

Comprehensive Sexuality Education



Background

Every young person will one day have life-changing decisions to make about their sexual and reproductive health. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) enables young people to protect and advocate for their health, well-being and dignity by providing them with a necessary toolkit of knowledge, attitudes and skills. It is a precondition for exercising full bodily autonomy, which requires the right to make choices about one's body and the information to make these choices in a meaningful way.

Explicitly, the term 'comprehensive sexuality education' did not make it into the final version of the Political Declaration (PD), despite strong advocacy from young people and communities alike. However, that doesn't mean we should stop promoting and advocating for CSE. We must look to education that supports young people to develop the knowledge, skills, ethical values and attitudes they need to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices about relationships, sex and reproduction. Although sustained advocacy is needed to ensure that CSE gets effectively implemented, it remains and continues to be a critical part of HIV prevention efforts.

CSE advocacy does not need to be an all or nothing effort. The PD recognises the importance of "comprehensive education in and out of school". Similarly, the PD is not the only document for advocacy and does not limit what you can and cannot advocate for. There are several ways that you may be able to utilise the commitments in the 2021 PD to support any advocacy campaigns and efforts that promote in- and out-of-school CSE.



Key Demands and Priority Actions for Young People



Young people call for the wider expansion of HIV prevention and treatment efforts, which includes new prevention interventions, such as PEP and PrEP, comprehensive harm reduction services, adequate and accessible mental health services, community-based social support, and in- and out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). They all form part of a wider combination HIV prevention and treatment package that should be made available to all young people in all their diversity, including key populations.

Laws that create barriers to accessing HIV testing, treatment, and prevention, such as the age of consent laws to access HIV testing, as well as laws limiting access to harm reduction services, together with laws that impose criminal sanctions for HIV exposure, non-disclosure, and transmission, must be repealed without delay. Any laws or policies restricting the provision of CSE must also be abolished, in order to make

substantive progress towards SDG 3 and 5, as well as to respect the right of health of young people globally.

These key demands need to be contextualised to the context of where the community advocating is based. They should be a starting point and adopted, not directly implemented.

Getting a Baseline



CSE can be delivered in formal and non-formal settings, whether in-school or out-of-school.

CSE should address sexual and reproductive health issues, puberty and menstruation, reproduction, contraception, pregnancy and childbirth, STIs, including HIV and AIDS. If it does not, it should not be classed as comprehensive. UNESCO and UNFPA have developed technical guidance on what should be included in CSE provision which can be found below:

→ [International Technical Guidance on CSE](#)

→ [International Technical Guidance on Out-Of-School CSE](#)

Firstly, what's important is to establish and foster interactive learning methods, including open and honest interactive discussions around CSE, which is helpful in the effective implementation of sexuality education - later down the line. This ensures that all teaching is relevant to young people's reality and enables and empowers them to question and form their own values and attitudes.

Although CSE is the topic that tends to generate the most controversy, as it did during the negotiations at the HLM 2021, it doesn't mean our advocacy for CSE has come to an end. There are plentiful resources, guides, and tools available to young people in various languages that buttress the importance of CSE and how you can get started on your advocacy.

The language in the Political Declaration reflects a compromise made between progressive and conservative members states on the issue. Since the PD neglects to mention CSE explicitly, there are other commitments you could use to help back up your case for CSE. For example, general commitments, such as number 56: "[C] Commit to reducing annual new HIV

infections to under 370,000 and annual AIDS-related deaths to under 250,000 by 2025 and eliminating all forms of HIV-related stigma and discrimination", is a good example of how the effective implementation of in- and out-of-school CSE can be used to achieve a target on the PD.

In particular, for CSE, there are two main avenues you could explore:

- 1 The first one is to develop and strengthen partnerships and coalitions in your community/ context that advocate for CSE. Many groups, organisations, and UN agencies support in- and out-of school-CSE. Those who oppose CSE can be organised, well resourced, and committed to their values. Those in favour of CSE will need to match this and be as equally, if not more organised and strategic with their advocacy. Search for groups and coalitions that you may be able to join, and you can always reach out to organisations like [The PACT](#) and [Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights](#) to explore potential partnerships and gather further information.
- 2 The second thing is to identify the "moveable middle." In advocacy, there will be those who support you, those who do not, and those who aren't sure (in the middle). The ones in the middle are your primary target group, making up the most significant percentage to rally support. Utilise these commitments as an entry point for conversations with relevant authorities in your context, and as a way to rally support and demonstrate the need for the components of CSE in the context of ending the HIV epidemic.

Contextualising the Targets



Depending on your situation, these targets may be closer or further away from being achieved. Based on your baseline, set some intermediary targets that are contextual to your setting that are achievable in a reasonable

timeframe that will support with the reaching of the relevant 2025 targets. You don't need to shoot straight for them, set some more achievable outcomes if needed.



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“Increasing national leadership, resource allocation and other evidence-based enabling measures for proven HIV combination prevention, including condom promotion and distribution... full access to comprehensive information and education, in and out of school.”

This commitment is focused on expanding HIV prevention efforts, including new HIV prevention methods. Although the term ‘sexuality’ was not included, this would be a good starting point or entry point when advocating for the CSE.

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“Committing to accelerating efforts to scale up scientifically accurate, age-appropriate comprehensive education, relevant to cultural contexts, that provides adolescent girls and boys and young women and men, in and out of school, consistent with their evolving capacities, with information on sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gender equality and women’s empowerment, human rights, physical, psychological and pubertal development and power in relationships between women and men, to enable them to build self-esteem and informed decision-making, communication and risk reduction skills and develop respectful relationships, in full partnership with young persons, parents, legal guardians, caregivers, educators and healthcare providers, in order to enable them to protect themselves from HIV infection”

This paragraph further breaks down focus areas where members states have committed to accelerating efforts. See here, the mention of comprehensive education, information on sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gender equality and women’s empowerment, human rights, pubertal development and so forth. While again this does not explicitly reference CSE, it can be used as a tool to hold your government accountable on the education that is provided in schools to young people on HIV, sex, relationships, and other factors that are integral to the HIV response.

Conclusion



Young people have the right to lead healthy and fulfilling lives free from violence and discrimination. As they develop, we want them to take more and more control over their lives so that they are able to make important life decisions on their own as they get older.

The balance between responsibility and rights is critical because it sets behavioural expectations and builds trust while providing young people with the knowledge, ability, and comfort to manage their sexual health throughout life in a thoughtful, empowered and responsible way. But responsibility is a two-way street.

Society needs to provide young people with science based, age-appropriate information that will equip them to live healthy lives and build healthy relationships. Young people need to take personal responsibility for their health and well-being, whilst advocates must also work to dismantle barriers to sexual health, including poverty and lack of access to health care.

This advocacy guide would not have been possible without the contributions of the following (in alphabetical order)

- African Network of Adolescents and Young Persons Development
- Sinayo Mukume
- The PACT
- Y+ Global
- Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights
- Youth LEAD
- Youth RISE
- Youth Voices Count

These youth networks and young activists have been critical in providing insight into how the 2021 Political Declaration can be used to hold decision-makers accountable to their commitments to young people to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

