

# Where do youth fit in the SDG architecture?

*Our vision is a world that values diversity, environmental sustainability and active participation by all citizens. A world that operates an economic system based on fairness and equality, where everyone has access to basic services such as health and education and where the standards of those services are high no matter what people's background or economic situation. No young person in this world would be excluded or marginalized because of gender, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation. Young people in this world are incorporated into decision making processes and given access to the levers of power regardless of their background."*

## Visions and principles for a post-2015 world

In September 2015 world leaders met in New York to adopt the post-2015 development agenda. In what has been considered the most inclusive global debate, thousands of voices made themselves heard and tried to bring their contribution to the world of tomorrow. The SDGs are the goals to be achieved by 2030 and a simple reading of them makes it quite obvious that by success or failure, they will shape the future in a significant way. From ending extreme poverty in all forms to fighting climate change, inequality and injustice, what has come to be known as the seventeen global goals touch upon all aspects of human life, all over the world.



The world of 2030 will be inhabited by today's youth, and we currently live in a 'younger' world than ever before. There are an estimated 1.2 billion youth age fifteen to twenty-four worldwide, 85% of them living in developing countries. Improving economic opportunities, promote quality education and ensure healthy lives for all are just a few aspects that will shape their life and future choices. Consequently, it should be quite obvious that youth should have a prominent voice on these topics. Moreover, since the SDGs are not legally binding and the review of their implementation is voluntary, citizens' involvement or lack thereof will have a great impact on their success.

Today's youth face a number of general and specific problems whose resolution will depend upon the success of the SDGs. To name just a few, low economic opportunities, poor education and poor health services affect the lives of hundreds of millions. According to the International Labor Organization, youth unemployment has been constantly rising to reach up to 13% in 2015, roughly three times bigger than the adult unemployment, while youth represent 25% of the working age population. In 2014 alone, 74 million youth were looking for work, this problem not being contained to developing countries alone. An index developed in the spring of 2014 shows that the overall wellbeing of 85% of the youth in the countries included in the index falls between medium and low, with the lowest index score in the economic opportunity domain. More than 87% of young women and men living in developing countries facing a broad range of development challenges and issues related to inequality, with around 238 million youth living with less than one dollar a day.

## **Youth voice in the SDGs**

In contrast to their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs focus on all countries, with an overall focus on sustainability. Even if the global goals pick up the unfinished work of the MDGs, they feature a much more comprehensive view of development, which falls in between social and economic development and protecting the environment. As youth consultations

point out, all three dimensions of sustainable development are relevant to youth everywhere, thus it is interesting to see how youth were involved in the shaping of the post-2015 agenda, what are their top priorities in the SDGs, where do they fit in within it and how will they participate in its implementation.

Youth around the world have actively participated in shaping the global goals through consultations and working groups which made recommendations for the decision-makers. While youth participated in the national and thematic UN consultations as stakeholders, they were also represented in one of the Major Groups for the negotiation of the post 2015-agenda. The UN Major Group for Children and Youth in the United Nations (**MGCY**) was the youth 'constituency' within sustainable development negotiations, and worked in the shaping of the global agenda by making **recommendations and proposals**, with major thematic proposals falling in twelve categories, the most important being promoting **gender equality and participation, decreasing youth unemployment worldwide through the promotion of decent work and universal education and increasing access to universal health care**.

Similarly, another significant involvement of youth in shaping of the global agenda was through the consultations carried in twelve countries worldwide under the Youth Conversations for Post-2015, a project initiated by the DFID/CSO Youth Working Group. Worried that youth participation in the UN consultations was not as meaningful and broad based as it should be given youth relevance for the whole process, the group carried inclusive consultations in twelve countries, in order to mainstream the results into the negotiation process.

Eleven principles emerged, which are the backbone of the vision for the future the consulted youth hold (in the order of their importance, as compiled in the **final report**):

Equality and freedom

Fair, responsible and accountable governance

Environment sustainability

The right to be healthy

Peace

Quality education for all

Responsible approach to the economy

Respect for diversity

Decent employment for all

Civic participation and active citizenship including youth empowerment

Global co-operation

Although these are the priorities emerging from all consultations, youth from different countries prioritized these principles differently. For example, for the Romanian youth, the most important ones were **active citizenship, primary health affordable to everyone and combating all forms of discrimination**, while the youth in Sierra Leone prioritized **equality of power and resource distribution, increased youth participation in decision making and stability for all**.

#### **How are these principles reflected in the SDGs?**

A look at the seventeen goals shows that the above mentioned principles are generally fairly represented. However, interestingly enough, young people do not have an SDG 'of their own', but they are included in three of the seventeen goals and six of 169 targets, specifically those regarding education, employment and one climate change-related goal. Under the mentioned targets, we are supposed to achieve universal literacy for youth, increase the number of youth who have relevant skills for employment, reduce the proportion of youth not in employment and raise the capacity for effective climate change related planning in least developed countries, including focusing on youth. However, youth are not explicitly included in the goals regarding health, political infrastructure or security, although these were identified by youth themselves as most relevant areas of interest.

To get to the point, while youth are somewhat represented in the post 2015 agenda, it is not at all obvious how this targets will be achieved, with states being quite free to adopt their own policies, and youth in different parts of the world having different priorities. Similar with not specifically

including youth in the goals, youth participation in the achievement of the SDGs is not explicitly codified in the post-2015 agenda. With the MGCY itself observing that children and young people are seen rather as beneficiaries than contributors, and that the overall post 2015 agenda falls short of recognizing the centrality and potential of youth in the implementation of the agenda, it seems that while the SDGs somewhat represent the key interests of youth, they fall short of empowering them to actively engage into the achievement of the Goals.

### **Steps further**

While states have pledged to allocate resources for the achievement of the Goals, and, more importantly, the Goals themselves stand as a moral commitment to the world of 2030, there is a lot to look forward to. However, since the SDGs are not legally binding, and review of the progress made by states is voluntary, citizens will have a large impact on the success of that commitment. Moreover, citizens should be the driving force behind the achievement of the SDGs if they are to be truly sustainable.

As the majority of tomorrow's population, youth have both incentives and opportunities to actively participate in the achievement of the SDGs and shape the world they will live in. The same youth consultations carried between 2013 and 2014 identifies five major themes which synthesize the results of all debates in terms of solutions for the problems identified by youth:

**"Sensitize:** Raise awareness to promote human rights, respect for others, support equality and protect the environment.

**Empower People:** Support wide scale civic participation, proper representation, accountability and knowledge of human rights.

**Harness Technology:** Use technology and promote innovation to enable, support and strengthen solutions and their reach.

**Collaborate:** Build effective relationships from local to international levels to support solutions across issues and amongst everyone involved.

**Reform Institutions:** Review and reform systems across education, health, governance and infrastructure (to ensure access to basic human securities)."

While all solutions proposed by youth consultations sound great in principle, the degree of their practical usability depends on the overall progress of the SDGs as a whole, starting with empowering youth to take action and awareness raising with a strong focus on education for sustainable development. Definitely, with the transition from the *Millennium Development Goals* to the *Sustainable Development Goals*, the focus shifts on the world of tomorrow.