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University for Peace est. by the United Nations

40th Jubilee Year

XI ECPD Global Youth Forum
YOUTH POWER FOR THE COMMON FUTURE
With the main topic
**YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEM CHANGE
TO SAVE THE EARTH FOR ALL**
(Belgrade, 29 October 2023)

REPORT

The XI ECPD Global Youth Forum Youth Power for the Common Future, with the main topic Youth Leadership for System Change to Save the Earth for All, held on October, 29th, 2023 in Belgrade, was organized by the European Center for Peace and Development of the University for Peace est. by the United Nations, with the support of the Youth Office, Belgrade.

OPENING KEYNOTES

The XI ECPD Global Youth Forum was opened by **H.E. Prof. Dr. Federico Mayor**, President of the ECPD International Council (long-standing UNESCO Director-General, Spain), **Prof. Dr. Don Wallace**, President of the ECPD Academic Council (President of the International Law Institute, USA), and **Prof. Dr. Jonathan Bradley**, President of the ECPD Executive Board (University of the West of England, UK), who emphasized why the Youth Forum matters. Then Prof. **Dr. Arthur Dahl**, Chair of the Youth Forum (President of the International Environment Forum, Switzerland), set the stage with some initial reflections. We have already overshoot many planetary boundaries, which poses existential threats to our future. We are trapped in a culture of materialism that promotes a consumer society to satisfy our basest and most self-ish desires, while encouraging the spending of wealth to prolong social conflict, leading to



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a deepening confusion and a sense of hopelessness among young people everywhere. Our society experiences exorbitant wealth, intransigence in thinking, religious fundamentalism, a decline in public trust, vested interests seeking to undermine the credibility of all sources of knowledge, and resurgent forces of racism, nationalism, and factionalism. Fortunately the youth present have a natural optimism that allows them to see beyond the challenges of the moment towards a better future.

In 1972, a report to the Club of Rome on *The Limits to Growth* presented computer-generated scenarios of the possible futures as the world reaches planetary limits to growth. The business-as-usual scenario led to the collapse of civilization by the mid-21st century, but alternative scenarios showed that sustainability was possible if we reduced population growth, resource consumption, industrial output and pollution. While these conclusions were derided and ignored at the time, the business-as-usual scenario has proven remarkably accurate in forecasting what actually happened. Now, 50 years later, the Club of Rome has issued a new report, *Earth for All*, (<https://www.earth4all.life/>) which again uses computer modelling to identify what we need to do to avoid a collapse that now seems likely. The report confirms what *Our Common Agenda*, the United Nations (UN) scientific assessments for climate (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC) and biodiversity (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services IPBES), and many others have been saying, that we only have about ten years left to turn the corner and make a fundamental transformation of our economy and society. It also provides a useful framework for the issues to be discussed at this ECPD Youth Forum: economic transformation, social change, and planetary health, where those from all generations present can, in an optimistic spirit, explore some of the better ways forward..

The report calls for rapid systems-change, including the fastest economic transformation in history. There are five critical turn-arounds: The first is to eliminate **poverty** by expanding the policy space and bringing debt under control, transforming the financial architecture, transforming global trade and improving access to and use of technology by all people regardless of age, gender, socio-economic background or geographical location so that poorer countries can leapfrog to a better future. Second we need to greatly reduce all types of **inequalities** with better sharing of the wealth created by our economy, such as by dividends to which everyone is entitled. We then need an empowerment turnaround by achieving **gender equity**, transforming education, ensuring financial independence and encourage leadership for women, and providing them with a secure pension and dignified ageing, which will also solve the population problem. The fourth change is to make the **food system** healthy for people and the planet instead of consuming the Earth's biosphere, by revolutionizing the way we farm, changing our diets, and eliminating food loss and waste. Fifth is the **energy** turnaround to address the climate crisis by introducing systemic energy efficiency, electrifying almost everything, and an exponential growth of new renewable energies. These provided the following three themes for the Youth Forum where participants could explore how they can contribute to the urgent transformation required.



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Prof. Dr. Francisco Rojas, Rector of the University for Peace est. by the United Nations, based in Costa Rica, of which the ECPD is European institution, noted that the Sustainable Development Goals require peace, but that conflicts continue around the world. He demonstrated a Global Peace Index that shows the most and least peaceful countries. Extreme poverty is the main issue for the environment, along with corruption. He cited many dimensions of human suffering, and shared a new conceptual map of the world that we would like to see, with solidarity, protection of the environment and education for peace.

Dr. Ouided Bouchamaoui, Vice-President of the ECPD International Council (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2015, Tunisia) shared a strong message of peace to the participants of the Youth Forum.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The panel on economic transformation began by considering the future to be invented in the face of the apocalyptic disaster that seems to be coming, with enormous resources wasted on weapons feeding conflict that can easily extend ever further. Our consumer society is immersed in mass marketing and communications driving to excess. The panel then asked what is truth in a world of deception, manipulation, propaganda, endless repetition of falsehoods, and climate denial. How do we judge the asymmetry of costs and benefits when we need to save the Earth? Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are threatened with annihilation. System change will be an ambitious structural challenge, but the power imbalance favours the realists over those who would plan a more perfect world. Youth leadership will be essential, but youth should also listen to the wisdom of the elders to avoid some mistakes. Do not delay, but keep a clear and sceptical mind to avoid rushing off in the wrong direction. Avoid the fashionable thinking of mass movements, since leaders like Hitler used a doctrine of hate to build his following, and today this is easily spread through social media. This reality can provide a warning, but should not temper youthful enthusiasm, and rather energise a positive response.

Youth are the leaders of today who must shape economic policies and strategies, driving innovation and change. Youth are highly digitally connected. With the creative energy that comes from digital knowledge they can ensure that technology is human centred, improves peoples lives and promotes global sustainability. Young people can campaign for social justice and a more equal and equitable future. However, in a world transitioning from offline to online, strategic thinking and actions are essential. Technology can influence our future and can also take us far away from human interaction with the natural environment. Now we are consuming the world, taking everything and destroying all life in the sea. We have only domestic animals, and there is no space left for nature. We may soon have no primary forests, no water, and no more food. It is for the youth to lead towards a better future in harmony with the natural world.



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One challenge is to find better indicators of human and environmental well-being than the value of things traded in the market. We presently measure progress with monetary indicators such as GDP. After World War II, increasing the flow of wealth through the economy was the priority. But GDP has limitations because it does not include productive activities such as raising a family, it allows for social and economic inequality, pollution is counted as an increase in wealth, and individual well-being is not considered. There are efforts to develop new indices of well-being such as Gross National Happiness in Bhutan, the Better Life Index and the Human Development Index, but these are not globally recognized and are still evolving. States need to agree on measures of well-being and life satisfaction, and youth can start by questioning their own assumptions about what is their true well-being..

One panelist raised the issue of brain drain in the Balkan countries, which have lost at least 20 percent of their population. Youth unemployment is very high, and curricula are out-of-date, so there is a mismatch between education and job needs. Humanities and social sciences are not in high demand, entrepreneurship is not taught, and those studying science and technology (STEM) emigrate where salaries are higher. There needs to be a closer relationship between science and business. Scientists are not trained to communicate with businesses or to understand the added value of their research. Business could be a source of research funding if there is more effective communications. Entrepreneurship is a key to economic growth and prosperity, creating value with resources in innovative ways and leading to job creation. Small and medium-sized enterprises account for 90 percent of businesses, create 70 percent of jobs and contribute 55 percent of GDP. There are challenges and risks, but governments can create a favourable environment.

In the wide-ranging discussion, it was suggested that we should not panic, but see the crisis as an opportunity to avoid the abyss. We cannot solve the problems with the same approaches that created them, but by using resources in different ways, and explaining science in ways that make commercial sense. In protecting nature, we know what to do, but must change short-term economic incentives. Alternative economic models were discussed, where the dominant neoliberalism with deregulation has gone too far and has increased social inequality, especially in education, while a welfare state can become bureaucratic. Entrepreneurship can be created as a value. The World Bank has identified three variables: the rule of law to protect contracts, supporting a professional middle class, and ensuring that everyone can succeed, not just a few. Multinational corporate subsidiaries are looking to exploit low wages, and nepotism and corruption are significant problems, requiring education in ethics and how to deal with corruption. In the developing world, countries are burdened with debts that often date back to colonial times or from more recent exploitation. They need to encourage and enable micro-entrepreneurs to thrive in their own communities. One participant asked what would happen if all barriers to the free movement of people were removed, would the disparities between nations eventually level out?



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SOCIAL CHANGE

Since extremes of wealth and poverty lead to social instability, transforming the economy is a prerequisite for social change towards a more just, equitable and inclusive society. But the focus on economy should not hide the importance of the social sciences, and the fact demonstrated by Earth for All that the major tipping points and transformations are social. The panel on social change was reasonably optimistic, noting that it takes time to improve. Social change will come from the underprivileged, where poverty and food insecurity have already been reduced to 10 percent, and 90 percent of children are in school.

Youth now have multilateral forums where they can express themselves. At the United Nations, there is an Envoy on Youth, to give youth a seat at the table in discussions concerning their future, and 10,000 youth volunteers supporting UN activities. Youth place the world above the interests of nations. *Our Common Agenda* calls for a focus on the future, through a deepening of solidarity with the world's young people and **future generations**. It recommends meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement by transforming education, skills training and lifelong learning. At the regional level, there is a European Youth Portal (https://youth.europa.eu/eu-youth-dialogue_en) to enable an EU Youth Dialogue. Youth can inspire global collaboration, moving from theory to practice and from imagination to action, bringing ethics into governance.

Do not think that youth are without a voice or cannot make a difference. Youth can be leaders in building social cohesion, seeing the diversity of the human race as an asset and source of wealth. Youth can easily connect with new technologies, and can organize themselves effectively, reaching out to the older generations for their wisdom and experience, while responding creatively to the new integrated world that has emerged. Youth must be interested in the world and understand it. Youth need to learn fundamental concepts such as risk management in an age of complexity, maintaining resilience, both material and psychological, and preparing for the unprecedented challenges of a world of climate change, infrastructure failures, and unanticipated events from which there may be little or no recovery. The past is not a guide to the future, and a new paradigm is needed. Youth must come to terms with the new reality, look for new concepts and design new systems, build their networks, make connections and make things happen. Youth often help with emergency response in crisis situations, making social change visible.

Another issue of social change is the transition from colonial dependencies to reparatory justice. The young generation is increasingly aware of historical injustices and the need to repair and heal them economically and educationally, both at home and in international politics. History was framed by the colonial empires, creating a need to understand the origins of present dilemmas. The new generation sees new opportunities as we face new crises such as climate change, where reparations could have transformative potential and support transnational justice. One panelist raised the problem of asylum-seeking youth who have no official documents to prove their age or family connections, where DNA tests can now help.



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The panel raised the debate on green capitalism, and whether capitalism has a future. It creates an unequal world and profits from differences. It has caused the ecological crisis. We are all rushing towards a cliff, and will crash, whether fast or slow. It believes it is natural to be selfish, but social contact and solidarity are part of human nature. The antithesis of capitalism is not necessarily communism or socialism; there are other possibilities for social change. We need to shift the focus, and try to do good to humankind. We become better people when we help others. An example was given of free health clinics in Central America staffed by volunteers from 36 countries, working with flexibility, humanism, creativity, courage, open-mindedness, initiative and humour.

Some practical projects for social action that were mentioned included an open-air museums network for cultural revitalisation, and libraries as instruments of human advancement through the democratisation of knowledge and the nurturing of human potential, where librarians can involve diverse populations in life-long learning in application of ethical principles. There was also an example of soft robots inspired by nature to make the world a better place.

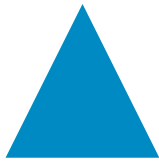
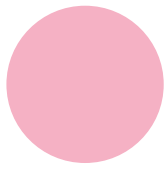
Another issue of social change is the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), and whether it will change the history of humanity. Many fear for the future and the potential negative impacts of AI. We need to learn to adopt new technologies, but use them for good towards improving the lives of all people and building inclusive digital communities and environments, not for wars. Young people can teach and provide support to older persons in adopting and using the new technologies. The participants also discussed technology and its impacts on economics, employment, environment and planetary health. Concerns were also expressed about the possibility that AI could affect youth's capacity for critical thinking. People may lose their ability to think for themselves and to communicate with others, the qualities that make them human. We must understand how algorithms work and become aware of their use to avoid any type of discrimination or biases including gender. There is a need for regulation by governments and changes by corporations. Curricula in schools should teach how to accept or reject proposed tech-related products, services and applications. We cannot foresee what future technologies will bring, but appropriate education and knowledge is critical to foster its meaningful development.

Youth power can be integrative, reaching beyond the view of the world in silos, tribal cultures, stereotypes and languages. Youth can transcend boundaries, organise themselves, follow positive examples, connect ideas and embrace others. Basic values like the oneness of humanity and a positive vision of a better future together are the foundation of progress. With an ethical vision, youth can influence others and advocate for their well-being with a kind of applied spirituality. Where youth can really lead is in social change at the community level in a spirit of service to others, organizing their own projects for social action, identifying local problems, consulting with the community on possible solutions, ensuring the participation of all, trying out some actions within the resources available, and reflecting on the results in a process of learning. In this way they can embrace the emerging realities and new opportunities in this time of rapid change.



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PLANETARY HEALTH

The triple environmental crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution have become existential threats to our future, as the youth have been insisting forcefully and effectively, but we are still not responding quickly enough. Governments are notorious for signing ambitious agreements and then failing to implement them. Contact with nature is also important for our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

The panel suggested that a first step towards planetary health is for each one to prepare to navigate the transition. Since the affluent are the most responsible for the climate and biodiversity catastrophes, they must reduce their lifestyles and GDP. In the materialistic consumer culture, selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value. Traditional corporations are greed institutionalised. Human nobility can be expressed in economic life by demonstrating honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other spiritual qualities. We are not merely self-interested economic entities, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. We need to question our assumptions, such as that we are inherently aggressive and competitive in the struggle to win out over others. Identities based on racism, nationalism and religious fanaticism have deep roots in our subconscious.

Economic arrangements need to be rethought by valuing people and the planet as explicitly as profit and economic gain have been valued in the past. Contentment, sufficiency and simplicity are values that can counteract the present materialism. New economic models should further a dynamic, just and thriving social order that is strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature, provides meaningful employment and helps to eradicate poverty in the world. Youth should explore what they consider the true purpose of life, the nature of progress, the meaning of true happiness and well-being, and the place of material pursuits in their individual and family life. The majority of young people suffer from climate anxiety, and need to channel this into positive efforts such as building community cohesion and undertaking social actions. Attention to planetary health is part of that.

Youth need to consider the physical characteristics of the world they want to build and live in, how human systems relate to and integrate with the natural systems of the biosphere, the qualities of communities, and the systems of organization and governance required from the local to the global level. Everyone should have education or training in some useful occupation and have the opportunity to serve society, as well as education to overcome gender stereotypes. How would the economy function? What would be everyone's rights and responsibilities? Youth need to agree on the underlying principles and values to guide this ever-evolving system, perhaps including the role of religion.

The panel described a number of ways in which youth can get involved in improving planetary environmental health. The Protect Our Planet (POP) movement is organising festivals for youth-led climate action around the world, with an international conference in 2024. Corporations are challenged to consider environment, social and governance (ESG) concerns, where



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youth can bring professional knowledge, continuing learning, innovation and ambition. In Japan, after the Fukushima nuclear accident, there are many citizens' movements against nuclear power, but there is a big generation gap, involving mostly people over 70, while young people are busy on their smart phones. This generation gap should be overcome. Citizen science involving the general public can play an important role in disaster risk management by building stronger communities, improving risk awareness, creating more responsibility, and creating better understanding of the difference between correlation and causality. There is the potential of ecotourism to bring people closer to nature and make natural history more popular, while giving priority to conservation over endless development.

One challenge for youth is choosing a field of work. Consider the difference between gaining wealth through earnest effort in fields such as agriculture, commerce, the arts, and industry, or obtaining it without exertion or through dishonourable means. What would this mean for individual development and social progress? Youth can generate income to ensure true happiness through the development of spiritual qualities, such as honesty, trustworthiness, generosity, justice, and consideration for others, and the recognition that material means are to be expended for the betterment of the world. Think about new and emerging careers in areas such as alternative economics, work as service, eliminating poverty, reducing inequality, creating new social structures and institutions, reforming governance, building unity in local communities, managing migration, saving the Earth, preserving endangered species, regenerating ecosystems, reforming food and agriculture, restoring water supplies, increasing bio-capacity, installing renewable energy, assisting with climate adaptation, recovering from loss and damage, and educating to empower individual capacity.

Youth are frequently rejecting the false assumptions of present society and seeking more ethical values, such as by replacing monetary wealth by human well-being as the goal of society, giving importance to environmental well-being with justice and equity, and assigning priority to the spiritual dimension of values and moral principles. Youth should focus on hope, which is a rare commodity today. Be positive, full of creative imagination, drawing on the fantastic potential that lies within each of us. Youth are the hope of the future, and the more youth looks forward, the more that future will open up.

In the discussion, one issue was about what young people can do by looking at their own lives, being coherent and setting an example. There is an educational crisis that requires access for all in all fields regardless of their means. In the effort to limit the power of large corporations, changing consumer behaviour can be important. More priority should be given to agriculture, changing the food system with more ethical and sustainability considerations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Several issues were raised during the Youth Forum that highlighted their concerns. The persistence of extreme poverty, a heritage of colonialism and corporate exploitation, showed the need for reparations in an unjust system. Widespread corruption shows a lack of ethics and morality, with material ends justifying any means. The increasing absence of truth, trust and



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trustworthiness is undermining confidence in governments and institutions. A major concern was about technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), emphasizing the need to acknowledge its benefits alongside its drawbacks. If youth are to change the world, they need to make sense of new technologies not just for utilitarian purposes but for the common good and human progress. AI is foreseen to have the potential to significantly impact human lives and spirit. While older generations may be sceptical, the youth may be overly accepting. Technology should serve as a tool for change that eases and enhances the quality of peoples' lives, not dominate them. This is particularly true of social media, which can sometimes have a negative impact, including cultivating violence. Without regulation and ethical considerations, technology can be a destructive force undermining peace and development.

The Forum emphasized the optimism of youth, but it takes time to make a difference, such as with volunteer service. The world is in the middle of a paradigm shift that is both complex and unprecedented. The old system of materialism and capitalism will not recover, but this creates opportunities for innovation and creativity.

The Youth Forum benefitted from a wide range of age groups, not only young people but also middle and older generations, demonstrating a universal concern for the future. The older generations can foster critical thinking and structure, transferring useful knowledge, while the youth bring their fresh perspective on enacting effective change. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experience is essential for systemic change, and showed that the future narrative is a shared narrative, inclusive of all generations..

The youth presentations focussed on communication, respect and understanding. Dialogue is essential for change, promoting conversations that challenge prejudices. Youth could be introduced to critical thinking, to encourage civilized yet critical discussions that are essential for growth. More informal gatherings that connect youth would allow participants to exchange ideas and to recognise and embrace cultural differences as a precondition for change. Organising intergenerational round tables could enhance communication across age groups.

Among the recommendations emerging from the Youth Forum was a call for youth to take a leadership role through networking and collaboration to create a new paradigm of economics beyond GDP in service to the common good and human and environmental well-being. We need to halt the overconsumption of the Earth's resources and regenerate nature and its ecosystem services. It is necessary to bring education and job creation into coherence, including education for life in rural and marginalized areas, while cultivating a common language and learning entrepreneurship. Youth need to be guided towards emerging professions with an ethical focus and the joy of being of service. This can focus on motivation through values, helping others and doing good for humanity.

9 November 2023



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