A Decade of Action: Building a Resilient Recovery

7–8 APRIL 2021

Marking the 10th Anniversary of the event, the 2021 Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum was held virtually on 7 and 8 April 2021. The Forum took place amidst an unprecedented novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted young people and setbacks in the implementation of the Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development. Given this historical juncture, the 2021 ECOSOC Youth Forum sought to give an account of the significant challenges youth have faced in the context of COVID-19 along with their resilient responses. The Forum emphasized the need for youth in all their diversity to be active partners in building the road to recovery and offered their vision to the realities of the post-COVID-19 world. Their views, experiences, and ideas on how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be achieved were explored, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will be reviewed at the 2021 High-level Political Forum (HLPF), namely SDGs 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), 13 (Climate Action), 16 (Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies) and 17 (Partnership).

The 2021 ECOSOC Youth Forum was chaired by H.E. Mr. Munir Akram, the President of the Economic and Social Council. The Forum was co-organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Office of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth (OSGEY), in collaboration with the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) and co-convened by the Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY) and the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organizations (ICMYO), with technical input from youth organizations relevant to the theme of the Forum.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Close to 19,000 participants and 400 Government representatives, including 60 High-level officials at the ministerial level, joined the 2021 ECOSOC Youth Forum to discuss the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as it pertains to youth.

The key messages and recommendations that emerged from the discussions during the meeting are the following.*

PLENARY SESSIONS

• **#YOUTHLEAD:** Building back from this pandemic is conditional upon building a better world for all segments of society as young people are facing gaps in education, unequal access to employment, and lack of ability to enjoy their youth, which will impact this generation for decades to come. This means investing in young people as actors in the response efforts through meaningful youth participation, recognition, protection, education, and entrepreneurship, as well as institutional support to all segments of society, including indigenous groups and women and girls.

• **With and For Youth:** Youth work in the UN is at a tipping point. Accelerating the implementation of Youth2030, ensuring cohesive and transparent delivery and meaningfully engagement of youth in decision-making and in implementation are underlined in the first-ever Youth2030 Progress Report. Fast-tracking internal changes in the UN for a future-focused reset on youth issues is emphasized.

• **Leaving No Youth Behind:** The principle of leaving no one behind is not being consistently implemented when it comes to young people. As a result, this has led to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that heighten their vulnerabilities and marginalization. Participants explained the need to do a better job in mitigating the different risk factors and addressing how these intersect with each other and the drivers of inequalities. Policies and programs need to consider young people’s experiences, address the root causes of their vulnerabilities and challenges, create opportunities for youth to contribute to design, implementation and evaluation, as well as leverage their untapped capacity and agency.

• **Reflecting Back and Looking Forward:** Young people are interested in engaging and advocating for the SDGs through various innovative approaches but are not always offered the opportunity to participate. Therefore, the UN needs to strengthen its inclusive youth participation mechanisms by creating new, innovative, and safe spaces.

*A more detailed account can be found in the rest of the summary.*
THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

- **People (SDG 2 and SDG 3):** An inclusive, multisector approach should be utilized in ensuring a sustainable transformation of both health and food systems. This is a critical juncture to ensure the systematic inclusion of youth in food security, health system governance and formal mechanisms for COVID-19 response and recovery. Ministries responsible for these portfolios must meaningfully partner with adolescents and young people and develop appropriate pathways for ensuring real inclusion.

- **Planet (SDG 12 and SDG 13):** Youth are confident of their role as agents for innovation and as drivers of global environmental change. They called for increased opportunities to create awareness of common environmental challenges and the potential and importance of individual climate action. Youth should be enabled and given the opportunity to contribute to fight the existential threat of climate change which will greatly impact their present and future.

- **Prosperity (SDG 1 and SDG 8):** Young people called on the international community to create enabling environments that allow a sustainable socio-economic recovery while keeping a youth-sensitive and inclusive approach to financial investments that build prosperous and just societies for everyone. There is a need to broaden existing financial mechanisms and direct them to sectors that can boost efficient, green, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recovery.

- **Peace and Inclusion (SDG 10 and SDG 16):** The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and unjust systems across the globe. Young people are adversely affected by the growing uncertainty of their education and employment, as well as increasing risks regarding inclusive digital spaces and access to meaningful participation at all levels. Stakeholders need to prioritize creating and maintaining safe spaces for young people so that they can meaningfully and inclusively engage on all levels of policymaking. Minimizing the digital divide and enabling access to the Internet are also two key components to ensure access to digital safe spaces for young people actively engaged in global discussions related to peace, the rule of law, and inclusion.

- **Partnerships (SDG 17):** Collaboration, when broken down into small, achievable parts, can address and have more impact on society’s most complex problems. Youth are to be included in partnerships of every size and scope. Partnerships to implement the 2030 Agenda should be created with youth. Youth must be included from the outset, not as an afterthought.
REGIONAL DISCUSSIONS

- **Africa:** World Health Organization (WHO) analysis reveals that Africa accounts for 12.8 percent of the innovations on new or modifications of existing technologies that have been developed worldwide to target different areas of the COVID-19 response. To continue this trajectory, Governments should prioritize greater investment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, robotics, artificial intelligence, drones, and mechatronics, as well as putting the right policies in place to boost creativity and entrepreneurship as well as bolster university-led research. To further address the existing inequalities, STEM-friendly infrastructure must be put in place to enable inclusive access to all young people, in particular girls.

- **Arab States:** Youth in Arab States have been exposed to fragile ecosystems, extreme natural disasters, and armed conflicts. 37 percent of youths live in conflict-affected nations, thereby bearing the brunt of socio-political instability. Also highlighted was that civic engagement among young people in the region is the lowest in the world. Youth volunteering and civic engagement should be integrated into national recovery and development plans so that marginalized groups can network and create sustainable skills. Development opportunities adapted for young people can transform youth volunteering from a coping mechanism to a strategic resource for community resilience, which is especially important in the midst of fragile and conflict-oriented environments.

- **Asia and the Pacific:** Where barriers exist, young people are creating informal structures, expressing solidarity while taking the SDGs into “their own hands.” Youth centers, youth councils, and other self-organized youth platforms are actively supporting the 2030 Agenda in the region. More recognition for similar youth-led innovations will promote a culture of solidarity, partnerships, and bridge actions in communities. The diversity of the region allows for the unique strengths of collective action.

- **Latin America and the Caribbean:** COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing violence and inequality in the region in a context where children, adolescents, and youths are not safe even inside their own homes. Cases of young people who have disappeared or have been killed while defending their planet and raising their voices for their rights have increased. It is key for youth to have decent work opportunities, with regulatory frameworks that support them, to overcome the increased violence associated with poverty and youth unemployment.

- **Europe, North America and other States:** Now is the chance to rebuild a broken system that could be more responsive for youth. Governments must include youth in the recovery plans and rebuilding process by establishing permanent platforms for participation to advance youth rights and tackle root causes of our climate and inequality crises as well as rethinking the world’s vision of progress in particular existing economic and political systems.
The future belongs to you, the youth. We need your energy, your ideals, your boldness, your imagination, your innovation, to build the structure of a peaceful, prosperous and equal world order.

— His Excellency Munir Akram
President of ECOSOC
Opening Session

ECOSOC President H.E. Mr. Munir Akram opened the Forum with a recognition of the significant historical context we find ourselves in, stating that “we are at an important inflection point in world history.” He cited “the COVID-19 pandemic, a deep global recession, an impending climate catastrophe, rising inequality and extremism, a new arms race, proliferating and unresolved disputes, and the danger of revived great power rivalry and tensions” as major causes. He called on youth to showcase their energy, ideas, boldness, imagination, and innovation to address these challenges.

United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, noted the pressing challenges that have emerged in recent times but also acknowledged a surge in youth engagement, including through his Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change and the work of his Envoy on Youth. “The UN’s first-ever system-wide Youth Strategy, Youth2030, is our commitment to strengthen our work with and for young people”, he said, referring to the UNUN’s Youth Strategy which serves as a framework for the UN’s work with and for youth across the human rights, peace and security, and development pillars and in all its humanitarian efforts. He concluded with a promise to consider youth leaders and the rights of future generations in his forthcoming report to Member States on charting the Common Agenda.

H.E. Mr. Volkan Bozkir, President of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, offered a message of hope, urging youth to “not become disillusioned. This pandemic will pass.” He also offered words of encouragement, affirming young voices to “never doubt your power.” He gave his vote of confidence in today’s youth by deeming them “the problem-solvers who will find the solutions to the existential challenges humanity will face in the future.”
Opening Session

UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, Ms. Jayathma Wickramanayake, remarked that “despite their resilience and bravery, young people cannot do it on their own. They need allies who will support them in translating their words into action to reach young people regardless of where they are.” She highlighted their call for a more inclusive UN and announced the launch of the first Youth2030 Progress Report.

Ms. Anika Jenne Dorothy, East Africa Coordinator for Amplify Girls, gave a powerful account of the issues girls and young women face during the COVID-19 pandemic. She called to attention “the abuse, the teenage pregnancy, the erosion of confidence, the inculcation of the tenets of patriarchy, the rampant female genital mutilation (FGM) practices, the fear, the lack of resources to get back to school, the relegation to a house help as a young girl and most heart-wrenching, the early marriages.” She declared that going back to school is not enough. Rather, we must invest in the breaking down of all barriers so that no girl is left behind in the great engine of personal development that is education.

“We cannot talk about girls’ intervention without talking about girls’ education. I’m here to tell governments that it is not enough to declare that girls must go back to school. We must also invest in systems and structures that enable girls holistically to reenter.”

— Anika Jenne Dorothy
East Africa Coordinator for Amplify Girls
“The world needs to move beyond platitudes about young people. We need meaningful opportunities for youth engagement in government systems, in the democratic process, peacebuilding and peace negotiations.”

— António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations
“#YouthLead: Young People in the Driver’s Seat to Build Back Better” was the first of many interactive discussions held with the participation of High-Level Government representatives, officials from international and regional organizations, and youth activists. Participants emphasized that the needs for young people will not be met with merely building back; this opportunity must be used to build back better. Before the pandemic, young people were already suffering from disproportionate gaps in employment and economic opportunities. In addition, we are witnessing the formation of a “generation disrupted,” one whose access to education, employment, and meaningful participation in policymaking has been severely disrupted. The ripple effects of this unsettlement will last generations. Speakers identified education investment as one of the key mechanisms in the endeavor to build back better. In an age where the tools are available to build the most educated generation in history, governments must focus on necessary education infrastructure in order to recover and build back better from the destructive nature of the pandemic on education. The panelists also recognized the power of institutional support for young voices and called on local governments and international organizations to better lend their support for youth by equipping them with resources, skills, and opportunities. The discussion also addressed the need for men and boys to become allies in gender equality, especially due to the negative pandemic impacts girls have faced.

Panelists (clockwise):
Ahmad Alhendawi,
Carlos Alvarado Quesada,
Nadine Khaouli,
Chandra Tripura
In the second interactive roundtable which stretched over two sessions during the two days of the Forum, entitled “Achieving the SDGs With and For Youth,” more than 70 speakers representing Ministers and High-Level Government representatives, strategic partners, and youth representatives highlighted progress on SDG implementation with and for young people, national and regional policies on youth development, and youth engagement in the context of the 2030 Agenda and the UN system-wide Youth Strategy: Youth2030. To open the session, the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth launched the first-ever progress report on the implementation of Youth2030 and presented the key findings and insights based on analysis of self-reporting by 33 UN entities and all 130 UN Country Teams on their work for and with youth. The data clearly shows that the UN response to the needs of youth during the COVID-19 crisis has been rapid and robust and that there is growing momentum for the youth agenda across the UN system.

Speakers also highlighted the unique role of the ECOSOC Youth Forum as a very important global space facilitating a dialogue between diverse stakeholders around key concerns relating to intergenerational partnerships for development and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This year’s ECOSOC Youth Forum again saw an increasing number of Member States sharing their speaking time with youth delegates who took this opportunity to deliver strong messages about the benefits of empowering young people by including them in official Member State delegations to the UN and other intergovernmental processes. The message was clear: “Nothing about us, without us”. This was supported by representatives from youth organizations and networks who highlighted the urgent need to increase spaces for young people to meaningfully participate in affairs that shape their livelihoods and future, and to ensure that these spaces are safe for young people to speak unfiltered.
A PEOPLE-CENTRIC RESPONSE

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Agriculture remains the backbone of most economies, and with climate conditions worsening every year, rapid soil degradation is a growing issue. It was stressed that at the current rate, the world would run short of harvests in approximately 60 years. Important aspects to consider are sustainable food systems and sustainable food choices, as well as affordability and access to healthy food.

Youth representatives stressed the importance of more equitable food systems to ensure the continuance of sustainable food choices. Also highlighted was the importance of supporting food relief organizations to adequately assist vulnerable populations in times of COVID-19 and beyond. It is also crucial to amplify efforts collectively and individually to restore the planet and protect life while integrating biodiversity in the food systems. To achieve all of the above, the leadership role of youth is more important than ever. Youth representation and the systematic inclusion of youth “councils” within food systems structures should be strengthened.
The impact of COVID-19 on young people are myriad. In addition to the infection, young people make up a large portion of the overburdened front-line healthcare workforce without personal protection equipment. The prevalence of misinformation on COVID-19 caused anxiety, stress, and depression. Negative shocks in unemployment, worsening health care disparities, and disrupted access to essential medicines, proper food and water were also noted. These shocks have exacerbated and unmasked existing divides in our systems, worsening the conditions that prevent the achievement of the right to well-being.

Youth representatives presented on-going solutions such as the launch (as already done by some youth organizations) of a global campaign to inform the population about COVID-19, dispelling myths and providing knowledge on treatments. It is also essential that governments support student-led initiatives on a local level. Speakers emphasized the importance of a people-centered approach with young voices given the opportunity to adequately engage and partner with like-minded agents of change.
Thematic Breakout Sessions

ACCELERATING ACTION FOR THE PLANET

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Participants highlighted the impacts of harvesting, pollution, and land degradation, especially on small islands and on the African continent. Often the result of exploitation, high-income countries are currently engaging in unsustainable consumption patterns that will lead to significant resource constraints and impeded progress on climate policy. Raising awareness and changing consumption and production habits to reduce our environmental footprint must become a priority for the current generation. Now, more than ever, consumers can catalyze changes by demanding more responsible and sustainable production patterns across all value chains. However, living sustainably is not simply an individual choice. It requires that policymakers, governments, and civil society develop policies and initiatives to support sustainable choices and make them as inclusive as possible. Youth are at the forefront of this issue and are organizing grassroots efforts to raise awareness and enact change from the local to international levels. There is a need for Member States and organizations to recognize these efforts and use their resources to assist and actively collaborate with youth who innovate solutions and demand more sustainable consumptions and production practices.
The ambition and dedication to environmental activism are the highest among youth than other age groups. Globally, this was illustrated through the contributions by the youth participants who expressed their collective willingness to address common environmental challenges. This kind of leadership will be needed for forceful, consistent, and coherent action to make a much-needed leap forward in decarbonizing our economies by 2030. In order to do this, participants highlighted the need for policies that set legal responsibilities for polluters to pay, to make climate policies legally binding (imposing legal actions for members that failed to adhere to international agreements), to hold governments accountable to their actions and focus on transitioning to living in a zero waste and zero carbon, socially inclusive world. Unlike political leaders, youth are not paid to design or implement policies. Yet, they continue to be leaders in promoting ambitious climate action or sustainable consumption and production because their lives, future generations, and the global community depend on it. However, bureaucratic passivity and access to finance are still identified as the main barriers to scalable solutions. Moreover, there are issues relating to the inclusion of specific privileged groups of youth at the expense of others – particularly, indigenous communities and vulnerable groups who are not engaged or have few opportunities to do so. The voices of Youth, especially from developing countries, should be amplified and become a part of the decision-making process with respect with climate action.
Participants recognized the enormous repercussions COVID-19 brought to the goal of eradicating poverty. More than 120 million people worldwide are estimated to have slipped back into extreme poverty compared to the year prior to the pandemic. Although widely viewed as a temporary shock to economic growth and living standards for affluent nations, developing countries face daunting long-term consequences. Young people have been hit especially hard by a more competitive job market, lost jobs, few social protections, exclusion from policy making bodies, and unequal access to healthcare.

In order to implement recovery strategies, it is necessary to learn from past experiences, particularly from the 2008 global financial crisis since young people are still trying to recover from a lack of access to decent jobs. The speakers called for countries to adopt financial policies that inject much-needed cash and other kinds of relief for those hit hardest by the pandemic -- for youth, strengthening their capabilities while closing gaps between their skills and job market requirements will be beneficial for recovery. It is also important to note that the youths have different paths to COVID-19 recovery based on their geographic and socioeconomic contexts. Directing recovery aid by considering region-specific needs, such as gender inequality aid, can help redirect our recovery strategies towards the sectors and population segments most in need.
Thematic Breakout Sessions

PROSPERING AND THRIVING

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people has been particularly disproportionate, hampering their education and access to productive employment and decent work, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where employment losses among youth have translated into high levels of inactivity, and socio-economic crises. Session participants highlighted the need to close the gap between what educational systems are teaching and what job markets are requiring. The creation of paid trainee and internship programs was also identified as a great priority. Participants also stressed the importance of promoting sustainable youth entrepreneurship and self-employment for prosperity. They invited action and investment in these areas, emphasizing that effective fiscal policies and financing towards SDG 8 should be comprehensive, large-scale, and targeted, working with and for youth.

Young people stressed that fiscal, employment, industrial, and monetary policies can address the COVID-19 crisis and its disproportionate effect on them and vulnerable communities. Alternative economic models such as the blue, green, creative, and circular economies have the potential to foster structural transformation, innovation, entrepreneurship and thus lead to the creation of decent jobs and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Further, human-centered investments are needed, including specific solutions for youth employment such as: (i) quality apprenticeships and paid traineeships programmes; (ii) subsidies to support continuity of young people in education and training; (iii) hiring subsidies; and (iv) access to various forms of capital (financial, social, human) for young entrepreneurs. Youth also highlighted technology as a catalyst that could be leveraged to innovate for a Financing for Development agenda that is inclusive and fair.
Panelists addressed how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and discrimination. They pointed to the digital gap, loss of jobs and income, and vulnerabilities linked to trafficking. Prior to the pandemic, a new generation of inequalities was already emerging due to the climate crisis and deepening power imbalances which has now been more amplified.

Reducing inequality calls for an end to exploitation, strong mechanisms for the provision of justice, preventing crime, and anti-discrimination legislation. Too often, these actions exclude youth participation when they are often the ones most impacted. Therefore, building their capacity to lead through networking and shifting to a people-centered approach in all fields, including health, social services, and food and water can help increase their presence while reducing inequality overall.
INCLUSIVE PEACE: THE WAY FORWARD

The COVID-19 pandemic has also heightened the dangers of some forms of crime, violence, and conflict, as well as people’s trust in public institutions. Violence against women and girls increased during the pandemic while homes became “not-so-safe” spaces. Organized criminal groups continue to profit while concerns over the transparency and accountability of emergency government funds increased. There has also been a concern for reduced civic spaces and public participation as well as the criminalization of rights defenders in many countries.

The panelists covered four main ways to address these concerns: digital inclusion and safe spaces, participation in decision-making and peace processes, reducing inequalities and discrimination, and crime prevention, criminal justice, and the rule of law. Most important is guaranteeing human rights and ensuring legislative protection of the right to civic participation and providing safe channels for youth engagement on peacebuilding.
Thematic Breakout Sessions

HARNESSING PARTNERSHIPS, RESOURCES AND SCIENCE: WORKING TOGETHER TO GET THINGS DONE

SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

SDG 17 is an especially important goal as it supports all the other SDGs. Speakers highlighted the value of a global partnership in which all are enabled to play a part in the achievement of the full set of SDGs. Global partnership is more crucial than ever in the context of COVID-19, where cooperation between governments, corporations, NGOs, and youth throughout the world will help build the road to recovery and make progress in a post COVID-19 world.

In order to maintain and improve these partnerships, speakers highlighted several steps that can be taken, especially for young voices. The youth must be encouraged to start at any level as any kind of collaboration has the potential to address some of society’s most complex problems. Strong guidance on how to engage in partnerships must be made available to youths who may have limited experience with such matters. Most importantly, staying committed with positive partnerships will build lasting relationships capable of the type of change we strive to make for our society.
Regional Breakout Sessions

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The 700 million youth in the Asia Pacific region responded remarkably to the pandemic, accelerating transformation and building action in different contexts and fields of engagement. Panelists, each with a different area of focus, highlighted the meaningful ways young people are transforming climate actions, disaster risk reductions, technology, entrepreneurship, and mental health. However, youth engagement in the implementation and review of the SDGs is still weak, and there is a low level of awareness about the SDGs, especially at the grassroots level.

It was proposed that young people should become full-fledged partners in the implementation and review of the SDGs. Speakers also called for meaningful dialogue and partnership between youths and other relevant stakeholders. The importance of an awareness campaign was also highlighted. There is a need for a sensitization campaign on the SDGs in schools and communities. Participants also stressed the importance of social media and their power to inform, educate and empower young people in the context of the follow-up and implementation of the SDGs. They also called for collaboration with media houses, educational institutions, and social media influencers to create campaigns on various issues, including youth mobilization and climate and environmental awareness. They call for youth collaborative action, especially in amplifying their voices through advocacy and volunteerism.
Youths in the Arab States face a myriad of challenges that have been made worse by the pandemic. With a stunning 17 percent of the population in the region ranging in age from 15 and 24, youth unemployment hovers at 25 percent. Women are at an increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence. On top of these economic challenges, the youth has been exposed to fragile ecosystems, extreme natural disasters, and armed conflicts. In fact, 37 percent of youths in the region live in conflict-affected countries, thereby bearing the brunt of socio-political instability. Also highlighted was that civic engagement among young people in the region is the lowest in the world. In fact, only 9 percent of youths in the 15–29 age group report volunteering with organizations in a given month.

Despite these challenges, young people have been at the forefront of innovating imaginative solutions to meet the unique challenges facing both their governments and the broader region. Examples include interactive courses developed by younger generations to promote positivity. They have also launched and sustained awareness campaigns and hotlines to combat violence against women. Participating youth delegates were clear on the need to maintain this trend and engage more youths and mobilize their capacities and resources. The panel discussed the need for Governments to support this innovation by prioritizing the inclusion of youth in recovery plans, SDG initiatives, and other types of programming. They must also partner with international and domestic organizations to empower the youth so that they can develop their potential and innovate even more.
Regional Breakout Sessions

AFRICA

Poverty and human rights issues continue to pose significant challenges in certain pockets of the continent. Highlighting the urgency of the situation is the fact that 26 million additional people were thrown into extreme poverty in 2020 amidst the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These developments are also exacerbating existing problems in infrastructure. Underdeveloped physical infrastructure such as office space, computers, and other resources remain a bottleneck for sustainable development. This, coupled with weak democratic institutions, results in youth and minorities continuously being excluded from key decision-making processes. As a result, inequalities remain systemic and hinder innovation and creativity among Africa’s youth. On the flip side, there were some positive developments during the pandemic. Some 12.8 percent of the innovative information technology solutions developed in response to the COVID-19 crisis came from the African continent, further highlighting the continent’s immense and still largely untapped potential.

In order to overcome bottlenecks, African youth representatives advocated for strategically engaging Africa’s young people in decision-making processes and inter-generational dialogues, which will in turn create an enabling environment for them to access and leverage Private–Public Partnership opportunities. A recent case in point was the “Week of Science” initiative in Makutano, Democratic Republic of the Congo, where young people had the opportunity to showcase their innovative ideas to potential investors. Speakers also agreed that quality education is the key to progress in Africa. As such, academic curricula should incorporate a strong Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) component. As we inch closer to 2030, African youth representatives reiterated that poverty can no longer be an excuse to hold back innovation as the African youth themselves do not lack ideas. What is missing is often ‘political will’ to create an enabling environment for the continent’s youth as well as mentorship and sponsorship arrangements to bring their ideas to fruition.
Regional Breakout Sessions

EUROPE, NORTH AMERICA, AND OTHER STATES

Youth participants highlighted five challenges young people from this region are facing that need to be addressed urgently. One such issue is human rights. Measures adopted to counter COVID-19 had huge consequences on the rights of young people. Emergency response measures have also increased institutional violence, such as police brutality. The rights of young people are not being respected, and this is even worse for young people with an indigenous, migrant, or refugee background. Mental health issues were also discussed as a growing issue amongst youth, even pre-COVID-19. The pandemic exposed the pre-existing damage caused by years of austerity, excessive privatization, and underfunding of public services. It has both shed light on the shortcomings of our often-celebrated social models in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) region and exemplified how unequal our societies are in accessing basic needs such as healthcare.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also exposing the failures of our current economic systems. Our economic system was not working for most young people. Governments are designing recovery plans, and a task force makes sure that European Union (EU) Member States comply with the guidelines of the European Semester, taking in account investments in education, social and environmental fields. The recovery plans should include measures aiming to increase access to employment for youth. However, in designing the recovery plans, governments must avoid repeating past mistakes and prioritize long-term human wellbeing by investing in ecological stability. Climate change and biodiversity loss are the most complex problems of our time. These issues are embedded in our lifestyles and require long-term measures rather than a rapid response focusing on immediate emergencies. We must design recovery plans that phase out all direct and indirect fossil-fuel subsidies, include investments in sustainable agriculture, and include young people in the decision-making process because they have a higher stake in the future.

Young people are underrepresented in the decision-making process and are challenged to make their voices heard. Higher unemployment, insufficient investments in skills development, lack of access to education, employment, decent housing, and inadequate mental health services are have exposed the fragility of young people. Governments need to promote a rights-based approach to youth participation, and policies must be adopted so that young people are included in the institutions responsible for implementing youth policies.
The Latin American region faces the most severe socioeconomic crisis in recent decades due to the multidimensional impacts of the pandemic. The increase in violence against children and youth (especially young women and girls), human trafficking, gaps in access to education, political instability, and other challenges place children and youth at risk. Especially alarming is the very high incidence of violence against women, with 4 out of every 10 girls experiencing some kind of partner violence. It is also essential that children and youth taught to recognize their bodies as the first territory that must be defended and protected not only by the State but also by society. Children and youth need to have access to programmes, processes, resources, and infrastructure that allow them to report attacks and identify situations in which they are victims of violence.

Similar problems are plaguing the Caribbean region. Young women and children are especially at risk of violence and trafficking, which is not helped by worsening education infrastructure and lack of digital technology. Moreover, most Caribbean islands are heavily dependent on the tourism sector, which has suffered greatly because of the pandemic. This situation highlighted the lack of diversity within the economy as well as the lack of social protection as many of the islands within the region do not have unemployment insurance. Despite these setbacks, youth-focused movements are being supported across the region, such as “National Transformation” in Barbados, which offers free courses on training young people for the employment sector. However, there is still a great need for governments to partner with the private sector, civil society, and the youth to prepare for a monumental recovery process. It is also important to ensure that youth groups do not work in silos to promote and advocate on the issues that affect them.
Day 2 Plenary Sessions

"Leaving No Youth Behind: Addressing the long-term consequences of COVID-19 for vulnerable youth groups" addressed the cornerstone principle of the 2030 agenda, that of leaving no one behind in our commitment to sustainable development and elimination of inequalities that prevent individuals from enjoying their human rights and reaching their full potential. This principle of leaving no one behind, while rhetorically having reached consensus, is not being followed by many member states because of their consistent lack of support for youth. A large section of youth experiences multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that heighten their disempowerment, such as a combination of poverty, low levels of education, gender inequalities, forced displacement, and disabilities. This complex reality continues to go unseen, undocumented, and unaddressed and have been compounded by COVID-19.

It is also important to understand is that young people’s experiences of the pandemic are extremely diverse given that youth is not a homogeneous group. Participants pointed to to better mitigate the different risk factors but how they intersect with each other and their root causes, as well as drivers of inequalities. Policies and programmes need to consider young people’s experiences, and they need to address the root causes of these vulnerabilities and challenges that they raise, leveraging opportunities resulting from their untapped capacities and agency. Meaningful inclusion of diverse young people is essential to achieve an inclusive recovery. The session concluded with a call to create and strengthen global networks co-created and implemented by youth of intersecting identities. With the support of stakeholders and governments, these new initiatives can provide feedback and observations on current mechanisms that impact young people.
It is clear that we can’t achieve the SDGs without young people. It is not about doing it for you, but doing it with you. You are bringing innovation. You are raising awareness and driving change. To drive the SDGs, we need to embrace all young people.

— Amina J Mohammed
Deputy Secretary-General
of the United Nations
Day 2 Plenary Sessions

“Reflecting back and looking forward—celebrating a decade of the youth forum and the start of decade of action,” the last plenary session of the programme, fittingly reflected on the contribution of youth to the HLPF and the Decade of Action. The three youth speakers and the UN Deputy-Secretary General, Ms. Amina Mohammed, reached the following concluding thoughts on the progress and implementation of the SDGs going forward:

- SDGs is a robust framework which is characterized by collective responsibility.

- It is important to use education to conceptualize the SDGs. We need a holistic approach to learning and find ways to integrate climate and SDGs into the curricula worldwide. Education is a docking station for all the other SDGs.

- The pandemic has resulted in an education crisis, and young women and girls are at especially a high risk of not returning to school. If we do not invest in education as a part of our COVID-19 recovery, we will fail not just an entire generation but also future generations.

- We need smarter and greener solutions achieve the SDGs. The ongoing pandemic had led to increased food insecurity. Youth voices will be included in the world food summit, which will offer another opportunity to participate and advocate for SDGs.

- We need more ways to bring young people on bord to join the SDG movement. We need to take a good look at the intergenerational transition and have a clear and meaningful interaction on how this will happen.

- Young people are driving change and mobilizing others to do so. They are the leaders of today and play a key role in advocating for the SDGs and holding others accountable.

Panelists (clockwise):
Amina J. Mohammed,
Abdullah Al-Khafajy,
Dilan Ezgi Koç,
Mariana Vasconcelos
Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, commended the Forum participants for a high level of engagement on virtual platforms. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of recognizing active and continuous engagements of relevant youth agencies and organizations. He also remarked that for the youth, “the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged at a critical time of your own development.” Not only are young people dealing with well-being and mental health issues during this crisis, they are rising above these challenges to be “at the forefront of climate action for healthy planning... innovating and creating green jobs....and offering sustainable solutions on how cities, companies and your fellow citizens can improve quality of life in their community.” In order to ensure that the demands of the young are not overlooked during these critical times, Mr. Liu stressed the need to for member-states to overcome structural barriers put in place to diminish youth representation. He concluded by promising not to leave youths behind but rather, to “stand with you as a generation” to bring the SDGs home in 2030.

Sisters Melati and Isabel Wijsen, Founders of Bye Bye Plastic Bags and YouthTopia, urged world leaders to act more quickly, noting that youths around the world are impatient with the lack of progress. “We need to see stronger commitments from those in positions of power. No more empty promises. We want action. We are living in a time when we can no longer sit at the sidelines.”

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Sisters Melati and Isabel Wijsen, Founders of Bye Bye Plastic Bags and YouthTopia, urged world leaders to act more quickly, noting that youths around the world are impatient with the lack of progress. “We need to see stronger commitments from those in positions of power. No more empty promises.” In a video, the sisters recounted their experience starting Bye Bye Plastics at the ages of 10 and 12 years old, respectively, an organization that has now grown to 57 locations worldwide within 7 years. Their story is one of perseverance and determination and most importantly, change. However, this kind of change is not occurring fast enough on a global scale and the sisters concluded their statement with a message of urgency. Young leaders have to treat “this emergency as an emergency that has all of our attention and priority.” For world leaders who do not seem to share these values, they leave them this message: “you cannot ignore us anymore.”
Closing Session

UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth Ms. Jayathma Wickramanayake stressed that “young people faced a future characterized by intersecting and complex crises with potentially irreversible long-term consequences, including the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, widening inequalities, and systematic and persistence discrimination, among others.” She mentioned that participants expressed the need for intergenerational partnerships, not only to respond to the challenges of the present, but to recover from the mistakes of the past and build forward a better future for all of us. In that context, and as an outcome of the discussions of the two-day youth forum, she recommended, first, that “we need to build strong relationships with young people to regain their trust in institutions.” This means recognizing them as full-fledged partners in SDG implementation and review. Second, we need to “ensure that young people are safe when exercising their rights and engaging in civic space and political processes.” Lastly, “we need to make sure that we put our money where our mouth is, and our investments are future proofed, and evidence based.” She stressed that “we have a unique opportunity to rebuild a more resilient and more sustainable future, a greener future. For that, we need investments in education for sustainable development, green jobs for youth, renewable energies, safe digital transformation, and youth-led climate action solutions”.

Concluding the forum was the President of ECOSOC, H.E. Mr. Munir Akram who stated that the “Tenth anniversary of the Youth Forum has, indeed, been exceptional. It has affirmed that our endeavors at the United Nations will be designed for and increasingly by and with youth; that no one will be left behind; that the weak and the vulnerable children, women, the aged, and the infirm will be the first to be protected”. He affirmed his commitment in designing the United Nations “for and increasingly by and with youth.” He underlined the need for a more intensive and continuing engagement with youth.

Jayathma Wickramanayake, UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth