

## TIPSHEET ON ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH SPECIAL NEEDS

Conference on inclusive education, 16-18 March 2025

Poland's presidency in the Council of the EU

UNICEF Refugee Response Office in Poland

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### OVERVIEW

This tip sheet is meant to help in identifying, engaging, and capacity building of youth with disabilities (YWDs). The tip sheet is based on youth engagement conducted between August 2021-May 2022 by UNICEF's youth engagement consultant. Anything quoted, its source is acknowledged.

*"When persons with disabilities participate in decision-making processes, it provides strong support towards ensuring that policies, strategies, programmes and operations to be more effective in addressing barriers to inclusion and more relevant in supporting their full and equal participation. Persons with disabilities have firsthand experience of the challenges they face and know better what can be done to enhance their rights and wellbeing. In addition, active participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations is a key part of shifting attitudes and dismantling stigma," United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, May 2021.*

For UNICEF, children and youth with disabilities are at the heart of our work. We involve and engage them because we believe in their capacities. We create and transform systems to fulfill the inclusion agenda.

*"Inclusion is not about inserting persons with disabilities into existing structures but about transforming systems to be inclusive of everyone. Inclusive communities put into place measures to support all children at home, at school, vocational centers, sports and cultural events and in their communities. When barriers exist, inclusive communities transform the way they are organized to meet the needs of all children."*

Source: Children with Disabilities. Ending Discrimination and Promoting Participation, Development and Inclusion, Programme Guidance Note, UNICEF, 2007

### WHAT IS DISABILITY?

"The definition of disability in these guidelines derives from Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

The term 'child' and 'children' is used to cover everyone under the age of 18 years. However, where a project or programme refers specifically to older children, the term adolescents or young people is used," UNICEF, Take Us Seriously, 2013.

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### HOW YOU ENGAGE YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES?

First of all, it is important to understand that you are dealing with youth with different types of disabilities and therefore important to approach disability in a holistic manner.

Depending on the duration of engagement, it is important to budget for them at least bundles, airtime, or an allowance. Some come from poor backgrounds, others are dependent on their families and have no livelihood.

That said, below is a compilation of some tips to apply if and when engaging youth with disabilities:

- The first step is a database with disaggregated disability data of youth with disabilities. Different disabilities require different accommodations.
- Reach out to YWDs *via email first then ask them* the preferred means. Some may prefer Whatsapp, others, texting, email, telegram etc.
- Do a *follow up* via Whatsapp/ call if they take longer to respond to the email.
- As much as there maybe a group of persons with disabilities, if any information is shared in there, it is important to send to them individually.
- If there is any video/activity to be done, ALWAYS ask them whether they are comfortable doing it. Then follow it with a consent form.
- Do a follow up if any activity is assigned. Some need further guidance, and they may 'fear' to ask.
- DO NOT bombard YWDs with too many details especially if you are asking them to do something. If it is an email, send a short email first. Once they respond, send more details but still keep them short and use different colors to make it easy to read and focus.
- Use simple words.
- Avoid truncations.
- To build their capacity, if they are invited to workshops, ask them to write a brief report. It is a way to track and encourage them to grow (some have never done any report).
- Show interest in their work and believe they can do it. Some just need affirmation, and they are good to go.
- Ensure to provide reasonable accommodation (ask them what they need first).

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- Always remember to recognize the person first before the disability. E.g., person with disability. I recognize you have a hearing disability (is it the right term you would like me to use?).
- If you invite them for anything, prepare them in advance. Some know but they may be unable to put thoughts in words. With clear guidance, they nail it. (Go through with them all that is needed, do a simulation exercise with them before the D-Day).
- If presenting anything to them, do so in large fonts/ colors etc.

### Hints and tips from young people with disabilities on communicating

- *"We do have feelings.*
- *We're just like other children.*
- *Show respect, and don't patronise us.*
- *Take your time and make sure you understand.*
- *Talk directly to us, not just to our parents or our caregivers.*
- *Don't be scared to ask questions.*
- *Really listen and understand.*
- *Make sure you really understand us. Take time to find out how we say yes or no.*
- *Keep calm and get on with it.*
- *Don't be scared.*
- *Learn from young people.*
- *Show an interest in us, make it more than just a job,"UNICEF Take Us Seriously, 2013.*