



Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities

Vatican Youth Symposium 2016



Youth are at the epicenter of the United Nations' newly adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – both as future leaders of that agenda, as they will be running nations, nongovernmental organizations and businesses by 2030, if they aren't already now, and as the audience most impacted, long-term, by the decisions being made by decision-makers now.

Youth, consequently, must be at any decision-making table, virtual or physical, when the UN Sustainable Development Goals are discussed and designs are implemented. Youth are already leading the world in finding, forging and funding solutions for sustainable development, creating inspiration for nations, cities and businesses to follow suit.

What is truly revolutionary, and can become the turning point and catalyst for change, is that young people today are not just recipients of knowledge and values, but, thanks to their social awareness and to the new technologies, they have become agents of change and education.

Their leadership in their own local contexts is remarkable, as is their capability of designing sustainable initiatives in their schools, families and communities. Young people are promoting change through constructive interaction not only with their peers, but by positively influencing adults, too. Developing this activity of self-education and providing youth with the best training possible is essential to self-empowerment.

Yet, despite the gains made above and the incredible leadership we are witnessing by youth, the statistics surrounding global youth development are still unsustainable by any measure.

Fifty per cent of the world's youth, for example, currently receive insufficient schooling, or are out of school. This is staggering. Compounding this problem is the fact that fifty per cent of out-of-school children of primary school age live in conflict-affected areas. All of this leads to over 100 million youth worldwide today without basic literacy skills, 60 per cent of which are women.[1] Due to this lack of education among youth, unemployment becomes prevalent and remains pervasive. Any attempts to employ youth will need to factor in four hundred and seventy million jobs to account for new entrants to the labour market between 2016-2030.[2]

These illiteracy and unemployment trends should not be tolerated as they provide the breeding ground for all forms of extreme indifference, such as forced labour and prostitution, organ trafficking, terrorist violence and organized crime.

In response, the need for a new moral imperative, as proposed by the Magisterium of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato si'*, in concert with the United Nations, becomes paramount. We must, to quote Goal 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, "take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms". This is our starting point.

Going further, a quality education, the 4th Sustainable Development Goal, becomes a priority as it will enable young people to take their future into their own hands with dignity, freedom and responsibility, rather than becoming victims of these crimes or, worse, exploiters of the Earth and other human beings.

The challenge for young leaders, then, is to design a new educational paradigm that takes into account the sustainable development of the Earth and the respect and love for their neighbors as themselves. By sharing our neighbor's burden and suffering, we live a fuller expression of justice and peace. In brief, as mandated by *Laudato si'*, this means educating for the covenant between humanity and the environment.

Investing in this kind of education might seem expensive to some, but as is evident to all, the costs of ignorance and of the lack of values result in a much higher price in terms of violence, addiction, marginalization and exclusion. The future of our global society is in danger due to the lack of an integral education. Without proper education, children around the world will not be capable of achieving social and economic independence and decent work in our increasingly complex and competitive world.

The proper valuation of these educational initiatives and of our moral obligations towards our

common home requires an “ecological conversion” and the participation of young people in global leadership, generosity, especially in the funding of innovative projects by governments and private companies, and a long-term program to improve human well-being and the environment for this generation and those to come.

This two-day symposium responds to this call by featuring youth from around the globe who are already focused on promoting and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, within the global moral framework described by *Laudato si'*. The sessions will cover the breadth and depth of the SDGs, the diversity of creative and courageous youth engagement on these goals via social media and social activism, and highlight winning ideas for SDG action happening now and into the future. The sessions will be live-streamed and interactive over social media to ensure global youth participation. The goal of this symposium is to launch, amplify and elevate new SDG participatory pedagogies, in collaboration with the very population that is constantly redefining democratic engagement. The innovation needed for 2030 will be found now in the initiative of 2016. So let's get to work. Time is ticking.

[1] [Data](#) from the UN Sustainable Development Goals,
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

[2] [Data](#) from the UN Sustainable Development Goals,
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/>