



Faradata Social Change and Women Empowerment Organization  
Center for Leadership and Youth Empowerment

## **Policy Brief**

Inclusive Mechanisms for Youth Socio-Political Participation

Written By:

Abdul Jamil Zahin

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## Executive Summary

Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute more than half of Afghanistan's population. While they are often involved in informal, politically relevant processes, such as activism or civic engagement, they are not formally represented in provincial and national political institutions such as provincial councils and parliament and many of them do not participate in elections. This can impact the quality of democratic governance and can challenge the representativeness of the political system, leading to the disenfranchisement of young citizens.

Further investigations based on the opinions of young people and youth-led organizations in Farah, Afghanistan, reveal that they strongly feel they are often excluded from politics and feel unheard. They expressed a need for a supportive environment to develop their political ideas and means of engagement.

Based on the majority of interviewees' opinions, today's youth need real and meaningful opportunities to participate in political processes and contribute to practical solutions that advance development. When given an opportunity to organize, voice their opinions and play a meaningful role in political decision making, young people consistently demonstrate their willingness and ability to foster positive, lasting change. They also become more likely to demand and defend democracy, and gain a greater sense of belonging.

### It is recommended:

- Establishing of district youth councils and linking them to the provincial councils and parliament at provincial and national level;
- Lowering the voting age to 15 for district and Provincial Councils' elections;
- Facilitate the connection between youth and political and community Leaders;
- And assigning students to teach media literacy and critical thinking, read and debate news in class and encouraging them to discuss with their parents and other adults who are important in their lives.

## Introduction

Despite making up more than half of the population in many countries, young people (ages 15-20) often find themselves marginalized from mainstream politics and decision making. They struggle to gain the respect of public officials and are seen as lacking the skills and experience to engage in political activity and lead positive change in their communities. This exclusion, combined with limited educational and economic opportunities, can leave young people both idle and frustrated with the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

People under the age of 25 in Afghanistan are rarely found in formal political leadership positions. In Afghanistan as well as in a third of world countries, eligibility for the national parliament starts at 25 years or higher and it is common practice to refer to politicians as 'young' if they are below 35-40 years of age. Youth is not represented adequately in formal political institutions and processes such as parliaments, political parties, elections, and public administrations. The

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<sup>1</sup> Veronique Dudouet, Youth in War-to- peace Transitions, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br15e.pdf>, page No: 45

situation is even more difficult for women in mid-level and decision-making/leadership positions.  
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One of the obstacles in targeting youth is finding a common definition for them. The United Nations (UN) defines them as people between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>3</sup> The WHO, meanwhile, distinguishes between specifically defined adolescent development stages. Teenagers aged 14-17, for instance, start to experiment with sex, drugs, friends, risks, develop strong peer relationships, form more stable relationships, and gain social and problem solving skills. Adolescent of ages 16-19 are able to plan and follow long term goals for the future, understand how choices and decisions effect the future, understand right from wrong (morally and ethically), and move from a child-parent/guardian relationship to a more equal adult-adult relationship.<sup>4</sup>

The focus on youth, in terms of their engagement in the political arena, is a relatively new priority for most democratic states but extremely timely, particularly in light of recent events, democratic transitions, and conflict resolution in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

### Current Youth Engagement and Challenges

Although, the Internet had become an important tool from which the teenagers in Afghanistan collected political information and channels which they used to organize and mobilize. Numbers of social media users in Afghanistan also showed that the degree of the youth's socio-political interests were higher than the adult's.<sup>6</sup> But, for my research, I spoke with 30 youths aged 14-18 of diverse backgrounds in Farah, Afghanistan, were consulted to contribute their experiences. Mohammad Reza – aged 14 at the time of the study – said, “The younger you are, the less respect you get for your opinions and engagement”. Likewise, Mahmoud – also aged 14 – said that the adults in his family tell him to “stay out of it [politics] until you can vote”.

With experiences like these, young people are often excluded from politics, and feel unheard. They expressed a need for a supportive environment to develop their political ideas - and to be heard. Abdul



<sup>2</sup> Official Publication, Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle, UNDP, 2018, [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/EN\\_G\\_UN-Youth\\_Guide-LR.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/EN_G_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf), Page: 30

<sup>3</sup> Veronique Dudouet, Youth in War-to- peace Transitions,

<sup>4</sup> Participation Manual, IMAI one-day or orientation on adolescent living with HIV, Stages of Adolescents Development, (World Health Organization, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> Participation is one of the guiding principles of the universal declaration of human rights, and young people's right to participation has been deemed important in numerous international agreements. For instance in 1994, 179 countries – including Afghanistan- recognized the importance of ensuring young people's “integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political processes and preparation for leadership roles.

<sup>6</sup> Dadullah Qani, Member of Farah Provincial Council, Organizational Interview with Farah PC, 10 October 2020.

Karim, aged 17, explained that when he does express his political beliefs aloud to others in any setting, “it feels good to be able to get my own point of view out there” but that, in order to feel heard, he would “need supporters and people who understand my views to support me.”

Based on the majority of interviewees’ opinions, today’s youth need real opportunities to participate in political processes and contribute to practical solutions that advance development. When given an opportunity to organize, voice their opinions and play a meaningful role in political decision making. Young people consistently demonstrate their willingness and ability to foster positive, lasting change. They also become more likely to demand and defend democracy, and gain a greater sense of belonging.

In a survey conducted by the UN LANYD in August 2012, a majority of 13,000 respondents expressing their voices from 186 countries including Afghanistan claimed that the main challenges for youth were limited opportunities for effective participation in decision-making processes. Young men and women feel excluded and marginalized in their own societies and communities.<sup>7</sup>

Both formal and informal engagement can be understood as political participation, and both are beneficial for a resilient democracy.<sup>8</sup> There is strong evidence that the participation of young people in the formal political process is relatively low when compared to older citizens in Afghanistan. This challenges the representativeness of the political system and leads to the disenfranchisement of young people.

There is no specific strategy for increasing youth participation in Afghanistan even if it is an important component of the Afghanistan National Youth Strategy, approved by Parliament in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

The current levels of knowledgeable engagement by Afghan’s youth remain too low.<sup>10</sup> Opportunities for civil learning and engagement are highly unequal for rural and urban youths. Civil education is increasingly viewed as controversial by the public<sup>11</sup> even the interviewees for this research claim it works.<sup>12</sup> But, discussing controversial issues, being contacted by parties and campaigns, and participating in the extra-curricular group all predict good civic outcomes for students.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>7</sup> Official Publication, Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle, UNDP, 2018, [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/ENG\\_UN-Youth\\_Guide-LR.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/ENG_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf), Page: 22

<sup>8</sup> UNDP, Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle.

<sup>9</sup> <https://8am.af/national-youth-strategy/> 1395 روزنامه هشت صبح، گزارش حمل

<sup>10</sup> بحث هفته، فعالیت سیاسی جوانان افغانستان، صفحه فارسی بی بی سی، مارچ 2014،

[https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/03/140326\\_afghanyouthes\\_activism\\_debte](https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/03/140326_afghanyouthes_activism_debte)

<sup>11</sup> Individual interview with Farah youth, Farah- Afghanistan, 10 October 2020

<sup>12</sup> Organizational Interview, Interviews with the members Farah Provincial Council, October 2020, Farah-Afghanistan.

<sup>13</sup> Ali Ahmad, Principal of Shaid M. Nader Aubi High School, Organizational Interview, Farah, 10 October 2020.

With increasing economic, political and environmental insecurity, there is further impetus for young people to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives. If citizenship is a lifelong right and responsibility, support for teenagers' participation and influence is necessary in all sectors of society.

Therefore, to break current patterns, there are many meaningful ways to provide youths (15-to-18-year-olds) opportunities to influence government decisions. Policymakers must embrace innovative and collaborative approaches to civic education through inclusion in public consultations and inquiries, youth parliamentary representatives, councils, voting and teaching critical thinking and media literacy.

## Further Reading

- Veronique Dudouet, Youth in War-to-peace Transitions, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br15e.pdf>
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  - Participation Manual, IMAI one-day or orientation on adolescent living with HIV, Stages of Adolescents Development, (World Health Organization, 2010)
- <sup>1</sup>روزنامه هشت صبح، گزارش حمل 1395 <https://8am.af/national-youth-strategy/>
- <sup>1</sup>بحث هفته، فعالیت سیاسی جوانان افغانستان، صفحه فارسی بی بی سی، مارچ 2014، [https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/03/140326\\_afghanyouthes\\_activism\\_debte](https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/03/140326_afghanyouthes_activism_debte)