

Youth Engagement in Decision-making: A Review of Canada's Implementation of Agenda 21, Chapter 25



~a position paper produced by the youth summit team~
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*"It is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has **implications for their futures.**" Agenda 21, 25.2*

Introduction

At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, Canada committed to Agenda 21, a seminal document representing a cooperatively created international commitment to sustainable development. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21 addresses issues of concern for children and youth and their ability to participate in sustainable development work. This chapter deals with major children and youth issues of that time including employment, equitable access to education, capacity-building for participation in decision-making processes, and others. For the youth participants involved in the Rio conference, this was an important victory in international sustainable development initiatives. It was a formal opening created for the input of youth perspectives into the complex world of international politics.

What has Canada done to implement this important chapter since the Rio Earth Summit?

The Canadian Youth Summit Team believes that much work needs to be done on youth engagement in decision-making in Canada at the federal government level. We also understand that more work needs to be done on building our own capacity to prepare substantive contributions to national and international policy development processes, and believe that the federal government has a role to play in this. We are dedicated to mobilize and prepare young Canadians so that our voices and perspectives on issues important to us are heard in the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development. We are also dedicated to ensuring that our current work in relation to the WSSD has more long-lasting and substantial results that will echo through all departments of the federal government for many generations to come. This position paper is meant to clearly articulate our concerns with the current level of Chapter 25 implementation by the federal government, and suggest some innovative new ideas regarding youth engagement in federal government decision-making processes. We also expect that this paper will serve as a catalyst to encourage discussion between Canadian youth and the federal government about youth engagement in decision-making.

A Review of Canada's Youth Engagement Activities

Canada has outwardly promoted ideas of incorporating youth into policy- and decision-making processes at both the national and international levels. One of the most recent examples was at the 21st session of UNEP Governing Council where Canada lead the way in passing a decision on youth engagement in decision-making in UNEP. We are, however, concerned that while youth are being consulted and given opportunity to participate, we are not yet *engaged* in the process. Many departments have yet to bring youth perspectives into their policy and decision-making work. What then is the difference between *participation* and *engagement*?

Some Case Studies

In researching this paper, several members of the Youth Summit Team made telephone calls to the main departments within the federal government to ask them how they engaged youth in their decision- and policy-making work. The following is a list of the best examples of youth engagement in federal government decision-making that we could find in this research.

- **Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.** One very good example of youth involvement in DFAIT can be found in the Canadian Center on Foreign Policy division (CCFPD). One of the CCFPD's three funding criteria for all projects is that it involve youth. Last year the CCFPD National Forum was on War Affected Children. This Forum went to great lengths to involve youth from across Canada in the preparations, on the government delegation, and through consultations. The Canadian youth delegation was even given the opportunity to travel abroad and meet with war affected children. Together they drafted a document full of recommendations for the federal government with respect to foreign policy. Whether or not the government will actualize the recommendations of youth remains to be seen, but both the CCFPD and the youth involved reflect very positively on the experience. DFAIT admitted that the process of substantive youth involvement is extremely laborious, but recognizes its effectiveness and is pushing to develop a youth component in every department. It must be remembered that the CCFPD is not a reflection of DFAIT's youth engagement activities as a whole, and that this process does not reflect our definition of a really great example of youth engagement. It is simply one of the better examples that we found in our research.
- **Environment Canada.** Environment Canada has several innovative ways for young people to become involved in the work of their department. The first is the National Youth Round Table (NYRT). This is a group of about 15 young people from across Canada selected by EC staff each year. They meet a couple of times each year, and are asked to comment on EC programs and work plan, as well as develop their own action items.

EC has a full-time salaried staff person dedicated to youth outreach programs thus allowing for continuity, and dedicated human resource time to this important issue.

Environment Canada includes an official youth delegate on their UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UN CSD) delegations. This young person is selected by the Canadian Environment Network's youth caucus, and must be a member of this organization. They are fully funded by the UN CSD delegation, and are given access to delegation meetings, preparatory documents, and people not always accessible to NGO delegates at the meetings.

Environment Canada is currently working with a youth for youth based initiative called the Capacity Building Project. EC helped four of the leading youth organizations in Canada get funding from the Voluntary Sector Initiative to build the capacity of youth organizations to work more effectively together, and to create a substantive voice on policy issues.

- **The Canadian Secretariat for the World Summit on Sustainable Development.** The Secretariat has hired a staff person responsible for youth consultations for the Canadian preparatory process. A youth representative also sits on a civil society Reference Group to advise the Secretariat on the preparation of their National Report to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. They have worked to support the YST recognizing its strength as a national, well-networked, youth-for-youth initiative.

Clearly there are not very many good examples of youth engagement to be found in the federal government system, although other small scale examples do exist in other areas of the federal government that are not mentioned here. Most of the departments that were contacted could not give us any information on a formal, coordinated mechanism for youth engagement. In fact most of them didn't really have a way for *any citizens* to effectively and substantively participate in policy-making. The Privy Council Office assured us that the best way to be heard was to write a letter to the Prime Minister – not exactly *engagement* in decision-making. Many of them thought that as youth, we were really asking about possible jobs and internships with their department and directed us to a variety of new youth focused websites where we could find that information. Some of the departments falling into this category were: Fisheries and Oceans, Department of Finance, Department of National Defense, Industry Canada, Citizenship and Immigration, Department of Justice, Parks Canada, Health Canada, CIDA, and Agriculture and Agri-Food.

We soon realized that a really great example of youth engagement – according to the standards described in the table below - in decision-making in the Canadian federal government was not going to be found. Instead of becoming dejected and disillusioned, we decided to write this position paper, and offer some concrete, exciting examples of ways in which we would like to become more engaged in decision-making processes with the federal government.

Participation, Involvement or Engagement?

There are different ways that governments can gain youth insight and input into their policy- and decision-making processes. As youth, we tend to advocate that we want to be *engaged* in political processes rather than simply *participate* in them. It is quite frustrating for us to have to further define 'participation' in order to become more engaged. Engagement in decision-making is a vital part of a democratic society and should be a commitment on the part of the federal government. That being said, the differences between these two approaches are described in this table.

Table 1. Participation vs. Engagement in Policy Making

Characteristic	Participation	Engagement
Description of those involved	"Participants" are invited to participate in a defined process	"Partners" who decide how they want to be engaged
Time for preparation/comment	Short	Sufficient to meet needs of all partners

Resources supplied for involvement	None/few	More, depending on needs. Greater degree of access to information.
Respect for diversity	Insufficient time/attention paid to this issue; often only a few perspectives (like active lobby organizations) are represented and youth voices lost.	This is recognized as vital to the process, and considered a requirement. For us, for-youth, by-youth driven initiatives work best.
Nature of relationship	Short-term/one time, no follow up done, no relationship or trust built.	Relationship is nurtured and trust built throughout the process, longer-term
Nature of input	Limited to commenting on already developed documents, positions, papers, etc.	Involved in the original shaping of the document, position or paper.
Accountability	None. There is often no information given on how comments received during the consultation will be reflected in the work being done. No mechanism in place for follow-up.	Necessary. Process must be transparent and accountable throughout the process. Partners must be able to see their views reflected in the work.
Flexibility	Very little. Process is often rigid, comments and participation limited to specific formats, times, and mechanisms.	The ultimate goal of engagement is to get a clear picture of the perspectives of partners, thus flexibility is required as much as is demanded by partners.
Accessibility	Often limited to those who know the right people, who understand political/issue jargon and have an intimate knowledge of what's being discussed.	Open to all with an interest/concern with the issue of discussion. Everyone is given a safe space to actively become engaged.
Who are the ultimate decision-makers?	For most government consultation processes, it is government representatives (or a single government minister) that have the last say.	This model requires diversity and representation in the decision-making body as well as in those involved in the process throughout.

A Call for Action!

Build the Capacity of the Youth Community!

1. A **space for youth engagement in the WSSD** event itself, and its preparatory meetings needs to be made specifically for young people. A strong and effective youth voice should be included in the desired outputs of the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development. In order to do this, sufficient resources and access to information need to be given to preparing this voice. Both Canadian and international youth organizations must be included, and the Canadian government should play a strong role in ensuring that these resources are made available to Canadian youth, and to youth in developing countries.
2. **More resources for youth initiatives need to be made available by the federal government.** Many youth organizations struggle for basic resources required to effectively function and cover core expenses. These resources are often made available to more adult led, established and well-known organizations rather than more grassroots, youth-for-youth groups. This lack of resources leads to difficulties with self-organizing and capacity building of

youth organizations – requirements if youth are going to be able to substantively contribute to decision-making processes.

Strengthen Existing Federal Government Youth Initiatives!

3. **The office of the Secretary of State for Children and Youth Affairs needs to be expanded.** It should be staffed with young people, and have sub-departments to address particular issues of concern to youth, like sustainable development. The mandate, resources and capacity of this department needs to be expanded in order to truly reflect the values of Canadian youth.
4. **The mechanisms by which the Senator on Youth Affairs outreaches to the youth community needs to be improved.** This person is an important information conduit between the youth of Canada and the Prime Minister, and the role is not currently effective. Perhaps a young person should be made Senator on this issue!
5. **The new websites for youth being developed by the federal government need to be improved.** These sites should allow for substantive contribution of youth on policy issues and other issues of concern. The government must then be held accountable to youth using the site to act on their concerns and report back on their activities.

Formalize Youth Engagement in Federal Government Departments!

6. **Ask youth how they want to be engaged in decision-making!** A great way to initiate a new series of youth initiatives in federal government would be to kick it all off with a national consultation process that allowed youth to develop the ways in which they would like to be engaged!
7. **Create a space for youth input into the work of the Commissioner on Environment and Sustainable Development.** This is particularly important in the context of the upcoming WSSD. The CESD is responsible for holding the federal government responsible for their sustainable development commitments, and youth need to be at this table making sure our perspectives are heard.
8. The Canadian government should **establish a central, coordinating body to engage youth in national policy and decision-making work.** A great potential home for this body would be in the Privy Council Office. This body would be responsible for soliciting and reporting on youth perspectives on key policy issues of concern to the youth community, as well as perspectives on policy work currently underway in the Federal government. A focus should be on long-term engagement and capacity and relationship building rather than time and issue specific short-term 'consultations.' This body should also have a mandate to engage civil society more broadly, as youth are not the only 'group' underrepresented in federal government decision-making processes.
9. **Youth delegates should address parliament each time the House of Commons is sitting.** The process of delegate selection should be determined by the broader youth community in order to ensure a balanced representation of perspectives and expertise on the diversity of issues up for discussion. This will serve as a constant reminder of the importance of youth

perspectives on different issues, and as a mechanism to directly deliver a critical review of current parliamentary issues to the House.

10. Develop a process to incorporate youth input into really important pieces of new and existing legislation. A decentralized system of input collection on this legislation would be made via many levels of consultations. For example, school systems could be encouraged to elect/appoint a student representative to facilitate a forum at their school and gather that school's input. Then the school representatives of the same region could get together and synthesize their feedback. This could be followed by further forums at larger levels of organization culminating in a national report. It could build upon and utilize existing student networks for further efficiency. An important result would be the creation of a real sense of participation in the political process in young people; an ability which they will carry with them into adulthood.

11. Each department should create a youth engagement strategy and implementation plan. This strategy could include: establishment of Youth Round Tables similar to that of Environment Canada, inclusion of youth on delegations sent to bilateral and multilateral meetings, description of how youth perspectives on policy issues will be gathered and used. Meaningful employment opportunities for young people in the civil service as well as internship opportunities could be described in this strategy and implementation plan as well for a more complete picture of departmental youth engagement. Each department should create permanent, competitively waged positions for young people where they will develop outreach, education, and engagement programs designed to link their peers to specific departmental activities.

12. Researching, writing and publication of an annual report on 'Youth Affairs and Youth Engagement in Canada.' This paper should be written by youth for federal government in order to track progress made towards their commitments to engage young people, and to ensure accountability to the issues of concern for young people.

Create New Outlets for Sharing Youth Perspectives!

13. Government funded media sources – like the CBC – need to have more for-youth, by-youth content. In this way, youth can become more aware of issues that affect them in an interesting and relevant fashion. Youth will become empowered to share their voices and concerns through a powerful outlet often reserved for those with more money and fame.

Conclusion

The Rio Earth Summit was a landmark event in the history of international sustainable development work. As we move towards the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development, *implementation* of the commitments made in Rio is emerging as a key issue of national concern. Youth engagement in decision-making is only one of these commitments, but a vital one. It is vital to the future health and happiness of generations to come. A key factor in succeeding in taking this action is to engage children and youth in shaping the future according to our own values and priorities. We have a unique perspective on the world that needs to be more effectively included in national policy creation. We must stop simply talking about 'making decisions for our children' and instead ACT on creating a better world for them, and *with them*.