



Youth Engagement in Governance

Lessons and Practice from MA Governance Reform

April 2026

Introduction

This report provides a synthesis of how youth engagement in governance is currently reflected across Member Association governance reform reports and diagnostic assessments from the 2025 Round of Reforms and discussions to date for the 2026 Round, as well as learning from the report on previous rounds, which was conducted in 2022 by ODS. It draws on evidence from Phase One and Phase Two documentation and focuses specifically on three dimensions of engagement: representation within governance structures, participation in organisational life (to highlight greater involvement), and influence within governance decision-making.

The analysis should be understood in context. Member Associations participating in the 2025 round are still in the process of implementing their governance reforms and were selected through Regional Offices rather than through an open application process. As a result, some prioritised more immediate or critical areas of governance development, including those linked to accreditation requirements. In addition, levels of youth engagement varied across the cohort, with some Member Associations already demonstrating strong practice in this area. Where areas for development are identified, these should therefore be understood as patterns observed across the reform group rather than attributable to individual organisations.

Consistent with findings from previous reform rounds, youth engagement in governance remains uneven and shaped by both structural factors and the practical realities of young people's lives. This context is important in understanding current progress, as the focus of reform is increasingly shifting from establishing representation towards enabling more meaningful participation and influence. Examples of good and emerging practice are included as short vignettes throughout the report.

Across the reports, there is a high degree of consistency in both the strengths identified and the limitations observed. While youth are present within governance systems, with all Member Associations meeting the minimum 20% representation requirement, and are highly active across organisational activities, many governance arrangements do not yet consistently enable meaningful participation or parity in decision-making. This report sets out the key themes emerging from the evidence and highlights the implications for the next phase of governance reform. To facilitate peer support and discussion across the governance reform process, a Community of Practice is being established which will invite MAs from all six governance reform rounds to participate. It is expected that the first session, taking place in May, will focus on youth engagement in governance as this has been identified as a critical issue.

Youth Representation: Established but Insufficient

Youth representation within governance structures is now a common feature across Member Associations. Board and Council compositions typically include provision for youth participation, reflecting federation-wide expectations of inclusive governance.

However, this level of representation should be understood in context. The presence of young people within governance bodies could simply reflect the baseline conditions required of Member Associations, rather than a deliberate design for strong youth influence. Evidence from the reports suggests that, while representation is in place, it does not in itself ensure meaningful engagement in governance processes. This does not mean to suggest that MAs do not see inclusion of youth as a critical area for their governance or for future governance arrangements.

However, there is limited indication that youth representation is consistently supported by:

- Clearly defined roles within governance – apart from being ‘consulted’ on youth issues; often they are not seen as full trustees by other members of the Board.
- Comprehensive induction processes tailored specifically to youth members (where induction processes exist)
- Expectations around contribution to decision-making
- or Structural positioning that enables influence

As a result, representation is best understood as an entry point. On its own, it does not yet constitute effective integration of youth into governance. This reflects findings from previous reform rounds, which noted that percentage requirements alone are limited as a tool for ensuring meaningful engagement, particularly where they intersect with other representation requirements or are not supported by wider governance structures.

Strong Youth Participation in Organisational Practice

In contrast to governance structures, the reports provide stronger and more consistent evidence of youth engagement across organisational and programmatic activity, particularly in MAs that have a Youth Action Movement (YAM) or similar movement.

Youth participation is well established within volunteer systems, community engagement, and service delivery. Youth networks are active and organised, with young people contributing to outreach, peer engagement, and implementation of activities. In some cases, these structures operate with a level of coordination and clarity that mirrors organisational systems.

This demonstrates that Member Associations have created meaningful opportunities for youth engagement within their operational models. Young people are not only present but are actively contributing to organisational objectives and community impact.

Strengthening youth leadership through structured engagement

One Member Association has developed a well-organised youth structure that operates alongside its wider organisational systems. Young people are engaged through coordinated networks with defined roles, regular meetings, and responsibility for delivering activities within their communities.

These structures mirror aspects of the organisation’s broader governance and operational approach, including communication, coordination, and accountability. As a result, young people are not only participating in programmes but are gaining practical leadership experience in structured environments.

This approach is strengthening the pipeline of young leaders within the organisation and creating a strong foundation for integration into governance roles.

Previous reform findings also highlight that sustained youth participation is often a prerequisite for engagement in governance, and is shaped by practical factors such as time, resources, and the availability of supportive and engaging environments.

Recognition of the Need for Greater Youth Involvement

Despite necessarily needing to focus on other areas of governance reforms, a consistent theme across the reports is that Member Associations recognise the need to strengthen youth engagement in governance.

This is reflected in:

- Acknowledgement that current approaches do not sufficiently enable youth participation in governance
- Identification of youth engagement as an area requiring further development
- Inclusion of actions aimed at increasing youth involvement in governance processes

Findings from previous reform rounds further reinforce this pattern, highlighting that youth engagement has historically been uneven across Member Associations. While some organisations made deliberate efforts to involve youth representatives, in others the level of engagement remained limited or unclear. These findings also highlight that youth participation is often shaped by practical constraints, including work, study, and family commitments, as well as the availability of formal roles within governance structures.

At the same time, this recognition has not yet translated into consistent change. In practice, youth engagement within governance remains limited, with participation often confined to consultation or specific stages of organisational activity. At the same time, a number of MAs have identified that there is an issue with youth engagement as a whole whereby many young people leave the country for further education or to seek employment for example, reducing down scope for youth volunteers at all.

This gap between recognition and implementation is a defining feature across the reports. Member Associations are clear on the direction of travel, but some governance systems have not yet been fully adapted to support it.

Developing Youth Influence in Governance Decision-Making

The most significant gap identified across the reports is the limited evidence of youth influence within governance decision-making.

Where youth engagement is referenced in relation to governance, it is most often described in terms of participation in consultations, contributions to needs assessments, or ‘youth’ representation within governance bodies. There is little evidence to suggest that young people are consistently involved in shaping decisions or influencing strategic direction.

Findings from previous reform rounds provide insight into how youth influence can be strengthened in practice. In some contexts, youth-led accountability was identified as an important enabling factor for

reform sustainability, where young people play a role in holding governance structures to account and contributing to oversight processes.

In addition, the inclusion of youth representation within transition or reform committees was highlighted as a practical mechanism for engaging young people directly in governance change processes. These approaches create opportunities for youth to contribute to the design and evolution of governance systems, while also strengthening their connection to decision-making.

These examples illustrate that youth influence is most effective where participation is linked to governance roles and responsibilities, rather than remaining at the level of consultation.

At the same time, governance decision-making remains concentrated within formal structures such as at Board level. These processes are not consistently shown to incorporate youth perspectives in a structured or systematic way despite youth forming 20% of the Board membership.

In some cases, the reports explicitly note that young people are not fully involved in decision-making processes. This reinforces the distinction between *participation* and *influence* and highlights that some governance systems are not yet designed to share decision-making power in practice [This is not confined to youth and is a clear issue around gender and grassroots engagement].

Absence of Structured Pathways into Governance

A further theme emerging from the reports is the lack of structured pathways to support youth progression into governance roles, highlighting the need for a strong Nominations and Governance Committee to support the process.

Integrating youth into governance planning and renewal

Another Member Association is actively incorporating youth participation into its governance planning processes. This includes considering youth representation within board renewal, succession planning, and skills development.

Governance tools such as skills gap analyses and forward planning processes are being used to identify opportunities to strengthen youth involvement and leadership over time. This reflects a deliberate effort to align governance development with longer-term

While there is strong engagement at community and volunteer level, there is limited evidence of systems that identify, prepare, and support young people to transition into governance positions. Succession planning processes do not consistently prioritise youth, and there are few examples of structured mechanisms to build governance capability among younger members. By the same token, it is important to highlight that not all youth volunteers within MAs will end up in a governance role especially as there is a consistent move towards skills-based Boards rather than simply representation.

Where future approaches are implied, they point towards the need for more intentional support, such as:

- Clear role definition for youth within governance, ensuring they are integrated as full trustees and that their roles and contributions are understood and valued across the Board
- Tailored induction and preparation for governance responsibilities
- More accessible governance processes and documentation
- Opportunities for young people to contribute more actively within meetings and discussions

These elements suggest an emerging understanding that youth participation in governance requires both structural and practical support. However, such approaches are not yet widely embedded.

Youth Integration as an Emerging Key Priority

Whilst not a consistent key area of focus in 2025, where the gender and grassroots engagement were more of a priority, within the current round of governance reform, youth integration into governance has already emerged as a priority area for Member Associations.

Embedding youth as a formal governance constituency

One Member Association has established a formal youth structure that is integrated across governance, programme delivery, and advocacy. Through this model, young people are represented within governance arrangements while also playing an active role in organisational and community-level work.

This structure creates a clear and recognised channel through which youth perspectives are brought into organisational discussions, supported by established systems of representation and engagement. It also enables continuity between youth participation at community level and their presence within governance spaces.

By formalising youth participation in this way, the organisation is strengthening the visibility and consistency of youth engagement across its governance and operational systems.

This priority will be encouraged to develop action plans that emphasise strengthening participation, improving how youth perspectives are incorporated into governance, and developing more inclusive approaches.

This is reflected in discussions that have emphasised:

- How to strengthen youth participation in governance processes
- How to improve how youth perspectives are incorporated into decision-making
- How to create more participatory and inclusive governance approaches

- How to support young people to participate more effectively (e.g. tailored induction, mentoring or buddy systems, pre-meeting briefings, accessible materials, structured opportunities to contribute)

Adapting governance practices to support inclusive participation

Some Member Associations are beginning to adapt governance practices to enable broader and more inclusive participation. This includes steps such as improving the clarity of board materials, providing additional support ahead of meetings, and creating more structured opportunities for members to contribute to discussions.

These changes are helping to make governance processes more accessible and to support participation from members with different levels of experience, including younger members.

This reflects a shift towards governance models that are more inclusive in practice, supporting more meaningful engagement over time.

There are also early indications of appetite for a shift towards governance practices that are more accessible and supportive of diverse participation, including attention to communication, meeting dynamics, and feedback mechanisms.

Findings from previous reform rounds also emphasise the importance of creating enabling conditions for youth engagement. These include flexibility in how young people participate, opportunities for skills development, and creating environments that are supportive and engaging. Such approaches recognise the practical realities of young people's lives and highlight that sustained participation is often dependent on how organisations design opportunities for involvement.

International best practice: embedding youth in governance

International best practice suggests that youth engagement becomes more effective when it is embedded within formal governance systems rather than positioned as a consultative function. In a number of global and regional contexts, youth bodies operate as recognised governance actors, with defined mandates to represent constituencies, contribute equitably to policy development, and engage directly with decision-makers.

These approaches are typically characterised by clear pathways from participation into decision-making, ongoing engagement across governance cycles, and collective representation rather than individual membership. This provides a useful point of reference for how youth integration into governance can evolve over time.

However, we are currently at the Phase One (Analysis) stage for 2026, so these best practice developments are at the level of intention rather than implementation. Evidence of fully implemented approaches that

embed youth within governance decision-making will hopefully strengthen as a key area of reform during Phase Two of the reform round and during the completion stages of the previous round.

Conclusion

The evidence across the reports presents a clear and consistent picture of youth engagement in governance across Member Associations.

Youth are present within governance structures and highly active within organisational and community contexts. Member Associations recognise the need to strengthen youth involvement and are beginning to prioritise this within governance reform processes.

However, governance systems do not yet consistently enable meaningful participation in decision-making. Representation has been established, but influence, leadership pathways, and integration into governance processes remain limited.

The central challenge is therefore not one of access, but of design. Governance systems will need to evolve to:

- Support meaningful participation
- Create pathways into leadership
- Ensure that youth perspectives shape decision-making

Across the reports, youth engagement can be understood as established in principle but not yet embedded in practice. It should be addressed as part of the six key principles of the project as a whole as there is an emphasis on equity, inclusivity and sustainability. Addressing this gap will be critical to the next phase of governance reform and continues to be an area of focus for support to MAs to achieve.

This reflects a progression seen across previous reform rounds, where similar challenges have been identified and where the need to move beyond representation towards more structured and sustained youth influence has been consistently highlighted.

Addressing this gap will be critical to the next phase of governance reform and continues to be an area of focus for support to MAs to achieve. This next current presents an opportunity to build on existing foundations and more deliberately embed youth within governance systems as active contributors to decision-making.