

**Youth are Pillars of Society**  
**Series Output Document Presented by:**  
**the Bahá'í International Community and the Major Group for Children and Youth**

In light of the 2022 ECOSOC Youth Forum and High-Level Political Forum theme, “Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda,” the Bahá'í International Community, in collaboration with the Major Group for Children and Youth, launched a series of interactive dialogues to take stock of progress made in increasing the participation of young people in decision-making processes, to explore remaining gaps, and to deliberate about the future of youth participation in the SDG Decade of Action. During the series, a diverse group of panelists from Member States, United Nations agencies, and civil society organizations came together to discuss: a) what is necessary for young people to not only be invited to speak on “youth issues” alone, but to be drawn on as valuable sources of insight and expertise on all issues under consideration; b) how can young people with requisite expertise be included in spaces not explicitly focused on youth and how can older individuals be welcomed as vital partners in youth spaces; c) how can intergenerational collaboration become more common and more explicitly valued and sought; and d) how can the youth movement foster mutual support and learning, rather than the promotion of individual status or ambition, competition for funding, and the desire for increased access to decision makers. This output document is an effort to share the themes that resonated the most throughout the Youth are Pillars of Society series that can be taken forward and are being offered for further consideration.

Through various initiatives such as the ECOSOC Youth Forum, the creation of the Office of the Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth in 2013, a number of key resolutions on youth, peace and security, and the current process to create a UN Youth Office, it is clear that the international community has taken steps to acknowledge the distinguishing characteristics of youth and their desire to contribute to multilateral spaces. Yet critical examination of decision making spaces at the UN reveals that a number of gaps still exist. Young people are often included in discussions in a tokenistic manner. UN spaces need to be restructured so that the diversity of contributions made by all stakeholders are valued and reflected in policy, programmes, and project implementation. There is a need for a paradigm shift in the way young people and their capacity are conceptualized and drawn on, in order to truly benefit from the insights they can share.

Such a shift can begin through systematic efforts to thoroughly consult relevant stakeholders when decisions are being made. Strategies must be created and implemented to build the capacity of youth and institutions to engage all areas of concern in multilateral spaces. It should be recognized that the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society is essential, not only for the future, but in devising responses to current challenges. Present circumstances—continuing effects of a world pandemic, rising number of intra- and inter-state conflicts, and the increasing threat of climate change—are revealing the imperative need for humanity to harness the full potential of actors of all ages, including young people who are ready and eager to generously share their experiences and do their part to contribute to securing our common future. Over the course of this series, youth

from around the world demonstrated again and again their readiness and capacity to work constructively for the betterment of humanity.

State acknowledgement of the many contributions youth are making has an impact on the international stage. When Member States open spaces for the full, meaningful, and substantive participation of young people, by drawing from the full range of the human experience, it contributes to the legitimacy of the multilateral system. Member States have many means to further open spaces for young people, for example by increasing the number of youth delegates to international fora, advocating for change in UN hiring policies to ensure younger people come into the organization, and engaging more fully with youth in civil society. Similarly, intergenerational collaboration will become more explicitly valued the more Member States not only create spaces that are diverse in representation, but also show their commitment by acting on the discussions that take place in these spaces. Such action will also increase levels of trust between youth and Member States, enriching intergovernmental processes.

Beyond the role of States, there is much that needs to be done to foster meaningful change in the way that youth are involved in multilateral spaces. UN agencies, then, have a significant role to play in modeling what meaningful engagement might look like. Each individual needs to be given the opportunity to grow and change as they encounter new information. Sufficient room needs to be given to allow for the evolution of actors, youth or otherwise, who engage in multilateral spaces. Yet collaboration between young people and UN agencies continues to be constrained by a handful of well-worn patterns, for example, youth seeking policy and monetary backing, on the one hand, and UN agencies seeking youth ambassadors to champion various campaigns and initiatives, on the other. There is a path to make these relationships less transactional. Processes can be changed so that youth are consulted earlier, to strengthen the viability of UN initiatives, thereby ensuring that youth and UN agencies grow in capacity together. Youth engagement should increasingly focus on shaping, together with older generations, decision-making spaces. This move towards closer collaboration with young people and seeking out their diversity of perspectives will strengthen our collective ability to advance the SDGs, a vision which pertains to all, irrespective of age.

The community of civil society organizations also has a responsibility in shaping spaces to ensure that the role of youth is recognized, strengthened, and contributes to the advancement of all of humanity. Increasing levels of collaboration between CSOs, UN agencies, and Member States needs to be at the center of deliberation, for the results of this collaboration depend on qualities of process as much as the content of the discussions themselves. Much can be done to create an environment that assists these actors to view each other in a less adversarial lens and more as true collaborators learning together. No type of actor has or can construct the solutions to the entirety of challenges humanity faces today. In reality we need the richness and diversity of contributions from all sectors of society. The nature of relationships built between actors, the resilient friendships forged on committees, task forces, and other ad hoc groups is crucial for the flow of information, institutional knowledge, and capacity, as well as the advancement of common goals. There are many individuals in multilateral spaces who are ready and willing to work together across a diversity of ages. All actors, regardless of age, are responsible for ensuring they can be accounted among this group.

Individually and collectively, youth and members of older generations must be able to recognize the talents and capacity each possess. Youth have the responsibility to build on the efforts

and gains of those prior who have made strides to increase participation of young people in multilateral spaces. They can continue their work by drawing on and adding to that wisdom in previously unimagined ways. Members of older generations, who were at some point youth themselves, should view youth as a reservoir of energy, innovation, and fresh insight. If the way each perceives the other can start to shift, then each ensures that multilateral spaces benefit from the strengths possessed by both sides. This is vital, since our aspirations are connected.

Throughout this series, it became evident that incredible momentum can be built when young people, characterized by a willingness to seek out solutions in collaboration with others, are brought to work together with other actors to achieve particular goals. When structures are created to channel their energies into constructive actions and to cultivate their capabilities to work for the betterment of their societies, young people have arisen to demonstrate solidarity with a wide range of actors. They can create strong and flexible networks and they are open to working with each other, across a variety of differences.

The nature of the change envisioned in the youth space is a long term project. Humanity as a whole stands at a key moment of transformation in many areas. Rapid changes are occurring in numerous sectors and the youth of today are witness to a global society in the throws of fundamental change. The current moment, with all its uncertainties and immense challenges, presents an opportunity not to be missed. It is an opportunity to rethink entire approaches to problem solving and allow actors to strive for higher levels of unity and cooperation across past boundaries of separation. In the months and years ahead, actors on the international stage have a number of spaces in which they must surpass these boundaries and benefit from the energy, creativity, and earnest aspirations of young people who are striving for the flourishing of society.