



Picture: Student Aid Drop CC, Bulgaria

Toolkit for Meaningful Youth Participation

Welcome

Welcome to this First Edition of the URI Toolkit for Meaningful Youth Participation. We're so happy you're here!

This Toolkit has been designed for people of all ages who would like to better understand some of the challenges of youth inclusion and discover practical steps to create more meaningful relationships across generations. It has been written in the context of interfaith peacebuilding work, for grassroots organisations who are wanting to work with young people in a more meaningful way.

This Toolkit has been put together through a collaborative effort from young people across the URI network, and includes stories and experiences of URI member groups. You can learn more about URI at www.uri.org. Special thanks is given to Ezra Fairley-Collins, URI Coordinator of Individual Membership Development, who took the lead in the design and compilation of this document.

Our intention is for this Toolkit to be a living document, which energizes the conversations and learnings around how we can do better at including the voices, experiences and skills of young people in our work for peace and justice across the world.

Your feedback, ideas and experiences are welcome! If you have a story or experience that you would like potentially included in this toolkit or suggestions for future editions, please contact youth@uri.org.

May our learning and drive for a more inclusive world never stop.

Sarah Oliver
URI Associate Director of Global Programs
Jan 2022



What is URI?

URI is a global grassroots interfaith network that cultivates peace and justice by engaging people to bridge religious and cultural differences and work together for the good of their communities and the world.

The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.



Picture: Anytown Las Vegas CC, North America

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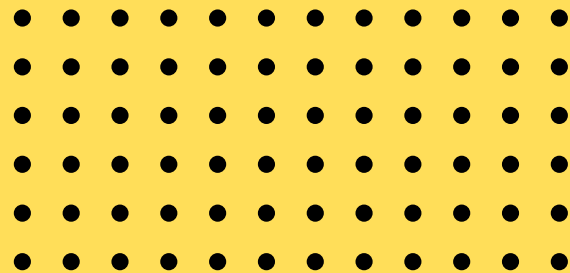
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Picture: URI Accelerate Peace Conference, 2019



Overview





OVERVIEW

"Every so often we hear young people speaking at very important events and conferences. We hear them giving keynote speeches. We see them getting awards. But we actually want to see, what's there left to be done to enhance that meaningful participation? What's the next step? How can we all together take this further? Not just as youth as one part of the population, but this is a question for all of us - how can we all together create spaces to be engaged in meaningful ways in all the processes in our society?"

- Samira Fatma Baručija, Regional Coordinator for URI Multiregion

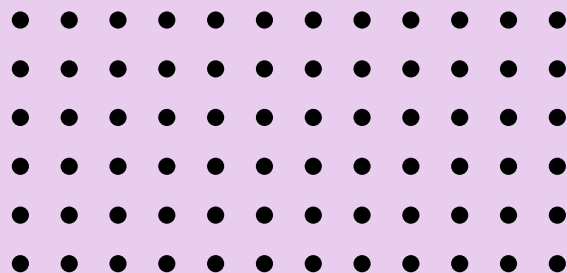
In 2021, URI held two events on the topic of "Meaningful Youth Participation." The first event featured young speakers from around the world who raised awareness of a variety of issues that impact youth. The following topics were identified as primary concerns: harmful myths and assumptions about young people, tokenism and how to avoid it, youth unemployment, and intergenerational dialogue. In a follow up workshop, participants addressed each issue, offering their personal experiences and practical solutions. It is from these discussions and notes taken that this toolkit has emerged.

As you move through the toolkit, we invite you to think about what these issues look like in your context. Who are the young people that come to mind, and how can you implement some of the suggestions and actions offered in this guide?



Picture: URI Accelerate Peace Conference, 2019

Dispelling Myths
Meaningful Inclusivity
Youth Unemployment
Intergenerational Dialogue



DISPELLING MYTHS



“Even though we have such complexities in our differences, we can always discover something that we share. And by doing that we grow our human connection, we build mutual trust and respect, and we trigger collaboration in ways we never thought so before.”

- Mena Ayazi, USA

Assumptions and stereotypes about any social grouping of people can be harmful when used as a blanket idea which puts a whole category of people into a certain ‘box’. Assumptions and stereotypes can lead to discrimination and continued oppression of minority voices. Ultimately, assumptions limit you from building true and authentic relationships with people.

We often hear the words ‘young people..’ followed by a generalisation or assumption, that unfairly casts all young people as one homogenous group who experience the same thing and act the same way. “Young people today are too this...or young people don’t understand that...” This is an unfair assumption to make and leads to growing myths about young people.

So in order to work with younger people in your organization in a more meaningful way, we invite you to read through some of these myths that we often hear, and see if you recognize any of them as being familiar to something you’ve heard being said about young people.



WHAT ARE SOME ASSUMPTIONS THAT ARE OFTEN MADE ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE?

Young people do not have the skill set to be qualified for leadership positions.

Young people in an organization can handle all the technology needs.

Young people only want to work with other young people.

Young people are not hard workers.

Because of age, young people are not equals.

Young people have more time and energy to solve problems.

Young people do not have good ideas to contribute.

Young people are too demanding and disruptive when they disagree with something and cause violence in society.



1

MYTH: Young people in an organization can handle all the technology needs.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- While young people have grown up in a digital age, it is not true that all young people are experts in technology.
- Relegating young people to only working with technology limits the positive impact a young person could make and assumes that person has a limited skill set.
- No one person, of any age, can handle all aspects of technology in an organization.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Ask all team members if they have skills to fix an issue as well as if they are willing and have the time to help.
- Seek out a professional who can help you with the issue.
- Don't assume that if a young person has helped you once they will always be available to help.
- Assess if you're falling into the trap of relegating all your tech needs to a young person without fair compensation.

2

MYTH: Young people only want to work with other young people.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Young people want to work with other talented and dedicated people regardless of age.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Assign projects and tasks based on skills, or call for volunteers, as opposed to making assumptions based on age.



③ **MYTH: Young people do not have the skill set to be qualified for leadership positions.**

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Young people have a variety of skills which enable them to be phenomenal leaders.
- Not all skills or experiences can be expressed in a resume.
- Some of the greatest movements in the world were started by young people.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Support the young people in your organization with effective mentorship and guidance.
- Recognize the leadership qualities and skills of young people you work with.
- When hiring a young person to a leadership position, support them with the resources and professional development skills they need to succeed.
- Look for specific opportunities to step aside so that young people can step into leadership roles.

④ **MYTH: Young people have more time and energy to solve problems.**

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Young people lead full lives with additional responsibilities.
- The load should be shared equally amongst all addressing the problems.



4

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Share the load equally amongst everyone facing the task at hand.
- Ask about a person's capability in delivering tasks prior to delegating them.

5

MYTH: Young people are not equals.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- When we speak of equality, it does not refer to physical equality but rather equality of opportunity which must be afforded to all individuals regardless of age.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- When witnessing moments where young people are not treated as equals, speak up to encourage equal opportunities.

6

MYTH: Young people do not have good ideas to contribute.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Because of the way each individual experiences the world, all people have good ideas to contribute.
- Some may not be comfortable sharing their ideas verbally due to language barriers or because of feeling undermined or dismissed.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Provide other opportunities of equal significance (e.g., through writing, individual consultation, etc.) for people to contribute their great ideas.
- Work to create an environment where all voices are valued equally so that everyone can share their ideas.



7

MYTH: Young people are too demanding and disruptive and cause violence in society.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Young justice seekers are striving every day for positive change. Although their actions for justice may include nontraditional methods, disrupting the status quo is how any change begins.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Reframe the negative meanings of the words "demanding" and "disruptive" into positive meanings for change.
- Prioritize temporary disruption for the sake of long-lasting change over comfortability.
- Seek to understand the root of the injustice and why action is necessary before dismissing it as "too disruptive."

8

MYTH: Young people are not hard workers.

THIS IS A MYTH BECAUSE:

- Like anyone of any age, with the right environment and support, young people work diligently to accomplish tasks.
- It is unfair to make a judgment about the work ethic of an entire generation.
- The way that someone accomplishes a task is not a reflection of their work ethic.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Young people may be experiencing barriers that prevent them from working diligently. Therefore, it is important to ask the young people if they have all that they need in order to work diligently to accomplish their tasks. If they do not, work to provide solutions to their needs.



HOW DO THESE ASSUMPTIONS IMPACT WORK DONE BY AND WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

“ I don't feel respected by older people. ”

“ I get excluded from making decisions that affect me. ”

“ I get assigned tasks instead of being asked about my skills or passions. ”

“ I'm only brought into conversations to talk about "youth topics". ”

HOW CAN WE WORK TO SHIFT THE NARRATIVE ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE?



Begin to see youth as a way of living, rather than being restricted to a certain age.



Seek the wisdom of religious traditions to learn more about the positive impact young people can make.



Notice when an assumption is being played out in your organization or community and bring this to the awareness of the group.



Make conversations about meaningful youth participation every day topics, rather than only workshops.



Help young children begin to challenge stereotypes about their position in the world.



Value young people for who they are instead of only what they do or the perspective that they bring.



Challenge the stereotypes and assumptions you and others have about young people.

READ A STORY OF DISPELLING MYTHS.

In Plovdiv, Bulgaria, young people have the opportunity to experience an Interfaith Youth Camp called "BRIDGE-Inter-Cultures," which promotes tolerance, mutual understanding and building bridges across cultures and religions. This Camp is hosted by BRIDGES Cooperation Circle, a URI member group, in partnership with the local government, URI Europe and private sponsors.

Through the Camp experience, young people have their myths about others dispelled as they visit cultural, historical and religious sites, meet religious leaders, and engage in workshops that open dialogue about the importance of cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence.

[Click Here to Read More.](#)

**How will you dispel your personal myths
about young people?**

MEANINGFUL INCLUSIVITY



"We're not merely trying to include young people in systems that are dysfunctional. What we want to do is give an opportunity for young people to shape what decision making should be, what processes there should be, to shape the table, not just be at the table."

- Noella Richard, Youth Policy Specialist, UNDP

WHAT IS TOKENISM?

In the rise of calls for diversity, tokenism is an attempt to conform to the new norm without any real desire for change. It is most often seen when minorities (e.g., age, race, gender) are sought out to fulfill a role to give an appearance of diversity.

Young people can be tokenized when they are invited to serve on boards or speak at events because a younger voice needs to be represented. An example of this is when youth are invited to serve in a lesser role as the "youth representative" rather than being included at the same level as other participants.

In these instances, the young person is only seen for their age. They are expected to represent all young people instead of participating fully as the unique individual that they are.

Meaningful youth participation first begins by eradicating tokenism as we move toward meaningful inclusivity. It is no longer enough to just invite youth to sit at the table.



“One of the things I have realized about tokenism, as a young person who has been fortunate enough to go to school, is that you will get platforms, they will put you there, to look like they are conforming to the new norm that says ‘you must have women, you must have young people, you must have black people’, and it is a beauty when you are a combination of all three. But we are also at that point of our lives that sitting at those tables is not enough. It’s either you create a space at that table, or we will bring our table and force you to listen to us.”

- Wambui Ngige, Human Rights Attorney, Kenya; URI At-Large Trustee

HOW DO WE AVOID TOKENISM? HOW DO WE CHALLENGE IT WHEN IT APPEARS?

- We avoid tokenism by clearly defining intentions when seeking youth representation.
- We avoid tokenism by asking questions in order to plug young people in where they are passionate.
- We avoid tokenism by working collaboratively and being led by young people.
- We challenge tokenism when it appears by acknowledging the harmful impact of our actions regardless of intention.
- We challenge tokenism when it appears by questioning assumptions about the value a young person brings.



- ▶ We challenge tokenism when it appears by questioning pre-existing behaviors and cultures.

HOW DO WE PRACTICE MEANINGFUL INCLUSIVITY?

We practice meaningful inclusivity by involving youth in all aspects of the work in meaningful ways; from conception to implementation. In this way, there are opportunities for young people to share their numerous gifts.

We practice meaningful inclusivity by asking questions directly to young people in order to deepen personal awareness. By doing this, we lead from our knowledge rather than leading from our assumptions.

We practice meaningful inclusivity by doing the work to make space for meaningful youth participation.

READ A STORY ABOUT MEANINGFUL INCLUSIVITY.

“For me meaningful youth participation is when youth are involved in all stages of planning, decision-making and executing.



For example, . . . especially in times of Covid, we had an initiative where we were trying to get hospital beds and oxygen cylinders to people in need. So we had created an online community where people could reach out to us. But we [needed] some form of validation, if not from the government, from other organizations, so that people [would] know this is a safe space and platform for people to use. We found that it was very difficult to convince officials about this project.

One, they didn't believe that youngsters have good ideas, and two they didn't believe that social media could be used in such a positive way. So we found [that] the challenge was this clash of opinions, because people believe older equals wiser, which is not true in our changing world. Or they give youth a part of the decision making and planning, but not the rest of it.

This is why I say meaningful youth participation is if youth are involved in every stage."

- Fareena Maria, URI Global Youth Movement, India/UAE

How are you practicing meaningful inclusivity with young people?



YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

“Once in a while my friends and I will have this conversation. We will pull out a job advert and it looks like the only qualification you have for it is that you’re alive. They have set the requirements so very high, that they are sure that we [as young people] are not supposed to get it. The most ironic thing is that at the end of the day they will put in ‘young people and people with disabilities are encouraged to apply.’ What are we even applying for?”

- Wambui Ngige, Human Rights Attorney, Kenya; URI At-Large Trustee

Youth unemployment is one of the biggest issues affecting young people today. In 2019, the International Labour Organization, reported 67.2 million youth (between the ages of 15 - 24) worldwide as being unemployed, and the impact of covid on our economic systems in the last two (2) years has only made this worse.

Engaging in meaningful youth participation means taking seriously the skills and capabilities of young people to enter the job market, and creating viable job opportunities for young people. It is important to understand the barriers that young people face in seeking formal employment and the ripple effect that this has on a country's economic and social development.



WHAT ARE SOME BARRIERS TO YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AROUND THE WORLD?

Employers seek a higher level of experience than most young people entering the job market have.

Employers measure skills not by ability but by the time to complete tasks.

Employers looking to hire don't make their job postings readily accessible.

Employers equate work quality to seniority or experience.

Family expectations versus the reality of the job market.

Employment opportunities do not align with goals or passions of many young people.

Expectation to work unrealistic hours because youth have "more time."

Employers offer jobs with the expectation that young people will move anywhere.

Employers offer mediocre compensation to young people.



HOW CAN WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE SOLUTION?

- ★ Provide dignity to labor. No job is beneath another.
- ★ Encourage young people to create jobs.
- ★ Vocalize and amplify the gifts that young people can bring to an organization.
- ★ Create opportunities for skill enhancement. Encourage young people to take advantage of these opportunities.
- ★ Strive to enhance the wellbeing of young people in the workplace.
- ★ Evaluate job candidates on their skills and abilities. Degrees and certificates don't always tell the full story.
- ★ Assess for the appropriate level of experience and skills. Entry level jobs require entry level skills and experience.
- ★ Adapt to the present providing opportunities for diverse voices to lead organizational change.
- ★ Post job openings in a public forum seeking out places to post jobs based on the type of employee desired.



- ★ Advocate for fair wages and reasonable hours for young people.
- ★ Commit to referring qualified young candidates for other positions, or create new positions for them.

READ A STORY ABOUT RESOLVING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT.

Desert Bloom Cooperation Circle in Amman, Jordan participated in a youth exchange in Manchester, UK called “Social-preneurship for Sustainable Growth among Disadvantaged Youths (SPP).” The overall project aim was to empower young participants with fewer opportunities and from disadvantaged backgrounds to become social and business entrepreneurs. This was an eye-opener to young participants. It encouraged them to explore pathways for how they can make change whether this is founding an enterprise, serving on a board, or supporting social entrepreneurs in other creative ways.

[Click Here to Read More.](#)

How are you making a positive impact in the youth unemployment crisis?



INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

“For all of the folks that are older than us and came before us . . . we need help. We need allyship. We can’t do it on our own and that can look a million different ways. That can be saying ‘Here. Here’s this contact’ or ‘Oh I could represent, but . . . I want to put youth at the forefront. I want to give a platform to youth. I want to amplify . . . But most importantly, I want to listen.’”

- Abraham Lugo, Anytown Las Vegas, USA

Intergenerational dialogue is central to building a synergistic whole where everyone benefits and discovers life, vitality and calmness. In the context of social change, young people are often told “it’s up to your generation now”. While this ‘handing over of the mantle of responsibility’ might seem ‘noble’ it can also be an avoidance of responsibility from older generations. Yes there is truth that younger generations will be impacted by the world’s problems as we move forward, but that doesn’t mean younger generations should be left to solve the problems on their own.

There is an incredible opportunity of skills sharing, peer mentorship, and collaboration that is offered through intergenerational dialogue. Practicing intergenerational dialogue is being able to understand the experiences and perspectives of someone from a different generation, and is the first step to working together in a fully inclusive and collaborative way.



WHAT MAKES INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE WORK WELL?

LISTENING

Practice compassionate listening to deepen appreciation and understanding.

OPENNESS

Strive to be curious and explore differences.

COMMUNICATING

Learn about others' communication styles and preferences. Different generations can have different ways of communicating.

RESPECT

Begin with a baseline of respect as each person has gifts and experiences to offer.

REPRESENTATION

Acknowledge who is not at the table and elevate the voices of the other.

LEADERSHIP

Practice collaborative leadership, rather than practicing a competitive approach to leadership.



NETWORKING

Take the wisdom learned and contacts made along the way, and share to help someone else's journey.

WHAT TOOLS HAVE YOU FOUND THAT WORK WELL FOR INTERGENERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT?

MUSIC

Music brings people together and can foster an environment for people to share what is meaningful for them.

ART

Creating art together lowers barriers for dialogue to emerge.

TRADITIONS

Revisit and revive traditions that have been forgotten.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Enjoy meaningful shared experiences together such as exploring nature or having coffee.

WORKING TOGETHER

Find opportunities to work together in meaningful ways such as organizing a peacebuilding or interfaith event.



READ A FEW STORIES ABOUT INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE.

Think Round, Inc. Cooperation Circle, a URI member group.

Think Round, Inc. is based in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of their programs is an Intergenerational Afterschool Program, which provides students with the opportunity to create high-end public artworks for display in their own community while enrolled in Afterschool activities. Children, youth, and teens interact with artists/instructors over sixty and youth interns in college to build creative ownership, civic pride, art skills, and camaraderie, through art.

[Click Here to Read More.](#)

Valeria Vergani, Director of the InterSpiritual Sustainability Society, Canada, URI Trustee

“In 2016 I was one of the students helping to set up the first-ever multifaith space in my small university in British Columbia, Canada. It had initially been a struggle to get a new and secular university to agree to ratify our multifaith group as an official club. We had reached out to a few local faith groups to let them know that we were going to bless and inaugurate the space on a Saturday afternoon, but we did not know if anyone would come to join us.



In the end, from the window of the new room we saw two small figures cloaked in black walking up the big hill that leads to the university campus. The two resident nuns from the local Catholic parish were walking from the church to meet us. Soon after, the Baha'i community drove up the hill, bringing together their Sikh friends – and snacks! And finally, we were overjoyed when one of our local Indigenous elders from the Squamish Nation arrived, and opened our small blessing ceremony with singing.

This small and simple inter-faith, inter-generational, inter-cultural, inter-racial ceremony taught us, students, about the importance of simply showing up; helping us to see that the smallest things make can make the biggest difference.”

- Offered at URI's Accelerate Peace Conference

[Listen to the full presentation.](#)

Sarah Oliver, URI Associate Director of Global Programs

“I was once invited to be part of a planning meeting for a community event. The meeting had been organised by a collaboration of different NGOs across the community. So while the meeting was led by a youth organisation from this network, there were older members of the community present as well.



As the discussion started, I suddenly realised there were certain barriers holding people back from participating and sharing fully.

For some of the younger members this was the first time they'd engaged in a meeting of this nature, and without a proper briefing, were understandably nervous to participate. While on the other end of the age spectrum, the older members were taking the approach that they felt this event should be youth focused and so they were trying to hold back from participating to give space to younger voices.

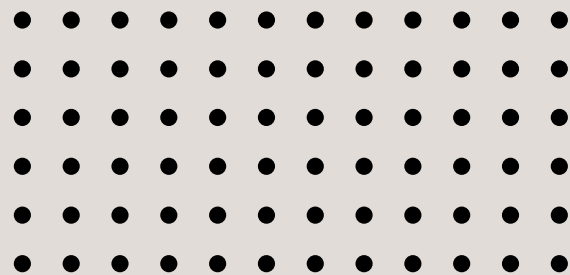
While this was important and appreciated, it backfired in that the older participants ended up hardly participating at all, which left the young people feeling unsure if their ideas had been heard or valued. This showed the need for us all to practice intergenerational dialogue, and to learn to have conversations across generational divides in a way that acknowledges power imbalances and works to strengthen our relationships and understandings of each other."

What is your commitment to age equity and holding effective spaces of intergenerational dialogue?



Picture: Eco-Arts Initiative CC, Rwanda

Additional Resources





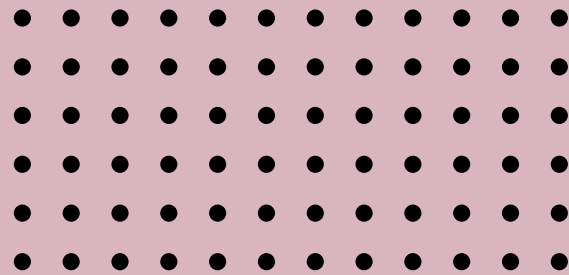
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Call to Action Storytellers](#)
- [Exploring Youth Entrepreneurship](#)
- [Know Your Neighbor: Interfaith Encounters "Interfaith 101" Webinar](#)
- [Let's Build! From Awareness to Advocacy for Meaningful Youth Participation](#)
- [Let's Talk! What Does Meaningful Youth Participation Look Like?](#)
- [Malawi Youth Training](#)
- [Op-Ed: To Lead Millennials, Come Along Side Them](#)
- [Providing Leadership Training for Students in Lagos](#)
- ["Why Don't They Come?" 9 Tools to Engage Youth in Interfaith Efforts](#)
- [Youth Leadership Training in Ghana](#)
- [Youth Unemployment, SDG 2030 Agenda](#)
- [The fifth edition of the Interfaith Youth Camp – "BRIDGE-Inter-Cultures" - Bulgaria](#)



Picture: Bridges CC, Bulgaria

Contributors





CONTRIBUTIONS

This toolkit has been brought about because of the wisdom of several incredible young people. We want to publicly thank them for dedicating their time and talents to bring together this gift.

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We also thank all those who participated in "Let's Talk! What Does Meaningful Youth Participation Look Like?" and "Let's Build! From Awareness to Advocacy for Meaningful Youth Participation!"



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Created December 2021

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