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**INTER PARES** | Parliaments in Partnership  
*EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments*



25<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY 1996-2021  
Implemented by International IDEA

## Workshop Report: Parliaments and Youth: Bridging the Gap

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### Introduction to INTER PARES

*INTER PARES Parliaments in Partnership - EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments* is a unique, European Union funded, three-year project designed to strengthen the capacity of parliaments around the world. Implemented by International IDEA, INTER PARES aims to enhance the legislative, oversight, representative, budgetary and administrative functions of partner parliaments through a series of targeted interventions.

A key element of the project is the promotion of sustainable inter-parliamentary cooperation and parliamentary support approaches, with a focus on selected thematic issues, one of which is Youth. The need for increased youth participation in democratic institutions and processes is reflected in the European Union’s Youth External Action (June 2020)<sup>1</sup> which highlights that youth should not only be an important target of support but also an important actor within decision making processes. Building on the importance of this need, INTER PARES is aiming to address how parliaments engage with youth as a segment of the population beyond existing efforts to increase youth representation.

### Workshop Objectives

As a first step, INTER PARES organized the workshop ‘Parliaments and Youth: Bridging the Gap’ on 24-26 November, 2020 to bring together EU institutions, EU Member State Parliaments, Partner Parliaments from around the world, and youth organizations to address the state of progress of youth participation in

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/08/youth-in-external-action-council-adopts-conclusions/>.

decision-making. The workshop was designed to explore a range of successful initiatives and solutions aimed at overcoming barriers to effective youth participation in parliamentary processes. In addition, it looked at identifying the gaps between the avenues for participation that are being offered currently by Parliaments versus what is needed by youth. The insights to be gained from these discussions will inform and guide INTER PARES in its youth programming.

Questions explored throughout the workshop included:

1. What can parliaments do to effectively engage young people, and what tools and platforms have proven most effective?
2. What approaches lead young people to believe their voices are considered?
3. What more can be done to ensure disadvantaged youth are included in the decision-making process, beyond superficial forms of acknowledgment?
4. What can INTERPARES do to support parliaments to engage effectively with youth in their work?

## Barriers to youth participation

### **i) Legal frameworks**

Age restrictions for running for parliament constitute a crucial barrier for many young people wishing to participate as elected officials. In fact, in 65% of countries, the minimum age for running in elections is higher than the age required to vote. In certain countries, like Malaysia, further barriers are imposed as students are legally forbidden from being politically active. In addition to this, legal requirements in some countries such as Bolivia forbid independent candidates which means that youth must be a member of a political party in order to run for parliament. In the main therefore, youth are fully dependent on a political party's openness to youth participation in order to be placed on the ballot and to be elected.

### **ii) Political parties and formal spaces of participation:**

Political parties play a key role in ensuring youth participation in formal politics, both as party members and as candidates; support for which is often lacking. Coupled with this lack of institutional support, a lack of financing for young candidates was raised as a serious challenge in enabling young people to run for office. Although youth quotas are used in some parties (including in The Gambia), their implementation is not systematic across all parties.

### **iii) Stigma against youth and cultural barriers that hinder youth participation**

The first session of the workshop showcased examples from around the world which demonstrated the societal challenges that young people face in participating in their formal election structures. In many instances, youth are considered to be unreliable and lacking in experience. Young people also face an added challenge that many political actors and society more widely, do not acknowledge that different kinds of experiences can benefit politics. Other barriers, such as the need to have fulltime employment, which often proves difficult in one's early political career, show why politics is not always a popular professional path. Lastly, in countries such as the Gambia, strong traditions dissuade people to compete directly with their elders.

### **iv) Intersectionality**

Although youth face many barriers simply due to their age, women and minority groups face a double challenge, as was particularly highlighted in Bolivia, where both racism and discrimination hinder youth participation. Young women in particular are not believed to be able to perform as their elders do.

## Strategies being implemented to overcome barriers in conventional politics

The workshop began with introducing successful strategies being implemented to ensure meaningful youth participation with parliament. Examples ranged from continual research on and monitoring of the situation youth face (IPU) and working to make young people aware they belong in politics (The Gambia), through to targeted programmes to support youth capacity (Bolivia).

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has long worked to support research and initiatives targeting increased youth participation in parliaments. One such initiative is the IPU [Forum of Young Parliamentarians](#) that meets twice yearly to boost the participation of young people in parliament and to help ensure young members play a full part in the work of parliament. The Forum also serves to mainstream youth throughout the IPU's work and to build bridges with outside organizations.

The Gambia's 'Not Too Young to Run' programme is being implemented by the [National Youth Council](#) of The Gambia, a state agency responsible for youth affairs. The programme is designed to motivate 15-35 year-olds across the country to run in elections by providing training on how to campaign and participate in elections. The establishment of the Interparty Youth Committee ensures that young people from across party lines are encouraged to participate.

In order to better equip young people to run for office, [International IDEA](#)'s trainings in Bolivia focus on political marketing, political advocacy, public image, public speaking, and construction of public policy. At the national level, International IDEA supports meetings between youth representatives working on a National Agenda and all relevant political organizations in order to help young people present their public policy proposals, leading to an acknowledgement by political parties that there is a need for youth to be involved in traditional policy making. Other capacity building programmes on political advocacy and legislative management led to 50 participants of the programme running for office, with 19 of those being elected.

All programmes placed an emphasis on the need for ongoing advocacy with youth, parties and elected officials to demonstrate the benefits of youth participation in parliaments.

## Parliamentary youth initiatives with a twist: beyond standard participation tools

The workshop also highlighted global and national initiatives being taken around the world to increase youth participation in parliaments including Youth Parliaments, Youth Councils and Youth Programmes hosted by parliament. Examples were selected based on methodologies that go beyond conventional forms of engagement (for example parallel or mock structures) and which seek to involve young people in decision making processes and create opportunities for increased interactions with their national parliaments, members of parliament and parliamentary staff.

### **Youth Parliaments:**

Youth parliaments are active in introducing young people to parliament and parliamentary processes and serve to equip them for future work in politics. In Greece, the [Hellenic Youth Parliament](#) is an education programme that works with schools to educate students on the parliament and its procedures, both through more traditional learning and through arts and culture. The program culminates with participants spending five days in parliament.

[The Young People's Parliament Programme](#) in Portugal is a similarly successful model initiated by the Assembly of the Republic and being implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. The initiative builds the capacity of youth in areas such as debating and campaigning and concludes in elected participants attending a National Session of the Youth People's Parliament at the Assembly of the Republic along with Members of Parliament.

Although formerly a once-in-five year event, since 2005 the [Youth Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago](#) meets on a yearly basis to host debates in a mock parliament setting. With specific targets to include people with disabilities and youth from rehabilitation centers, the Youth Parliament seeks to have a wide representation of youth voices from across the country participate to develop their debating skills and parliamentary etiquette. The initiative has led to a wider interest in the legislative process and has seen former Youth Parliament members being elected as Members of Parliament, with the 2020 online forum re-connecting with former participants in their current capacities.

#### **Youth Councils:**

Youth Councils have been developed in several countries, such as Finland and Ireland in order to give young people formal channels into decision making processes.

The [Sami Youth Council](#) is an appointed group of people between the ages of 18-28 who participate in the parliament and represent the youth of the Sámi minority group. The representatives of the Sami Youth Council prepare statements and comments on laws which concern Sámi youth and their living conditions. The role of the Council is also to sit on board meetings and manage projects and events to support youth participation. The council has influenced perceptions on youth participation and increased youth positions in various communities and has impacted decision making on areas such as climate change and self-governance.

In Ireland, the [Comhairle na nÓg \(Youth Council\)](#) has also served to successfully channel youth voices into local services and policies through 31 youth councils across the country. As in other countries, the success of this initiative draws in part from its work at both the national and local levels where consultations with local authorities also serve to influence consultations with the national government.

#### **Youth programmes hosted by parliament:**

In Hungary, the Parliamentary Museum supports social participation through a number of initiatives including role plays, games, media and short films. In addition, the organization of model parliaments, civic lessons and trainings for teachers has helped ensure a wider understanding of the role of parliament and the importance of respecting the opinions of others.

## [New methods and innovative ways to facilitate youth engagement](#)

[Undi18](#)'s first successful initiative was a three-year advocacy campaign that culminated in lowering the voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18. Since then, they have launched various other campaigns ranging from gender equality to senate reform. A more recent initiative is the Parliamen Digital launched in July 2020, which brought together 222 young people from across the country (per the national constituencies) to sit in a digital parliament to discuss national matters such as economic responses to the pandemic and the education sector. The sessions were live streamed to engage a wider audience and which led to mass media coverage of the two-day event. Undi18 will use the momentum of these initiatives to form a youth parliament over the next two years in order to push for parliamentary reforms.

Denmark's [Youth Climate Council](#) has been instrumental in ensuring that the voices of young people are considered in climate talks in the country. Formed as a panel of young people, the Council works as a formal channel to give regular youth inputs to climate related decisions. The working philosophy of the

Council members is to ensure broad participation through consultation with a wide group of young people and also ensuring that their members are kept up to date of the issues in hand.

Young accountability activists from around the world work with the [Open Government Youth Collective](#) to secure concrete commitment from national and local governments to empower citizens, fight corruption and use new technologies to strengthen government activity. The collective recently launched a survey to gauge youth interaction with and interest in politics which can be found [here](#).

Key findings from the survey show that although youth are interested in their parliamentary structures and largely acknowledge the importance of their parliaments, many young people do not participate in activities organized by their parliaments. The survey also shows that low youth engagement is problematic and must be addressed by specific platforms designed to increase relationships between parliaments and young people.

### Recommendations to enhance youth engagement with parliaments:

Throughout the workshop, important recommendations were made on ways to increase youth engagement in parliamentary processes. These included a need for action from parliaments and political parties to better support young people's engagement in political processes and on how youth and youth groups can better strategize their engagement with parliaments. A list of the recommendations for the different players involved are as follows:

#### *For parliaments:*

- i. Parliaments should establish formal channels for youth input, for example, through the creation of consultative bodies on parliamentary decisions.
- ii. Where formal mechanisms are not possible, parliaments must systematically develop new and innovative methods to collect the opinions and views of youth. Their inputs must be included at the start of the process and considered in decision making and solution-creating processes giving due acknowledgement of their professionalism and education.
- iii. Ensure that youth inputs are acknowledged and that there are feedback loops to show youth how and where their inputs were incorporated, while providing reasons for unincorporated inputs.
- iv. As many young people do not follow their parliaments or MPs on social media, parliamentarians should better use civil society organizations to gather their inputs.
- v. Systematize youth representation by ensuring that youth are adequately involved across the parliament's organizational structure.
- vi. Ensure that opportunities for youth engagement stretch beyond young people in the urban centres.
- vii. Use interactive online platforms, including polls, to get youth feedback on policy formation. Complement in person consultations with online engagement.

#### *For political parties:*

- i. Ensuring that young people have a voice in political parties by increasing the number of young members.
- ii. Provide training for young candidates to be more effective representatives of a new generation of leaders. Political parties must also be diligent in their selection of young candidates and nurture their growth to become effective representatives.
- iii. Youth candidates must receive funding in order to carry out successful campaigns and to ensure that participation does not impact their ability to earn a livelihood.
- iv. Promote youth quotas within parties.

- v. To overcome barriers to youth inclusion, parties must ensure that all ages within the country have a natural path to joining as members or candidates ensuring space for formal youth participation in political processes.

#### *For youth groups and organizations working with youth:*

- i. Build the capacity and skills of young people to effectively work with, and in parliament. Improve understanding and develop the capacity among young people in relation to how the process of public consultation feeds into the making of legislation.
- ii. Work to get the support of politicians, the government and the opposition, including in programming and the assignment of available funds.
- iii. Ensure that legislation which either hinders or facilitates youth participation in the democracy system is well understood so that campaigns for change can be targeted effectively.
- iv. Once momentum is built, use it to continue to expand programmes; Use networks and reputation effectively to continue expansion and meaningful impact.
- v. Ensure that youth are selected as representatives through mechanisms that promote candidacy diversity. Special efforts must be made to ensure that society's make up is reflected in initiatives and that young people beyond urban areas are targeted.
- vi. Build community consultation into programming. Youth representatives must have the capacity to solicit inputs from a broad range of young people to ensure democratic legitimacy, be that into programme design or into Youth Parliaments or Councils. Allow time for consultations and education so that young people can effectively represent numerous voices.
- vii. Document findings and present them as widely as possible. Use evidence-based research for advocacy.

#### *Working online:*

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the current realities of online work, several recommendations were also directly targeted at working online.

- i. When using online tools, extra effort needs to be made to recruit diverse participants, including women, people with disabilities and from minority groups and indigenous communities. Be active on social media in reaching out to NGOs, women's organizations and youth organizations in order to ensure a wide representation of participants in activities.
- ii. Where internet connection is difficult or where technological resources do not exist, provide technical and/or financial support to participants whenever possible. Should this not be possible, partner with local organizations who can host participants and provide them with office space, laptops and an internet connection.
- iii. Use social media to reach out to like-minded organizations and influencers in order to help spread messages.
- iv. Online modalities of engagement should be kept, but where and when possible should be complemented and combined with in-person programming.

## Conclusion

The workshop concluded on day three with a brief speech from Gonzalo Jorro-Martinez, Policy Officer – Parliaments and Political Parties, DG DEVCO, European Commission, to sum up the key points raised over the three days and to thank all the participants. A new Working Group will be established to coordinate implementation of INTER PARES youth strategy, and development of possible youth engagement tools, including the "Checklist for Parliaments, Parliamentary Youth Academy and Youth E-learning" course. Further information on the Group will be circulated to all workshop participants.