

Recommendations for

Meaningful Youth Participation

in Belgian International Cooperation

PLAN INTERNATIONAL
Until every girl is free

Enabel

FORUM DES JEUNES

VLAAMSE JEUGDRAAD

Why this document?

Young people[1] are not just a target group of international cooperation. We are partners, changemakers and experts in our own realities.

This document is the result of **two** youth-led processes:

1. The **Youth Participation Lab** (May 2026)[2], that brought together youth leaders from Belgium, Senegal, Vietnam, Ecuador, Bolivia and Niger, alongside Belgian youth organisations and policymakers. The event was jointly organised by BeGlobal (Enabel) and Plan International Belgium, and co-created with representatives from Vlaamse Jeugdraad, Le Forum des Jeunes, Enabel's Youth Sounding Board and Plan International Belgium's Youth Advisory Panel.
2. **Peer sessions** between the members of Enabel's *Youth Sounding Board*[3], an advisory board composed of national and international youth from inside and outside Enabel.

They explored one central question:

> **"What would it take for youth participation in Belgian international cooperation to become more meaningful, inclusive and structural?"**

This document offers **clear recommendations** while inviting decision-makers to keep the conversation going. It is a constructive call to action to work together to make meaningful youth participation a reality[4].

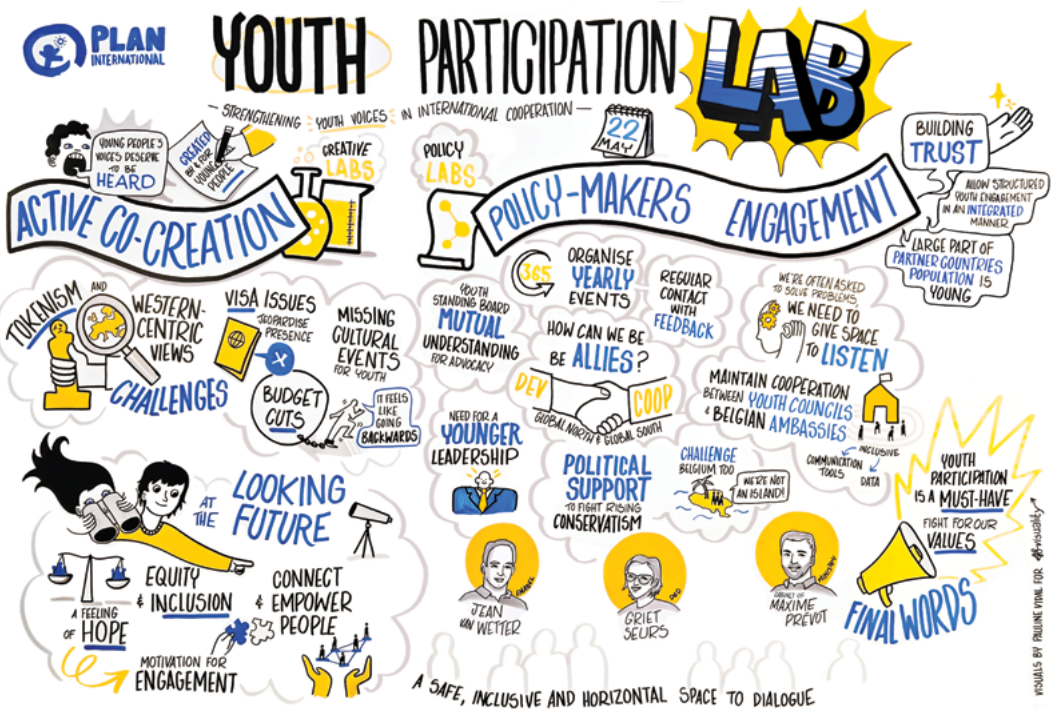
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1 "Youth" is understood as a flexible category, recognising that age definitions vary across contexts. The UN uses 15–24 for statistical purposes, while Enabel generally uses 15–35, adapting the age range to programme objectives. Young people are not a homogenous group, as their experiences and opportunities are shaped by factors including gender, age, socio-economic status, disability, geographical location and digital access.

2 Youth Participation Lab 2026

3 Youth Sounding Board – Youth & policy at BeGlobal

4 Many valuable guidelines on meaningful youth participation (in international cooperation) already exist. See, for example, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs Meaningful Youth Participation Toolkit, which provides concrete approaches for moving past tokenism and engaging young people from partner countries as equal partners in diplomacy and development cooperation.



"As young people, we've come here to make our voices heard and to make sure they are taken into account. It's not enough to simply listen to us; our voices also need to lead to concrete action. We don't want promises that end up not being kept."



Tacko
20 years old, Participant of the EmpowerXChange, Youth advocate with Plan International in Senegal

The challenge:
More than a seat at the table

Belgium's development cooperation policy[5] recognises young people as **key accelerators of sustainable development**, with the world's largest generation of young people[6] holding enormous potential to drive social and economic transformation. Investing in young people's skills, leadership and innovation is therefore considered essential to advancing Belgium's priorities, including **stability, health and addressing the climate crisis**.

Yet recognition does not necessarily translate into influence. Young people may be invited to speak but are not always given meaningful opportunities to shape decisions. Too often, youth participation remains ad hoc, project-based or limited to the usual voices: becoming a box-ticking exercise rather than a meaningful way to influence policy and practice.

The demand:
Move from consultation to partnership

We call on Minister Maxime Prévot, the Directorate-General International Cooperation (DG INT) and Enabel to **move beyond seeing young people as a target group or a voice to consult and recognise them as equal partners in shaping Belgian international cooperation**.

As partners, young people bring lived experiences, local knowledge[7], innovative ideas and fresh perspectives to the table that are an asset for international cooperation by making it more effective and equitable. They understand the realities facing their generation, challenge the status quo, and help shape a more sustainable and just future for all.

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[5] Minister Maxime Prévot | FOD Buitenlandse Zaken - Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking

[6] Adolescents and young people today: Empowering a growing global population | United Nations Population Fund

[7] Increasing opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making on Belgian international cooperation can also contribute to the Minister's ambition to advance localisation: Nos priorités pour l'aide humanitaire | SPF Affaires étrangères - Commerce extérieur et Coopération au Développement



Recommendations[8]

[8] These recommendations are addressed to different actors (Enabel, DG INT, and the Cabinet of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Prévot) and apply to different contexts. Some focus on Belgium, others on partner countries, while many are relevant to both.

Make youth participation

representative



- **Reach beyond the "usual voices":** Proactively involve young people who face additional barriers to participation, including girls and young women, LGBTQI+ youth, youth with disabilities, youth with lower incomes or education levels, limited mobility, rural youth, young people from marginalised or Indigenous communities, young caregivers, young people who are not affiliated or politically connected, and other underrepresented groups.
- **Map before you build:** Identify existing youth organisations, informal networks, grassroots initiatives and participation mechanisms in Belgium and partner countries, and build on them rather than creating parallel structures.
- **Work through trusted entry points:** Community centres, cultural and sports groups, diaspora and migrant youth networks, local NGOs and other grassroots actors can help reach young people who are not connected to formal participation structures.
- **Invest in bridge organisations:** Support organisations that can reach excluded young people, create safe and accessible participation spaces, and connect youth perspectives with institutional processes.
- **Remove barriers to participation:** Provide appropriate support for language, accessibility, transport, digital access, timing and compensation.



"Different perspectives and lived experiences are essential if international cooperation is to truly reflect the realities of those most concerned."*

Maxime Prévot

Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Development Cooperation

* Quoted from a video message shared during the Youth Participation Lab event.

Make youth participation

meaningful



- **Involve young people from the start and throughout the policy and programme cycle**, including design, implementation, funding, monitoring and evaluation.
- **Adapt participation to the context:** There is no one-size-fits-all model. In partner countries, participation should reflect local realities, including technology, language, culture, working conditions and political or security risks. Where live participation is difficult, use flexible formats such as written input, video, voice notes or other locally appropriate approaches.
- **Create safe spaces for honest and critical dialogue**, where young people can express critical views, challenge institutions, propose new ideas or raise issues that are often overlooked or missing from policy discussions. Participation should not be limited to hearing opinions that align with institutional perspectives or current priorities of Belgian development cooperation.
- **Invest in capacity-building and empowerment:** Young people should have access to the information, training and support they need to participate on an equal footing. This also means strengthening access to information and Global Citizenship Education so that young people can engage critically with global issues, understand Belgium's role in the world and hold decision-makers accountable[9].
- For youth-led organisations, meaningful partnership also requires **simpler and more flexible funding and administrative procedures**, particularly for smaller, informal or grassroots initiatives.
- **Close the feedback loop:** Institutions should clearly communicate how youth input was used, which recommendations were adopted or not, and why.

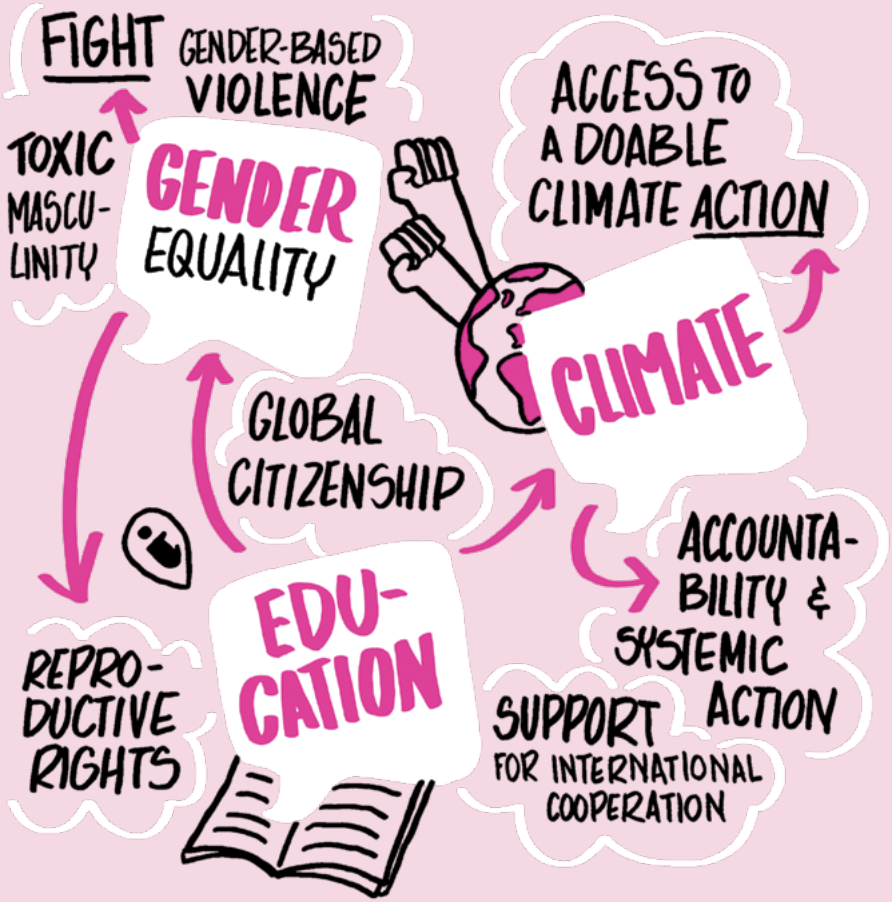
"Policymakers need to be willing to take risks, willing to listen to us, trust us, and give us the space to express ourselves."



Victor
26 years old, Member of the Youth Sounding Board of Enabel

[9] Strategic note: Global Citizenship Education in Belgium (2024)

International cooperation topics young people want to have a say about



- **Climate change** and climate justice;
- **Gender equality**, SRHR and inclusion;
- **Education** and access to basic services;
- **Employment** and economic inclusion;
- **Migration** and youth mobility;
- **Digitalisation**, innovation, digital rights and online safety;
- **Mental health** and wellbeing;
- **Intergenerational dialogue** as an approach to decision-making.

"We want to show that young people care deeply about international solidarity, human rights, multilateralism, and global justice and that Belgian international cooperation should continue to reflect those values."



Erika
20 years old, Member of Forum des Jeunes

From recommendations to action: How to put youth participation into practice

Meaningful youth participation cannot depend on a single project or one-off consultation. It requires long-term political commitment, dedicated resources and well-supported mechanisms that are co-created with young people and flexible enough to respond to their realities.

Above all, it takes time: youth participation is a process, not a one-off output.



1 Develop a comprehensive, well-resourced Youth Participation Strategy for Belgian international cooperation

Develop a comprehensive Youth Participation Strategy for Belgian international cooperation, with clear responsibilities, resources and accountability.

The strategy should include:

- Mainstreaming meaningful youth participation across policy and programming, ensuring that it is integrated across a wide range of topics, rather than treated as a standalone issue.
- Dedicated and accessible funding for youth participation, including a fixed minimum share of the overall cooperation budget for youth-led and youth-co-designed initiatives.
- Providing longer-term and flexible funding for youth-led organisations[10], movements and bridging organisations, and simpler funding and administrative requirements for smaller and less formal youth initiatives.
- Supporting youth-led innovation, recognising young people as innovators and providing them with the space and resources to develop, test and scale their own solutions.
- Investment in youth empowerment, supporting young people to develop the knowledge, skills, agency, networks and opportunities they need to develop their leadership.
- Establishing a dedicated youth participation focal point within the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to coordinate implementation and serve as a direct point of contact for young people and youth-led organisations.
- A clear accountability framework to monitor, evaluate and report on progress.

[10] Youth-led organisations play an important role in strengthening civic space and democratic participation. Long-term, flexible funding support is particularly important in contexts of shrinking civic space and growing anti-rights and anti-gender movements, which can disproportionately affect young people and youth-led organisations. See Future-Proofing: The Professionalization of an Anti-Rights Youth Generation - Ipas

2 Establish a recurring, high-level dialogue between young people and decision-makers

Establish a recurring, high-level dialogue between young people and youth-led organisations, the Minister and Cabinet of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, DG INT and Enabel.

The dialogue should:

- Be co-created and prepared with young people and youth-led organisations.
- Bring together diverse youth voices from Belgium and partner countries;
- Feed into concrete policy and decision-making moments, including policy and budget cycles, evaluations and key international conventions (such as the Conference of the Parties, the Commission on the Status of Women,…).
- Have clear institutional ownership and responsibility for convening and attending the dialogue.
- Include transparent follow-up and public reporting on recommendations and decisions.

3 Involve, strengthen and diversify existing youth participation mechanisms

Build on existing youth advisory and representation structures[11], rather than creating parallel mechanisms or spaces.

This should include:

- Recognising youth bodies as partners and proactively seeking and using their input in policy and decision-making.
- Supporting youth bodies to broaden participation, reaching more diverse and underrepresented young people.
- Regularly reviewing and adapting ways of working with existing mechanisms, with a focus on continuously improving the quality and impact of the dialogue.

[11] For example, the Youth Sounding Board of Enabel, the EU & UN Youth Representatives linked to Forum des Jeunes and Vlaamse Jeugdraad, the Youth Advisory Panel of Plan International Belgium, etc.

4 Create stronger channels for partner country youth voices

Ensure that young people in partner countries, especially those affected by programmes funded by DG INT, can shape not only individual programmes or projects in which they participate, but also wider Belgian policy and programming.

This could include:

- Strengthening local youth participation ecosystems in partner countries, supporting existing youth-led organisations, networks and initiatives through embassies, Enabel, civil society and other partners.
- Mandating Belgian embassies to facilitate regular dialogue with young people and youth-led organisations, or establish local Youth Sounding Boards where appropriate[12].
- Encouraging Belgian implementing NGOs to pilot and scale innovative participation methodologies that enable children and young people to meaningfully contribute throughout the programme cycle.
- Creating regular spaces for DG INT, Enabel and Belgian NGOs to engage directly with young people involved in DG INT-funded programmes on policy priorities or programme learning;
- Fostering exchange between young people in Belgium and partner countries, creating opportunities to learn from one another and shape discussions together.

[12] Examples include the Youth Advisory Committees working with Dutch embassies around the world, as well as the growing number of EU Delegations that have established national youth sounding boards or other youth advisory structures adapted to local contexts.



This is a youth-led publication, developed in close collaboration with young people from the Vlaamse Jeugdraad, le Forum des Jeunes, Plan International Belgium's Youth Advisory Panel, and the Youth Sounding Board of Enabel.

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Belgium
partner in development

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