



**INFORMAL SUMMARY**  
United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)  
Youth Forum 2015

**Youth Engagement in the Transition from MDGs to SDGs: What will it take?**

**2-3 February 2015**  
**United Nations Headquarters, New York**

1. Overview

Held on 2-3 February 2015 at UN Headquarters, the ECOSOC Youth Forum provided a platform for young people to engage in dialogue with Member States and other high-profile development stakeholders on how they can be included in shaping the future development agenda. Nearly 500 youth representatives actively participated in discussions with Member State representatives (including Ministers) and leaders from civil society, the private sector, media and the UN system, contributing their ideas and identifying the key priorities that might be missing or require greater attention from policymakers in the transition from the MDGs to the post-2015 context.

The Youth Forum was hosted by the President of ECOSOC, Mr. Martin Sajdik (Austria) and co-organized by UN-DESA and the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth with the support of UN Women and other UN entities. The forum was addressed by the United Nations Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon, as well as other high level officials of the United Nations System; and included six substantive panels organized around key thematic areas, as well as break-out sessions and interactive discussions between speakers and participants ([link](#) to programme).

In recognition of the need for improving communication and information on the SDGs—and in commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Programme of Action on Youth (WPAY), the **#youthnow** and **#youth2015** advocacy campaigns were created to engage and connect young people through social media on youth priorities within the global development agenda. These campaigns are an important means to keep the discussion on sustainable development going and growing among the global youth population.

In his opening remarks, the ECOSOC President called attention to the promise of 1.8 billion young people worldwide for a better future. He expanded by saying that, too often, young people are seen as potential liabilities, rather than as problem-solvers and development partners with unique attributes. “The question is no longer if youth engagement is necessary but how to strengthen it,” he said,



**ECOSOC Youth Forum**



welcoming young people to voice their opinions on development, policy, climate change and education in 2015 and beyond.

The Secretary-General told the Forum that “2015 is a chance to change history”. He urged youth to take advantage of the high level of connectivity that increasingly informs our understanding of the world, remarking that, “Young people can speak out as never before. You can denounce injustice and reach hands across cultures and communities.”

As the UN representative on all things relating to young people, the Secretary-General’s Youth Envoy Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi said that a “sense of ownership” is critical to the success of the future sustainable development agenda. Young people worldwide are ready to “carry their share” of the post-2015 development, he said.

In a keynote address urging increased investment for children, activist and 2007 International Children's Peace Prize Winner, Thandiwe Chama, called on delegates to be “on the right side of history” by placing “our rights, the rights of children and youth, at the heart of the SDG agenda”.

The young activist and co-founder of 'KidsRights Youngsters' noted that youth leadership, education, health and gender equality remained “key preconditions” for a successful post-2015 sustainable development agenda. “We cannot achieve the SDGs without ensuring that my rights are the same as those of my brothers,” she continued. “Strengthen, fund and empower us.”

In her address, Gabriela Rivadeneira, President of the National Assembly of Ecuador, emphasized that broader development, and the role of youth within that process, must ensure the eradication of poverty, environmental protection and protection of cultural identity and heritage. She noted that in her country, “Today, youth are playing a role in public life and we are ensuring the political participation of persons as of 16 years of age in the democratic system”, which serves as an important element of advancing sustainable development.

### *1.1. 2015: A landmark year for youth and global development efforts*

This year’s Youth Forum of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) arrived at an important moment given the need to build youth momentum in 2015. In September 2015, the successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—will be agreed at the global Summit on the post-2015 development agenda.

There is no question that the MDGs catalysed progress on issues that are central to young people’s concerns. Although the international community did not reach all of the development goals, since 2000 many lessons have been learned, exchanged and documented on their strengths and shortcomings. Some of these gaps were highlighted throughout the day and are referenced below as part of the actionable recommendations resulting from the Forum’s discussions. However, most of the





recommendations are more forward-looking, representing both optimistic enthusiasm as well as pragmatic concerns that many young people have regarding the emerging post-2015 development agenda and its successful implementation.

The post-2015 development agenda will be a truly global agenda which reflects the concerns and realities of shared development challenges in poor and rich countries alike. This should be a rallying point for youth and increased solidarity across borders for young people and their shared priorities. ECOSOC remains the central UN platform for youth. Within the Council, the question is no longer if youth engagement is necessary, but rather, how to strengthen it to encourage young people to be agents of change and partners—not just beneficiaries—in development.

This year also marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY). Adopted by the General Assembly in 1995, it provides an overarching policy framework and practical guidelines in 15 priority areas for national action and international support to improve the situation of young people around the world. The 20th anniversary commemoration of the WPAY coupled with ongoing work towards the development of a post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development created a ripe opportunity for the ECOSOC Youth Forum to take stock of progress and gains made within the broader development framework of the UN, while focusing on how young people have been and continue to be engaged in setting the agenda and framework for the SDGs.

Furthermore the coinciding of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action this year provided an additional opportunity to focus on importance of ensuring that youth policies and programmes as well as broader development frameworks, including the SDGs, promote gender equality and address the specific needs of young women and girls.

## 2. Key messages emerging from the sessions

### 2.1 Looking ahead to the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs

**There was wide agreement among youth participants that effective youth action on the SDGs will require first and foremost, strong engagement at the national level while remaining connected and committed to the bigger global conversation.** Working on the development of the SDGs framework, some Youth representatives have realized that much of the work that needs to be done to ensure their success must occur at the national level. However, the linkages made among youth at the global and regional levels can help to catalyze efforts at the national level through partnerships and knowledge sharing.

**Some youth participants advocated for engaging early and strategically on processes and consultations at the global level.** The time is now for ensuring that young people's concerns on sustainable development are adequately reflected in the global post-2015 negotiations. Aspects of the





agenda which are still considered “in play” and therefore could receive the greatest attention were identified as follow-up of implementation, financing, accountability mechanism, among others.

**“Champions” for youth whom sit at the centre of the negotiating table on the post-2015 development agenda should be identified for partnerships.** One youth participant from civil society spoke of the benefits that have been reaped from finding partners within Delegations and Government Ministries who could bring to attention the concerns of youth in fora or processes where youth or NGOs might not be able to go.

The sustainable development agenda is an integrating agenda founded on economic, social and environmental dimensions. There was general agreement that **financing the SDGs in vertical silos will not lead to a successful implementation of the agenda. Youth could be considered an integrator between the different dimensions, putting the power behind the achievement of the SDGs.** It was said by one panelist that each 1 dollar spent on the young, releases 15 dollars into the economy. Investing in girls and young women is one way of enabling economic development. Currently only 1% of ODA is reportedly targeted specifically at girls and young women.

**Many youth participants spoke of the need for new, dynamic methods for communicating the SDGs to young people, both globally and within national contexts.** Youth potentially have a lot of energy and ideas to contribute to the successful implementation of the SDGs, but they need to know what they are first! It was proposed that young people need to work closely with the UN and other development partners to strategize on ways of bridging the everyday concerns of young people with the emerging framework for the proposed 17 SDGs.

**Connect IRL to URL.**<sup>1</sup> In one discussion, a public sector representative from a Member State and youth participants discussed the need to maximize the potential of technology for information and participation—in particular, social media for campaigning or monitoring purposes-- but not to rely on it alone for impact. Rather, it was suggested that creating and building online communities on the hard work that communities and their representative groups (e.g., NGOs) are doing “in real life”.

Not everyone has easy access to social media and ICTs, therefore, **ways of partnering and communicating on the post-2015 development agenda need to include print and other media options for reaching the least digitally connected** (e.g., people living in rural areas). A few participants identified creative, low-cost and highly visible initiatives (e.g., the “ice bucket challenge” for ALS), which could have an impact. Education systems were also identified as critical platforms for raising awareness among younger generations of sustainable development.

---

<sup>1</sup> IRL is slang in electronic communication for “in real life” or, not online. URL refers to the internet address of a website.





**“Youth delegates to the UN are a ‘must-have’, not a ‘nice-to-have’”**, as one youth participant noted. There was broad agreement among youth participants that countries which have youth delegates included in their delegation to the UN are delivering on their commitment to inclusivity. As the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth recommended both in his opening and closing remarks, all Member States should consider including a young participant in their delegation at the Summit in September, as well as at the COP-21 Summit in Paris and even the Financing conference in Addis to ensure young people’s place at the table. The UN Youth Delegate Programme is overseen by UN DESA, for more information about UN Youth Delegates visit <http://undesadspd.org/Youth/OurWork/Youthdelegateprogramme.aspx>

**Stay connected through the Major Group on Children and Youth.** Youth participants—and their allies in the UN system—talked about the importance of staying informed and updated on a peer-to-peer basis. Youth and children are one of the nine “Major Groups” specifically invited to provide inputs on sustainable development issues to the UN. The website [childrenyouth.org](http://childrenyouth.org) is a good resource for remaining informed of all the latest developments and staying connected to the wider global conversation on the post-2015 development agenda.

**There are emerging challenges to young people’s rights and well-being, which young people urged decision-makers—and allies in civil society and academia—to give greater attention in the post-2015 context:** (i) human trafficking and irregular migration, especially in and through, but not limited to, Africa; (ii) international support to youth—especially via support to education systems—in countries facing conflict and/or terrorism, where state capacities may be weak; and (iii) housing, which in connection with rapid urbanization, has become a serious socio-economic challenge for young people in rich and poor countries alike.

## 2.2 Commemorating and exchanging lessons learned from WPAY

**While the continued relevance of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) was strongly highlighted during the Forum, discussions also pointed to the lack of progress in its implementation which is lagging behind the commitments made in 1995.**

**WPAY advocates have many successes to point to, but there are clear areas for improvement from the original programme that require bolder, more concerted efforts going forward, particularly with regard—but not limited—to the ongoing high rates of youth unemployment and poor-quality jobs available to youth, lack of or limited access to decision making and participatory processes, and gender discrimination, to name but a few.**





**One panelist suggested that there are new global realities since WPAY was adopted which would need to be given consideration going forward with implementation**, including (i) the youth bulge<sup>2</sup>; (ii) diffusion of power, in part through global inter-connectivity; (iii) changing media landscape; (iv) technological advances and their aspects on many aspects of life; and (v) ongoing gaps in meeting human rights standards across the world.

According to one panelist representing a Member State perspective, **WPAY could benefit from a more rigorous assessment exercise. While WPAY indicators are adopted by Member States and the exchange of national measures and policies is important, but a clearer, more precise process for assessing the impact of these measures within countries could advance progress on WPAY** (e.g., by bringing youth groups into collaboration with national entities as part of the proposed exercise).

**There is a need for legal and policy frameworks that respond adequately to young peoples' needs, aspirations and demands.** One Youth representative highlighted the Baku Commitment on Youth Policies is one such framework based on a set of concise commitments to frame policies and to encourage commitments from the UN system as well as its Member States.

### 2.3 Taking stock of the youth development and well-being in 2015

**Policies at all levels – nationally, regionally and globally—are urgently needed to address youth unemployment.** This was a common cause of concern across all participants. Today's labor market, still under distress from the financial crisis has made opportunities for young people scarce with strong negative impacts on society. Young people are three times more likely to be unemployed and often working under precarious conditions. One example shared by a panelist of a positive regional response was the European Union's "Youth on the Move Program", which focuses on the value of vocational training. Good jobs for young people will also play an important role in delivering on the SDGs.

**Youth participants expressed the importance of holistic, integrated education-employment measures which were innovative and flexible.** Investing in young people before they enter the labor market can have a massive transformative impact on the economy. **Innovative and flexible programmes were those that managed to combine various aspects of education, employment, entrepreneurship and training programmes** – specific examples given by various participants included work experience, paid internship, subsidized social work/community service, skills development, apprenticeships, mentoring, dual training-education models (e.g., Spain's recent programme) are all worthy of further piloting and scaling. Further, young people need an overall enabling environment which allows for capabilities to be developed in different educational and professional strands – tertiary, professional education and technical and vocational training, etc. The assurance of basic well-being and social protection should support such measures.

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "youth bulge" refers to a demographic dynamic in which a large share of the population is comprised of children and young people.





As one panelist noted, the **most successful economies are those that recognize that ideas and skills are what count, not simply a diploma.** A growing recognition across the labour market of the importance of on non-formal education and skills development is allowing young people from a diversity of backgrounds and educational experiences to gain a foothold in the labour market.

**Providing and supporting and enabling environment for young entrepreneurs is also critical to ensuring a robust youth employment response.** Increasing access to credit, financial literacy skills, and entrepreneurship training is central to young people harnessing the means necessary to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors.

**Because youth participation is essential for the democratic system to work, opportunities are needed for bridging young people's increasing apathy with traditional political systems and their participation in formal political spaces.** Participants proposed youth-led organizations as natural entry points for encouraging youth participation at the national level. Ensuring innovative and diverse spaces for the participation of young people and youth organizations in policy making is critical, noted many youth participants from civil society.

**There were numerous calls from participants that reminded the Forum that young people with disabilities and young people living with HIV and AIDS, as well as other marginalized youth should be more comprehensively engaged in the discussion of development,** in particular, of policies that affect their well-being.

#### 2.4 Partnering to advance youth development priorities

**There was wide agreement among youth participants that the local and grassroots level is critical to successful partnerships, and one proposal put forward was that Governments should consider organizing events such as the Youth Forum to reach people in localities.** Peer-to-peer-training and capacity-building at the grassroots level was widely considered to be an essential part of such partnerships. The SDGs have to be translated at the local level, which local youth fora could help to achieve.

**Given the diversity of interests among potential partners for sustainable development, transparency must form the basis of any partnership.** The private sector has interests that are not always the same as those of Governments or youth. At the same time, each potential partner brings certain comparative advantages to joint efforts. A transparent and thorough assessment of these advantages (and weaknesses)—as well as the power dynamics through which joint efforts are mediated—will help to ensure the efficacy of any partnership.

**Partnerships with for-profit organizations and businesses** should be explored in relation to software and mobile technology for data collection and monitoring as they bring a lot of knowledge to the table.





### 2.5 Pursuing improved transparency and accountability

Government transparency is essential to forming effective, inclusive partnerships. In order to improve transparency and inclusiveness, **youth participation and representation in national decision-making bodies and/or processes should be strengthened.** There were various proposals mentioned by participants, including for example through the reconsideration of minimum age requirements which keep young people out of leadership roles; through setting quotas for government entities and companies to employ a certain proportion of young people; and through the development and creation of mechanisms for participation in decision making, such as youth parliaments and/or advisory boards.

**Youth participants expressed their concerns regarding follow up of implementation on sustainable development commitments.** Youth participants urged Governments, where they have not already, to identify and promote key mechanisms or focal points on sustainable development within state institutions for the engagement of young people in ongoing discussions and follow-up on commitments. Lack of clarity or transparency here can cause confusion and create inefficiencies for citizen engagement. Accountability is especially important in least developed countries (LDCs) and countries in transition.

**Data is key for accountability, including disaggregation, improved quality of access, and solicitation of inputs from youth in rural areas.** Young people should be engaged in data collection, and open-source data should be used to drive evidence based advocacy. The UN has an important role to play in opening up data sources to CSOs, NGOs and youth-focussed organisations.

**Given that the measurement and tracking of indicators can be subject to variation, depending on shifting political priorities, a long-term political commitment to the longer-term sustainable development agenda is vital.** Some youth participants talked about the benefits of democratic systems in which the ability of political opponents to point to policy short-comings can serve as a powerful enabling mechanism for development.

**Data gathering needs to be independent and open to input by civil society stakeholders.** Further, the potential negative side effects of the measuring process deserve greater attention. This includes data privacy issues, which will be different from country to country. In the measurement and data gathering process stigma can be problematic for example with regards to data collection on HIV and AIDS.

**Youth have a responsibility to hold each other to account.** Peer-to-peer engagement and accountability will help drive forward positive change. Localised initiatives that involve young people working on local and regional social justice projects build strong constituencies of change-agents and such projects should be exported and scaled.

### 2.6 Achieving gender equality for youth in 2015 and beyond







**Panelists in this session agreed that Governments should fully implement the existing commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action and ensure a gender-sensitive implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY).** Political commitments must translate into action and change at the grassroots levels (see Annex for a call to governments by the Members of the Panel on “Gender Equality and Youth: 20 Years since the Beijing Platform for Action and onwards to a Post-2015 Development Framework”).

**Many participants recognized gender equality is a precondition for advancing development and reducing poverty.** Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of themselves, whole families and communities, and they improve prospects for the next generation.

Despite solid evidence demonstrating the centrality of women’s empowerment to reducing poverty, promoting development and addressing the world’s most urgent challenges, gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise. **Participants highlighted the ongoing paucity of platforms for girls and marginalized groups to communicate their needs to decision-makers, and urged an expansion of spaces and mechanisms for this interaction. It was also agreed that youth leaders and development workers need to connect directly with those they represent, in local languages and contexts, in ways defined by them.**

**Gender stereotypes, norms, and consequent expectations prevent millions of boys and girls from pursuing their interests and reaching their full potential. Peer-to-peer engagement was noted by youth participants as a particularly important for overcoming this.** The HeforShe campaign was mentioned as a successful example of how mind-sets can be changed among young people themselves. Even the smallest differences in how we treat and girls and boys differently can have long-lasting impact, even in areas as seemingly innocuous as the types of toys, games and sports we encourage boys and girls to play.

Gender stereotypes, which can be reinforced by both sexes, have resulted in striking disparities between men and women in various sectors, professions and leadership roles. To correct this, there was broad support among participants for **the SDGs to mainstream gender across goals and push beyond the MDGs and their important--but limited--focus on parliamentary representation, by focusing on the root causes of gender inequality.**

**Mentorship was highlighted amongst panellists for this session as a key driver for positive change.** Young girls and boys cannot aspire to what they want to be without being able to see successful role models. It was stated that mentoring must be a big part of the next development agenda. **There was also strong applause among the attendees for a call for the next Secretary General of the UN to be a woman, someone who can be global role model for girls around the world.**

### 2.7 Strengthening youth participation in Africa





**For many youth participants, addressing youth concerns in Africa is an opportunity, not just a challenge.** Participants discussed the important role African youth can play in entrepreneurship, innovation and peace building on the continent, which can only be realized through investing in key areas, such as education and leadership training. For entrepreneurship to take hold, active peer support groups and networks are needed to support successful business ideas with mentorship and funding.

**Young African women and girls face specific challenges, which include lack of access to education, gender-based violence, female circumcision, early and child marriage and other issues facing the girl-child in Africa,** as highlighted by both participants and panelists. While acknowledging the need to include rather than exclude men and boys, panelists discussed the need for greater progress in achieving gender equality and empowerment for all Africa's youth whilst engaging with community leaders.

**It is not the number of youth in a region that determines the probability of violent conflict, but the number of youth who are unemployed, disenfranchised and disengaged.** Youth participants highlighted the important role of African youth in achieving Agenda 2063's aim of "Silencing the Guns" and achieving a conflict free Africa, but acknowledged that youth in conflict situations often face many dangers in their efforts to advocate for peace and speak out against injustice.

Youth participants welcomed the African Union's adoption of Agenda 2063, Africa's ambitious 50-year development framework. **With reference to Agenda 2063 and the African Youth Charter, participants emphasized the importance of implementing these agendas, funding relevant policies and programming, and holding governments and all stakeholders accountable for their implementation.**

**African youth were encouraged by the panelists to engage with their governments, including through standing for political office.**





## ANNEX

### **A Call to Governments by Members of the Panel on “Gender Equality and Youth: 20 Years since the Beijing Platform for Action and onwards to a Post-2015 Development Framework”**

In keeping with the ECOSOC Youth Forum’s overall theme of “Youth managing the transition from MDGs to SDGs” and to mark the 20-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Women, with the support of the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), organized a session on Gender Equality and Youth.

Four youth leaders – Dakshitha Wickremarathne from Sri Lanka, Melissa Ruvimbo Kubvoruno from Zimbabwe, Mirna Ines Fernández from Bolivia and Vivian Onano from Kenya – spoke at a panel on “Gender equality and youth: 20 years since the Beijing Platform for Action and onwards to a post-2015 development framework” and presented the following demands and recommendations.

#### Gender equality and youth

- We call on Governments to fully implement the existing commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action and ensure a gender-sensitive implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY). Political commitments must translate into action and change at the grassroots levels.
- We call on Governments to create or encourage the establishment of mechanisms at national and regional levels for youth and civil society organizations to hold leaders accountable for the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Such mechanisms should include national/regional civil society watch-dogs with youth representatives to monitor and report on progress.
- The MDGs largely failed to address the root causes of gender inequality and adopt a life-cycle approach to realizing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. As a result, girls and young women continue to face unique challenges because of their gender and age and are subject to systematic discrimination on a daily basis. Therefore, we call on Governments and the United Nations system to ensure that girls and young women are clearly acknowledged and their voices and priorities are reflected in the post-2015 development agenda. Girls and young women must be engaged as active agents in the implementation and monitoring of the post-2015 development agenda.





- We call upon all Governments to ensure that the stand-alone goal for gender quality and the empowerment of women is included in the Sustainable Development Goals, together with specific targets on gender-based violence, economic empowerment, and equality in decision-making in both public and private domains, among others. We also call on them to mainstream gender perspectives throughout the framework.
- Gender inequality is rooted in gender stereotypes, social norms, behaviour and attitudes that form early and that perpetuate inequality and discrimination against women and girls. Therefore, efforts to prevent gender stereotypes and change attitudes that condone gender inequality and violence must also start early, in schools, in society and in homes. We are calling upon the governments, educational institutions and the United Nations to put in place gender-sensitive curriculum in schools, starting from kindergarten and primary school levels.
- Every girl and young woman has the basic right to education, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. They have the right to quality education that prepares them for full employment and decent work. We call upon Governments to make affordable, accessible and quality education available for all women and girls.
- We call upon Governments and educational institutions to establish guidelines for comprehensive sexual education, which respects all genders, and provides comprehensive and gender-sensitive information on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- We call upon Governments to allocate specific budgets for comprehensive health care for women and girls, and invest in young mothers, to promote their health and lifelong learning and education opportunities.
- We call upon Governments to take urgent and decisive action to end gender-based violence. In order to do so, we urge all Governments to implement their existing commitments and establish adequate legislation at national and local levels to prosecute gender-based violence. We urge them to ensure allocation of sufficient resources to implement existing and new laws to this effect, raise public awareness of the laws, and to expand their efforts to prevent such violence from occurring.
- The gender gap in economic participation and opportunity stands at 60 per cent globally. Globally, only 22 per cent of Parliamentarians are women. Young women face additional





barriers in participating in politics and leadership positions. We call upon Governments and the civil society and the youth movement to work on eliminating gender stereotypes and barriers that women, including young women, face in participating in decision-making at all levels.

- Efforts to overcome gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms, attitudes and behavior must take a bottom-up approach, and start at the grassroots levels. We call upon all youth to start inclusive conversations in their communities, their schools and work places and among their friends on gender equality, engaging men and women, boys and girls. We call upon youth to engage traditional leaders and faith-based organizations to promote gender equality.
- We demand real progress towards gender equality by 2020 and full gender equality by 2030. We call upon youth everywhere to hold their governments accountable for ensuring gender equality. Young people are innovative and known for their “out of the box” thinking. We call upon them to create new understandings of masculinity and femininity that promote healthy, respectful relationships and end gender stereotypes that are the root causes of gender inequality.

