

Securing a constituency-based approach for youth engagement in NCDs



Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) accounted for more than 73% of the deaths globally in 2017—a 23% increase from 2008.¹ Of these, nearly 40% of deaths are premature² with three-quarters of them associated with unhealthy behaviours initiated during adolescence and early adulthood.³ These young people are a key target population for NCD interventions. However, with more than 50% of the world's population younger than 30 years,⁴ youth also represent a key stakeholder group and partner in the fight against NCDs.

Last year declarations from the third UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs⁵ and the WHO Global Conference on Primary Health Care⁶ were missed opportunities to recognise the role of young people both as rights-holders and a crucial part of civil society. Young people are already participating in the NCD movement as researchers, practitioners, activists, and community organisers. Similarly, there are many youth-led organisations in the global NCD space with important capabilities to offer. But the challenge continues to be that these groups generally work in silos and have different priorities. The absence of a well coordinated, inclusive, and enabling space for collective engagement in the NCD agenda leads to duplication of efforts and undermines the potential of youth advocacy at the global level. With the current approach, young people are not well represented as a constituency and are therefore seldom recognised for their potential.

This status quo needs to change, and a new approach is needed to promote collective engagement that leaves no one behind. Achieving this will require a number of changes. Youth-led organisations will need to overcome organisational silos to work more collectively towards our common goals. Additionally, we need political support from existing institutions that lead the NCD agenda to secure and strengthen organisational spaces for youth participation. Effective youth engagement will only be meaningful when it is non-prescriptive, and when youth get a seat at the table because they are recognised as contributing something valuable and not just to fill a checkbox that says youth.

To achieve this radical shift, there is a need to develop and strengthen the space for youth as an

organised constituency, drawing on the principles of meaningful engagement set out by the UN Major Group for Children and Youth and endorsed by the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development.⁷ We can also learn from within the NCD movement itself. For example the NCD Alliance's Our Views Our Voices model of engagement has positioned people living with NCDs as an important constituency in the NCD response by bringing them together in a collective way and supporting the development of a shared advocacy agenda that is promoted at global, regional, and national levels.

If we are to truly leverage the potential of the global youth constituency, we must do so in a way that is self-organised and rights-based. By bringing together youth-led organisations working in the NCD space, we can harness the power of these groups to advocate collectively and align priorities. This approach will provide a robust, inclusive, and sustainable mechanism to get young people involved in the global advocacy space. This is an opportune moment where young people have a crucial role as there is a need to ensure accountability to drive progress towards NCD targets.

To unite the efforts of youth-led groups, we propose the creation of a coalition of youth-led organisations working on NCDs and their risk factors. This coalition will be tasked with: strengthening formal mechanisms

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For the NCD Alliance's Our Views Our Voices 2016–2020 see <https://ncdalliance.org/what-we-do/capacity-development/our-views-our-voices>



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for young people to engage in the NCD agenda at a policy level; enhancing the engagement of a diverse range of youth actors; and building the capacity of the next generation to engage in the global advocacy space.

Forging a shared agenda for young people and youth-led organisations will enable proactive and impactful advocacy to drive change. By taking a constituency-based approach to youth engagement, we can be more impactful and make a lasting contribution to the NCD movement.

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- 3 Baker R, Taylor E, Essafi S, Jarvis JD, Odok C. Engaging young people in the prevention of noncommunicable diseases. *Bull World Health Organ* 2016; **94**: 484.
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- 7 United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth. Principles and barriers to meaningful youth engagement. 2017. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20522UNMGCYPrinciplesandBarriersforMeaningfulYouthEngagement.pdf> (accessed Feb 6, 2019).