From Policy to Grassroots: Why Youth Lived Experience Must Anchor Global Mental Health Governance

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While global governance speaks endlessly of equity and borderless solutions, it frequently establishes invisible borders when it comes to recognizing the expertise and leadership of people with lived experience of mental health conditions - especially the young. True transformation in global mental health policy requires embedding lived experience directly at the core of decision-making structures. When personal, direct interaction with health systems, societal dynamics, and recovery anchors global governance, policy moves from purely clinical or technical models toward human-centered, rights-based approaches that address the social, economic, and political determinants of mental well-being.

Despite the adoption of the UN political declaration on NCDs and mental health last year and its explicit call for a whole-of-society approach, political commitment has rarely materialized into concrete, operational action. In practice, implementation frameworks continue to treat mental health as a secondary priority, while meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience remains absent from national strategies and resource allocations.

This operational mismatch was starkly evident during recent global high-level convenings such as the World Health Assembly in May 2026. While civil society organizations and advocates robustly centered lived experience across numerous side events, official member state interventions underscored a persistent power-shifting disconnect. Although nations such as Ireland and Denmark made brief references to integrating peer roles into health systems and listening to lived realities, broader official state-level commitments largely fell short of driving true structural transformation.

If institutional hesitation remains the norm for lived experience broadly, it is a fatal flaw when applied to youth. Today's young people are not merely younger versions of past generations; they are navigating an entirely unprecedented psychological landscape defined by hyper-digital socialization, algorithmic pressures, and compounding global polycrises. The modern determinants of youth mental health have fundamentally shifted, yet traditional health systems remain anchored in retroactive, analog models of care. Because legacy institutions are inherently ill-equipped to keep pace with these rapidly emerging realities, youth lived experience is not just a supplementary perspective - it is an operational necessity. Without youth co-leadership actively designing interventions, global mental health policies are solving for a world that no longer exists, rendering them functionally obsolete before they even reach the implementation phase.

The Experience Paradox: How Global Governance Creates a Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Exclusion

The United Nations political declaration on NCDs and mental health stands as a landmark victory, showcasing the immense power of civil society advocacy and multi-stakeholder hearings to successfully shape global agenda. However, a critical reflection on the depth of youth engagement highlights persistent structural barriers. Participating youth advocates were often restricted to brief 3-minute speaking slots, limiting meaningful dialogue and substantive policy contributions. More critically, access to these decision-making arenas inherently favors specific privileged nationalities and socioeconomic classes, amplified by steep demands for extensive formal experience - a standard exceptionally difficult to meet while navigating a mental health condition. For young people with lived experience of mental health conditions, these barriers are compounded. Participation in international policy spaces often presupposes the very resources that historically excluded young people have had the least opportunity to acquire: professional networks, prior institutional experience, financial security, flexible time and familiarity with how global governance works.

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle. Institutions seek young people who can demonstrate established experience, but access to that experience is itself unequally distributed. Those who have already entered international networks are better positioned to secure further opportunities, while those facing financial insecurity, disability-related barriers, geographic exclusion or other forms of marginalisation are left to overcome additional hurdles before their expertise is even considered.

This creates a paradox. Young people are invited to participate in systems that frequently require them to demonstrate that they have already benefited from the opportunities participation is supposed to provide. And when the same relatively small group of young people repeatedly occupies these spaces, the issue becomes about whose experiences and knowledge are being treated as representative of an extraordinarily diverse generation.

Supply Without Demand: The Disparity Between Youth Readiness and Institutional Buy-In

As a first-of-its-kind global research and learning community designed by and for young people with lived experience, the Possibilities Collective, initiated by Generation Mental Health (GenMH) and commissioned by Wellcome, serves as a vital part of the solution. By democratizing research education and dismantling traditional academic gatekeeping, the Collective specifically empowers youth in research settings to level the playing field, equipping them with the tools and mentorship needed to transform lived experience into rigorous evidence.

Its premise is that young people should not need to arrive with established institutional credentials or privileged networks before they can begin developing the expertise to influence mental health research and policy.

To move beyond theoretical training, the Collective aims to create clear bridges to internships and practical opportunities where youth can apply what they have learned in real-world policy and research environments. However, sustaining this momentum requires strong institutional buy-in and genuine allies who actively value future leaders and firsthand experience. As we generate a skilled, eager supply of youth researchers ready to improve policies and evidence, a critical question remains: where is the corresponding demand from international institutions and decision-making bodies to formally integrate this vital expertise? Training can help young people become better equipped to contribute; it cannot, by itself, ensure that institutions will recruit them, remunerate their contributions or share decision-making authority with them. The next challenge therefore becomes about changing the institutional conditions that determine whether their expertise is sought, supported and acted upon.

The scale of interest in the Possibilities Collective, alongside the demand for GenMH's other programs, points to a persistent gap between young people's aspirations and the opportunities available to them. When the Collective launched publicly, 762 people from 81 countries completed an interest form, including 453 who expressed interest in our training or mentorship programs. But only 153 people identifying as mental health experts or funders expressed interest in mentoring young people or undertaking consulting work with the Collective. In another example, Generation Mental Health's fellowship program received over 300 applications for just five or six funded placements across each of its 2 cohorts.

While these figures are not representative of all young people with lived experience, they offer a glimpse of the disparity between the appetite for opportunities and the limited resources available to support them. Across its diverse initiatives, GenMH encounters young people eager to develop their skills, contribute to research, strengthen advocacy and improve mental health in their communities, yet only a small proportion can access the funded opportunities needed to turn that motivation into sustained action. There is no dearth of talented young people, but the challenge remains to create the conditions in which their talent, knowledge and commitment can flourish.

Doing so requires more than expanding the number of training programs or fellowship places. It requires designing supported pathways into influence that recognize the diversity of young people's circumstances and potential. Young people should not have to accumulate conventional credentials or overcome structural disadvantages before their lived experience, situated knowledge and

leadership potential are taken seriously. Lowering unnecessary barriers to entry does not mean lowering standards; it means recognizing that lived experience, when equipped with democratized research tools, is a standard of expertise all its own.

The Courage to Share Power: A Vision for the New Operational Reality of Lived Experience

A truly fit-for-purpose system must be designed to serve those most affected. Today, the world is home to the largest generation of young people in history - over 1.9 billion individuals, according to the United Nations Population Fund. Simultaneously, this demographic bears the heaviest psychological and social burden; the World Health Organization reports that half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14 and with suicide being the third leading cause of death in 15-29 year-olds, making youth the most acutely impacted population worldwide.

To bridge the gap between paper commitments and operational practice, global governance must finally align with this demographic reality. We urge international institutions, member states, and funders to adopt three structural recommendations:

- **Mandate co-leadership over consultation:** Move beyond 3-minute speaking slots and performative advisory boards by establishing mandated, voting seats for youth with lived experience within primary funding, steering, and policy-drafting committees.
- **Redefine "Rigorous Evidence":** Dismantle the "extensive experience" paradox by formally recognizing lived experience and democratized, community-led research as valid, actionable data on par with traditional academic credentials.
- **Invest in lived experience infrastructure:** Shift financial resources from isolated, tokenized event sponsorships toward sustained, core funding for platforms like the Possibilities Collective that actively generate a supply of highly skilled youth researchers.

As the international mental health community looks toward the 7th Global Ministerial Mental Health Summit in Kigali in 2027, governments, civil society and funding institutions face a defining choice. They can continue to perpetuate symbolic inclusion, or commit to structural transformation by embedding models like the Possibilities Collective into global governance. The lived experience ecosystem is no longer asking for a seat at the table; we are arriving with the evidence, the researchers, and the frameworks. This is now the operational reality, and the global health system needs to respond. The true test for global governance is no longer whether institutions are willing to listen, but whether they have the courage to share the power to implement.

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Find out more about The Possibilities Collective.