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UNV Partnerships Forum

Session: Innovation for the SDGs - *Contributing to the SDGs through a problem-based approach, by tackling specific issues that fall under global development priorities. How can partnerships find innovative volunteer solutions?*

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be with you here today. The UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, sends you his warm greetings, and as he is -much to his regret- unable to join this important forum, he sends you me.

First of all, I would like to thank UNV for organizing this important gathering and for putting together such an impressive program. It has been enlightening to learn more and discuss the critical role of volunteers in the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Secondly, and before I get started, I wish to give a special shout out to all the young volunteers who have been supporting us over the past days. They offer us yet another testament of young people's commitment to volunteerism and I wish to recognize them for their contributions to the success of this Forum. To all of you, I hope that you feel you are learning something in the process and will be taking away a valuable experience.

Having attended various sessions of the Forum yesterday, I feel that in addressing you this morning, I may have little news to add. Hearing so many of you speak on the importance of engaging young people in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this feels like preaching to the converted. So I ask you to please bear with me...

Last month at the opening of the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly, there were two things that must have struck everyone who attended.

First: young people were everywhere. From the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants, to the launch of the first class of UN Young Leaders for the SDGs, the High-Level breakfast event that brought together world leaders and youth leaders -which Sarah Poole of UNDP referred to during the panel yesterday-, to events on human rights, peace and security, the prevention of violent extremism, young people brought forward concrete ways in which they are making our world a better place.

Second: the ubiquity of partnerships. From the UN Private Sector Forum and the Social Good Summit, to the countless events and pledges made to initiatives such as Every Woman Every Child and the Zero Hunger Challenge, it is extremely encouraging to see an unprecedented level of commitment by leaders of global business, civil society, academia, philanthropy and otherwise to do their part in realizing the SDGs.

At the same time, Member States themselves, this being the UN after all, didn't stay behind, and many Heads of State, Government or Delegation in their official statements during the GA's Open Debate highlighted both the importance of partnerships and the need for engaging of young people in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

So there seems to be a clear and widely-shared recognition on the role of partnerships and young people to address the world's most pressing problems and set humanity on a course of prosperity and sustainability.

While we have a specific SDG on partnerships, Goal 17, some of us, including the Envoy on Youth, have argued one could speak of an 18th or –if you will- an invisible Goal that runs across all SDGs; and that is the Youth Goal.

This invisible Goal brings together all the different targets and indicators that relate to young people's development and well-being, and includes education, health, gender equality and the empowerment of girls, employment, civic participation and the inclusiveness of societies, and many other targets.

As you may know, the world today is home to the largest generation of young people in its history: standing at a staggering 1.8 billion between the ages of 10 to 24. Close to 90 per cent of them live in developing countries, where they tend to make up a large proportion of the population. What is more, their numbers are expected to continue to grow, especially in the least developed regions.

So it must be clear, with these huge numbers the SDGs cannot be achieved, unless we involve young people and create the conditions that allow them to reach and unleash their full potential.

However, as most of you know, young people today face some daunting challenges:

- In many parts of the world access to and quality of education continue to be a major challenge.
- We heard already of high levels of joblessness among youth and the challenge of finding decent employment. In order to absorb current unemployment levels as well as new labour market entrants, it is estimated that 600 million new jobs need to be created by the year 2030.
- Working poverty is on the rise among young people, including right here in the countries of the EU, and many youth today face challenges in becoming financially independent.

- While this can have further implications like the delay of marriage and family life, at the same time, we are confronted with the fact that 1 in 3 young women in developing countries, are married by age 18, usually with little say over the matter and often to much older men.
- They make up a large proportion of the over 15 million adolescent girls, who give birth every year and who are basically having children while still being children themselves, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity that most of them grew up in.
- In terms of their civic and political engagement young people often are confronted with social, legal and other barriers that limit their participation.
- Many young people find themselves growing up in fragile contexts, affected by lack of security and stability, whether in the privacy of their own homes, their local communities or at the level of their national societies.

So it must be clear that the world's demographic and development realities mean that the success of the 2030 Agenda hinges on fulfilling young people's human rights and meeting their development needs, while ensuring their meaningful engagement in the implementation of the SDGs.

Far too often, however, the rhetoric around young people casts them away as a liability. In all kinds of contexts, young men are portrayed as lazy and self-absorbed at best, or as potential perpetrators of violence at worst, while young women are seen as passive victims.

This flies in the face of the fact that the vast majority of young people around the world are idealists, with strong values, and a commitment to peace and development.

Young people should be valued for their potential and promise, not seen as a problem.

An important way to counter these damaging and inaccurate narratives is to amplify the voices of young men and women themselves.

Decisions made by older generations may affect them for their entire lives. They need and deserve a place at the decision-making table, if they are to be fully engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and take the process forward.

The good news is that at the global level we have been making inroads.

Young people were at the heart of the Post-2015 process and actively engaged in shaping the discussions and catalyzing engagement, such as through the MY World Survey –that we heard about yesterday-, and the “Global Youth Call” which offered a rallying cry for youth sector actors around concrete proposals for target areas on youth in the new development agenda.

Young people volunteered their time, energy and insights and brought their voices into the process at every stage, including in the intergovernmental negotiations, in which the Major Group for Children and Youth played a critical role.

All these efforts have contributed to the fact that the 2030 Agenda itself critically recognizes the key role that today's youth is to play in ensuring its achievement, by stating that "...Young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world."

Young people continue to be involved in the Follow Up and Review of the 2030 Agenda, at the national as well as global levels, such as through the participation of volunteer youth delegates –as State Secretary Silberhorn mentioned yesterday-, as well as the Major Group for Children and Youth.

Also we have seen gains on other fronts: in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, as a first-ever in the history of conferences on Financing for Development, Member States expressed commitments to investing in youth as critical to achieving sustainable development.

In December last year, we saw the adoption of the ground-breaking Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, which was a historic step towards recognizing the role and potential of young people in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, including their engagement in peace negotiations.

Further, this year at the World Humanitarian Summit we witnessed the launch of the Compact on Young People in Humanitarian Action, which reflects a novel partnership bringing together youth organizations, civil society, private sector, donors, and UN system entities and recognizes young people for the important role they often play as first responders and volunteers in times of crises. The compact seeks to improve coordination and joint action to both address the needs of young people in humanitarian settings, as well as to facilitate and leverage their contributions to humanitarian response efforts.

Next month, the Human Rights Council will be holding its inaugural Global Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. This Forum will focus on the theme "Youth in Democratic Processes". Also here it is envisioned that while discussing the need for expanding opportunities and spaces for meaningful and inclusive youth participation, we will at the same time highlight the contributions that young people are already making, as volunteers, innovators, social entrepreneurs, activists and community mobilizers.

So though it is heartening to see that on the global front we have been able increasingly change the narrative on youth from either liabilities or sheer beneficiaries whose needs ought be addressed, to key stakeholders to be engaged as partners for development, we all know that the proof will be in the pudding.

Therefore much depends on how all of this will translate to the local levels into the lived experiences of young people on the ground.

Let me underscore 3 key elements here:

1) The ways in which we engage young people as agents for social change, the space we create for their meaningful participation, the inter-generational support and partnership we offer in breaking down existing barriers, will be critical in the development of their sense of agency and young people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda.

After all, who would be better placed than youth themselves to reach their peers, in their own language and on their own turf.

In working with youth volunteers, we must recognize and tap into the unique assets that young people have to offer. We need to draw on their creativity, innovation and energy.

They may not necessarily have the same knowledge and skill sets as more experienced counterparts, but they look at problems with a fresh eye and can bring us new solutions that older generations may be overlooking in their accustomed ways.

Connected to each other like never before, through social media and ICT, they can help drive social progress, inspire political change and build resilience.

Nowadays young people are growing up with an acute awareness of their surroundings in relation to the world outside, to an extent that no generation has experienced before.

This increased awareness for some may result in a sense of disillusionment or even resentment, but for the large majority it translates into a strong commitment to fight inequality, environmental degradation and social injustice.

In looking at partnerships for the green and shared economy, you will find it is young people who are on the forefront pioneering new models of sustainable consumption and production.

2) Which brings me to my second point: Ensuring the broadest ownership of the SDGs also speaks to the issues of expanding and strengthening the volunteerism infrastructure at all levels that were brought up in some of the discussions yesterday.

By virtue of the fact that young people's needs are cross-cutting in the SDGs, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships are required to address their needs in a coherent and comprehensive manner. To that end the UN has developed a System Wide Action Plan for Youth, bringing together the expertise of a wide range of UN agencies and covering key thematic areas and priorities.

At country level in many countries, the UN has established Interagency Coordination Mechanisms bringing together all relevant UN agencies, and sometimes expanding this

partnership to also include donors and youth organizations, to support Governments in their efforts to address youth needs through policies and programmes on the ground.

Also numerous UN Country Teams over recent years have established Youth Advisory Panels, convening national and sub-national youth groups and organizations, including those that are most marginalized, in order to facilitate their inputs in identifying young people's specific needs and priorities and getting their guidance on how to best address them through the UN's efforts on the ground.

New and innovative approaches and models are being explored, such as Hackathons that bring together young techies, youth advocates and development practitioners and have them work together, often under pressure cooker conditions, to come up with targeted solutions for specific problems that youth or their societies face.

3) Lastly, it is important to celebrate young people for the contributions they are already making in driving social change, often on a purely voluntary, non-profit basis. This is why we recently launched the UN Young Leaders initiative which is connecting the United Nations with outstanding young leaders working for the SDGs and reflects the broader commitment of the UN to youth empowerment and leadership.

This first year the 17 Young Leaders were selected from a pool of over 18,000 nominations received from all over the world in the short time span of only four weeks. Therefore the 17 are merely representative of the exemplary work that young people are already leading in service of their communities. They also serve to inspire other young women and men everywhere who want to play their part in making a better world for all.

We have heard of the amazing examples of youth leading the fight against Ebola, supporting data collection efforts in their neighbourhoods and beyond, and acting as community mobilizers in helping improve electoral processes, just to mention a few. For every example that we learn about, it is important to realize that there are thousands more out there.

In closing, let me remind we must make every effort to advance both SDG 17 and invisible Goal 18, as they mutually reinforce each other and together are key to the success of making all other Goals a reality.

In our efforts to harness the full power of partnerships across the widest range of stakeholders and to scale up our capacity to engage in transformative actions, we have to tap into the potential that youth have to offer. And volunteerism will prove a critical piece of bringing this to life.

Thank you.