



A youth organizer in Nicaragua surveys members of the community about the most pressing issues affecting their neighborhood.

## Youth Democracy, Human Rights & Governance Cross-Sectoral Initiative

Under the USAID Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) award, the [Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening](#) (CEPPS) is facilitating an initiative to explore the intersections of DRG and other youth development sectors, bringing together practitioners, donors and young leaders from across the world. This initiative is a forum and learning community exploring cross-sectoral challenges and opportunities to connect young people’s political participation with improved development outcomes.

### Engaging Families & Communities as Allies to Increase Youth Participation and Leadership

Social and Behavior Change (SBC) interventions directly confront attitudes and beliefs and help shape social norms that can enhance young people’s participation in public life. For example, programs targeting the behavior of community members who influence youth actions can shift social norms to ensure more inclusive and equitable youth participation and leadership opportunities. A number of actors exert influence over a young person’s life choices, whether negatively or positively, intentionally or unintentionally. Community members, such as parents, peers, coaches, civic leaders, and teachers, can create safe spaces that foster young people’s positive, meaningful participation in public life. These actors can also support opportunities for young people to practice civic and political engagement and play leadership roles in achieving community change across development sectors.

#### Key Challenges

- Adults, both within and outside government, often hold attitudes, perceptions, and stereotypes that shape behaviors and social norms that create barriers to youth participation and their access to decision-making. For example, when these actors espouse beliefs like “young people lack the experience to lead” or “young women should prioritize other pursuits, such as helping in the home,” this has a direct, negative impact on a young person’s ability to participate in public life.
- Young people who are politically active or informed are often pigeonholed into “youth only” spaces, such as youth parliaments or political party youth wings, where older politicians often benefit from sidelining or excluding them from opportunities to practice leadership and inform political priorities.
- Nonpolitical and political actors alike often associate young people solely with the future rather than recognizing the active roles they are already assuming.
- Community members often hold conventional attitudes and beliefs about who can and should participate in politics and decision making. These attitudes may engender exclusionary, and in some cases, violent backlash for young women and young people belonging to marginalized identity groups, such as ethnic minorities or young people with disabilities.
- Family members tend to prioritize discussing politics with boys and young men, either intentionally or unintentionally excluding girls and young women from such conversations in the home.
- Family members, religious leaders, and peers may discourage young people—especially young women—from running for political office or withhold support for careers in public service because they are not seen as respectable, trustworthy, honest, or financially viable positions.

## Key Recommendations for Practitioners

- Integrate positive narratives of youth leadership and youth participation into media content and other communication channels, such as theater and storytelling, radio shows, or blogs.
- Create safe spaces that prepare young people to lead and participate, such as small group settings, and identify entry points to practice leadership, such as attending a meeting to discuss the local government budget.
- Identify opportunities for intergenerational collaboration and mentorship to empower young people and community members to engage in action-based initiatives and critical reflection.
- Institutionalize youth leadership by advocating for formal youth representation in decision-making structures.
- Partner with and reinforce the idea of youth groups to promote youth civic education and leadership from a young age. Create youth groups for specific segments of the demographic, such as girls and young women.
- Create platforms for young people to display their competency, ideas, and leadership such as hosting a public debate to highlight youth candidates during a political process.
- Implement programs that integrate roleplaying activities between young people and nonpolitical actors to create a safe space for dialogue, exploration, and reflection on diverse opinions, attitudes, and beliefs.
- Use a [positive youth development](#) framework, which considers the role of young people within their systems, as a model to design interventions across multiple levels of society and engage a variety of actors, including family members, community leaders, and policy or legal experts.
- Utilize participatory, community mapping exercises with young people in leadership roles and empower young people to work alongside nonpolitical actors to collectively identify community issues and come up with solutions that lead to positive policy outcomes benefiting everyone.

## Shifting Social Norms throughout the Program Cycle

A solid understanding of social norms in a particular community, who maintains these norms, and how they relate to behaviors, can guide practitioners in designing more effective youth development programs. The [Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change](#), a cooperative effort funded by USAID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, offers programmatic guidance and resources on diagnosing and shifting social norms within the context of public health for each phase of program design. This guidance has been adapted below and can be used across sectors to better understand the role of families and communities in efforts to bolster youth political participation and leadership.

- **Phase 1:** Include an orientation to social norms. This will provide practitioners with an understanding of how social norms are connected to program outcomes.
- **Phase 2:** Diagnose the social norms that impact youth leadership and participation alongside community members with the aim of identifying which norms are important to target and understanding how these norms are enforced.
- **Phase 3:** Focus on norm-shifting interventions. During this phase, practitioners should work alongside young people and their communities to shift the narrative to one that promotes positive social norms around young people's leadership and meaningful participation.
- **Phase 4:** Focus on implementation, M&E and expanding norm-shifting interventions. The objective during this phase is to monitor and evaluate what works and what does not work to determine the effectiveness of the intervention as well as using information gleaned to scale up and sustain strategies.

## CALL TO ACTION

1. Before posting about youth leadership and political participation on websites and social media, be sure the content being posted empowers young people and encourages their participation rather than reinforcing harmful attitudes and beliefs about young people that negate their agency in the political sector.
2. Identify opportunities to promote intergenerational collaboration and mentorship across youth development sectors.

*“An SBC intervention engages people at multiple levels, includes different approaches and channels for communication, creates safe spaces for critical reflection by community members, and roots the issue within the community’s own value system.”*

### Additional Resources

- NDI: [Shaping Democratic Norms & Attitudes](#)
- IFES: [How to Boost Youth Political Participation During COVID-19](#)
- USAID: [Improving Development Outcomes Through Social and Behavior Change Communication](#)
- Learning Collaborative: [Top 20 Resources on Social Norms](#)
- Journal of Civil Society: [Young People, Family Relationships, and Civic Participation](#)
- Chemonics: [Social and Behavior Change Communication \(SBCC\) in Practice](#)
- Malin H, Ballard P, J, Damon W: [Civic Purpose: An Integrated Construct for Understanding Civic Development in Adolescence](#)

---

### Continue to Engage with the Youth DRG Cross-Sectoral Initiative

- Network with youth development thought leaders, practitioners, and donors across sectors;
- Discover effective approaches and updates related to youth political participation and leadership within a Positive Youth Development framework; and
- Identify lessons learned and promising practices related to youth political participation and cross-sectoral programs.

**For more information, please contact CEPPS partners:**

Rachel E. Mims [rmims@ndi.org](mailto:rmims@ndi.org) | Neetha Tangirala [ntangirala@iri.org](mailto:ntangirala@iri.org) | Ashley Law [alaw@ifes.org](mailto:alaw@ifes.org) | Alyson Kozma [akozma@cepps.org](mailto:akozma@cepps.org)

*This Initiative is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*