

Fourth Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

Themes: Employment, education, culture, social protection & youth

Youth speech AUS/NL/UK by Dutch UN Youth Delegate Ralien Bekkers

Dear co-chairs, Mr. Kőrösi and Mr. Kamau,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Last week I told my little brother that I would be far away from home for a conference about the future. “*Can I please come with you?*” he directly asked me. It struck me as a quite logical question. After all, it is **his** future too, isn't it? I explained how I would do the work for him this time. More importantly, I promised him that there would be a room filled with very important and intelligent people that would also have his best interests, and those of all other families around the world, at heart.

Isn't it actually strange that we are discussing youth here, without hardly any youth present in the room? That we are deciding about the future, without future generations being part of these discussions? It is good to talk about young people, but it is much more powerful and meaningful to talk with young people.

You will then find that young people share many of your concerns. And better, that we often have a clear view on how to achieve improvements. I am going to ask you urgently to give your attention to youth priorities such as education and employment, equality and good governance. They are high ranking on the younger generation's agendas.

In an ideal world we should not have to ask for help. But reality is, that many legal, policy and regulatory barriers hinder the meaningful participation and empowerment of young people to exercise and claim their rights. We must however put young people at the center of the design, implementation and monitoring of the future goals.

Meanwhile, I am most thankful to the governments of Australia, the Netherlands and the UK for the opportunity to speak. Although this statement does not represent the governments of the countries, it does represent the voices of their youth. But it also includes the ideas of tens of other young people from around the world, since they were actively involved in the open writing process of this speech.

In doing so, something became perfectly clear. We, as people, despite our differences and diverse cultures, should work together as one. We have to make sure that all cultures, all ages and all differences between people are recognized in the goals. Diversity is not a weakness, it is our strength. Youth is demonstrating it by working together, transcending national boundaries. Over and over again, our work results in common statements and solutions. It *is* possible.

We support strong and ambitious SDGs that not only promote a sustainable and safe world, but also tackle the problems that get in the way. I'm speaking of economic inequality and youth unemployment, weak governance structures, natural resource inefficiency and violations of human

rights. Recently, the High Level Panel did a good job putting young people at the center of the discussions but still needs to incorporate more youth focused indicators. We feel that the report provides a baseline for strong SDGs but should build on the work done by others including the Commonwealth Youth Development Index and the Major Group of Children and Youth in creating goals and targets, disaggregating data, and we should *even* consider a youth specific goal.

In addition, we must rethink the way that we approach development. We call on Member States to work towards a holistic approach, defining “well-being” that incorporates environmental and social considerations, beyond the economic focus of GDP.

First, the fast increasing numbers of youth unemployment are of major concern. We as youth should be educated to tackle current and future challenges. We must be equipped with new and sustainable skills that prepare for work. Not to search desperately, in some cases even for years, for a low quality job. Investment in quality education is of high priority and generates immediate and intergenerational paybacks. But only if governments prioritize creation of green and decent jobs, building a sustainably skilled workforce by increased investment, together with private sector, in order to enhance national ecosystems for youth enterprise.

Second, the new framework should make an explicit commitment to the meaningful inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. We must remove the barriers they face for accessing basic services, economic opportunities, political representation, and human rights. Supporting equal opportunities and reducing social inequalities will lead to more sustainable societies. Investing in girls, for instance, is one of the single most effective interventions for reducing poverty. SDGs should ensure girls’ access to education and health services, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting policies that empower their role in society.

And *third*, fair, responsive and accountable governance is among top priorities of young people around the world. We vow for a world where decision-makers have integrity, responsibility and are held to account. A world where governance systems are designed to take courageous decisions for long-term benefit. Truth is, nowadays many young people feel disempowered by the systems that are supposed to represent them. This creates distrust, which should be actively avoided. Let’s face it: you do not only need us for designing these goals, but you will need us all the more to achieve them by 2030.

Unfortunately, none of the young people I spoke with in my country knew about this very “far away” process. Therefore we would like you to think of a way how to make sure that all children and youth around the world learn about and know the SDGs from 2015 onwards, and feel like they are part of it. You can start now. Talk, listen and work together with us for the challenges of our futures. Here at the UN, and back at home. We must become partners and allies for sustainable development. The nuanced perspectives of youth on these issues can provide new solutions and mobilize youth as assets and problem solvers.

There is so much potential. Do you know that an Indian teen girl recently developed a super energy efficient 20-second cell phone charger? That a high school student in the USA designed the fastest and cheapest cancer detector ever? And that a 19-year-old boy from the Netherlands created a system to clean the plastic soup in the oceans? Also, Bill Gates & Steve Jobs created

revolutionary innovations when they were only 21. Without these young ideas, we would never be where we are today. Youth innovations should play a prominent role in the new development framework. But it really is your task to stimulate and empower all of us, in order to become part of the solution. Only when we succeed in forming intergenerational partnerships right now, focusing on intergenerational equity and solidarity, we have a chance on real and long-term success.

Ladies and gentlemen, way more important than all the beautiful words are the actions that should follow from them. All young people, and families around the world, count on you and your actions. We look forward to actively working with you, to create and achieve the goals for our common, sustainable future. Because not only youth, but a partnership of generations, will be part of the solution.

Thank you.