

“Don’t talk about us without us.” – Policy Debate at the ESCAP 2022 congress

Dialogues between experts and adolescents for youth participation at the ESCAP 2022 congress and for true power sharing in Youth health & SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) policies, pan-regional practice and science

A conversation between Amélie Galladé, member of the Swiss youth delegation at the ESCAP 2022 congress, and Matthias Köster, child and adolescent and adult psychiatrist/psychotherapist & SDG-promoter from Zürich

Amélie Galladé:

“Don’t talk about us without us.” The youth delegation at the ESCAP 2022 Congress repeated this slogan persistently, pointing out both the relevance of our statements regarding adolescents’ mental health and the issue of most decisions affecting us and our mental health still being made without our participation. I was part of the Swiss youth delegation at the congress and co-prepared our oral presentation and our poster on young people’s mental health regarding the new media. At the policy debate, I discussed issues and solutions as a youth ambassador with Matthias Köster as an expert. Regardless of the discussed topic, we always returned to youth participation, interdisciplinarity, networks, and the United Nations’ SDGs as central parts of every solution to improve young people’s mental health. **We need education plans for schools to implement systematic prevention and early detection of mental health risks and issues from a young age.** Policymakers need to view investment in mental health as a proven measure with an extraordinarily high return of prevention. The resources to improve adolescents’ mental health, as well as the young people’s commitment, already exist, however, they are not distributed effectively. For a real and sustainable improvement of our mental health, resources should be reallocated and political power should be shared with us, the next generation, for a participative and sustainable decision making.

So, the resources and political means should be shared with us by decision and policymakers to not only talk about but make a change.

Matthias Köster:

I agree a lot and see your writing as a proof how **shared-decision-making, dialogical understanding of each other and co-implementing youth policies are human rights**, but also the most direct way to co-empower each other and enable the protection of your livable future and transform our behaviours towards planetary health now.

The ESCAP 2022 congress was a very uplifting **pan-European truly health- and peace-promoting network experience** in multiple ways. I feel privileged to have learned so much from the youth representatives and coming together with so many **respectful and humble enablers and critically thinking colleagues from science and practice**. I feel hopeful as well, when the young generation is so engaged to prepare initiatives sustainably and also to join European forces to transform us and our ecosystems and communities how everybody and our planet needs it.

At the ESCAP congress in Maastricht a sense of **togetherness and transformational collaborative** readiness was co-created - many seemed very grateful for **the hospitality and warmth** of the main congress organizers Manon Hillegers, Arne Popma, Therese van

Amelsvoort, Wouter Staal and Cisca Joldersma who generously gave their time to co-prepare this with and for the youth ambassadors. Furthermore, waiving the registration fee to the congress and hosting a dinner the night before the first congress day was another mind and heart opener. **Taking our time to co-develop local, national and international youths' needs** during a workshop that was moderated by the *MIND Us* project agent Amine Bakkali and Youth Center *@ease* representatives Sara Langefeld and Dion Ras as preparation for the policy debate was another key process – as the precious times we spent since 2019 in a constructive and ongoing local Zürich Youth dialogue on Youths' **mental health** demands, their social dimensions and the most relevant science, policy and practice gaps.

I brought in the **“Our Europe, our future, our rights” 2021 report from 10,000 youths** and how to build youth policies around those demands with the idea of youths' voices already collected:

First: We can and must try to **stop any war, any violence, any neglect everywhere** – among family members, among pupils, among job colleagues. Not to prevent this enough is very damaging to our health and more costly. And also, when science and policies don't deliver **data that shows impacts of preventative actions on qualities of life of young people** especially. **Not to finance this is unethical!**

Second: by transforming society in an integral and more sustainable way including adapting the educational systems - as you wrote about how teachers and pupils should be prepared to act against digital bullying – but also in a deep behavioural sense how education is delivered to deal with the complexities of life and utilizes mental health prevention or how sustainable we eat, move about and care for each other.

Third: **Co-creating health services and health literacy and self-care agency in a sustainable way** – mostly around health promoting schools and financing communities and youths' needs with longtime (!), scientific evaluations included. I also showed some “how to find scientific articles” and many references that were offered as a shared source – sometimes we could have spent more time discussing that. I respected your wish for autonomous work.

At the ESCAP congress we heard about the **need for public health and preventative science** to show health changes in the communities. That fits with the current WHO Europe 2022 programmes that should be implemented only with light regional adaptations.

There is no true co-development without time and resources taken for listening and co-learning, trust-building and really understanding each other – **investing time and personal and financial resources mission-oriented for and with the youth is key to making our European communities attractive places to live in.**

The ESCAP board took part and shared the stage for your key points in an unfiltered, open way in front of all participants. The ESCAP President-Elect Jörg Fegert suggested **strengthening storytelling by the youth to create publicity** to enhance youth-oriented policies. And creating **more “citizen science”** with and for you which would make research more participative and more needs-oriented.

For me it's prototypical for a **fair, participative and democratic society and agile co-implementation that can be the future of a caring Europe and a healthy planet.**

It's inspiring to be creative together and it motivates me to continue to enhance WHO-advised and SDG-oriented co-projects with the youth in their communities in the centre.

Amélie:

Pointing out the key points necessary for youth participation, which I truly share and support, I think you raise an important issue. Before all these mentioned steps and actions are taken to improve youth participation concretely and institutionally, from my experience, first adults should listen to our young voices and take them seriously to start the conversation on an equal and at eye level. **Making young people truly feel and be heard is proven to enhance their mental health.** I am thankful for every adult and person in charge of power including us in the dialogue and thus including us in the process of policy and decision making, although it should already be a matter of course everywhere and for everyone.

The ESCAP congress board, the other participants, and speakers did a great example treating the youth delegations from the beginning as equals and giving us multiple opportunities to raise our voices. However, I hope that we achieve a level of youth participation as intended by the SDGs, in which listening to our adolescents' demands, hopes, concerns, wishes, and dreams is not an extraordinarily progressive and praiseworthy act. Rather our participation should be implemented in the process. Therefore, we should reach a common sense of how resources are allocated, political means are shared and participation is being lived.

The ESCAP 2022 congress can be considered a great example of my envisioned youth participation for tomorrow.

By relieving us, the Swiss youth delegation, from congress fees, they enabled our attendance. Still, without the additional financial support from our sponsors and our parents, we would not have been able to afford physical attendance as a whole group. Often, adult decision makers forget about the financial barriers for many young people to join important events and networks.

Participation in such an event as the ESCAP 2022 congress not only requires travel and funding support but also a lot of hours to invest in the abstracts, building a fundament of knowledge together, the process of creating and practicing our inputs, and preparing the policy debate together with the congress board, the Dutch youth delegation and other enablers. All these tasks for successful event participation should not be underestimated and build high barriers to youth participation. **As of today, political participation as a young person is a privilege you have to afford regarding finance and time resources. This must change.** Certainly, I acknowledge that the attendance of such a relevant congress requires a certain amount of professionalism and preparation. Still, when talking about youth participation, the height of these barriers holding young people back from raising their voices should be a central point in the discussion and always be considered.

We, the youth delegations at ESCAP 2022, and many other young people give our best by investing our free time and resources to overcome these barriers to be part of the change to an accessible, goal-oriented and effective youth participation for hopefully every adolescent on some day. Therefore, we need you. We need every one of you. Every adult can support youth participation.

For example, by adverting us to opportunities for raising our voice as Matthias Köster has done by motivating us to submit our abstracts and supporting us throughout the whole process of preparation and organization. Giving us a stage to present our demands to an audience of stakeholders like the congress board enabled our participation in the policy debate. By not only generously giving us a platform, but guaranteeing it to us constitutionally. By creating networks for regional, national, European, and international dialogue. By anchoring our political rights in law and thereby guaranteeing them. Last but not least, by listening attentively to us, asking questions for a more profound understanding of our generation, and taking us seriously, as every congress participant I met in the three days in Maastricht did. This list of possibilities to become a youth participation enabler could be expanded endlessly.

By that, I would like to show you both the still existing potential for youth participation improvement and the great number of possibilities for every individual to take action in their community, their work, their daily life, and their political means.

I hope that we all share the common goal of a physically and mentally healthier next generation, resources invested effectively, and a sustainable balance of participation and power in decision making. All these aspects are linked to each other; thus, we can only achieve them by aiming for them together. You can play your part. We count on you.

Matthias:

Your experience and your demands are so important and co-implementing those in our civil cultures together with and for the youth. I hope that health professionals help to really co-create youth-friendly services in peaceful communities and that science and policy financing is directed to the UN-SDG goals and health impacts on a communal level as promoted by the WHO. That the political bodies of the youth - like the Youth Forum (www.youthforum.org), the European Youth Parliament (www.eyp.org), Unicef's Youth Advocacy, Stakeholders from Citizen Science and Public Health are brought together with agile change makers for more sustainable economies and societies and a healthy planet – internationally, nationally and in all communities.

And that we do this **together with our Russian, Ukrainian and global partners in peace!** And that we help the peaceful Russian partners to stop the cruelty and madness of a war started by a minority of totalitarian Kreml-oligarchs against civility, justice and free autonomy within their own multicultural society and our common Ukrainian and Belarussian neighbours. And that implies proactively **counteracting those among us that profit from war, unethical or destructive businesses, non-inclusive political structures or attacks against good health and peace-promoting competence, freedom of speech or siloed disciplines.**

Our ESCAP colleagues and you showed a spirit that was open-minded and open-hearted and ready to build anew on **deep rooted trust by a respectful trans-disciplinarian network of cooperation and sharing** and I feel very, very grateful for all of that supportive and co-inspiring atmosphere with all of you.

Let's invest in securing quality of life and exclusion of violence or neglect of any kind by sustainable co-implementation and yearly evidence-based evaluation data as the most important preventive policy. Just as so-called **climate justice and every one of the 17 SDGs. This is what every community, every school teacher and every young person deserves – every day and everywhere.**

I wonder how you think about this and how this relates to your future-oriented youth policy demands or which question you pose back especially to mental health professionals how this civil policy and science gap can be filled.

Amélie:

In my previous statement, I underlined the importance of adults and powerholders to enable real youth participation for every adolescent and not only for those who can afford it.

However, I agree that in many parts of the world and globally, we are still at the very base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as the essential basis of peace is not given. In those areas, first, we need peace to fulfill other SDGs such as youth participation.

Thus, it is even more important for those living in peaceful and stable countries to commit themselves to youth participation in our communities and to build up an example to the future, for other countries, which hopefully will become peaceful the soonest possible.

Today, power, resources, and peace are not distributed equally, however, we can still make a difference. Are you reading this article privileged regarding your power of decision-making, allocating more resources than on the global average, or/and living in a peaceful country?

Then, please, take a moment and think of how you can use your privilege responsibly and how you could share some of it with those who are not that lucky. Please, consider in what ways you can enable peace, youth participation, and the pursuit of the SDGs. Our future needs us.

Warm regards from Zürich
Amélie & Matthias

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