

**MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SRHR DIPLOMACY: A  
COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE YASRHR PROGRAM'S CONTRIBUTIONS  
AND CHALLENGES**



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**ACRONYMS**

CHOICE	Choice for Youth and Sexuality
CPD	Commission on Population and Development
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DGIS	Directorate-General for International Cooperation. Dutch translation: Directie Sociale Ontwikkeling
DSO	Department for Social Development. Dutch translation: Directie Sociale Ontwikkeling
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
ICPD	International Conference on Family Planning
KII	Key Informant Interview
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MFA	Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TOR	Terms of Reference
YAC	Youth Advisory Council
YASRHR	Youth Ambassador on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender Equality and Bodily Autonomy

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

In 2015, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, together with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) initiated the Youth Ambassador on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender Equality and Body Autonomy (YASRHR) program. The aim of the program is to appoint a youth ambassador to advocate for youth SRHR and amplify the voices of young people on the global stage, as well as hold the MFA accountable to do more on meaningful youth participation (MYP). Since its inception 9 years ago, more than 7 YASRHRs have been in position. The Dutch MFA's commitment to promoting MYP within SRHR and its programs more broadly is detailed in the ministries' Youth at Heart Strategy and initiatives aimed at strengthening civil society organizations and enhancing SRHR access. The overall alignment of the Dutch MFA's priorities with the YASRHR program objectives underscores the Netherlands' significant contribution to advancing SRHR globally.

### THE EVALUATION AND ITS AIMS

In 2023, CHOICE in collaboration with the MFA embarked on a comprehensive evaluation to assess the YASRHR program's impact. The evaluation aimed to understand how well the YASRHR program works by highlighting successes, challenges, and learnings. The evaluation explored how young voices were taken into account in shaping policies, the program's impact on policies, and the role of the YASRHR in shaping the discourse around SRHR and meaningful youth participation.

### EVALUATION APPROACH

To evaluate the YASRHR program and its impact, a mixed methods approach was used. This included a literature review, online surveys, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions to understand the impact and contributions of the YASRHR program. In total, 18 people were interviewed, including staff from the MFA, CHOICE coordinators and YASRHRs themselves. Surveys were sent to 83 people who interacted with the YASRHRs, of which 9 responded.

### WHAT WE FOUND

The YASRHR program has been a game-changer, demonstrating the impact of effective MYP. YASRHRs have made a real impact on the policies and actions of the MFA, had traction at high level international events, and influenced policy and norm setting. The evaluation also identified challenges and barriers. These are outlined below.

**Influence on policies, strategies and approaches in the MFA:** YASRHRs have been instrumental in influencing the development strategies like the Youth at Heart Strategy and shaping the ideas for the Youth Advisory Council. YASRHRs have been part of the development of policies like the Feminist Foreign Policy and the Global Health Strategy. Whilst the program gained recognition globally and set an example for other youth focused policies and structures within the Netherlands, challenges remain. Notably, the MFA needs to develop a clear, structured and timely process for YASRHRs to be able to give more meaningful feedback on policy documents.

**Influence at high level international events:** The participation by YASRHRs at international events over the last 9 years reflects the programs focus on the international SRHR context and advocating in this arena. This includes engagement at the high-level UN forum, the Commission on Population and Development (CPD), where YASRHRs have written and delivered the speech on behalf of the government of the Netherlands.

**YASRHR engagement with youth from around the world:** YASRHRs engaged with youth around the world through country visits, consultations and at events, actively listening to their voices and amplifying these at the global stage. Whilst YASRHRs led engagements in the Netherlands with Dutch civil society on SRHR issues, the focus of work was often on international SRHR issues. The evaluation found a lack of focus on SRHR issues specific to the Netherlands.

**Measuring YASRHR impact on norm setting:** The evaluation found it difficult to quantify the impact of the YASRHR role on norm setting within the MFA. Directly linking YASRHR participation in high level events or their ongoing engagement with the MFA to direct policy, program or funding changes proved challenging. The evaluation found that the impact of the YASRHR is more in soft influence, which can be hard to measure.

**Meaningful Youth Participation: the experiences of YASRHRs:**

- **Positive change over time:** Over the years, the experiences of young people involved in the program have evolved, with improvements noted in their ability to protect their time and access to information and people within the MFA.
- **Certain challenges remain:**
  - Challenges related to the number of hours for the role and relative compensation remain consistent. YASRHRs believe that the current part time hours are not enough, and an increase in hours should reflect a change in compensation.
  - Challenges in understanding the MFA, how it operates and how the YASRHR works within the ministry remain difficult to navigate.
  - More structured coordination between the YASRHR and other youth initiatives within the MFA, like the Youth Advisory Council, remains a barrier to improved cooperation between different youth functions.

**In conclusion:** the YASRHR program is a one of its kind intervention, influencing policy discussions and fostering meaningful engagements nationally and internationally. The journey from symbolic representation to tangible outcomes underscores its wide-reaching impact, making it a crucial force in the discourse on SRHR in the Netherlands and globally. The assessment provides a foundation for refining the program, addressing challenges, and fostering continued collaboration for sustained success in advocating for the SRHR of young people worldwide.

## **MOVING TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

These four key recommendations aim to build on the program's positive contributions, address challenges, and foster continued success in advocating for the SRHR of young people globally. For more in-depth recommendations from the evaluation, please see Chapter 12 of the main report.

**1. Enhance engagement with MFA policies and documents:** Strengthen the YASRHR program's effectiveness in engaging with MFA policies and documents in a more structural way, addressing challenges and improving direct influence on policy making. Enhance the induction process with comprehensive information on MFA processes, key stakeholders, and interdepartmental dynamics.

**2. Consider alternative time and compensation models:** Consider increasing the time commitment for the role beyond the current 16 hours per week. An increase in the part time hours should also reflect an increase in the rate of pay for the role.

**3. Streamline alignment between different youth functions:** Address challenges related to coordination between the different MYP structures and initiatives within the MFA, such as the Youth Advisory Council, ensuring a more cohesive approach to youth engagement and participation.

**4. Enhance the capacity strengthening for YASRHRs:** Continue efforts to strengthen YASRHR capacity and help YASRHRs to better understand MFA operations and processes. Focus on providing more specific training on the processes and ways of working in MFA, and work with YASRHRs to develop realistic expectations of what is possible in the role.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

As we approach ten years of the Youth Ambassador Program on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender Equality, and Bodily Autonomy (YASRHR), CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), embarks on a comprehensive evaluation to assess the program's impact over the past nine years. This endeavour aims to delve into the achievements, challenges, and learnings from the program, which has played an instrumental role in amplifying the voices of young people and fostering meaningful youth participation in international policy making.

### 2.1 Background: advocacy for youth empowerment

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality is a youth-led organisation committed to empowering young individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual, reproductive, and love lives. The organisation advocates with young people for their sexual and reproductive health and rights and for meaningful and inclusive participation in the decisions made about their lives. Through international advocacy and youth leadership programs, CHOICE strives to mutually strengthen the capacities of young people and youth-led organisations, supporting them to be leaders and change-makers.

The Youth Ambassador SRHR Program, initiated in 2015 in collaboration with the MFA, serves as a crucial link between young people and policy makers. Over seven ambassadorial terms, in a total of nine years, the program aimed to contribute to align the MFA's work with the realities faced by young people in the Netherlands and abroad. As the seventh YASRHR's term draws to a close in December 2023, CHOICE recognizes the need for a thorough evaluation to assess the impact, successes, and areas for improvement over the past nine years.

### 2.2 Objectives & research questions: evaluating impact and identifying successes

The primary objectives of this evaluation were to determine the impact of the Youth Ambassador SRHR program, highlight key successes, and foster learning by documenting barriers and challenges. The evaluation focuses on the extent to which young people's voices are included in policies, the program's contribution to progressive national and international policy setting, and the influence of the Youth Ambassador in shaping discussions on SRHR, gender equality, and bodily autonomy.

The evaluation was led by four key questions:

1. To what extent has the YASRHR contributed to more representation of young people's voices in the MFA's policies, and the department of social cooperation's policies specifically?
2. To what extent does the YASRHR contribute to a more progressive national and international policy and norm setting regarding SRHR, gender equality and bodily autonomy?
3. To what extent have the YASRHR's activities in Dutch and international events influenced policymakers at the Ministry to refer more to SRHR, freedom of choice, women's rights and gender equality in their positions and policy?
4. What have been the experiences of young people who were consulted by the YASRHR?

## 3. CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Understanding the context in which the YASRHR program operates is paramount for a comprehensive evaluation. This chapter delves into the relevance of youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), recognizing its significance in the global landscape. Furthermore, it explores the imperative of meaningful youth participation, as acknowledged in international declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the ICPD Program of Action, and the Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS (UNGASS on HIV and AIDS 2001).

### 3.1 Relevance of youth SRHR: a global imperative

In numerous low- and middle-income countries, young people constitute substantial proportions of the population. With more than 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10-24 worldwide, close to 90% of these are living in low- and middle-income countries, where they form a large part of the

population.<sup>1</sup> However, they often find themselves disproportionately affected by SRHR challenges. Acknowledging the unique needs and vulnerabilities of young individuals, particularly in the realm of sexual and reproductive health and rights, has become a focal point of international discussions and commitments.

The importance of meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes has gained prominence through various international declarations. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Program of Action, and the Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS (UNGASS on HIV and AIDS 2001) all underscore the necessity of involving young people in shaping policies and programs that directly impact their lives.

### 3.2. Overview of the YASRHR program: nurturing youth advocacy

This chapter also provides an overview of the YASRHR program, explaining its core concept, funding from the MFA, its inception, and historical evolution. Understanding the genesis and evolution of the YASRHR program is crucial for contextualising its role in advocating for youth SRHR and amplifying the voices of young people on the global stage.

*Program conceptualisation and inception:* Prior to the conception of the YASRHR program, CHOICE had a partnership with the MFA through which a young person from the organisation was shadowing the ambassador on SRHR. Based on this existing initiative, the YASRHR program was conceptualized by CHOICE and presented to the SRHR division within MFA. The Ministry expressed an interest in expanding their portfolio of youth focused youth work, indicating their initial interest in the program. Through a consultative process led by CHOICE, the program was designed, with an agreement to pilot 2 youth ambassadors, starting in 2015.

*Historical evolution:* since its inception in 2015 and following the success of the pilot, the YASRHR program has seen 7 youth ambassadors in the role over 9 years. The program consisted of an initial 4-year period, and a subsequent 5 year period, which brings us to this current evaluation in 2023. In the initial 4-year term, the program was focused on SRHR and HIV, with a shift in focus in the second term to SRHR, gender equality and bodily autonomy.

*The YASRHR within the MFA:* the YASRHR sits within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' social development department, also known as DSO. The DSO consists of 2 main divisions and one task force. One division is focused on health and AIDS (DSO/GA). This is primarily where the YASRHR role sits, and this department is also responsible for SRHR issues.<sup>2</sup> The YASRHR also engages with other departments within the DSO including the taskforce on women's rights and gender (Taskforce Vrouwenrechten en Gendergelijkheid, TFGV), the division on civil society and education (Maatschappelijk Middenveld en Onderwijs DSO/MO) as well as the ambassador on youth, education and work's team (Team Jongeren, Onderwijs en Werk JOW).

### 3.3 Dutch MFA priorities in youth: aligning objectives

An integral component of the context analysis is an exploration of the priorities of the MFA concerning youth issues. Examining how the YASRHR program aligns with and contributes to these priorities provides valuable insights into the program's strategic positioning and its potential impact on shaping Dutch policy and international discourse on youth SRHR.

The Netherlands has been unwavering in its commitment to promoting SRHR globally. Rooted in the principles of human rights and collaboration, the MFA sees themselves as a connector, donor,

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Track. United Nations (2023). Source:

<https://www.un.org/ldc5/youth#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20world%20counts%201.8,large%20proportion%20of%20the%20population>

<sup>2</sup> Organisational Structure. Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2023). Source:

<https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-foreign-affairs/organisational-structure/policy-theme-departments>

watchdog, knowledge broker, and diplomatic negotiator. Central to this commitment is the pursuit of universal access to SRHR, including issues related to HIV/AIDS, with a focus on fostering freedom of choice for women and young people.

#### *Results and focus areas*

The Netherlands, recognizing that freedoms enjoyed in the country are not universal, actively campaigns for global access to information, resources, and services related to SRHR. The Dutch MFA's efforts in 2019 focused on key result areas<sup>3</sup>:

1. **Young People, Information, and Choices:** Aiming to provide accurate information on sexual and reproductive health and rights to young people aged 10 to 24, the Netherlands invested in comprehensive sexuality education, reaching over a million young individuals in 2018-2019.
2. **Access to Health Products:** Striving for better access to affordable, high-quality health products, the Netherlands sought to make contraceptives, medicines, diagnostic devices, vaccines, and other prophylactics available to women, young people, and specific risk groups.
3. **Quality of Healthcare:** Emphasising the importance of a well-functioning basic healthcare system, the Netherlands focused on strengthening health systems, particularly in family planning, pregnancy and childbirth, and safe abortions.
4. **Rights and Respect:** Advocating for more respect for the sexual and reproductive rights of all individuals, the Netherlands achieved significant milestones, contributing to better national policies, legislation, services, and reduced discrimination.

#### *Youth At Heart strategy*

In 2020, the Dutch government outlined its commitment to young people through its Youth At Heart Strategy <sup>4</sup>. The Netherlands recognises the challenges and opportunities posed by the significant young population in the focus regions: the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa. With a considerable gap between the numbers of young people entering the job market and available opportunities, the Netherlands is committed to prioritising youth in its development policies through this Youth at Heart Strategy. Although the strategy primarily focuses on education and youth employment, there is a strong focus on enhancing young people's meaningful participation and the value MFA sees in ongoing dialogues with young people, besides the other two strategies of setting up new programs and joining international initiatives.

The strategy seeks to amplify young people's voices by incorporating their challenges and perspectives into existing programs. This involves more frequent consultations, the appointment of a youth advisory committee (YAC), and the designation of an Ambassador for Youth, Education, and Work. The strategy has been shaped through consultations with diverse stakeholders, acknowledging their valuable input, including young people, the YASRHRs and CHOICE.

#### *Future initiatives*

Looking ahead, the Netherlands envisions strengthening civil society organisations through its policy framework (2021-2025), with a focus on enhancing access to SRHR. The revised SRHR partnerships grant scheme aims to empower organisations in low- and middle-income countries, particularly those focusing on young people and marginalized groups, fostering a relationship of equality and autonomy. It is important to note that the YASRHR program is not a part of this partnership grant scheme.

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<sup>3</sup> Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Key Results Areas. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands . Directorate-General for International Cooperation. (2020). Source: <https://dutchdevelopmentresults.nl/2019/theme/srhr>

<sup>4</sup> Youth at Heart Strategy. Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2020). Source: <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/05/14/youth-at-heart---young-people-at-the-heart-of-dutch-development-cooperation>



In summary, the Dutch MFA's priorities in youth and SRHR align seamlessly with the objectives of the YASRHR program. By championing global access, defending rights, and investing in education and healthcare, the Netherlands contributes significantly to the broader goal of fostering freedom of choice and advancing SRHR worldwide.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

To address the research questions and evaluate the effectiveness of the YASRHR program, the proposed methodology employed a mixed methods approach. The methodology incorporated literature review, online surveys, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions to comprehensively understand the impact and contributions of the YASRHR program.

##### **4.1 Sampling**

The consultants undertook qualitative research with a wide sample of people. This included representatives from the MFA, current and former youth ambassadors, YASRHR program coordinators from CHOICE, as well as organisations and youth advocates who had previous engagements with the YASRHR. Access to people who were interviewed for this research was facilitated by CHOICE.

24 people were approached to take part in interviews. A total of 18 people were interviewed as part of this research. This includes 11 people in key informant interviews, and 7 people in 3 different focus group discussions. 83 people were approached to take part in an online survey. We received responses from 9 people. Data collection took place between October and December 2023.

As a part of the focus group discussions, YASRHRs were asked to participate in a live mentimeter survey. The survey asked questions on their perceptions and experiences of the core elements and pre-conditions of meaningful youth participation based on the flower of participation<sup>5</sup> and graph of participation<sup>6</sup> tools designed by CHOICE, and how present they were during their tenure as YASRHR. This was followed by a reflection and group discussion on the answers to the questions.

##### **4.2 Reflection on the methodology**

The chosen methodology employed a multifaceted approach to comprehensively investigate the impact of the YASRHR program on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) policies. The integration of various data collection methods intended to provide a holistic understanding of the program's influence. However, as with any research design, there were both strengths and limitations that shaped the overall outcomes.

##### Strengths

- *Diversity in data collection:* The use of diverse data collection methods allowed for a nuanced exploration of the YASRHR program's impact. Surveys, interviews, and multiple focus group discussions contributed to gathering perspectives from different stakeholders involved or affected by the program.
- *Inclusion of CHOICE Coordinators:* Incorporating the coordinators of the YASRHR program from CHOICE's side as participants in key informant interviews, enriched the data by offering insights from individuals closely involved with the program's administration and day-to-day business. Their perspectives provided valuable content and a more comprehensive understanding of the program's dynamics.
- *Event and report analysis for real-time impact:* The Inclusion of event analysis provided for a real-time assessment of the YASRHRs influence during events. This method captured the dynamic nature of policy discussions and allowed for the exploration of immediate impacts.

<sup>5</sup> Flower of Participation. Youth Do It. Source: <https://www.youthdoit.org/themes/meaningful-youth-participation/flower-of-participation/>

<sup>6</sup> The Graph of Participation (2017). A tool to assess if and to what extent Meaningful Youth Participation is integrated in your activity, program and/or organization. CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality. Source: <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/Graph-of-Participation.pdf>

- *Multiple focus group discussions:* While initially the evaluation anticipated to have only one focus group discussion with all the seven ambassadors, in the end it turned into three different focus group discussions. By accident and due to availability, the focus group discussions were mixed in when the YASRHR did their turn, offering varied perspectives and valuable discussions and insights during the focus group discussion.

#### Weaknesses

- *Public document accessibility:* The reliance on the analysis of MFA specific documents faced as a challenge, as not all documents are public. This limitation restricted the depth of the policy and program document analysis, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the YASRHRs contributions and impact.
- *Incomplete participant inclusion:* The inability to interview everyone, including some staff members from the MFA as well as former CHOICE coordinators, is a notable limitation. Perspectives from those who played foundational roles in shaping the program as well as those that have a closest view on the current impact of the program could have added a depth and historical context to findings.

#### **Analysis overview:**

As we delve into the analysis of the YASRHR program, our examination is organized around the specific questions in the Terms of Reference (TOR), attached in Annex A. Each section corresponds to key aspects outlined in the TOR, providing a focused exploration of the YASRHR program. Each section includes a summary of the key findings of that chapter. Additionally, we have included a separate section for additional analysis themes at the end. This structure allows for a systematic investigation into the program's structure, flexibility, financial support, safe spaces, and policies, among other dimensions. Together, these components offer a comprehensive understanding of the YASRHR program.

## **5. REPRESENTATION IN THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS' POLICIES**

### **5.1. Overview**

The analysis of this chapter is led by the question *"To what extent has the YASRHR contributed to more representation of young people's voices in the MFA's policies, and the department of social cooperation's policies specifically?"*

**Summary of key findings:**

- The YASRHR played an important role in the development of Youth at Heart Strategy.
- The YASRHR guided the MFA in the development of the Youth Advisory Council structure.
- The catalyzation of youth councils at Dutch embassies across the world was, in part due to development of youth at heart strategy. YASRHRs are engaging with these structures with positive feedback from embassies and youth.
- The MFA is lacking a clear approach in how to engage YASRHRs to give input or contributions to policies or documents.
- It is unclear if the YASRHR influenced concrete increases in spending on youth or SRHR issues.
- The key factors for effective meaningful youth participation and representation in and engagement with the Ministry include a high-level support from leadership, a perceived added value of the role by another team beyond the global health division and soft engagements (conversations, informal meetings).
- Mainly, YASRHRs have soft influence in the MFA, quantifying the impact of this is difficult, like with other advocacy programs.
- Challenges to increasing representation of young people’s voices within the MFA include the tension between driving participation within the MFA and maintaining a critical voice causing an overestimation of the program’s capacity to directly shape decision making within MFA.

**5.2. Analysis**

The YASRHR has emerged as a critical force in influencing policy discussions within the MFA, leaving a lasting mark on critical strategies and initiatives. In various instances, the YASRHR has demonstrated their active and influential participation, both within and outside the DSO. Specific examples are outlined in the next sections of this report.

**5.3 How YASRHR’s engagement and participation led to concrete outcomes for MYP**

*Youth at Heart Strategy*

The impact of the YASRHR program has not only been felt within the global health division within DSO of the MFA, but widely across DSO. The YASRHR, amongst other youth initiatives in MFA, has provided valuable input into the departments’ ‘Youth At Heart strategy’, which underpins the MFAs current multifaceted approach to meaningful youth participation. A representative from the MFA highlighted the instrumental role of the various youth structures within the MFA, including the YASRHR, in shaping the Youth at Heart Strategy. Notably, one of the YASRHR provided important insight on the third chapter on meaningful youth participation.

*“We learned quite a little a bit on the youth ambassador (YASRHR) to help us and to guide us, to give active insights as one of the young people who are involved and information on how to do meaningful youth representation.” (KII with representative of MFA in a discussion on the Youth At Heart Strategy, November 2023)*

*Igniting other MYP initiatives in MFA*

Several people within the MFA acknowledged the critical role the YASRHR played in catalysing the establishment of the YAC. The YASRHR was considered as a prominent example of meaningful youth participation, and was presented as a guiding example for the development of the YAC. Since its development, YASRHRs have also engaged with the YAC, through facilitation by the MFA, the Dutch Youth Council (Nationale Jeugdraad) and CHOICE. This has led to YASRHR input on YAC policy work relating to comprehensive sexuality education.

The establishment of youth councils at embassies emerged as a notable outcome too, aligning with a broader trend of increased youth focus in the MFAs work. Whilst not a mandatory element of embassies' work, the MFA noted a marked increase in the establishment of youth councils following the launch of the Youth At Heart strategy, which was developed with contributions from the YASRHR and CHOICE. In addition, engagement with youth councils at embassies by the YASRHR during country visits had a marked impact, as indicated from our interviews with embassy staff and online surveys we conducted with youth council members. The research found that YASRHR engagement with youth councils created visibility on youth and SRHR issues for the embassies, partner organisations and youth in the countries, creating a sense of credibility and momentum on the topic.

*"I accompanied YASRHR to one of our YAC members who is working on SRHR in one of the city's informal settlements. The fact that the YASRHR visited her at her place of work meant a lot for the credibility and legitimacy of her work." (KII with embassy staff member, November 2023)*

While there is a positive shift within the MFA towards more meaningful youth participation, some challenges persist. Ambitions of embassies might surpass the mandates of these councils. For example, an interview with one staff member at an embassy found that when the youth council was established, the embassy had envisioned that the members would meet regularly and be consulted to provide input on embassy strategies and documents. However, the practical realities of implementing this in a youth council where members are not compensated for their time was soon realised to be too ambitious. Nonetheless, engagements with embassies as a part of this research demonstrated some important lessons learned including how to better practically implement youth councils by applying similar structures and processes from existing MFA youth functions like the YASRHR.

#### *Review and consultation on specific policies and initiatives of the MFA*

An emerging theme in the interviews and focus groups discussions was the challenges faced in providing meaningful policy contributions and feedback to the MFA. Many YASRHRs noted being engaged to provide review and input on policy positions and papers, and representatives from the MFA frequently highlighted their valuable inputs to their work. However, some YASRHRs indicated that they were not consulted on any meaningful policy related matters, and others indicated that although consulted, they were often asked to provide input in a short time frame. Overall YASRHRs emphasised the lack of planning and clear procedures for policy contributions, which was also recognised by the MFA. While there is acknowledgment of the program's informal impact, measuring the success of YASRHRs in influencing policies remains a nuanced challenge. The direct influence on policies is explored further in chapter seven.

#### *Quantifying the hidden influence of the YASRHR*

The informal nature of the YASRHRs engagements, spanning meetings, town halls, and closed-door discussions within the MFA, is a significant aspect of the YASRHR role. The YASRHR undertakes significant work in fostering inclusive thinking and contributing to consultations on pressing issues. Additionally, contributions to consultations on diverse topics, such as youth unemployment, showcase the broader impact of YASRHRs' engagements.

*It's about informing, engaging and trying to be a critical voice (key informant interview with CHOICE coordinator, November 2023)*

Quantifying the impact of such engagements is challenging. A coordinator of the YASRHR program highlighted the need to fine-tune how this program measures success, considering the short time frame and part-time nature of the ambassador role. This is also discussed later in this report, under the section of monitoring and reporting.

#### *Funding to youth and SRHR related issues*

As a part of this evaluation, the consultants wanted to understand if the YASRHR had any influence on MFA spending related to youth and SRHR issues. A key informant from the MFA suggested that

roles like YASRHR likely contributed to increased youth-focused spending and noted that they observed an overall increase in funding for youth-led organisations within the MFA. However, they underscored the need for concrete financial data to support this perspective, which was not made available by the MFA for this research. Furthermore, MFA spending is not disaggregated by metrics like age, so validating this statement may be challenging.

#### **5.4 Defining success factors in influencing MYP in DSO**

The impact of the YASRHR program on social cooperation policies is characterised by a nuanced and indirect influence, reflecting the program's approach to diplomatic engagement. The program's strategy, which emphasises a more subtle and relationship-driven method of advocacy, is a common approach used for advocacy with high level decision makers and governments. According to interviews with CHOICE coordinators as well as the YASRHRs, the program focuses on initiating conversations, presenting information, and relying on the MFA staff to integrate these insights into their work.

*"A big part of the program is also just throwing up a ball and seeing where it lands. It's really in that regard a lot of conversations with people and hoping that they will take it along. We really work on creating those relationships, giving the information and hoping that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Professionals will say, all right, I'm going to take this up. (...) It's more indirect influencing than very direct influencing." (KII CHOICE representative, November 2023).*

This makes results harder to track and pin-point to one instance that created lasting change, as is the case for many interventions that apply this common approach used in advocacy. Additionally, critical voices emerge from MFA interviews, highlighting a perceived gap between the YASRHR's envisioned influence on program and budgetary decisions and the practical challenges in realising this ambition. One employee expressed the difficulty faced by youth ambassadors in exerting influence due to their limited presence within the MFA, emphasising the challenge of impactful participation. Another person underscored the dual expectations placed on the YASRHR, noting the tension between driving ministry participation, and maintaining a critical voice. These observations caution against overestimating the program's capacity to directly shape decision-making within the MFA, pointing to structural and organisational constraints that may limit the envisioned impact of the YASRHR.

The success of the YASRHR program within the MFA is contingent on leadership support, presenting a possible risk if political shifts occur. Furthermore, challenges remain in forging linkages to other departments and themes. This was highlighted in focus groups with YASRHRs, who shared that they faced challenges in identifying and engaging with MFA staff who worked in other topics such as LGBTQI issues, or other teams and departments within MFA, limiting their possibilities to collaborate on other topics.

*"When it goes outside of the borders of the department you're working in, it's so difficult to get a grip on responsibilities or even collaboration. They really hold back on that" (FGD with YASRHRs, November 2023)*

The perspective of the team focussing on Youth, Education and Employment within the MFA reveals that collaboration across departments is possible when there is perceived added value by that team or department, as demonstrated by joint initiatives and conferences around, for example, the Youth at Heart strategy. Nevertheless, expectations need to align with the practical constraints of departmental boundaries. While receptivity varies across departments, proactive outreach by the MFA, as seen in the efforts of the Youth, Education and Employment team, suggests a potential for collaboration, contingent on the perceived benefits of CHOICE and the YASRHR's involvement.

## 6. CONTRIBUTION TO PROGRESSIVE POLICY AND NORM SETTING

### 6.1. Overview

The analysis of this chapter is led by the question “*To what extent does the YASRHR contribute to a more progressive national and international policy and norm setting regarding SRHR, gender equality and bodily autonomy*”. The chapter is divided in two sub chapters, norm setting at the national and the international level.

#### Summary of key findings:

- YASRHRs have had actionable influence on major strategies, like the Feminist Foreign Policy and Global Health Strategy.
- The soft power influence of the YASRHR is significant but nuanced. Most recently the YASRHR influenced the MFA agenda to focus on a specific topic, notably SRHR and disability.
- The Dutch MFA and YASRHR program have inspired interest beyond Dutch borders, generating conversations to consider adopting similar structures in other nations like Canada, Sweden, the UK and Australia.
- The program is recognized for its unique ability to shape diplomatic narratives if it comes to MYP and SRHR.
- There has been significant impact abroad, notably at embassies. The YASRHR has engagement with embassies and youth councils.
- YASRHRs undertake various engagements at high level international events. The most notable engagement is the CPD speech, which is consistently given by the YASRHR.
- Measuring how the YASRHR contributes to policy and norm setting is challenging and influence should be measured in a softer way.
- The program does not have specific indicators that track against the YASRHRs influence

### 6.2 National level

Measuring the YASRHR's direct influence on national policy proves challenging, with an employee from the MFA emphasising the need to view it as part of a broader ecosystem centred on young people in SRHR. Chapter 6 has already discussed the challenges in directly linking YASRHR engagement with the MFA to policy changes and outcomes. Rather, influence is measured in a softer way.

This complexity of measuring impact is underscored by the program indicators from CHOICE, which until 2019, were more centred on measuring the experiences of YASRHRs by capturing qualitative data focussing on external events, rather than capturing quantitative outcomes. However, the program has made significant changes on this matter. Since 2019, with the start of the new program cycle, CHOICE reports quantitative indicators to IATI and the MFA, whilst continuing to capture experiences of meaningful participation through the narrative analysis of YASRHRs supported by the program coordinator of CHOICE.

#### *MFA's strategies and policies related to SRHR.*

The MFA acknowledged the impact of various consultations with young people held by the YASRHRs. In particular, consultations influenced the development of the global health strategy and the feminist foreign policy. Engagements with YASRHRs helped shape both documents, with YASRHRs amplifying the voices of young people from across the world to aid in informing the gender and health focused policies of the MFA. These strategies serve as a guiding framework for all global health and gender programming, marking the significant relevance of these contributions.

There has been actionable influence on the views and perceptions of the MFA as a result of YASRHR engagements. This was noted by both the MFA as well as by the YASRHRs themselves. For example, the new insights the MFA gained on disability and SRHR because of YASRHR advocacy to the MFA

on this topic. While the impact of this may not manifest as direct policy or program changes, such contributions remain significant. The MFA noted that this exemplifies the program's role in introducing and championing themes that may not be on the MFA agenda. Whilst they may not be immediate priorities for the MFA, engagements like these are crucial for fostering inclusivity and awareness. This same example was given by the YASRHR and CHOICE. In relation, during the last CPD the YASRHR proposed a side event on CSE for persons with disabilities. Despite not aligning with the MFA's priority themes, the YASRHR successfully persuaded the MFA to host the event in collaboration with other CSOs. This demonstrates the influence of the YASRHR, showing that they are an advocate for disability rights and SRHR, and can have influence in this topic on the MFA.

Other YASRHRs built bridges and created awareness about other topics. This included facilitating a connection between the MFA and the climate movement and SRHR, as well as the urgency of menstrual health and the link made with several NGOs working on that matter.

*"I would learn a lot from the YASRHR. Practically for example, one of them would take in a priority like, what is exactly period poverty. That is one of the topics I wasn't very aware of and that is just a practical thing that I learnt about". (KII with MFA representative, November 2023)*

This demonstrates the program's role in bridging connections between diverse stakeholders and the capacity to raise awareness and stimulate action on pressing concerns. In essence, the YASRHR program's contributions to social cooperation policies may not always yield immediate and quantifiable outcomes. Still, its capacity to introduce critical topics, spark conversations, and influence perspectives within the MFA underscores its unique and valuable role in shaping diplomatic discourse on SRHR.

### **6.3 International level**

#### *Elevating youth structures*

The YASRHR program extends far beyond Dutch borders, resonating globally and inspiring MYP and structures accordingly in other nations. MFA staff interviewed underscored the program's influence with countries like Canada, Sweden, the UK, and Australia expressing interest in implementing similar initiatives within their governments. A coordinator from CHOICE emphasised the possibility for the MFA to commit funds or formalized technical support to encourage other countries to adopt a similar YASRHR model. In Uganda, following consultations with the embassy, efforts were made within the European Commission to establish a youth council. This reflects the broader international reach of the YASRHR model.

#### *Diplomatic representation and favourable perceptions abroad*

Within the MFA, staff recognised the YASRHR's unique ability to shape diplomatic narratives positively. The program has been instrumental in portraying the Netherlands abroad in a favourable light, emphasising the importance of engaging young people in international discussions. Predecessors highlight the YASRHR's role in progressive norm-setting, offering a tangible voice to young people and contributing to the global discourse on SRHR.

*"When it comes to walking our talk as a ministry, having young people, young ambassadors, young representatives walking around representing us, what it does is give the impression that the Netherlands is really taking youth seriously." (KII with MFA representative, November 2023).*

#### *A consistent platform for youth voices on the international stage*

The most notable example of how the MFA is contributing to norm setting at the international level is through its youth participation at the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). At CPD, the Netherlands has showcased the significance of youth voices by engaging the YASRHR to write and present the countries' national statement. One notable aspect is the program's consistent commitment to platforming young people on the international stage for nine years. The Netherlands stands alone in this dedication, a significant

contribution to advancing progressive norms and emphasising the importance of meaningful youth participation globally.

YASRHRs expressed the significance of their participation at such a high-level event, and one youth ambassador made reference to the fact that she secured sections in key CPD documents, exemplifying the program's active participation on the international stage. A member of staff from the MFA noted the meaningful participation of youth ambassadors in decision-making on the Netherlands' position, negotiations, and UN language, challenging the perception that people might have of the contributions of the YASRHRs as tokenistic. The MFA also indicated that the YASRHR provided a valuable link to civil society actors at high level engagements like CPD. The continued participation of the YASRHR at CPD provides an essential opportunity for youth SRHR negotiations on an international stage.

*"It was very real and tangible. It says we also invest beyond financial means in terms of creating space and opportunity. There are young people in delegations all the time, but a young person speaking on sexual reproductive health and rights is incredible."* (KII with CHOICE coordinator, November 2023).

#### *Other international events*

Contributions extend to international events such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) where the YASRHR has been part of the delegation as well, Beijing+25, ICPD+25, and the Generation Equality Forum, where YASRHRs were engaged to ensure that youth voices were included in crucial discussions. YASRHRs also represent the Netherlands in various fora and engage with high-level stakeholders, as seen in one YASRHR's participation in a high-level panel at the ICPD+25 in Nairobi.

#### *Challenges in quantifying impact and broader influence*

While the program's efforts were acknowledged across all stakeholders interviewed for this research, measuring its impact on progressive norm-setting proves challenging. MFA staff recognize the complexities of quantifying the influence of amplifying young voices in the intricate landscape of SRHR discussions, especially at the international level. Despite these challenges, the YASRHR's global influence extends beyond governmental structures, leaving a lasting impact on diplomatic circles and various organisations, illustrating its significance on the broader international stage.

## **7. INFLUENCE ON POLICYMAKERS AT DUTCH AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS**

### **7.1. Overview**

#### **Summary of key findings:**

- YASRHRs actively engaged with events in the Netherlands through schools, universities and Dutch CSOs. However, their focus is on the international SRHR context, with less reference to Dutch SRHR issues. The idea of establishing a deeper connection to SRHR and young people in the Netherlands is supported.
- The most significant focus of the role is participation at international events. Most notable is the YASRHR participation at CPD, CSW and embassy visits.
- Directly linking YASRHR engagement at these events to increased reference in SRHR, freedom of choice and rights changes in positions and policy is difficult to establish, as the YASRHR role has a more soft influence on the MFA.

The analysis of this chapter is led by the question *"To what extent have the YASRHR's activities in Dutch and international events influenced policymakers at the Ministry to refer more to SRHR, freedom of choice, women's rights and gender equality in their positions and policy?"*. Most impact was reached internationally, which is why the chapter zooms in on international events such as the CPD and visits to embassies.



## 7.2 Influence through Dutch events

The YASRHR program has emerged as a dynamic force, leaving a lasting impact on both Dutch and international fronts. However, this evaluation has identified the lack of emphasis of the YASRHR program on SRHR issues in the Netherlands. Some YASRHRs have undertaken engagements within the Netherlands, working mainly with schools and universities, as well as Dutch CSOs focused on international SRHR work. For example, one YASRHR was involved in a Dutch youth advocacy event known as the Night of the UN, where Dutch youth advocates came together to address major societal challenges from human rights to climate change. However, a specific focus on SRHR issues within the Netherlands has been limited.

Through interviews with stakeholders and consultations with former CHOICE coordinators, the consultants found the need for an intensified focus on SRHR issues specific to the youth of the Netherlands. Whilst engagement and advocacy on SRHR issues in the Netherlands is not a core element of the YASRHR role, which is an internationally focused role within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this was an emerging theme from the interviews conducted as a part of this research. The idea of establishing a deeper connection to SRHR and young people in the Netherlands is supported.

## 7.3 Influence through international events

On the international stage, the YASRHR program has demonstrated a substantial influence. Participating actively in global platforms, the program has witnessed policymakers incorporating YASRHR themes into their positions. The CPD stands out as a significant arena where youth ambassadors have eloquently spoken on behalf of the Netherlands. Despite initial apprehensions, the CPD experience is hailed as a unique opportunity to amplify youth voices, symbolising the Dutch commitment to prioritising young perspectives in high level diplomatic settings.

*"It was quite unique that a government literally gave young people a voice. For example the CPD where official representations were allowed to say something, the Netherlands opted for it.(...) back then, it was quite revolutionary. Because, of course, we gave up speaking time. They ultimately gave speaking time to the young people who specifically expressed the young people's position."* (KII with member of staff from MFA, November 2023).

## 7.4 International visits

Embassy visits have also proven to be instrumental, initiated based on SRHR priority countries, embassy interest and possibility for meaningful engagement. These visits not only visualize the impactful work of the YASRHR but also create meaningful platforms for engagement with youth from the countries. The snowball effect of these engagements, particularly when YASRHRs were accompanied by MFA ambassadors on trips, has significantly increased traction and visibility. This collective effort has gone beyond individual visits, contributing to a broader and more inclusive dialogue on sexual and reproductive health and rights at international embassies of the Netherlands. International visits to embassies were highly valued by all stakeholders interviewed for this research, including the MFA, CHOICE and the YASRHRs. From our interviews, feedback emerged about improving the coordination of these visits through more timely engagement with embassies, as well as setting clear expectations with embassies and the YASRHRs about the visits, their purpose, and the outcomes.

In essence, the YASRHR program has evolved into a formidable intervention, influencing policy discussions, giving young people a voice, and fostering meaningful engagements both nationally and internationally. The journey from symbolic representation to tangible outcomes underscores the program's wide-reaching impact, making it a pivotal force in the discourse on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Netherlands and around the world.

## 8. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

### 8.1 Overview

The analysis of this chapter examines the experiences of the YASRHRs according to CHOICE's Flower of Participation<sup>7</sup>.

#### Summary of key findings:

- Overall, the experiences of the YASRHRs appeared to change over the 9 years of the program. YASRHRs in the earlier years of the program faced more challenges, which improved over time. Notably:
  - YASRHRs felt more able to say no to engagements and protect their time.
  - YASRHRs in the later years of the program found that accessing information from the MFA became easier.
  - Over time, YASRHRs appeared to have a more clear understanding of the responsibilities of their role, this was less well defined for earlier YASRHRs.
  - Importantly, all YASRHRs felt they had a lot of responsibility and capacity to influence the MFA, which is positive.
- Some challenges remained the same for all YASRHRs. Notably:
  - All YASRHR indicated that they faced difficulty in relation to where the role sits. All YASRHRs highlighted the challenge of being both independent from CHOICE and the MFA, as it isolated them.
  - Some YASRHRs faced challenges in speaking freely on more challenging topics, and some felt less able to criticise the MFA stance on certain SRHR topics.
  - Engaging with other young people can bring some nuanced challenges to the YASRHR role. Effectively amplifying the voice of young people from different contexts can be challenging and a significant responsibility.
  - Access to timely information seems to be a crucial point, in order to get as easy access to information it is recommended to build in a thorough handover period and make a joint annual plan as YASRHR, MFA and CHOICE for both external events as well as internal advocacy.

### 8.2 Common experiences

In this section, the collective experiences of the YASRHRs within the MFA are explored. The analysis uses CHOICE's Graph of Participation<sup>8</sup>, based on the Flower of Participation, to identify the recurring themes in responses.

#### Core elements

The core elements are the foundational pillars of meaningful youth participation that shape its structure. The greater the presence and the strength of these five core elements, the more robust meaningful youth participation becomes. The core elements encompass voice, freedom of choice, responsibility, decision making power and information.

<sup>7</sup> Flower of Participation. Youth Do It. CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality & YOUACT. Source retrieved from: <https://www.youthdoit.org/themes/meaningful-youth-participation/flower-of-participation/>

<sup>8</sup> The Graph of Participation (2017). A tool to assess if and to what extent Meaningful Youth Participation is integrated in your activity, program and/or organization. CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality. Source: <https://www.youthdoit.org/assets/Uploads/Graph-of-Participation.pdf>

### 8.2.1 Freedom of choice

The concept 'freedom of choice' is the first core element examined. Freedom of choice examines the extent to which YASRHRs had the autonomy to shape their participation within the program, balancing the dynamics between CHOICE and the MFA.

#### *Freedom in choosing focus areas and priorities*

YASRHRs acknowledged the freedom they held in shaping their roles and advocating for their chosen focus areas. This created a sense of empowerment, which was echoed by both the MFA and CHOICE coordinators, highlighting the value of personal interpretation and lived experiences in conveying the agenda. The diversity in focus areas and approaches to the role is seen as refreshing, contributing to a richer tapestry of perspectives. This diversity allows for unique interpretations and initiatives, providing a platform for YASRHRs to craft their distinct narratives.

*"It is admirable how much responsibility and freedom you get as a young person on a specific topic, and they do kind of let you work on your own topic. That is very cool, and it really helps to build your own vision" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023).*

While YASRHRs appreciated the freedom to choose and work on personal topics, there is recognition of the importance of aligning them, to some extent, with MFA priorities. A more strategic approach could ensure a greater balance between personal advocacy and contributing to broader national priorities.

#### *Freedom to decline opportunities*

The potential for increased pressure and time investment is a concern expressed by some YASRHRs. YASRHRs theoretically have the freedom to decline opportunities, given the part-time nature of the role. While some feel empowered to turn down events, especially when supervised by CHOICE, others sense pressure to accept every engagement, reflecting potential expectations and perceptions surrounding commitment.

*"If you decline what's being framed as an opportunity it makes you look, you know, as if you do not want to give it a hundred percent, or if you're just.. You're not committed enough" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023).*

The ability to decline opportunities, or not, highlights a nuanced aspect of meaningful youth participation within the MFA.

*"I think that just illustrates how they look at youth participation, as something that you can pick and choose. If the opportunity is for you, how can you decline this? (...) there is many other that can do it in my place (...) it was purely about the position and about how it looks and that when push comes to shove there is very little flexibility to actually implement it" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023)*

YASRHRs in the earlier years of the program felt less ability to decline opportunities due to pressure from the MFA, but YASRHRs in later years felt more able to decline opportunities based on the time allocation for the role.

### 8.2.2 Information

This section on information explores the extent to which YASRHRs received timely and understandable information about the program's goals, timeline, and activities as well as more widely, information needed for the YASRHRs to be able to carry out their work—a crucial aspect for effective participation.

#### *The significance of a detailed handover*

All YASRHRs acknowledged that a robust and detailed handover period is significant. While some YASRHRs had a well-structured handover including a lot of time to do the handover, others cited

challenges with less extensive documentation which impacted their initial experience. This varied between YASRHRs and appears to be due to the capacity and time availability of YASRHRs at the end of their tenure.

#### *The advantage of embeddedness for access to information*

Several voices, both within the MFA and among the ambassadors themselves, highlight the unique dynamics surrounding access to information within this program. The consensus among various stakeholders is that being part of the MFA and having direct access to its resources is considered a strength. This integration into the ministry's structure is seen as meaningful and valuable, distinguishing the YASRHR role from other youth-focused programs. The embedded nature of the ambassador role is perceived as offering distinct advantages, providing access to internal workings and facilitating a more informed approach to advocacy.

#### *Critical role of timely information sharing for meaningful participation*

Information sharing was also critical for effective and timely feedback on MFA policies and positions. The unique dynamics of the MFA, which were described as a 'fast moving train', meant that information sharing was often ad-hoc and not timely. Ad hoc information sharing combined with the fact that YASRHRs had few days in the office had an impact on both the meaningfulness as well as the number of possible engagements of the YASRHRs. Overall, YASRHRs in the first cycle indicated more pronounced difficulty in obtaining information from the MFA. Reflections of more recent YASRHRs indicate that information sharing from the MFA is improving but that there is a need to structure the access to information in a better way to enhance the meaningfulness of the engagements that YASRHRs have.

### **8.2.3 Voice**

The exploration of the core element voice delves into the dynamics of how YASRHRs felt they were able to articulate their views and the extent to which their opinions are heard and integrated into policies and programs. This section aims to unravel the multifaceted nature of voicing opinions and maintaining independence within the YASRHR program, examining the challenges and opportunities encountered by young ambassadors as they navigate complex diplomatic spaces.

An essential theme identified in the analysis were instances when YASRHRs found themselves advised against expressing certain opinions or asked to modify their stance. One ambassador faced requests to revise her critical stance on CSE in the Netherlands, which highlights the nuanced nature of independence within the program. There were other YASRHRs that shared examples of discomfort during discussions around sensitive topics.

*"With the ministry, I didn't know if they wanted to support me or tell me to be a bit lower, lower my voice in certain topics. So that really overstressed me a lot" (FGD YASRHRs, December 2023).*

There was a struggle with the perception of being linked closely to the Ministry, navigating the delicate balance between independence and alignment with institutional expectations. Although the position is independent, YASRHRs expressed that from the outside looking in, they were viewed as part of the MFA which they felt had an impact on their independence.

An additional theme emerging in the core element of voice is the challenges associated with the independence of the YASRHR role. The fine balance between autonomy and integration within the MFA team is acknowledged by both respondents from the MFA and CHOICE. It is recognized as potentially creating a sense of isolation within the larger organisational structure. One of the YASRHRs highlighted the potential loneliness associated with navigating both the independent and integrated aspects of the role. The dual placement can create a sense of not fully belonging, underscoring the nuanced experiences of YASRHRs. All YASRHRs shared this reflection and remains a consistent dynamic across the program.

This reflects the broader challenge faced by YASRHRs in voicing critique of the Dutch Government in high-level forums, raising questions about the parameters of true independence. Some YASRHRs argued that the position can also not be fully independent as in some instances you are a direct representation of the Netherlands and the MFA, for example when delivering the CPD speech on behalf of the Netherlands.

*"I feel like the dilemma is that you have CHOICE on one side, which is an advocacy movement, and you have the MFA, and you are somewhere treading the line between being diplomatic. For me, for example, in the UN you are part of the delegation so you can't be that critical" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023).*

However, one YASRHR provided a different perspective on the critiques raised around the ability to challenge the MFA. One YASRHR noted that they felt able to express their critical voice in closed door engagements with the MFA. This demonstrates that critical views of YASRHRs were considered and heard. Yet, the same YASRHR indicated that to enact change based on a critical view would face constraints. Each YASRHR has a unique experience and view in how they felt able to express their voice, and a more open environment for expressing views and opinions is not linear in time, but rather dependent on different YASRHRs experiences.

#### **8.2.4 Responsibility**

The core element of responsibility centres around independence being given to carry out a role. Additionally, the consultant team has expanded responsibility to involve the fine balance between managing independence, juggling expectations and shouldering the weight of representing the broad diversity of voices of young people across the globe. As mentioned earlier, the role of YASRHR is independent and situated between the MFA and CHOICE. All YASRHRs acknowledged the delicate balance, neither fully integrated within the MFA nor exclusively aligned with CHOICE.

*"I did not feel completely integrated within the MFA, but also not completely integrated within CHOICE - I was somewhere in the middle" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023).*

##### *Clarifying expectations and defining responsibilities*

Representatives from the MFA also underscored the struggle of managing the high expectations and responsibilities that come with the role, as it demands a significant commitment from YASRHRs which can conflict with other responsibilities like studies or work. This was acknowledged by the YASRHRs, some of whom shared their challenges of managing their additional responsibilities around the role. Some YASRHRs reflected feeling that they sometimes could not live up to the expectations and responsibilities that came with the role in the hours assigned to do it.

The flexible nature of the YASRHR role, which is determined by the interests of the YASRHR, can lead to some lack of clarity on the responsibilities of the YASRHR role. There is a need for clear expectations of the YASRHR role and the associated responsibilities during the hiring and onboarding process. This also clearly needs to recognise the limitations of the role in having direct influence on MFA policies.

Drawing comparisons to other youth representatives, such as the UN representatives, reveals distinct mandates, underlining the unique position of YASRHRs and their responsibility for internal policy advocacy. A representative from the MFA that was closely linked to the setup of the program shared the divergent roles of the YASRHR and the UN youth representative. The YASRHR's responsibility encompasses an inward focus on amplifying young voices within the internal policy landscape, distinguishing it from the more externally facing role of the UN youth representative.

##### *Amplifying voices of young people*

Another challenge that emerged was the responsibility in engaging with and representing the views of young people based in challenging contexts. Several YASRHRs shared experiences that they at times felt uncomfortable in managing the expectations of young people they had engaged with.

Others emphasised that they felt it was their role to act as a bridge between the two worlds of youth activism and governments and/or UN agencies.

*"It really made me feel like I was being a connector and I really felt like trying to get those worlds together which I think is really unique (...) being the connection between CHOICE and the government is also a really empowering position, i think that's also something we should not underestimate". (FGD YASRHR, November 2023).*

YASRHRs in earlier years of the program emphasised a lack of clarity on the responsibilities of their role more than YASRHRs in the later years of the program although it was a recurrent theme. Across YASRHRs, challenges around the responsibility of engaging with young people emerged.

### **8.2.5 Decision making power**

The core element of decision-making power is based on the extent to which the YASRHRs could make decisions within the program, its activities and the role more broadly.

The mentimeter reveals that the majority of the YASRHRs (five) felt they had decision making power to a low extent within the program. One felt they had decision making power to some extent, and one to a high extent. In the FGDs that followed, the other core elements and preconditions were explored in more depth than the specific aspect of decision making power. Rather, when decision making power was discussed, it was linked to other core elements like freedom of choice and voice.

However, the fact that most YASRHRs stated they did not feel a lot of decision making power within the role or the MFA is not necessarily a negative analysis. As the graph of participation explains, it is not the aim to score all elements as being present to a very high extent. Rather, it is about the meaningfulness of the core elements and preconditions that fit the level of MYP aimed for. As there seems to be a lot of freedom of choice, voice and responsibility felt within the role of YASRHR, the evaluators felt that the engagements of the YASRHRs are meaningful without experiencing decision making power to a high extent. Additionally, as discussed under the previous chapters, the evaluators see that YASRHRs appreciate the specific elements that they can make decisions about, like turning down opportunities or choosing focus areas that mattered to them. One reflection from a YASRHR indicates an important nuance about decision making power.

*"More decision making power also means more pressure and probably a higher time investment"* (YASRHR, FGD December 2023).

Additionally, an important consideration is that there are challenges associated with too much decision-making power. The role is already demanding, and an increase in responsibilities could pose difficulties in navigating the complex structure of the MFA. If the capacity for decision making power in the YASRHR role is increased, it should be in line with increased support from the MFA in terms of more compensated hours for the role.

### **8.3 Pre-conditions**

Pre-conditions are essential prerequisites for meaningful youth participation. In the flower of participation, these are referred to as capacity strengthening, commitment from adults, youth friendliness, flexibility (with regards to time), a safe space, financial means, youth-friendliness and policies that ensure MYP.

**Summary of key findings:**

- Several pre-conditions are effectively in place to support YASRHRs. These include:
  - Over time, YASRHRs felt better compensated for their work. It is important to note that an increase in the compensation for the role was due to advocacy efforts by previous YASRHRs. Still, YASRHRs continue to work beyond the hours allocated for the role. Increasing the number of part time hours for the YASRHR, and compensating the youth ambassadors for these hours, can reflect a more equitable approach going forward.
  - Strong internal policies and support structures are in place and are implemented by CHOICE.
  - Over time, as the YASRHR role has become more established within the MFA, the commitment and buy-in from staff has increased. However, a good and enabling work environment within the MFA often hinges on support from specific individuals. Beyond the MFA, engagements with adults in other government departments was more challenging for YASRHRs.
  - Although a training budget is available for YASRHRs, many YASRHRs did not have the time to undertake additional training.
- But challenges related to the pre-conditions from MYP persist, notably:
  - The YASRHRs understanding of the MFA and how it operates is a challenge in capacity strengthening. This can be lengthy and is not well covered in the induction. Rather, much of the role is learning by doing, although there is some dedicated support for specific elements of the role, like speech writing training.
  - MFA coordination was at times a challenge. Frequent changes in MFA staff, although the nature of politics, was sometimes challenging for YASRHRs to navigate. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of politics and policy meant engaging YASRHRs on their views or asking them to provide input was often at short notice and ad hoc, making meaningful participation hard.
  - The time commitment for the YASRHR role has not increased since the inception of the program. Many YASRHRs work beyond 16 hours per week, which is challenging to balance with other personal commitments like study or other work.
  - Other youth representative functions with different time commitment structures exist, and their model should be considered. This includes extending the term for this role, or extending the hours for the role.

**8.3.1 Capacity strengthening**

Capacity strengthening is the precondition that enables YASRHRs to effectively contribute to the program's objectives. Over the years, there is a noticeable shift in perceptions regarding capacity building. Responses in the mentimeter, indicate a growing emphasis on structural support which could be analysed from the more positive responses by fellow YASRHRs.

CHOICE coordinators emphasise that the program predominantly follows a "learning by doing" approach, providing ample space for mentorship. This underscores the significance of experiential learning and mentorship opportunities in shaping the youth ambassadors' capabilities. CHOICE also sheds light on capacity strengthening embedded within events such as the CPD. Training opportunities provided for events like the CPD reflects a commitment to enhancing specific skills, including speech writing. However, YASRHRs suggest that there could be additional value in expanding training to include decision-making processes and policy intricacies.

*"(...) also, the whole, you know, adding words on policy and how that works that is not something you get explained, that's just something you have to figure out yourself" (FGD YASRHR, November 2023).*

*"It would be a nice feature to the program if the MFA goes beyond introducing you to people and tells you how decision-making processes work, and policy making" (FGD YASRHR, 30 November 2023).*

On a more critical note, a representative from the MFA identifies a challenge in the time required to build the capacities of YASRHRs, particularly considering their initial limited understanding of the political landscape within the MFA. The tension between the time needed for capacity development and the relatively short tenure of YASRHRs poses a noteworthy challenge.

While capacity strengthening is acknowledged as an integral part of the program, feedback suggests that support from CHOICE tends to be more robust than that from the MFA. Despite the availability of a training budget, most YASRHRs did not fully utilize it. Time constraints emerged as a significant factor inhibiting the ambassadors from engaging in self-selected training opportunities.

### **8.3.2 Commitment from adults**

The second precondition to create an enabling environment is the commitment that YASRHRs felt from adults within the MFA to MYP.

#### *Enabling environment for MYP within the global health division*

As explored earlier in the report, MYP grew within the MFA over the course of the program. There was a marked evolution in the understanding of the YASRHR role and the MYP framework. Insights from the FGDs underscore that the first YASRHRs faced challenges in being heard and meaningfully participating. Later, YASRHRs agreed that the pioneering of the first YASRHRs laid the foundation for the later YASRHRs, advocating for better recognition within MFA and, for example, financial compensation.

#### *The importance of leadership for MYP*

All participants from interviews and FGDs said that the success of YASRHR often hinges on the support of specific individuals within the MFA. Personal connections, mentorship, and constructive critique contributed significantly to the ambassador's experience. Several YASRHRs echoed this sentiment, expressing that their assertiveness, input, and criticisms were appreciated and contributed to positive changes. They never felt alone in their struggles, emphasising the importance of collaborative efforts. There are, however, also quite some critical notes to make. Not all YASRHRs felt this support as strongly and agreed that they therefore had more difficulties in getting their point across.

#### *Pushing MYP to the next stop beyond the global health division and DSO*

A more limited commitment from adults was experienced when YASRHRs from later terms engaged with adults from other departments or Ministry functions than the DSO or beyond the global health division they are a part of. YASRHRs expressed concerns about the limited impact of the YASRHR program beyond its hosting department. While the program may bring change within its immediate mandate, there is a need for greater influence and recognition across different departments within the MFA. Both YASRHRs as well as MFA representatives encountered challenges in conveying the significance of the YASRHR role, and meaningful youth participation specifically, to colleagues who may not entirely understand the position. One of the MFA representatives highlights their own experiences in the struggle to demonstrate the added value of the YASRHR program and youth participation in general, which can result in complacent attitudes or a perception of youth participation as a mere 'nice-to-have.'

#### *Youth - adult partnerships: the key to institutionalisation and scaling up?*

Valuable insights were provided in discussions around institutionalising greater commitment from adults in the program. MFA representatives advocated for deeper investments in youth-adult partnerships and dialogues, urging a shift from merely demanding a seat at the table to fostering collaborative relationships. Along with this, the importance of securing backing from senior leadership and the DGIS was emphasised to avoid that it's only the portfolio holder within MFA that



sees the added value of the YASRHR getting involved in several processes within the MFA. When involving the DGIS more heavily, it becomes challenging for other colleagues and departments to not take the program and its lessons seriously.

### **8.3.3 Youth friendliness**

The concept of youth friendliness within the YASRHR program extends beyond mere language and materials. It encompasses the overall experience, continuity of participation, adaptability to political changes, and the capacity to integrate youth voices meaningfully within the MFA.

#### *Youth friendliness of language and materials*

Limited information was found regarding the youth friendliness of language and materials. As stated under capacity building, some YASRHRs struggled with the processes and how to influence, adjust or provide input on policies and strategies. This was due to the fact that there was little information provided on the process, which highlights a challenge in the youth-friendliness of the process.

#### *Continuity in a dynamic political landscape*

Maintaining continuity in participation is a challenge within the dynamic political landscape of the MFA. While coordination roles may remain stable, focal points and staff within the MFA often experience changes. This fluctuation, inherent to politics, can impact the YASRHRs' experience, as noted by coordinators from CHOICE and YASRHRs. Frequent changes in focal points pose challenges for building sustained relationships and advocacy within the MFA.

The challenging nature of politics presents another challenge to youth friendliness. MFA staff highlighted the challenge of injecting youth voices into the complex and non-linear decision-making processes of the MFA. The unpredictable nature of politics and decision-making poses obstacles to the straightforward integration of youth perspectives. The ad hoc nature of the policy processes, coupled with the urgency of certain situations, poses a challenge for YASRHRs in maintaining the meaningfulness of their participation. The demand for quick responses and immediate action can conflict with the part-time nature of the ambassador's role, potentially hindering effective contributions.

*"I didn't really feel it was very structured. It was a bit random sometimes" (FGD YASRHR, December 2023).*

#### *Youth friendly attitude of employees*

Much of the program's success, as already explored, is also dependent on the youth friendly approach of staff within the MFA. MFA staff interviewed emphasised the dependence on individuals within the MFA who are willing to explore future opportunities and adapt to changing circumstances. The success of the YASRHR program often relies on the personal commitment of individuals to champion youth-friendly initiatives and ensure the inclusion of youth perspectives.

In essence, achieving true youth friendliness within the MFA requires navigating the complexities of politics, fostering adaptability, and ensuring that the YASRHRs' voices are not only acknowledged but also strategically integrated into the policy development processes.

### **8.3.4 Flexibility**

Flexibility in time is about the extent to which the young people's time and schedule is taken into consideration during the implementation of the program, for example when planning meetings and events. The evaluation also explored other themes related to flexibility which included workload and time commitment beyond the responsiveness to the YASRHRs schedules and calendars.

#### *Addressing time commitment and compensation concerns*

Across the duration of the YASRHR program, the time commitment for the YASRHR role has not been increased. It remains as a 16 hour per week role. As a result, there have been persistent challenges around working hours in the role. YASRHRs cited consistently working beyond these

specified hours. This raises concerns about the adequacy of compensation for the role, relative to the time input. One YASRHR emphasised that the role is never truly completed, with an undefined workload that could potentially expand to full-time engagement if pursued ambitiously. An MFA representative highlighted the time required to understand processes fully, suggesting that a second year is crucial, as currently there is no second year.

*A balancing act: time constraints, ambiguity and tokenism challenges in the YASRHR role*

The YASRHR role demands significant time and flexibility. Youth Ambassadors often find it challenging to balance the role with structured jobs. The part-time nature of the position, coupled with an undefined workload and need for flexibility, makes it difficult to manage external commitments. Various YASRHRs, each with distinct personal circumstances, shared their struggles in maintaining equilibrium between their roles as ambassadors and other responsibilities.

The YASRHRs frequently faced challenges related to last-minute requests for feedback on policies and documents. This practice, while acknowledged as a characteristic of government work, raised concerns about tokenistic participation. Several YASRHRs and MFA staff expressed the need for thoughtful consideration by the MFA in determining when and how the YASRHRs' perspectives are sought to avoid tokenism.

Individual connections within the MFA played a significant role in the level of support received by YASRHRs. Some YASRHRs cited examples of being frequently engaged in ways that would fit the schedule and calendar of the YASRHR due to their specific areas of interest and expertise, illustrating that the effectiveness of the role depends on the personal buy-in from individuals within the MFA on certain SRHR topics.

*From 16 to 40 hours*

When considering the potential transition of the YASRHR role into a full-time position, in order to enhance meaningful participation in policy discussions, diverse perspectives emerge. Staff from the MFA expressed the view that having YASRHRs on board full time could be advantageous, emphasising the need to integrate them into broader policy discussions. However, they also raised a note of caution, highlighting the risk of transforming the role into that of a conventional junior policy officer. MFA staff underscores the distinctive nature of the YASRHR role, signalling the importance of preserving its unique character within the team dynamic. This perspective aligns with the recognition that the YASRHR role holds a special status, differentiating it from traditional team members and even other youth representatives, such as the UN Youth representatives. It is important to note that all other youth representative functions under the MFA are part time roles, like the YASRHR role. The juxtaposition of potential benefits with the need for careful consideration underscores the delicate balance between increasing flexibility, meaningful participation, and maintaining the distinctiveness of the YASRHR position within the larger policy landscape.

*Flexibility is key*

In other ways, several other people made remarks related to the issue of flexibility around time. One YASRHR provided insights into document review processes, noting that timely feedback was not always feasible, particularly for those not physically present at the MFA. A coordinator from CHOICE underscored the oversight in considering time for travel and additional work related to consulting young people when conceptualising the program, emphasising that the initial time estimates were overly conservative.

In conclusion, flexibility is not only about the number of hours committed but also the adaptability of the program to the diverse needs of the youth ambassadors. Striking the right balance between formal time commitments, external obligations, and the dynamic nature of policy work is crucial for ensuring a sustainable and impactful YASRHR program.

### **8.3.5 Financial means**

Financial means are a critical aspect of ensuring the meaningful participation of YASRHRs.

### *The evolution of YASRHRs compensation*

The financial means allocated to YASRHRs have undergone a significant evolution since the inception of the program. In its initial phase, ambassadors received a nominal compensation of 200 euros, despite many noting that the workload often exceeded the designated 16 hours per week. Over time, there has been a commendable increase in financial support, with the current compensation being 1000 euros. The MFA reflects on the positive trajectory of financial compensation, acknowledging that the current support is much improved. One YASRHR played a crucial role in advocating for improved financial compensation, initially successful in raising it to 500 euros. YASRHRs, particularly in the program's early phases, emphasised their dependence on other flexible financial sources, such as student financing, to sustain their involvement due to the challenges of combining the YASRHR role with additional work. However, this raises questions about the accessibility and inclusiveness of the program for those who cannot rely on other financial support or lack flexibility in their lives to combine the job with other tasks like studies, jobs or familial commitments.

### *The adequacy of compensation relative to the time input*

Importantly and noted by all stakeholders is that the workload consistently surpassed the initial estimation of two days a week, prompting consideration of how compensation aligns with the actual time investment. The notion of fair payment for the hours worked is integral to ensuring meaningful youth participation. Despite the increase in compensation for 16 hours, YASRHRs consistently found themselves dedicating more time to their roles. Many ambassadors worked beyond the designated hours, perceiving it as necessary for achieving success and impactful contributions. Coordinators from CHOICE also reflected on this, agreeing that the financial compensation relative to the worked hours of the role are not equitable.

In conclusion, while acknowledging the positive trajectory in increased financial support, YASRHRs continue to work beyond the hours allocated for the role. Increasing the number of part time hours for the YASRHR, and compensating the youth ambassadors for these hours, can reflect a more equitable approach going forward.

### **8.3.6 Safe space**

The precondition of safe space is another key element under creating an enabling environment. Whilst in the graph of participation, a safe space is defined as a place created and sustained for young people to participate in the program, the evaluation included other aspects of safety as well.

### *Individual representation*

A recurrent theme in interviews with YASRHR and MFA is the vulnerability experienced by the youth ambassadors when representing the program on a personal level. A concerning factor were experiences of stalking and harassment, reflecting the personal safety concerns YASRHRs grapple with while serving in the program. Additionally, YASRHRs described instances of discomfort due to individuals approaching them with intentions related to obtaining a visa. This showcases the complex challenges youth ambassadors may encounter outside the structured program environment. Additionally, representatives from the MFA shared concerns about the safety of youth ambassadors when sharing their personal stories. Acknowledging their vulnerability, there was an emphasis to navigate potential challenges cautiously.

Navigating the delicate balance between personal engagement and security is a key aspect of ensuring a safe space for the youth ambassadors. There is a tension between ambassadors' desire to share personal stories and the potential risks associated with such disclosures. It delves into the role of the program and its stakeholders in striking this balance, creating an environment where youth ambassadors can contribute authentically while feeling secure. This has been improved over the last terms by having a business number and WhatsApp that can be switched off, a laptop of the MFA and by having people in online meetings that are keeping an eye out on the online participants in an online event. However, it is recommended to keep personal safety and security and personal

well-being as structural part of the update meetings between CHOICE and the YASRHR as well as within the MFA and the YASRHR.

### **8.3.7 Policies**

A crucial aspect of ensuring MYP in the YASRHR program is the implementation of effective policies that foster MYP. This section examines the existing policies within the program, with a focus on logistical arrangements and reimbursement protocols, exploring their impact on the ambassadors' participation and the overall success of the program.

#### *Good logistical support critical for MYP*

The YASRHR program is praised for its well-organised logistical support. YASRHRs receive essential tools, including phones and laptops, to facilitate their work. Furthermore, CHOICE and the MFA ensure that travel costs are reimbursed, providing ambassadors with financial support for their engagements. YASRHRs express gratitude for the logistical and financial support, emphasising its role in increasing the meaningfulness of their participation. The provision of tools and financial assistance allows ambassadors to focus their limited time on substantive tasks such as speechwriting and panel preparation, enhancing their overall impact in various forums, instead of on logistical matters.

#### *The next step to release YASRHR from administrative burdens*

While the travel reimbursement policy is appreciated, this section also touches on some challenges faced by ambassadors in navigating the process. Concerns about the time-consuming nature of reimbursement procedures were raised several times. Ambassadors suggested the implementation of a more streamlined system, such as a business card, to alleviate administrative burdens and enhance efficiency. Additionally, while ambassadors appreciated the support around travel, there have been concerns about the differing travel standards for MFA and YASRHR.

## **9. IMPACT OF YOUTH CONSULTATIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS ON YASRHR STRATEGIES**

In the chapter ahead, the evaluation explores how consultations and other interaction with young people impact the strategies of the YASRHR. This chapter considers the nature of interactions and how they influence the youth ambassadors in amplifying the voices of young people and representing their concerns. The focus is on understanding how consultations shape the overall approach of YASRHR in advocating for global SRHR.

### **Summary of key findings:**

- Youth consultations were seen positively by the youth in countries. Some YASRHRs noted the intricacies of representation and legitimacy to speak for global youth.
- Country visits are pivotal for YASRHRs and are positively viewed by MFA and YASRHRs.
- Although most embassies also saw the value of YASRHR visits and considered there was value in YASRHR engagements with youth in their countries, some noted that the impact was less visible.
- There were some challenges in follow up with young people engaged in partner countries, which embassies wanted to see improvements on for future engagements.
- There is a need to find ways to increase engagement with youth in the Netherlands whilst keeping linkages to global youth organisations and networks. Bringing those worlds together to advise the MFA and inform the strategies of the YASRHR is an important consideration going forward.

### **9.1 Survey results from SRHR partners and individuals consulted by the YASRHR**

A survey was distributed to CHOICE partners, partners working in MFA priority countries, as well as youth advocates engaged by the YASRHR during consultations. Out of 83 recipients, the survey received responses from nine individuals, resulting in just over a 10% response rate. Predominantly,

respondents were from Kenya and Uganda, with additional feedback received from one participant each in Nigeria and Nepal.

The survey outcomes demonstrated a clear understanding of the YASRHR role, which primarily involves amplifying the voices of fellow youth on both the national and global stages while championing SRHR causes. Experiences of engagement with the YASRHR were overwhelmingly positive, with visits and dialogues facilitated by supportive partners of other partnerships by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Participants recognized these encounters as valuable spaces to share information about their own lived experiences, as reflected in a unanimous agreement that the engagements were useful.

Quoting one survey response: *"The engagement with the YASRHR made me realize that the SRHR issues faced by young people are relatively the same all over the world, and hence we have to join hands, work together to advocate for policies that favour us."*

Quoting a participant's perspective: *"Our interaction with YASRHR was enlightening. Our young people got the opportunity to ask questions, seek clarification, and provide feedback that can help move the SRHR conversation for diverse groups of young people forward."*

Follow-up after engagements was generally robust, although two participants reported not receiving follow-up communications. Feedback provided during certain visits involved direct communication with the YASRHR of the respective mission and also included insights shared with MFA staff. The survey indicated that participants did not encounter any challenges in engaging with the YASRHR. However, a common feedback theme was that the visits were relatively short, with the YASRHRs often feeling rushed.

## **9.2 Informative country visits and engagements**

Country visits and engagements with young people from diverse backgrounds emerged as pivotal moments in shaping YASRHRs strategies. Insights gained from these encounters were noted across FGDs, reflecting the significance of firsthand experiences in informing the thinking and approaches of the YASRHR. However, embassy staff's perspectives varied, with some expressing less visible impact on their end. Notably, embassy staff that had been involved in shaping the agenda of the visit and had their own objectives too felt the visits were more meaningful, where embassy staff that were not that involved and strategic about the visit felt like a bystander to the visit to the embassy. To make the visits to the embassy more impactful it is recommended to include embassy staff and youth councils to the embassy in the agenda setting of the visit.

## **9.3 Strategies for advocacy and recommendations**

YASRHRs employed various strategies to leverage insights gained from consultations. The current YASRHR, for instance, utilized input gathered during youth consultations to formulate a comprehensive recommendations report, targeting the MFA and other stakeholders involved in SRHR issues. Other YASRHRs gave examples of using the input from the consultations to shape their input on policy documents and strategies of the MFA. While not all YASRHRs did youth consultations, and the way they were done varied from YASRHR to YASRHR, consultations are seen as a relevant aspect of the YASRHR role to increase legitimacy of amplifying young people's voices as well as shaping the perspectives of YASRHRs about issues across the globe.

## **9.4 Challenges in follow up and feedback**

While the impact of engagements was recognized, follow-up procedures, primarily undertaken by CHOICE, were not always seen as consistent, in the view of some embassies. One embassy highlighted the need for timely and adequate feedback to enhance the meaningfulness of these interactions. However, another embassy noted timely feedback and follow up with partners, by which they were impressed. Embassies identified feedback delays as a missed opportunity, particularly for social media and public dissemination of the visit.

### 9.5 One-off nature of consultations in the country

Several comments arose from the one-off consultations led by YASRHRs. One-time consultations took place both online and in-person. Stakeholders interviewed questioned the feasibility of adequately representing the vast and diverse opinions within the limited timeframe of the YASRHR role. Notably, the need for a more structured and less ad-hoc approach to one-time consultations were highlighted. This emphasises the importance of refining the consultation process for impactful and meaningful participation.

### 9.6 Legitimacy of representation

Assessing the legitimacy of the YASRHR to amplify the voice of young people from around the world was a recurrent theme. Questions arose regarding the legitimacy of a Dutch individual representing the global youth population, emphasising the need for deeper connections and representation rooted in African and Asian networks. People interviewed outlined the importance of strengthening representation of a variety of backgrounds and diminishing the perception of a Dutch-centric approach. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, questions arose around the legitimacy of the role while not having a support network in the Netherlands. Recommended is to find ways to increase presence in the Netherlands while keeping linkages to global youth organisations and networks and bring those worlds together to advise the MFA and inform the strategies of the YASRHR.

## 10. ADDITIONAL THEMES EMERGING FROM THE RESEARCH

During the data collection and analysis period of this work, several key themes emerged in the research that were significant. The consultants wanted to take space to write about them in this report, as they provide important insights on the program and how it works.

### Summary of key findings:

- The YASRHR role has significant engagement with other MFA youth functions, such as the UN Youth Ambassadors and the Youth Advisory Council. Improving coordination between these functions and the YASRHR could have significant value.
- The role of CHOICE as the coordinating entity for the YASRHR program was a frequent theme throughout. CHOICE was viewed very positively by both the MFA and YASRHRs in their coordinating and supporting role.
- Reporting in the program, whilst having seen significant improvements in the last 3 years, can still be improved. Now the program measured against more quantitative indicators and reports these to IATI. Much of the reporting remains qualitative in nature, with a narrative reflection from YASRHRs at the end of their term.

### 10.1 Interaction and engagement with other youth functions within the MFA

The collaboration between the YASRHR and various youth-focused entities within the MFA reflects a multi-faceted approach to meaningful youth participation. The YASRHR role engaged with other youth functions including:

- **The Youth Advisory Council (YAC):** comprising 10 members from countries where the MFA has programs, the YAC serves as a policy advisory body to the MFA. Facilitated by the MFA, engagement between the YASRHR and YAC is semi-structured, fostering some ad-hoc collaboration. At present, CHOICE and the National Youth Council (NJR) have monthly meetings to discuss the collaboration between the YASRHR and the YAC. There are plans to create a more structured approach to this collaboration in 2024. Noteworthy is the YASRHRs involvement in providing insights into the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) guide, where two former YASRHRs worked closely with the YAC to shape policy guidance.
- **UN Youth Representatives:** With a focus on international security, rule of law, food security, climate, and European affairs, the UN Youth Representatives operate in 2-year terms, with a junior-senior structure. Staff within the MFA, as well as CHOICE coordinators, expressed their support for adopting a similar structure for the YASRHR, citing enhanced

effectiveness and knowledge retention. At present, the YASRHR engages with the UN Youth Representative through the National Youth Council. The NJR has fostered engagement between the YASRHR and the UN Youth Representatives by hosting meetings where topics of interest align between the two parties. This engagement has been active for the last 2 years.

- **Youth councils at embassies:** Embassy youth councils, acting as sounding boards for the embassy and providing feedback on strategic documents, serve a dual purpose. Several YASRHRs engaged in capacity strengthening with youth councils, including in Uganda. An emerging theme from the research found that there was a clear need to prioritise financial compensation and set more clear expectations for participants of youth councils at embassies in their role on the youth council more broadly. Within these interactions the YASRHR program can lead as a good example, by including financial compensation, expectation setting, and mutual capacity building included in the engagement with these councils in embassies. Additionally, MFA should adopt the lessons learned from the other structures already implemented and translate them to the youth councils at embassies.
- **Improved coordination between the functions:** the current ambassador on youth, education and work within the MFA perceives a synergy between the various youth functions and envisions a unified approach to represent the Netherlands across different teams. The youth ambassadors are regarded as both external experts and trusted internal partners, fostering collaborative discussions in weekly division team meetings. YASRHRs emphasise better coordination and collaboration between youth functions is essential for sustained meaningful youth participation. Critically, stakeholders and functions across the MFA need to avoid reinventing the wheel. There is an expressed desire for more collaboration and knowledge-sharing among MFA's youth-focused initiatives.

## **10.2 Role of CHOICE as the implementing partner for the program**

The success and effectiveness of the YASRHR program are significantly attributed to the pivotal role played by CHOICE, the implementing partner. This partnership has been acknowledged by various stakeholders, like most MFA staff interviewed for this research, as well as all YASRHRs.

Relative to the other youth functions within the MFA, it was acknowledged that the YASRHR role is more effective due to CHOICE's support. Although coordination challenges persist among various youth functions, the MFA's efforts to align these structures to overcome poor coordination is clear, and is stipulated in the Youth Advisory Council's Terms of Reference (ToR).

CHOICE provided support to YASRHRs, but also to the MFA. A representative from the Department of Youth, Education, and Employment emphasised how they leaned on CHOICE for guidance and insights, praising the organisation for being significantly ahead in active meaningful youth participation. The unique support provided by CHOICE has been crucial, making the YASRHR program more hands-on, experienced, and grounded in specialist knowledge. The staff member expressed admiration for CHOICE, emphasising the importance of their active involvement in strategy development and ongoing support.

CHOICE's role extends beyond mere implementation, including active participation in strategy development and providing support in areas such as travel logistics. For example, CHOICE coordinators suggest that the organisations' involvement has been instrumental in linking the ambassadors' passion to key priorities of the MFA, such as linking the current YASRHR to SRHR and disability focused organisations, as based on their current interests. This hands-on support has strengthened the relationship between CHOICE and the MFA.

YASRHRs were critical about the limited collaboration between the MFA and CHOICE and called for better alignment and communication between the two entities so they did not have to navigate the web of relationships. Despite these challenges and occasional criticism around needed improvements in reporting and monitoring, CHOICE remains a crucial programmatic partner, providing support that complements the ministry's efforts. Overall, CHOICE is seen as a knowledgeable and credible partner

in matters of meaningful youth participation and is a critical element in the effective implementation of the YASRHR program.

### **10.3 Challenges in specific contexts**

A MFA representative, highlighted the unexpected challenges and push back faced in specific context, noting instances of criticism, negativity and pushback on SRHR during conferences and negotiations. This acknowledgment prompts a reflection on potential gaps in preparation, especially linked to preparing for pushback and more conservative voices and forces within the SRHR field and suggests the need for proactive measures to address the diverse challenges encountered in various settings, for example during conferences and negotiations.

### **10.4 Reporting and monitoring: addressing the gaps**

The current state of reporting within the YASRHR program reveals some challenges around the structure and a common approach in the reporting process. Since the inception of the program, YASRHR reports, which are submitted to the MFA at the end of the YASRHR term, have been self-written. Over the years, there has been a notable change. Reports have become more structured, especially in the last two terms of the YASRHR. Presently, YASRHR end of term reports are self-written reflections focusing on the external actions of YASRHRs, and reflect on their individual progress against self set and wider program goals. With support from CHOICE, efforts to improve the reporting is notable. Still, there is scope for more profound reflection on the YASRHR internal engagement within the MFA, for example by considering including some additional standardised, but more in-depth, indicators within the existing reporting structure that seek to measure some of the less well captured information, like input to policies and documents as well as the program's role in bridging connections between diverse stakeholders and the capacity to raise awareness and stimulate action on pressing concerns.

End-of-term reports for each YASRHR, as highlighted by a CHOICE coordinator, were in the past limited in scope, lacking a deeper qualitative dive. Initially, a more standardised reporting structure was lacking. Since, improvements have been made to standardise and streamline reporting. There are more structured indicators and analysis against outcomes is undertaken between YASRHRs and CHOICE every 3 months, as well as reporting to IATI. This has brought more clarity and helped to better track the progress of YASRHRs consistently year on year.

The development of additional, more in depth indicators, can provide more data. If undertaken, this should be a co-creation process, with targets developed in consultation with current and former YASRHRs. The aim is to strike a balance between structure in the indicators, and flexibility in what they seek to measure, due to the dynamic nature of the role. This sentiment is widely shared among stakeholders interviewed.

Although historical challenges in M&E were acknowledged by CHOICE, recent improvements have brought more structure to the process, with quarterly evaluations aligned with CHOICE's M&E systems. Midterm and end-term evaluations, including case studies, were planned but faced budget constraints. Addressing these gaps in reporting and monitoring is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of the YASRHR program, ensuring a balance between flexibility and structure, and capturing the diverse dimensions of their impactful work within and outside the MFA.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

The YASRHR program has played a crucial role in influencing and contributing to various aspects of the MFAs policies and initiatives. YASRHRs have actively participated in the development of key strategies, such as the Youth at Heart Strategy, and have guided the establishment of the Youth Advisory Council structure. YASRHRs have been part of the development of policies like the Feminist Foreign Policy and the Global Health Strategy. Whilst the program gained recognition globally and set an example for other youth focused policies and structures within the Netherlands, challenges



remain. Notably, the MFA needs to develop a clear, structured and timely process for YASRHRs to be able to give more meaningful feedback on policy documents.

The participation by YASRHRs at international events over the last 9 years reflects the programs focus on the international SRHR context and advocating in this arena. This includes engagement at the high-level UN forum, the Commission on Population and Development (CPD), where YASRHRs have written and delivered the speech on behalf of the government of the Netherlands. However, quantifying the impact of these engagements on tangible outcomes remains challenging. Rather, the YASRHR role is seen to have a soft influence on policy making.

YASRHRs engaged with youth around the world through country visits, consultations and at events, actively listening to their voices and amplifying these at the global stage. Whilst YASRHRs led engagements in the Netherlands with Dutch civil society on SRHR issues, the focus of work was often on international SRHR issues. The evaluation found a lack of focus on SRHR issues specific to the Netherlands.

The evaluation found it difficult to quantify the impact of the YASRHR role on norm setting within the MFA. Directly linking YASRHR participation in high level events or their ongoing engagement with the MFA to direct policy, program or funding changes proved challenging. The evaluation found that the impact of the YASRHR is more in soft influence, which can be hard to measure.

The evaluation also assesses the experiences of YASRHRs relative to the principles and preconditions of MYP. The evaluation found that there has been a positive change over time. Over the years, the experiences of young people involved in the program have evolved, with improvements noted in their ability to protect their time and access to information and people within the MFA. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Challenges relating to hours dedicated to the role and relative compensation remained a challenge. Furthermore, clearly understanding the complexities of the MFA and how it operates remained difficult for YASRHRs to navigate, and more effective collaboration between youth functions within the Ministry is needed. Addressing these are critical to ensuring deeper meaningful youth participation within the YASRHR program.

In conclusion, the YASRHR program is a one of its kind intervention, influencing policy discussions and fostering meaningful engagements nationally and internationally. The journey from symbolic representation to tangible outcomes underscores its wide-reaching impact, making it a crucial force in the discourse on SRHR in the Netherlands and globally. The assessment provides a foundation for refining the program, addressing challenges, and fostering continued collaboration for sustained success in advocating for the SRHR of young people worldwide.

## **12. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the documents reviewed, interviews and focus group discussion undertaken, our analysis has informed the development of several actionable recommendations for the program, outlined below. These assessments aim to address various aspects of the YASRHR program, promoting its effectiveness, sustainability, and impact in fostering meaningful youth participation and influencing SRHR policies. The recommendations are grouped per stakeholder.

### **12.1 Joint recommendations to CHOICE and the MFA**

#### **Program duration**

- Reevaluate the 14-month commitment, considering financial challenges and potential hindrances to participation. Explore alternatives that align with the career steps and study commitments of prospective ambassadors.
- Consider extending the overall role duration to account for the substantial time needed for onboarding, recognizing the complexities of understanding the intricate processes within the Ministry. This may mean increasing the role to 2 years, for example.

**Flexibility and equitable compensation**

- Consider various possible structural options for the program, notably full-time, part-time, and junior-senior structures. Highlight the positives and negatives of each to accommodate diverse applicant pools.
- Consider increasing the time commitment for the role, whilst keeping it part time. This keeps the structure and flexibility of the role the same, whilst providing more paid hours, which many YASRHRs indicate they already work. The current 16 hour per week commitment (2 days per week) could be scaled to 20 or 24 hours per week (2.5 or 3 days).
  - An increase in the part time hours should also reflect an increase in the rate of pay for the role.

**Coordination and communication**

- Encourage a more profound reflection on internal engagement within the MFA, going beyond self-written reports and focusing on internal impact as to also be able to track later change.
- Allocate budgetary resources for mid-term and end-term evaluations, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of the program's impact.
- Proactively address unexpected challenges, pushback and criticism in specific context by preparing YASRHRs for diverse voices and conservative forces within the SRHR field.

**Induction process**

- Work together to enhance the induction process with comprehensive information on MFA processes, key stakeholders, and interdepartmental dynamics. Provide a semi structured onboarding program to streamline the familiarisation process, whilst remaining flexible to the needs and interests of the YASRHR.

**Annual planning**

- Introduce a more structured approach to annual planning between the YASRHR, CHOICE and the MFA, collaboratively shaping the youth ambassador's focus based on known themes, events, and policy documents for the coming term. This fosters clarity and meaningful input from ambassadors in their engagements with the MFA. Additionally, it answers to the need for thoughtful consideration by the MFA in determining when and how the YASRHRs' perspectives are sought to avoid tokenism. Achieving true youth friendliness within the MFA requires navigating the complexities of politics, fostering adaptability, and ensuring that the YASRHRs' voices are not only acknowledged but also strategically integrated into the policy development processes.

**Youth-adult partnerships**

- Strengthen coordination and communication between the MFA and CHOICE to streamline relationships and avoid unnecessary challenges for YASRHRs.
- Encourage collaboration and knowledge-sharing among various youth-focused initiatives within the MFA by proactively engaging with the (civil society and MFA) coordinators of these initiatives.
- Jointly explore the possibility of the MFA to commit funds or formalised technical support to encourage other countries to adopt a similar YASRHR model.

**12.2 Recommendations to CHOICE****Overall program structure**

- Maintain the existing standardised reporting system used by CHOICE. Consider including some additional standardised, but more in-depth, indicators within the existing reporting structure that seek to measure some of the less well captured information, like input to policies and documents as well as the program's role in bridging connections between diverse stakeholders and the capacity to raise awareness and stimulate action on pressing concerns. Ensure that indicators balance capturing information with the flexible and dynamic nature of

the YASRHR role. If undertaken, this should be a co-creation process with targets developed in consultation with current and former YASRHRs and the MFA .

### **Support to YASRHRs**

- Provide YASRHRs with ongoing support for self-reflection and deeper qualitative evaluations, acknowledging the unique challenges and successes of their roles, e.g. by developing a comprehensive support framework that includes mentorship, counselling and regular check-ins with all involved parties (not just one of the stakeholders), by assigning experienced mentors to YASRHRs that can guide them through the challenges they encounter. Mentors can be individuals with a good understanding of youth advocacy, diplomacy and the specific context of the YASRHRH role, and are an addition to the more structural engagement of the coordinator in CHOICE. Mentors, for example, can be previous ambassadors. Furthermore it is recommended to develop tools and resources specifically for qualitative evaluation like guidelines for conducting reflective sessions, templates for documenting experiences and methodologies for assessing the impact of their advocacy work.
- Address disparities in support provided to YASRHRs by optimising the use of training budgets, for example by providing support for and stimulating self-selected training opportunities and exploring innovative approaches to mentorship and skill development.

### **High level engagements and consultations**

- Encourage YASRHRs to actively engage with Dutch civil society focussing on SRHR issues in the Netherlands and young people in the Netherlands, fostering a stronger connection and garnering more legitimacy for the program domestically.

### **Realistic expectations**

- Develop clear and realistic expectations for the YASRHR role, both for external engagement as internal influencing within the MFA including associated responsibilities during the hiring and onboarding process, recognising the role's limitations in directly influencing MFA policies. Translate them to the terms of reference used to hire YASRHRs.

### **Induction process**

- Strengthen the onboarding process to ensure YASRHRs understand their role and limitations. Ensure discussions around the limitations of the role are ongoing, and are a part of regular check ins.

### **Minimum event attendance**

- Clearly outline a minimum number of events and activities, including their focus based on their priorities, that YASRHRs are expected to attend, setting clear expectations from the outset and enable the YASRHRs to say no to extra events and activities to safeguard their time.

### **Embassy visits**

- Consider more regular visits to the same countries, especially in one term of one youth ambassador, in order to maintain engagement with young people consulted in the partner countries.

### **Youth-adult partnerships**

- Promote personal buy-in from individuals within the MFA by tailoring engagements to their specific interests and expertise.

### **Youth consultations**

- During youth consultations, focus on positive and solution-oriented discussions to take into consideration the mental health of coordinators, YASRHRs and youth involved in the consultations. Support YASRHRs to develop their skills to lead consultations in such a way.

- Refine the consultation process to move towards a more structured and less ad-hoc approach, ensuring meaningful and impactful participation within the limited timeframe.

**Increased presence in the Netherlands**

- Consider establishing a deeper connection to SRHR issues specific to the youth of the Netherlands, acknowledging the emerging theme from stakeholder interviews.

**Improved financial support for YASRHRs**

- Implement measures to protect young people's time around reimbursement and financial issues, such as automatic business card reimbursements to CHOICE.

**12.3 Recommendations to the MFA****Youth adult partnerships**

- Invest in the principles of youth adult partnerships with youth-led organisations like CHOICE and find ways to align structures, engage in partnerships and dialogues to go beyond providing young people a seat at the table and move to fostering collaborative relationships - also between youth structures.
- Institutionalize greater commitment from adults in the program through deeper investments in youth-adult partnerships and dialogues.
- Foster collaborative relationships by securing backing from senior leadership and DGIS, avoiding tokenism and ensuring widespread recognition of the YASRHRs' added value.

**Process on providing timely feedback**

- Strengthen the YASRHR program's effectiveness in engaging with MFA policies and documents in a more structural way. Develop a clear process for YASRHRs to provide feedback on policy related documents. This can address the challenges highlighted and improve the YASRHRs direct influence on policy making.

**Onboarding**

- Clearly define expectations and roles during the onboarding phase, ensuring YASRHRs have a deeper understanding of their responsibilities, the possibilities, and objectives.
- Collaborate with CHOICE to provide robust support, ensuring equal attention and resources from both CHOICE and MFA.

**Engagement with other youth functions**

- Strengthen coordination and collaboration between different youth functions within the MFA, fostering synergy and avoiding duplication of efforts.
- Encourage regular interactions and shared learning among various youth functions, creating a more cohesive approach to youth engagement and participation.
- Facilitate connections between YASRHRs and existing youth structures within the MFA, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- Consider consolidating different youth functions within the MFA under a single coordination mechanism. This promotes better communication and knowledge sharing among various youth functions within the MFA.

**Support to youth functions within embassies**

- Consider sharing lessons learned and compensation schemes for different youth structures within MFA, like YASRHR program, with embassies that are hosting youth councils to avoid reinventing the wheel and ensure meaningful and equitable engagement of the YASRHR with the embassy councils as they will be compensated for their time which ensures a more equitable relationship.

**Institutionalising the program in the MFA**

- Emphasise the importance of leadership buy-in for the program's success. Develop strategies to institutionalize the program within the MFA for long-term sustainability.
- Align the program with existing youth participation structures and strategies within the MFA, fostering a more integrated and coherent approach to meaningful youth participation.

**High level engagements and consultations**

- Focus on increasing the legitimacy of the YASRHR role within the MFA by showcasing tangible outcomes, such as participation in high-level events and engagement with policymakers.
- Institutionalize visits to embassies or partner countries where YASRHRs travel with ambassadors or MFA staff. Recognize the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing the program's impact.
- Involve embassy staff and youth councils in agenda setting for embassy visits to enhance the strategic objectives and outcomes of the program globally and support the YASRHR in amplifying youth voices across the globe and alignment with other youth structures within the MFA.
- Explore the possibility of the MFA to commit funds or formalized technical support to encourage other countries to adopt a similar YASRHR model.
- Proactively address unexpected challenges, pushback and criticism in specific context by preparing YASRHRs for diverse voices and conservative forces within the SRHR field.

**Focal point identification**

- Clearly outline the MFA focal point's role, responsibilities, and the support they provide. This ensures YASRHRs have a dedicated contact for guidance and assistance and ensures there is a dedicated person that is looking over the schedule and calendar of the YASRHR and the MFA.

**Increased presence in the Netherlands**

- Consider establishing a deeper connection to SRHR issues specific to the youth of the Netherlands and the relevant ministry bodies and their youth participation mechanisms within the Netherlands like the Ministry of Health, Well-being and Sports and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, acknowledging the emerging theme from stakeholder interviews.

**ANNEXES****Annex A - Terms of Reference Evaluation YASRHR program (separate attachment)**