



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

Engaging, Supporting, and Empowering Global Youth

Executive Summary

Every generation looks to the next as a source of hope and change. History has taught us that, without including young people, individual states—and, consequently, the multilateral system as a whole—face a growing crisis of credibility and legitimacy. While the youth demographic continues to gain influence, particularly in developing countries, which account for close to 90 percent of the global youth population, youth remain heavily underrepresented in the policymaking sphere internationally.¹

At the most basic level, youth as a complex, heterogeneous group is important because 48 percent of the world’s population is under the age of 24. This presents a clear demographic and democratic imperative for their further inclusion and meaningful participation in policymaking circles at the national and international levels.

Broadly speaking, youth face certain universal challenges. The 2014 Global Youth Wellbeing Index revealed that youth face a global crisis of overall well-being and feel excluded from economic opportunities and spheres of power.² This is reflected in the highest global youth unemployment rate in history, at 12.7 percent.³ Widening disparity between social classes, higher unemployment rates, and increasing economic instability create additional social, economic, and political strains.⁴

Failure on the part of national, regional, and global entities to offer youth equal opportunities forces or results in young people creating platforms for themselves. This dynamic progression has both negative and positive ramifications. By empowering youth to transcend the boundaries of traditional “youth” platforms and create a larger space to participate in the very

¹ UN Economic and Social Council, “Background Note to Youth Forum 2015,” 2015, available at http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/youth2015/pdf/background_note.pdf.

² Nicole Goldin et al., *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Center for Strategic and International Studies and International Youth Foundation, 2004), available at www.youthindex.org/reports/globalyouthwellbeingindex.pdf.

³ Suzie Boss, “A Call to Action: Challenges Facing Global Youth,” *Edutopia*, March 28, 2012, available at www.edutopia.org/blog/global-education-youth-challenges-suzie-boss.

⁴ Goldin et al., *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index*.

foundations of the multilateral system, the international community can shape a world that is inclusive of and beneficial for all.

The lack of representation in policymaking, compounded by the reality or perception that their interests are ignored or overlooked, has fueled young people's discontent and mistrust of national governments and, by extension, the multilateral system. In order to be embraced by more young people globally, this multilateral system will need to include more youth voices in its traditional top-down structures and policymaking processes. This could include creating more youth leadership positions in national and international structures; developing consultative and participatory frameworks designed for, and ideally by, youth; and systematically including youth-based associations and networks as stakeholders.

The multilateral system has primarily dealt with youth as an issue unto itself or, to use a term often cited in the analysis of multilateral structures, as a "silo." This is an inefficient and ineffective way to capitalize on the potential of youth as positive agents across the multilateral system and hinders the system's ability to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century in a systemic and comprehensive way. Instead, the question of youth should be dealt with in a crosscutting fashion that is holistic and integrated across multilateral structures and agencies.

This paper highlights structural factors that suppress youth empowerment and the ability of youth to participate more fully in the multilateral system. Building off recent developments within the multilateral framework, such as the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the passing of Security Council Resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security, and the increasing currency of the "Sustaining Peace" approach to peace, security, and development, the timing may be ripe for the instituting of frameworks for meaningful youth participation across the UN System. Fully realizing the potential for youth participation requires structural reform and youth involvement in decision making and policy formulation. Young people should be equal partners in creating and implementing policy, which will increase the legitimacy and ownership of these policies among youth.

From the implementation of the SDGs and enabling environments for economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, to political and social inclusion, innovation in education, and messaging, this paper puts forward a series of recommendations towards the goal of engaging, supporting, and empowering global youth.