

YOUTH AND GLOBAL PROGRESS

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Abstract

The celebration of the International Year of Youth (IYY) during the period 12 August 2010 - 11 August 2011 and the High-level Meeting of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding (New York, July 25-28, 2011) encouraged a large and significant debate about youth and global progress. The article analyzes the positions of the UN Member States on the necessity to move from commitments to results-oriented actions in the field of youth. The specific challenges and opportunities facing a very important population group in its march to progress, as well as the main ways and means for advancing young people's aspirations, human rights and fundamental freedoms are scrutinized on the basis of the most relevant and recent UN, UNESCO and ASEAN documents. The critical approach demonstrated by youth representatives towards current plans of action on youth issues, as well as some important and far-reaching initiatives formulated at global and regional levels recognizing the close relationship between youth and global progress are presented in a detailed manner in the article. Existing development strategies have to be adapted to make youth a more dynamic agent of global progress. One of the main conclusions is that by actively promoting an universalist vision of progress, the younger generation has the historic chance to provide a solid building block for a new world order based on fundamental values proclaimed by the UN.

Keywords: global progress, younger generation, International Year of Youth, youth development.

Coping with a historic premiere

In the twenty-first century, being silent, passive and indifferent is not an option for young people. The active participation of youth in the process of development and the ways and means for combating alienation and frustration among the younger generation are priority issues on global agenda.

The high visibility of student's demonstrations and youth protest movements worldwide make impossible any underestimation of the matter.

A consensus is emerging that the present is not inherited from the past but is borrowed from the future. "Youth are showing their influence throughout the world, and they deserve support and opportunities to reach their potential and make the greatest possible contribution to our shared future. That is why I have made addressing the needs of youth one of my top priorities".¹

This assessment made by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his message to the Global Social Business Summit 2011 in Vienna, 11-12 November, is a source of inspiration for the present article dealing with youth and global progress from the perspective of momentous world events in the field of youth in 2009-2011.

Let's put it in context. Thus, it should be recalled that in December 2009, on the proposal of the Group of 77 and China the General Assembly adopted its resolution 64/134 proclaiming the

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¹ The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's message to the Global Social Business Summit 2011 in Vienna, 11-12 November, is available at <http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp> visited several times in November 2011. The most recent book on youth emanating from the UN System is *Investing in Youth Policy*, prepared under the auspices of the Asia - Pacific Interagency Group on Youth, Bangkok, 2011.

International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding, to commence on 12 August 2010 and to be concluded on 11 August 2011. The proclamation and celebration of the International Year of Youth (IYY) represented the renewed commitment of Member States to ensuring that young men and women are at the core of the development agenda whose implementation is an imperative prerequisite of global progress.²

To begin with, it is appropriate to refer to the Outcome document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding adopted by consensus by 193 UN Member States on 26 July 2011 (see the full text in the *Appendix*) which starts with the following two paragraphs: “We, Heads of State and Government, Ministers and representatives of Member States, gathered at a high-level meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 25 and 26 July 2011 on the theme “Youth: dialogue and mutual understanding”, 1. Stress the need to disseminate and foster among young people and educate them about the ideals of peace, freedom, justice, tolerance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, solidarity and dedication to the objectives of progress and development;” (*emphasis added*)

In the light of the above mentioned programmatic document, the first question to be asked is an elementary one: Could a world without young people be imagined? No special research is needed to answer that we cannot imagine that. But who are the young people?

The UN demographic statistics show that on 1st October 2011 our planet numbered 7 billion people, including over 1.8 billion young persons between the ages of 15 and 24, a figure never seen before. That figure may prove to be much higher if we use a more liberal definitional approach according to which the younger generation covers the group of 10-35 years. But even with that restrictive statistical definition what is obvious is the fact that the present generation of youth is the largest ever in history. This represents a world premiere.³

Academic debates and popular interpretations of the concept of global progress have not produced a consensus definition of this suggestive notion. However, there is broad agreement that in general terms progress comprises both material/economic and immaterial components. Well-being, quality of life, life satisfaction and sustainable development are integral parts of global progress. “Progress is the attraction that moves humanity”, said Marcus Garvey.⁴ The dynamism of today’s youth is there to prove the validity of this assertion.

To be more specific from the younger generation’s perspective, it has to be recognized that there is no genuine global progress possible without reducing the development gap among the 193 UN Member States. In fact, this is a major objective in line with the recommendations adopted in September 2010 by the UN General Assembly and incorporated in the outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, proclaimed by the UN Millennium Summit on September 8, 2000) at its 65th session in 2010.

There are eight MDGs which might give tangibility to global progress as they are directed to universal actions meant to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal

² All relevant documents about the International Year of Youth quoted in this article are available at <http://www.un.org/en/events/youthday/visited> several times in November 2011. For the chronology of the High-level Meeting of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding see *Journal of the United Nations* dated July 25, 26 and 28, 2011. For all recent UN resolutions on youth see <http://social.un.org/index/Youth/Resourcesandtools/SGreports.aspx>

³ See UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Remarks at special event to launch the 7 Billion Actions Initiative, 14 September 2011 available at http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/search_full.asp?statID=1293 visited on November 10, 2011. Pierre Buhler, French diplomat and the author of the book “Power in the XXIst Century” cogently observed that there was a lot of attention paid to the fact that we had crossed the 7 billion population mark. Much less attention was paid to another fact that 60 percent of these 7 billion live in Asia - 37 percent in China and India alone. See his article “Whose Century, the 21st?” in *The International Herald Tribune* dated November 24, 2011.

⁴ The quotation is available at www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/marcus_garvey.html.

health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.⁵

According to optimistic assessments, the MDGs can be achieved, even in the poorest countries, with renewed commitment, effective implementation and intensified collective efforts by all UN Member States. However, the process is of an unprecedented complexity under the present circumstances of globalized competition.

It is true that each country has the primary responsibility for its own development, but efforts at the domestic level need to be supported by an enabling international environment that complements national actions and strategies. In this context it should be emphasized that good governance and the rule of law at the national and international levels are very important factors for sustainable development and the elimination of existing gaps.

In conformity with recent evaluations, global progress in the MDGs in areas closely related to youth has been significant. Positive results have been registered in promoting gender equality, access to skilled care at birth and universal primary education. At the same time, however, it is clearly recognized that even this progress is insufficient and uneven. Therefore, in a realistic reflection of the current situation, the Outcome document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth, already mentioned above, states the following on behalf of 193 UN Member States who:

“Welcome the ongoing efforts by Member States to implement their pledges to achieve the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, and acknowledge the contributions of Member States, the United Nations entities, civil society organizations, including youth-led organizations, and the private sector to improve the situation of young people; note with concern, however, that, despite these efforts, substantial numbers of young people reside in areas where poverty constitutes a major challenge and access to basic social services is limited, especially for girls and young women, and that youth development remains hindered by the economic and financial crisis, as well as by challenges brought about by the food crisis and continued food insecurity, the energy crisis and climate change; and also note with concern that the overall progress towards achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, in particular on issues relevant to youth, has been uneven”; (See *Appendix*)

The delegation of Mexico at the High-level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding offered a more vivid picture of this situation described above by reminding that today over 200 million youth live on less than a dollar a day, 88 million are unemployed, 160 million suffer from malnutrition, 130 million have not had access to basic levels of education, and 10 million live with HIV/AIDS. Therefore, the world community of nations should not wait any longer to change this reality and adapt existing development strategies to make youth an active agent of global progress.⁶

It is in the light of these realities that we have to see the correlation between youth and global progress, which is one of the basic ideas of this article. In the absence of a universally accepted definition of global progress we should not ignore the simple fact that it demands a visible increase in global quality of life (QOL) to be illustrated with reliable data on social, economic and psychological factors that contribute to QOL including wealth, health, security, knowledge, freedom

⁵ The full text of the United Nations Millennium Declaration is available at <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/>.

⁶ All debates during the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding can be consulted in verbatim form in documents A/65/PV.110-115 dated July 25-28, 2011. See also press release GA/11119. The outcome document A/RES/65/312 was adopted without a vote on July 26, 2011. All quotations and examples from debates are given in this article on the basis of documents A/65/PV.110-114. At the time of writing, document A/65/PV.115 is still under embargo.

and equality. Yet, all these elements have to be linked to the actual demands of the younger generation.⁷

So being the case, the delegation of Monaco had all reasons to refer to a French writer, George Bernanos, who asserted: “It is the fever of young people that keeps the world temperature stable. When young people cool down, the rest of the world feels the chill”.⁸ That assertion was further explained by evoking some major events of 2011. Indeed, it is the feverish youth yearning for democracy, human rights and justice that paved the way for new regimes in the Arab world. It is undisputable that the Arab Spring would have been impossible without the involvement of dynamic young people, whose essential role has been widely lauded and emphasized worldwide. The Arab protest movements and uprisings reflected the staunch will of young people to actively participate at all levels of decision-making to establish their role in the transition towards a modern and democratic society.⁹

Moreover, as UN debates fully illustrated, young people also have an instrumental mission to perform in international organizations so that in the decision-making process their views should not be ignored, especially in the framework of achieving the MDGs, which call for vibrant youth participation. The reason for that is crystal-clear: the positive effects of globalization are not sufficiently reaped by the youth of today, while the negative ones affect first of all the younger generation.

In this regard, the delegation of Switzerland cogently pointed out that information and communications technology is a fantastic tool to promote the participation and integration of young people in society by creating links and bridges and by contributing to learning about democracy and human rights with a view to creating an open society for all, with education and training opportunities. The same delegation rightly concluded that young people must be placed “at the centre of action for democratic change and progress”.¹⁰

In a similar spirit, the delegation of Nigeria, one of the largest African countries, reminded the obvious truth that the youth of any society are its assets and its hope for the future; early investment in them is imperative for meaningful national development. Their energy, if properly harnessed, will contribute in no small measure to today’s success and tomorrow’s hope.¹¹

Towards results-oriented actions

Consistent with the above African approach, the delegation of South Africa had one of the most vibrant messages to convey during the general debate of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth. In its view, it is time for Member States to move from commitment to results oriented actions. All energies should be channelled to youth development, since the youth are today’s resources and tomorrow’s leaders. Young people hold the key to society’s future. Their ambitions, goals and aspirations for peace, security, development and human rights are often in accordance with those of society as a whole.¹²

⁷ For a relevant analysis of the concept of global progress used in the present article see Better Life Initiative: Measuring Well-being and Progress - OECD available at www.oecd.org/ff/?404; <http://www.oecd.org/80/progress> visited on November 5, 2011. For the concept of “civilizational progress” see Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, 304 p. See also Chris Salamone, Gilbert N. Morris, *Rescue America: Our Best America Is Only One Generation Away*, Greenleaf Book Group Press, New York, 2011, 250 p. In an opinion mentioned by these two authors “all collective progress is merely an outcrop of individual progress”. (p.2)

⁸ Georges Bernanos (1888 - 1948) was a French author. His writings contain a strong criticism of modern society.

⁹ For the source of quotation see note 6 supra.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

From an European perspective, the delegation of Romania reminded that we live in a quickly growing global society in which the links between nations are growing ever stronger and more complex. This presents the youth of today not only with an extra challenge but with a unique opportunity. Mobility has allowed young people to develop a better sense of understanding towards other cultures and societies, breeding tolerance and balance. From this point of view, there are reasons to be optimistic, since more and more young people from challenged areas of the world now benefit from the fruits of globalization.¹³

There is no doubt that global society and its inherent mobility offer the younger generation the possibility for better training in various fields, making a considerable contribution to their overall capacity to adapt to the requirements of today's dynamic global labour market. On the other hand, much more has to be done for supporting the costs of facilitating, introducing and promoting youth access to information and communication technologies, which are crucial elements that cannot be denied and which, in fact, are inseparable from global progress.¹⁴

We will quote two more delegations which emphasized the young people's role in promoting global progress. Thus, the delegation of India after pointing out that young people constitute a vibrant and dynamic segment of society, it concluded that the younger generation is also the most valuable human resource in any country, as youth are, in fact, the building blocks of the nation. This assessment is highly relevant as it comes on behalf of a country with an extraordinary demographic potential. It is statistically demonstrated that a total of 840 million people, close to 70 per cent of India's population of around 1.2 billion, are under 31 years of age. Consequently, India is the country with the youngest population in the world and has valuable ideas to convey on youth issues to the world community.¹⁵

The analysis offered by the delegation of the United States of America brings additional relevant elements to clarify why we confront what is both a great shared challenge and a great shared opportunity in the field of youth. The point of departure in this analysis is the undeniable fact that now more than ever young people are at the very core of changing world events. More than 60 per cent of the world's population is under the age of 30. That demographic reality is increasingly a potential driver of great economic and social reform. However, the same reality can generate one of the great threats to national and international stability and security. The US delegation pointed out that of all nations with new outbreaks of civil conflict, 86 per cent have significant majorities under the age of 30.

The American delegation took also the opportunity to remind that extremist and criminal organizations have sophisticated and comprehensive youth strategies, offering young people empowerment, a sense of belonging, a sense of political participation. Boys and young men are often the prime targets of such extremist recruitment, fuelling unrest around the world. Girls and young women are very often the most vulnerable victims of disenfranchisement and oppression, and an under tapped resource in the fight for economic growth.¹⁶

However, during the same debate the delegation of Mali and delegates from other African countries did not fail to mention that young people are often the engines of history. It was thus that men such as Modibo Keita, Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Seèkou Toureè, Agostinho Neto, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and others (all young men) committed to freeing their peoples from the colonial yoke.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For details and relevant examples from Southeast Asia see *Investing in Youth Policy*, prepared under the auspices of the Asia – Pacific Interagency Group on Youth, Bangkok, 2011, 136 p. See also *Youth in Transition. The Challenges of Generational Changes in Asia*, UNESCO, Bangkok, 2005, 266p.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.