

**Youth Can Move the World: A Workshop Series on Transforming Multilateralism
Workshop One | 26 April 2023**

Transformative Leadership in the UN System

New approaches to leadership are needed to meet the increasingly complex threats facing humanity today. “We need new ... ways of working together that are suited to the challenges we face and the diverse landscape of actors ... that have the capacity to contribute to solutions,” wrote the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his *Our Common Agenda* report. Youth have vital and unique contributions to make to such processes of transformation. But the needs of the moment will not be met merely by introducing young voices into old systems, nor by youth assuming leadership of institutions that are outdated, insufficient, or corrupt. To the contrary, youth must be at the forefront of transforming the concept and practice of leadership itself.

Young people are not immune to common pitfalls of leadership, such as preoccupation with status and personal advancement or protectiveness of turf and prerogative. Leaders of any age advance the common good only to the degree that their behavior, choices, and values align with that end. One area where young people can play a vital role, then, is in giving serious attention, along with their older colleagues, to the qualities and characteristics that must distinguish the exercise of leadership and power. Principled action, moral courage, and similar qualities are increasingly recognized as elements necessary for sustainable progress and development. So often characterized by an acute sense of justice and concern for equity, young people can be central in reinforcing the kinds of ethical capacities that allow leaders, of all ages, to not only work for the advancement of their constituents, but withstand the temptations of corruption and graft; that not only pursue economic development, but refute the many prejudices that perpetuate extreme inequalities of wealth and income.

All systems of decision-making are founded on certain assumptions and expectations, which exert influence on the individuals functioning within them. Many youth-focused spaces at the UN, like numerous other arenas, are predicated on norms of protest, opposition, and conflict. As a result, when young leaders are invited to the international stage, they are often placed—whether implicitly or explicitly—in a position to fight someone or something. Whatever benefits or challenges this might involve, the wider point is that the outcomes which decision-making spaces produce are shaped by the values and principles that those spaces reflect, reinforce, and normalize. Those who set the parameters of decision-making spaces—predominantly individuals at more advanced points in their professional careers, presently—therefore have both the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that those parameters support the most effective and constructive functioning possible. The need is not just to expand the number of seats at the table available to young people, necessary as that might be, but to ensure that the consultation taking place around the table best leads to decisions that improve lives and societies.

Effective leadership, in any setting, hinges on appropriate training, preparation, and support. The participation of young people in international spaces is sometimes viewed in a somewhat magical fashion, burdening youth with unrealistic, “add youth and stir,” expectations of sudden or automatic success. But young people—like those of any age—need the skills, background, and understanding required to excel in the roles they are asked to play. An area of vital concern, therefore, is learning

how to provide each successive generation with meaningful opportunities to develop skills of leadership, decision-making, and the many practical elements that go into fostering consequential social progress.

Similarly important will be expanding the range, variety, and forms of accompaniment, by which knowledge and insights are shared from those with more experience in a given area to those with less. Intergenerational cooperation and solidarity will be key in helping young people draw on the accumulated experience of older collaborators, as well as in transcending zero-sum paradigms that cast youth as potential rivals to or replacements of older partners. Yet experience and age are neither intrinsically nor automatically linked. More robust systems of accompaniment will therefore also be needed between contemporaries, at all stages of life, as well as in cases where it is younger people who represent the reservoir of practical experience, and older colleagues who are in need of development.

The expansion of capacity to foster and lead transformative social change must advance at scales hardly imagined in previous ages. The international system today is optimized to engage a relatively small number of exceptionally high achievers. The contributions of these individuals is, of course, well appreciated. But the society-altering goals before the United Nations, such as ending poverty in all its forms or ensuring sustainable patterns of production and consumption, call for the development of capacity at levels never seen before. If the international community is to truly tap the transformative potential of rising generations, it does not need young leaders by the tens and dozens; it needs them by the hundreds of thousands—from the grassroots through to the international level. And that calls for fundamental changes in paradigms around leadership and leadership development.

What would it look like to establish fundamentally different patterns of leadership in thousands of localities around the world, raising generation after generation of capable leaders? Ultimately, this is a question to be answered in practice, by taking action, reflecting on its results, and refining efforts in light of lessons learned. Yet already it seems clear that leadership emerging among the masses, and not just a small elite, will be characterized less by visibility, following, and formalized power, than by personal initiative, collective endeavor, and service to the common good. It will assume different degrees of formality in different contexts, will begin for many with action undertaken at the neighborhood and village level, and will be characterized by many, many young people arising to take ownership of the betterment of their own communities. As one young man from Kenya reflected, after attending a conference focused on the contribution that youth can make to the progress and betterment of their local communities:

“I have always liked the idea of service, but I thought it was something done by people who had money or resources. I come from a village of very many people. I cannot feed or clothe them—that is what I always thought. Being at the conference has, however, opened my mind to the fact that service extends to more than just giving material possessions. I have energy, time, and some basic skills which I will now use to be of benefit to my community.”