



# Youth Mental Wellbeing *For Successful Implementation of the SDGs*

Commemorating International Youth Day

Wednesday August 3, 2016  
ECOSOC Chamber, UN Headquarters



1.8 billion of our world's population today is between the ages of 10 and 24, and half of the world's population is under 30. Never in history have we seen so many young people. This brings about a huge potential and power for change and SDGs' implementation. As they work their way into the societal system and at the same time question it, young people

can be the driving force for true innovation. But the reality is this population is also largely dissatisfied and unmotivated.

Concentrated mostly in developing countries, and suffering from huge unemployment rates and lack of education, more often than not, they resort to measures such as protest, violence, school dropouts, illegal migration, and in some cases fall victims of rape, unwanted pregnancies, domestic violence or human trafficking.

To list just a few examples of these trends:

**About 9 out of 10 people between the ages of 10 and 24 lives in less developed countries<sup>1</sup>**

**In 2015, 74 million young people (ages 15- 24) were unemployed, which accounts for 36% of all unemployed worldwide.<sup>2</sup>**

**One study of 69 countries found that being without a job translates into negative views about the effectiveness of democracy by young people.<sup>3</sup>**

**2/3 of youth in developing economies are without work, not studying, or engaged in irregular/informal employment.<sup>4</sup>**

**14% of girls and 18% of boys aged 13–15 years in low- and middle-income countries are reported to use alcohol.<sup>5</sup>**

**One in six adolescents (ages 14–16) does not complete primary school.<sup>6</sup>**

**The first sexual experience of 45 percent of women who were under 15 at the time of their sexual initiation was forced.<sup>7</sup>**

**Every 10 minutes, somewhere in the world, an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> [UNFPA, 2014]

<sup>2</sup> [UNDP Human Development Report 2015, p.63 <http://goo.gl/Q7pq34>]

<sup>3</sup> [UNDP Human Development Report 2015 pg 64 <http://goo.gl/Q7pq34>]

<sup>4</sup> [UNDP, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KdkY7u>]

<sup>5</sup> [WHO, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1Gr7bUG>]

<sup>6</sup> [UNDP Human Development Report 2015 pg 74 <http://goo.gl/Cg3QwM>]

<sup>7</sup> [UN WOMEN, “Fast facts: statistics on violence against women and girls”, <http://goo.gl/3zrUL0>]

<sup>8</sup> [UNFPA, 2014]

**Approximately 430 young people aged 10 to 24 die every day through interpersonal violence<sup>9</sup>**

**Globally, 43% of homicide victims are aged 15-29<sup>10</sup>**

**In any given year, about 20% of adolescents will experience a mental health problem, most commonly depression or anxiety<sup>11</sup>**

**Throughout the world, more than 600 million young people live in fragile and conflict-affected contexts<sup>12</sup>**

**Migrants under the age of 30 represent 32% of all international migrants, the majority (60%) of which live in developing countries<sup>13</sup>**

So the question begs, how do we channel that great, powerful, young energy, towards more productive action?

The situations highlighted above are obviously very real and a response to fragile systems, which can take a long time to strengthen. However, there is a lot that can be done right away through changes in the youth's and the surrounding communities' mentality. No matter how hard the situation may be, there is always a way to respond positively and constructively. Ultimately, that change in mentality also can have a real impact on the community and systemic level. As acknowledged by UNODS, resilient mental health has been one important factor protecting youth from substance use and related disorders, for instance.<sup>14</sup>

But having a strong frame of mind takes a lot of courage and young people need support to nurture it. We are not talking about the mental wellbeing of not having a mental illness, such as depression or schizophrenia, or substance abuse-related conditions. We are referring

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<sup>9</sup> [WHO, Fact Sheet on Adolescent health, 2015 <http://goo.gl/kjKbBT>]

<sup>10</sup> [UNODC, Global Study on Homicide, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1n7PUr9>]

<sup>11</sup> [WHO, Fact Sheet on Adolescent health, 2015 <http://goo.gl/G7DPkU>]

<sup>12</sup> [UNDP, Practice Note: Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding, p.6, <http://goo.gl/qUHqEc>]

<sup>13</sup> [UNDP, Guidance Note - A Development Approach to Migration and Displacement, p.5, <http://goo.gl/QN4W1Y>]

<sup>14</sup> [UNODC, <http://bit.ly/1Niz6Lb>]

to the type of mental wellbeing that takes things a step further, and entails confidence, motivation, courage and hope in the face of challenge.

There is an increasing volume of scientific literature that demonstrates that the human brain, and more particularly so in its young, developmental stages, has a very high degree of flexibility and a great capacity for resilience, endurance, empathy, collaboration, creativity. Not only does it have that potential, but we are recently seeing how that is actually a *natural* tendency of the brain, rather than a trait of some exceptional individuals. We have to help unleash those positive tendencies and let the brain do its work. Most of the blockages to develop that potential are related to high levels of stress inflicted by society as well as to negative and discouraging information by the mass media and, often times, our own educators. Physical exercises, stretching, breathing, mediation – among other measures such as positive psychology and developing growth mindsets - have all proven to be useful techniques to regulate stress and emotion, enhance motivation, and diminish tensions in the brain. Those are soft measures that don't require a lot of funding or specialized technology. Any young person in any corner of the world can do it, with the help of good mentorship.

If we provide the space for that kind of holistic education to our youth, we can go a long way towards including them as partners for the implementation of the SDGs. A recent UNIDO study has seen for instance how, by encouraging young women and men to be involved in agro-based value-chains, new employment and business opportunities can be created. Rather than immigrating to urban areas where often times they don't find the livelihoods they are looking for and end up in the informal market or other situations that increase their marginalization, these young people from rural areas can become young entrepreneurs. They can create local businesses by processing agricultural resources and developing tourism opportunities, transforming traditional agrarian societies into entrepreneurial societies<sup>15</sup>. This does not mean every young person in a rural community should go this direction. It is just meant to be one example of how a tweak on perspective in the youth's mindset, accompanied by mentorship and encouragement, can have productive results. When it comes to mentorship, collaboration

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<sup>15</sup> [UNIDO, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1e4biyh>]

becomes very important; we can create more channels to engage youth that are more comfortable and motivated to help those that are less so. When sustained over time, that strong mindset builds character and integrity, bringing long-term spillover effects towards less violence, more motivation and initiative, and more respect for others, the environment and the earth.

As the UN focuses on finding concrete ways and actions to realize the SDGs and to engage young people in the process, the year 2016 offers good timing to welcome new and innovative approaches and tools such as the ones IBREA Foundation presents.

Young people have been at the heart of the UN almost since its inception. In 1965, the UN adopted the *Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect, and Understanding between Peoples*. Two decades later, the UN General Assembly observed 1985 as the *International Youth Day: Participation, Development and Peace*, drawing international attention to the important role played by youth around the world, especially for development.

In 1995, the UN strengthened this agenda by directing global response to the challenges faced by youth into the next millennium. It did that by adopting the *World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)*, which guides policy and action to improve the situation of young people. The WPAY contains 15 priority areas ranging from education, health and employment, to HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, and juvenile delinquency.

The UN Secretary-General (UNSG) has identified in his second term working with and for young people as one of his top priorities and established the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, with the appointment of his first-ever Envoy on Youth, Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi, in January 2013.

In February of 2016, ECOSOC celebrated its 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Forum, following annual forums since 2011, to discuss ways in which young people can play an active role in the implementation of the MDGs and SDGs agendas. This year's forum highlighted that "Youth engagement is imperative for the achievement of SDG16 on peaceful and inclusive societies".

IBREA Foundation, as civil society organization working on the ground, wants to offer its views and suggestions for contributing to the UN community's efforts with youth. IBREA's work focuses on unleashing the brain's great potential, leading to better health, increased motivation and emotional wellbeing, and enhanced purpose and concentration. Working with different beneficiary groups, ranging from women, elderly and children, to youth, we have seen how young people who receive IBREA's brain-based holistic education program, are making the most out of it because of their great passion and desire for change.

Rather than offering technical or material solutions to the youth, what IBREA's program offers is a space to train themselves and find their own power inside themselves. Then, we encourage them to use that power and confidence to positively influence their community.

Commemorating this year's International Youth Day, we invite you to have a lively discussion on all these topics.

### **Opening Remarks**

H.E. Mr. Oh Joon, Permanent Representative of Republic of Korea to the United Nations and the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for 2015-2016

H.E. Mr. Ruben Zamora Rivas, Permanent Representative of El Salvador to the United Nations

### **Speakers**

Dr. Michael Gershon, MD, Neuroscientist, Columbia University

Mr. Ilchi Lee, President, IBREA Foundation

Adora Svitek, Inspirational Youth Speaker and Activist

Chernor Bah, Youth Activist, Sierra Leone

Representative, Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations

Representative, Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations

Dr. Barbara Melamed, Clinical Health Psychologist, expert on children's mental health

Karmen Kizzie Rouland, PhD, Education and Psychology

Live testimonies from youth from the US, China, El Salvador, Liberia,

Sierra Leone, Japan, Korea

Video speech from famous singer, Halsey