#YouthLead Dialogues Summary

United Nations Youth Office

Youth Compass

#YOUTHLEAD #FESTIVAL

In collaboration with:

unicef for every child

United Nations Futures Lab NETWORK

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Foreword

For decades, young people have been at the heart of the United Nations' mission. In 2025, as we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY30), we are called not only to reflect on the progress made and celebrate hard-won achievements, but also to take bold, transformative steps forward with and for young people.

It is in this spirit that we launched the #YouthLead Dialogues – a decentralized youth foresight process designed to place young people's visions at the center of global action. Over 75,000 young people in 182 countries engaged in and co-led these dialogues, sharing the realities they face today, the futures they want to build, and the actions to get us there. This process is part of the UN Youth Compass – a flagship initiative of the UN Youth Office designed not only to equip young people to navigate and shape policymaking and decision-making, but also to strengthen institutions to accelerate meaningful youth participation.

The ideas presented here will inform the High-Level Meeting celebrating WPAY30 and other key moments during the United Nations General Assembly high-level week, ensuring youth perspectives guide policies and programmes at every level.

From integrating dialogues into school curricula in India, to opening the doors of parliament to youth in Uzbekistan; from joining intergenerational gatherings in the United States, Venezuela, and Albania, to contributing through UNICEF's U-Report or UNDP's SparkBlue platform; or even simply sitting down with friends in Uganda—young people brought their voices directly into the global conversation.

This demonstrates that multilateralism is not confined to closed rooms. It flourishes wherever young people are heard and shows us that fostering youth participation in decision-making means meeting them where they are.

Young people's message is urgent, inspiring, and clear. The future they imagine – one grounded in peace, justice, equality, inclusion, sustainability, and solidarity – is not a dream too distant or idealized; it is practical, realistic, and within our reach. Yet the gap between this vision and today's realities remains wide. From barriers to education and decent jobs, to rising mental health concerns, the climate crisis and eroding trust in institutions, young people are deeply concerned about the world they live in.

Closing this gap requires urgent action – nurturing seeds of change, restoring hope, and forging the way forward together.

Young people's vision reminds us that foresight is not prediction but practice – a way to connect today's realities with tomorrow's possibilities. I extend my gratitude to the over 75,000 young people who contributed, and to the partners who made this process possible, particularly UNICEF Innocenti and the UN Futures Lab/Global Hub. The future is not something we wait for. It is something we build, together.

Felipe Paullier
Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs

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Background and Methodology

The year 2025 marks a historic milestone for the advancement of the youth agenda: the 30th anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth. To inform the high-level plenary meeting to commemorate the anniversary, the UN Youth Office convened the #YouthLead Festival: Accelerating Global Progress Through Intergenerational Collaboration in September 2025, under the framework of the UN Youth Compass and in tandem with the General Assembly high-level week, mobilizing a collective movement of youth-led and youth-focused activities to generate momentum during the high-level week.

The UN Youth Office mobilised partners and allies to organise #YouthLead Dialogues in preparation for the #YouthLead Festival. These dialogues gathered perspectives from young people and key stakeholders, including UN entities, country teams, youth-led organisations, and civil society partners. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight and the UN Futures Lab/Global Hub supported the initiative by integrating strategic foresight into youth-led discussions and insights in a decentralized format.

The #YouthLead Dialogues aimed to raise awareness among youth about the 30th anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth, engage young people and key stakeholders in advancing intergenerational solutions to drive forward the youth agenda,

Over
75,000
participants engaged in #YouthLead Dialogues across

182
countries.

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and strengthen synergies between global processes and commitments to advance youth affairs. It also served to capture and amplify young people and key stakeholders' views, recommendations, and commitments on accelerating global progress through intergenerational collaboration, and harness the role of the UN Youth Office as a convenor, enabler, advocate, catalyst, and steward to advance the youth agenda.

The initiative engaged over 75,000 children and young people from 182 countries in a decentralised youth foresight exercise. In the first phase, young people and key stakeholders around the world organised their own discussion spaces using a set of guiding questions. Insights to the process were submitted via an online form, UNICEF U-Report and UNDP SparkBlue. Guided by the Three Horizons Framework, participants started with Horizon 1 to share observations about the systems they currently live in, especially those that no longer serve us and are in decline. Horizon 3 encouraged participants to envision bold, transformative futures that reflect their hopes and aspirations. Horizon 2 invited participants to identify "seeds of change"— innovations, ideas, and practices already emerging today. These seeds can help us bring about the preferred future, but only if we nurture them properly. Otherwise, they could be captured by existing systems and fall short of ushering in change.

634
decentralized #YouthLead Dialogues hosted in

67
countries across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Europe and other States.

The second phase invited more than 40 young people from all regions to join a foresight workshop to build on some of the key findings from the self-organised dialogues. The Three Horizons was complemented by backcasting, through which participants were encouraged to imagine that the preferred future had already been achieved. Then, they traced a 30-year path back to the present, identifying milestones and interventions that contributed to building the preferred future.

Today's Realities: What we are living with

Young people were asked about the priorities they hold today and the barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential. They were encouraged not only to identify obvious challenges but also to critically examine well-intentioned norms and systemic limitations often accepted as "just the way things are." This approach helped surface a nuanced understanding of the current landscape from the perspective of young people and revealed that youth priorities are often accompanied by significant barriers.

Employment and economic opportunities
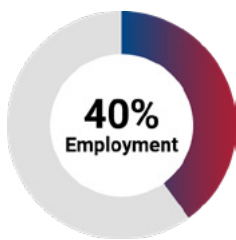
40% Employment

The top priority for young people was employment and economic opportunities, with nearly 40% naming it as their main concern. The "business-as-usual" reality is one of scarcity and frustration: decent, meaningful jobs are increasingly out of reach, information on opportunities and skills is fragmented, and training pathways rarely match the demands of a shifting economy. This system continues to reproduce barriers, normalising limited access and outdated skills development.

"Some barriers come from outdated systems and expectations, e.g. career paths don't always match the reality of a changing world. Even well-meant advice from older generations can sometimes overlook the pressures young people face today, like high costs of living, student debt, or unstable job markets. Social norms can also make it hard to speak up or take risks without fear of failure or judgment."
**– Young woman from Nigeria**

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Education

Over 30% of participants pointed to education as their priority. While young people value learning, they underscored that many formal curricula are outdated, designed for a world that no longer exists. Access also remains unequal, with "armed conflict leading to too many children and young people losing their right to education" (workshop participant from Egypt). With systems that do not meet their needs and frequent disruptions, many young people feel unprepared for the future they are expected to shape.

30% Education
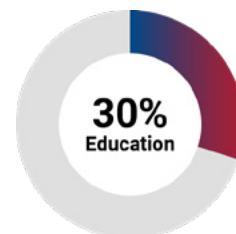
> "*There's no real benefit in making the educated even more educated while others are still denied the chance to learn in the first place. We need to create environments that genuinely support girls — and stay away from those that merely pretend to be progressive.*"
>
> **– Adolescent, 17, from Iraq**

Health

Physical and mental well-being were cited as a priority by over 10% of respondents. Youth expressed a strong desire to care for their health but noted that limited resources and persistent stigma—especially around mental health—make it difficult to access the support they need. They also emphasised the culture that instills deep-rooted "fear of failure" adds to the psychological weights they carry (from a self-organised dialogue). Many reported feeling isolated or forced to find their own ways to cope, especially when mental health and wellbeing are closely linked to other areas of priorities and life.
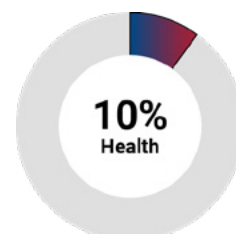
10% Health

> "*Mental health, in particular, deserves much more attention, especially as young people face growing challenges today. Social media and the current state of the world expose us to constant stress and anxiety, and this can seriously affect our well-being. Without proper support and care, this situation could lead to devastating consequences.*"
>
> **– Adolescent, 17, from Morocco**

> "*Many young people are held back by the idea that they're too young to make a difference. Adults often make decisions for us instead of with us. Even when it's well-meaning, it stops our growth. In many places, youth don't get access to real opportunities, training, or a platform to speak up. We're expected to follow rules quietly instead of leading change. The biggest barrier is not lack of talent — it's lack of trust. We need space to express, fail, learn, and lead without being underestimated.*"
>
> **– Adolescent, 16, from India**

Technology

10%
Technology

With almost 10% of young people selecting technology as an area of priority, they underscored how deeply integrated such tools are in the lives of young people, indispensable for education, connection, and self-expression. This reliance persists despite its misalignment with their preferred futures: access remains uneven, "depending on place and privilege" (workshop participant from Bangladesh), and tools and platforms are largely designed without youth well-being or safety in mind.

"By leveraging technology and collective efforts, we can create a brighter, more equitable world where every young person can learn, stay healthy, and feel valued, regardless of their background or challenges."
– Young person from Nigeria

"Connectivity should not be a luxury. It must be the bridge between potential and progress."
– Young person from Rwanda

Youth leadership

8%
Leadership

Selected by just over 8% of the participants, youth leadership was another topic of interest, perhaps because many youths are already leaders in their own communities. In particular, young people pointed to the dichotomy that has yet to be addressed: Young people recognising themselves as active agents of change that contribute to society, while systems fail to respond to meaningfully engage them in building solutions. Labeling the "ambitions of young people as unrealistic and dismissing youth concerns as inexperience" (from a self-organised dialogue) were identified as key barriers to ushering in more inclusive systems.

"When people say "you're too young," or "wait your turn," they may not realize they are dimming the light of someone ready to shine. When young voices are only heard for decoration, and not for transformation, change is delayed. But despite it all we rise. We are not asking for permission. We are asking for trust, for opportunity, and for room to lead. Because when young people are supported, heard, and empowered, we don't just imagine a better future—we build it."
– Young person from Ivory Coast

The Future We Want: A world that works for young people

While some may question the value of imagining preferred futures when urgent challenges persist in the present, it is important to recognise that the idealism of youth has been a driver of change throughout history. Visioning preferred futures provides a sense of direction and purpose, especially in times of uncertainty and anxiety when positive visions are most needed. Preferred futures thus do not ignore the discomfort of current realities; rather, they help illuminate the gap between where we are and where we want to be, empowering individuals and communities to take meaningful steps toward change.

> *"In a future where the barriers young people face today have been removed, life in my community is vibrant and full of opportunities. Young people feel empowered to express themselves and pursue their dreams without fear of stigma or discrimination."*
> **– Young person from Zimbabwe**

Education

Learning is imagined as flexible and skills-oriented—designed not just to transfer knowledge but to foster creativity, critical thinking, and active participation. It is also inclusive, where we see "everyone learning in different ways without being frowned upon" (workshop participant from India). In this future, children and youth co-design their learning journeys, and education equips them to contribute meaningfully to society.

> *"Young people have hope that they can make a change in the world and that their voices are not only heard but empowered. A future where each individual is given the right to express themselves without fear and no innocent child is killed simply for the colour of their skin or their faith. I envisage a world of clear skies and oceans and bright futures. This can only be possible through education, the UN, and the people. We need young people speaking out and seeing the change."*
> **– Young person from Pakistan and the United Kingdom**

Health

Mental and physical health, including sexual and reproductive health, are prioritised through stigma-free, youth-friendly systems that are accessible to all. In this envisioned future, no one worries about affordability when seeking care, and information is shared in ways that foster trust and open dialogue. Well-being is seen as a collective responsibility, supported by communities and institutions alike.

" *In the future I imagine, young people are not seen as "future leaders" but as co-creators of the present. They grow up in communities that center care over control, access over exclusion. Schools teach empathy alongside science. Health systems adapt to every body and mind. And every young person, regardless of disability, background, or identity, is trusted to shape solutions—not just react to problems."*
−Young person from India

Environment

Environmental sustainability is no longer a peripheral goal but deeply embedded in everyday life. We embrace the reciprocal relationship humans have with nature and this plays a central role in supporting the wellbeing of communities. Everyone lives in clean, healthy environments and actively cares for nature, which is reflected in urban design, food systems, water management, and cultural values.

Equity

Equity is another defining feature. Everyone enjoys equal access to quality education, decent jobs, and meaningful opportunities, and policies and systems ensure the representation of marginalised communities. Those left furthest behind are now placed at the centre of actions, and structures and systems of inequality and oppression have been dismantled. A culture that values collaboration over competition underpins everyday life. This inclusive environment fosters innovation and leadership, where "everyone feels confident, creative, and hopeful" (from a self-organised dialogue).

" *Personally, I envision a world where people of all generations embrace diverse backgrounds and actively lift each other up. As a young person, I believe that it would be especially meaningful for youth to continue to amplify each other's voices."*
− Young woman from the United States

Intergenerational Cooperation

Generations work alongside each other and contribute to building thriving communities, rooted in mutual respect, solidarity and shared responsibility. This is grounded in the understanding that being a child, adolescent, youth, adult, and elderly are "stages of life that we all live through," (workshop participant from Chile) embracing the fluid transition between generations. Lifelong learning is supported through the free exchange of ideas and wisdom across age groups.

"There's more listening. Older people don't assume they always know best, and younger people don't feel like they have to prove themselves all the time. There's respect both ways."
– Adolescent, 17, from Bolivia

Peace and human rights

Peace is a unifying theme across all aspects of the preferred future. Education systems play a central role in cultivating a culture of peace, where individuals continuously learn the values of collaboration, empathy, and non-violence. They are also equipped with the skills to protect the rights of others and resolve conflicts constructively. Young people are recognised as key contributors to sustaining peace. Peace is not viewed as a standalone goal but as a foundational condition that enables other elements of society to flourish. At the same time, these elements reinforce peace, creating a virtuous cycle of mutual support. Achieving and maintaining peace is seen as a shared responsibility across generations, requiring ongoing cooperation, dialogue, and trust.

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"What are some things we can do today to get closer to the future you have imagined?"

Answers from U-Report poll respondents

"Invest in education, listen to the voices of young people, ensure equal opportunities, promote mental health, encourage civic engagement, and eliminate all forms of discrimination."
– Young man from Haiti

"Listen to youth, amplify their voices, challenge injustice, invest in education and mental health, create safe spaces, and redesign systems with them—not for them. Liberation begins with shared power and purpose."
– Young woman from the United Arab Emirates

"Empower young minds and give opportunities for youth leadership and participation."
– Young man from Nepal

"Listen actively, challenge stereotypes, uplift all voices, educate for empathy, and create equal opportunities—every action, big or small, shapes a more inclusive, gender-equal future for everyone."
– Young woman from Indonesia

"Make the world safe again and better education"
– Young woman from Kyrgyzstan

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Seeds of Change: What is starting to shift

As identified by young people, the seeds of change necessary to build the preferred future already exist. What we need now is to fine-tune and scale these efforts, ensuring they are inclusive, accessible, and supported by institutions and communities. By exploring the ideas of participants from around the globe and developing relevant recommendations in the workshop, young people were able to clarify how to best leverage the existing opportunities.

"
"We need to bet on talent before it's polished. That means funding early-stage student projects, translating knowledge into local languages, and creating mentorship networks across borders. And for each of us: share what we know. A spreadsheet, a script, a framework, those can be someone else's launchpad."
– Young person from Brazil

Communities learning by doing together

One of the most promising seeds identified was the rise of community hubs, highlighted as vital spaces for learning, experimentation, and social innovation. These hubs support a culture of learning by doing, which is also reflected in the examples shared by participants, such as the expansion of project-based learning in schools in Finland and increased advocacy around the need for non-formal education in Moldova. Organisations across sectors place the wellbeing of communities at the centre, through practices like integrating the priorities of communities in corporate business plans (workshop participant from Germany).

Recommendations: Young people emphasized that community hubs must be inclusive and accessible—physically, linguistically, and culturally – and called on governments and local organisations to start investing in efforts to expand these spaces and raise awareness about them from 2027.

"
"In a world where younger and older generations learn to understand each other, problems can help to the creation of communal solutions that can benefit everyone."
– Adolescent from Serbia and the Netherlands

13

Transformative climate innovations

Climate-related innovations also featured prominently. Participants pointed to urban rooftop farming, vertical gardens, and community kitchens as examples of how we can reimagine food systems to be more sustainable, participatory, and socially connected. Many highlighted such innovations and more must be powered by clean energy. These ideas not only address food security but also foster community resilience and environmental stewardship.

Recommendations: Young people urged governments to treat urban gardens and community kitchens as essential public goods, laying the foundations for such spaces to thrive from 2026 and to support equitable food distribution systems from 2030 onwards.

Technology for good

Technology was another key area of focus. Participants highlighted movements advocating for safe, ethical, and inclusive technology, many of which are youth-led. Examples shared included Kenya, India, and Uzbekistan, where young people are pushing for transparency and accountability from developers and promote responsible applications among users. Many also pointed to digital storytelling as a form of advocacy to raise awareness, build connections, and strengthen civic engagement, especially among young people.

Recommendations: Young people called for more effective implementation of existing global standards like the Global Digital Compact at regional and national levels, starting immediately. Additionally, they highlighted the need for decision-makers to further explore inclusive design processes to support the implementation of international frameworks from 2027 onwards.

> **"*In my community, internet-connected schools would mean equal access to learning materials and a greener way to study, less paper and more digital collaboration. It opens doors to opportunity, innovation, and a brighter future for every child.*"**
> **– Young person from Zambia**

Generations shaping the future together

The growing momentum around intergenerational co-leadership excited many participants. Youth advisory councils are becoming more common at all levels of governance, ensuring young people's perspectives are not only heard but institutionalised through formal mechanisms. Reverse mentorship – where young people share their expertise with older generations – is gaining traction, described by one participant as "an interesting twist to the culture of one-on-one mentorship" (workshop participant from Pakistan). Intergenerational collaboration spaces, such as policy and project design labs, are also emerging, as noted by a participant from the United States. Additionally, young people are gaining space within United Nations disarmament mechanisms. For example, the International

Humanitarian Law and Youth Initiative (IHLYI) participated in the preparatory meeting for the 11th Conference of States Parties (CSP11) to the Arms Trade Treaty, advocating for youth voices from conflict-affected regions. Their input prompted positive responses from Panama and Argentina, showing how youth-led dialogues can influence global peace and disarmament processes.

Recommendations: Young people encouraged institutions to continue and increase funding for youth-led initiatives through cash transfers, scholarships, and grants. They also emphasised the need for intergenerational impact assessments to be integrated into decision-making by 2035. Additionally, they called for mechanisms that ensure the meaningful participation of young people, such as youth advisory councils, to be mainstreamed by 2040.

"One thing we can do – and need to do – is move beyond symbolic gestures and actually redesign how decisions get made. If we're serious about intergenerational solidarity, we have to embed shared power into the architecture of our institutions. That means long-term investment in youth-led bodies, it means building governance models where young people aren't just consulted but have real authority, and it means creating cultures where intergenerational co-leadership feels natural, not novel. Shifting mindsets starts with shifting the systems that shape them."
– Young person from Jamaica

Conclusion

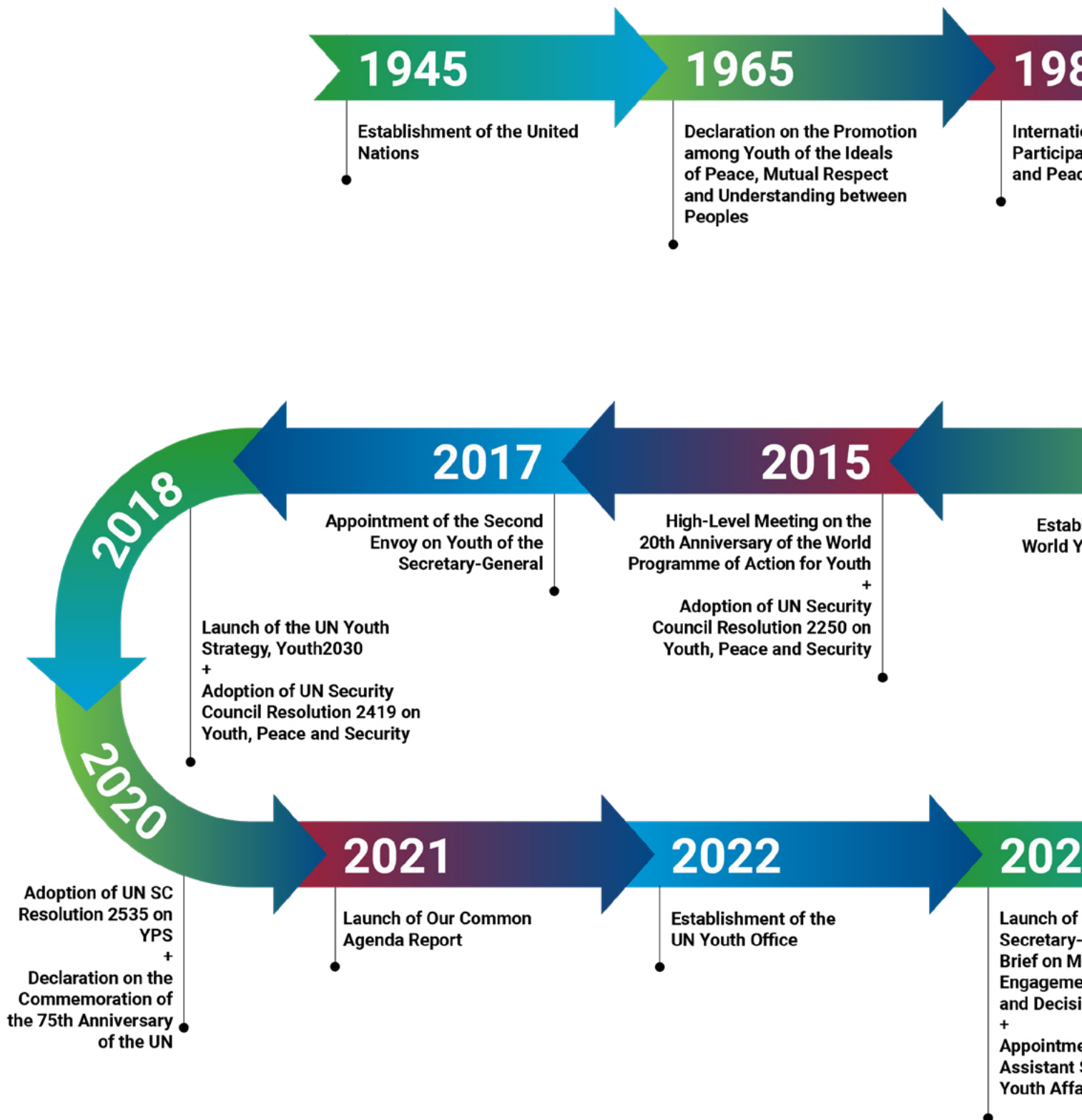Throughout the #YouthLead Dialogues, many of the action items proposed by young people were set within the next ten years, reflecting a strong sense of urgency and a desire to act swiftly. This timeline underscores their commitment to driving meaningful change now. **It also highlights a powerful belief shared across the dialogues: the future is not something to passively await, but something to actively and collectively build.**

By anchoring their visions in concrete, near-term milestones, as well as highlighting the need for structural changes across systems and sectors, young people demonstrated both strategic foresight and a keen understanding of the interconnected nature of the topics and priorities they highlighted. This initiative illuminated that young people are not only imagining better futures but also mapping out the paths to get there, building on momentum that is already gaining ground.

It is important to recognise that many of the seeds of change are already being planted and nurtured by young people themselves. From community-based learning hubs to youth-led movements for intergenerational policy design, young people are actively shaping the foundations of a more equitable and sustainable future. Their leadership is not emerging— it is already here. By meaningfully engaging youth in decision-making and integrating foresight to strengthen the anticipatory capacity of institutions, we can move beyond imagining the future to actively building it.

80 Years of Youth at the United Nations

1945

Establishment of the United Nations

1965

Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples

198

Internatio
Participa
and Peac

2018

Launch of the UN Youth Strategy, Youth2030
+
Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2419 on Youth, Peace and Security

2017

Appointment of the Second Envoy on Youth of the Secretary-General

2015

High-Level Meeting on the 20th Anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth
+
Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security

Estab
World Y

2020

Adoption of UN SC Resolution 2535 on YPS
+
Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the UN

2021

Launch of Our Common Agenda Report

2022

Establishment of the UN Youth Office

202

Launch of
Secretary-
Brief on M
Engageme
and Decisi
+
Appointme
Assistant S
Youth Affa

85

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1995

Adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond
+
Creation of UN Youth Delegate Program

1999

Establishment of the International Youth Day (12 August)

2007

Supplement to the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond

2011

High-level Meeting on Youth: Dialogue & Mutual Understanding

2012

First Economic and Social Council Youth Forum

2013

Appointment of the First Envoy on Youth of the Secretary-General

2014

...lishment of the ...outh Skills Day (15 July)

3

...the ...General's Policy ...eaningful Youth ...nt in Policymaking ...on-Making Processes

...ent of the First ...Secretary-General of ...irs

2024

Adoption of the Pact for the Future, with chapter on Youth & Future Generations

2025

High-Level Meeting on the 30th Anniversary of the World Programme of Action for Youth

19

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