



SheDecides+5

Conference Report

Brussels, May 19 and 20, 2022





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▶▶ Introduction

In 2022, SheDecides celebrated five years as a global movement of collective action for the right for all women and girls to decide over their body, life and future. The SheDecides+5 meeting hosted by the Belgian Government under the leadership of Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Kitir, in partnership with the SheDecides Support Unit, in Brussels on May 19 and 20, 2022 was a key moment for SheDecides Champions and partners to celebrate its achievements, explore how the context has changed, identify current challenges, and reinforce their commitment to standing up and defending bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in a changing world.

This gathering of leaders, donors, government representatives and activists provided a moment to reflect on the importance of having strong political leadership and joint coordinated efforts across regions, sectors and actors. As many Champions noted across the two days, rights are increasingly at risk around the world. With increased opposition rolling back gains and backlash emerging from places where process has been secured, the need for SheDecides is stronger than ever. The direct attacks against gender equality and SRHR are further exacerbated by shrinking civic and democratic space, and decreasing financial and political support at national and global levels.



This global gathering allowed Champions to explore together these new threats to progress, identify how the SRHR sector can coordinate to best defend against them and strategise about the unique role of SheDecides. Through connecting with other Champions and partners, and listening to sector experts, young leaders and each other, they were able to renew their inspiration, connect and build partnerships with each other, as well as use this as a moment to publicly express their support for bodily autonomy.

"United in the SheDecides movement, we need to accelerate our efforts for the health and wellbeing of women and girls."

Liesje Schreinemacher, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Netherlands

▶▶ Objectives and achievements

The SheDecides+5 meeting created the space for leaders in the SRHR community to come together and reflect, take stock and plan. It was designed to allow opportunities for high level political engagement, as well as advanced, technical-level strategic collaboration and coordination. With the participation of UN agencies, experts and others, Champions had the opportunity to reflect on the latest data and political context, and to translate that into a clear call to action for the SheDecides community. Through fostering supportive dialogues and sharing expertise, updated analysis and recommendations, Champions shaped and influenced the direction of SheDecides, contributing to its work plan and defining its place within the SRHR ecosystem.



Through panels, discussions and workshops, Champions and partners shared some of the challenges that the SRHR community is facing.

From access to services to closing civic space, much of the progress that has been made is on fragile ground, and women, girls and young people are still cut out of discussions that affect their lives. There was a recognition that while the SRHR community has long experience and a strong, systematic and evidence-based way of working, it is not always winning hearts and minds, and has underestimated the power of misinformation.

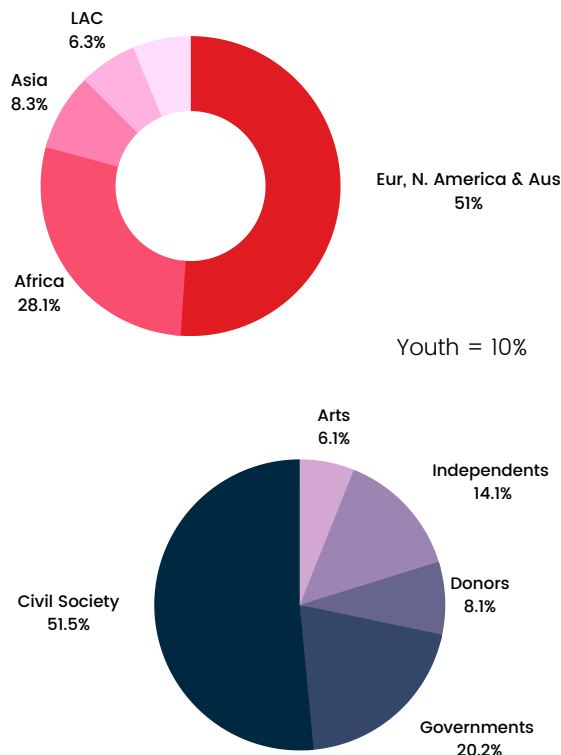
For this reason, SheDecides as a movement needs to redouble efforts to speak out, and speak loud against these attacks. Champions voiced concern at the challenge to Roe v Wade which would rollback abortion rights in the United States and set a devastating global precedent, emboldening anti-choice opposition groups elsewhere. The SheDecides community - responding to the call from Dawn Laguens, Interim Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Global - noted that a global movement like SheDecides is well-placed to coordinate global solidarity messages which will boldly defend the right to abortion.

The lack of funding being made available for movements, young people and advocacy was flagged as a challenge for many, especially those in the Global South. While gaining public support and political will is central to realising the SheDecides vision, funding services, activism and movements is needed to drive the change, especially at the national level.

But in every challenge there is great opportunity; many felt that this is the time to organise, to strengthen support to the movement and not shy away. The Green Wave in Latin America has shown the power in the movement and the possibility for change. Champions also identified the power in diverse and varied constituencies, highlighting that when the movement share a common goal and works together to break down the spaces between different groups and issues, including young people, women, LGBTIQ+ activists, governments and civil society organisations, it becomes a lot more challenging to silence the powerful collective voice and prevent progress.

Power imbalances both within and outside of the SheDecides movement were also raised as points of consideration. The importance of power sharing and addressing patterns of decolonisation were felt to be central to effective movement building, along with taking a robust intersectional approach. Champions argued that we cannot address the inequality of women's bodies without addressing global inequalities; the stark reality is that many laws restricting women's access to abortion or that criminalise LGBTIQ+ persons are colonial relics. Unequal power relations related to SRHR cannot be effectively challenged, unless they have also been addressed internally within the bodily autonomy movement.

Diversity of SheDecides Champions



A range of governments across regions reaffirmed their support for SheDecides and the importance of collective action to counter opposition and deliver change. There was consensus across these leaders of the importance of a movement like SheDecides, speaking publicly about gender equality and SRHR, and not shying away from more challenging political discussions. There was strong agreement on the important role of young people in advocating for change – and the need to intentionally support youth-led action instead of co-opting youth movements or tokenising youth activists. Many also shared their deep concern about the rising power of the opposition and direct attacks on democracy, especially it affects abortion access, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and LGBTIQ+ rights.



Ministers recognised that while political will is important, it must be accompanied by action and that they are in a unique position to influence this space. They shared approaches including supporting UN agencies, engaging bilaterally and promoting feminist foreign policy frameworks through diplomatic dialogue.

SheDecides warmly welcomed the specific commitments made by the Netherlands, South Africa and Sweden to advance this agenda.

Recognising the need to support collective action, Liesje Schreinemacher, the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, committed to organising a dialogue with governments, civil society organisations and young people on CSE in Africa.



Echoing this need to engage across sectors, Lindiwe Zulu, South Africa Minister of Social Development, committed to collaborating with partners, governments and civil society organisations to host a conference on sexual and reproductive justice. One of the new SheDecides Champions,



One of the new SheDecides Champions, Matilda Ernkran, Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation announced her commitment to supporting collective action through a grant of 1 million kronor to the SheDecides Support Unit.



Further support to the SheDecides Support Unit was pledged for 2023 by Meryame Kitir, Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation and Major Cities Policy, Belgium.



For many, the brightest highlight of the SheDecides+5 meeting was welcoming seven new Champions from four regions. Coming from civil society, the arts sector and governments, the new Champions demonstrate what it means to be a SheDecides representative: unquestioned commitment to SRHR, a passion for working collaboratively, and a desire for a better, fairer world.

Dayna Ash from Lebanon brought with her a strong queer activist voice, and along with Enas Dajani from Palestine, called on the Movement to understand and act on issues of occupation and conflict. Young leaders Ndiilo Nthengwe of Namibia and Richine Masengo of The Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrated clearly that any change we push for must be led by young people – and designed to reflect the world they live in. Alongside Maria Antonieta Alcalde from Mexico, all called for greater recognition of intersectionality across age, gender, sexuality, region, ability and class. Until everyone's rights are respected, we will not have succeeded. Finally, Ministers Lindiwe Zulu from South Africa and Matilda Ernkran from Sweden demonstrated that activism and passion are not restricted to civil society, and that their leadership from the inside can open doors and unlock action.



Being able to meet in-person provided more opportunity for bilateral discussion, informal interaction and open conversation. Although engaging over Zoom and connecting remotely during the pandemic period has allowed us to be in touch more frequently, being able to meet together over the two days created a space for deeper engagement and connection was invaluable. Champions were able to share not just a sense of collective mission, but also personal connections that build trust and collaboration across the Movement.

Whilst SheDecides+5 was a primarily internal meeting, it nevertheless had an impact beyond by providing an opportunity for Champions to use their platforms to speak out for bodily autonomy and SRHR. It was a key moment for movement members and allies to showcase their commitment – both individually, and collectively as part of a movement fighting for a world where SheDecides.

As event participants, movement members were able to use SheDecides' communications and story-telling channels to demonstrate their political commitment and leadership in progressing SRHR, through various communications opportunities.



These included:

- ▶ Opportunities to write a blog post for the SheDecides+5 webpage
- ▶ Social media assets shared with participants ahead of the conference that movement members could adapt and use to express support for bodily autonomy and share their story of commitment, action or progress for her right to decide
- ▶ A dedicated Media Room with a videographer and photographer, where participants could record 'talking heads' and short Q&A videos on key issues related to the agenda for use on external channels.
- ▶ Official conference photography

Highlights from the 2 day conference were shared across SheDecides social media channels, including videos of key speeches and quotes from speakers.

▶▶ SheDecides and the Wider Ecosystem

The rich discussion and deep exchange over the two days resulted in a clear steer for the next phase of SheDecides, with consensus on its role as a convener and political voice. It also identified specific areas for prioritisation. Champions felt that SheDecides' focus must be on the sharp end of SRHR, prioritising its bold voice on issues such as abortion, CSE and youth leadership, and reflect radical intersectionality in its approach.

"SheDecides matters because a threat in one country is a threat in all countries. It matters because oppression does not stop at borders."

Jona Turalde, Vice-Chair, Guiding Group

As its focus is on contributing to tangible change and inspiring progressive action from decision makers, the role of SheDecides is to facilitate and open up doors between those who hold power and those who do not. It will do this by connecting national champions, youth leaders and game-changers to decision makers and decision-making global spaces, and challenge and change unequal power dynamics. Champions also pointed out the need for supporting collective global action for the right to decide, ensuring visibility for critical issues and enhancing the work of SheDecides movement members and allies already operating in this space.



► Convene and Strengthen

Many Champions reflected that the siloing of the SRHR community, between regions, issues and spaces has limited its impact. Because SheDecides is an inclusive feminist space that ensures equal space for a diverse and intersectional set of voices, it is uniquely placed to bring a wide range of stakeholders together and harness their influence. Through working collectively, SheDecides will contribute to strengthening the Movement and brokering partnerships between like-minded partners holding different roles and areas of expertise.

This involves supporting the Champions to share best practice, evidence and opportunities, ensuring that all can benefit from the learning of others and have access to decision-making platforms. The importance of partnership was a strong theme throughout the two days, and SheDecides was requested to support the strategic collaboration of Champions and supporters around events and milestones, creating a strong public voice in global fora and decision-making spaces.



► Take Political Action

Throughout the two days, much of the focus on how to overcome opposition and progress the agenda was linked to political change and leadership. Many Champions saw SheDecides as having an explicitly political role, complimenting others that are working in this ecosystem. They saw a role for SheDecides in supporting Champion Governments to take bold political action around global advocacy moments and to increase support for bodily autonomy, as well as engaging new Government leaders across regions to diversify voices calling for progress. SheDecides' ability to harness the collective political power of the diverse constituencies, strategise ahead of key advocacy moments to coordinate joint action, and working intentionally to support youth-led action around accountability were highlighted as key areas of value-add.

The meeting also looked at the intersection of different political leadership initiatives driven by SheDecides Champion Governments including UN policy development and cross-regional norm setting work, carried out for instance by the Nexus initiative. There was broad agreement that the complementarity between the intergovernmental initiatives and the broader outreach work that the SheDecides Movement can offer would strengthen and enhance collective efforts. SheDecides, as a diverse global movement taking joint political action, focuses on strengthening smart, tailored coordination with a range of expert stakeholders. It engages in public-facing strategic communications, making political leadership visible. Nexus, in contrast, takes a more closed-door approach, providing technical support to likeminded member states around specific intergovernmental negotiations to uphold and defend SRHR



► Amplify and Speak Out

The added value of SheDecides speaking out and amplifying the voices of others was highlighted as a significant asset to the ecosystem, and will remain a strong part of its focus across the next strategic phase. There was a strong call from Champions for SheDecides to support them in standing up and speaking out in a single voice against attacks on bodily autonomy and SRHR. There was recognition in the enormous power of a group of Champions speaking out consistently, bravely, and jointly each and every time there is an attack. This strong public voice will support the behind-the-scenes advocacy that many partners already engage in. The freedom with which SheDecides can speak and the diversity of its Champions and messengers also gives it a specific role in countering backlash and opposition, and inspiring others to also speak out.

Intergenerational collaboration

Cross-cutting the three pillars of SheDecides strategic work (1. Convene and Strengthen, 2. Take Political Action 3. Amplify and Speak out) is the role that many Champions saw for SheDecides in further supporting and promoting youth leadership and in integrating young people into its broader intergenerational platform. Through connecting youth leaders and youth-led organisations to decision-makers, SheDecides can play an important brokering role.

To ensure that young people are able to fully benefit from this brokering, it was felt that SheDecides could continue to play a role in supporting them to be able to engage on a level playing field in decision-making spaces. Leading youth-led organisations and initiatives beyond the SheDecides Movement were also invited to SheDecides+5 to share experiences and to establish connections with the SheDecides Champion network.



CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality presented the Flower of Participation and facilitated a learning session alongside the Dutch Youth Ambassador and the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan, outlining concrete steps and best practice for amplifying youth leadership and investing in intergenerational action. The [SheDecides Youth Accountability Panel](#) created in 2021, was also present at the SheDecides+5 meeting, and will guide the Movement identifying opportunities to support the efforts of youth-led organisations and networks and will similarly strengthen meaningful and inclusive youth participation within the Movement.



▶▶ Thematic outcomes

Champions and supporters had the opportunity to take the discussions about the direction of SheDecides to the next level through collectively exploring opportunities for influence and support around the thematic areas of abortion, CSE and political commitment/accountability on SRHR and bodily autonomy.

Broadening from its original focus on the Global Gag Rule, these are high focus areas for SheDecides as a result of the extreme pressure from opposition forces on these issues, as well as SheDecides having a unique mandate from its founding and Champions to concentrate its efforts on the sharp end of SRHR. The unique value-add of SheDecides as a convener and powerful voice to counter opposition will strengthen and amplify the efforts of those stakeholders already active in these spaces, and increase the collective impact.



"Just like democracy, gender equality has to be practised every day."

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, Belgium

▶ Abortion

The working session on abortion opened with presentations on key opportunities for collective efforts, influence and advancement, including the Global Safe Abortion Dialogue platform (GSAD) and the new WHO Technical Guidance on Abortion. This was complemented by a reflection on the challenges in relation to sudden shifts in the political and funding landscape due to emerging conflicts and crisis situations, as well as the role of youth networks in advancing this agenda.

This was followed by a robust and passionate discussion about the need to fund and take action at the national level to protect gains made and fight back against strong and organised opposition to abortion. Because the strength of SheDecides is in its global convening and communications role, this national level work is something that the Movement will be following and amplifying as needed, but may not engage in directly.

Participants felt that SheDecides could play a strong role as a member of the Global Safe Abortion Dialogue platform, supporting this technical/operational space to bring its political and advocacy asks into the wider political landscape and magnifying its outcomes to ensure greater support and awareness. SheDecides could also play a similar role in amplifying the new WHO Technical Guidance on Abortion through its political and CSO networks.



Participants provided further examples of how SheDecides could continue supporting the advancement of abortion rights through, including:

- ▶ Providing space and opportunities to share best practices for political action within the Movement.
- ▶ Amplifying the needs, stories of positive change and provide opportunities for different actors and activities to speak up for the right to abortion through SheDecides communication platforms.
- ▶ Giving more space for health care specialists (abortion care providers, gynecologists and midwives) to speak up in global advocacy forums to challenge myths and change the negative narrative around abortion.
- ▶ Destigmatising abortion through social media and other communication efforts across regions, making use of international campaign day for joint messages.
- ▶ Including messaging and support for access to non-discriminatory access to abortion care services for trans- or non-binary persons.
- ▶ Ensuring space for youth leaders to participate and speak out in decision making spaces.
- ▶ Encouraging and support political leadership and voices from countries and governments who have a supportive policy and legal environment at the national level, but are traditionally more silent at the global level.



The GSAD members provided a draft list of possible global and regional opportunities for collective action in relation to the SheDecides Movement. Participants flagged the need for further strategic discussions to narrow down a more concrete list of opportunities for joint action and to explore further how to maximise impact and tap into existing pro-choice initiatives, platforms, conferences and financial support.

▶ **Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

Following presentations on data, political opportunities for influencing – including the Global Partnership Forum on CSE – integrating CSE into education policy and advocacy, and the Southern African regional context, participants identified the specific role that SheDecides could play in priority spaces.

Participants felt that SheDecides could use its unique role, in close collaboration with SheDecides movement members and allies in the CSE space, through the following activities:



- ▶ Running capacity strengthening programmes for youth – especially before events – to ensure that they are able to participate fully and influence.
- ▶ Create a sub-network of CSE-focused Champions and support them to engage in key moments, make public statements in support and support/organise side events.
- ▶ Work with Champions at the national level to encourage governments to include youth in their delegations and CSE to be reflected in their positions, including around moments such as the High Level Political Forum and The Commission on Population and Development.
- ▶ Work with Nexus to develop public facing messages and statements, and make political leadership visible around key moments such as the Transforming Education Summit, High Level Political Forum, and UN General Assembly.
- ▶ Consider undertaking public opinion polling (or similar methods) and storytelling on CSE to demonstrate broad support.

"We know that CSE works, there is no excuse from withholding this empowering, essential knowledge from young people."

Julia Bunting, President of the Population Council



The concrete opportunities identified for SheDecides to play a key role included:

- ▶ Transforming Education Summit, Pre-Summit and National Consultations
- ▶ High Level Political Forum, with its focus on Goal 4 (Education) and Goal 5 (gender equality)
- ▶ Connecting and amplifying initiatives and support public-facing advocacy efforts in relation to the East and Southern African Commitments on CSE
- ▶ Commission on Population and Development
- ▶ Adolescent Wellbeing Conference/Symposium
- ▶ High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage



► Global Commitments & Accountability

This campfire conversation session focussed predominantly on ICPD+25 and Generation Equality Forums and sparked quite a critical discussion on the processes and the challenges with accountability; it was helpful as a frame to the wider obstacles that the Movement faces in turning commitments into concrete action. At the top-level, participants clearly expressed SheDecides' added value in political convening, offering platforms/space for joint strategising, and in coordinating bold SheDecides messaging and statements; there was a clear support for SheDecides to harness the power of the Movement and to find moments for collective action. The specific roles they identified for SheDecides within priority spaces included:

- Building consistent political presence at key advocacy moments/ around processes (e.g. host side events, receptions, media pieces).
- Creating space for youth-led organisations to lead and for young people to access decision-makers and political processes.
- Creating space for pre/post strategising amongst SheDecides Champions and organisations, especially at events where many of them are present.
- Leveraging the Champion network for collective political statements and joint political action.
- Facilitating learning and intelligence sharing within the Movement.
- Creating opportunities for activists to engage in high-level political dialogues and events discussions with Ministers and leaders.



The key spaces and moments identified as priorities for SheDecides included intergovernmental spaces and summits such as:

- UN General Assembly
- Transforming Education Summit, Pre-Summit and National Consultations
- High Level Political Forum, with its focus on Goal 4 (Education) and Goal 5 (gender equality)
- High Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage
- International Conference on Population and Development +30



International conferences such as Women Deliver, the International Conference on Family Planning, and the Commission on the Status of Women were also highlighted as priorities.

▶▶ Next Steps

The SheDecides+5 meeting indicated a strong agreement that there is a continued need for SheDecides as a vehicle for joint action and coordination; it was recognised that its primary role is as a platform for change, working in partnership across the SRHR ecosystem and supporting political progress.

"The enemy is the patriarchy and misogyny – we need to uproot it. And we have the power to drive the change that we need."

Memory Kachambwa, Executive Director, Femnet

In recognition of its position at the global level, and of the strong national level connections of other SheDecides members, there was broad agreement that it is not best suited to fund or run national level initiatives, but instead to provide a platform for collaboration. With this consensus around its role and a recognition of the need to shore up its future through securing funding, the following next steps will be taken forward:

1. Finalisation of the 2022-2027 Strategy: SheDecides Support Unit has worked consultatively across the Movement since late 2021 to build a new Strategy for SheDecides. It has engaged the Youth Accountability Panel, the Guiding Group and created the 2022-2027 Strategy Buzz Group which had intergenerational representation across all regions, sectors and thematic areas of the Movement, which was facilitated by an external strategy expert consultant. The December Champion meeting and subsequent follow-up meetings with movement members helped set the direction of the road forward. Along with a survey shared with allies across the SRHR movement, common goals, priorities and unique added value as a movement were identified. The result of this iterative and collaborative process was the development of a strategy that sets out three goals - Convene and Strengthen | Take Political Action | Amplify and Speak Out - within the context of being a diverse, intergenerational global movement, taking joint political action for the right of all women, girls and young people to decide over their own body, life and future. Integrating feedback from the SheDecides+5 meeting, this strategy will be updated, finalised and signed off by the Guiding Group in June, for implementation in 2022 - 2027.



2. Development of a 2022-2023 workplan: With the input gathered from the SheDecides+5 meeting, the SheDecides Support Unit will develop a work plan prioritising areas for collective action and where we can have the best impact within this complex landscape. Alongside the 2022-2027 Strategy, this will be used as the basis for fundraising to ensure the post-2022 future of SheDecides and the SheDecides Support Unit.
3. Revision of the Youth Engagement Strategy: The Youth Accountability Panel will strengthen how the SheDecides Movement meaningfully engages and supports youth-movements and young activists, updating the Youth Engagement Strategy 2022-2027 with clearer progress targets, holding the SheDecides Support Unit and the wider movement accountable for the commitment to promoting youth leadership and strengthening intergenerational action.



4. Champion Roadmaps 2022 – 2027: The SheDecides Support Unit will update Champion Terms of Reference and work with Champions to create their individual Roadmaps. Roadmaps will detail how each Champion (as an individual or as an institution) will engage with and contribute to the new Strategy, and the support that they will receive from the SheDecides Support Unit. The Roadmaps will provide a clear overview of the spaces where Champions will be jointly engaging, further facilitating work planning.
5. The Guiding Group: In 2023 the Guiding Group will review the governance manual, existing policies, and renew working structures to be fit for purpose and aligned to the new strategy, as well as renewing the Terms of Reference for Guiding Group members to ensure continued financial, political and diverse representation and partnership support for SheDecides, as well as overseeing the time-bound rotation of Champions as guiding group members.

