ACTIVATE – SDG AWARENESS BUILDING & MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH

“This year’s High-Level Political Forum has brought more voices and views of young people to the Forum than ever before. As Council President, I have undertaken to do this with the hope it will be the start of a new normal within the United Nations and our own countries—and that is one where the voices of children and youth are consistently and systematically heard, and their ideas are taken into account as we work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.”

– Inga Rhonda King, 74th President of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

KEY ASKS

Just as people’s participation was a hallmark of the SDG negotiations’ process — infusing increased ambition and legitimacy into that process — people’s participation must continue and be strengthened for SDG implementation in all countries. Thus, a key aspect of monitoring, follow-up and review will be to foster awareness of the SDGs among the public as well as encouraging their active participation in public participation in these processes — from the community, national, regional and global level, serving as the “people’s reality check” on if the SDGs are delivering on their promises on the ground (or not).

1. The process for preparing the national review should directly involve children and adolescent girls and boys.

For example, through consultations (on and/or offline), surveys, focus group discussions, etc. UNICEF together with civil society, child-focused organizations and other partners could support the government in that process. Child, adolescent and youth participation should be meaningful. This means providing them with the space (a safe and inclusive space to express their views), the voice (appropriate information and facilitation for the expression of young people’s views) and the audience (mechanisms to ensure that their views are taken into due consideration). When participation is meaningful, young people’s opinions have an influence, and they feel more empowered to make a change.

The results of this effort as well as the methods employed should be described in the national review report, including the number of children, adolescents and youth involved in the process. A deliberate effort should be done to meaningfully engage young people that are marginalized or excluded (e.g. children with disabilities, street children, children without parental care, children living in poverty, ethnic/minority children, refugee or migrant children etc.). Managers should allocate more time, resources and skilled facilitation to ensure inclusive, safe and meaningful participation for the most marginalized and excluded. Further, the reporting back on how children, adolescents and youth have been involved in the process could be part of a special report or dedicated chapter of the VNR. For example, in 2017 Slovenia had a special report within their VNR entitled: Youth in Slovenia in the context of the 2030 Agenda\(^2\), which was produced by the National Youth Council of Slovenia based on a survey that the youth group conducted with their peers across the country. This should be considered an example of good practice.

Perception data collected through participatory monitoring activities are an essential “reality check” and useful complement to official data and statistics. Perception data is collected directly from people/constituencies and aims to understand their personal views/perceptions on key topics (e.g. healthcare, education). Moreover, perception data polls/surveys differ from other instruments like traditional household surveys in that the main motivation is to uncover what people think and solicit their views on specific issues. These channels allow people who participate in such activities to share whether or not the SDGs are resulting in positive changes to their lives, schools, communities, etc. and can help to better inform governments and other key decision-makers on the views and ideas of their constituencies.

Although not a replacement for official data, collection and analysis of perception data can help governments take more informed, efficient and effective decisions and also to help fill data gaps, where official statistics are not available. A platform called U-Report – which emerged from UNICEF’s Innovation work and is currently operational in 61 countries and growing -- can be used to reach out to young people on their views and concerns on key issues via mobile phone, with summary reports of results being made available to government leaders and other key decision-makers.

2. Children, adolescents and youth should be made aware of the SDGs through the use of child-friendly education and learning materials.

The mandate for governments to report on building this awareness can be specifically found in targets 4.7 and 12.8 of Agenda 2030 which suggest:

Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.
Government Leaders -- including the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs -- have called on all Heads of Government for the SDGs to be taught to children in schools. UNICEF can support this effort, particularly due to our existing work in this space and creating child-friendly education and entertainment materials on the SDGs through our foundational partnerships on the World’s Largest Lesson2 and Comics Uniting Nations3. UNICEF’s Youth Activate Talk Methodology4 is also a platform from children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of mediums.

3. Awareness of the issues and participation in monitoring and accountability processes should be seen as part of a continuum to regularly, meaningfully and consistently engage children, adolescents and youth as agents of change to influence behaviors and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities.

This goes beyond engagement just for the purposes of reporting periods, but rather systematizing the engagement of young people in a variety of ways and across media and communications channels, including for example: digital platforms (including U-Report), participatory theatre, intergenerational community dialogues, community & children’s radio, participatory video, school clubs, TV Edu-tainment and child-participatory research.

4. World Children’s Day2 (20 November) is a day that Governments and other stakeholders can celebrate child rights and participation and make commitments to take further action.

The realization of child rights and the successful implementation of the SDGs are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Every year on the 20th of November is the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified human rights treaty in existence. While children and adolescents are taking action on the SDGs throughout the year in their lives, schools and communities, the occasion of World Children’s Day on 20 November is a key annual opportunity to amplify their voices; take stock of progress; and for governments, the private sector, civil society, the UN System and others to make new commitments towards fulfilling the rights of every child and meaningfully engaging children as global citizens and positive agents of change.

Implementation in Action: World Largest Lesson teaches over 500,000 young Nigerians about the SDGs in a single week

In 2015, UNICEF partnered with Project Everyone to launch the World’s Largest Lesson (WLL), a global initiative aimed at bringing the SDGs to the classroom through lesson plans, videos, comics and other creative content – available freely and in a multitude of languages for educators to download, use or adapt for their classrooms.

The inspiration behind the WLL is that the SDGs must be brought down to local realities if they are to succeed in changing the world for the better by 2030. Children, youth, families and communities must internalize how the issues represented by the SDGs affect their own daily lives and environments, whether that be on improving health and nutrition; the importance of early learning and quality education; fostering more peaceful communities where children live free from violence; or establishing more sustainable approaches to use and preservation of natural resources. When that understanding happens, people of all ages can be inspired to take action, resulting in sustained progress on these goals and shifts in social norms and behaviours in the long-term.

One of the most effective means for children to learn about these issues is through peer-to-peer learning. In October 2019, this was put into practice to great effect in Nigeria, where over 2500 youth volunteers taught the World’s Largest Lesson across the country5, reaching over 500,000 young Nigerians in a single week. UNICEF, UNESCO, Project Everyone and a host of local NGOs are now working with the Nigerian Government to reach millions of more children over the coming months and years, while also discussing options for the integration of SDG-focused education into school curricula.

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1 Youth in Slovenia in the context of the 2030 Agenda: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16313Slovenia.pdf
2 World’s Largest Lesson: http://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/
3 Comics Uniting Nations: http://www.comicsunitingnations.org/
4 https://www.unicef.org/media/60596/file
5 World Children’s Day: https://www.unicef.org/world-childrens-day/
6 World’s Largest Lesson in Nigeria: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvwEk5ONngw&feature=youtu.be