



Economic and Social Council Youth Forum

"Youth at the Forefront: Leveraging Science and Social Inclusion for Sustainable Development"

15-17 April 2025

United Nations Headquarters – New York

BACKGROUND NOTE

Substantive Scope

The ECOSOC Youth Forum will be held from 15-17 April 2025 under the overarching theme "*Youth at the Forefront: Leveraging Science and Social Inclusion for Sustainable Development*".

It will feature a series of thematic sessions related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will be under review at the 2025 session of the High-level political forum on sustainable development: good health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), life below water (SDG 14), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17).

By emphasizing science- and evidence-based solutions, the forum will encourage innovative and data-driven approaches to addressing today's most pressing challenges.

The discussions at the Youth Forum will also aim to contribute to the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2).

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

The world is not on track to achieve SDG 3. Changing course and achieving health for all requires prioritizing the achievement of universal health coverage, strengthening health systems, investing in disease prevention and treatment, and addressing disparities in access to care and services, especially for populations at risk of being left behind. Ensuring that these populations are able to make decisions about their own lives and health is crucial. UNFPA has found that only 56 per cent of women are able to make their own decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, and this lack of autonomy puts women's lives at risk, robs them of opportunities, and contributes to intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Importantly, achieving the ambition of the SDG 3 requires investments in the health and well-being of adolescents and youth, who constitute almost a quarter of the global population. Over 1.5 million young people aged 10–24 years died in 2021, about 4,500 every day. While notable progress has been achieved in reducing adolescent mortality, progress in reducing ill health has stagnated - presenting challenges for the current and future health of young people.

Young people have been at the forefront of mobilizing actions for their health and wellbeing at grassroots and global levels - from the annual Pre-World Health Assembly (PreWHA) which brings together youth advocates to chart a progressive agenda on health and influence global health governance - through to thematic youth-led engagement mechanisms such as the Joint Youth Working Group on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), Gender Equality and Climate Change, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Youth Platform, Global Youth Coalition on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and many other.

Mental health is of particular concern. Half of all mental health disorders in adulthood start by age 14, but most cases are undetected and untreated. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds. Depression and anxiety are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents. Addressing mental health and wellbeing requires a strong multisectoral approach and a focus on the linkages between mental health and social inclusion.

Ensuring young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights is also critical. Although progress has been achieved in key indicators related to adolescent sexual and reproductive health many adolescents and young people still lack access to high quality, inclusive and affordable sexual and reproductive health care. In 2024, young people made their voices heard on SRHR through the ICPD Cotonou Youth Action Agenda.

To address these challenges, health and social systems should be adolescent- and youth-responsive, ensure a protective policy environment, and promote universal health coverage for young people with access to lifesaving and health-enhancing interventions. Furthermore, there should be sustained investment in youth constituencies and youth-led mechanisms for health, providing rights-based spaces for young people to engage in directly shaping health policies and strategies. Meaningful youth engagement and intergenerational policy frameworks are crucial for accelerating progress towards achieving SDG 3 and ensuring health and well-being for all. SDG 3

and SDG 5 are mutually reinforcing, as sexual and reproductive health and rights are a critical aspect of achieving gender equality.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

In 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the countries of the world came together and pledged to act for a world free from discrimination – a world of equality, justice and peace.

This set the normative standard for action for gender equality and women’s rights across all Member States of the United Nations. It established the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which remains a transformative framework calling for the rights of every woman and girl to live a life free from discrimination, violence and inequality.

Progress has been made in lifting women and girls out of poverty. Pre-pandemic, the world made significant progress in reducing poverty compared to 30 years ago, with improved access to education, employment, and social protections lifting many women and girls out of poverty. These achievements were backed by international cooperation, grassroots mobilizations, and investments in gender-sensitive policies. However, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed some of these gains, disproportionately affecting women, girls and youth by widening economic inequalities and pushing many back into poverty. Despite considerable advancements to achieve gender parity and eradicate poverty among women and girls, system barriers within current economic structures continue to exist.

Globally, 1 in every 10 women still lives in extreme poverty. Without significant systemic changes, projections show that by 2030, 342.2 million women and girls will remain trapped in extreme poverty. Alarming, 220.9 million of these women and girls are in sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring the urgent need for transformative actions to reverse growing inequality, especially in the Global South.

There are strong linkages between women and girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights and economic empowerment. It is estimated that with each additional child born to a woman between the ages of 25 and 39, labor participation decreases by 10-15%, and adolescent girls who have children before they are 18 earn approximately 25% less income than women who have children when they are older. This is significant as 16 million adolescent girls (15-19 years) in low- and middle-income countries become mothers every year. When women and girls are empowered their families, their future children, and their communities are also empowered which are crucial measures in eradicating poverty. Unless accelerated progress is achieved, a girl born today will be 39 years old before women hold as many seats in parliament as men, she will be 68 years old before child marriage is eradicated, and she will be 137 years old before extreme poverty for women and girls is eliminated.

The harsh realities of conflict and humanitarian crises further exacerbate gender inequalities. Last year, 612 million women and girls lived amidst the brutal realities of armed conflict, facing a 50-per-cent increase in conflict-related sexual violence. In 2024, nearly 300 million people worldwide required humanitarian assistance and protection, with the majority being women and children.

Over the past five years, the number of women and girls living in proximity to war and conflict has surged by 50% and is now at a staggering number of 600 million lives. These inequalities and injustices underscore the need for targeted interventions, ensuring that young women and girls have a decisive voice in shaping policies and decisions that affect their current realities and futures.

SDG 8: Decent Jobs for Youth

Youth unemployment has fallen to a 15-year low of 13%, signaling recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, but critical challenges persist. Recovery remains uneven, with young women facing significant barriers to employment and 1 in 5 young people still classified as NEET (not in employment, education, or training)—the majority of whom are young women. Additionally, many youth, particularly in low-income countries, are trapped in poor-quality, low-wage, or insecure jobs, with just 1 in 5 young workers in these contexts enjoying regular employment compared to 4 in 5 in high-income countries.

At the same time, a mismatch between education systems and labor market needs exacerbates the situation: 44 per cent of businesses struggle to find talent with the necessary skills, while 67 per cent of young workers in developing economies hold qualifications that do not align with their jobs. This disconnect hinders young people’s transition into decent work and prevents them from realizing their full potential.

To address these pressing issues, the UN Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, launched at the ECOSOC Youth Forum in 2016, has championed innovative, youth-centered solutions at regional and country levels.

Through partnerships with organizations such as the Global Youth Caucus for Decent Work and Sustainable Economies, the initiative champions policies that promote inclusive job creation, quality education and skills development. By fostering collaboration among governments, social partners, businesses, and civil society these efforts aim to build inclusive labour markets with and for youth. Youth-led mechanisms and youth voices, especially from grassroot and disadvantaged communities, are central to shaping these solutions and preparing the global workforce of today and tomorrow.

SDG 14: Life Below Water

Our ocean, a vital natural resource, important driver of global economies and livelihoods, and primary source of protein for over 3 billion people, is facing significant challenges affecting current and future generations. The sustainability of global fishery resources has plummeted from 90 per cent in 1974 to 62.3 per cent in 2021. Marine protected areas cover only 8.12 per cent of the ocean, falling short of the 10 per cent SDG target. Record-high ocean temperatures, with daily average sea surface temperatures between 60° North and 60° South reaching over 21°C in early 2024, have triggered a fourth global coral bleaching event, threatening up to 90 per cent of corals by 2050 if warming reaches 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Despite some progress in combating illegal fishing, scaling up marine protected areas, and addressing pollution, there is still need for accelerated global action, including youth engagement in ensuring the long-term health and sustainability of our oceans.

Youth around the world are not standing idle in the face of this crisis. They are taking action, advocating for change, and leading the charge towards a sustainable blue economy and healthy marine ecosystems. The 2022 UN Ocean Conference recognized the crucial role of youth participation and empowerment in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14 and its interlinkages with other SDGs. The conference called for a "blue deal" that is inclusive of young people, emphasizing the need for ocean literacy, skills development, and meaningful engagement of youth in decision-making processes. As the 2025 UN Ocean Conference approaches, the knowledge, passion, and innovation of young people have the potential to contribute significantly to the transformative changes needed to restore and protect the ocean. Investing in youth-led initiatives, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, and creating spaces for young voices to be heard are important steps in harnessing the potential of the next generation to contribute to a sustainable future for the blue planet. The Ocean Youth Constituency is already mobilizing toward the 2025 UN Ocean Conference, building upon initiatives like the youth forums at the previous Ocean Conference.

Multiple sectors and stakeholders need to be involved in finding and implementing solutions that protect the Ocean, including Governments, coastal cities, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, innovators and the private sector.

Ocean literacy and the increased involvement of women and young people in actions towards Goal 14 are important enablers for making and sustaining progress.

SDG 17: Partnerships and Financing for Youth: Unlocking the Potential of the Green Economy

In a rapidly changing world that is grappling with the effects of climate change, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity, the green economy can offer a powerful pathway to a more sustainable and inclusive future. Youth must be equal partners in this process, equipped with the skills, tools, and platforms to navigate the financial architectures and lead and thrive in this transformation.

Fostering cross-sector collaboration and innovative financing mechanisms can bridge existing gaps in education, training, and access to green jobs, while influencing global funding platforms and processes with and for youth. Partnerships can catalyze action, ensuring that young people are not only beneficiaries of but also leaders in shaping a greener, more equitable future.

Empowering and Engaging Young People: The Evolving Role of Science and Technology

Science and technology are key to solving the world's most pressing challenges. 5.5 billion people, or 68 per cent of the world's population, are now using the internet. This widespread connectivity is driving a wave of rapid technological advancements in areas like artificial intelligence (AI), space technologies, quantum computing, the Internet of Things (IoT), and more.

Technology and science are not just a tool for development; it is an essential enabler that spans across all 17 SDGs, serving as the backbone for global progress. Every SDG—whether addressing poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean water, or climate action—is deeply connected to technological innovation and its applications.

The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities with almost 80 per cent of young people in the age group of 15-24 years old using globally the Internet, but there are still challenges that need to be addressed for all to benefit from emerging technologies. The digital divide remains, with only 43 per cent of young people aged 15-24 in low-income countries having access to the internet, compared to 99 per cent in high-income countries.

The growing demand for digital content, especially video, highlights the need for reliable, trustworthy data in an increasingly digital world. With “data” at the core of emerging technologies, it is crucial for young people to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to navigate this fast-evolving technological landscape. Challenges such as cybersecurity risks, energy efficiency, privacy concerns, and the ethical use of AI and data need to be addressed. Raising awareness of these issues among youth is critical to ensuring that youth can responsibly engage with and benefit from these technologies.

Regional Breakout Sessions

The ECOSOC Youth Forum serves as a platform for discussions on the regional impact of the SDGs. The regional breakout sessions are organized by the regional commissions, together with regional youth entities and platforms, to delve into regional challenges and opportunities as well as identify the development needs for youth at the regional level and consider how best to articulate and mainstream them in the context of achieving the SDGs at the global level.

To ensure broad and diverse participation of regional youth-led and youth-focused organizations, as well as government representatives, various preparatory events are being organized during the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development¹. These events promote intergovernmental and intergenerational discussions leading up to the Youth Forum.

¹ Including but not limited to the Asia Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development's Youth Forum, Europe & North America Regional Youth Assembly and other regional convenings led by youth constituencies.