

## The Power of ICT: Enhancing opportunities for youth engagement in governance processes

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**Abstract:** This paper will explore the lessons learned from youth led Commonwealth network, CYGEN to demonstrate how ICT can be used to ensure youth's ability to engage in national, regional, and international political processes and dialogue. It will examine how CYGEN utilised, and adapted to a series of communication platforms in order to best reach, communicate, and sustain engagement with its members. Through qualitative data it will explore and contrast various digital platforms for engaging young people, and identify the different purposes they can be utilised for.

*Key outcome:* From CYGEN's experience in testing and employing various platforms, the most effective methods of engaging and sustaining young people's engagement requires a combination of ICT platforms which enable top-down information sharing, bottom-up project-based work, and horizontal learning and connecting through both online and offline methods.

*Recommendations:* From these lesson learned CYGEN has four recommendations to support actors in effectively utilising ICT for successful, meaningful, and high levels of youth engagement: 1. Create and implement a National ICT Youth Engagement Strategy which employs a combination of offline, and online techniques to more effectively engage, reach, and consult with young people; 2. Utilise existing ICT platforms which are already commonly used by young people, whilst also ensuring existing platforms are youth-friendly; 3. Ensure that new platforms consider three main principles in their design: accessibility, affordability and usability for young people; 4. Implement a Gender and Age Action Plan to guarantee that gender is taken into account in implementing youth engagement strategies.

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## **The Power of ICT: Enhancing opportunities for youth engagement in governance processes**

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Significant attention has been paid to the positive role that young people play in promoting development, peace and democracy.<sup>i</sup> Whilst at a policy level the Commonwealth has committed itself to promoting youth development, the means and quality of youth engagement remains a critical issue as governments take up this mantle. How do we ensure that youth engagement moves beyond a strategic policy? How do we mobilise and sustain youth engagement in a cost effective manner?

Investing in young people requires a nuanced understanding of their needs, drive, and methods to enable improved communication to, and amongst them. There are an estimated 1.8 billion young people in the world<sup>ii</sup>, with 60% of the Commonwealth being under the age of 30.<sup>iii</sup> Mobilising, and sustaining youth engagement necessitates innovative approaches that move from traditional modes of political participation, and embrace the generational shift toward information, communication and technology (ICT). With 3.773 billion internet users around the world, and 2.786 billion active on social media, ICT platforms have the capacity to transform political engagement and community consultation in ways we can only imagine.<sup>iv</sup>

This paper seeks to explore how the Commonwealth Youth Gender Equality Network (CYGEN) has adapted to this challenge, and utilised various ICT methods to effectively mobilise and increase the participation of youth across the Commonwealth. Through qualitative data it will provide recommendations which advocate for the inclusion of specific youth-friendly communication platforms as a method of increasing youth participation in governance processes and structures, and cost-effective method of improving connection, communication and consultation with young people.

### **The Case of CYGEN: Learning through practice**

CYGEN is a youth led, and focused network which actively promotes the meaningful inclusion of youth voices on gender equality issues in existing structures, governance processes. As a network of young experts from the Commonwealth, it consults with, and mobilises youth to achieve policy changes

around a core agenda and provides inputs into Commonwealth and International fora.<sup>1</sup>

In developing a multidisciplinary and international network, CYGEN had to discover methods for mobilising, and sustaining meaningful engagement with its members in internal discussions, whilst facilitating consultations to feed into national, regional, and international agendas. Studies show that young people are increasingly shifting away from conventional forms of political participation and institutionalised engagement toward online channels<sup>v</sup>. Globally, internet usage is on the rise with internet penetration increasing by 21% in 2016 alone.<sup>vi</sup> In high income countries, young people spend more than 27 hours online every week.<sup>vii</sup> In emerging and developing countries, 44% of people access the internet, with young people 15% more likely to do.<sup>viii</sup> East Asia, South Asia, and Africa are the fastest growing markets for internet penetration. With 50% of web traffic in 2017 occurring through mobile devices, the demand for mobile services is facilitating new forms of working and sharing. Connection and communication with what was traditionally considered rural and inaccessible communities is easier than ever.<sup>ix</sup>

For CYGEN, harnessing the power of ICT seemed like an inevitable step in reaching and connecting with its members. Doing so, has enabled members from different parts of the world to meet without spending endlessly on travel costs, allowances, and meeting logistics. Whilst ICT has the incredible potential to bring people together, the affordability, accessibility and usability of particular platforms over others play a critical role in their success as a tool for youth engagement.

### **Affordability, Accessibility, Usability**

For the past two years CYGEN has been testing different ICT platforms to maximise engagement. Table 1 gives an outline of the methods used. Items in red are platforms which were used but proved ineffective with members. Orange are those that enable peer to peer or group discussions. Green are those which are most commonly used by CYGEN.

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<sup>1</sup> CYGEN participated and actively informed events such as the Commission on Status of Women,(CSW) 60 and 61, the Commonwealth Heads' Of Government Meeting Women's and Youth Forums, the Yogyakarta Principles Review, Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings, and other Commonwealth discussions such as the Commonwealth Women Leaders' Summit.

Table 1: CYGEN and ICT Platforms

ICT PLATFORM	DESCRIPTION	PURPOSE	COST	CHALLENGES
Huddle	Team collaboration and project management software for enterprises, government, civil society groups. Manages tasks, projects and documents simply in secure cloud workspaces	Member engagement. Sharing documents.	Provided by Commonwealth Secretariat as part 'Commonwealth Connects' project	Clunky platform. Requires strong internet connection and computer access. Can be used with phones but with limited functionality
WhatsApp	A free, instant messaging application for smartphones. Able to make voice and video calls, send messages, images, videos, documents, audio files, and voice notes	Quick communication amongst members. Most effective amongst small group of Executive Members. Used for peer to peer connection	Free	With too much discussion the instant notifications can prove annoying
Skype	An instant messaging app that provides online text message and video chat/conference services. Can transmit text and video messages, documents, images, text, and video.	Initially used for meetings amongst members	Free	Requires strong internet connection. Inconsistent quality. Difficult for video conferencing.
Zoom	Provides remote conferencing services using cloud computing. Offering both meeting and webinar software, Zoom combines video conferencing, online meetings, and mobile collaboration.	Currently in use for team and working group meetings.	Free for 45 minute online meeting	45 minute time limit on meetings with the free, basic service.
Email	Electronic messages between individuals, or groups,	Inform members of updates, opportunities and to share documents	Free	Requires back and forth. Not good for group work
Google docs	A free, web-based software office suite offered by Google within its Google Drive service	Used by working groups for projects.	Free	For best use requires computer access. Difficult interface
Facebook	An online social media and social networking service	Used for broader network consultations, showcasing work, connecting members.	Free	Best used for information sharing rather than managing complex tasks
Twitter	An online news and social networking service	Used for public visibility and advocacy efforts.	Free	Not effective for peer to peer, or group learning
Instagram	A mobile, desktop, and internet-based photo-sharing application	Not officially used but enables connection between members	Free	For photo sharing rather than information.

The key to successfully utilising digital platforms to mobilise and engage youth centralises on three main issues: affordability; accessibility; and usability. **Affordability** was a critical factor for CYGEN and its members, therefore several free, or basic packages were employed. Amongst young people, cost and the ability of a platform to be run on older devices was critical to their uptake.

Whilst affordability is central to whether young people will use it, **accessibility** is a primary factor influencing the retention of young people's interest. Can the platform be used on phones and tablet devices and with limited bandwidth? For CYGEN members, the size of the platform was a barrier for members who had devices with limited capacity. In organising meetings, stable internet connections proved troublesome for video conferences. Even when videos were disconnected, Skype was often unable to provide a quality connection, therefore CYGEN moved to Zoom as an alternative which provided consistent, higher-quality calls.

Lastly, the **usability** of a platform influenced the frequency with which members engaged. Huddle, was quickly dismissed due its clunky interface, and lack of notifications. The ease and friendliness of social media platforms are key features of what young people seek in professional platforms. Globally, the most active users of Facebook are those between 16 and 31.<sup>x</sup> The popularity of such platforms lies in the ease that young people can connect *with* people, and connect *to* the platform through their mobile and tablet interface. Repurposing social media platforms for professional use will enable increased, and sustained uptake amongst young people.

### **The art of choosing the right platform**

Actors must ask whom do they wish to capture, and what level of interactivity is required? For communication purposes or information sharing, CYGEN members found that Facebook and Twitter were best suited. They are effective tools to interact with large, external parties, and keep people updated. However for e-consultations emails, Zoom, and Google Docs proved more professional, time-efficient and accessible allowing for high levels of engagement for targeted advocacy and research.

Selecting a suitable platform must be considered in relation to the principle of “meaningful engagement, and moving beyond top down information sharing. For CYGEN, a blend of platforms enabled members to share, contribute and connect facilitating more sophisticated, nuanced and sustained engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Compared to traditional modes of physically gathering activists, ICT platforms can be a successful method of reducing costs whilst maximising youth engagement. However, their success depends on choosing tailored, context specific, and youth-friendly platforms.<sup>2</sup> Youth friendly platforms require consideration of the affordability, accessibility and usability for young people. Sometimes this entails transforming existing services to ensure they are youth-friendly, alternatively shifting communication to commonly used platforms by young people.

For developing and emerging countries in the Commonwealth, actors must also account for equitable access for young woman, and rural communities. Data shows both groups continue to unequally bear the burden of the digital divide. With weak infrastructure in rural areas, the proliferation of ICT in Africa has been predominantly mobile-led. Therefore, it is essential that governments employ alternative offline strategies such as mobile-based technology.<sup>3</sup> Research also suggests that women are nearly 50% less likely to access the internet than men in the same communities.<sup>xi</sup> Globally, the gender digital divide is 12%, and as high as 31% in developing and emerging countries.<sup>xii</sup> Consequently actors must make a conscious effort to ensure women and girls, rural communities and other marginalised groups are able to access ICT platforms

From CYGEN’s experience, the most effective and quality engagement required a combination of ICT platforms which enabled top-down information sharing, bottom-up project-based work, and horizontal learning and connecting. Therefore CYGEN proposes four recommendations to enable Commonwealth actors to effectively utilise ICT for successful, and meaningful, youth engagement:

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<sup>2</sup> Questions to consider when deciding what constitutes a youth-friendly platform: Who bears the cost burden of the platform? The host or the User? Is the platform widely available? Does it require specific technology, or devices? Can it function with limited internet, or offline?

<sup>3</sup> Mobile technologies which do not require internet access but depend on traditional communications networks and towers, have proven successful in East Africa in the health and banking sector in connecting rural, internet less areas.

1. Create and implement National ICT Youth Engagement Strategy which employs a combination of offline, and online techniques to more effectively engage, reach and consult with young people
2. Utilise existing ICT platforms which are already commonly used by young people, whilst also ensuring existing platforms are youth-friendly
3. Ensure that new platforms consider three main principles in their design: accessibility, affordability and usability for young people
4. Implement a Gender and Age Action Plan to guarantee that gender is taken into account in implementing youth engagement strategies

Whether liked or not, ICT technology is changing the way people work, play and connect, and actors must embrace these new technologies as a means of reaching communities, especially young people whose future is digital.

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<sup>i</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2013) The Commonwealth Charter, London

<sup>ii</sup> UNFPA (2014) The State of World Population 2014, UNFPA: New York  
[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14-Report\\_FINAL-web.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14-Report_FINAL-web.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2016) Fast Facts: The Youth Development Index, Retrieved from [www.commonwealth.org](http://www.commonwealth.org)

<sup>iv</sup> We Are Social, (2017, Jan 24) *Digital in 2017 Global Overview*, Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview> - Slide 5

<sup>v</sup> Ohlin et al. (2010) "How Young People participate in civic activities using internet and mobile technologies," Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Retrieved from: <https://www.education.gov.au/national-youth-affairs-research-scheme-publications-2006-2012>

<sup>vi</sup> Hootsuite & We Are Social, (2017, Jan 24) *Digital in 2017 Global Overview*, Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview> - Slide 6

<sup>vii</sup> Ofcom (2015, May 11) Time spent online doubles in a decade, Retrieved from <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2015/time-spent-online-doubles-in-a-decade>

<sup>viii</sup> Pew Research Center, March, 2015, "Internet Seen as Positive Influence on Education but Negative Influence on Morality in Emerging and Developing Nations"

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid - Slide 7

<sup>x</sup> Hootsuite & We Are Social, (2017, Jan 24) *Digital in 2017 Global Overview*, Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview> - Slide 22

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> Alliance for Affordable Internet (2015) The Affordability Report 2015/2016, Retrieved: <http://a4ai.org/affordability-report/report/2015/> (May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

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## Author Bio

*Milena Bacalja Perianes* is a gender researcher and SRHR expert. With field experience in Cambodia, Mongolia, Malawi, and South Africa, her specialties include youth engagement, SRHR, HIV, and women’s rights. Previously she worked for UNAIDS Cambodia and Mongolia, the International AIDS Society, and Simavi managing and implementing a variety of community-based programmes and advocacy initiatives. She is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Menstrual Health Hub, as well as Founding and Executive Member of CYGEN. With an MPhil in Multi-disciplinary Gender Studies from the University of Cambridge, and Masters in International Development from RMIT, Milena is particularly interested in youth engagement in the development agenda with a core focus on gender equity and equality issues.

### **Organisational Bio**

The Commonwealth Youth Gender Equality Network (CYGEN) is a youth led, and focused network which actively promotes and supports the meaningful inclusion of youth voices on gender equality issues in local, national, regional, Commonwealth and international agendas. CYGEN seeks to improve the position of young people, and advocate for increased youth engagement and participation in existing structures, processes and governance. CYGEN affords young people the opportunity to voice their concerns on gender equality issues that not only affect them, but that impact the variety of communities in which they live. CYGEN receives technical and financial assistance through the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS).