

Perspectives of German Adolescents and Young Adults on Global Health Policy Issues



Youth inputs to inform the German Federal Ministry of Health's work on global health policy issues.

About this policy Brief

Photo: Miriam El-Madhi

Key messages

- The youth delegate program aims to increase meaningful youth participation in global health policy
- Youth stressed the need for UHC to focus on more comprehensive and easily accessible health services for vulnerable and marginalized population groups incl. LGBTQIA+, migrants and refugees.
- Youth emphasize the importance of preventative measures and argue for more funding earmarked for prevention in Germany and globally.
- Youth argues that climate change is a social determinant of health and should be included as such in the WHO's work.

This policy brief was developed to support government officials and decision makers of the German Federal Ministry of Health in incorporating youth voices and perspectives into their work on (global) health policy issues. Given that young people have different health needs, lived experiences of health issues and perspectives on the global political discourse on health, their input is valuable to ensure inclusive, equitable and fair policy processes. This policy brief showcases youth perspectives on three topics to be taken into account in the work

surrounding the 76th World Health Assembly.

This policy brief was developed based on a survey on key issues on health for German youth and three youth roundtable discussions on the topics of Universal Health Coverage, Climate change and health, and social determinants of health. The survey and roundtable discussions were organized by the German youth delegate to the 76th WHA. The youth survey took place from the 22nd February 2023 until the 20th March 2023 and a total of 162 young people (aged 17-30) participated.

Roundtable discussions took place on the 12th, 18th, and 20th April 2023 totaling to 35 participants.

Introduction

The UN estimates that young people (aged 15-24) currently account for 2.1 billion individuals – around 16% of the world's population (1). Accordingly, healthcare services and systems need to respond to their needs. Youth has significant interest in global health issues, however, has been a historically under-represented population group, facing different challenges and vulnerabilities. Political decision-making processes need to be more inclusive and employ intersectional and participatory approaches that are accessible for young people.

Meaningful youth engagement

The youth delegate program recognizes the youth delegate, adolescents and young adults as partners and equal stakeholders and aims to engage the youth in a meaningful and effective way, hence avoiding a tokenistic effect of the program (2). The German youth delegate operates under the principles of diversity and inclusion, equity, transparency, and autonomy. The youth survey and roundtable discussions represent youth engagement mechanisms for young people to input their perspectives and opinions on (global) topics related to health.

Universal Health Coverage

According to the Director General's report on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), it can be gauged that the proposed UHC targets will not be attained by 2030 (3). Especially, the dimension on cost coverage is falling behind and more than 940 million people are at risk of poverty from health expenditures (4).

In the youth survey, UHC emerged as the most prominent health policy concern for German youth. German youth see UHC as a possible mechanism to increase resilience and fairness of health systems as well as equity of health outcomes. During the roundtable discussion, youth participants advocated for better and sustainable use of (financial) resources and **prioritization of preventative healthcare services** and offers as part of UHC. To this end, it was emphasized that predominantly national financial budgets have to be mobilized for UHC, supported through **multilateral financing mechanisms**. The dimension within UHC that should be prioritized is the prevention of financial hardship, as identified by German youth.

Further, it was emphasized that special efforts are needed to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized groups incl. **migrants, refugees, individuals with language barriers, LGBTQIA+, and individuals living with substance use disorders** have access to healthcare

services and are covered by UHC. UHC should also cover **sexual and reproductive health and rights** (incl. those of marginalized individuals such as LGBTQIA+) and contribute to people's sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Young people emphasized that for UHC to make a difference in health outcomes, (marginalized and vulnerable) **individuals and communities have to be included** in political and policy processes.

Climate Change and Health

The WHO recognizes climate change as impacting the social and environmental determinants of health and as a significant threat to health (5). In the youth survey, climate change emerged as the second most prominent health policy concern for German youth.

Participants attributed significant anxiety and negative mental health impacts stemming from climate change and its effects. This was deemed especially important for vulnerable groups with limited mobility incl. children and adolescents, (pregnant) women, elderly and inhabitants in regions vulnerable to climate change. Youth emphasized the need for comprehensive resilience strategies that address climate change related health outcomes (incl. communicable, non-communicable and mental health) in Germany and globally. Again, participants stressed **preventative approaches** and called for more tangible, technical recommendations by the WHO.

Youth positioned themselves as advocates for **transdisciplinary collaboration** between sectors (health in all policies), disciplines, and countries. Further, they proposed measures such as **earmarking financial resources** for both climate change and development initiatives (i.e. boosting co-benefits) especially within nutrition and diet, green transport and urban planning.

Participants accentuated negative health impacts of climate change primarily affect vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and vastly **reinforce social and thus health inequalities**. Proposed pathways for action include an increase in education, awareness and advocacy around the impacts of climate change, strengthening the focus on climate change mitigation and **preventative measures** within the pandemic treaty (negotiations), and strengthening the WHO's position with other sectors (incl. environment, agriculture, migration, education, investments and trade, and security). Additionally, youth participants regarded **climate change** adaptation and mitigation measures as important for improving health equity.

Social Determinants of Health

Within the director general report it was acknowledged that insufficient progress was made in reducing the negative impact of social determinates on health outcomes (6). It was acknowledged that important social determinants, such as economic inequality, racism and gender discrimination, as well as the potential health-damaging actions by commercial actors (commercial determinants) have not been adequately addressed.

Social determinants that were of special concern for youth include **education, nutrition, gender, peace and security, democracy, and commercial determinants**. Participants stressed negative impacts of these determinants on vulnerable groups such as **migrants and refugees, sex workers, people living with HIV and substance use disorders, people living in public institutions (e.g. prisons, assisted living for elderly or disabled) as well as children, adolescents, women, and LGBTQIA+**. For these groups, the importance of creating easily accessible and needs-based health and social services was highlighted.

Participants stressed that COVID-19 increased health inequities thus initiatives must be set in place to ensure resilience for future crises. Participants underlined that mechanism to address social determinants need to be inclusive and transdisciplinary (e.g., health in all policies).

References

1. United Nations. Global Issues: Youth [Internet]. United Nations; 2021. Available from: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>
2. UN. Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking Processes [Internet]. United Nations; 2023.
3. WHO. Reorienting health systems to primary health care as a resilient foundation for universal health coverage and preparations for a high-level meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on universal health coverage - Report by the Director-General [Internet]. World Health Organization; 2023 Jan.
4. WHO. Primary Health Care on the Road to Universal Health Coverage - 2019 GLOBAL MONITORING REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY [Internet]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019
5. WHO. Climate change and health [Internet]. World Health Organization; 2021. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>
6. WHO. Social determinants of health - Report by the Director-General [Internet]. World Health Organization; 2022 Dec.

For more information, please contact:
Miriam El-Mahdi, M.Sc. Global Health
German Youth Delegate to the 76th WHA
E-Mail: germany@youthdelegatewha.de

Overarching Issues and Topics

During the three roundtable sessions with German adolescents and young adults some overarching topics and issues were identified.

Communication

Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of (health) communication. According to youth, health communication needs to be more transparent and needs to follow evidence-based (risk) communication guidelines. Additionally, more efforts are needed to adapt communication contents and information services to the needs of specific (vulnerable) groups.

Access

“Access to” was a common phrase in all three youth consultations and especially during the consultation on social determinants. This predominantly includes access to health services, information, and education. Youth advocates for the establishment of more easily accessible health information services, educational services for vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups globally.

Digital Health

Digital health was mentioned primarily in the consultations focusing on UHC and social determinants of health. Participants recognized the positive impacts of digital health for surveillance and response, improvements in efficiency and potentials for cross-border collaborations.

However, participants frequently criticized data privacy and security gaps, questioned who benefits from digital health services, role of (big) tech companies as well as digital literacy skills of the population, health workforce and marginalized groups. Youth emphasized that digital health cannot be seen as a panacea for poor healthcare services and access but needs to address structural problems.

Some participants favored stronger (financial) support of community health workers as a lever to improve health of rural populations with careful consideration of bias, power dynamics and motives of private companies in healthcare were mentioned as well.