



GUIDANCE NOTE

Integrating Youth Leadership
into Mental Health and
Psychosocial Support Responses
in Humanitarian Emergencies

Published by the MHPSS Collaborative, 2024

Contributing authors: Eric Dagadu, Paul Klahre, Shruti Lal and Victor Ugo

Editors: Frances Ellery and Louise Juul Hansen

Design: Neil Adams, GrasshopperDesign.net

Cover photo: Jacob Ammentorp Lund

For more information:

Dr. Victor Ugo, MHPSS & Youth Advisor

MHPSS Collaborative

vu@redbarnet.dk

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere appreciation to all who contributed to the development of this resource. The insights and dedication of the young people who participated in the co-creation workshops have been instrumental in shaping our approach. We are equally grateful to the practitioners and experts whose feedback has been invaluable. Their collective contributions have ensured that this guidance is relevant and geared towards addressing the needs of young people and organizations involved in delivering MHPSS responses and services in humanitarian emergencies.

About the MHPSS Collaborative

The MHPSS Collaborative is a global hub for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), research, innovation, learning and advocacy. We connect key academic and humanitarian actors with local civil society to give children, youth and families in fragile and humanitarian settings the possibility to thrive. Our vision is a world that protects and cares for the mental health and wellbeing of children, youth and families. The MHPSS Collaborative is hosted by Save the Children Denmark.

Learn more at www.mhpsscollaborative.org

info@mhpsscollaborative.org

Suggested citation: MHPSS Collaborative: *Guidance Note on Integrating Youth Leadership into Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Responses in Humanitarian Emergencies*; Copenhagen 2024.

This document is copyrighted. It may be copied, distributed or translated partly or in its entirety without fee or prior permission by not-for-profit organizations provided that the source is referenced in all copies. For copying, distribution or translation in any other circumstance, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher.



CONTENTS

Glossary	iv
Executive summary	vi
Introduction	1
Purpose	1
Who will benefit from this resource?	2
Co-creation in action	2
Importance of integrating youth leadership in MHPSS responses	3
Barriers and challenges for youth leadership integration	5
Six principles for meaningful partnership and engagement	9
Nine strategies for promoting and integrating youth leadership	13
Potential roles for youth leadership in MHPSS responses	17
Useful resources	20

GLOSSARY

IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
REPSSI	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Youth

The age range for defining young people, youth, and adolescents differs across contexts. For this document and to recognize young people in their diversity, youth is understood broadly as a transitional phase of life from childhood over through adolescence to adulthood that does not exceed 35 years.

Youth leadership

Young people’s ability to voluntarily initiate and implement MHPSS responses with ownership over the process and outcome. Youth leadership can be exercised by young individuals in a community, youth groups and initiatives, and youth-led organizations. Integrating youth leadership into MHPSS responses is not simply limited to hiring them as staff. It also refers to both (i) externally supporting independent youth-led action, and (ii) engaging young people meaningfully in decision-making structures, existing institutions and MHPSS mechanisms.

MHPSS

Mental health and psychosocial support refers to any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing and/or prevent or treat mental health conditions.¹

Humanitarian emergencies

Events or series of events that represent a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or other large group of people.²

¹ <https://www.state.gov/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-mhpss/>

² <https://www.humanitariancoalition.ca/what-is-a-humanitarian-emergency>

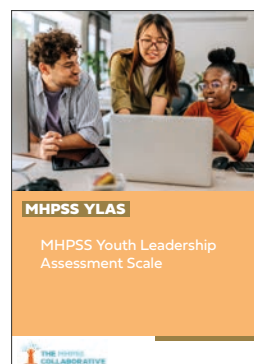
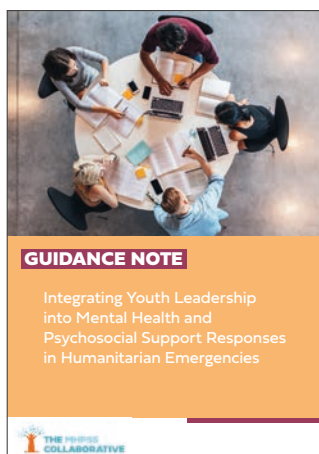
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This guidance note is a comprehensive resource for recognizing and engaging young people as leaders in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) responses during humanitarian emergencies. It outlines the numerous benefits of youth leadership, including increased relevance, reach, and effectiveness of MHPSS interventions, while also acknowledging the challenges that need to be addressed.

Through a collaborative research process involving the MHPSS Collaborative, master's students from the Geneva Graduate Institute, and young people themselves, this guidance identifies key principles for establishing meaningful partnerships with youth, such as adaptability, equality, inclusivity, and agency. It offers practical strategies for organizations to build internal capacity, train and mentor young leaders, ensure their safety and well-being, and meaningfully integrate them into decision-making structures.

This resource serves as a roadmap for MHPSS organizations, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to harness the power of youth leadership for a more inclusive, impactful, and sustainable approach to MHPSS responses in humanitarian emergencies.

The *Integrating Youth Leadership into Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Responses in Humanitarian Emergencies* collection includes a report from the research, this **guidance note** and an assessment scale. They can be accessed at www.mhpsscollaborative.org



INTRODUCTION

In humanitarian emergencies, young people's potential as leaders in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) responses and services often remains untapped. While they offer unique perspectives and innovative approaches and solutions, their roles are typically framed as beneficiaries rather than active contributors. This guidance seeks to shift that narrative. Recognizing the critical intersection of youth leadership and MHPSS, it provides a roadmap for organizations to harness young people's strengths as leaders, ensuring more effective, inclusive and sustainable MHPSS responses in crisis situations.

Purpose

This resource will help:

- Integrate youth leadership into MHPSS responses in humanitarian emergencies across all project phases
- Encourage and inspire organizations to create effective and context-specific strategies and solutions
- Provide actionable recommendations to organizations for enhancing the integration of youth leadership
- Provide a crucial tool for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders in MHPSS responses
- Establish clear principles for meaningful youth engagement, ensuring equity and impact
- Set the stage for future best practices and continuous improvement in the field

Who will benefit from this resource?

Organizations involved in MHPSS and humanitarian response, specifically those seeking to:

- Operationally integrate youth leadership within their organizational structures and processes
- Incorporate youth leadership into their MHPSS and humanitarian response work
- Practitioners working to improve MHPSS responses in humanitarian settings
- Policymakers looking to incorporate youth perspectives into MHPSS strategies, policies and frameworks

Co-creation in action

This guidance is the outcome of collaborative research by the MHPSS Collaborative and master's students at the Geneva Graduate Institute. From the project's inception, young people played pivotal roles, shaping both the research and the resulting guidance. Comprehensive desk research, interviews and focus group discussions with young leaders, MHPSS practitioners, experts, funders and policymakers laid the groundwork for the initial draft guidance. This was then refined through a co-creation workshop with young research participants and went through multiple reviews by an external advisory committee and academic supervisors from the Geneva Graduate Institute.

IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN MHPSS RESPONSES

The integration of youth leadership is a game-changer for the field of MHPSS. This section highlights how youth leadership has significant potential to improve quality, increase capacity and create synergies in MHPSS responses.

Enhances the relevance of MHPSS responses

Youth leadership can improve MHPSS interventions because:

Young people have an intimate understanding of their own and their communities' needs and strengths, which can inform more relevant, suitable and effective interventions

Youth bring innovative ideas, solutions and technological skills that can enhance and modernize MHPSS responses to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

Expands the reach of MHPSS responses

Youth leadership can significantly improve the scope of MHPSS responses because:

Young people are best placed to reach and engage their peers, increasing the effectiveness of peer-to-peer support

Young people are often more likely to speak about and prioritize mental health, which can help break down stigma and encourage more people to seek support.

Boosts capacity for MHPSS responses

Youth leadership is a great resource for providing MHPSS responses because:

Young people's motivation, enthusiasm, bravery and quick mobilization can significantly increase the capacity for MHPSS responses

Supporting existing youth-led initiatives can maximize their potential and increase their impact.

Benefits to young people engaged in MHPSS support

Partnering with young people in MHPSS responses directly supports them because it:

Promotes reflection about and care for their own mental health and wellbeing

Improves self-confidence, soft skills and response capacity

Acknowledges their agency and right to participate in decisions that affect their lives and communities

Increases their recognition and value as partners

Provides opportunities to gain professional experience and kickstart careers in the field of MHPSS.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH LEADERSHIP INTEGRATION

To effectively integrate youth leadership into MHPSS responses, it is crucial to understand the potential barriers and challenges that may arise. This awareness enables the development of proactive strategies to address these obstacles, fostering an environment where young people can thrive as leaders.

Mutual lack of trust

Lack of trust is a two-way street. Organizations/institutions often have doubts about young people's ability to lead, while young people may not trust them due to past experiences and lack of representation.

Young people's skills, knowledge, and lived experiences are often underestimated or dismissed, hindering their participation.

Negative stereotypes about youth can undermine their credibility and create barriers to meaningful engagement.

Limited youth representation in decision-making can further erode trust and discourage participation.

MITIGATION

Foster open dialogues, promote youth representation, and actively challenge negative stereotypes about young people's capabilities.

Organizational challenges

Organizations often struggle to effectively collaborate with young people.

Many organizations lack the internal resources and expertise to meaningfully engage with young people.

There is often a lack of awareness and understanding of youth engagement best practices and available resources.

Organizations may not fully understand the diverse needs and perspectives of young people, leading to ineffective engagement strategies.

MITIGATION

Invest in staff training and resources to build capacity for youth engagement, create dedicated roles for youth engagement, and seek guidance from youth-led organizations and experts to enhance collaboration with young people.

Exclusion from meaningful decision-making

Even when young people are included, their participation is often tokenistic lacking genuine influence and decision-making power.

Young people may be invited to participate but lack real influence over decisions that affect them.

Some organizations engage with youth superficially, focusing on fulfilling requirements rather than genuinely valuing their input.

Lack of diversity in youth representation can lead to the exclusion of marginalized voices and perspectives.

Administrative and political barriers, such as resistance to power-sharing, can hinder meaningful youth participation.

MITIGATION

Ensure meaningful inclusion by involving youth in all stages of decision-making, establish inclusive youth advisory bodies, and advocate for policies that prioritize youth involvement in decision-making.

Limited resources for youth

Young people and youth-led organizations often lack the resources necessary to effectively contribute to MHPSS initiatives.

Many young people have limited knowledge about the humanitarian sector and MHPSS, making it difficult to engage effectively.

Financial constraints and limited access to funding can prevent youth-led initiatives from taking off.

Specialized training opportunities in MHPSS and humanitarian response are often inaccessible to young people.

MITIGATION

Establish dedicated funding streams, offer accessible training, mentorship, and capacity-building programs, and connect young people and youth-led organizations with relevant networks and resources.

Risk of harm to young people

Engaging young people in MHPSS responses can pose risks to their well-being.

Young leaders may experience burnout and mental health challenges due to overwork and exposure to trauma.

Youth engagement can sometimes unintentionally reinforce existing power imbalances or social hierarchies.

MITIGATION

Prioritize the mental well-being and safety of young leaders by providing regular check-ins, supervision, setting clear boundaries, access to support services and fostering a safe environment where they can seek help.

Overlooking the diversity of youth

Young people are not a monolithic group, and ignoring their diversity can have negative consequences.

Treating young people as a homogenous group ignores their diverse identities, experiences, and needs.

Marginalized youth may face additional barriers to participation, limiting their voices and perspectives.

MITIGATION

Recognize and actively address the diverse needs and experiences of young people, actively seek out and include marginalized voices, and challenge biases and discriminatory practices.

SIX PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

To effectively partner with young people in MHPSS responses, organizations must adopt guiding principles that prioritize meaningful engagement, collaboration, and empowerment. The following principles provide a framework for building strong and sustainable partnerships with young people.

Intentional and realistic collaboration

Organizations should approach youth partnerships with thoughtful planning and realistic expectations. This entails:

Honestly assessing the organization's readiness to share power and decision-making with young people.

Evaluating the internal capacity to support meaningful youth participation at all levels.

Identifying and allocating resources specifically for youth-led initiatives.

Adaptability to young people's realities

Organizations should strive to understand and respect the unique needs, perspectives, and realities of young people. This involves:

Identifying and partnering with existing youth networks and organizations.

Actively seeking input from young people on their expectations, concerns, and priorities.

Building trust by starting with appropriate roles and responsibilities for youth, gradually increasing responsibilities as capacity grows.

Using language and channels of communication that are relevant to the young people they want to engage.

Creating safe and inclusive spaces where young people feel comfortable expressing their opinions and ideas.

Equality and partnership

Young people should be treated as equal partners, not just beneficiaries, in MHPSS responses. This means:

Empowering young people to lead initiatives beyond data collection, including program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Establishing formal partnerships with youth-led organizations, recognizing their expertise and contributions.

Demonstrating respect and valuing the perspectives of young people as equal contributors to decision-making.

Inclusivity and diversity

Organizations should strive to equitably engage all young people, particularly those from marginalized or underrepresented groups. This includes:

Acknowledging and valuing the diversity of young people, including their various identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

Actively reaching out to marginalized and underrepresented groups, creating pathways for their participation.

Addressing barriers to participation, such as financial constraints, by providing resources and support.

Youth agency, ownership, and influence

Young people should have the agency to shape and lead MHPSS initiatives. This requires:

Providing opportunities for young people to influence decisions at all stages of the MHPSS programme cycle.

Creating spaces for young people to advocate for their priorities and express their ideas, opinions, and solutions, not just their needs.

Transferring full responsibility for specific projects or initiatives to youth-led organizations when appropriate.

Supporting youth-led projects and initiatives, allowing young people to exercise their leadership skills and take ownership.

Ensuring long-term engagement with young people throughout the entire project duration.

Sustainability of youth participation

Organizations should strive to make youth engagement a long-term, sustainable practice. This involves:

Ensuring that resources and support for youth leadership are embedded in the organization's structure, not reliant on short-term funding or individual champions.

Investing in the development of young leaders, providing them with the skills and resources to sustain their involvement.

Regularly reviewing and adapting youth engagement strategies to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

NINE STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING AND INTEGRATING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Transforming principles into action requires concrete strategies. This section outlines practical steps that can be taken to effectively promote and integrate youth leadership within MHPSS responses.

Foster organizational commitment

Embed youth leadership within your organization’s DNA:		
Designate a dedicated youth focal point or team to champion youth engagement.	Develop and implement policies that explicitly support youth leadership across all areas of your work.	Establish and nurture partnerships with youth-led organizations, valuing their expertise and insights.
Cultivate a trusting and inclusive organizational culture that values young people’s perspectives.	Integrate training on effective youth collaboration and partnership into your emergency preparedness and response protocols.	

Invest in training and mentorship

Empower young people with the skills and knowledge they need to lead:

Offer training on MHPSS fundamentals, psychological first aid, and other relevant topics.

Strengthen the capacity of youth-led organizations through targeted training and resource-sharing.

Provide mentorship and coaching opportunities to emerging young leaders to strengthen their skills and confidence.

Incorporate youth capacity-building into emergency preparedness and anticipatory action plans.

Prioritize youth safety and well-being

Create a supportive and protective environment for young leaders:

Provide regular supervision, guidance, and mentorship to young people involved in MHPSS work.

Develop and implement robust safeguarding policies and procedures, ensuring all staff are trained on their application.

Facilitate peer support networks and spaces for young leaders to connect, share experiences, and build resilience.

Ensure young people have adequate breaks and downtime to prevent burnout and prioritize their mental well-being.

Integrate youth into decision-making

Give young people a seat at the table:

Actively seek and value the insights and perspectives of young people in all decision-making processes.

Establish permanent youth representation on steering committees, advisory boards, and coordination groups.

Cultivate long-term relationships with young people, ensuring their voices are consistently heard, and moving beyond one-off engagements.

Partner with youth organizations

Collaborate for greater impact:

Actively build relationships with youth-led organizations, inviting them to participate in your activities and programs.

Establish formal partnerships that offer ongoing support, resources, and opportunities for collaboration.

Secure long-term funding for youth-led initiatives

Empower youth-led action:

Create dedicated funding mechanisms for youth-led initiatives and organizations.

Provide support and guidance to young people throughout the funding application process.

Involve young people in funding allocation decisions to ensure their priorities are reflected.

Minimize reporting requirements for youth-led organizations to reduce administrative burdens.

Consider making youth engagement a requirement for funding eligibility to incentivize broader youth participation.

Recognize and compensate contributions

Value young people's time, expertise, and commitment:

Provide fair financial compensation (beyond reimbursement of expenses), for their time, expertise and effort.

Offer educational and professional development opportunities, such as training, mentorship, and certifications.

Publicly acknowledge and celebrate their contributions through social media, events, or publications.

Facilitate networking opportunities for young people to connect with peers and potential mentors.

Encourage feedback and continuous improvement

Learn from young people's experiences and insights:

Establish open and accessible channels for feedback from young people, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.

Regularly evaluate your organization's youth engagement practices, transparently communicating how youth involvement has influenced decision-making and program outcomes.

Use feedback to identify areas for improvement and implement changes that enhance the effectiveness of youth leadership initiatives.

Champion accountability and transparency

Demonstrate your commitment to youth leadership:

Publicly share your progress, challenges, and lessons learned in integrating youth leadership into your work.

Be open to feedback and critique, taking corrective action when necessary.

Advocate for the importance of youth leadership in MHPSS within your organization, networks, and the broader humanitarian community.

POTENTIAL ROLES FOR YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN MHPSS RESPONSES

From advocacy to innovation, the potential for youth leadership in MHPSS is vast and varied. This list serves as a springboard for exploring the diverse ways young people can lead, shape, and strengthen MHPSS responses in their communities and beyond.

While this list provides an overview, it's important to recognize that the specific roles young people assume will vary depending on the unique context and needs of each humanitarian emergency. Flexibility and adaptability are key to ensuring youth leadership is effectively integrated and optimized.

Advocacy and awareness

Awareness initiatives

Lead campaigns to destigmatize mental health and promote help-seeking behaviours.

Policy advocacy

Engage with decision-makers to advocate for youth-responsive MHPSS policies and resource allocation.

Community outreach

Partner with local organizations and leaders to raise awareness and reduce barriers to MHPSS access.

Information and communication

Knowledge sharing

Create and disseminate culturally relevant MHPSS information through diverse channels (e.g., social media, workshops, art).

Digital platforms

Develop and manage online safe spaces for peer support, information exchange, and community building.

Peer support and facilitation

Peer-led support groups

Facilitate safe and supportive spaces for young people to share experiences, learn coping skills, and build resilience.

(Note: Peer supporters should not provide counselling, which requires professional training).

Mentorship programs

Pair experienced youth leaders with those new to MHPSS work to provide guidance and support.

Research and data collection

Participatory research

Engage in research to identify MHPSS needs, barriers, and culturally appropriate solutions.

Data collection and analysis

Collect and analyse data to inform program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Capacity building and training

Training delivery

Co-facilitate workshops and training sessions on basic MHPSS skills, self-care, and resilience.

Curriculum development

Collaborate with experts to develop culturally relevant training materials for youth and community members.

Community engagement and mobilization

Community-led initiatives

Initiate and lead projects that address local MHPSS needs, utilizing community assets and strengths.

Social action campaigns

Organize events, campaigns, and creative projects to promote mental well-being and advocate for change.

Resource development and distribution

Content creation

Develop engaging and accessible MHPSS resources tailored to diverse youth populations.

Outreach and distribution

Ensure equitable access to MHPSS resources, particularly for marginalized and hard-to-reach communities.

Collaboration and partnership

Intergenerational partnerships

Foster collaboration with adult MHPSS professionals, community leaders, and other stakeholders.

Networking and coalition building

Build alliances with other youth-led organizations to amplify collective voices and impact.

Innovation and technology

Digital solutions

Co-create and pilot technology-based interventions (e.g., apps, chatbots) for MHPSS support and information.

Creative approaches

Explore innovative methods, such as art therapy, music, and storytelling, to promote mental well-being.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Participatory monitoring

Actively participate in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of MHPSS programs.

Feedback and learning

Provide ongoing feedback to improve services and share lessons learned with the wider community.

USEFUL RESOURCES

This section offers a curated selection of resources ranging from foundational texts to practical tools, all aimed at deepening understanding and facilitating effective action. While the guidance provides a comprehensive framework, these resources can be adapted and utilized based on the specific needs and contexts of different humanitarian settings.

Engaging young people in humanitarian action

- [IASC Guidelines on Working with and For Youth in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises](#) (2020)
- [Shifting Power to Young People – How Young People Can Lead and Drive Solutions in Humanitarian Action](#) (Action Aid/Restless Development, 2019).

Engaging young people in MHPSS

- [Young People’s Participation and Mental Health: A Protocol for Practitioners](#)
- [Youth engaged for mental health: A framework for youth participation under the WHO Pan-European Mental Health Coalition](#)
- [Integrating mental health and psychosocial support into youth programming: a toolkit](#)
- [MHPSS and Participation: Guidance Document to Accompany the MHPSS Compendium of Resources](#) (UNICEF, 2020).
- [Mainstreaming Psychosocial Care and Support Through Child Participation](#) (REPSSI, 2007).
- [Practical Tips on Engaging Adolescents and Youth in The Covid-19 Response](#) (UNICEF, 2020)

On MHPSS response

- [IASC MHPSS Minimum Service Package](#) (2022)
- [Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into Youth Programming: A Toolkit](#) (USAID, 2019).

Community-based MHPSS response in emergencies

- [IOM Manual on Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies and Displacement](#) (2019)
- [Improving Well-Being Through Education – Integrating Community-Based Psychosocial Support into Education in Emergencies](#) (Finn Church Aid, 2018)
- [Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: Three-Tiered Support for Children and Families. Operational Guidelines. Field Test Version](#) (UNICEF 2020).

Principles for youth engagement

- [Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-Making, Our Common Agenda Policy Brief](#) (United Nations 2023).
- [Principles and Barriers for Meaningful Youth Engagement](#) (UN Major Group for Children and Youth, 2017)
- [Meaningfully Engaging With Youth Guidance and Training For UN Staff](#) (UNESCO, 2019).
- [A Youth Participation Best Practice Toolkit: Part I](#) (Save The Children, 2016).
- [Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement](#) (UNICEF, 2020)

Engaging young people in advocacy

- [Youth Leadership, Participation and Accountability 2.0. Part 3. The ‘unofficial’ Handbook](#) (Restless Development & UNFPA)

