Over the last 25–30 years there has been noticeable progress made by young people, which has resulted in enormous achievements, in particular on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), which is without doubt a contentious topic. The new 2030 agenda lays the path for us young people to continue to safeguard the realization of SRHR for all, and to become united on burning issues, such as access to safe and legal abortion. The new agenda enables us to produce better results and ensure young people are at the heart of the new Sustainable Development Agenda, both in terms of involvement and decision-making processes.

January 1st 2017 marks the one-year anniversary of the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Together the international community, alongside civil society, academia and most importantly youth participated in negotiations on the new Sustainable Development Agenda, which ultimately guides the world’s priorities over the next 15 years.

Despite ambitious commitments, the SDGs did not manage to meet the needs of everyone. Young people’s SRHR were not fully represented. In the following article, young SRHR advocates demonstrate the unfulfilled needs and gaps with specific examples and reflections.

Youth friendly abortion care: the issue of parental consent

In keeping with youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, addressing the importance of youth-friendly abortion care is of the utmost importance. Statistics on unsafe abortions show that young women are at a greater risk. According to the latest available data from The Guttmacher Institute, around 22 million unsafe abortions are estimated to take place worldwide each year (1). Consequently, complications from unsafe abortions cause high-rates of morbidity and mortality, causing the death of approximately 47 000 women a year, where nearly half are young women (2).

Every year there are approximately 85 million unplanned pregnancies (3). Women who seek to terminate an unplanned pregnancy are often stigmatized (even within a less restricted national legal framework). Young women are often stigmatized, not only for seeking to terminate an unplanned pregnancy, but also for being sexually active in the first place.

The vast majority of countries in the European Region have no restrictions with regards to reasons for wanting to terminate a pregnancy (4). However, a lack of regulation on the reason for terminating a pregnancy does not mean that there is equal access to abortion for all women in a country. One often mentioned issue is cost, while another key barrier is parental consent. In the majority of countries within the European Region without restrictions on the reason for seeking abortion, adolescents and young women are required to obtain parental consent when seeking an abortion (5). This occurs even though the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has determined that in accordance with their evolving capacities, girls aged between 16 and 17 should be able to access SRH services without parental consent (6).

As a result all of the above leaves a large group of adolescents and young women greatly exposed. Their bodily autonomy is challenged by a combination of legal restrictions and the absence of regulations on their right to access safe and legal abortion.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as an instrument to empower young people

CSE “enables young people to protect their health, well-being and dignity. It is based on human rights principles and advances gender equality and the rights and empowerment of young people” - as reflected in the most recent Global Review of UNESCO (7).

High demand for access to CSE by young people was evidenced by the 2012 Bali Global Youth Forum Declaration, the 2014 Colombo Declaration on Youth, youth delegates’ inputs to the post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda and the AIDS Conference 2016 Youth Call. Ideally, one day every young person will have the ability to make life-changing decisions regarding their SRH. Yet research suggests that the majority of adolescents lack the knowledge required to make these decisions responsibly, leaving them vulnerable to coercion, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy (8). Furthermore, CSE goes beyond information, helping young people to explore their SRH in a positive way.

According to the data provided by the “All in” initiative, young people account for almost 50% of new HIV infections. According to UNFPA, only 21% of young people have adequate access to information on HIV/AIDS, while data from eastern Europe and central Asia indicates that the highest cases of teenage pregnancy are among adolescents and young girls up to the age of 18 (8). This data presents only a partial indication of how knowledge on youth and CSE could be used to change attitudes and behaviour leading to better SRH for young people worldwide.

An innovative example of providing free access to CSE is the newly developed social media platform “Global Hub for CSE Advocacy” (http://www. advocates4cse.com). It aims to empower experts and activists working in the field with adequate information and serves as a platform for exchanging good practices and relevant country data.

Understanding, nourishing and supporting youth leadership and participation

According to the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, “participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society (9).” Although this is how the concept is
defined in the preamble of the revised Charter, there is a considerable difference in how youth participation is perceived and practiced across and within countries in Europe.

Looking back, one of the milestones in recognizing the value of youth participation was at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action adopted in Cairo in 1994. This included a reference on the need for "Countries to meet the needs and aspirations of youth, particularly in the areas of formal and non-formal education (...) and health, thereby ensuring their integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political process and preparation for leadership roles (10)." It is considered to be one of the stepping stones that led to a shift in viewing young people not only as beneficiaries of health and education programmes, but as rights holders and capable actors that should have a say on issues that affect their lives, including their SRHR.

Since then, youth participation has been understood, nourished and practiced in several ways. The ICPD Review survey from 2014 revealed that most countries reported instituting concrete procedures and mechanisms for adolescents and youth to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that have a direct impact on their lives (11). The examples provided range from the existence of Youth Councils to mechanisms for involving young people in the drafting of youth laws (Georgia), the development of annual plans of action (Azerbaijan) and the organizing of Youth Governance Days (Republic of Moldova).

Although progress and achievements have been made, realizing and incorporating the values and principles that define meaningful youth participation is still a work in progress in many countries in Europe. One of the reasons could be linked to the general lack of strong evidence of the effect of youth participation on the impact of SRHR interventions (12). Therefore, while we should invest more in gathering data and evidence, we must continue our work to ensure that young people have the skills, the platforms and the support to contribute to the decisions and actions that immediately affect their lives.

Our involvement as today's youth is highly crucial in terms of the administration and execution of positive achievements and changes within the WHO European Region. Youth are clearly the foremost driving force to attain and maintain positive SRH in Europe. Despite a substantial amount of work undertaken by young people on SRHR over the last 25-30 years, we must continue to ensure that young people are actively involved in decision-making processes and that governments are held accountable for their commitments to young people's SRHR.

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