

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN UN EVENTS – PROTECTION CHECKLIST

Who is participating and why? Is participation a genuine informed choice? What happens once participation is over? Making sure youth participation is safe involves anticipating risks and ensuring participatory exercises take into account the specific experiences of young people and the overall state of civic space.

This paper provides information on key issues that should be taken into account concerning youth participation in events, consultations, conferences, workshops etc organized or co-organized by the UN, with the aim of not exposing participants to reprisals for their cooperation with the UN.

THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

Participation is a human right¹ and enables effective enjoyment of all human rights. It is critical for sustainable democracy, robust rule of law, for social inclusion and economic development. Genuine participation is also important for empowering individuals and groups, including youth activists and young peacemakers and for eliminating marginalization and discrimination. As such, it contributes to effective prevention of human rights violations and conflict.

Effective participation means that all voices, including those not representing majority views, are heard and can influence the outcomes of decision-making. Unfortunately, when faced with critical interventions, state and non-state actors sometimes resort to harassment and violence to intimidate and retaliate. **While protection concerns related to youth participants must be taken into account at all stages of events and meetings, excluding critical and minority voices can never be the answer.** Reducing the diversity of participants or excluding some voices only reinforce the very same authoritarian patterns that inclusive participation aims to address.

ASSESS RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Participation never occurs in a void: when promoting youth participation, always pay attention to the overall situation of civic space. Public exposure and association with the UN (through events/meetings/joint programmes) can be empowering but can also contribute to stigmatization or even reprisals – particularly, in polarized or tightly controlled environments.

"The world needs young people to keep speaking out, thinking big, pushing boundaries and keeping up the pressure."

UN Secretary-General,
Antonio Guterres

MAP THE CONCERNS

A proper risk assessment requires reliable information about and engagement with participants and their environment: What do you know about them? What kind of expectations do they have? Do you have credible information on the context in which they are working? Are there sensitive issues for them that your event will shed light on? How will your activity be publicized?

¹ UN [ICCPR](#) article 25 states that every citizen shall have the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives.



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KEEP IN MIND AT ALL TIMES:

- IDENTIFY AND DISCUSS SECURITY CONCERNS
- DO NO HARM
- DO NOT RAISE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
- FACILITATE SELF-PROTECTION

ESTABLISH STRONG LINKS WITH ACTORS ON THE GROUND

Actors on the ground have a better understanding of the risks created by public exposure and sensitivities. Good links with people and entities based in participants' communities increase the accuracy of risk assessments and can be instrumental in case measures have to be taken to prevent or respond to reprisals.

CONSIDER SPECIFIC RISKS

Factors such as gender, disabilities, being a member of a minority or the subject matter the youth activists are working on can deeply impact the risk of threats or violence and intimidation, harassment, smear campaigns and other negative repercussions. For instance, girls who take on public and visible roles, can be more likely to face resistance from within their own families and communities. Do you need to accommodate specific requirements of some participants? The location you choose and technology you use can help to mitigate risks but also can expose participants. Security and accessibility always need to be carefully assessed. The principle of “do no harm” applies at all time.

USE SAFE COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Participants working in constrained environments or on sensitive issues are routinely exposed to communications surveillance. To the extent possible (follow digital security advice)² use encrypted tools and secure data at all stages of your preparatory work.

BUDGET FOR PROTECTION

Put aside some emergency funds in case special protection measures are needed during or after your activities. To pre-empt retaliation in some cases, measures such as temporary relocation of participants or the use of special equipment for safe communications might be required.

CONNECT WITH PROTECTION NETWORKS:

Engage with networks that can reach and support participants in their communities. Regional and global protection networks supporting defenders and activists can provide valuable help (e.g. [Front Line Defenders](#), [Defend Defenders](#), [CSO LifeLine](#)).

PARTICIPATION MUST BE BASED ON AN INFORMED DECISION

The UN takes reprisals for cooperation with its entities and representatives seriously and will follow up when allegations of reprisals emerge following a UN sponsored event, but it is not in the position to fully guarantee the safety of participants before, during or after the events. Participants in UN events should be made aware of the goals and plans of the activities – and possible security risks – before engaging with the UN.

² See for instance ‘Security in a Box’, a guide to digital security to activists and human rights defenders: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/security-box>



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CONCEIVE ACTIVITIES BEARING IN MIND SECURITY

In order to ensure meaningful youth participation around relevant themes, **be ready** to address protection concerns. For instance, avoid to the extent possible disclosing sensitive information. Be ready to change and adapt your plans in case participants identify new protection concerns. Designate a **focal point that participants can turn to before, during and after the event** with concerns about their safety and security and ensure they can effectively make contact throughout.

INFORM ALL PARTICIPANTS ABOUT PLANS

Make all participants aware of the nature, format, and purpose of the event well in advance to agree on the safest forms of their contribution. **Discuss carefully the implications of contacts with the media, the use of social media** during or after activities, the dissemination of images etc. Inform everyone about the potential presence and participation of persons unknown to you and them.

ENSURE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Protection concerns should not justify “artificial” participation. Promoting participatory channels which systematically exclude critical voices and topics risk reinforcing authoritarian patterns.

ENSURE PARTNERS ARE AWARE OF PROTECTION CONCERNS

Are **all organizers of the event aware of protection concerns** and choices? For example: is there clarity on what can be disseminated and how? Do your partners know how to react, including in case a participant becomes distressed during the event?

ENSURE QUICK AND COORDINATED FOLLOW UP

Continued attention to participants’ safety is critical upon their return to their community. Do they think they are at risk and need protection? Do they expect negative consequences? Ensuring follow up requires having good communication channels in place and a good plan to respond to risks should they emerge.

DEBRIEF WITH THOSE INVOLVED AFTER THE ACTIVITY ENDS

Ask participants about their perception of risks their participation may have created once the activity ends and **re-discuss strategies/tools they may utilize should protection concerns emerge**: provide contact numbers, safe channels of communication, and coded messages to them and their trusted ones.

RESPOND CAREFULLY

If acts of reprisals are reported, **promptly activate your trusted partners** in Government or civil society: work to corroborate allegations and always ensure that those affected or those close to persons experiencing reprisals, are involved in decisions about whether to intervene and how. Bear in mind that immediate action (within the first 48 hours) is critical in terms of signaling a strong UN position against reprisals.

EACH UN ENTITY HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO ADDRESS REPRISALS; CONTACT OHCHR FOR INFORMATION ON SUPPORT AT: reprisals@ohchr.org

