

**Statement by Jayathma Wickramanayake,
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ECOSOC Youth Forum 2021
Opening "10x10 Ten Years of #ECOSOCYF"
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[EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY]**

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Fellow youth,

It is a pleasure to join you all for the 10th anniversary of the ECOSOC Youth Forum and to welcome you virtually to the United Nations.

Together, all of us here today are making history.

It is incredibly inspiring to know that over 11,000 young people are joining us from all over the world, making this year's ECOSOC Youth Forum the largest gathering of young people at the UN **ever!**

It is my hope that this milestone convening will serve as an example for the UN to continue increasingly welcoming young people's voices — both virtually and in-person — for years to come.

Whether you are joining from New York, Cairo, or Colombo, like me, we are gathered together here today to recognize the vital role of youth as agents of change and a driving force in the Decade of Action to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals.

This is an opportunity to celebrate young people's resilience, drive, creativity, and leadership in building a more sustainable, just, and inclusive world for all, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

But we are also here to shine a light on where young people are most often left behind, excluded and marginalized.

While this year's Youth Forum is the most inclusive it has **ever** been, I cannot help but think about the millions of young people who cannot join us here virtually for various reasons.

That is why I am counting on everyone's leadership and support to extend this privilege and use it to amplify the voices and concerns of **all** young people in **all** their diversity.

We **need** to show the generations before us that those of us who are Millennials and Generation Z are walking the talk when it comes to inclusivity and equality.

Over the past decade, the ECOSOC Youth Forum has become a pivotal and unique platform that brings together Member States, young people, representatives of youth-led and youth-focused organizations, as well as other stakeholders, to promote meaningful youth engagement and review progress on the SDGs as it relates to young people at the global, regional and national level.

In this spirit, let us not forget that we are here to hold decision-makers accountable for their actions, which will continue to impact generations for years to come, and to advocate for more young people to be represented where decisions are being made.

With that in mind, I am especially encouraged that over 60 high-level government officials — including Heads of State, Vice-Presidents and Minister — will be joining us as part of this intergenerational dialogue over the next two days.

I hope this commitment inspires others and continues far beyond this year's Youth Forum. Putting diverse voices around the table is the **only** way to ensure we do not repeat or continue to perpetuate past mistakes.

Dear friends,

Being young has always had its set of challenges. However, over 1.8 billion young people today face issues that ***no other generation*** has encountered.

As we mark World Health Day today, it's imperative to also reflect on the immense impacts that COVID-19 has had on young people around the world:

- One in eight young people do not have access to education, the majority of whom are girls;
- One in six young people lost their jobs;
- Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights has decreased, leading to an increase in unwanted pregnancies and an additional 10 million girls at risk of child marriages;
- And youth's heightened mental health issues are a continuing concern.

At the same time the ongoing climate crisis, conflicts and systems of inequality continue to pose a threat to young people's lives and futures.

Yet, it would be a mistake to think that young people have been passively waiting for others to give them the rights, privileges and opportunities they deserve.

On the contrary, it is often those left furthest behind, including the ***most marginalized and stigmatized***, who take charge to secure their rights and those of others. The leadership and resilience of young women, indigenous youth, LGBTIQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, young refugees and migrants, and others demonstrates this every day.

Over the last year alone, we have seen young people worldwide take to the streets and dominate online spaces demanding climate action, racial and gender equality, democracy, and the respect of fundamental freedoms and human rights.

And here, I want to take a moment to remember and honour the young people who have lost their lives in the process.

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 – in villages, favelas, refugee camps, cities or islands – ensuring that *no youth is left behind*.

Let us not forget that during the monumental UN75 Global Dialogues over the past year, youth were the most optimistic group when it came to the future of the United Nations and multilateralism, despite disproportionately facing the long-term impacts of current global crises.

But they have also called for a more inclusive UN.

In 2018, the UN Secretary-General launched the first-ever UN system-wide Youth Strategy, Youth2030, to serve as a framework for the UN and partners to come together **with** and **for** youth. The accelerated implementation of this strategy will be critical to ensure we are able to deliver on our common vision of achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The launch of the first-ever Youth2030 Progress Report later today will be a milestone moment on this journey.

Dear colleagues,

We are at an intersection. Despite the hardships of the past year, we have an unprecedented opportunity to recover better together, reimagine the status quo and build a new normal based on values of justice, equality, intersectionality, and sustainability — with young people front and center.

I look forward to the discussions to come, and wish you all an energizing and productive Forum!

Thank you.

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