

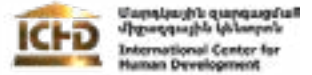


**ARMENIA CIVICS
FOR ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM**

COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING IN ARMENIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Yerevan, 2023



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Author: Anna Gevorgyan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Comprehensive Assessment of Youth Engagement in Decision Making (CAYEDMA) was commissioned by the International Center for Human Development (ICHD) in July 2022, with the purpose to identify the strengths, gaps, challenges and opportunities for the engagement of the Armenian youth in decision-making.

This study took into account the findings from the Armenia Youth Situational Analysis conducted by Making Cents in 2019 (Making Cents, 2019). The 2019 study collected a considerable evidence base regarding the situation of youth in Armenia, specifically following the 2018 Velvet revolution. However, the need for updated evidence was imperative in the context of the major social-political events that significantly affected Armenia in the recent five years, namely, the Velvet Revolution of 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, the escalation of the armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh in the fall of 2020, and the subsequent military clashes on the border of the country with Azerbaijan having resulted in palpable security threats.

CAYEDMA aimed to examine how and to what extent the mentioned events have affected youth aspirations and readiness to engage in decision-making processes in Armenia, how their agency and beliefs get manifested in these processes and how young people choose to engage in them. The study provides policy recommendations to key national and local stakeholders for effectively engaging youth in decision-making.

The full report of the study in English is available at Armcivics.am website.

The CAYEDMA study used USAID's framework for Positive Youth Development (PYD)¹ as an underlying analytical basis. PYD framework

consists of **below-mentioned four domains** that, taken together, are the measure of healthy, productive, and engaged youth. Policies and programs built on the PYD framework work with youth to improve their:

- **Assets:** Youth have the necessary resources and skills to achieve desired outcomes.
- **Agency:** Youth have the ability to employ their assets and aspirations to make their own decisions about their lives and set their own goals, and to act on those decisions in order to achieve desired outcomes without fear of violence or retribution.
- **Enabling environment:** Youth are surrounded by an enabling environment that maximizes their assets, agency, access to services and opportunities, and ability to avoid risks, while promoting their social and emotional competence to thrive.
- **Contribution:** Youth are encouraged, recognized, and able to be involved in and lead through various channels as a source of change for their own and their communities' positive development.

Thus, the CAYEDMA research questions intended to identify **the key assets, manifestations of youth agency and contributions, as well as the main features of the enabling environment in Armenia** that characterize youth engagement in decision making. Within this framework, qualitative research methodology was employed to provide analysis of young people's experiences and views vis-à-vis PYD's four domains on one hand, and an analysis of how key stakeholders perceive and practice engaging young people in decision making on the other.

The study followed a mixed-method approach, combining a review of secondary quantitative data and qualitative methods of primary data

¹ Positive youth development is a philosophy and a programmatic approach which engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets, and competencies, foster healthy relationships, strengthen the environment, and transform systems. <https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development-pyd-framework>

collection, to obtain rich insights on youth profile and their engagement in decision making. The following methods were used to collect data:

a. Comprehensive literature and desk review:

> The desk review was carried out to identify; a) the profile of Armenian youth, based on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as age, gender, area of residence, education, employability and vulnerability status; b) practices of youth engagement in decision making (YEDM) vis-a-vis the PYD conceptual framework; c) political, institutional and funding arrangements, including the government's level of commitment to establishing a favorable environment for engaging youth in decision making; d) the current youth policies and practices in Armenia.

b. Semi-structured key informant (KII) and key expert interviews (KEI) (individual, dyadic and triadic):

> Twenty-four KII and KEI were held with the representatives of key public agencies responsible for implementation and monitoring of youth policies; university student councils; a civil society organization (CSO) representing an ethnic minority in Armenia; two CSOs targeting gender issues and women's rights; and eight international development partners.

> Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with two special youth groups, namely those returning from the 44-day war and those representing LGBTQ+ communities.

c. Focus group (FG) discussions with youth and civil society organizations:

> Twenty-two focus groups with over two hundred young people aged 15-29 in Yerevan and the selected urban and rural communities of Syunik and Armavir were conducted. Additionally, three special groups are identified among youth that included youth with disabilities, youth from ethnic minorities and youth displaced from Nagorno Karabakh.

> Eight FG discussions were conducted with the representatives of the civil society organizations and with the representatives of the public councils and local governance bodies. Twenty-seven representatives from CSOs targeting their activities for youth participated in six FG discussions.

Key Findings

The findings regarding the definitions of youth indicate the need for a broader, more holistic approach to defining youth in the Armenian context. The review of the policy documents shows that there is **no common definition** of youth as a target group, and various policies adopt their own definition of youth, which is exclusively age-bound.

Still, many policy makers and practitioners rely on the provisional definition of youth, adopted in the Republic of Armenia (RA) Draft State Strategy on Youth 2021-2025, which defines young people as "persons between the age range of 13-30 transitioning from adolescence to adulthood".

The study, however, shows that the participants adhere to **a multi-dimensional approach to defining youth** and acknowledge the complexity of youth reflected in their experiences, opinions, backgrounds, identities and beliefs, as well as the diversity of their transitions and life trajectories.

The young people in Armenia define youth as a composite of various factors, including age, extent of maturity at various ages, transitions from childhood and to adulthood and identity. Moreover, different social groups of young people prioritized different factors when defining youth. While there are no location-specific differences in the definitions of youth, the differences among various age groups and groups suffering vulnerabilities are quite essential. For these groups, the opportunities to exercise their rights and the capacity to manifest their identities are critical elements of their definitions of youth.

The perceptions and opinions of young people about what youth encompasses are closely tied with their understanding of **engagement in the decision-making**. The experiences, backgrounds and identities of young people as a heterogeneous group appear to strongly affect their understanding of and attitudes to YEDM. Participants emphasize three elements for youth to meaningfully participate in decision making: (a) their rights and responsibilities, (b) independence and (c) mutual partnership with adults. The extent to which these elements are manifested in the behaviors, relationships and surroundings of young people would also determine the degree of their participation in the decision making at

the family, community and state levels.

The study shows that **the perceptions of youth about YEDM are consistent with the PYD definition of YEDM, i.e., they consider YEDM to be an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults in the decision-making.** The review of the available policy documents shows that the government intends to move away from purely awareness raising level of YEDM towards more proactive participation.

In the **domain of youth assets**, data shows that both young people and stakeholders working with them, report about the **lack of necessary competencies for meaningful engagement**, such as civic skills, communication, negotiation and advocacy skills, despite numerous asset-building youth programs having been implemented by various CSOs in the recent years.

One of the key reasons identified by the CAYEDMA, **is the lack of meaningful opportunities and contexts where young people can practice the skills** and knowledge gained. Another key finding regarding youth assets is the **low degree of awareness of the platforms, spaces and channels** that would enable their engagement in the decision-making processes, more so at the state, than the community level. These findings may implicate **the relevance and efficiency of the programs** being implemented by the formal and non-formal institutions in developing the YEDM-relevant competencies of youth.

The study reveals that **the high level of uncertainty, the overall instability in the country in the aftermath of the 44-day war, and the resulting palpable anxiety of young people over their own future, are the factors directly affecting youth agency.** These factors lead to restricted contributions among all groups of youth, exacerbated by the decreasing level of trust within both their communities and the state. Still, the future of most young people includes (a) furthering their education (most frequently among the 15-24 age group) and finding better employment (in the older age group). Another tangible tendency regarding how young people perceive their future is the **polarization of their positions about their future in the country.** One group is adamant that after the war they must live and work in Armenia to help in its renaissance, another is disappointed and disillusioned to

the point of being determined to leave the country at all costs.

As to the complex interactions of youth with their **social contexts**, which eventually shapes their agency and allows them to form specific patterns of behavior, the study reveals that **influences on youth perceptions of YEDM are often based on gender**, especially at the family and community levels. Thus, irrespective of the residence and age of young people, **men, specifically fathers, grandfathers and brothers tend to play a more decisive role in influencing young people's perceptions and decisions to engage** in decision making in their families and communities. However, there is an emerging tendency among families to become more open towards engaging their younger members in decision making, depending on the family culture: the less patriarchal and hierarchical the family is, the more open it is to YEDM.

Another factor affecting YEDM within families is the **level of income** of the members. The data shows that those with the highest income tend to possess more decision-making power, regardless of age and gender. Finally, the study shows that the **agency of youth is defined by their vulnerability.** Thus, the participants of the 44-day war reported a higher degree of trust within their families after their participation in military actions. The young people with disabilities reported on the consultative nature of their families, and that they are being listened to while making decisions. Yet, they identified the high-level of family care as a hindrance to larger engagement in certain situations, mostly related to their jobs and education. Young people from ethnic minorities tend to be the most affected by their family decisions.

At the community level, **the disposition of the young people towards the heads and staff of the local government, specifically lack of trust, and absence of the consultative dialogue are the key factors** affecting their sense of agency, especially among the youth in the older age group. **Trust was seen as a crucial factor affecting the engagement of youth.** Frustrations develop among youth, most often within the younger 15-19 age group, about not being heard and valued by adults in general, and by decision-makers. This often leads to disengagement from DM processes.

Thus, the key finding in the domain of agency

is that in the times of compound crises, **the Armenian youth still hold some positive beliefs about the future, specifically related to their personal growth and development, and are gaining some decision-making power within their families, where decision making can be gender-based. Meanwhile their expectations of engagement at the community and state levels have been lowered, due to critical uncertainties, unpredictability in long-term planning and decreased trust in authorities at these levels.**

The findings regarding the domain of **Contribution** indicate that **self-goals** and **self-development** are key motivators for young people to contribute at the organizational, community and national levels. For specific youth groups, namely LGBTQ+ youth and those with disabilities, **expression of their identities is a key motivator to engage.** The identity development and self-expression within these groups played a large role in the definitions of youth and engagement in decision making in general. Identity, specifically positive expression of national identity, is a key motivator for youth living in communities that have suffered the most from the escalation of the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh.

Youth regard **volunteering, a common form of youth engagement** in Armenia, as an avenue for furthering their future, helping with career opportunities and expanding their network. The study shows that youth may be motivated to engage in decision making when their **beliefs about civic action and the potential change** that they can bring into their personal lives and in their communities, are meaningful. Therefore, volunteering in crisis situations tends to prevail over other engagement forms, and the young people are less skeptical about their voices being heard.

The key factor to motivate youth to contribute to decision making is the availability of effective **feedback mechanisms**, such as building and maintaining communication with youth on their participation and its outcomes. Youth note their reluctance to engage in future decision-making efforts if such mechanisms are missing.

Challenges of participation among youth include **gender, age, marital status and vulnerability.** The engagement of older and married young people tends to decrease, as

they focus more on employment, income generation and family responsibilities. Young women in the 24-29 age bracket with family responsibilities tend to withdraw from engagement, emphasizing child rearing and education. If LGBTQ+ young people want to participate in decision making at the community and national level, they tend to hide their identities. Their residence type is also considered a key factor affecting how young people participate in decision making. Displaced young people often lack sufficient information to engage meaningfully in their new communities, and young people with disabilities sometimes lack participatory mechanisms, often depending on the type of disability.

Regarding the forms of contribution, young people and the stakeholders working with them believe that the **traditional forms of participation**, such as participation in elections and in formal politics, **are important and youth engage in such forms of contribution.** Directly engaging in politics, for instance, was mentioned as one of the avenues for young people to contribute after the Velvet Revolution. Despite the reported decrease in the number of young people in their activities, **CSOs** are still seen as viable platforms for engagement of youth, especially for vulnerable young people, such as youth with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ communities. For them, **CSOs remain effective channels and spaces of collective engagement.**

This study shows a **decline in digital participation among youth.** The youth have become skeptical about the value of social media and/or digital platforms and prefer to use other pathways to raise their voice about community issues, such as directly approaching the person who may be in charge.

A significant factor that affected the use of social media and digital space in general is attributed to growing distrust towards media information following the 44-day war and particularly the fake news spread through social media. In smaller communities, digital participation is less frequent because youth tend to engage through personal networks, and they lack access to digital platforms. However, digital participation is increasingly valued among young people with disabilities.

The **enabling environment** is characterized by the **absence of an overarching policy targeting**

youth, and this remains a key priority for policymakers. Although the government has opted for development of a regulatory rather than a policy framework, both young people and the other stakeholders, specifically civil society, believe that the transparency and inclusiveness of the policymaking process is rather limited. Only a very limited number of international development partners (IDPs) and CSOs are involved in the process. Additionally, the limited capacity and number of the public agencies responsible for youth-related policy development and implementation represent challenges to the implementation of the upcoming law.

The study shows that the existent **institutional platforms** for youth engagement, **such as youth councils and youth centers, are considered ineffective because of their lack of independence and working mechanisms** to function without being susceptible to change by senior public officials.

The **significant role of the CSOs** in building the capacities of youth has been confirmed in this study. As one of the largest stakeholders in YEDM, CSOs offer youth training to address career and job-related skills, negotiation, communication and critical thinking skills along with IT skills and subject-specific topics, such as the environment and a few others. However, soft skills are considered ones that young people need the most for more effective engagement in decision making.

CSOs also continue to provide **safe spaces** for youth, and this is especially significant for socially vulnerable youth, such as young people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, and to some extent young women.

The CAYEDMA shows also that **the formal youth engagement platforms, such as various public and student councils, provide for nominal, rather than meaningful YEDM** and many young people are not aware of those.

Community youth centers established through donor and/or state funding need to be further assessed on their provision of youth-friendly services and how they engage young people in designing, implementing and assessing the services and programs they offer.

Finally, **bonding, kinship and peer networks**

typically found in the Armenian context play a significant role in defining the participatory behaviors of the young people in their families and communities.

Key Recommendations

To the national policymakers:

1. Adopt an all-inclusive approach to the definition of youth in the policy and regulatory framework that reflects both age-driven and social aspects of youth and their forms of participation.
2. Hold national consultations with both youth and relevant experts on how the apathy and withdrawal from civic and political engagement of young people, resulting from the 44-Day War and its aftermath, can be challenged and what relevant mechanisms can be streamlined into youth policies and programs.
3. Ensure engagement of youth from all segments of the population, including marginalized and otherwise vulnerable young people, in all stages of developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs, policies, and investment of resources.
4. Create and use youth-friendly feedback mechanisms to respond to youth engagement regardless of its outcome at various levels of decision making.
5. Involve youth as valuable partners to determine the best methods and mechanisms for how they would best like to be engaged in the decision-making in educational institutions and community and national levels.
6. Conduct extensive consultations with all the relevant stakeholders and youth primarily on the development of the new law on youth and strategic documents. Incorporate feedback mechanisms on the results of these consultations and communicate to the stakeholders about how they were used, as well as outcomes and the impact of their participation.
7. Ensure that meetings, consultations and activities regarding youth policies and programs are adapted and use a clear and accessible language for young people to understand and relate to.

8. Ensure effective coordination of youth programs and services offered by the state, international development partners, CSOs and other relevant entities to streamline the investment of resources in the youth field.

9. Collect and, when necessary, produce the evidence base for the design and implementation of youth-related policies and programs and make it available for all the interested bodies and individuals.

10. Expand institutional structures that are responsible for the design and implementation of youth policies by allocating sufficient human, physical and financial resources and ensure capacity building of public authorities.

11. Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the civic education programs at schools, both curricular and extracurricular, and incorporate the results in the development of the new curriculum reform.

12. Review the concept of youth centers as 'safe and participatory spaces' for the youth to explore and develop their own ideas and meet decision-makers. These should allow young people to openly express their ideas and themselves without creating barriers among young people.

To the local government (LG) bodies:

13. Ensure youth-focused effective communication channels, both online and offline, and publicize ways for young people to get engaged, including places that young people already frequent (schools, universities, youth centers, CSOs).

14. Develop communication capacities of the LG bodies with youth by examining the best strategies of communication with target youth groups. Employ a variety of communication strategies (including physical, digital, school-level, alternative community premises) for youth of various ages and social groups considering what works best for each of the groups. Adopt user-friendly language and communication strategies that enable youth to engage more frequently on community-related issues.

15. Conduct and maintain a mapping of youth organizations and other informal initiatives to improve the coordination of the youth engagement activities with no exclusion

of diverse youth groups.

16. Ensure involvement of diverse groups of youth in the planning, implementation and monitoring of community programs and activities, such as five-year community development plans.

17. Ensure that youth engagement encompasses levels ranging from family to policy and forging connections among those levels.

18. Provide safe and convenient meeting spaces for youth beyond the regional and community official premises and engage in open dialogue and reflection with them.

To the CSOs:

19. Assess the effectiveness and relevance of youth capacity building programs so that they promote youth understanding of the technical content, the socio-political context, and the stakeholders with whom they are engaging. Ensure learning and practice opportunities where youth can apply the capacities they have gained.

20. In the programmatic activities, aim to target broader segments of youth, including "unorganized youth", i.e., youth not representing any organization, as well as young people with fewer opportunities. This will facilitate going beyond the "silo" approach of working with the same community of youth.

21. Ensure that the programmatic activities directed at youth equally target their working with their families and communities.

22. Facilitate the development of partnerships between communities and/or government and youth groups so that youth can engage in community work and have opportunities to volunteer.

23. Establish partnerships between youth organizations and local and national government to promote mentorship programs for youth.



The Armenia Civics for Engagement Program

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