



United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
4 October 2021

Original: English

Fifteenth session

Virtual Barbados
3–7 October 2021

Youth Forum Declaration

Pull up: Change Di Riddim

1. This Declaration contains the priorities and recommendations of youth who participated in the third meeting of the UNCTAD Youth Forum, held with remote participation from 16 to 18 September 2021, in the lead up to the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XV). With over 300 participants from over 80 countries, the Forum provided a global view of the tools needed to achieve a sustainable recovery in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in terms of trade and development.

2. Youth participants selected five topics they deemed to be the most crucial to young people to address at this point in time, namely, inclusive social and economic development, new economies, climate action, inclusive and equitable learning and youth civic participation. Under each of these areas, suggestions and policy recommendations are included to be presented to member States at UNCTAD XV.

I. Inclusive social and economic development

3. To address existing inequalities and rebuild a more resilient future in the decade of action, youth groups have heralded the importance of strengthening collective efforts and partnerships to translate the 2030 Agenda into reality. Although the pandemic has thrown open a sea of challenges, a forward-looking picture points towards advancing a “trinity of sustainomics”, encompassing more human-centric public policies consolidating three important features, namely, skill development, strengthening the business environment (including capital markets) and reintegrating equitable solutions for cross-cutting aspects within a green transition. These features, in turn, would foster the efficiency of existing forecasting and monitoring of the global flagship goals, integrating a cluster of initiatives intended to accelerate sustainable financing models, and “glocalization”, highlighting the interpretation of global processes at the local, national and regional levels, leaving no one behind.

Skill development

4. According to the International Labour Organization, the pandemic-induced economic recession has pushed around 117 million plus people into extreme poverty and 73 per cent of global youth into unemployment. Youth ask for rebooting systems with multidimensional reforms towards risk-sharing risk-reduction strategies; improving big data analytics and bold investments to strengthen livelihood opportunities; broadening social safety nets while



integrating quality education, entrepreneurial conditions and health and agricultural models in synchronization with the Sustainable Development Goals; and promoting social empowerment, digital literacy, electronic infrastructure and a strong culture of innovation.

5. International organizations must strengthen collaboration with relevant stakeholders to create reformed productive assets for self-reliance, with thematic task groups upskilling remote rural agroecosystems. The world must integrate community service programmes with humanities and social sciences as core subjects at the secondary and tertiary levels of education for better intersectional performance towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals 1 to 4 and 8 and 9.

Improving the business landscape

6. Ecology and economy are interlinked and directly proportional to each other. Access to capital markets and streamlining the business environment are crucial for business development. Whether it be access to finance or access to diverse capital inflows and investment mechanisms, there needs to be a decrease in the risk profile of businesses participating in the economy, to encourage entrepreneurial development. Attention must also be paid to the formalization of business practices.

7. Furthermore, improving budget allocation, ease of doing business and access to finance and building capacity would make youth businesses more competitive as they attempt to navigate domestic and global markets and take advantage of new economies. On average, it takes individuals in low-income nations two days longer to start or formalize their businesses than individuals in high-income nations.¹ Moreover, despite the quality of products or services being produced, small and medium-sized and youth-led businesses often have a challenge surmounting barriers to trade and global trade regulation. The link between youth entrepreneurship and employment is significant. As youth businesses grow and expand, this adds jobs to the labour market and young people are more likely to employ other young people.

8. Likewise, building green fiscal policies and sustainable businesses has taken on new meaning. Apart from the financial sustainability of business, young people are increasingly looking at the environmental impact of business. The ecology–economy debate must find balance in green business practices that safeguard our environment for future generations. Member States must promote sustainable economic development regulations in collaboration with the private sector and civil society.

9. Addressing the foregoing fiscal and regulatory issues are key to youth becoming active participants in national and global economies, productively engaging their significant youth potential.

Cross-cutting elements

10. A gender-sensitive focus on human rights and the needs of the economically disadvantaged, minority ethnic groups, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ+) community and other vulnerable groups is important for a better future social narrative. Young people work in sectors particularly affected by the pandemic's socioeconomic crises (at the national or global level) and safeguarding young people and providing decent work and social support will be key. For countries in conflict, sustainable strategies are required to ensure successful reintegration post-conflict and to incorporate these unique needs into (global) economic development strategies.

11. We must also operationalize Sustainable Development Goal 8, target 8.7, and Sustainable Development Goal 16, target 16.2, ensuring multilateral cooperation between all economic and social partners for joint national development strategies. This would assist in tackling the root causes of modern slavery and a wide spectrum of other challenges. In looking to the future of work, we must be cognizant of the current challenges of work that befall many vulnerable groups in society.

¹ See <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.

12. Finally, UNCTAD is a decisive interlinking bridge, to provide transparency, accountability and new approaches, highlighting a paradigm shift in the institutional workings of multilateralism towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The principal actions outlined adopt a focused set of state-of-the-art value-based Sustainable Development Goals investments and data innovations as part of targeted and evidence-based follow-up and review and capacity-building processes in social welfare inclusiveness, interconnected governance, a greener economy and digitalization that can accelerate development. UNCTAD represents a new potential to build back more inclusively, sustainably and collectively, together with implementational interventions by ambassadors, youth action hubs, civil servants, think tanks and local civic communities in improving efficiency, suggesting greater perseverance towards human development frameworks.

II. New economies

13. Youth recognize new economies as solution-based models aiming to achieve sustainability, resiliency and inclusivity and to combat climate change. New economies extend beyond the current gross domestic product-focused economic system. They are adaptive solutions to inherent and emerging markets, to address intersectional issues from various sectors for global development. New economies encompass ideas of de-growth, ecological protection, stakeholder value, net positive outcomes, impact-weighted accounting and regenerative and circular business models, as well as the changing landscapes of the gig economy, the creative economy and the blue economy. It acknowledges the ability to empower youth and stimulate our potential for co-creation, co-leadership and innovation, promoting self-awareness and self-empowerment. Regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, new economies provide equal platforms for everyone's development, which is fundamental to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

14. Achieving sustainable development requires more attention from Governments and education in new economies. Therefore, youth urge that (a) member States allocate more funding towards research on de-growth, the ecological economy, decoupling and rebound effects, which are crucial topics to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals; (b) schools and universities shall teach students the limitations of traditional economic theories and cover new economic theories; and (c) government advisers should be trained in both traditional gross domestic product-focused economics and new economic fields in order to adequately measure and report on true growth.

Building a regenerative system

15. Youth encourage member States to consider the implementation of policies related to the practices of regenerative and circular economies comprising (a) extended producer responsibility rules; (b) landfill and virgin material taxes; (c) government support measures for primary and secondary materials; (d) green public procurement of goods and services; (e) an assessment of how to address potential rebound effects for every policy on the circular economy; and (f) an examination of regenerative farming as the new agricultural standard.

Narrowing the skill gap for youth empowerment in the gig economy

16. Concerning the gig economy, youth recommend considering (a) the creation of improved infrastructure and accessibility to the Internet and technology; and (b) taking action to narrow skill gaps in digital literacy and knowledge transfer; while (c) ensuring updates to employment laws and the creation of robust social safety nets to protect workers; and it is also crucial to (d) address new economic models in national policies and international agreements, including regulations to adapt to needs of artificial intelligence, data protection and antimonopoly.

New economies as a tool to combat human rights issues

17. Finally, new economies should prevent human rights abuses and eradicate contemporary forms of exploitation. To achieve this, member States need to take coordinated action to (a) introduce import controls on goods produced using forced and child labour; (b)

adopt mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation; and (c) secure these measures in trade agreements and legislative and development frameworks.

III. Climate action: An inclusive response

18. Youth believe that the UNCTAD mandate of technical cooperation and policy analysis could help lay the foundation of an inclusive framework accounting for best practices ensuring cost-effective application across different geographical regions to tackle climate change in the post-pandemic era.

Inclusivity and conciliation in trade measures related to climate change

19. Pursuant to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, along with special and differential treatment under the World Trade Organization policy mandate, youth propose that the least developed countries be exempted from carbon border taxes imposed by developed countries for a few years, during which they should be aided (through technology transfer and capacity-building) using funds from carbon border taxes collected from manufacturer-sellers from other countries. Further, measures should be taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions via the prohibition of the disposal of polluting vehicles in developing nations, to ensure holistic decarbonization.

20. Youth urge UNCTAD, through its mandate on consensus-building, to encourage member States to introduce green fiscal policy in a phased manner by linking government expenditures with environmental goals and creating policy space for green investment, enabling a sustainable and resilient recovery from the losses due to the pandemic.

New avenues of trade for inclusive and sustainable development

21. Youth propose the need to redefine trade priorities to combat climate change in the most cost-effective ways through the bilateral and multilateral trade of regenerative biomass from places of abundance to extremely arid areas. Several experiments in this regard have led to the creation of an industry that has proven to increase incomes manifold.

22. Indigenous people constitute 5 per cent of the population and safeguard 80 per cent of biodiversity.² Therefore, a concerted gender-responsive approach, operationalizing Sustainable Development Goals 5, 10, 12 and 13, should be tailored to promote and invest in their unique sustainable practices aimed at ecosystem preservation, which can be emulated by businesses in compliance with intellectual property rights law.

23. Youth request member States to promote social and sustainable entrepreneurship as a viable career option among youth and rural communities in partnership with the private sector.

Revitalizing the blue and green economy

24. Youth propose a gradual restructuring of the maritime industry to preserve biodiversity through the greening of small-scale fisheries and investments in sustainable alternatives: offshore wind energy; tidal energy; and algae-based biofuels.

25. Livestock farming generates a whopping 14.5 per cent of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.³ Therefore, youth propose the need to promote and invest in locally farmed animal products. Lastly, youth propose investments in sustainable practices for meat production by leveraging the laboratory-grown meat production industry, thereby rendering it accessible to all.

26. Youth call upon member States to take constructive action in cognizance of the sixth assessment report by the International Panel on Climate Change through a revision of trade

² See <https://unfccc.int/news/values-of-indigenous-peoples-can-be-a-key-component-of-climate-resilience>.

³ See <http://www.fao.org/3/i6345e/i6345e.pdf>.

priorities, capacity-building and investment in people-centric climate information systems, since the success of these policies eventually rests on the contributions of citizens.

IV. Inclusive and equitable learning

27. The recent global pandemic has disrupted the education of more than 70 per cent of youth worldwide, according to the International Labour Organization. Even before the onslaught of the pandemic, many youth, particularly in developing countries, lacked access to quality education and training opportunities. Moving forward, youth express the need for an inclusive education system that is resilient to future disruptions and reflects the new needs of the twenty-first century market. Quality education should be encouraged by way of providing human resources, infrastructure and skills that enable youth to successfully transition into the labour force. In the case of youth from marginalized backgrounds, such as indigenous groups or those living in conflict-affected areas, a focus on providing basic employability skills is crucial. A more equitable education system would address possible barriers, such as poverty or limited transportation, and ensure everybody has a chance to succeed in life.

28. In this ever-evolving world, the education curriculum has to be restructured and redesigned, commensurate with societal needs. In the post-pandemic era, we can see an adaptation of hybrid learning becoming the new normal. While it offers enormous potential for reaching out to every student around the world, it has also been challenged by the lack of digital resources and infrastructure to support it. It is crucial to create a curriculum that is interactive in order to foster creativity and also provides the necessary technological understanding. It is also true that the problem of education cannot be solved just by the efforts of Governments and international organizations. Increased youth participation in curriculum development and the education sector would reduce dependence on Governments' efforts and encourage development.

Education recovery and resilience

29. Many countries that have suffered from wars, conflicts and disasters have seen their education sectors lag, despite its being one of the critical components of socioeconomic growth. UNCTAD, in partnership with Governments, needs to work on evidence-based and futuristic policies to influence system-wide changes that will enhance resilient, sustainable and responsive actions, to ensure education resilience, so that the most vulnerable children are not left behind.

Equitable access for all

30. Youth believe that education is and should remain a human right, not a commodity or public good. Legislation must be enacted to ensure equitable access to education for all and its perpetual trade exclusion. Moreover, to ensure vulnerable States have access to free education, intellectual property rules need to be reassessed to ensure that copyrighted and patented teaching and learning resources are permitted nationally via copyright laws; and library and research use is exempted from trade negotiations.

Bridging skill gaps

31. Global technological advancement is rapidly outpacing education systems in developing countries. Thus, there exists a significant education and workforce skill gap. UNCTAD, in conjunction with an inclusive public-private partnership, can provide technical assistance for developing States to embark on a comprehensive restructuring of their education systems that both equips current students and retools students who have graduated with skills that are relevant for the global workforce, as well as the sustainable development needs of their countries.

Social and emotional learning

32. In this rapidly changing world, the importance of social and emotional skills such as communication, empathy, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking cannot be

overemphasized. The purpose of education is to liberate; however, the current competitive nature of the education system has inculcated fear in students. It is crucial for policymakers to provide the proper environment for students to thrive. UNCTAD can help by advocating for countries to enact societal policies that promote innovation and individualism in relation to competitive learning outcomes. Social and emotional learning can help students foster positive identity development and recognize and appreciate diversity, and thereby foster inclusivity. It is crucial for UNCTAD, in collaboration with education stakeholders across the globe, to work towards the inclusion of social and emotional learning in the education curriculum.

Hybrid education and the digital divide

33. In the wake of the pandemic, it is more crucial than ever to work towards a hybrid education system for the entire world. The biggest impediment to this is the digital divide, as different countries face different developmental challenges. UNCTAD, in collaboration with individual countries, should develop contextualized policies that will enable each country to bridge the digital divide by focusing on their most significant educational value chain gaps.

V. Youth civic participation

Recognition of the role of youth and youth-led organizations, including the youth action hubs, in shaping society and decision-making processes

34. Young people all around the world recognize the power of collaboration and unity; together we can achieve more in bettering the lives of people everywhere than we can by ourselves. Youth-led organizations that exist at all levels of society and in communities are a testament to this. However, the overwhelming majority of these youth-led organizations operate without being formally integrated with government institutions and without recognition of the positive impact they are having. In 2018, UNCTAD pioneered a new model of working with youth, the Youth Action Hubs initiative, resulting in numerous programmes around the globe tackling many of the major issues the world collectively faces today. The initiative, together with UNCTAD, seeks to empower young people and provide a working relationship with formal institutions. Youth call upon Governments to formally recognize, collaborate with and involve youth-led organizations in decision-making processes, with an understanding that together we can accelerate progress towards shared goals.

Measuring the progress of youth civic participation by establishing a youth development index

35. While young people contribute to civil society in various ways and to varying degrees, there currently exists a lack of clear understanding of the extent of this contribution. Bearing this in mind, an urgent need emerges for member States to implement a youth development index on civic participation that provides key quantitative and qualitative insights into how young people currently contribute to nation-building. Young people call upon UNCTAD member States to collaborate with youth in developing and implementing a youth development index that ensures evidence-based, youth-centric decision-making in relation to the formulation of policy.

Global citizenship and the Sustainable Development Goals: Think globally, act locally

36. On 25 September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda. Today, we see that not enough is being done to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with the risk of catastrophic environmental, social, political and economic crises ever increasing. Young people today and throughout history have been at the forefront of change, taking action and leading causes that seek to better the lives of people everywhere. In the modern era, young people recognize that humanity is highly interconnected and interdependent, meaning that actions young people take at a local level to further the Sustainable Development Goals will be felt throughout our interconnected global network. Young people call upon those member States that have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals to redouble their efforts, working together with young people to

understand their role in fostering local action that will contribute to solving the global problems we collectively face.

Strengthening the process of democracy

37. Democracies around the world derive their power from the people, existing for the people. Healthy democracies function through a clear separation of powers, transparent and inclusive decision-making and a robust contestation of ideas that seeks to balance the competing interests of all citizens. In addition, fair and regular elections are essential for stable democracies.

38. However, in many parts of the world, a breakdown of these fundamental aspects of democracy has occurred, resulting in significant hardship for countless numbers of people, including youth, who will inherit these failings. Bearing in mind that youth make up a quarter of the world's population and represent the future of our nations, greater provision must be made by all Governments to foster, encourage and make way for enhanced and meaningful youth participation in democratic processes. Youth call upon Governments to take action to democratize democracy, with consideration for future generations.
