

CHAPTER

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CHAPTER I

YOUTH AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today's younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations. We have mapped the road to sustainable development; it will be for all of us to ensure that the journey is successful and its gains irreversible.
(United Nations, General Assembly, 2015b, para. 53)

THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: LEAVING NO YOUTH BEHIND

In September 2015, Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁵ setting out a global vision and plan for ending poverty and hunger, realizing human rights, and strengthening world peace by 2030. At the heart of the Agenda is a set of universal objectives embodied in 17 Sustainable Development

⁵ The 2030 Agenda comprises a preamble identifying five key areas to be addressed, a declaration setting out the commitment and vision, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets including the means of implementation, and provisions for follow-up and review incorporating monitoring and reporting mechanisms (see United Nations, General Assembly, 2015b).



Goals⁶ and 169 targets that are integrated and indivisible and that aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure equality and prosperity by balancing and coordinating the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

While considerable progress has been made over the past two decades in reducing poverty, alleviating hunger, reducing inequality and improving outcomes for many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable, such progress has been uneven (United Nations, 2017c). Inequality has not only persisted, but in many instances widened, with substantial numbers of people, including youth, excluded from full participation in economic, political and social life. The situation of young people from groups considered vulnerable or marginalized—including indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees, people living in poverty, and girls and young women—underlines the fact that the 2030 Agenda will not be a success unless it is based on the ideals of inclusiveness and shared prosperity.

⁶ See United Nations (2015d).

BOX 1.1.

DIVERSITY OF YOUTH

While geography and gender characterize part of the diversity of youth, diversity also reflects the varied experiences and life situations of young people. Youth with disabilities; indigenous youth; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth; migrant, displaced and refugee youth; youth in conflict and post-conflict situations; and rural youth, among others, often face challenges and barriers to participation specific to their situation. As many young people identify with more than one group, the challenges they encounter are often multiplied. The dearth of information and data on marginalized and vulnerable youth makes identifying and addressing their distinctive challenges particularly difficult (see chapter V).

A central principle of the 2030 Agenda is the assurance that “no one will be left behind”.⁷ The Sustainable Development Goals and targets are meant for all nations, all peoples of all ages, and all societies. The universal nature of the 2030 Agenda supposes that youth, defined by the United Nations as persons aged 15 to 24 years,⁸ should be considered across all Goals and targets, a point emphasized in the 2017 report of the Secretary-General on youth development links to sustainable development:

The pledges made in the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first, as well as its affirmation to be people-centred, ensure that youth are included in all aspects of the Agenda. (United Nations, General Assembly, 2017e, para. 6)

YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 2030 Agenda clearly applies to all of the world's 1.2 billion young people, who currently make up 16 per cent of the global population—and to the 1.3 billion young people who will call the world home by 2030, the target date for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2017c).

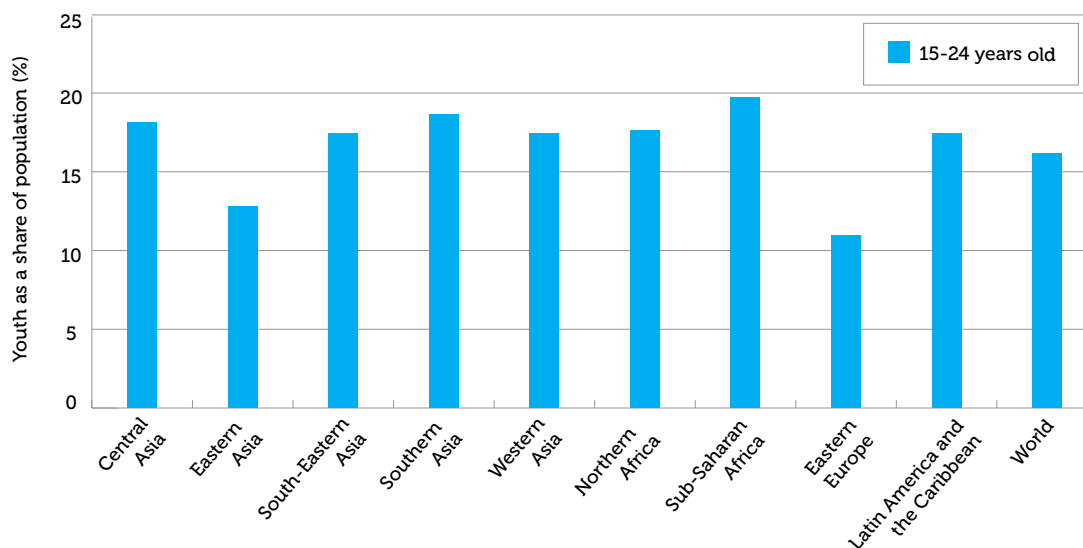
The size of the youth population matters greatly in the context of sustainable development. The age structure of a population and the relative size of the youth cohort are important because they serve as determining factors in the growth of the labour force and pressures on the

⁷ United Nations, General Assembly (2015b), preamble, para. 2.

⁸ Some Governments and Sustainable Development Goal indicators define youth more broadly. For example, indicator 16.2.3 refers to the “proportion of young women and men aged 18–29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18” (United Nations, 2018).



FIGURE 1.1. YOUTH AS A SHARE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION BY REGION, 2015



Source: United Nations (2017d).

economy in terms of job creation. Indeed, Governments and policymakers often view young people not as an asset but as a source of labour market pressures that are difficult to address, and large numbers of unemployed youth are viewed as potential causes of political instability and civil unrest (United Nations, 2016a). As a case in point, the unrest that erupted across the Arab world in 2011 finds its roots in the economic dislocation of the region's large youth population and its expectations for improved economic outcomes. While the political unrest associated with large, restive youth populations across the Arab world has found resolution in many States, it is important to highlight the escalation of violence and civil strife that continue to undermine the welfare of young people and their families in countries such as Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The continued growth of the youth population in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with rising

unemployment and continued political instability, suggest similar emerging concerns for many States in that region.

While the population of young people is growing overall, the age structure of the population and the relative size of the youth population vary widely. In developed countries, where fertility rates have declined for decades, youth make up a relatively small share of the total population, while the share of persons over age 60 is on the rise. In contrast, youth in sub-Saharan Africa comprise nearly 20 per cent of the total population, and this share is expected to remain stable over the next 20 years. In other developing regions, the proportion of youth in the total population is declining, though it remains sizeable in Latin America and the Caribbean (17 per cent), Western Asia (17 per cent), and Southern Asia (19 per cent).



BOX 1.2.

WHAT IS A
YOUTH BULGE?

As countries develop economically, shifting towards more industrialization, urbanization, and skills-dependent economic production, they experience a demographic transition wherein fertility and the share of the population made up of child-age dependents decline. As the relative number of children decreases, populations experience a growth in youth as a share of the total population, resulting in what is known as a youth bulge. This demographic bulge then passes through the body of the total population as a cohort in successive bulges until—as seen now in developed economies—the highest shares of the total population are made up of older workers and those of retirement age.

While most developing nations, in particular the emerging economies, have seen their youth bulges peak⁹ and now have a bulge in their older working-age populations, other regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, are only just beginning to experience a rise in their youth populations.

While a youth bulge is often seen in terms of the challenges it poses, the growth of a country's youth population as a share of the total population also presents opportunities. As the youth population increases, it ushers in a period during which a country's working-age population makes up a growing share of the overall population while dependent children make up a declining share. This creates an opportunity for a demographic dividend, wherein the relative abundance of working-age people can

lead to increased savings, higher productivity and more rapid economic growth. However, the ability of countries to harness the demographic dividend depends critically on their investments in human capital, particularly among young people poised to enter the labour force, whose productivity, entrepreneurship and innovation will drive future economic growth. If human capital investment falls short or if the labour market is unable to absorb new workers, the opportunity deriving from this demographic dividend may be squandered (Williamson, 2013).

A demographic dividend can have a positive impact on economic growth, political stability, and social and sustainable development. However, despite their significant present and future numbers, young people are often faced with age-related challenges and barriers to participation in economic, political and social life, greatly hindering their own development and, by extension, sustainable development. Harnessing the potential of youth is dependent on protecting young people's health and well-being, guaranteeing a quality education and the freedom to participate, providing decent work opportunities, and addressing the myriad other challenges young people face.

YOUTH AS ARCHITECTS OF
THE 2030 AGENDA

Far from being mere mentions in and beneficiaries of the 2030 Agenda, young people were active contributors to its development and continue to be engaged in the frameworks and processes that support its implementation, follow-up and review (see chapter IV).

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda represented the culmination of an extensive three-year process involving Member States and civil society, including youth organizations, working together to develop a comprehensive set of Sustainable Development Goals and targets to be met within a 15-year period. This journey began in Rio de Janeiro, at the 2012 United Nations Conference on

⁹ In Western Asia and Northern Africa, for example, where the youth bulge has been particularly sizeable in recent decades, the share of the population made up of youth is now starting to decline.



Sustainable Development (Rio+20),¹⁰ where Member States and civil society stakeholders came together to launch a process to develop a global agenda and a new set of sustainable development goals that would be “limited in number, aspirational and easy to communicate” (United Nations, n.d.(b), para. 3). The new goals would succeed the Millennium Development Goals, which had been adopted in 2000 and targeted for achievement by 2015.

Building on the success—and importantly, learning from the shortfalls—of the Millennium Development Goals, the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, in which a considerable number of young people participated, resulted in an outcome document entitled “The future we want”, committing to the establishment of an “inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals ... open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly” (United Nations, General Assembly, 2012, para. 248). This was a marked improvement over the process of establishing the Millennium Development Goals, which had been criticized for its lack of civil society participation and transparency.

To ensure greater transparency and participation, Governments invited representatives from civil society organizations to become part of the 30-member Open Working Group of the General Assembly¹¹ to drive the development of the 2030 Agenda and to deliberate and negotiate its 17 Goals. In particular, they stressed the

valuable role of “Major Groups and other stakeholders”.¹²—a mechanism developed within the framework of the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992 and formalized in Agenda 21— in safeguarding and fostering sustainable societies for future generations, which formed a core element of the negotiations.

Following the 2012 Conference, the Major Group for Children and Youth was a key stakeholder in the Open Working Group negotiations, drawing on the expertise and input of young people and youth entities from all over the world to ensure that the rights, priorities and needs of young people were integrated and considered across the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Goals and 169 targets.

Reflecting the commitment to achieve broad global participation and transparency, the Open Working Group deliberations were informed by the outcomes of “global conversations” conducted by the United Nations—a set of 11 thematic global and regional consultations, 83 national consultations, and door-to-door surveys on development priorities. The United Nations also launched the MY World survey, an online and offline platform for people to contribute their thoughts on the global priorities they would like to see in the Goals. The survey reflected overwhelming participation from young people, with the majority of respondents under the age

¹⁰ The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)—the third international conference aimed at reconciling the long-term economic and environmental goals of the global community—established the foundations for the development and adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

¹¹ The Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals was established in 2013 by decision 67/555 of the General Assembly (see A/67/L.48/rev.1; see also United Nations, n.d.[b]).

¹² The Major Group system comprises nine major sectors including women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers. Arising out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992 and reaffirmed at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, this mechanism enables civil society stakeholders to actively engage in intergovernmental deliberations on sustainable development. As part of this process, Governments also invite other stakeholders, including local communities, volunteer groups and foundations, migrants and families, older persons, and persons with disabilities, to participate in United Nations processes related to sustainable development through close collaboration with the Major Groups.



of 30, and gender balance in responses. Interestingly, the majority of votes were received via offline consultations, highlighting the necessity of efforts to ensure that no one is left behind as technology advances.¹³

The 2030 Agenda calls upon Major Groups and other stakeholders “to report on their contribution to the implementation of the Agenda” (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015b, para. 89). Through coordination by the Major Group for Children and Youth, young people and youth entities continue to engage in follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda by contributing to

deliberations on the formal areas of work of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development,¹⁴ including voluntary national reviews (VNRs),¹⁵ and follow-up mechanisms for linked processes, including the ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development follow-up (to review outcomes of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda), the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, and the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction.

¹³ United Nations (2015b).

¹⁴ See General Assembly resolution 67/290 of 9 July 2013 on the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development (A/RES/67/290).

¹⁵ See chapter VI of the present *Report* for more information on the voluntary national review process.

BOX 1.3.

YOUTH IN ACTION: YOUTH NEGOTIATING THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

UNITED NATIONS MAJOR GROUP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, mandated by the General Assembly, is the “official, formal and self-organized space for children and youth to contribute to and engage in certain intergovernmental and allied policy processes at the United Nations”.* It acts as a bridge between young people and the United Nations system, ensuring their right to meaningful participation by, inter alia, conducting and facilitating online and offline activities associated with policy and advocacy, capacity-building, youth action, and knowledge generation.

With the implementation of the 2030 Agenda under way, the Major Group for Children and Youth and other young stakeholders continue to be actively engaged. The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development—where Member States work on identifying emerging issues and creating cohesion across the three dimensions of sustainable development, engage in thematic reviews, work towards enhancing the science-policy interface and evidence-based decision-making, and monitor and review progress made towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals—provides an important space for young people to engage either via the VNRs of their countries or through shadow reporting and awareness-raising (see chapter V).

The Major Group for Children and Youth is involved in numerous other processes at the United Nations level to advance sustainable development, including those pertaining to disaster risk reduction, financing for development, humanitarian affairs, and youth development.

* United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (<https://www.unmgcy.org/>).



MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION: BRINGING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS TO LIFE

The means of implementation targets under Goal 17 and under each Sustainable Development Goal are key to realizing our Agenda and are of equal importance with the other Goals and targets. The Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals, can be met within the framework of a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, supported by the concrete policies and actions as outlined in the outcome document of the third International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Addis Ababa from 13 to 16 July 2015. (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015b, para. 40)

Provisions addressing the means of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals can be found throughout the 2030 Agenda but feature most prominently in Goal 17, which focuses on revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development and provides the foundation for achieving all the Goals. Goal 17 incorporates targets specifying how the international community should finance and operationalize the Goals, including reaffirming the commitment of developed countries to earmark 0.7 per cent of their gross national income (GNI) for official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries, and to consider allocating at least 0.2 per cent of their GNI for ODA to least developed countries. Goal 17 also includes a number of targets relating to technology transfer, investment and trade aimed at encouraging greater investment in developing countries in ways that facilitate economic development and support strengthening economic welfare therein.

Central to the 2030 Agenda is the Addis Ababa Action Agenda,¹⁶ adopted by Member States in July 2015

to provide a global framework for financing sustainable development and for ensuring the efficacy of the joint commitments made under the Sustainable Development Goals. Organized around seven action areas,¹⁷ the Addis Ababa Action Agenda incorporates more than 100 measures on global financing and investment practices aimed at boosting collaboration between Governments, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders in the areas of science and technology, infrastructure development and investment, and poverty eradication so as to transform the global economy and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda aligns financial flows and policies with economic, social and environmental priorities (United Nations, 2015a). It essentially provides a financing framework for Governments, international organizations, the business sector, civil society, and philanthropists implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on fostering partnerships and actions aimed at promoting prosperity and preserving the planet.

Importantly, in its opening paragraphs, the Action Agenda acknowledges the necessity of investing in youth for the realization of sustainable development:

We recognize that investing in children and youth is critical to achieving inclusive, equitable and sustainable development for present and future generations, and we recognize the need to support countries that face particular challenges to make the requisite investments in this area. (United Nations, General Assembly, 2015a, para. 7)

¹⁶ United Nations, General Assembly (2015a).

¹⁷ The seven action areas of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda are domestic public resources; domestic and international private business and finance; international development cooperation; international trade as an engine for development; debt and debt sustainability; addressing systemic issues; and science, technology, innovation and capacity-building.



While the Addis Ababa Action Agenda makes explicit reference to the situation of young people only seven times (see box 1.4), it is similar to the 2030 Agenda in that support of youth is one of its cross-cutting themes, helping to harness synergies and policy action across its seven areas, and should be considered in all actions to achieve sustainable development.

YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING WITHIN NEW AND EXISTING FRAMEWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE 2030 AGENDA

While the adoption of the 2030 Agenda offers the opportunity to break new ground, its success is ultimately tied to the integration and advancement of existing development efforts and processes. Some of the key frameworks that can support its implementation include the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Istanbul Declaration and Programme of

Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020, the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway, the New Urban Agenda, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.¹⁸

In addition, numerous youth- and adolescent-specific international instruments and frameworks exist that can support youth objectives within the 2030 Agenda. In many cases they offer more robust analysis and options for addressing global youth challenges. Instruments that can serve as important resources for Member States and youth organizations as they develop thematic policies and programmes pertaining to youth in the context of national development strategies include, inter alia,

¹⁸ See the outcome document of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, Istanbul, 9-13 May (A/CONF.219/3/Rev.1); General Assembly resolution 69/15 of 14 November 2014 on the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (A/RES/69/15); and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015).



UN Photo/Manuel Elias



the World Programme of Action for Youth, adopted in 1995 to guide the development of youth policies; the Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!) framework, launched in 2017 to advance adolescent health by 2030 (WHO, n.d.); the Global initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, aimed at enhancing youth employment prospects by 2020 (ILO, 2015b); and United Nations Security Council resolution 2250 of 2015,¹⁹ which calls for increased youth representation

at all levels of decision-making in peacebuilding and dispute resolution.

As noted in chapter VI of the present *Report*, young people are becoming increasingly active partners in sustainable development efforts. Recognized as the torchbearers of the 2030 Agenda, youth are at the heart of sustainable development. Their active engagement is key to achieving sustainable, inclusive and stable societies and to averting the most serious future challenges to sustainable development, including the impacts of climate change, conflict, gender inequality, forced migration, poverty and unemployment.

¹⁹ Security Council resolution 2250 (2015) of 9 December 2015 on increasing inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels (S/RES/2250 (2015)).

BOX 1.4.

REFERENCES TO YOUTH IN THE ADDIS ABABA ACTION AGENDA

In the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, youth are mentioned seven times in four paragraphs.

Paragraph 7 emphasizes “that investing in children and youth is critical to achieving inclusive, equitable and sustainable development for present and future generations” and acknowledges “the need to support countries that face particular challenges to make the requisite investments in this area”.

Paragraph 16, which focuses on generating full and productive employment and decent work for all and promoting micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, addresses the issue head-on by committing to the promotion of “adequate skills development training for all, particularly for youth and entrepreneurs” and “to developing and operationalizing, by 2020, a global strategy for youth employment and implementing the International Labour Organization (ILO) Global Jobs Pact”, reflecting target 8.b of the Sustainable Development Goals. Importantly for youth employment, the Action Agenda specifically commits countries to promoting stable and affordable access to finance in support of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which are essential for promoting job creation.

Paragraph 12 expressly mentions youth in the context of delivering social protection and essential public services, reflecting the commitment to “provide fiscally sustainable and nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, with a focus on those furthest below the poverty line and the vulnerable, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, children, youth and older persons”.

Paragraph 114 focuses on the importance of ensuring access to science and technology for development efforts and includes a specific commitment to promoting “access to technology and science for women, youth and children”.

Source: United Nations, General Assembly (2015a).