Believe in Better: From Policy to Practice

Strengthening accountability relationships with and for young people

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United Nations
Office of the Secretary-General's
Envoy on Youth

YOUTH 2030
WORKING WITH AND FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Foreword

Progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its goals will not be achieved without the participation, ideas and energy of young people. Indeed, many of the challenges we face – from climate change and poverty to human rights and the inclusion of marginalized groups in public life – disproportionally affect young people. It is crucial, therefore, that they have opportunities to be meaningfully included in the decision-making spaces where collective solutions are debated, and that they have ways of holding duty bearers to account when they fall short of their promises to instill change.

The research underpinning this report demonstrates how the United Nations is supporting young people to do this at multiple levels of governance across a range of countries, with differing challenges and opportunities. It covers how they are finding innovative ways to engage duty bearers, monitor their actions and contribute to new ideas, behaviors and policy directions. There are numerous insights into how young people are organizing, included, and responded to by those in positions of power. At the heart of these efforts is the strengthening of social accountability relationships between young people and governments, as well as the United Nations, who work with both.

Yet, young people tell us that we can do more, with more of their peers in their full diversity and in ways that are more likely to foster transformative change. Their well-meaning critiques ask us to be radical, to be hard-headed and realistic about what we are achieving, the leverage we possess and the spectrum of possible outcomes in different contexts. Furthermore, as youth-led social movements in many countries demonstrated when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to largely turn to digital and rethink modes of engagement, young people want us to be nimble and seize windows of opportunity where they arise.

A clear roadmap we have to support in these efforts is "Our Common Agenda" — the United Nations Secretary General's latest agenda of action that presents concrete proposals for how we can all work together and create a future that's better for everyone. At the core of its recommendations lies the need to deepen solidarity with the world's young people; re-building trust and removing obstacles that stand in the way of meaningful intergenerational partnerships.

I hope that those reading this report draw inspiration from it, whilst taking its messages as a chance to reflect on their own work supporting young people to participate in decision-making and to hold governments to account for progress towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. A lot has already been done and much of it is beginning to bear fruit, even under the most trying of circumstances. It's now time to take stock, listen to what young people say works and what else can be done, and to partner with organizations and governments pushing for change wherever they may be.

Jayathma Wickramanayake
United Nations Secretary General's Envoy on Youth

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Acronyms

COVID/COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DCO	Development Coordination Office
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex, The 'plus' is used to signify all of the gender identities and sexual orientations not specifically covered by the other five initials.
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSGEY	Office of Secretary General's Envoy on Youth
PETS	Public Expenditure Tracking
RCO	UN Resident Coordinator's Office
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
VNRs	Voluntary National Reviews

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Executive summary

Young people are central to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their voices, energy and creativity are needed to ensure that decisions and policies that affect their lives fulfil the Agenda's promise to tackle the biggest issues facing the world both today and in the future.

This report explores the ways the United Nations (UN) is supporting young people to engage in participatory decision-making processes and to hold duty bearers in their governments to account for the realization of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). It focuses on activities in 37 countries across five UN regions, including deep dives into seven: Kenya, Ghana, Thailand, Albania, Jordan, Pakistan and Guatemala, to showcase stories of successful collaborations, challenges and hopes for the future.

The research uncovered a range of activities and processes supported at different levels of governance by UN entities. Among them are spaces for deliberation and decision-making to which young people are invited by states and international organizations. It also includes ad hoc, created, and increasingly digital opportunities for young people to engage duty bearers, raise issues that are important to them, and nudge agendas in new directions. All these activities have the potential to contribute to what this report terms **healthy social accountability relationships.**

The report also describes outcomes from the UN's support to young people that cover a broad spectrum. These run from awareness-raising, mobilization and empowerment, to capacity-building, consultation and advocacy, and then to commitments to behavior and policy changes. Each is more or less possible depending on the enabling environments in which UN entities and young people work together. And each is an important step towards transformative change.

The report concludes with recommendations on how UN entities can support young people and strengthen social accountability relationships across different contexts. A spectrum of types of support in different enabling environments is identified. The report's annex includes a list of open-source case studies, tools and other resources that UN entities and young people can use to build their capacity for future engagement.

Key messages

- **The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women were mentioned most frequently by young people as supporting them to engage in social accountability initiatives.** Young people are most often supported to work at the sub-national level, followed by the national level. Yet, there were also suggestions from the seven deep dive countries that UN entities often work in silos and their work can overlap.

- **Almost all of the surveyed government respondents reported that they involve young people in decision-making processes.** Most common were regular opportunities for young people to engage government representatives, followed by helping them access information and securing commitments to youth participation in planning and budgeting processes.

- **All 25 UN Country Teams included in this research indicated they support a broad variety of social accountability initiatives.** In particular, young people were supported to work on COVID response and recovery, program implementation and policy making. More technically difficult initiatives, such as formal SDG review and follow ups, planning and budgeting, legislative activism, and monitoring and evaluating policies and programs were less supported.

- **Over half of young respondents reported being supported by UN entities with training on, or tools for, social accountability.** Most common were those related to accessing information, data and evidence, followed by training on rights-based and awareness-raising approaches, and online advocacy. More technical activities, such as public expenditure tracking (PETS) and grievance redress mechanisms were the tools young people were supported with least.

- **Grassroots groups, girls and young women, and young people with disabilities were the top three categories of young people supported by both UN Country Teams and governments to engage in social accountability initiatives.** However, conversations with young people revealed that the location where UN entities work affects who they support. For example, they argued that 'politically connected' groups in urban areas are the ones supported the most, whilst peripheral and rural young people can be overlooked.

- **Outcomes claimed by UN Country Teams were generally related to women and children, and the health and education sectors.** This likely reflects the mandates of UNICEF, the UNDP and UN Women. The next most-commonly cited sectors were culture and sport, social protection, and employment and labor.

- **There was a general reluctance among UN Country Teams to claim outcomes related to their support for young people to engage in social accountability initiatives.** This likely stems from confusion over what should count as a good outcome in different enabling environments, as well as difficulty in identifying attribution and measuring the impact of such work.

- **Over half of UN Country Team respondents said that their initiatives were not monitored or evaluated, or that they were not sure if they were.** While the majority of young people indicated that they had been asked to provide some form of feedback to UN entities, only about a third said this was for an evaluation of a social accountability-related activity.

Key recommendations

- **Reach beyond the usual suspects.** Young people felt that UN entities should work harder to support difficult-to-reach and marginalized groups. It was argued that this can be achieved through innovative funding mechanisms and small grants distributed among networks that have a presence among grassroots civil society organizations.

- **Raise awareness about and translate the SDGs.** Young people suggested that there is a need to raise awareness of the SDGs beyond young people directly engaged by UN entity programs, and to translate their rationales into language they can easily understand, including more succinct measures of progress towards targets.

- **Capitalize on what young people are already doing.** Some young people argued that they are already part of successful initiatives and efforts to engage duty bearers, and that with UN support they could scale up their activities and have greater impact through training in how to better use evidence to support advocacy.

- **Challenge tokenism and follow up.** Across the deep dive countries, young people argued that consultations and decision-making platforms could often feel tokenistic. To address this, UN entities must ensure there is follow up after consultations and platforms, and communicate back to young people what has changed or not as a result of their participation.

- **Lend credibility and amplify marginalized voices.** Youth representatives from deep dive countries urged UN entities to use their position and leverage (often through funding governments directly) to open up spaces for young people who are harder to reach or who governments do not always want to engage with (e.g. LGBTQI+ youth). This was seen as particularly important in places where governments are most comfortable engaging young people who do not challenge them.

- **Define social accountability.** Further work could help UN Country Teams map out how supported initiatives contribute to social accountability, even in contexts where youth holding duty bearers accountable may be a distant aim. This should also help Country Teams spot instances where participation strays into tokenism – or where windows of opportunity arise for transformative change. UN entities could learn from 'theory of change' and participatory monitoring approaches to improve their support for social accountability.

- **Set clear, contextually relevant and realistic goals.** UN Country Teams should see themselves as catalysts of healthy social accountability relationships. To do this, they must ensure they understand their enabling environments' challenges and opportunities, and begin their interventions with realistic goals. This will help them to not unduly raise expectations among young people and duty bearers.

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1. Introduction

The UN recognizes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be achieved without the voices, creativity and participation of young people in decisions that affect their lives.[1] Moreover, its Youth Strategy argues that 'young people's empowerment, development and engagement is an end in itself, as well as a means to build a better world'.[2] These simple truths are crucial for a world facing a host of challenges that span borders and threaten the futures of 1.8 billion young people, around 90% of whom live in developing countries.[3]

This report uses new research to explore ways the UN is supporting young people to engage in participatory decision-making processes and to hold duty bearers in their governments to account for the realization of the sustainable development goals. It focuses on activities from 30 countries across five UN regions, and deep dives into seven: Kenya, Ghana, Thailand, Albania, Jordan, Pakistan and Guatemala, to showcase stories of successful collaborations, challenges and hopes for the future. It concludes with recommendations from young people, UN entities and government representatives.

Throughout the report, attention is paid to relationships between UN entities, youth groups, organizations and networks, and governments; referred to as the 'accountability triad' (see box: *Accountability relationships*). The focus is on both the formal and informal ways in which these relationships can be strengthened and sustained to ensure young people's voices are amplified, and that advocacy leads to change. The report has adopted a broad definition of what constitutes an outcome, because survey and interview respondents differed in their definition of 'outcomes'. This has meant that the report has been able to capture the spectrum of enabling environments, opportunities and success stories across the studied countries.

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1.   https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda
2.   https://www.unyouth2030.com/
3.   This report follows the Youth Strategy, in the most part, which considers the broad range of definitions used by UN entities for what age groups can be considered 'youth', whilst recognising that the UN Secretariat usually gives a bracket of 15-24 years old. Throughout, the terms 'youth' and 'young person/ people' are also used interchangeably to acknowledge the diverse spectrum of young people (race, gender, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity).

Accountability Relationships

The data gathered for this report unpicks key relationships between a social accountability 'triad' composed of UN entities, the young people they support, and duty bearers in governments.

Social accountability 'emerges from actions by citizens and civil society organizations aimed at holding the state to account, as well as efforts by government and other actors (media, private sector, donors) to support these actions' (UNDP, 2010).[4] It is an ongoing process through which trust is built between citizens and states, and through which people can raise their voices. Healthy social accountability relationships lead to more inclusive and better policies, and provide citizens with ways of sanctioning non-performing duty bearers. In most cases, therefore, they require a minimum of cooperation among the actors in the triad.

As highlighted in its Youth Strategy, UN entities can play a role as partners to young people and brokers of social accountability relationships. They can help youth groups, organizations and networks to engage bureaucrats, state officials and elected politicians responsible for ensuring progress towards the SDGs.

To do this they use a variety of techniques, from raising awareness of important issues and helping young people to organize, to building their capacity to gather evidence, conduct advocacy and run campaigns. They can also create opportunities for young people and duty bearers to meet. This support can involve funding, but this is not always necessary or best – and in some situations UN entities are better working at arm's length. Indeed, the ownership of the triad's accountability relationships directly affect their sustainability and potential for transformative change.[5]

This report's findings cover a broad range of activities and processes. Among them are spaces for deliberation and decision-making to which young people are invited by states and international organizations. Here, the groups often debate progress towards the SDGs and future policies with the use of evidence and cutting-edge technical advice. The report also includes examples of ad hoc, created, and increasingly digital opportunities for young people to engage duty bearers, raise issues that are important to them and nudge agendas in new directions. Whatever the venue or medium, the report seeks to understand the role UN entities play before, during and after engagements, and what has been done for and with young people. Where possible, it also provides perspectives from two or more triad members.

In places, the report seeks a dialogue with themes identified by the 2020 _Believe in Better_ working paper jointly published by the Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, ActionAid, Restless Development and the Major Group for Children and Youth.[6] It examined opportunities for young people to engage in SDG-related accountability processes, and urged triad actors to create participatory spaces. Attention was drawn to a number of themes including: meaningful

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4. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic Governance/OGC/dg-ogc-Fostering Social Accountability-Guidance Note.pdf
5. Arising from critical gender theorists, transformative change seeks to challenge the power dynamics underpinning pressing social issues rather than only addressing their effects.
6. https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Believe-in-Better.pdf

participation that accounts for the challenges of intergenerational engagements and collaborations; the need to update notions of inclusion with an intersectional lens to fully realize promises to leave no one behind; and further efforts to capitalize on translocal-local spaces and practices that allow young people to challenge and overcome physical and structural divides.[7, 8]

Believe in Better also laid down the principles of meaningful youth engagement:[9] institutionally mandated, rights-based, safe, designated, resourced, transparent, accessible, voluntary, informative, with reciprocal accountability and due consideration for diversity and inclusion. This report takes these principles as its starting point for analyzing uncovered activities and processes involving young people and UN entities. However, it goes further through its use of research instruments designed to understand the quality and nature of youth participation in decision-making around the SDGs. The development of these research instruments drew inspiration from Arnstein's (1969) much-cited 'ladder of citizen participation' that is used to understand empowerment (see box: *Participation*).

Participation

The participation ladder can help analysts understand the nature and quality of participation. Each rung of the ladder seeks to describe the extent of people's power to contribute to and shape the processes they are involved in.

At the lower end of the ladder are those activities that are better thought of as substitutes for real participation, such as when programs aim to educate people with little scope for feedback loops that adjust the curriculum or introduce new topics. These are often labelled as tokenistic by skeptical participants. At the top are processes within which participants are in the lead and control every stage of an engagement – from planning to implementation and evaluation – and power shared or delegated to them by others.

The participation ladder is an oversimplification of what engagements between young people and duty bearers look like in real life. Moreover, it does not capture the way activities, processes and platforms can move up and down the ladder depending on the wider enabling environment and the actions of those involved.

Yet, the ladder helps to remind analysts that participation cannot always be taken at face value. Instead, the experiences and perspectives of the 'not so powerful' must be revealed. The ladder can also be helpful to those supporting young people to engage with duty bearers (such as UN entities) in that it helps them to have a critical eye on the nature of those engagements, and provides a guide for what more meaningful participation might look like.

1 Citizen Control
2 Delegated Power — Citizen Power
3 Partnership
4 Placation
5 Consultation — Tokenism
6 Informing
7 Therapy — Nonparticipation
8 Manipulation

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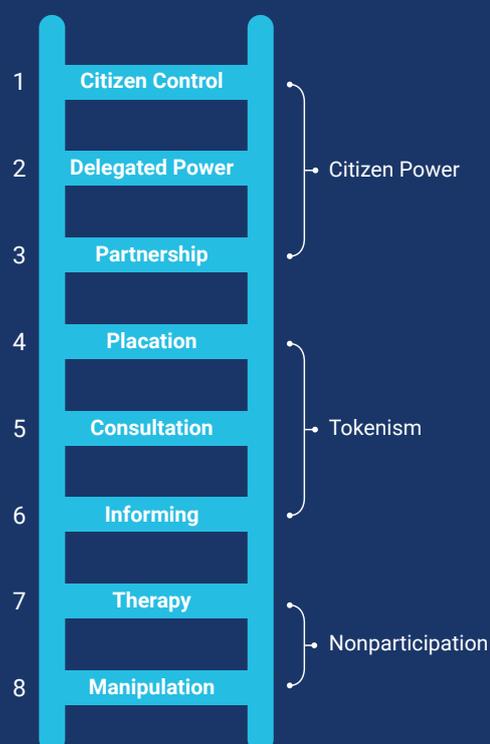
7. https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/what-does-it-mean-to-leave-no-one-behind-.html
8. A theme identified in the Believe in Better report, 'translocal' focuses attention on the socio-spatial dynamics and processes of identity formation that transcend boundaries (in particular the nation state), and highlights the significance of networked places, where mobility and circulations of ideas, symbols and knowledge are created and re-created, often from one locality to another.
9. Believe in Better working paper, ActionAid p5

This report begins broadly with descriptions of who is doing what across the studied countries, before narrowing down to specific formal and informal participatory processes. Along the way, the techniques and tools young people use in their engagements with duty bearers are overviewed. Particular attention is given to Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes as a UN-endorsed mechanism through which young people can provide feedback on governments' progress towards the SDGs, and to the translocal, digital and informal spaces through which young people are collaborating, raising their voices, and engaging duty bearers.[10] Focus is also given to who participates in such spaces and how, and the barriers to those who often struggle to be included.

The findings draw out what respondents reported to be good ways of supporting young people in decision-making processes and to hold duty bearers to account. They also look at examples of activities and processes that have not met participants' expectations. Analysis of major trends across the countries are compared with and illustrated by case studies and voices from the seven deep dive countries. It is important to acknowledge that the two do not always agree with one another, and the evidence is sometimes contradictory. Furthermore, the research was not intended to be statistically significant or representative. Instead, the findings add to an emerging picture of what UN entities are doing and how young people are engaging their governments with their support.

The report concludes with recommendations on how UN entities can support young people and strengthen relationships across different contexts. A spectrum of types of support in different enabling environments is identified. The report's annex includes a list of open-source case studies, tools and other resources that UN entities and young people can use to build capacity for future engagements.

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10.   https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/

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2. Methods

This review adopted a mixed methods approach to data gathering, composed of quantitative web-based surveys, and qualitative key informant interviews and focus group discussions. These approaches were implemented in parallel from July to September 2021.

2.1 Sampling

Country selection
Countries were selected to participate in this review based on the following guiding principles:

1. Prioritization of countries scoring highly in the areas of youth, SDGs and social accountability, based on the 2020 results against the Youth2030 Scorecard; a self-reporting strategic planning, performance measurement and accountability tool for recording joint action by UN Country Teams.[11, 12]
2. Proportionate allocation by region, taking into account the five regions of Development Coordination Office distribution of the 130 UN Country Teams.[13]
3. Feasibility of implementation, taking into account active conflict or other factors that may impede or enhance the team's ability to gather data in the period required.
4. Within-region variation, including geographic, linguist and other factors.
5. Prioritization of the Youth2030 Fast Track countries, where additional countries must be added or removed to meet a regional target.

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11. https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Youth-2030-UNCT-Scorecard.pdf
12. The Scorecard's indicators span both i) working for youth and ii) working with youth. It captures working with youth at the UN Country Team level through a set of practical measures, drawing from well-laid down principles of meaningful youth engagement (see introduction).
13. These regions included: Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Arab States.

In total, 37 countries were selected to participate in this research based on the above criteria. A full breakdown of these countries is provided in the annex.

Quantitative surveys

Surveys were intended to provide a quantitative overview of existing practices, models and priorities related to young people and social accountability across countries and stakeholder groups. They were implemented using a web-based platform, and shared with stakeholders in all 37 selected countries. Surveys were based on common themes and tailored to each of the three stakeholder groups (youth group members, government representatives and UN Country Team members), ensuring appropriateness for each group while allowing for comparison of key questions across surveys. These themes included accountability context, participation, platforms, engagement, outcomes and future support.

Young people and government representatives were accessed through existing networks of UN Country Teams, ActionAid and the research team. They were invited to participate in the survey based on their previous involvement in UN activities or their known role in promoting youth engagement and social accountability. Resident Coordinator's Offices(RCO) in each country, or a nominated focal point within UN entities, identified appropriate survey respondents from UN entities engaged with young people.

Qualitative data collection

To gain a deeper insight into the UN's support to the triad's relationships, qualitative data was gathered remotely from seven deep dive countries selected from the 37 surveyed countries. In each country, one 4-8 person focus group discussion with young people and UN Country Team representatives was carried out, lasting between 1.5 and 2 hours. This was complemented by 1-3 key informant interviews carried out in each country with government representatives, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Following these discussions, participants commonly shared additional insights, resources and tools with the review team over email, providing additional context and detail for this review.

2.2 Analysis

Survey data was analyzed to identify key trends within each respondent group. Where possible, secondary coding was conducted to establish a country-level score for relevant questions, based on a binary yes/no categorization. Quantitative datasets for each of the three respondent groups were analyzed independently. Where possible, questions were analyzed to support triangulation and comparison between datasets.

Qualitative data gathered through the focus groups and key informant interviews, as well as through open response survey questions, was analyzed thematically based on a pre-established thematic framework that drew from the participation ladder and the Believe in Better report discussed in the introduction. Once initial analysis was complete, quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed iteratively to maximize the extent to which both datasets complemented each other.

2.3 Limitations

As with all data gathering activities, this review includes a number of limitations. These limitations, along with steps taken to address them, where possible, are described briefly below.

Firstly, due to the nature of the activity and time available to conduct the data collection, participants were accessed primarily through UN Country Team networks and/or facilitated by UN Country Team staff. While this provided useful entry points into youth and government respondent groups that would not have been possible to access otherwise, this approach to sampling means that findings from this survey may not be representative of all youth groups or government actors in any given country. Rather, these findings provide indications of possible trends related to similar groups and contexts.

Secondly, survey participants from all three stakeholder groups were asked to complete questionnaires on behalf of their agency/group's activities as a whole, rather than based on their individual experiences or views. While many stakeholders took steps to gather information from colleagues to ensure the accuracy of their responses, it is possible that not all respondents were perfectly aware of the activities carried out by their agency or group at the time of the survey. This is particularly true for UN Country Team and government respondent groups, given frequent staff transfer. As such, findings should be interpreted as a snapshot of on-going and recent activity rather than a historical account of engagement and support to young people.

Third, the relatively uneven response rates across stakeholders and countries meant it was not always possible to carry out country-level data comparison across stakeholder groups. However, removing countries with responses from fewer than two stakeholder groups from the data set (see details in next section) did help to ensure that findings presented in the review were as comparable as possible.

Additionally, implementing surveys using web-based forms meant that the survey population is limited to those individuals with access to the internet. While this limitation was unavoidable due to other study constraints, it does mean that the views of individuals without this form of access are likely not reflected in this study. However, research team members did engage with stakeholders on the topic of access to the internet as it relates to inclusion, ensuring that this access barrier is discussed in the review.

Lastly, though the survey tools were available in English, Spanish, French and Arabic, it was not feasible to translate them into all the languages used by survey participants. This may have resulted in some individuals opting not to complete the surveys, or others doing so in a language they were not fully comfortable with. Where requested, the review team collaborated with UN Country Team translators to ensure the survey could be implemented in additional languages. All qualitative data collection was carried out in the participant's language of preference.

3. Study Scope

The survey was shared with individuals from 37 countries. Overall, a total of 433 individuals from 35 countries participated in the survey. In an effort to ensure responses from each survey could be analyzed jointly, countries where only one of the three 'triad' members (UN Country Team, government, youth networks) responded were excluded. Therefore, in total, responses covering 25 countries were used for this review. Across these 25 countries, a total of 105 UN Country Team representatives, 99 government representatives and 229 youth network representatives participated in the survey.[14]

Table 3.1: Regional breakdown of 25 survey countries and territories

Africa	Asia Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean	Arab States
• Cameroon • Ghana • Kenya • Rwanda • Somalia • Togo • Zimbabwe	• Cambodia • India • Lao PDR • Pakistan • Thailand	• Albania • Kosovo* • North Macedonia • Serbia • Uzbekistan	• Brazil • Costa Rica • Dominican Republic • Guatemala • Ecuador	• Iraq • Jordan • Morocco

3.1 UN Country Team representatives

Overall, 105 UN Country Team representatives participated in the survey from the 25 countries. An overview of survey participants by agency is presented below.

Figure 3.1: Agency affiliation of UN Country Team representatives, by country

% of countries

Agency	Value
UNFPA	22
UNDP	20
UNICEF	19
UN Other	15
UNESCO	9
UN Women	5
RCO	5
UNV	4
WHO	2
WFP	2
ILO	2
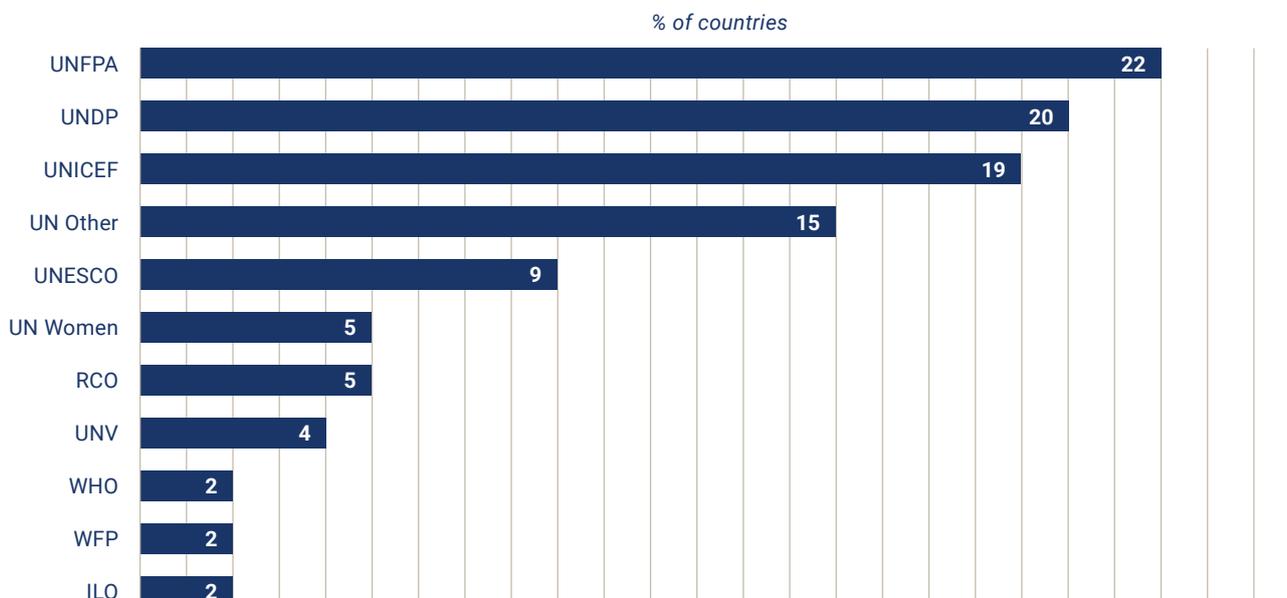
The category of 'other UN' includes a wide variety of UN entities, including the IOM, UNHCR, UNAIDS, UN Habitat, UNRWA, and others who had only one respondent.

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14. As participants were asked to provide responses on behalf of their agency, entity or network, data is not intended to present individuals' perspectives and is therefore not gender disaggregated.
    *References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UNSCR 1244 (1999).

UN Country Team representatives most commonly described themselves as working on youth issues, followed by women and children and social protection/volunteering. The least common responses related to agriculture, and technology and innovation.

Figure 3.2: Breakdown of sectors where the UN supports social accountability, by % of respondents

% of respondents

Sector	%
Youth	75,2
Women and children	40,0
Social Protection / Social Service / Volunteering	33,3
Education	28,6
Health	24,8
Employment / Labor	19,1
Statistics / Planning	11,4
Justice / Security	11,4
Culture / Sport	9,5
Environment / Disaster Management / Climate / Energy	8,6
Technology and Innovation	3,8
Agriculture	2,9
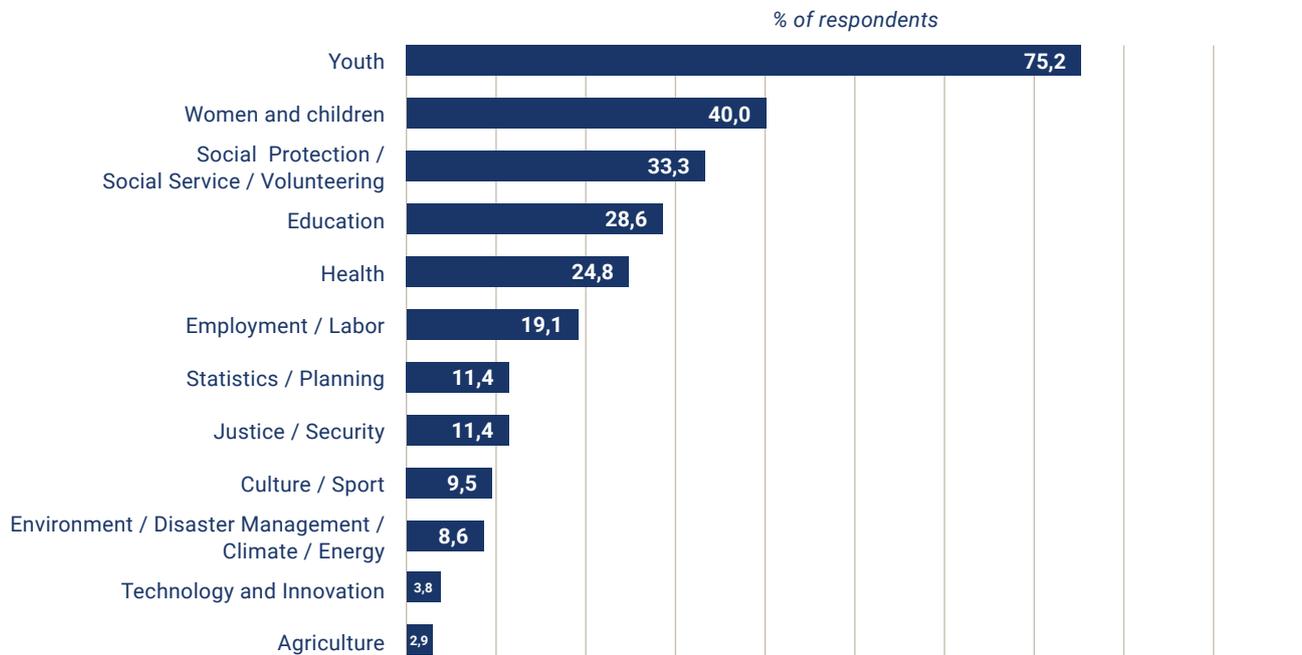
3.2 Government representatives

A total of 99 government representatives participated in the survey across 19 of the 25 countries.

Figure 3.3: Breakdown of sector focus of government representatives, by % of respondents

% of respondents

Sector	%
Youth	50,5
Social Protection / Social Service / Volunteering	32,3
Education	27,3
Women and Children	26,3
Employment / Labor	18,2
Culture / Sport	12,1
Justice / Security	12,1
Health	11,1
Agriculture	9,1
Statistics / Planning	8,1
Technology and innovation	7,1
Environment / Disaster Management	5,1
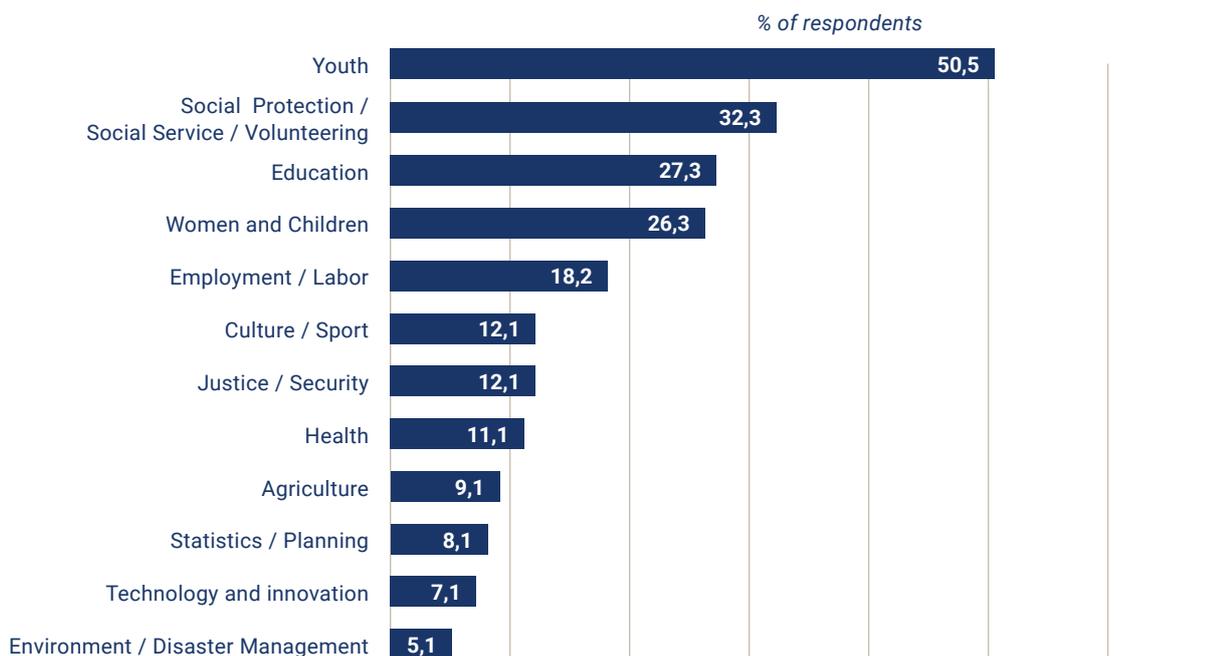
Of these representatives, the majority described themselves as working at the national level (86.8%), followed by sub-national and then transnational/international levels.

Figure 3.4: Levels of work for government representatives, by % of respondents

% of respondents

Level	%
Transnational / international	32,4
Sub-national	38,2
National	86,8

3.3 Youth groups and networks

In total, 229 representatives of youth groups or networks took the survey from the 25 countries analyzed in this report. They classified themselves approximately equally representing youth groups or networks that are youth-led, focused solely on youth issues or focused on multiple sectors.

Figure 3.5: Type of youth organization covered, by % of respondents

- ■ Youth-led — 30,6%
- ■ Focused on youth — 26,2%
- ■ Multi-sector incl. youth — 34,1%
- ■ Other (please specify) — 9,2%
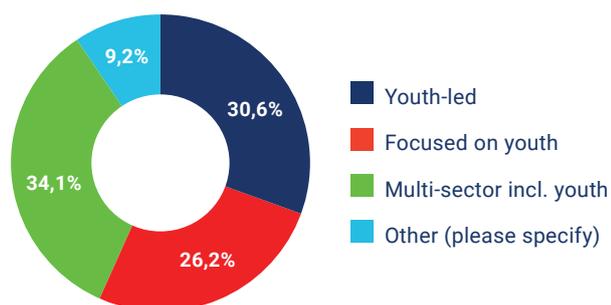
With regards to what they worked on, youth respondents most commonly noted that their group focused on education, followed by social protection, and women and children's issues more generally.

Figure 3.6: Breakdown of youth group sectoral focus, by % of respondents

% of youth respondents

Sector	%
Education	64,2
Social Protection / Social Service / Volunteering	57,2
Women and Children	53,3
Health	41,5
Culture / Sport	31,9
Employment / Labor	30,6
Environment / Disaster Management	31,1
Justice / Security	25,8
Technology and innovation	21,0
Agriculture	10,9
Statistics / Planning	10,5
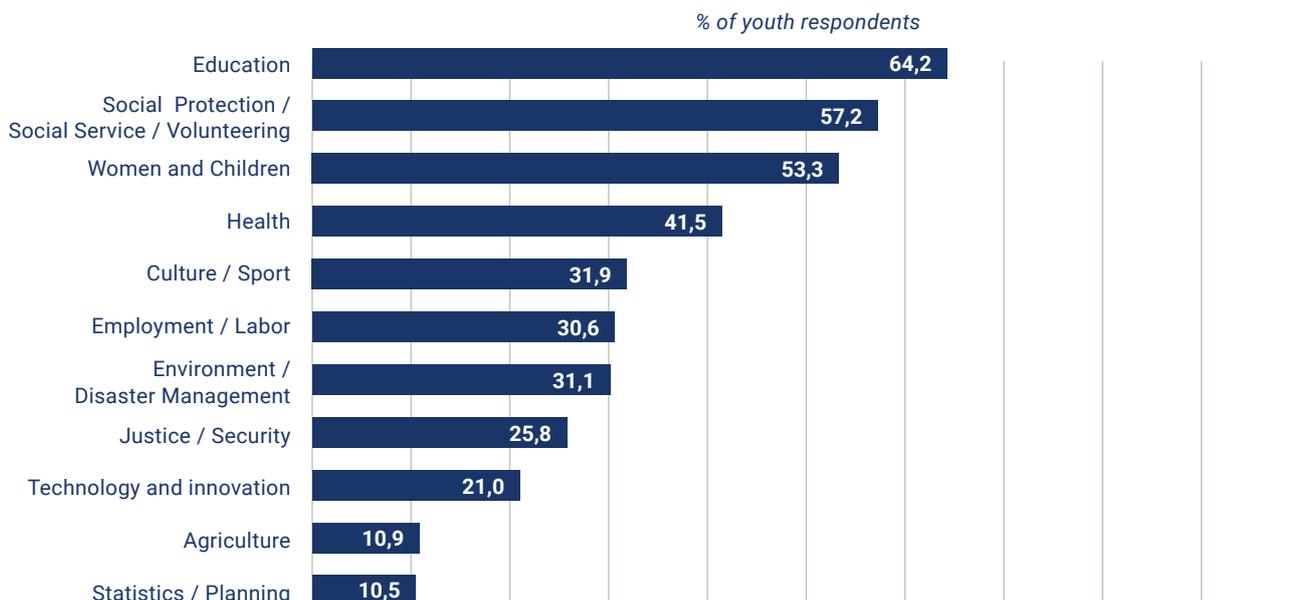
CREDIT: ActionAid

4. Key findings

This section begins with broad descriptions of what triad members are doing to support youth participation in decision-making, and to hold governments accountable for progress towards the SDGs. It then narrows down to focus on specific formal and informal participatory processes, and the techniques and tools young people are supported to use in their engagements with duty bearers. Who participates in such spaces and how, and who struggles to be included, is also explored.

Analysis of major trends are compared with and illustrated by case studies and voices from the deep dive countries. The narrative draws out what respondents reported to be effective ways of supporting young people. It also delves into examples of activities and processes that have not met participants' expectations. In order to protect respondents' identities, the analysis is kept descriptive and only rarely delves to the country level. Names and organizations are also omitted.

4.1 Enabling environments

The enabling environment for social accountability initiatives in part, but never completely, determines what kind of initiatives it is possible to support and types of change they can aim for. Indeed, social accountability relationships can be conceptualized as requiring both a willing and able government, and interested and active citizens.

For example, in country X, governments may provide information on decision-making and development outcomes in a manner easily digestible for non-experts; and citizens may demand it and have the skills to use it to conduct advocacy. In contrast, in country Y, the government may make decisions behind closed doors and actively spread false information about progress towards professed policy goals; while citizens may have given up on engaging unresponsive duty bearers and lack the skills to use any evidence in advocacy efforts.

All members of the triad can play a role in creating an enabling environment for social accountability processes and relationships. While governments often commit to regular opportunities to be engaged by young people, the UN recognizes that it can be a partner to young people and broker of relationships between them and governments. It can

also advocate for more transparency around governance processes related to the SDGs, and encourage governments to be more responsive when engaged by young people.

Overall, roughly three quarters or more of survey respondents from UN Country Teams reported engaging young people in social accountability processes across all the surveyed regions. This was highest in Europe and Central Asia, and lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: UN Country Team engagement of young people by region, by % of respondents

% of UNCT respondents
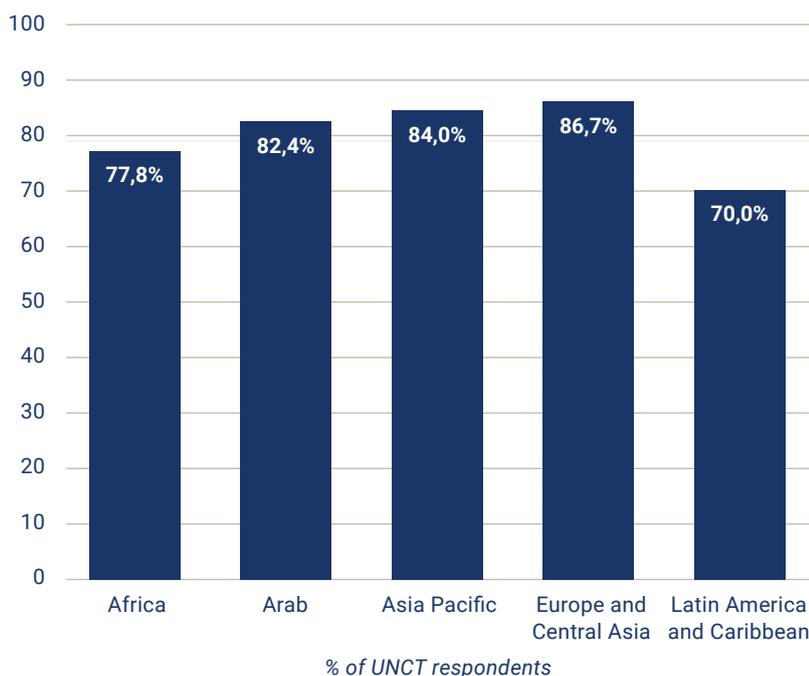
Youth representatives in 24 of the 25 countries reported that they are engaged in social accountability processes supported by the UN. However, only 63% said the UN supported this engagement, and 29.5% said they did not know if the UN supported them or not. These findings may point to a lack of a shared definition of what social accountability means across contexts and among the triad members (see box: *Considering the 'social accountability' label*).

Considering the 'social accountability' label

The term 'social accountability' is increasingly used to describe efforts to empower citizens to engage duty bearers in government and, sometimes, beyond. It arguably has its roots in literature describing civil society activism that enables citizens to sanction poorly performing duty bearers. For many academics, the key illustrative example comes from Mexico's deepening democracy over the 1990-2000s (Fox, 2008).

Our conversations with members of the triad in the seven deep dive countries often revealed different understandings of the concept of social accountability. For example, many suggested consultations and participation in decision-making were social accountability. This should not be seen as a case of misunderstanding, as these activities are necessary parts of healthy social accountability relationships. However they are not sufficient, as there are many situations in which consulted citizens have little ability to hold duty bearers to account; or where they cannot follow up to ensure agreements are kept.

This suggests a need to consider whether UN-supported 'social accountability' activities are strengthening relationships in ways that will lead to responsive duty bearers and create opportunities to sanction poor governance or broken promises. This may be thought of as ensuring that 'accountability' mechanisms are accorded as much attention as citizens' 'social' opportunities to engage duty bearers. Although, this is arguably the harder part of social accountability in many contexts.

Governments have a number of ways in which they create favorable enabling environments for youth participation in social accountability initiatives. Encouragingly, almost all (94.3%) of the surveyed government respondents reported that they involve young people in decision-making processes. They most commonly reported providing regular opportunities for young people to engage government representatives, followed by rights to access information, and commitments to young people's participation in planning and budgeting processes (see Figure 4.2). Funding for youth groups, regular reporting on progress towards the SDGs, and commitments to budget transparency were the least reported ways government respondents said they support young people.

These findings suggest that, although governments are happy for young people to engage them and participate in some governance processes, they may be less willing to provide them with the information they would need to hold them to account.

Figure 4.2: Breakdown of sector focus of government representatives, by % of respondents

% of government respondents

Regular opportunites for youth to engage government representatives	71,7
Access to information rights through relevant legislative acts	66,0
Commitment to participatory planning and budgeting processes	47,2
Funding for youth groups and networks focused on SDGs	35,9
Regular reporting on progress towards the SDGs	32,1
Commitment to budget transparency	32,1
Other (please specify)	18,9
Not sure	1,9

The findings should also be viewed against how responsive UN Country Teams judged governments to be, to engagements by young people (Figure 4.3). Governments of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Arab States were believed to have the least responsive duty bearers. In contrast, governments in Asia Pacific, Europe and Central Asia were judged to be the most responsive.

Figure 4.3: UN Country Team views on levels of government responsiveness, by % of respondents

	Africa	Arab States	Asia Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean
Rarely	20,0%	20,0%			26,9%
Sometimes	40,0%	50,0%	54,2%	64,3%	65,4%
Often	40,0%	30,0%	45,8%	35,7%	7,7%

Legend: ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely
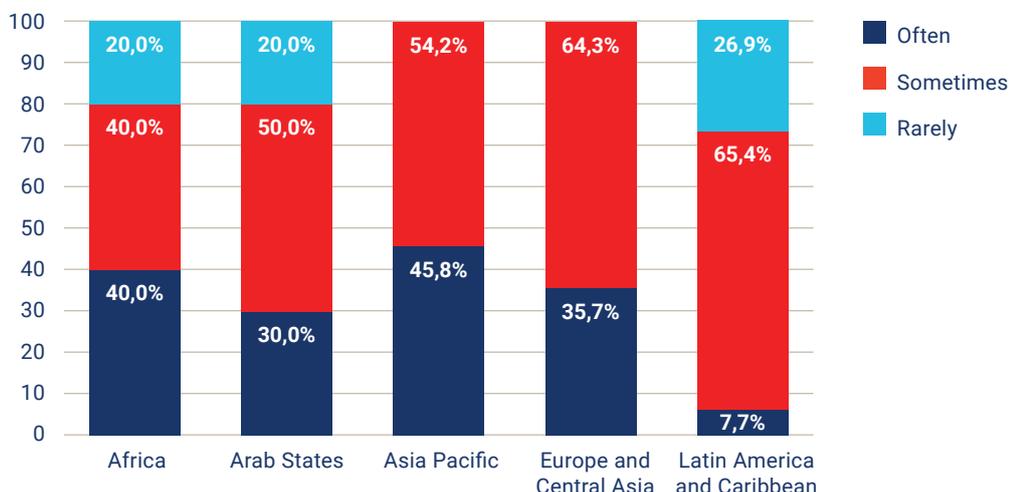
Social accountability theorists suggest that young people with more access to information will be better equipped to elicit responses from the government and hold them to account. It is notable, therefore, that UN Country Team respondents from Asia Pacific, Europe and Central Asia judge the governments they engage with to be most committed to access and rights to information, and to offering regular opportunities for young people to engage them on progress towards the SDGs. In contrast, access and rights to information is believed to be less of a commitment in Africa and the Arab States, where governments are judged to be relatively unresponsive.

Figure 4.4: Government's commitments, by % of UNCT respondents

Legend:
- Budget transparancy
- Access to information rights
- Participatory planning & budgeting
- Regular opportunities for engagement
- Funding for youth groups re SDGs
- Regular progress reporting towards SDGs
- Not sure
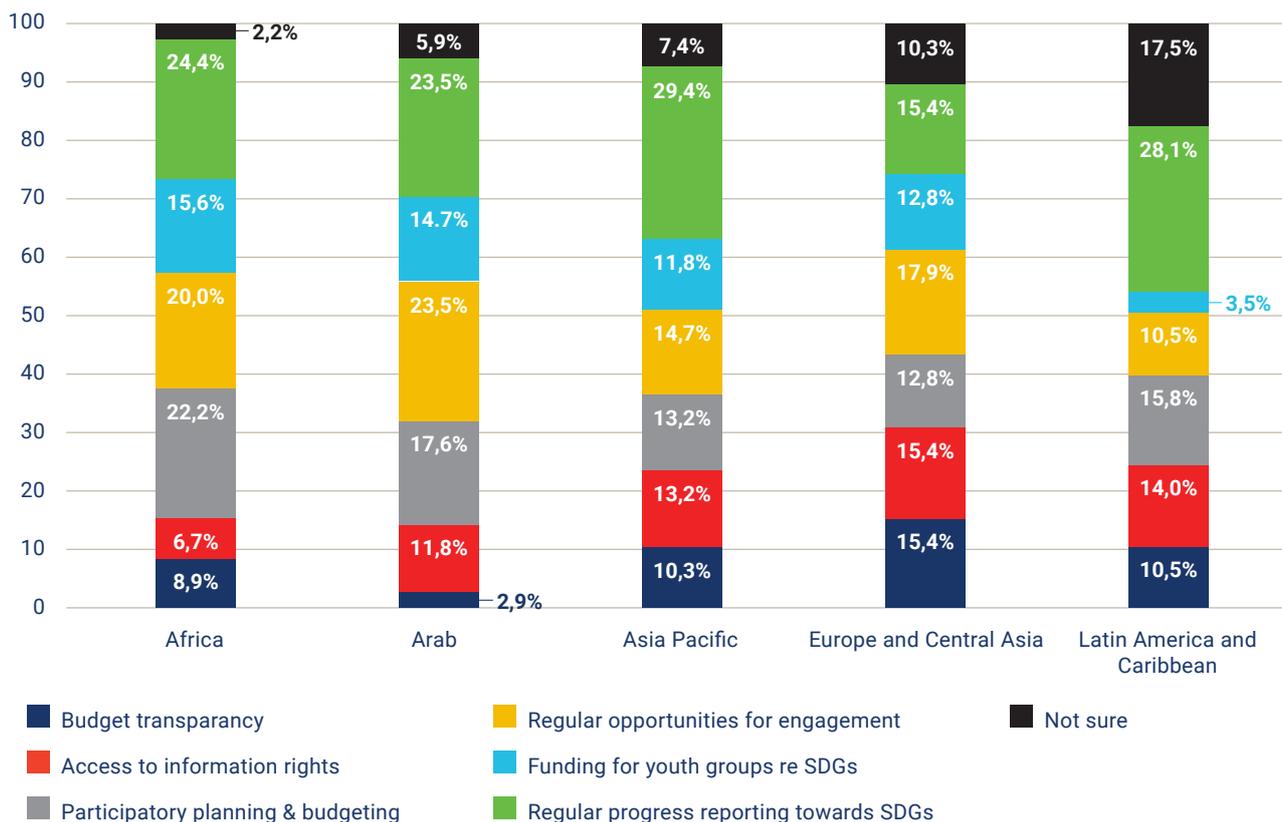
The generally high level of UN Country Team support to social accountability processes, despite the differing challenges across regions, suggests that UN entities believe such activities are worthwhile and that they perceive opportunities for change. Interviewed UN entities saw themselves as supporting a spectrum of carefully targeted activities with the potential to cultivate and strengthen relationships between the triad's three actors, regardless of the limitations of the enabling environment. This is a theme that is returned to throughout the report.

4.2 Which UN entities support young people

Youth respondents were asked which UN entities support their groups and networks to engage governments (see Figure 4.5). The UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women were mentioned most frequently across the 25 countries. This reflects UNDP and UNFPA's broad mandates, and UNICEF and UN Women's respective focus on children, young people and women.

Figure 4.5: Top 5 UN entities that young people report support them, by # of countries

% of UNCT respondents'
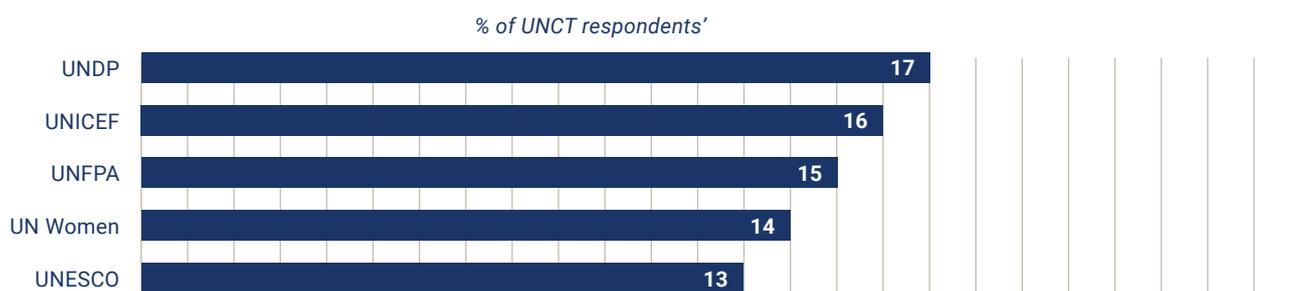
UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA were all mentioned as supporting young people to engage governments across 11 countries: Cambodia, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Jordan, Lao PDR, Morocco, Pakistan, Thailand and Zimbabwe. Yet, this figure masks exactly how active different UN entities are at the country level. For example, UNFPA was consistently mentioned as the lead agency working to support young people in Albania, even though it collaborates with UNICEF, UNDP and others. However, there were also suggestions that UN entities often work in silos, sometimes not communicating with one another or with youth partners about their programs (see box: *Collaboration(s)*).

Collaboration(s)

Ongoing reforms of the United Nations development system have sought to strengthen UN entities' ability to cooperate, coordinate and collaborate among themselves and with young people and governments worldwide. At country level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework is the most important instrument for these ambitions.[15] It ensures that UN entities' work is rooted in four key principles: to clearly articulate the United Nation's collective response to help countries meet the SDGs; to embody the spirit of partnerships with local actors and governments; to help turn promises to leave no one behind into reality; and to provide UN country teams with the tools to tailor responses to countries' specific needs and realities.

UNICEF's Generation Unlimited platform was cited by interviewees as a valued approach to addressing issues of coordination and integration. In Kenya and Jordan, youth groups and government representatives emphasized the importance of a 'one stop shop' for youth engagement, which Generation Unlimited was helping to provide. In Jordan, the platform brings together young people with the government and thematic experts to produce policy papers and recommendations, which are shared on live TV. In Kenya, it brings together youth-serving organizations, government representatives and UN entities with the aim of coordinating and integrating all youth-related interventions. One of the outcomes of this is a multi-sector partnership that will see more than 30 million young Kenyans in education, training or employment by 2030.

In Guatemala, youth organizations explained that the UN plays a unique role in promoting social accountability. Here, a number of UN entities work together to establish bridging relationships between young people and government, which creates the political space for young people to have meaningful engagement with governments where accountability relationships can be established. This was cited as particularly important for marginalized groups such as indigenous youth and young people with disabilities. Equally, UN entities strengthen the role of young people in these relationships by building relations between groups that are not always networked or organized. Organizations working on these issues also cited data generated by UN entities related to the SDGs as an important tool that they use to hold the government to account.

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15.   https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/cooperation-framework

Of the four most frequently mentioned UN entities, young people indicated they most often support them to work at the sub-national level, followed by the national level (see Figure 4.6). While trends are similar across UN entities, UNICEF appears to work most at the sub-national level, closely followed by UN Women and UNDP. This may be because duty bearers are more accessible below the national levels, and UN entities are better able to play a brokering role where their regular programs and activities take place. However, social accountability initiatives can benefit from working across levels, so relationships and impacts can be scaled (see box: *Bridging local and national engagement*).

Figure 4.6: Levels of support for most cited UN entities, by % of respondents
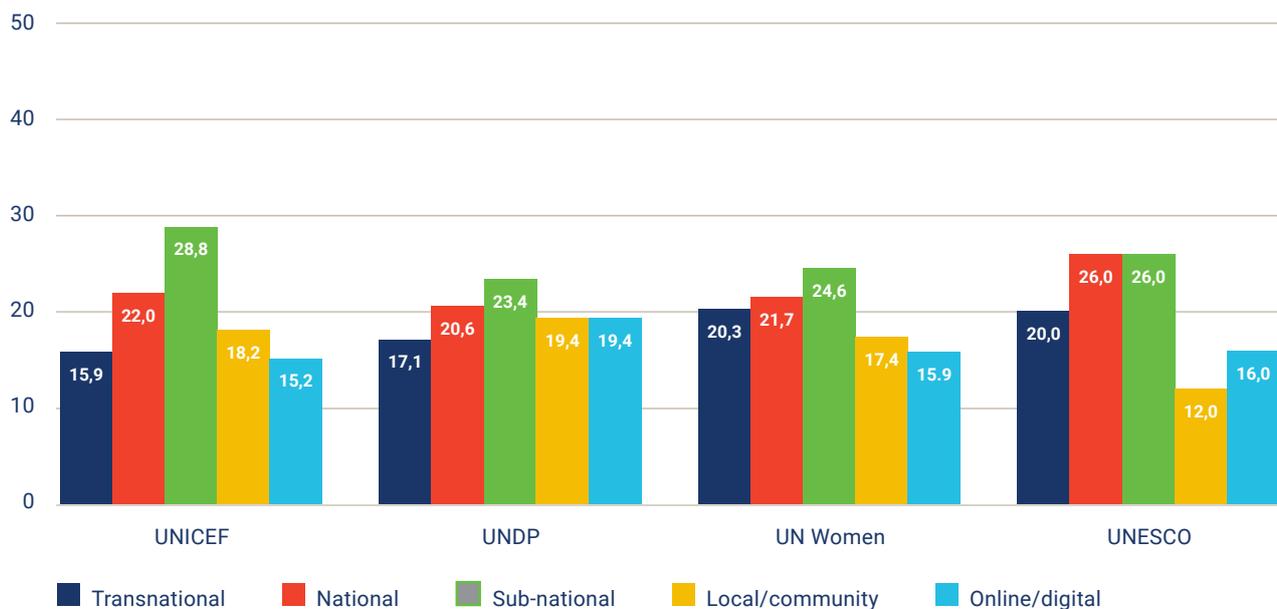
Bridging local and national engagement

Pakistan provided a good example of working at multiple levels (federal, provincial and district). There, UNDP deployed SDG teams to support planning and reporting. This has led to the identification of priority areas for young people, recommendations and newly-designed interventions. Quantitative and qualitative data to inform the priorities was collected from across the country by the government with UNDP's support. They consulted young people, youth organizations and community groups, as well as policymakers, academia and development partners. This has led to youth groups working with the government to pilot a district-level framework for the SDGs, and an SDG scorecard. The tools used to generate the data are a district-level Youth Development Index, Digital Youth Survey, National Youth Pulse and a community of best practice.[16]

4.3 Who is supported

UN Country Teams and governments were asked which types of young people they regularly engage in social accountability processes and decision-making. Grassroots groups, girls and young women, and young people with disabilities were the top three groups engaged by both UN Country Teams and government representatives. Overall, UN Country Teams reported engaging a more diverse range of young people in social accountability processes than government stakeholders (see Figure 4.7). Although, the differences may reflect government representatives' lack of knowledge about what other ministries and departments are doing.

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16.   Please contact UNDP Pakistan for access to these tools.

Figure 4.7: Types of young people engaged by UN Country Teams, by # countries[17]

# of countries

Group	# of countries
Grassroots groups	25
Girls and young women	25
Youth with disabilities	23
Migrant youth	20
LGBTIQ+ youth	20
Indigenous youth	19
Living in conflict-affected areas	18
Refugee youth	17
Living with HIV	16
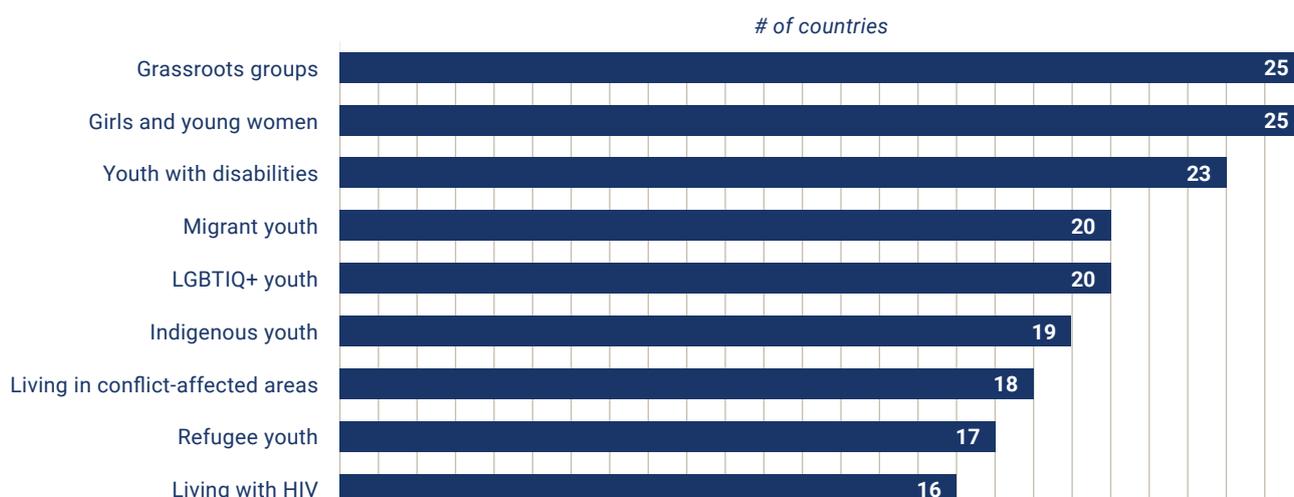
These results suggest UN Country Teams are working to ensure they are leaving no one behind. They may also suggest logistical challenges and political factors that determine who can be engaged by who. These were raised by respondents from the deep dive countries (see box: *Capitals, connections and education*).

Capitals, connections and education

Conversations with respondents from the deep dive countries covered how the location of UN entities' work affects who they are able to support. For example, young people often argued that 'politically connected' groups in urban areas with the capacity to officially register their organizations with governments are the ones supported by the UN. This means that those in peripheral, often rural, locations and unable to register – for reasons from capacity to the nature of the issue they focus on – can be overlooked. As one youth representative put it:

"It is unbelievable that the partnerships between INGOs and specifically UN entities are always with royal NGOs in Jordan. These royal institutions will compete with youth organizations, especially when they apply for permissions. For example, when we as youth try to apply for permission from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, if a royal organization is applying too, they will not look at my application for permission."

Young refugees were one of the groups engaged least by surveyed UN Country Teams and government representatives, which may again reflect the relatively few humanitarian contexts in which surveys were implemented. It may also point to the difficulty of supporting non-citizens to engage in social accountability processes.[18] This speaks to the challenge of engaging young people who are not accorded the same rights as others and those who are, or may wish to remain, unseen by authorities (see box: *Inclusive innovations*).

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17. These questions were asked slightly differently to UN Country Team and to government respondents. UN Country Team representatives were asked about groups of youth engaged in 'social accountability processes', while government reps were asked about groups of youth engaged in 'decision-making processes'.
18. In certain contexts (e.g. Jordan), young refugees are engaged very specifically by a bespoke UN agency such as UNRWA. In other contexts, young refugees are engaged most often by UNHCR.

Inclusive innovations

UN entities are striving to overcome barriers to inclusion in the places they work. As with the UNFPA in Albania, this is often done by working with and providing funds to youth networks with physical links to difficult-to-reach groups, and to those able to fulfil the reporting roles for those less capable. It was argued that such networks can organize and accompany marginalized young people in government-invited spaces, and ensure they are given seats on bodies such as youth councils or school committees. This can also begin to address intersectional barriers to participation and to move beyond 'the usual suspects' engaged by governments.

Spaces specifically designed for marginalized young people can be another way to ensure that their voices are heard. In Kenya, the Pastoralist Youth Summit has created such opportunities for 200 young people from pastoralist communities who face challenges such as unemployment, poor education, radicalization and poor leadership. The Summit provides a platform for young people from pastoralist counties of Kenya to share challenges and develop effective strategies with government representatives.

4.4 What is supported

UN Country Team respondents were asked what broad types of social accountability initiatives they support. Nineteen suggested they were supporting young people across all types of initiatives (see Figure 4.8). As an indication of the responsiveness of UN Country Teams, COVID response and recovery and program implementation were supported in all 25 countries, and policy-making in 24. It was notable, however, that more technically difficult initiatives, such as formal SDG review and follow ups, planning and budgeting, legislative activism and monitoring and evaluating policies and programs, were less supported.

Figure 4.8: UN Country Team supported initiatives, by # of countries
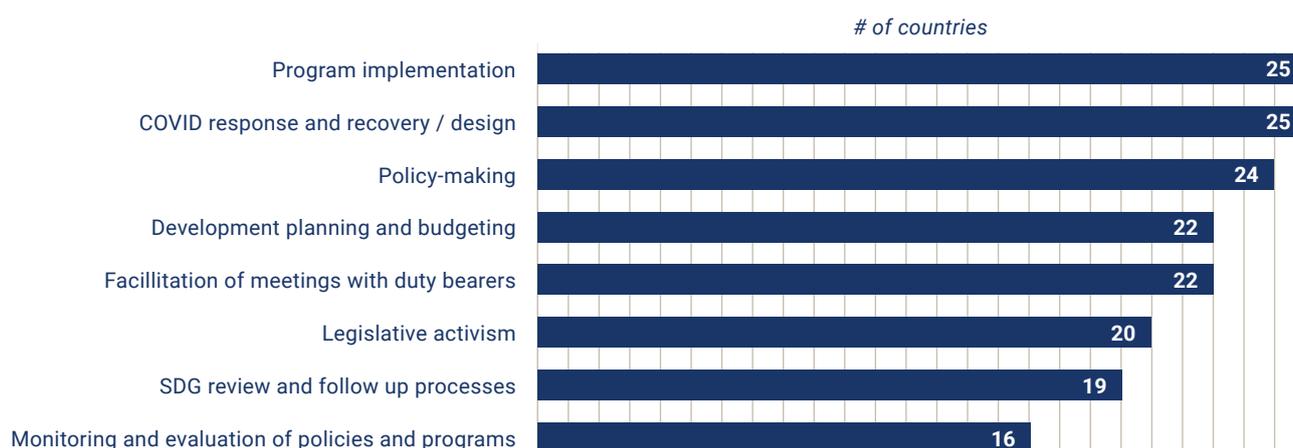
Across all initiatives, UN Country Team respondents most commonly provide support at the national level, followed by the local and community level and then the sub-national (see Figure 4.9). Twenty-three of the 25 countries also noted that they had moved to online engagements following COVID-19 (see box: *Moving online: COVID and convenience*). Moreover, four UN Country Teams reported that all eight categories of social accountability initiatives occur online. This suggests that, for some, the move to digital has not limited the scope of their work.

Figure 4.9: Levels of support for initiatives, by % of respondents

?

	Transnational/International	National	Sub-national	Local/community	Online/digital space
COVID response and recovery	14,3	77,8	50,8	76,2	60,3
Legislative activism	11,4	91,4	31,4	40,0	37,1
Facillitation of meetings with duty bearers	14,9	80,9	53,2	61,7	46,8
SDG review and follow up	12,7	90,5	30,2	31,8	33,3
Program implementation	11,9	73,1	53,7	74,6	44,8
Monitoring or evaluation of policies and programs	12,2	80,5	41,5	53,7	36,6
Development planning / budgeting	10,3	74,4	41,0	53,9	33,3
Policy-making	11,1	83,9	55,6	66,7	52,4

Moving online: COVID and convenience

Respondents from the deep dive countries suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the nature of engagement, with a lot of activity moving to online spaces.

In Kenya, youth groups described online platforms as convenient and efficient and a way to engage large numbers of young people. However, they cautioned that face-to-face engagement is still very important as it is livelier and forces government representatives to respond more; *"the government feels uncomfortable, but they tend to listen."*

In Albania, UNICEF is supporting an international NGO to facilitate the uptake of U-Report; an online initiative that aims to digitally insert young people's voices into policy-making processes by providing a platform for the triad actors to engage one another.[19] The INGO is currently undertaking an information campaign in secondary schools to introduce teachers and students to the way it works and the way it can strengthen social accountability relationships.

In Guatemala, UNDP worked with 15 youth networks to implement a survey with 2,000 young people to understand their views on conflict drivers and security challenges stemming from COVID-19. This virtual exercise, carried out in 2020, allowed young people to share their experiences in a new way and bridged the gap between young people and policy-makers at the height of the pandemic. Data was analyzed by youth groups, who developed anti-conflict plans and advocacy messages on youth priorities. UNDP facilitated meetings of youth representatives with the offices of the Prosecutor and the Human Rights Ombudsman, who have responded to a number of issues raised with concrete plans.

Some UN Country Team and youth representatives were concerned, however, about implications of a move to digital support and digital engagement. This included concerns that those without access (due to a lack of infrastructure or money) or ICT skills may be left behind. For others, digital spaces raised new safeguarding implications and possibly required revisiting 'do no harm' principles, developed in previous eras when online engagements were relatively uncommon.

19.   https://www.unicef.org/innovation/U-Report

4.5 Processes and platforms

The *Believe in Better* working paper identified the importance of formal processes and spaces such as platforms at different levels of governance for young people to engage duty bearers. Almost three quarters of the surveyed youth respondents reported that their groups were supported by the UN to take part in regular governance processes, or to attend events or platforms where young people can hold the government to account (see Figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10: Support for formal processes and platforms as reported by young people, by % of respondents

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

10,9%
17,2%
71,9%
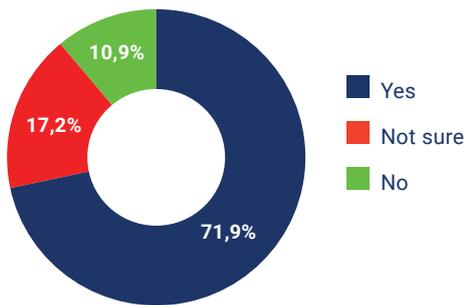
According to young people, civil society or community groups were the most common types of participants in the processes and platforms they took part in, followed by state bureaucrats and officials, and the media (see Figure 4.11). This may suggest that some of these platforms were mainly venues for civil society networking, awareness-raising and planning.

Figure 4.11: Breakdown of who else participates in accountability platforms, as reported by young people

% of youth respondents'

Civil society or community groups	25,5
State bureaucrats or officials	16.3
Media	15,8
Issue-based groups (e.g business or trade associations, unions, guides etc.)	12,5
Service providers (e.g. health workers, teachers, police etc.)	11,4
Politicians	8,7
Other (please specify)	6,5
Not sure	3,3
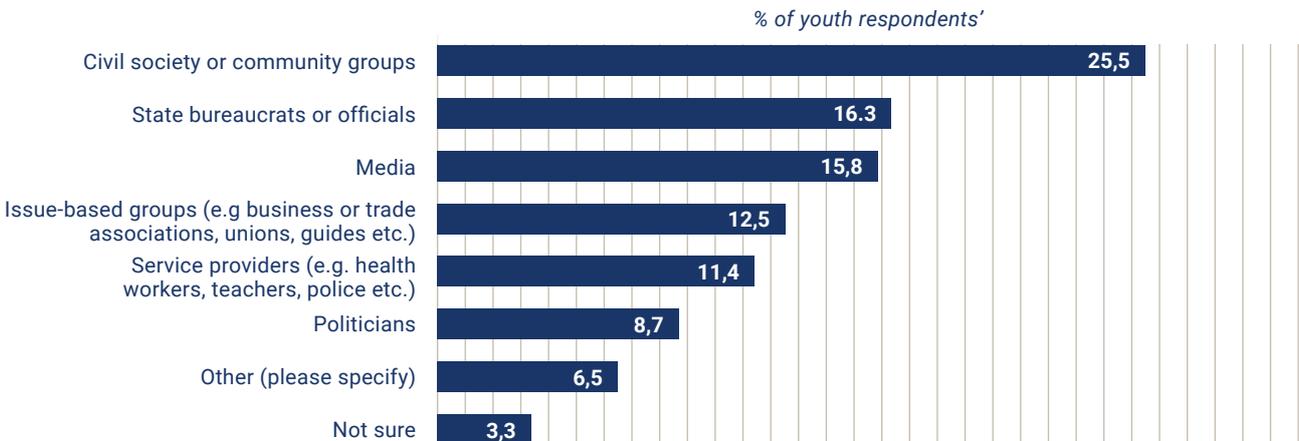
Government representatives in 15 countries, covering all five regions, reported supporting major processes, events or platforms where young people have regular opportunities to participate (see Figure 4.12). With the exception of the transnational, there was a roughly even spread among the levels at which they did so (see box: *Transnational platforms*).

Figure 4.12: Levels where platforms take place, as reported by governments, by # of countries

# of countries

Transnational	National	Sub-national	Local/ community	Online/digital space
8%	14%	12%	14%	13%
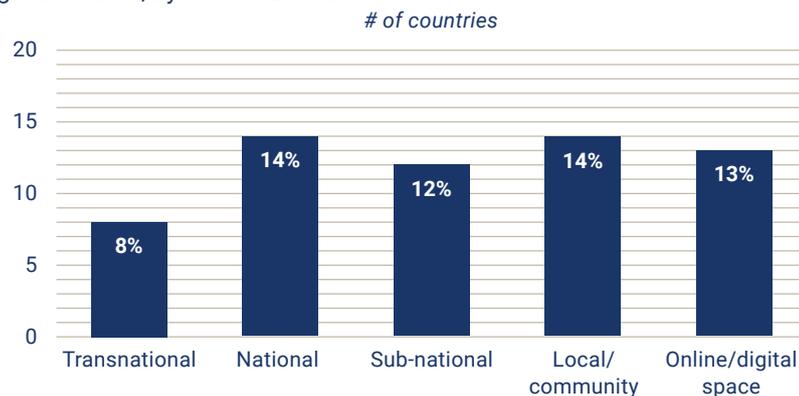
Transnational platforms

A Ghanaian youth representative recounted an opportunity to attend a regional platform focused on family planning and condom use in Rwanda. Supported by the UNFPA, young participants from ten African countries discussed applying for Global Fund grants in 2020 with representatives of their governments. By the end of the trip, the Ghanaian government representatives had committed to include Condom Programming into the country's proposal. The youth activist argued that the competition created by the presence of representatives from other countries helped secure this.

Government representatives in all 15 countries reported that young people could engage in development planning and program implementation as part of their participation in the supported processes or platforms (see Figure 4.13). This was closely followed by opportunities to meet with political duty bearers. The perhaps more technically difficult and resource-intensive Universal Periodic Reviews (government-led processes examining human rights) and participatory budgeting were only available for young people to participate in in six and nine countries respectively.

Figure 4.13: Activities young people can participate in as part of accountability platforms, events or processes, as reported by governments, by # of countries
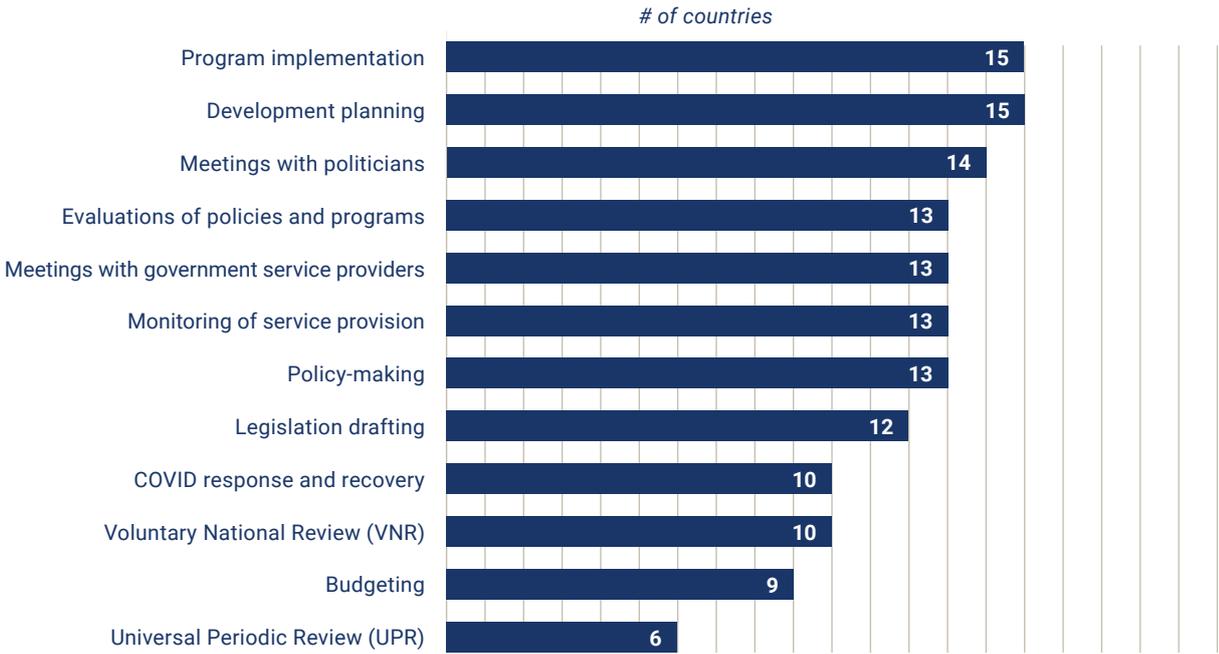
Government representatives also shared how the UN supports them to run processes and platforms. In eight of the 15 countries, the UN supports both young people's participation and opportunities for them to engage. In the remainder, there was a mixture of support to young people or government. This suggests that, in many cases, UN entities and governments work side-by-side to provide opportunities for young people to participate in processes and platforms (see box: *Working behind the scenes*).

Working behind the scenes

In Kenya, UNFPA supports the State Department of Youth Affairs to hold *Kikao* meetings in conjunction with 25 youth partners to reach out to the most vulnerable in society. The aim of these platforms is to accelerate SDG implementation at the county level. Youth participants from every county have used these platforms to participate in budget setting. However, they are sometimes also able to use the spaces as a way to "sneak" in questions about more controversial issues in ways that the government finds less confrontational. Such opportunities present themselves for young people because they are seen as a government initiative rather than a UNFPA initiative. Identified priorities are then taken up by Youth Engagement Sector Working Groups, which monitor outcomes and progress against any agreed targets.

4.6 Training and tools

Social accountability initiatives use a variety of skills and tools to generate information on the performance of duty bearers that can be used in engagements and to hold them to account. They include on- and off- line advocacy, the use of media, legal activism, participatory monitoring, data and budget analyses. Each requires people to be aware of their rights, varying levels of technical ability and a minimum level of transparency and cooperation by governments.

Overall, 63.5% of young respondents have been supported by UN entities with such training or tools. Roughly half reported that the most common form of support they received related to accessing information, data and evidence, followed by training on rights-based and awareness-raising approaches, and online advocacy (see Figure 14.4). The least commonly mentioned training type was art-based activism. Across countries, young people in Pakistan noted receiving training on the greatest number of topics (11), followed by Lao PDR and Cambodia (10).

Figure 4.14: Forms of support received by youth networks from the UN in relation to accountability, by # of countries
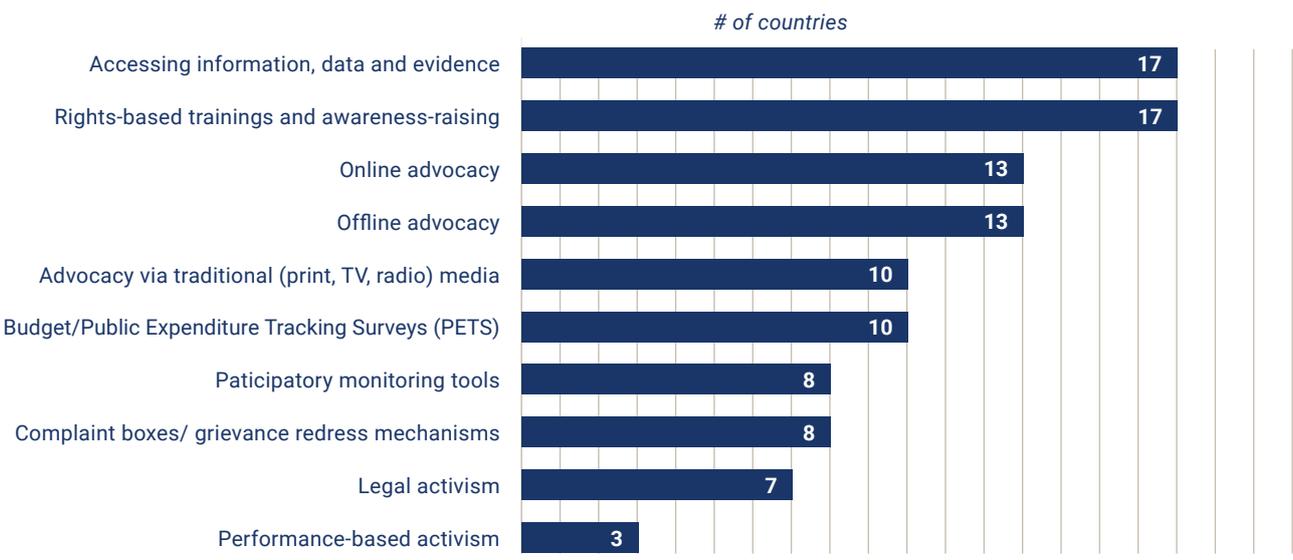
What's being used?

As part of the surveys, respondents were asked to provide examples of guidance, training and tools that had informed their social accountability initiatives. A search of UN databases was also conducted for similar materials and case studies of their use. The results revealed a variety of initiatives across the studied countries.

Almost all the sources provided and found through the search are in English. Most are reports or case studies, but there are quite a number of examples of tools provided by UN Country Teams and youth organizations that are being used on initiatives around the countries surveyed. Most of the sources are from Africa and Asia, or are sources with a global perspective. There is a large number of sources from Kenya.

Of the 25 surveyed UN Country Teams, representatives in four countries –Jordan, Morocco, Rwanda and Thailand – reported training young people on at least 10 forms of social accountability initiatives. The highest proportion reported training in online advocacy and rights-based approaches, followed by offline advocacy (see Figure 4.15). The fewest reported training young people on grievance redress mechanisms. These findings suggest that more technical activities, such as PETS and those that require government involvement such as grievance redress mechanisms, are the least supported.

Figure 4.15: Forms of training provided by the UN to young people, as reported by UN Country Teams, by # of countries
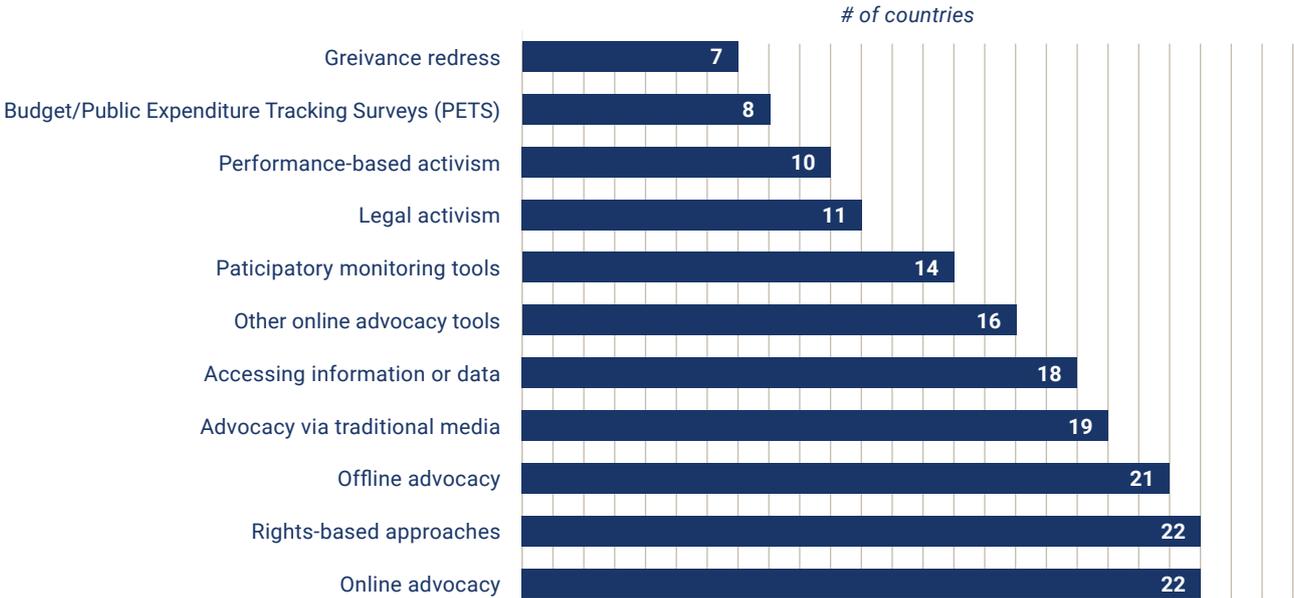
Seventy percent of all training provided by UN Country Teams was given at the national level, with 69.2% of respondents who had reported that grievance redress training was a form of support, saying this occurred at the local/community level. Additionally, 72.9% of respondents who supported online training said this occurred online; and equal proportions of respondents who supported PETS training said this occurred at the national level (54.5%) and at the local/community level (54.5%). This likely reflects where opportunities for social accountability are found and budgets are held within the surveyed countries.

4.7 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to conduct regular and inclusive VNRs of progress at the national and sub-national levels. They are designed to be country-led and to involve multiple stakeholders. They also provide opportunities for the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned.

Of the 25 surveyed countries, respondents in 18 noted that young people had participated in the most recent VNR (see Figure 4.16).[20] However, there was not always agreement between surveyed stakeholders in these countries. For example, in three countries the government noted young people participated in the most recent VNR when the UN Country Team did not, and in eight countries the UN Country Team noted young people participated when the government did not. This may be due to divergent levels of exposure to, or understanding of, VNRs.

Figure 4.16: Countries where UN Country Teams and government respondents reported young people participated in the VNR process

- UNCT only
- Government only
- UNCT and Government
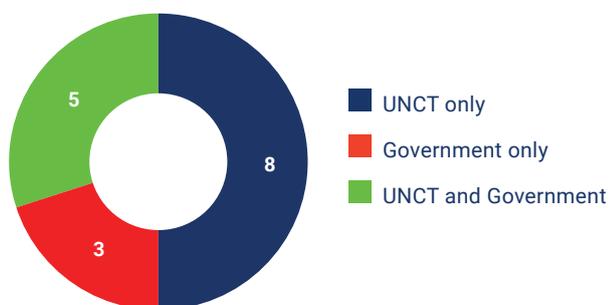
UN Country Teams and government representatives were asked which type of young people are included in VNR processes (see Figure 4.17). Both groups most commonly cited girls and young women as having participated, followed by young people with disabilities and grassroots groups. Young people in conflict-affected areas, migrants and refugees were those least cited. This likely reflects a concerted effort to include young people commonly considered to be marginalized, and the challenges of engaging those in humanitarian crises and considered to be stateless.

Figure 4.17: Groups of young people who participated in the VNR process, as reported by UN Country Teams and governments

% of UNCT and government respondents

	Government	UNCT
Girls and young women	66.7	66.7
Youth with disabilities	56.7	41.7
Grassroots groups	46.7	44.4
Other (please specify)	33.3	22.2
Indigenous youth	26.7	27.8
LGBTIQ+ youth	26.7	16.7
Youth living with HIV	26.7	16.7
Migrant youth	20.0	16.7
Refugee youth	16.7	11.1
In conflict affected areas	10.0	19.4
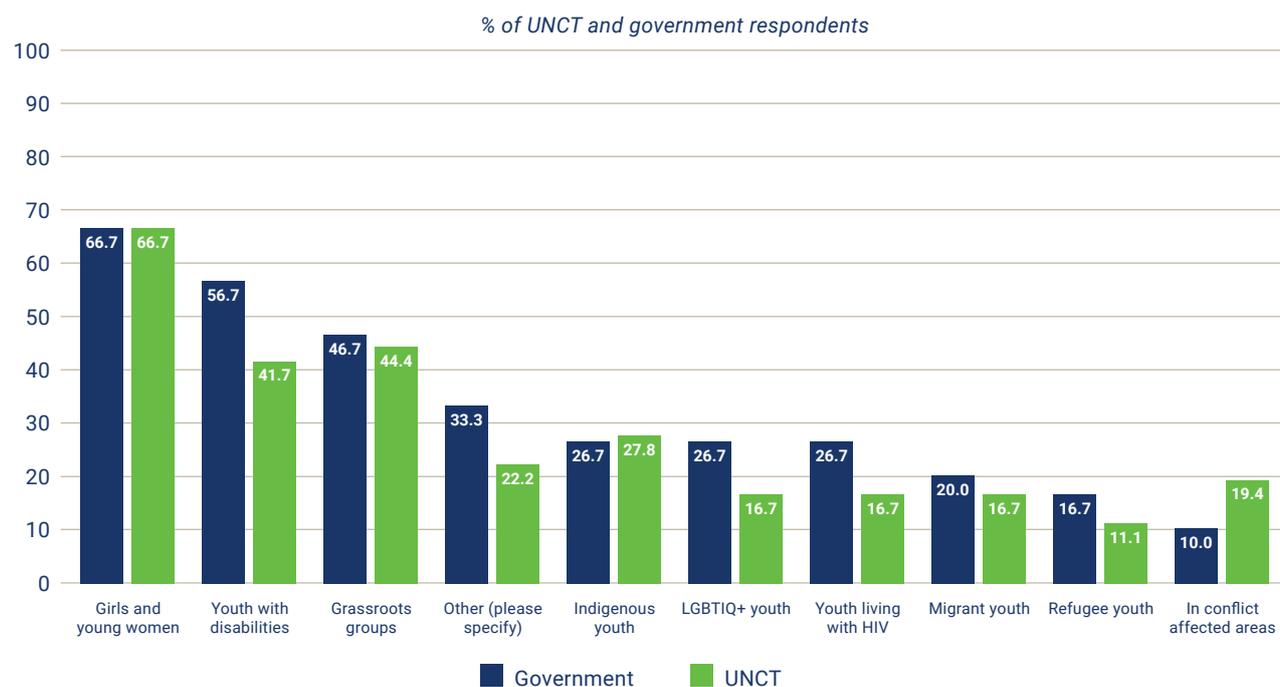
20.   This does not necessarily mean that young people did not participate in the other seven countries, it only means that in 18 countries out of the 25 surveyed, did respondents say that young people had participated.

When asked about the nature of youth participation in VNR processes, it was clear that young people considered their own participation to mostly consist of being consulted (see Figure 4.18). In contrast, government representatives thought of it as more substantial or meaningful, including writing reports and presenting findings to authorities. Put another way, members of the triad often disagree over where their support to young people sits on the participation ladder. This may be indicative of the 'newness' of the review process in many contexts, or it may point to hidden barriers to young people shaping the process.

Figure 4.18: Youth participation in VNR processes as reported by young people, UN Country Teams and government representatives
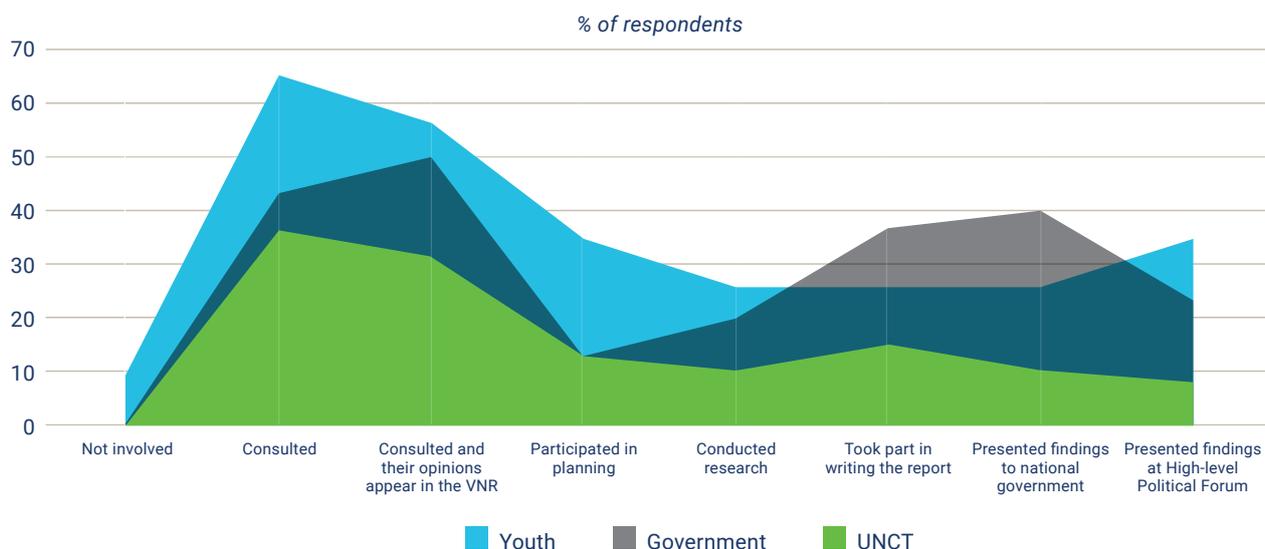
Despite this, according to UN Country Teams, young people do appear to be given opportunities to be involved in presenting VNR findings to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) established in 2012 to monitor and guide progress towards the SDGs.[21] The deep dives also revealed examples of UN entities and governments collaborating to support young people's inclusion in VNRs (see box: *Thailand's VNR*).

Thailand's VNR

Supported by UNFPA, Thailand's Development Affairs Division led on conducting a VNR in 2021. As part of it, they engaged three youth networks and asked them to share their comments on the first draft of the report. Although the youth networks did not ask for substantive edits, they had much to say about how young people could be supported to be more involved in future decision-making around issues related to the SDGs in general and VNR processes in particular.

The youth networks argued that there is a low level of awareness of the SDGs among their peers, and that a potential solution would be to include information on them in the national curriculum. They also suggested that young people could be given time and funding to work on projects related to the SDGs, and that this should count towards their school credits. Lastly, they called for more channels for a diverse range of people to participate in the VNRs, including more online opportunities. All three recommendations made it into the final report.

Reflecting on the process, a Thai government representative argued that a hidden benefit of including young people in presentations to the HLPF in New York was the informal conversations that took place between Thai officials and young people on the sidelines of the trip. These conversations provided insights into young people's thinking on issues related to the SDGs, and motivated those who attended to continue relevant work long after.

4.8 Feedback

Closing 'feedback loops' and participatory evaluations are important for building strong social accountability relationships. Closing the feedback loop refers to how duty bearers respond to those who engage them, whether that consists of promises to consider their advice, or fully changing the way a service is provided or a policy's direction. Participatory evaluations allow those supported by programs, services and policies to assess them using values and metrics that have meaning in their lives.

When asked, government representatives most commonly said they kept young people up-to-date through social media, published reports or documents, and face-to-face or virtual meetings (see Figure 4.19). In contrast, traditional media, community or religious leaders and VNR processes were less frequently cited as communications mechanisms. This may reflect efforts to 'go where young people are' when it comes to keeping them abreast of government responses. But it also raises the possibility of excluding those without the capacity to access or digest reports and project documents.

Figure 4.19: Ways governments keep young people up-to-date on the implementation of the SDGs, as reported by governments, by # of countries
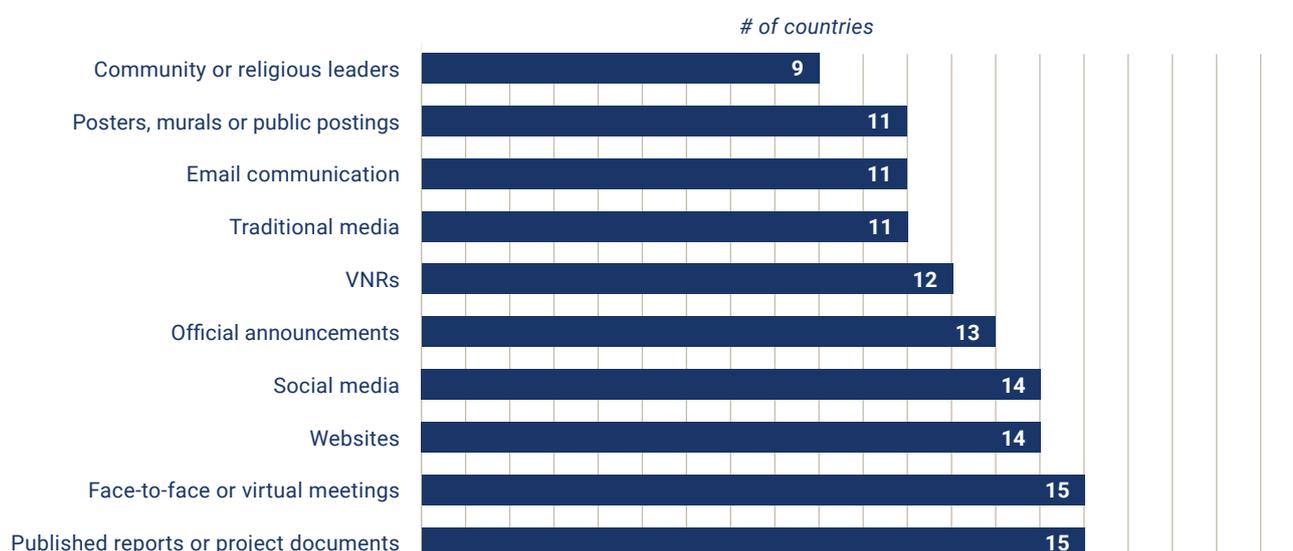
Over half of UN Country Team respondents said that their initiatives were not monitored or evaluated, or that they were not sure if they were (see Figure 4.20). While the majority of young people indicated that they had been asked to provide some form of feedback to UN entities, only about a third said this was in relation to an evaluation of a specific social accountability-related activity. Although encouraging, this may reflect a culture of feedback that falls short of robust participatory evaluation.

Figure 4.20: Young people's experiences being asked to provide feedback on UN support to youth, by % of young respondents

CREDIT: ActionAid

5. What works?

Research participants were asked to identify examples of outcomes arising from UN entities' support for young people's participation in decision-making around the SDGs and holding governments to account. However, identifying attribution and measuring the impact of social accountability initiatives is difficult. Many were concerned that what they saw as good outcomes arising from their work would not count.

Added to this, what should be considered evidence of success varies from country to country. For example in some enabling environments, networking and brokering relationships between youth organizations interested in the SDGs is a good outcome of UN support. In others, the government's wholesale adoption of recommended regulations, policies or laws are achievable aims (see box: *Windows of opportunity and critical junctures*).

Windows of opportunity and critical junctures

Countries are always changing. Issues and leaders emerge and begin to take the spotlight, or institutions, economic dynamics and social norms adapt to long-running internal and external events. This can create windows of opportunity for types of social accountability initiatives previously thought impossible. Often this takes the form of brokering connections between reform-minded individuals inside government, and those outside of government who can offer technical advice and a political base. The UN Country Team's work in Pakistan took this form, with it playing a brokering and convening role between key ministries, technical experts and youth groups.

Enabling environments can also change rapidly. Although often only perceivable afterwards, such situations are often known as 'critical junctures'. Examples include crises such as economic crashes or pandemics, the rise of social movements, the discovery of new resources, or a change in leadership/government. Our discussions with research respondents in Albania revealed how the UN Country Team's work capitalized upon, and was buttressed by, ongoing social and political dynamics. Meanwhile, UN Country Team members in Jordan suggested youth members of its *HeForShe* network were well-positioned to raise awareness of increases in domestic violence and where to find services when COVID-19 restrictions began.

Accordingly, this section describes potential outcomes from UN support to young people that cover a spectrum. It runs from awareness-raising, mobilization and networking, to capacity-building, consultation and advocacy, and then to participation in platforms and governance processes that allow for regular young duty bearer engagements, and, finally, to duty bearers' commitments and policy changes.

Theoretically, these outcomes are progressively easier to achieve in more inclusive, transparent, and responsive enabling environments. Yet, they should not be understood as better than one another, as each is important for fostering the conditions for healthy social accountability relationships. Figure 5.1 provides a visual for thinking about these potential outcomes.[22]

Figure 5.1: Spectrum of potential social accountability outcomes

5.1 What and where outcomes are claimed

Young people in 14 countries shared examples of outcomes achieved related to SDG accountability. Young people most commonly claimed outcomes at the national level, followed by online/digital space and local/community. Though young people most commonly claimed outcomes across a number of levels, those in Albania claimed outcomes at the national level only, while those in Guatemala and Thailand claimed outcomes at the local or sub-national level only.

Figure 5.2: Levels of outcomes shared by young people, by # of countries
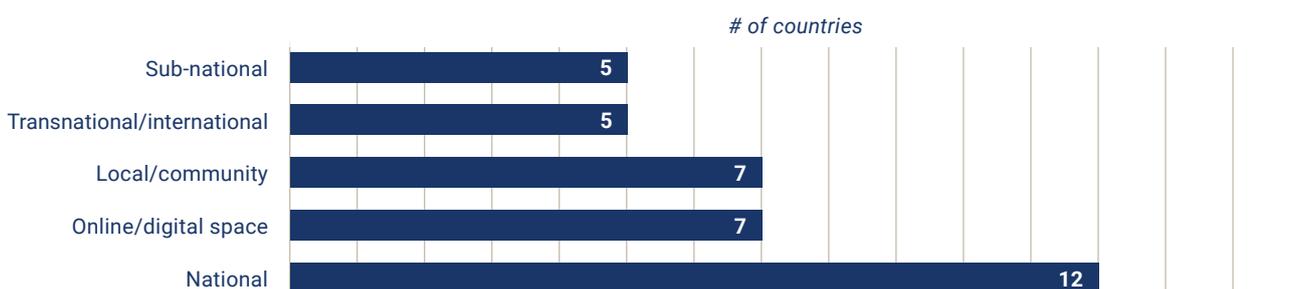
UN Country Team respondents from nine countries also shared the levels at which their claimed outcomes occur, with all reporting outcomes at the national level (see Figure 5.3). This was followed by outcomes at the sub-national or local level, which were reported in five countries (Cambodia, Ghana, India, Morocco, Uzbekistan) and online outcomes in four countries (Guatemala, Jordan, Morocco and Uzbekistan). This may reflect the increasing use of such spaces since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the relative ease of accessing and supporting young people to engage duty bearers online.

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22. Observers may notice the absence of accountability mechanisms on the spectrum. This is because the research did not uncover instances of UN entities' support leading to the establishment or use of accountability mechanisms.

Figure 5.3: Levels at which young people and UN Country Teams claim results, as a % of respondents from each group

# of countries
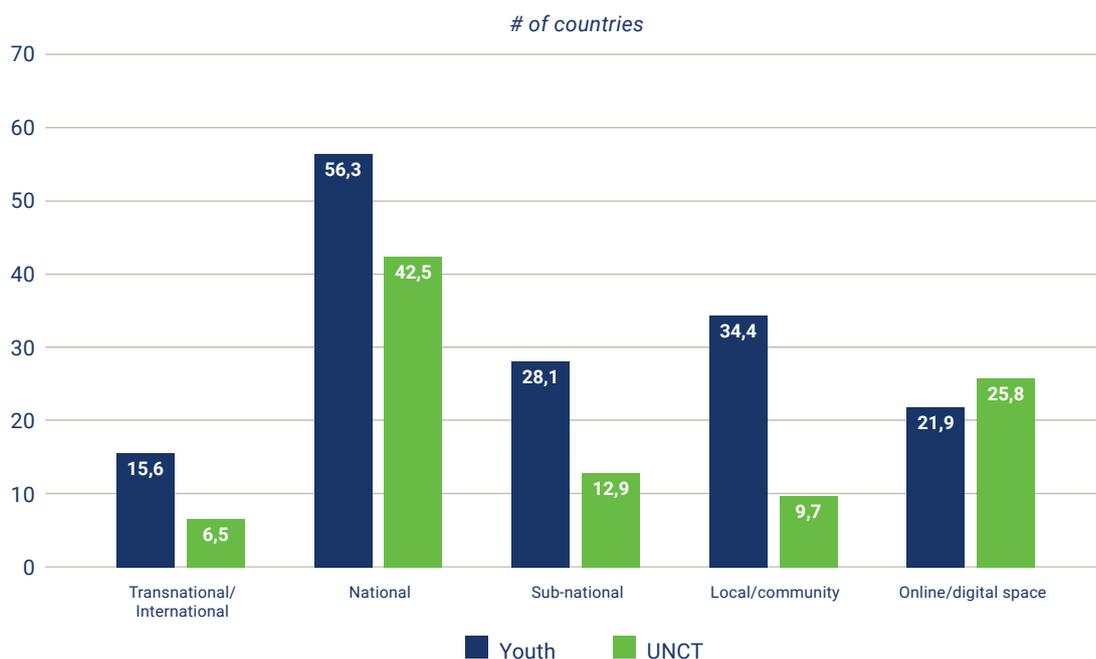
Outcomes claimed by UN Country Teams were generally related to the women and children, health, and education sectors, likely reflecting the mandates of UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP and UN Women. The next most-commonly cited sectors were culture and sport, social protection, and employment and labor. This may be because youth-focused ministries and departments are also often mandated to oversee these areas. It may also reflect the common misplaced belief that livelihoods, security and justice, and planning are 'adult' issues, with little relevance to young people.

Figure 5.4: Sectors where UN Country Team results are claimed, as a % respondents

'% of UNCT respondents
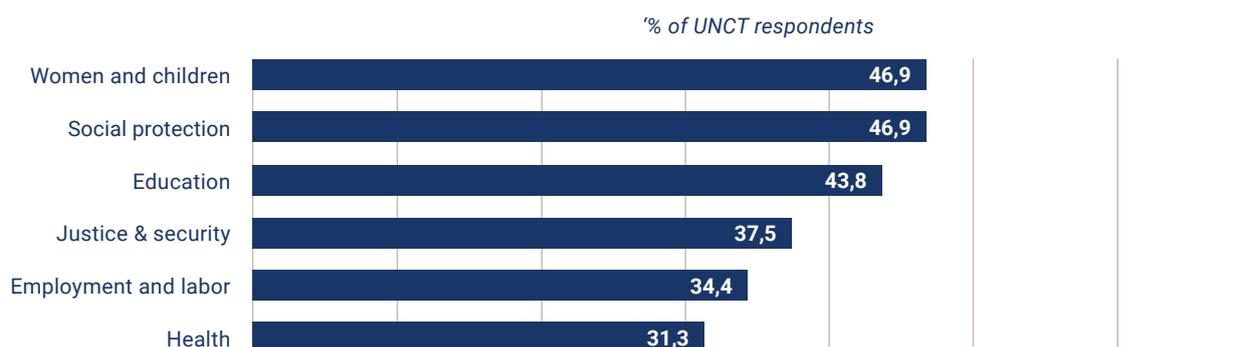
Young people tend to agree with UN Country Teams that most outcomes relate to women and children, and education. However, they did not suggest any outcomes in the justice and security sector, but they did report outcomes in the technology and health sectors. This may indicate different understandings of the impact of the claimed outcomes.

Figure 5.5: Sectors where young people's results are claimed, as a % respondents

% of youth respondents

Sector	%
Women and children	50,0
Education	47,9
Health	42,9
Social protection	21,4
Employment & labor	21,4
Technology & innovation	21,4
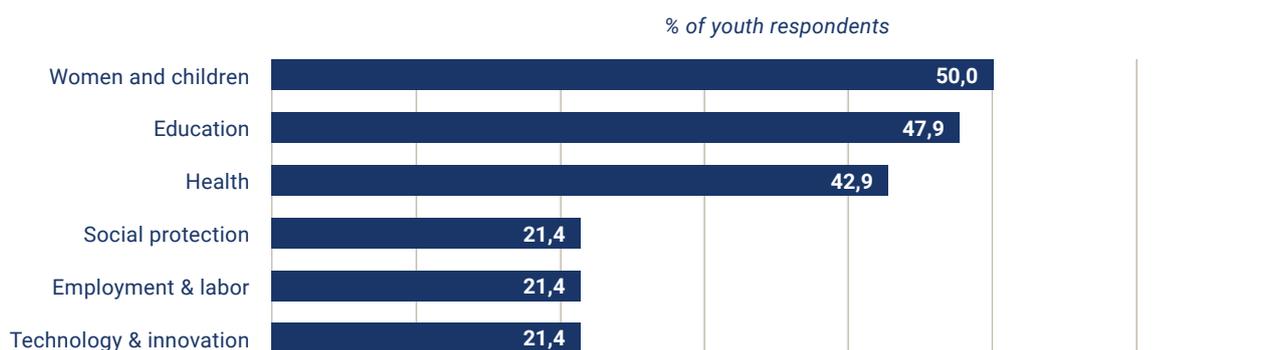
5.2 Outcomes from UN Country Teams' support

UN Country Team and young respondents' descriptions of their work illustrate what the spectrum of outcomes in Figure 5.5 look like in practice, and why they are important for social accountability relationships.

At one end are examples of initiatives that raise awareness among, mobilize and network young people. For example, in Guatemala, the UN Resident Coordinator's Office has spearheaded awareness-raising of sustainable development issues among students enrolled in university communication and international relations departments. The hope is that they will be well-placed to participate in decision-making forums and to engage the government in the near future. Meanwhile, since 2015, UN Women has supported the Arabic arm of the global HeForShe movement in Jordan.[23] With the agency's support the movement has mobilized more than 30,000 young people across the kingdom, and engaged more than 500 volunteers in universities and communities to spread awareness of issues related to gender equality and human rights.

For many a next step is to support the consultation of young people on issues important to them, and to related advocacy. In Albania, for instance, UNICEF sought to ensure young people's voices were heard by the government's initiative on reducing violence in schools. As part of this, round tables were held with 1,000 students in 20 schools to gather information. A technical consultant was also hired to help use the information to develop local and national strategies that promote positive behaviors. Meanwhile in Kenya, UNFPA worked in partnership with youth networks to support a Youth Caravan that traveled across the country consulting young people about issues affecting them and raising awareness of their rights. At the end, a communique was drafted and read to government representatives during the 2019 International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi.

The creation of platforms that allow for more regular engagements between young people and other triad members can also be important in some contexts. For example, in Jordan, UN entities supported the establishment of the Youth Peace and Security 2250 National Coalition. It consists of 22 member organizations representing INGOs, NGOs, youth organizations and academia working for peace and security across the kingdom, and it operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Youth. The coalition currently provides networking opportunities for its members, and regular moments for engaging government officials and the country's political leadership around shared issues. The next challenge is to translate this activity to action (see box: *From advocacy to implementation*).

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23.   https://www.heforshe.org/en

From advocacy to implementation

Although there is much evidence of close working relationships between Jordan's UN Country Team and youth and government representatives, young people interviewed for this research were clear about the challenges ahead. They argued that, *"UNFPA made it easy for us to meet with the Ministry of Youth to talk about youth issues of peace and security, as well as the Crown Prince's Organization, which is important in Jordan."* However, further support and leverage is likely to be needed by the UN to ensure that recommendations they give to the government are implemented. Indeed, there were concerns that their meetings with officials often led to little in the way of action.

These concerns were echoed by young people in other deep dive countries. They suggested that while networking, mobilization, capacity-building and engagement opportunities with duty bearers are often well-supported by UN entities, they are not always as well followed up as they could be. This was coupled with a conviction that UN entities should leverage their influence with governments to ensure recommendations become reality.

Youth organizations in Guatemala cited similar challenges. They noted that once an agreement has been made, *"the UN's action ends and it is the government's obligation to continue it. Sometimes government interest wanes."* Young people noted that additional follow up and monitoring from UN entities to ensure agreed actions remain government priorities, would help close this accountability loop.

At the far end of the spectrum are examples of behavior and policy changes. Here, the emphasis is often on specific issues for which young people's voices and carefully targeted technical and policy advice can be combined to great effect.

In Thailand, for example, UNFPA worked with the Child and Youth Council of Thailand to build the capacity of young people to gather evidence and conduct advocacy on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. They raised three recommendations to the National Committee responsible for the implementation of the Prevention and Alleviation of Adolescent Pregnancy Act, and kept the issues alive in the media. This contributed to the Ministry of Public Health issuing an inter-ministerial memorandum of understanding in 2020 on ensuring all pregnant adolescents and young people stay in the education system.

In Albania, representatives from student organizations have been supported to conduct advocacy directed at the Ministry of Education. This has contributed to a change in the schools' Code of Ethics and to the Strategy for Education 2021-2026's focus on non-violent behavior. A contract on positive behavior in schools has since been signed by 20,000 teachers, students and parents, confirming their obligations to one another.

Meanwhile in Pakistan, UNFPA has worked closely with the Federal and Provincial Ministries of Education, the Prime Minister's Office and youth organizations to achieve significant outcomes around life skills training, for both in- and out-of-school adolescents and young people. Among them are policy changes that will see the roll out of a life skills focused curriculum during 2022, and a social media campaign supported by the Prime Minister's National Youth Development Program to raise awareness about life skills. Youth organizations and networks put the issue on the agenda of both the provincial and federal governments by directly lobbying government representatives in meetings. They established the issue as being high priority for the country's young people, after which youth organizations brought UNFPA in to strengthen the partnership and provide technical assistance.

Yet, in some contexts, the enabling environment favors initiatives that involve young people in the development of broad policies and legislation – from inception to uptake or passing – with the potential to affect multiple sectors and SDGs.

In Albania, recent political developments, including youth movements and a change in government, have arguably opened up the enabling environment for youth participation in decision-making. This did not go unnoticed by UN Country Team members, who capitalized on windows of opportunity. Notably, UNFPA worked with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth as it drafted its first Law on Youth in 2019. It made sure that more than 2,000 young people across the country participated in consultations and, in cooperation with the Olof Palme Center (an international NGO), held a national conference on the draft law. Participants included representatives of line ministries, local self-government units, youth organizations and networks and youth experts and activists. This led to the establishment of a working group to facilitate further engagements, the hiring of legal experts for its members to consult, and support to youth-led advocacy with respective Parliamentary Commissions. UNFPA also ensured the law synergized with Albania's National Youth Action Plan 2020-2030, for which multiple UN entities had supported young people to participate in its creation.

In Kenya, various UN entities worked closely with the State Department for Youth Affairs to develop Kenya's National Youth policy. The government was keen that the policy was 'co-created' with young people, so held grassroots-level forums across the whole country to consult young people at multiple levels of governance ahead of its development. The resulting policy promotes the creation of sustainable decent jobs and income-generating opportunities for all young people, with an emphasis on building digital skills and leveraging young people's affinity to new technologies. It contains a coordination framework to ensure it is taken up by government structures at all levels, and implemented in coordination with grassroots groups. It also proposes a focus on the development of a 'Youth Development Index' to track and measure the impact of initiatives, programs, projects and activities.

A similar process was followed in Guatemala, where youth organizations are working together with UNFPA to create the conditions for the review of the country's National Youth Policy. Together, in 2020, they facilitated 900 young people's representatives to participate in virtual policy consultations, covering local, regional and national levels. An additional platform was also developed to allow university students to participate. This process identified issues that corresponded to young people's priorities, and where the government was best placed to respond. This formed the basis of an action plan to be used in the development of the updated policy. Participating youth organizations cited the importance of VNR reporting and the SDGs more broadly in underpinning this process, which set the stage for the youth policy to become one of the country's development priorities.

It is tempting to argue that all-encompassing behavior, policy and legislative changes of this sort are the 'better' outcomes with more 'impact'. However, this would ignore the wide range of enabling environments within which UN Country Teams work to support young people, and dismiss activities, developments and relationships that set the stage for future participation and engagements. Instead, the task is to carefully assess what the opportunities are in each context, and where young people can be most usefully aided to work towards transformational change.

6. Recommendations

Participants in this research were asked for their views on how UN entities can best support young people and governments to strengthen accountability relationships crucial for the SDGs. This section first considers how young people can be directly supported by UN entities. It then turns to how they can be supported indirectly through UN entities' support to governments.

6.1 UN entities' direct support to young people (with)

Young people and UN Country Team members were asked to rank which forms of support were most crucial to allow young people to participate in social accountability initiatives related to the SDGs. The responses were scored on a 5-point scale, using weighted averages (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Scores given to forms of support for young people and accountability, by UN Country Team and young people

average score
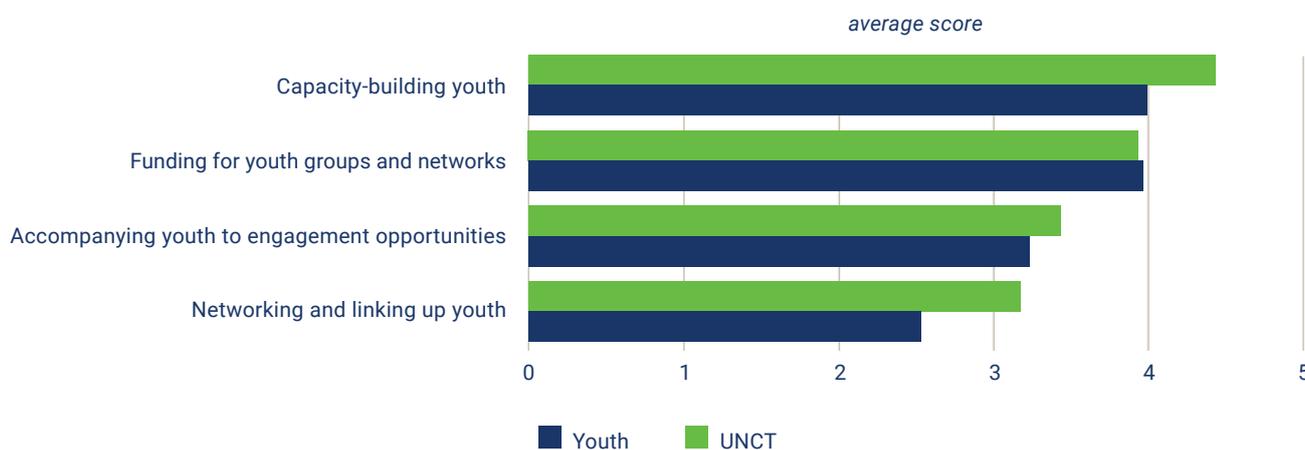
Youth   UNCT

On average, both UN Country Teams and youth respondents ranked capacity-building to be the most important form of support, followed very closely by funding. However, UN Country Team respondents considered capacity-building relatively more important than young people did.

Discussions with young people in deep dive countries added detail to the forms of direct support they wanted from UN entities. In particular, three recommendations stood out:

1 **Reach beyond the usual suspects.** As touched upon in Section 4.3, young people felt that UN entities should work harder to support difficult-to-reach and marginalized groups. For example, a UN Country Team member in Jordan raised the issue of more support for stateless young people caught between development and humanitarian programs. In Thailand, a government respondent argued that the UN Country Team should seek to work with young people outside of large urban centers, and lend its credibility to them when they participate in governance forums. It was argued this can be achieved through innovative funding mechanisms and small grants distributed among networks that have a presence among grassroots civil society organizations.

2 **Raise awareness about and translate the SDGs.** Many young people suggested that there is a need for UN entities to raise awareness of the SDGs beyond young people they directly engage in programs, and to translate their rationales into language they can easily understand, including more succinct measures of progress towards targets. In Albania, young people also argued that the SDGs struggle for space and to be understood alongside the country's ongoing goal of accession into the European Union and all the policies that seek to ensure its success. They suggested that more work has to be done to show how the SDGs fit with countries' existing goals.

3 **Capitalize on what young people are already doing.** Some young people argued that they are already part of successful initiatives and efforts to engage duty bearers, and that with UN support they could scale up their activities and have greater impact. For example, in Kenya, national and sub-national governments are attending grassroots level forums across the country with youth groups and organizations. Their aim is to engage young people in decision-making around governance issues, and the government is open to hearing criticism about key issues, as one government official observed: "*it is ok for the youth to be critical, it is how they communicate*". This initiative is taking place without UN support, but youth organizations could be supported to prioritize their advocacy agendas and build evidence by UN entities in order to make these opportunities more effective for addressing issues that matter to young people.

6.2 UN entities' indirect support to young people (for)

Similar to youth groups, government representatives also ranked capacity-building and funding for platforms as the topmost important forms of support from UN entities. Networking with young people and support during engagements were less requested.

Figure 6.2: Scores given to forms of support for government and accountability, by government

average score

Form of support	Score
Accompanying government representatives to engagement opportunities	3,14
Networking and linking up government with youth	3,11
Funding for platforms, processes and events	3,78
Capacity building government to engage youth	3,79
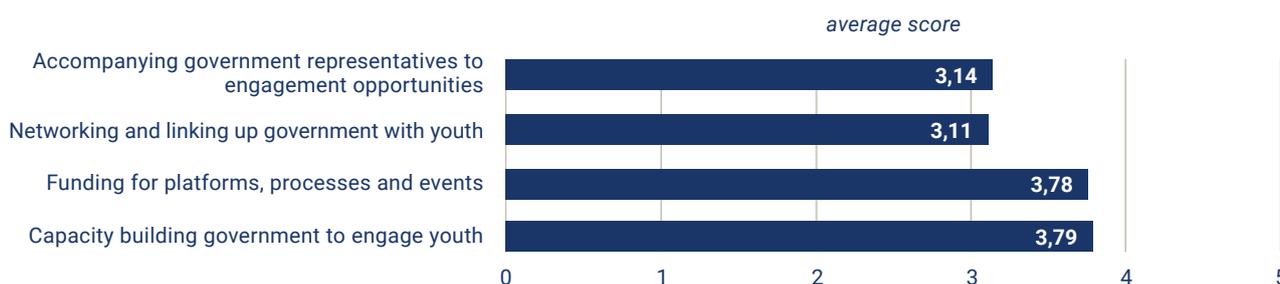
Discussions with government representatives and the wider research findings suggested three ways for UN entities to indirectly support young people to engage in social accountability initiatives:

1 **Behind-the-scenes brokering and networking.** Although the survey results suggested governments felt there was less of a need for such support, discussions revealed that they often benefited from UN entities connecting them to youth groups. For example, UNICEF supports multiple Jordanian ministries' SDG Working Groups by building the capacity of young people to gather data and evidence to present to them during consultations and regular platforms. Meanwhile in Thailand, UN entities helped prepare the ground for its VNRs by arranging meetings between officials and youth groups. For many, however, it was important for ownership and the legitimacy of engagements that they be led by the government or young people, rather than by UN entities.

2 **Challenge tokenism and follow up.** Across the deep dive countries, young people often argued that consultations and decision-making platforms could feel tokenistic. They complained that, although their opinions are sought, they do not know what happens next and rarely see the results of engagements. This was leading to skepticism of UN entities' motives in supporting them to take part. As one described: *"there is a silly game played by politicians, capitalists. They create organizations for youth to volunteer as a way to mobilize youth to vote for them. In short, using youth as instruments."* For many, UN entities must ensure there is follow up after consultations and platforms, and the feedback loop is closed, by communicating back to young people what has changed, or not, as a result of their participation.

3 **Lend credibility and amplify marginalized voices.** Youth representatives from deep dive countries urged UN entities to use their position and leverage (often through funding governments directly) to open up spaces for harder-to-reach young people, or those who governments do not always want to engage with (e.g. LGBTQI+ youth). There was a real sense that the UN's influence was essential to their voices being heard and responded to. As one respondent put it, *"Where the UN helps, they bring in the necessity of the government to respond. When a UN agency is involved, they keep the pressure to be responsive and make it harder to shut off organizations."* This was seen as particularly important in places where governments are most comfortable engaging with young people who do not challenge them.

6.3 Strengthening UN entities

The research findings also point to two recommendations for UN Country Teams as they continue to seek to support young people to participate in decision-making and hold governments to account:

1 **Define social accountability.** Social accountability is not a new concept for many UN entities, and has been a goal of programs and partners for over a decade. Still, the research suggested that UN Country Teams have a diverse range of views on what contributes to social accountability. As discussed in Section 5, this is in-part likely due to the variety of enabling environments that UN Country Teams work in and the possibilities they provide for supporting young people.

Yet, during discussions with UN Country Teams from the deep dive countries, very few depicted accountability as an end goal of young people's participation in consultations, engagements and platforms. Participation is necessary, but not sufficient, for social accountability. Indeed, it can only be secured by building strong relationships between triad members, regular and transparent information on progress towards the SDGs, and mechanisms for sanctioning poor performance.

This suggests further work may be needed to help UN Country Teams map out how supported initiatives contribute to social accountability. This may also help UN Country Teams spot instances where youth participation strays into tokenism – or where windows of opportunity arise for transformative change. Here, UN entities could learn from their peers and partners that have long used 'theories of change' and participatory monitoring to think through and reality check their support for social accountability.

2 **Set clear, contextually-relevant and realistic goals.** Related to the need for robust thinking about how UN Country Teams' support to triad members contributes to social accountability, UN Country Teams should also set clear and realistic goals. As discussed in Sections 4.1 and 5, the enabling environment partly structures the potential outcomes of UN Country Teams' work. But it does not completely determine them. Rather, the energy, creativity and innovation of young people and duty bearers can drive transformative change.

With this in mind, UN Country Teams should continue to see themselves as catalysts of such relationships. Yet, they must also be confident about the outcomes they aim for on the spectrum outlined in Section 5. This will aid them to better articulate how awareness-raising, capacity-building and networking contribute to the conditions needed to support behavior and policy changes, or even to hold duty bearers to account. It may also help them not to unduly raise expectations among young people and duty bearers. To do this, UN Country Teams must ensure they understand their enabling environment's challenges and opportunities, begin their interventions with realistic goals, and strive to support meaningful participation of young people.

6.4 Conclusion

This report explored the ways the UN is supporting young people to engage in participatory decision-making processes, and to hold duty bearers in their governments to account for the realization of the SDGs. The research uncovered a range of activities and processes supported at different levels of governance by UN entities. It also described outcomes from UN support to young people that cover a broad spectrum. It runs from awareness-raising, mobilization and empowerment, to capacity-building, consultation and advocacy, and then to commitments to behavior and policy changes. Each is more or less possible, depending on the enabling environments in which UN entities and young people work together. And each is an important step towards transformative change. The report concluded with recommendations on how UN entities can support young people and strengthen social accountability relationships across different contexts.

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Annex 1: Details on study participants

The survey was shared with individuals from 37 countries. Overall, a total of 433 individuals from 35 countries participated in the survey. In an effort to ensure responses from each survey could be analyzed jointly, countries where only one of the three 'triad' members (UN Country Team, government, youth networks) responded were excluded. Therefore, in total, responses covering 25 countries were used for this review. Across these 25 countries, a total of 105 UN Country Team representatives, 99 government representatives and 229 youth network representatives participated in the survey.

Regional breakdown of 25 survey countries and territories

Africa	Asia Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean	Arab States
• Cameroon • Ghana • Kenya • Rwanda • Somalia • Togo • Zimbabwe	• Cambodia • India • Lao PDR • Pakistan • Thailand	• Albania • Kosovo* • North Macedonia • Serbia • Uzbekistan	• Brazil • Costa Rica • Dominican Republic • Guatemala • Ecuador	• Iraq • Jordan • Morocco

To gain a deeper insight into the UN's support to the triad's relationships, qualitative data was gathered remotely from seven 'deep dive' countries selected from the 37 surveyed countries. **Kenya, Ghana, Thailand, Albania, Jordan, Pakistan, and Guatemala.**

*References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UNSCR 1244 (1999).