

Seventh Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians

Post-COVID-19 recovery: A youth-responsive approach

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Outcome document

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The Conference brought together 128 parliamentarians from around the world, of whom 57 were women MPs and 71 male MPs. Around 15 per cent of the MPs in the Conference were under the age of 30. Participants also included representatives of international organizations, youth organizations and parliaments, academia and the private sector, thereby reaching a total number of participants of 257.

The Conference launched the birth of a new momentum for youth empowerment, driven by a bold and forward-looking call: *No democracy without inclusion and representative participation, and no inclusion and representative participation without young people in their rightful place at the decision-making table.*

The positive momentum should further nurture consensus and spur resolute action to support the meaningful participation of young men and women in political life. This would live up to the aspirations of the IPU Resolution on Youth Participation in the Democratic Process, adopted in 2010, and kick start a new decade of action for its comprehensive implementation.

The participants deliberated extensively about youth under-representation in parliaments and challenged the reality where only 2.6 per cent of the world's MPs are under 30 and where young people can be old enough to vote, but not old enough to be elected to parliament in 69 per cent of countries.

To make governance institutions fit for purpose by being inclusive, representative and efficient, the participants called on parliaments to:

- Open up to youth participation and to the leadership of young members by adopting and implementing youth quotas; aligning the minimum age of eligibility for political office with the voting age; and introducing measures to have young MPs lead parliamentary structures and decision-making bodies;
- Build strong intergenerational partnerships between young and senior MPs, supported through mentorship for and by young MPs, as well as powered by dedicated intergenerational fora;
- Create and reinforce internal mechanisms, such as youth parliamentary committees, caucuses and networks of young MPs in order to advance the youth empowerment agenda;
- Open up internal processes, including during pandemics and any other crisis, to young men and women to inform parliamentary work and decisions.

Through engagement in the new IPU Campaign *I Say Yes to Youth in Parliament*, launched at the Conference, participants agreed to be changemakers by taking transformative action and creating a worldwide movement for youth participation. They pledged to encourage their respective parliaments and networks to join the Campaign.

In addition to spearheading reforms and taking transformative action, several inspiring new ideas emerged to support youth engagement and participation, including:

- The creation of safe spaces where youth are empowered to drive change.
- Expanding the boundaries of what it means to be a politician.
- Opening parliaments to more people from the grassroots level.

- Harnessing the transformative power of increased connectivity and social media to increase awareness of the role of parliament and that of parliamentarians.

Youth-responsive policymaking is required in key sectors such as education, health and employment, particularly as the world is endeavouring to emerge from the pandemic and needs to embark on a recovery process that can build back better, in a more inclusive, fair, resilient and sustainable way. For such a recovery to deliver on its promises, it must go hand in hand with youth responsiveness.

Education systems should be fit for purpose and build bridges rather than exacerbate divides. During the pandemic, one in eight students were left without access to education. With more than 1.5 billion children and youth worldwide affected by the closure of schools and universities, the future of young people seems to be in danger. Resolute action should eliminate inequalities of access to online learning; ease the costs and financial burdens on households; ensure learning continuity and international mobility.

The good practices highlighted and recommendations made at the Conference have the potential to make a difference. Parliamentarians of all ages were called upon to:

- Oversee government budgets to meet the target of spending 6% of national GDP on education.
- Protect education in national budgets and focus stimulus packages on education recovery efforts.
- Apply a gender, age and diversity dimension to legislation, taking into account the specific needs of girls and boys, including those who are marginalized and living in poverty.
- Work on hybrid models in education systems, starting by bridging the digital divide and reducing or eliminating the costs of digital learning. National digitalization programmes should be established and resourced, and their implementation carefully monitored.
- Work closely with students and universities.
- Ensure that development cooperation supports education during the pandemic and in its aftermath.

Youth health and youth health services are important areas requiring attention during the pandemic and in the post pandemic phase.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health is significant, including clinical mental illness, isolation and chronic stress. Young people are disproportionately affected by social distancing and quarantine measures. Young people lacked access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic, which caused an increase in teenage pregnancies. In the context of Universal Health Coverage, special attention should be paid to mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and the entire chain of support services.

Despite these impacts, young men and women have been and continue to be essential in supporting others, in particular their elders, and offering support to their communities. Young people have been key players in countering misinformation related to the pandemic using their online activity, influence and leadership.

Good practices shared at the Conference included legislation passed to ensure education continuity for pregnant adolescents, vocational training for teen mothers and the creation of and support for safe spaces where young men and women can access sexual and reproductive health services while respecting their privacy.

Recommendations for MPs and Parliaments include:

- Ensure that Universal Health Care delivers on its promises to young people. The IPU's Resolution on Achieving Universal Health Care Coverage by 2030 can serve as a framework to assist in this regard.
- Robust legislation and oversight to address the current disruptions in access to essential health services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare, as well as to eliminate gender-based violence against young women and girls.

- Encourage and call for more attention to and resources for youth mental health and urge governments to invest in mental health services.
- Contribute to combating any pandemic of misinformation among young people and promote youth-led initiatives to help counter misinformation.
- Encourage people to support others by donating vaccines. The WHO's GoGiveOne Campaign is a key example, calling on everyone, everywhere to play a part in vaccinating the world.
- Protect investments in human capital as fiscal spaces shrink as a result of the pandemic

Economic empowerment: Youth participation, education, health and well-being are interconnected. All three are driven by growth, competitiveness and employment – in short, sustainable economic development.

Inequality is a key challenge today, including unequal distribution of income and resources as well as limited access to goods and services, which are all hindering opportunities for growth. The situation was difficult for young people already before the pandemic. Young people were three times more likely to be unemployed than others. Three out of four worked in the informal economy and one in three was living in poverty. While the world has recovered from the economic recession of 2008, youth employment never really has.

The pandemic impacted young people to a major degree: it brought severe disruption to education and training, it increased difficulties for young jobseekers in finding a job, and young people lost their jobs in the sectors most affected by the pandemic such as retail, manufacturing, tourism, etc.

Good practices shared among participants included the adoption and implementation of youth quotas on the boards of administration of private enterprises, certification of SMEs led by youth and encouragement for large corporations to include these SMEs in their procurement, micro credits and cash programmes for young people, supporting youth SMEs, and investing in youth employment and skills strategy programmes.

Recommendations for MPs and Parliaments include:

- Support structural reforms, including to address youth unemployment
- Expand investment to capture the scale of the crisis and channel greater investment to spur youth employment, in particular in strategic sectors such as the green economy and the care and health economy.
- Enable the building of an atmosphere where youth are empowered to innovate for stronger economic growth, including by supporting quality job opportunities in the private and public sectors, as well as volunteering opportunities. A noteworthy practice to promote is youth quotas on the boards of enterprises.
- Promote investment in people, institutions and decent jobs.
- Initiate robust legislation to encourage the private sector through tax stimulus to employ young people.
- Promote youth-inclusive policies and economic stimulus packages to cushion the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Improve the legislative frameworks designed particularly for young entrepreneurs.
- Consider the use of basic income as a means to economically empower young people.

The political will of parliamentarians, as well as the overt support and commitment of various stakeholders, should be drawn upon to bring education systems back to life, open up the doors of employment and entrepreneurship to young people, and break through barriers and allow the power of ideas and action by youth to change the essence of political engagement. Last but not least, it is imperative to protect future generations by safeguarding their health and well-being.