

# COUNTRY REFLECTIONS ON MEANINGFUL ADOLESCENT & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT (MAYE)

SRI LANKA, BANGLADESH, MALDIVES AND INDIA

**AUTHORS: HAFSAH, NAZMUL, FATIMAH,  
MANVI & SUDIPTA**

**EDITORS: SUDIPTA & KALKI**

The youth represent one of the most influential yet vulnerable demographics globally. However, there have been many reiterations of how youth empowerment frequently succumbs to 'tokenism.' **Enabling meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement (MAYE) is recognised as a highly effective approach to ensure that young people are actively included in policies and interventions related to them.** Despite numerous interventions and discussions focused on MAYE, significant gaps remain. The one-size-fits-all understanding of young people's needs and the prevailing homogenous imagination of young people often translates into a lack of understanding of the diverse intersectional realities they come from. This oversight needs to be addressed when discussing the implementation of MAYE.

Addressing diverse realities means tailoring empowerment efforts to the specific populations being served and recognising the various social axes of power at play in the lives of young people. These axes include not only gender and age but also factors like caste, class, race, religion, and ability. **SYAN members from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and India got together to share reflections, identify parallels as well as investigate the contextual realities of MAYE in the South-East Asia region.**

**Sri Lanka** has a robust youth population, and the value of youth empowerment is deeply ingrained as a core objective in many programs. However, meaningful inclusion of young people is often absent. While young people are taken as part of programs specifically focused only for young people, in spaces beyond that where diverse stakeholders convene to discuss important social causes, youth is not present in a leadership capacity with decision making and accountability power. In the space of adolescent health and wellbeing, apart from few INGOs, there is a drastic gap of young people and civil society advocating for their wellbeing agenda.

Likewise, in **Bangladesh**, numerous organizations, including government entities, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs), are dedicated to advancing the rights of adolescents and youth, particularly in areas such as education and health. However, a significant challenge persists—the limited participation of adolescents and young individuals in the decision-making processes within these organizations. The experiences aren't very different in India and Maldives as well.

Even when youth participation is ensured, opportunities for youth engagement frequently tend to be limited to certain young individuals who are relatively privileged within their socio-cultural context.

In the Indian context, dissemination strategies regarding MAYE opportunities must be improved to ensure fair youth representation from across the country, given the country's diverse geo-cultural spread, and not only limited to youth from mainland metropolitan cities. India has high digital penetration, and the power of that can be harnessed for effective dissemination of information. However, **MAYE should not be limited to "engagement and involvement" but should also transcend to "co-creation and co-production" with young people.**

*Manvi* from 'Being Initiative' notes that in the organization's MAYE strategy, it is being co-created with their youth advisory board, which is usually very effective. YuWaah's (Generation Unlimited India) MAYE strategy was also co-created with their Young People's Action Team and serves as a good example. Lived experiences of young people from across communities and intersections must be given a place at decision-making tables, which can have different implications in various regions, and a one-size-fits-all approach might not be very effective.

In **India**, caste is an integral part of the socio-religious fabric that significantly influences young people's access to services. Moreover, the backgrounds young people come from contribute to the unique challenges they face. For example, urban poor youth may encounter issues like house demolitions, while others may be engaged in labor work, with or without access to education. Civic amenities in the neighborhoods where they live also play a crucial role in their development. The diverse realities of young people in India affect their relationship with the state, their citizenship status, and their access to essential services. Therefore, when considering MAYE and designing interventions, it is essential to address concerns related to citizenship, not limited to just sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) or health.

**Young people need to advocate for their well-being, and it is important to build their capacity to understand the significance of advocating for their well-being agenda and support them in that process.** Youth Advocacy Network Sri Lanka (YANSL) is the only youth organization in Sri Lanka working on sexual and reproductive health rights with a focus on safe abortion. The need for young people in policy and advocacy spaces, by involving them as consultants/advisors, is critical. **Connecting young people to community-level stakeholders and ensuring their engagement at the community level is a great way to facilitate MAYE.**

*Hafsah*, working at YANSL also shares an effective practice in MAYE. YANSL developed Sri Lanka's first evidence based advocacy resource on adolescent health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka. The family health bureau of Sri Lanka constitutes a youth advisory arm where young people are consulted in an advisory capacity. The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka also constitutes a youth advisory committee supporting the work of SRHR in Sri Lanka.

In Bangladesh, *Nazmul* notes that SERAC-Bangladesh is working towards improving SRHR as part of their "Dhaka Project" that is aimed at reducing maternal mortality and unmet needs for family planning methods among adolescent girls and women. In this initiative, one thousand volunteers aged 18-24 have been directly engaged in community mobilization and decision-making processes. They received training and worked within their communities alongside general practitioners. The volunteers conduct community sessions with community members, addressing topics such as family planning (FP), maternal health (MR), post-abortion care (PAC), and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). They actively promote the services provided by general practitioners, ensuring that community members can access FP, MR, PAC, and SGBV services free of charge. General practitioners also participate in these community sessions. During meetings with various stakeholders, the volunteers are connected to share the problems they have identified and propose solutions, which greatly contributes to the development of effective strategies.

**The power of meaningful youth engagement lies within us, the youth. Our voice is our strength; our knowledge is our power. Most importantly, ensuring that we have a seat at the decision-making table, and nothing is decided without us and for us!** Indeed, a crucial means to address this is by embracing the principles of youth-led accountability and diverse interventions for diverse realities of young people are emerging concepts that have the potential to redefine meaningful youth engagement and ensure our rights are upheld.