

## **SUMMARY REPORT. MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SRHR DIPLOMACY: A REVIEW OF THE YASRHR PROGRAM**

### **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, programme 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.