

2024

Youth Ambassador Program

WRITTEN BY



**Sara
Bahgat**

01

Introduction

The youth ambassador for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender equality and bodily autonomy is a unique position awarded to a different person each year. The youth ambassador is an independent role positioned within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and the youth-led non-governmental organization CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality. The role aims to include a youth voice in the ministry's work on SRHR, and to give young people access to forums and platforms that are otherwise difficult for young people to access.

This year I, Sara Bahgat, had the opportunity to fill this role! Over the past year, I have consulted over 200 youth from different countries and regions around the world, participated on the national delegation to the Commission on Population and Development at the United Nations in New York and the CHOICE delegation to the Human Rights Council at the

United Nations in Geneva, participated in advocacy events at the (inter) national level, and advocated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This year is special because the program is celebrating its 10th anniversary! Of course we can't let this anniversary pass by, so this document is a manifesto to reflect on 10 years of youth ambassadors, full of stories, lessons, criticisms, appreciation and recommendations! So for this manifesto, former youth ambassadors were interviewed, CHOICE and the ministry contributed, and I reflect on my own year. I hope that by reading this manifesto you will gain insight into the work of youth ambassadors, what we have accomplished, what we have learned, and what remains to be done. In the coming years of the program, I hope that Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP) will improve, not only for youth ambassadors, but for youth activists everywhere.

CHOICE FOR YOUTH & SEXUALITY

The Youth Ambassador Program has been coordinated for ten years by CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. CHOICE is committed to young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights and their meaningful involvement in decisions about their lives (under the heading: meaningful youth participation). Together with the youth ambassador, we give young people a voice in international discussions, such as at the United Nations, on SRHR and gender equality. The youth ambassador opens doors that sometimes remain closed to "ordinary" NGO staff and is a crucial link between CHOICE, (I) NGOs/CSOs and the government.

As program coordinator, you experience the youth ambassador program up close and work closely with the youth ambassador. My role is to ensure that the ambassador can excel. In doing so, I wear different hats: mentor, confidant, brainstorming partner, reality checker, and social media strategist. In fact, I am just as much a jack-of-all-trades as the youth ambassador himself. And I do so with great pleasure.

The job of youth ambassador - speechwriter, social media influencer, researcher, storyteller and so much more - is dynamic and challenging,

but above all, meaningful. More and more countries are bringing a youth ambassador to international conferences. Moreover, the youth ambassador builds a bridge between international developments and Dutch youth. After all, decisions taken internationally also affect young people in the Netherlands.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Sara Bahgat, the Youth Ambassador 2024. She had an impressive year, in which a lot happened. My personal highlight: her powerful speech at the UN, addressed to all member states, including the Netherlands. Goosebumps!

The youth ambassador program is a success as far as I am concerned. The relevance for both the ministry and the (I)NGO/CSO world is evident. And with a structural youth ambassador in international decision-making spaces, one thing becomes clear: **young people deserve a place at the table.**

In the words of Lambda, a Mozambican LGBTQ+ organization: "Nothing about us without us!"

MELCHIOR DEEKMAN

Program coordinator of Youth Ambassador Program



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Youth Ambassador for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender Equality and Bodily Autonomy is celebrating its 10th anniversary. By creating this position, the Netherlands wanted to ensure that the voice of young people is included in the Dutch commitment to this issue. We are proud to say that the 8 ambassadors we have known so far have represented the voice of young people loudly and clearly.

As a youth ambassador you have access to the Ministry, policy staff, embassies, meetings and documents, which are normally not accessible to young people. The youth ambassador is therefore a link between the reality of young people in the Netherlands and young people worldwide. Thanks to these ambassadors, a structure has been set up for meaningful youth participation within the ministry. And more and more countries are working with the same formula, which is an improvement.

As contact person for the youth ambassador at the ministry, you work closely together. Together you prepare the various events, speeches and trips. My first experience with this guidance was during the Global Youth Dialogue as part of 30 years of ICPD this year. This youth dialogue was organized by UNFPA and the Netherlands co-hosted, together with Benin and Denmark. Sara Bahgat addressed a room of more than 400 young people, from 130 countries. A great moment after which a powerful set of recommendations prepared by the young people in the room were presented.

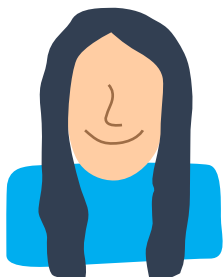
The Youth Ambassador program gives young people a voice and a place at the negotiating table. **This is good for both young people themselves and the policies the Netherlands stands for.**

NOORTJE VERHART

Policy offer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and focal point youth ambassador at the Ministry

02

Meaningful Inclusive Youth Participation



Sara

As a youth ambassador, you have an influential position and are given exceptional opportunities. Unfortunately, these opportunities are still given too few to young people. But even with all these opportunities, tokenism lurks. Therefore, as a youth ambassador, you are always committed to meaningful and inclusive youth participation. Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP) means that young people are actively involved in all phases of decision-making within organizations. This can be either on par with adults or completely independent, with only young people

making the decisions. Young people play a role in various steps, such as identifying problems or opportunities, developing policies or programs, and implementing and evaluating projects that affect them. This requires systems that allow young people to actively participate and in which their opinions are taken seriously.¹ MIYP is not only valuable for young people's personal development, but also strengthens their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and is thus crucial to the work of the youth ambassador.



Lotte
(2016-2016)

When I ask Youth Ambassador Lotte about tokenism in the role, she says, "Well, that risk was always there. However, I always said what I wanted to say. Also because I spearheaded MIYP. If something was tokenistic, I immediately made that negotiable." Her presence was not only symbolic, but led to concrete changes.

She shares with me how she was able to influence negotiations in the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) at the UN in New York. "I was in the national CPD delegation, participated quite actively in the negotiations for those texts, and I was also able to change small things there." With a subtle change, she ensured that the age ranges for research on young girls and sexuality were broadened, which could mean a meaningful change in understanding of the issue. "I had done it a little sneaky," she laughs. "It's really two figures I added in there ... but then when you think about what it could mean, that was kind of cool."

¹ | *Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation* » CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality



Melodi
(2015/2016)

“Honestly, I found it quite difficult to assess when my contribution was really meaningful and when I was used mostly symbolically. I was often asked to attend certain events, and sometimes I really wondered: are they doing this because my presence adds something, or am I just there ‘for form’? In fact, I still don’t think I can always assess in retrospect what the intention was. I was often involved late or barely given time to prepare. A good example was the big AIDS conference in Amsterdam. Because it was in the Netherlands, I was given a very prominent role - every day I sat on panels and had interviews. But AIDS was not a topic I knew much about. I was put there as an expert without any substantive preparation. In retrospect, I thought: this is just not right. During a panel I was asked, “What is it like to do this as a young person?” I found that frustrating because I had prepared well for the topic. It sometimes felt like my age outweighed the content of what I wanted to contribute.”



Lisa
(2015/2016)

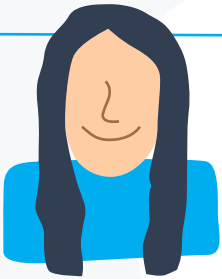
Lisa also talks about her experience with MIYP as a youth ambassador: “I knew we had a way to go in embedding youth participation broadly. But what I had not considered

was that sometimes that there was also some getting used to the role of youth ambassador. For example, when there were preparations for a UN summit or documents to go through, I noticed that I often had to indicate myself that I wanted to be there, especially to colleagues from other ministries or who were not familiar with the role. At the same time, people sometimes thought, ‘Oh, this is something with young people, send that to Lisa.’ But that’s not completely the crux of what meaningful engagement is like. For sure, everyone supported the idea of youth participation, but putting it into practice, as through my participation, could still meet with hesitance.”

Sara: The reflections of the youth ambassadors show that meaningful and inclusive youth participation is sometimes difficult to recognize, and it varies from situation to situation. Sometimes you can make a big impact and sometimes you can count on resistance or tokenism. Over the years, although the youth ambassador gets more opportunities, it remains difficult to assess whether participation is happening in a meaningful way.

Advocacy

03



Sara

In their year, most youth ambassadors chose a theme within SRHR that they focused on. In most cases, these themes were underpinned by the lived experience of young people worldwide. For example, youth ambassadors did consultations with young people on their theme to reinforce their message.



Jim
(2022-2023)

Choosing a focus theme came from personal motivation for some youth ambassadors. For example, Jim chose to focus on sex education and the inclusion of youth with disabilities.

His little brother lives with a disability and this motivated him to advocate for this group and stand up for their rights and freedoms. Jim explains how this personal motivation strengthened his message: "That helped a lot for me, because that gives credibility to why you are the person to proclaim that story." At the same time, he talks about struggling as an activist from the Global North: "I think we all struggle with that quite a bit, who are you to tell this story on behalf of other young people?"

When I ask about the impact made on this issue, Jim says, "I've been very visible on disability inclusion, which is very much an underserved issue. Once a year a letter is written from the State Department about the commitment to disability inclusion, and that was set up as a result of motions. But that is now being discontinued, and then I do think, yes, well I have committed to this for a year and the following year this is withdrawn, so there are no guarantees at all."



Laura
(2021-2022)

Laura's theme was menstrual poverty. She knew a lot about the topic before she became a youth ambassador. But a big part of her term as youth ambassador involved holding consultations with young people from other parts of the world to learn more about your topic in a different context. For Laura, this was very valuable: "I thought I knew a lot about menstrual poverty. But then when you talk to hundreds of young people, you very quickly adjust your image and you find out that it varies greatly from country to country or continent to continent and that there are huge invisible challenges."



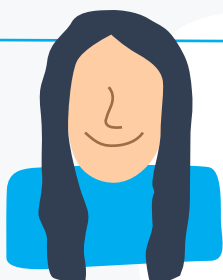
Lotte
(2016-2016)

The youth ambassador program has also changed over the years. Indeed, when I ask the first youth ambassador, Lotte, about her experience with consultations, the answer and message is different: "It was very deliberately not my intention to speak for others. International consultations quickly create a strange dynamic, especially when a Dutch person would speak out about what people in, say, Nigeria need. I do understand it, because from this position you now have a degree of influence. Still, I felt I was part of an international network of young people advocating for different issues, such as UN agendas, without giving the impression that I was representing anyone. I really wanted to avoid that."

Sara: In the later years of the program, the youth ambassadors chose a focus theme within SRHR, on which they then held consultations with young people from different countries and regions. This input can be used to represent different voices, not just your own perspective. At the same time, this raises questions about your privileged position as a youth ambassador: can you represent other voices, or are the voices of young people from the Global South not being heard enough? Among youth ambassadors, opinions about holding consultations are divided and they exemplify my dichotomy.

04

Working with Youth



Sara

For all the youth ambassadors, it was a special year full of new people, impressions and lessons. Looking back on this period, I asked them what advice they would like to give to people who work with young people, both youth ambassadors and other young people.



Jim
(2022-2023)

"It is very important to make an extra effort so that a young person can participate as well as someone with more experience. **This is often underestimated.** We are often treated as if we have the same experience, when it is often our first time working in a real working environment."



Lisa
(2015/2016)

"Young people can serve as advisors on the widest possible range of issues, not just youth issues. It's good to involve young people in policy. But then it has to be about everything from A to Z. And not just that young people are asked to give advice on topics that are directly about young people. But things you wouldn't initially think of, this is also something that affects young people, because then it always does. So you can really make great use of someone's interesting, refreshing perspectives that people who are experts on the topic would never have, because they're just already in the jargon."



Melodi
(2015/2016)

"I know a lot of adults are just pretty scared that they're not hip enough and can't keep up. So there's actually more tension at play with them than I realized at the time. What I would always pass along to both parties: the other person thinks it's scary too. We're just all humans and want to be liked. And we just find it scary. The younger ones on content. And older people more on social aspects. To adults: level to the young people. Ask questions. Try to connect. There are many ways to do that, of course and there is no one-size-fits-all."



Sanne
(2016/2017)

"Giving young people real space requires more than an invitation to an event or a symbolic place in a project. It's about opportunities on a personal level. Don't just give young people a stage, but also the opportunity to have a real influence, for example in how programs are designed. Only true allies of young people understand this and also know what it requires." Sanne emphasizes that young people give enormous passion and energy, but that the work should not only be seen as "inspiring" or "valuable" to organizations. "What young people give is precious: it takes a lot of time, mental health and energy. That needs to be seen and compensated for. Because their commitment and drive are not up for grabs - it requires mutual respect and support."

Special Memories

As a youth ambassador, you go through a lot of special experiences. Experiences that will stay with you forever. With the 10th anniversary of this program, of course these memories cannot be missing!



Sanne
(2016/2017)

For Sanne, the most valuable experience was a project in Kenya, where cultural understanding was central.

She talks about how important it was as an outsider not to simply provide solutions, but rather to first fully understand the community and its traditions. "It starts with understanding other cultures," she explains. "It requires a certain humility, especially when you visit a project as a Dutch organization. You really have to take the time to understand how traditions are created."

She explains that the project had a clear focus on engaging the community itself in coming up with solutions. "The leadership comes from the community, coming up with their own solutions and implementing them, creating real support."

For example, the program focused on the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM). She says it would have been easy to focus mainly on the negative aspects and emphasize how harmful it is. But this is precisely where the program took a different approach. "Instead of making a moral appeal, we wanted to understand why this ritual is so important to the community," she says. This meant engaging with the women who performed the practice to gain insights into their roles and why FGM is seen as an important rite of passage. Based on these insights, they worked with the community to develop a replacement initiative, a ritual that retained the same social function but without the harmful effects. "I really appreciated being invited to witness this unique approach," says Sanne.



Laura

Laura's best experience as a youth ambassador was also while traveling, this time in Uganda. "We had a youth consultation. About 100 young girls had come from all over Uganda all the way to Kampala. I found that already really

tremendously special, but also to speak with so many young women about such important and also vulnerable issues, such as SRHR. That has always stayed with me. That also kind of planted a seed that I always want to stay socially involved and it opened my heart very much."

Sara's Reflections

06

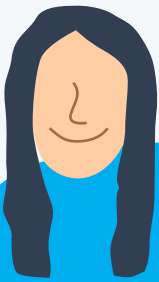
Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP)

As I reflect on tokenism in my term, a memory immediately comes to mind. During the launch of the outcomes of a youth dialogue, young people took center stage. At least, that was the idea. Yet youth speakers kept to their maximum speaking time, and many adult speakers did not. In the end, young people had to surrender speaking time while presenting the outcomes of their dialogue, and the “high-level” adult speakers were exempt from this. It raised questions for me such as: are we sitting here because it looks good to give young people a stage? Will what we say be listened to? Is something going to be done with these outcomes? The situation of us young people being cut off in our appeals to adults felt symbolic of young people having to fight for their place.

Advocacy

In my year, I chose to focus on an inclusive approach to contraception. In addition to focusing on MIYP, of course. This topic stemmed from my undergraduate thesis in which I researched modern contraceptive use among Egyptians. All the data on contraceptive use was only about married women, and right away my thought turned to young people. What about young people, unmarried people, divorced women and queer people? During the consultations I did with young people, the stigma on contraceptive use became clearer to me. For example, some youth indicated that as an unmarried person, they do not have access to contraception. Even health care providers may deny them this.

Interpreting this input also raised questions and doubts in me. On the one hand, my independent position ensures that you have more honest conversations with young people than when you talk to young people from a donor position, for example. Therefore, I see the input as very valuable information to include in my advocacy efforts. On the other hand, I recognize that it is difficult for me to represent young people from other contexts, and that they are best able to do so themselves. As a youth ambassador with a position of privilege, I feel that you will always have to take this input into your work, but that you should also always advocate for equal opportunities for young people worldwide.

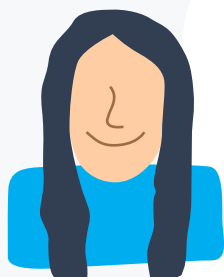


Special Memory

This year was a year filled with so many special experiences that it is very difficult to pick one specifically. There are things happening in a year that I never thought I would have had the opportunity to experience in life, let alone at this age. But if I have to pick one special moment, it is that I gave the national statement during the CPD at the UN in New York. I did this from my independent position and not on behalf of the Netherlands, but that didn't make it any less special. Maybe even more special! During this statement, I therefore chose to also be critical of SRHR developments in the Netherlands. I don't get nervous easily, especially after this year, but that was a moment where I broke out in a sweat, so scary! It was really fantastic to do and it was great to hear throughout the week from other member states that the Netherlands inspires other countries to include a young person in their delegation. A very tangible result of the program and a development in the right direction.

07

Recommendations and the way forward



Sara

How to move forward now? That's a question I've asked myself repeatedly this year. I have gained a lot of knowledge about things that need to be better, so here I try to provide answers as to what is needed to achieve that. My answers are based on my experiences as a young person, as a youth ambassador, the consultations, visits and interviews with former youth ambassadors. The recommendations are both SRHR thematic and focused on the work with young people and the youth ambassador. The youth ambassador program was evaluated last year and the resulting recommendations can also be found online as well.²

SRHR

- **Integrate mental health structurally into SRHR programs:** activism has a mental price; peer-to-peer work for youth is tough and requires structural mental care to monitor the sustainability of the work and health of the workers.
- **Involve boys and men in SRHR:** if we truly strive for gender equality, we must not only focus on girls, women and queer people, but rather involve boys and men. Too often programs still focus primarily, understandably, on groups in vulnerable positions. This excludes a group that is crucial to achieving gender equality: boys and men.
- **For equal access to contraception for all youth, efforts must be made to ensure availability, education, and a sociocultural landscape that is tolerant of contraception:** if any of these three are missing, it becomes difficult for young people to have autonomy over their contraception and family planning.

² | [Summary-2pg_Meaningful-Youth-Participation-in-SRHR-Diplomacy_a-Comprehensive-Review-of-the-YASRHR-Programs-Contribution.pdf \(choiceforyouth.org\)](#)

Working with young people

- **In working with young people, support them in work and preparation:** for many young people, the work is new, so invest extra time in support so they can be well prepared and confident.
- **Involve young people not only on topics where young people are explicitly mentioned, but use their expertise on other topics:** everything affects young people, even less obvious topics! As a young person, you can have broad (lived) expertise and so your input is valuable and crucial for effective policy.
- **Give young people a place at every decision-making table, even if you have to sacrifice yourself for it:** there are still too few young people at too many decision-making tables. That is why I argue for proportional representation of young people, for example in multilateral forums such as the UN.
- **Always take sustainability of programs as a starting point:** make sure that funding of programs is always designed to work toward independence from them. When the political climate changes, as we are now seeing in the Netherlands, it has a great impact on SRHR programs elsewhere. Programs must therefore be designed in such a way as to limit the influence of a changing political context. Consider, for example, implementing entrepreneurship or financial literacy. Appeals for youth-friendly funding can also be made to the corporate social responsibility of companies operating in the Global South.
- **Value and compensate the work of young people:** like adults, young people put a lot of time and effort into their work. This work should be rewarded. Age should not be a reason for not fairly compensating young people for their efforts.

Youth Ambassador

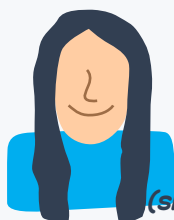
- **Invest extra time in engaging with the youth ambassador:** as youth ambassador you are working part time at two different organizations. This is very valuable, but it can also be more difficult to navigate. It is therefore necessary to inform the youth ambassadors of updates.
- **Trust and build on the knowledge of the youth ambassador:** the youth ambassador brings their own knowledge as well as knowledge from other young people. Take advantage of this unique perspective by asking for input structurally.
- **Make the exchange between youth from the Global North and Global South more equal:** it is valuable for a youth ambassador from the Global North to learn about contexts in the Global South, but this also applies the other way around. Development cooperation always has, consciously or unconsciously, a colonial background and this is reflected as a youth ambassador. The privileges that come with the role would be a lot more valuable if young people elsewhere in the world also had them. An example could be to co-sponsor the youth ambassador and another young person from the Global South to go to certain conferences, like the UN.

08

Profiles

Over the past 10 years, there have been many inspiring youth ambassadors, each with their own style, story and motivation, but with a shared passion for youth and human rights. Without their commitment, the program would not have become what it is today: a valuable and influential position for a passionate young person. Therefore, I would also like to thank all youth ambassadors for their commitment over the past 10 years. I now belong to a line of alumni for whom I have enormous admiration.

To get an idea of the youth ambassadors interviewed, below is an overview in chronological order:



**Sara
Bahgat**

(she/her)

Sara Bahgat served as youth ambassador in 2024. Sara has championed inclusive approaches to contraception and Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP). She is contributing to the program's 10th anniversary with this manifesto.



**Jim
Monkel**

(he/him)

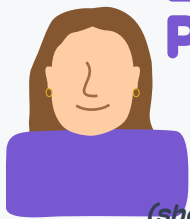
Jim Monkel served as youth ambassador in 2022-2023. During his year, Jim championed disability inclusion and comprehensive sexuality education. After the youth ambassadorship, Jim stayed in the sector, this time on civil society side. As Advocacy Officer at Hivos, he continues to advocate for the Feminist Foreign Policy of the Netherlands.



**Laura
Bas**

(she/her)

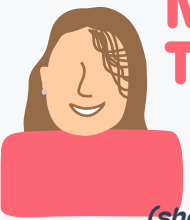
Laura Bas served as youth ambassador in 2021-2022. In her year, Laura focused on MIYP and menstrual poverty. Currently, Laura is a speaker, changemaker and generation-Z expert. She also serves as a columnist for MT/Sprout, shares career advice through her TikTok and Instagram channel, and is writing her first book on generation-Z and the future of work.



**Lisa de
Pagter**

(she/her)

Lisa de Pagter served as youth ambassador in 2020–2021. Her focus was on gender equality in conflict settings, but due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdowns, she primarily worked on embedding MIYP within the broader Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Lisa now works as Policy Officer at the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.



**Melodi
Tamarzians**

(she/her)

Melodi Tamarzians was youth ambassador in 2017–2018. During her year, Melodi worked on various issues within SRHR and on MIYP. Today, Melodi has harnessed her passion for change as a game changer with her company Game Changer Consultancy. With her company, she conducts trainings to facilitate behavioral and organizational change.



**Sanne
Thijssen**

(she/her)

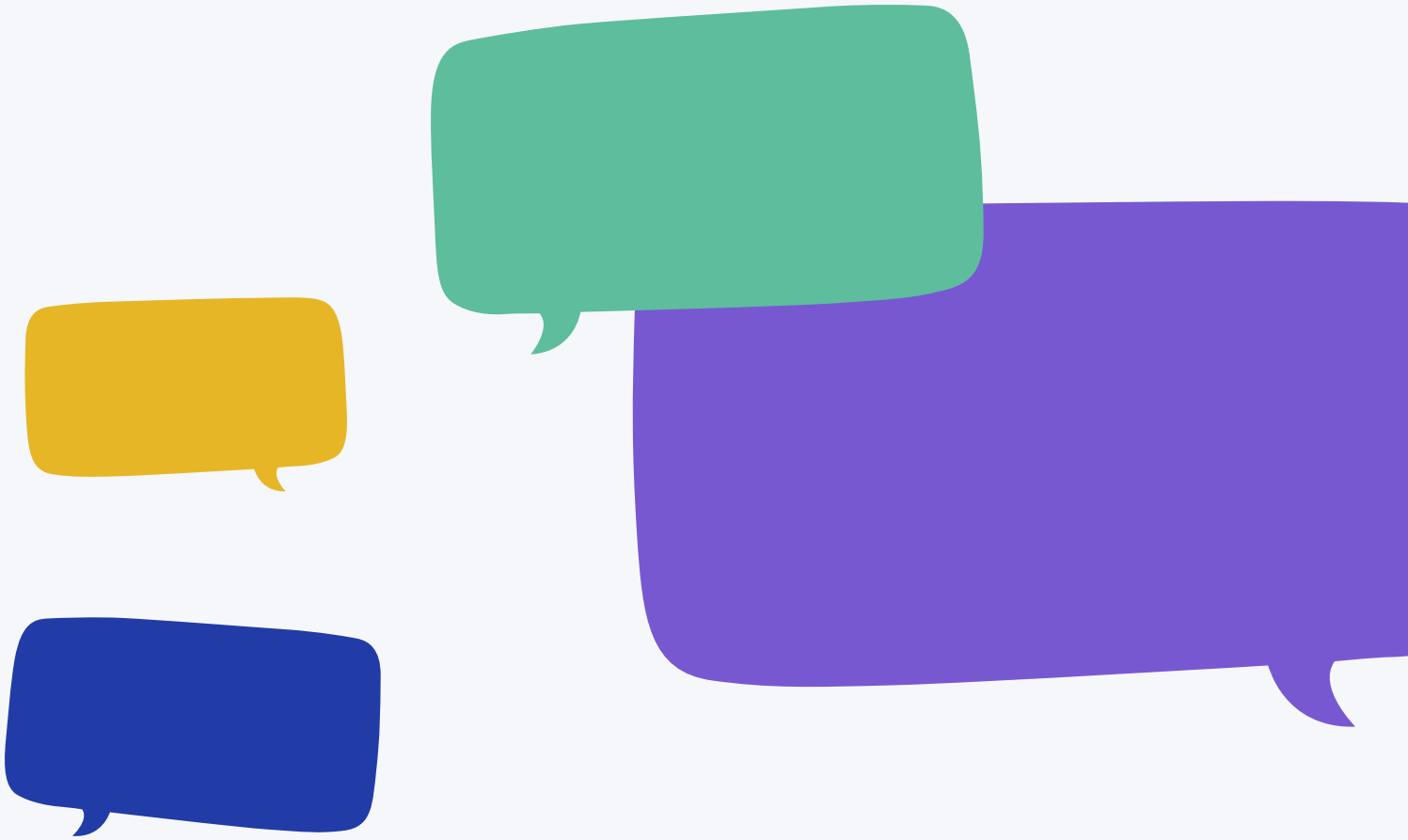
Sanne Thijssen served as youth ambassador in 2016–2017. Sanne focused on universal access to youth friendly services and youth SRHR in humanitarian settings. Today, Sanne continues to work on these themes through her own company Shake the Dust, where she uses communications, co-creation and consulting support to help organizations advance youth participation, health and rights.



**Lotte
Dijkstra**

(she/her)

Lotte Dijkstra was the first Youth Ambassador in 2015–2016. Because the program was still new, Lotte did not work on a specific theme, but on SRHR and MIYP in general. She also put the role on the map through her visibility at various conferences and in the media. Currently, Lotte works is training to become a psychiatrist and sits on the Supervisory Board of Rutgers.



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