

INTERACTION CHILDREN AND YOUTH WORKING GROUP FEEDBACK ON USAID'S 2021 YOUTH IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY UPDATE

November 2021

Introduction

The Children and Youth Working Group (W.G.) is composed of over 30 InterAction Member NGOs that work with and for children and youth globally. The Working Group commends USAID for updating the Youth in Development Policy. The original 2012 policy was groundbreaking for the Agency at the time. We applaud the Agency's efforts to update it with evidence-based intervention knowledge from Youth Power and other work, as well as from consultations with implementers, young people, and civil society. We were also grateful to have had the opportunity to meet with policy drafters and leadership ahead of the release of this draft.

Read the Updated Youth in Development Policy Update [HERE](#).

Sections or Statements That the W.G. Strongly Supports and Feels are Essential for the USAID Policy

- Definition of youth that is inclusive of life stages and age ranges across the life cycle continuum.
- References to child marriage.
- Focus on digital safety and protection.
- References to addressing mental health.
- Focus on needs of youth with intersecting marginalized identities.
- References to intersection of age and gender.
- Focus on the need for disaggregation of data by age and sex that specifically looks at unique barriers faced by adolescent girls.
- Encouragement of funding for youth-led organizations.

Sections or Statements Where Clarification is Needed

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a mental health crisis for youth globally. According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2021, it is estimated [86 million](#) adolescents aged 15–19 and [80 million](#) adolescents aged 10–14 live with a diagnosed mental disorder as defined by the World Health Organization. We recommend a larger emphasis due to the youth mental health crisis spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, the Inclusion Development section’s mention of mental health (page 34) should go beyond providing education materials as a way of supporting youth with diagnosed mental disorders or greater mental health needs.

CONSIDERATIONS OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

There should be some emphasis on the fact that skills/capacity to engage adolescents is very different from youth in their twenties. Specific and different considerations, resources, and budgets are needed for other groups based on their age range. Failure to take this into account typically results in children (under 18 years old) being silenced and not having equal access. This note would also be applicable to supporting accessible and inclusive participation of certain groups—one size will not fit all.

There should also be more reference to the fact that supporting youth requires supporting communities and, in some cases—like making inclusive spaces for those with marginalized identities—working specifically with elders.

Major Gaps and Inaccuracies

AGES AND STAGES

Implementation of the Global Child Thrive Act defines their work as “an early learning (36 months and younger), preschool, and basic education program for children until they reach 8 years of age or complete primary school” and the new policy defines youth as ages 10-29. We are concerned that nine-year-olds are excluded.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

The draft Youth Policy does reference more than 20 relevant U.S. Government or USAID strategies or policies that this policy is informed by, but fails to mention how it will work to ensure cohesion and coordination across them. In particular, the draft policy lacks explicit language on how it will work with existing strategies on early childhood development, including through interagency coordination mechanisms that ensure children are receiving the inputs in early childhood that will allow them to succeed and thrive in youth and beyond. The internal collaboration section (page 42) does highlight recommended structures and at least one cross-sectoral working group, and we recommend that more information is given on how that group will make decisions, whether or not they can control cross-sectoral funding, and if and where they intend to consult with and report out to civil society, youth, and other key stakeholders. While we do commend the number of key strategies that are highlighted throughout the draft policy, we recommend that these areas be expanded upon to include how coordination will take place and where USAID is working internally to ensure seamless transitions between life stages and coordination that includes decision-making and cross-sectoral funding opportunities.

CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is mentioned separately from gender-based violence, but child, early, and forced marriage are all forms of gender-based violence and should be acknowledged as such. While those who are married as children often lack the skills and resources to prevent unwanted pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies are just one of many consequences facing those who marry as children. We recommend that the reference to unwanted pregnancies (page 25) be made more explicit as a related consequence of child marriage and unwanted pregnancies for youth.

LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION

Education and workforce skills development are both highlighted in the strategy's inclusion section (page 34), but young LGBTQIA+ persons should enjoy inclusion in all of USAID's youth in development efforts across all sectors. We recommend that this section be expanded upon to include other sectoral responses, which are rightly mentioned throughout the strategy, such as participation. In addition, we recommend that LGBTQIA+ efforts are included in the gender section to reduce binary mentions of gender and ensure all youth are meaningfully included in the Agency's work.

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

More explicit inclusion of youth with disabilities and the implementation of a twin-track approach mainstreamed throughout the policy. There needs to be consistent use of the terminology 'persons' with disabilities versus 'people' with disabilities per the CRPD. All references to education should be explicitly indicated as 'inclusive.' On page 24, within the subsection of health, there is a lack of comprehensive sexual education also for youth with disabilities. On page 36, the subsection on digital technology needs to address the digital divide and the lack of access or the inaccessibility of technology and digital literacy for youth with disabilities. On page 37, in reference to humanitarian assistance, the lack of consultations of persons with disabilities can translate into poorly designed early warning systems that do not factor in the needs of those living with a sensory impairment or another form of disability. Generally speaking, there should be youth directly consulting on this policy and specifically youth with intersecting marginalized identities.

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE LAST DECADE

On page seven, there should be mention of the changes to civic space and the challenges related to exercising civil rights and freedoms as a key challenge. In order for youth to effectively and meaningfully participate and contribute, there must be adequate civic space.

PARENTS

The draft strategy often discusses parents and adolescents as separate groups, including a lack of any mention of USAID's flagship framework for ending preventable child and maternal deaths—Acting on the Call. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death of girls ages 15-19. It would be helpful if the strategy were updated to include how and where adolescent parents or pregnant and parenting adolescents will be included in these groups to ensure their participation is encouraged and



welcome, including that materials should be adapted to ensure that they are both youth friendly and accessible for adult parents.

ABOUT INTERACTION

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people. [InterAction.org](https://www.interaction.org).