with diverse SOGIESC, including LGBTQIA+ youth)**

Governance and operational environment

13. **Is there a government institution or body that holds the (legal) mandate for supporting youth participation/youth institutions?**
    a. *How well resourced and supported is this institution?*
14. **Is there a legal constituted youth organization to support participation, like a youth council/congress etc.?**
15. **Is there a process for legal recognition/institutionalization of youth-led bodies and initiatives?**
    a. *If yes, please provide details.*
    b. *If not/unsure – if a young person wanted to start a club/organization/initiative, how could they go about this? What support, if any, would be available?*
16. **What funding systems are in place to support youth-led initiatives? How can youth access funding?**
17. **(If not addressed above): What avenues exist for youth to be heard at different levels of government, including national and subnational (e.g., community) forums?**
    a. *What decision-making forums exist at the community/state level? How can youth get involved in these processes? What are the barriers to their participation in these forums?*

Awareness, skills and capacities

18. **(How) do youth learn about their right to participation?**
    a. *Do opportunities for learning exist in schools, colleges etc., or less formal settings?*
19. **(How) do youth know about the different avenues and opportunities that exist to support youth participation?**
    a. *E.g., if a young person was interested in participating in political decision-making or a particular issue, how would they go about it or find out what is going on?*
20. **How do youth gain the skills, confidence and capabilities they need to engage effectively in decision-making processes?**
    a. *Are there any initiatives to support the development of skills etc.?*
21. **What measures are in place to upskill and support adults in to work with adolescents and youth and support their participation?**

Section 3: Conclusion

22. **Is there anything further you wish to add?**

Thank you very much for your time.

B.4 Question guide for youth focus group discussions

Introduction

Hello and thanks very much for joining us today! We're excited to hear your views. We should be here for around 1.5 hours.

The Ministry of [INSERT], together with UNICEF Pacific, is in the process of mapping out the different youth organizations and institutions and youth-led initiatives in eight Pacific Island countries, including [INSERT COUNTRY]. We are also looking into the opportunities and challenges for youth in general and also in the way they are able to be involved in political action and decision-making. The purpose of this is to inform UNICEF Pacific's engagement with adolescents and youth in its work on climate and environment programming and other programming areas, and to support the Government in strengthening youth engagement and youth-led initiatives more generally.

We are very interested in your views on how youth engage in decision-making and how they are supported to lead initiatives in your country. But before we start, there are a couple of things to go over:

First, your participation here is completely voluntary – there is no obligation to take part, so please don't feel forced to stay. Also, please feel free to decide not to answer particular questions if you don't want to.

Second, we are not going to write your names down, and we won't use your names in any reports we write that uses the information from this discussion. So people might read your views and ideas, but they won't know it is coming from you. So please feel very free to be open and honest. There is no right and wrong, we are just interested in your views and opinions!

Section 1: Introduction

1. **Please can you introduce yourself – your name (which I won't write down), age and where you are from**
2. **First of all, what are some of the best things for youth living in [INSERT COUNTRY]?**
3. **What do you see as the main problems facing youth in [INSERT COUNTRY]?**
   a. *Prompt: why are these issues problems? What is driving these problems?*
4. **How can youth help address these problems?**

Section 2: Avenues for youth participation and enabling environment

5. **If there is a problem that a youth sees in their community [pick up on a problem mentioned above], what can they do to address it?**

Prompts:

   a. *Who are the decision makers that can help address the problem?*
   b. *What avenues are there to access decision makers?*
   c. *Would it be easy to address the problem with the decision makers? Why?/why not? What are the barriers?*
   d. *Would most youth take this kind of action? Why/why not?*
   e. *What would help youth have better access to decision makers?*

6. **More generally, what avenues or forums exist for youth to get involved in community decision-making?**
   a. *How do these forums work? What things are discussed? Can youth influence the agenda?*
   b. *Do youth usually get involved in these forums? Why/why not? How?*
   c. *Do youth feel listened to in these forums? Why/why not?*
   d. *What comes out of these forums? What results can be achieved? Do youth find out whether their views were taken on board?*

Section 2: Avenues for youth participation and enabling environment (cont.)

7. **What about in schools and colleges, etc. – are there student representative bodies?**
   a. *How do these bodies work? What things are discussed? Can youth influence the agenda?*
   b. *Do youth usually get involved in these bodies? Why/why not? How?*
   c. *Do youth feel listened to in these bodies? Why/why not?*
   b. *What comes out of these bodies? What results can be achieved? Do youth find out whether their views were taken on board?*
8. **How about at the national political level? What forums exist for youth to influence policies, laws, programmes and decisions at that level?**
   a. *How do these forums work? What things are discussed? Can youth influence the agenda?*
   b. *Do youth usually get involved in these forums? Why/why not? How?*
   c. *Do youth feel listened to in these forums? Why/why not?*
   d. *What comes out of these forums? What results can be achieved? Do youth find out whether their views were taken on board?*
9. **Are there certain youth who might find it more difficult to get involved in political or community decision-making?**

   Prompts:
   a. *Examples: youth with disabilities, young women, LGBT youth etc.*
   b. *Why?*
   c. *What could change this and make it easier for them?*
10. **(How) is youth participation understood and valued among those in positions of power/authority?** *(parents, schools/teachers, community leaders, local government leaders, national leaders)*

Section 3: Other youth initiatives

11. **What youth-led clubs, associations or initiatives exist in your community?**
    a. *e.g., sports clubs, environmental action, youth groups etc.*
12. **How did these clubs/initiatives get started?**
    a. *Who started it and why/how?*
    b. *Did anyone support – government funding, mentoring etc.?*
13. **What have been the outcomes – both positive and negative – from these initiatives?**
14. **Is it difficult to start such initiatives that are youth-led?**

    If so, why? What would help make it easier?

Section 3: Conclusion

15. **What do you think would improve life for youth in your community? What would make it easier for them to have their views heard?**

Thank you very much for your time.

Annex C: coram international ethical guidelines for field research

Each research project carried out by Coram International at Coram Children's Legal Centre (CCLC) is ethically reviewed and an ethical protocol is developed that is tailored and relevant to each piece of research. The reason for this is that different types of research will raise unique, context-specific ethical issues and it will be necessary to identify and address these issues on a project-specific basis. However, the guidelines below should be applied when carrying out all project-specific ethical reviews and when tailoring project-specific guidance.

1. Application of ethical guidelines

Child: For the purposes of these guidelines, a child will be considered to be a person below the age of 18 years, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 1).

The ethical guidelines apply to all field research carried out by Coram International and organizations and individuals carrying out research on behalf of Coram International. The guidelines do not apply to the consideration and selection of research projects.[121] They apply to: methodology selection and design; risk assessment and risk mitigation measures and the development of ethical protocols and tools; the design of data-collection tools; the collection, storage, collation and analysis of data; and the publication of research.

Note on research in light of COVID-19: These ethical guidelines continue to apply during the COVID-19 pandemic, but all field research must take into account the particular ethical risks and considerations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the risks and ethical implications of travel and of different forms of data collection. Primary concerns include the risks of transmission, the ability to protect children during virtual interviewing, the mental health and well-being of researchers and research participants, and the consequent impact on the reliability of the data (which can undermine the justification for research in the first place).

Information and advice have been compiled by several agencies, including UNICEF and academic institutions:

UNICEF, *Ethical considerations for evidence generation involving children on the COVID-19 pandemic*, April 2020, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/DP%202020–01%20CL.pdf.

University College London, *Guidance for research and ethical approval in light of the COVID-19 pandemic*, March 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/ethics/research-human-participants/guidance-research-and-ethical-approval-light-covid-19-pandemic.

The research project lead/team should consult the documents linked above, as well as local travel advice and expertise when finalizing the research protocols for each study.

[121] The reason for this is that, as consultants, Coram International's involvement in a research project typically starts at the point at which the research project, including its scope, focus and basic methods, have already been reviewed and necessary approvals received by the commissioning client. For projects initiated by Coram International, however, it is suggested that a harm/benefit analysis be carried out as part of the ethical review process.

2. Ethics review

All research project methodologies and data-collection, collation and analysis tools must be approved by the Director of Coram International, the Research Manager or the Research and Projects Manager, before they are deployed. The Director or managers will review research methodologies and tools in light of these Guidelines and best practice, and make revisions accordingly, which will then be incorporated into revised methodologies and tools.

In addition, ethical review may be carried out where required by the client and/or the particular research project.

3. Selecting researchers

Coram International takes steps to ensure that all external researchers have the necessary experience to carry out the research required. Where necessary, training will be provided to external researchers by Coram International staff on the rationale and methods for the data collection, good practice guidance on data-collection methods, and on the application and administration of the ethical protocol and tools.

4. Guiding principles

All research projects will be subject to the following ethical principles.

4.1 Do no harm and best interests of the child

It is of paramount importance that researchers protect the physical, social and psychological well-being and the rights, interests and privacy of research participants. The welfare and best interests of the participants are the primary consideration in methodology design and data collection. This applies to adult and child research participants.

In relation to child participants, all research is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 3.1, which states: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

The 'do no harm' principal applies throughout the research process, including in the selection and recruitment of research participants, the development of the research methodology and tools, and in the analysis, reporting and publication of data and findings.

It is the obligation of the researcher to identify and avoid harmful effects. If researchers identify that they are causing harm to a participant/s, the research will be stopped and the appropriate manager or designated lead informed.

Particular care will be taken to ensure that questions are asked sensitively and in a child-friendly manner that is appropriate to the age, gender, ethnicity and social background of the participants. Clear language will be used which avoids victimization, blame and judgement. Where it is clear that the interview is having a negative effect on a participant, the interview will be stopped. Any child protection or other safeguarding concerns are identified and dealt with appropriately (see section 4.9, below).

Children will be provided with the opportunity to participate in data collection with a trusted adult or friend if this would make them feel more at ease. Researchers should identify staff at institutions (e.g., schools, community groups, detention centres) that are available to accompany participants, if requested.

Interviews may cover particularly sensitive or traumatic material, and it is important to ensure that participants feel empowered and not solely like victims. Interviews should finish on a 'positive or empowering note' (e.g., through asking questions about what would improve the situation of children in the relevant study sample). This helps to ensure that children do not leave the interview focusing on past experiences of abuse. Where children reveal past experiences of violence or abuse, researchers will convey empathy, but will not show shock or anger, as this can be harmful to children who have experienced violence. The disclosure should be discussed with the designated manager/lead for the project.

Special measures may be needed when carrying out data collection remotely or virtually (e.g., through Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype etc.). In these cases, particularly where research participants are children, it may be necessary to ensure interactions take place in the physical presence of an adult with whom the child has a good rapport (e.g., a parent, where appropriate, or a social worker) in order to mitigate potential trauma caused by the interaction and provide immediate support to the participant where required.

4.2 Inclusion and non-discrimination

The research design and process will adhere to the principle of non-discrimination, as required by Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means that all children have an equal right to participate in the research without discrimination or bias. Specific groups of children will often be targeted for inclusion in a research project; however, this will only be done where and to the extent required for the purposes of the research.

The selection and recruitment of research participants will be done in an inclusive way and a manner which avoids entrenching existing vulnerability, inequality or marginalization of particular groups. Research methods and tools must enable the participation of diverse groups of persons.

4.3 Data collection must be necessary

It is important to ensure that unnecessary intrusion into the lives of participants is avoided. Researchers must ensure that the data being collected is necessary to address the research questions specific to each project. Data collection for extraneous purposes must be avoided.

4.4 Researchers must not raise participants' expectations

Researchers must carefully explain the nature and purpose of the study to participants, and the role that the data will play in the research project. Participants should also be informed that the purpose of the researcher's visit is not to offer any direct assistance. This is necessary to avoid raising expectations of participants that the researcher will be unable to meet.

4.5 Ensuring cultural appropriateness

Researchers must ensure that data-collection methods and tools are culturally appropriate to the particular country, ethnic, gender and religious context in which they are used. Researchers should ensure, where possible, that data-collection tools are reviewed by a researcher living in the country context in which research is taking place. Where possible, data-collection tools should be piloted on a small sample of participants to identify content that lacks cultural appropriateness and adjustments should be made accordingly.

4.6 Voluntary participation

Researchers must ensure that participation in research is on a voluntary basis. This extends to particular questions, and researchers must ensure that participants understand that they are not required to answer questions should they not wish to do so. Researchers will explain to participants in clear, age-appropriate language that participants are not required to participate in the study, that they do not need to answer all the questions they are asked, and that they may stop participating in the research at any time. Researchers will carefully explain that refusal to participate will not result in any negative consequences.

Where possible and appropriate, participants may be provided with material reimbursement, and/or compensation for time spent contributing to the research. However, the use of material reimbursement/compensation (whether and how it should be given and what form it will take) will be dependent on the cultural context in which research is being carried out. This should be informed by consultation with stakeholders and consideration of what is appropriate in a given context. Researchers must be careful to ensure that compensation/reimbursement does not unduly influence, pressure or coerce children to participate in the research, and that their consent is freely given.

4.7 Informed consent

Researchers must ensure that all participants consent to their involvement in the research. Consent must be informed, given voluntarily and is renegotiable throughout the research activity. In the case of children, whether consent can be given independently (i.e., without a consenting adult) will depend on the context and the child's capacity (see next paragraph).

At the start of all data collection, research participants will be informed of the purpose and nature of the study, their contribution and how the data collected from them will be used in the study. Special care must be taken to ensure that especially vulnerable children give informed consent or that it is sought. In this context, vulnerable children may include children with disabilities or children with learning difficulties or mental health issues. Informed consent could be obtained through the use of alternative, tailored communication tools and/or with the help of adults who work with the participants.

Consent must be indicated through an explicit act – either verbally and recorded by researchers or through an information and consent form. The form that the act of consent takes will be dependent on the context and will be informed by consultation with stakeholders. Information and consent forms will be used where this would be appropriate and not intimidating for participants. The information and consent form should explain, in clear, accessible, age-appropriate language, the nature of the study, the participant's expected contribution and the fact that participation is entirely voluntary. Researchers should talk participants though the consent form and ensure that they understand it.

However, in some cultural contexts, written consent may be inappropriate, intimidating or highly problematic, if written practices are different or hold other meanings, for example, related to deception, domination or abuse. Flexible means of providing information and signifying consent are essential for participants who are not able or willing to use written methods. Signing consent forms can be problematic and/or intimidating for those who are not physically able to, and populations who are not literate or are particularly vulnerable. In situations where children or parents do not provide written consent, it is important to have a planned process and witnesses (or means of auditing) that can verify a proper process was followed and can confirm that the child appears to have given their consent freely. Researchers will explain the nature and purpose of the study, the participant's expected contribution, and the way the data they contribute will be used, and request the verbal consent of the participants to conduct research and then record that permission has been granted. Special effort must be made to explain the nature and purpose of the study and the participant's contribution in clear, age-appropriate language. Researchers will request the participant to relay the key information back to them to ensure that they have understood

it. Participants will also be advised that the information they provide will be held in strict confidence (see section 4.8, below).

In relation to child participants, **whether consent is also by a parent or guardian** will be a matter to be decided in relation to the context of the research and the child's capacity. Ability for children to consent independently may be regulated by law, which may require the consent of a parent or carer for a child under a certain age. In contexts or situations not guided by law, the decision on whether consent from parents/carers is needed will be made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the nature and context of the research and the age and capacity of participants, and depending on the relevant legal provisions in the country in which research is being conducted.

4.8 Anonymity and confidentiality

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is of the utmost importance. The identity of all research participants will be kept confidential throughout the process of data collection as well as in the analysis and writing up study findings. The following measures will be used to ensure anonymity:

- Interviews will take place in a secure, private location (such as a separate room or corner or outside space) which ensures that the participant's answers are not overheard.
- Researchers will not record the name of participants and will ensure that names are not recorded on any documents containing collected data, including on transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions.
- Where use of personal computers is necessary, researchers will delete electronic records of data once transferred to CCLC for storage.
- CCLC will store all data on a secure, locked server, to which persons who are not employed by the Centre cannot gain access.
- Research findings will be presented in such a way as to ensure that individuals are not able to be identified.

All participants will be informed of their rights to anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. Participants should be informed about any situations where it is possible that their confidentiality will be compromised. This may occur where, in a particular, named setting, the background information relating to a participant may make it possible for them to be identified even where they are not named.

When collecting and processing personal data from European Union countries, researchers must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation.

4.9 Addressing safeguarding/child protection concerns

During the data-collection process (e.g., in individual interviews and also possibly group interviews), participants may disclose information that raises safeguarding or child protection concerns (e.g., information indicating that they are currently at risk of or are experiencing violence, exploitation or abuse). This will require preparation and consultation and an immediate and sensitive response from researchers and follow-up to appropriate support and referral services.

Prior to the data collection taking place, researchers should be provided with copies of the child protection policies and procedures of each institution from which participants are recruited (e.g., schools, community groups, detention facilities) and should familiarize themselves with child protection referral mechanisms and child protection focal points. This should be discussed with a manager or designated safeguarding lead and a decision made about whether to raise an alert. At this point, the safeguarding policy and procedures must be followed.

In the event that the child interviewee reveals that they are at high risk of ongoing or immediate harm, or discloses that other children are at high risk of ongoing or immediate harm, the researcher will prioritize obtaining the child's informed consent to report this information to the appropriate professional as set out in the child protection policy, or, in the absence of such a policy, the person with authority and professional capacity to respond. If the child declines, the researcher should consult with an appropriate designated focal point, as well as the lead researcher and other key persons in the research team (on a need-to-know basis), concerning the appropriate course of action in line with the child's best interests. If a decision is made to report this information to the designated professional, the child interviewee is carefully informed of this decision and kept informed of any other key stages in the reporting and response process.

In some cases, it will be more likely that child safeguarding concerns may arise. Where this is the case, researchers should ensure that a risk assessment is completed and/or research is carried out with a social or support worker who is able to give assistance and advice to the participant where necessary.

4.10 Ensuring the safety and well-being of researchers and participants

Steps must be taken to ensure that data collection takes place in a safe environment. Risks must be assessed as part of the development of the ethical protocol and review, along with steps taken to mitigate these risks. Participants should, where possible, be interviewed with at least two persons present (two researchers; one researcher and one interpreter; one researcher and a social worker; or one researcher and a note taker), or, if interviewed with only one person present, all reasonable steps must be taken to conduct the research in a safe space that allows for private conversation that cannot be overheard, but where the child and researcher are not placed at risk by, for example, being interviewed in a closed room.

Researchers will sign a code of conduct as part of the consultancy agreement or employment with Coram International.

Coram International will take measures to support the mental well-being of researchers. Field researchers will be provided with the opportunity to de-brief with the manager of the research project or member of staff responsible for supervising data collection. As part of the development of the ethical protocol, Coram will consult with its client and other key stakeholders in order to identify service providers (e.g., counsellors) who are able to provide support to researchers should this be required.

UNICEF
Pacific Multi Country Office
Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati,
Rebublic of Marshall Islands (RMI),
Federated States of Micronesia
(FSM), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa,
Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga,
Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

United Nations Children's Fund
3rd Floor, FDB Building,
360 Victoria Parade
Suva, Fiji

Telephone: (679) 3300439
Email: suva@unicef.org

unicef
for every child

Design by Iris Communication