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Stop Saying It, Just Do It! Young People's Participation During the COVID Pandemic: A View From Europe



To the Editors:

In April 2020, Efuribe et al. [1] published a commentary in this journal calling for “Youth Engagement and the Inclusion of Young People in Matters That Affect Their Lives” in relation to the COVID-19 crisis. They raised awareness of the need for politicians to weigh the short-term benefits associated with control of viral transmission against the potentially significant medium- and long-term costs that these healthcare decisions could have on the well-being of the population. Regrettably, a year later, the worldwide situation is more alarming than ever. Although the pandemic crisis is severely compromising the physical and mental health of young people [2], they still have no clearly representative voice. The objective of this commentary is to cite concrete examples as to how governments and health professionals can support young people in taking an active role in becoming catalysts of inclusive and resilient responses to the crisis and thus contribute to building the society of tomorrow.

The outbreak of the pandemic has resulted in an increase in solidarity in the form of volunteering, especially among young people. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the guardian reported that around 750,000 people signed up to the National Healthcare Service volunteer scheme in 2020. Young people throughout the world have been role models and good examples of citizenship. They have contributed to the dissemination of information among their peers and helped to contain the spread of the virus. For example, the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations has created a map of COVID-19 activities that gathers all the activities of medical students and their efforts to combat and raise awareness of COVID-19 [3]. Finally, they have ignored their own needs for the sake of people who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as the elderly.

Governments have important responsibilities in this regard. First, they need to recognize the valuable contribution of young people as effective working partners. As an inspiring example, the prime minister of the Netherlands recently announced his intention to involve children, young people, and youth organizations in the preparation of recovery measures [4]. Along the same lines, last January, the President of the Swiss Confederation publicly acknowledged the contribution of young people to the battle against the COVID virus. Second, governments should not take a short-term view of this issue but must take into consideration the medium- and long-term effects of their decisions on the well-being of young people and future generations. For

instance, during the second wave, many European countries followed World Health Organization recommendations [5] and weighed the numerous benefits of in-person schooling against the risks of spreading COVID-19 in schools and communities. They decided to keep schools open at almost any price (this was not the case in many states of the United States until recently).

Governments should take note of these experiences and harness the sense of urgency of young people by engaging them in cocreation and/or implementation of policy responses and postpandemic recovery plans. Effective collaboration between young people and governments could take inspiration from Switzerland's Sustainability Impact Assessment framework, which aims to incorporate intergenerational considerations of environmental, social, and economic sustainability into laws, action plans, and public projects.

Fostering an approach toward a resilient society suggests that governments take into account environmental improvements as an integral part of a long-term recovery strategy [6]. Climate and environmental ministers from countries of the European Union as well as members of the European Parliament [7] have called for such a strategy. An inclusive society requires national governments to reinforce the representation of youth-related issues at the level of decision-making. For example, the British Youth Council has urged its government to create a Ministry for Young People to bring the voices of youth into policy making related to the COVID-19 pandemic [8]. Youth participation must be supported by experienced adult professionals to ensure respect for the basic principles of effective and ethical youth participation as described by the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund [9] and to avoid irrelevant or disrespectful behavior during rallies or other actions. For example, when young people are asked about their views on health precautions, they need to have time to inform themselves, to reflect and discuss issues together before giving their feedback; while adults need to beware of giving them partial information that could be misleading.

Primary care workers have an important role to play. For example, healthcare professionals need to investigate not only how young people experience the pandemic but also how to maintain close contact with them to understand their needs – especially mental health needs – in times of crisis. Healthcare workers also have a role to play in promoting the participation of young people in decisions that will affect their health, such as defining their needs in times of pandemic and making

themselves heard at the level of public health and political organizations. For instance, in Switzerland, one group of physicians organized a two-day workshop last November to gather the views of young people and professionals from various professions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the health and circumstances of young people [10]. Thanks to an interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach that included committed journalists, the meeting led to a significant advocacy initiative, and drew the attention of policy makers and politicians to the rights of young people to be heard.

The meeting also underlined the acute need to collect coordinated national data from health, education, and social sectors to raise awareness among policy makers, politicians, and the general public of the specific health needs of young people. Although the pandemic has less direct impact on young people than on the elderly, we need indicators that measure the medium- and long-term effects of healthcare decisions during the pandemic on young people's mental and physical health as well as school attainment and socialization to name only a few.

In summary, this unprecedented period requires a coordinated, holistic public health approach in which health professionals are essential partners and help the voices of young people to be heard.

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