

**High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Children on the Move**  
**Geneva, 8-9 December 2016**  
**Keynote Address by Mr. Moez Masoud, PhD Scholar, University of Cambridge**

Mr. High Commissioner,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen

I am honored to be here today to address this distinguished assembly on such an important and timely topic.

I use the word topic with a bit of caution, because by categorizing “children” or “youth” as a topic we inherently turn them into an “issue”, a “problem”, a “challenge”, instead of an “opportunity”, a “potential development”, a “positive reality”. The discussion, inevitably, becomes a subjective one.

This is often the case with many “issues” that the multilateral system – and the United Nations more particularly – deals with. We see the same happen with “women”, with “health”, with “the environment” to name but a few. All of these terms are seen through the silos of respective agencies, bureaucracies, departments, when in fact they are so deeply intertwined, more than ever now, in this transnational world we live in today. So it's a question of realizing that it's much bigger than just one issue. As I was speaking with a colleague earlier today: it may be the biggest security issue we face on the planet, if youth are neglected by us in the next ten, twenty years or so.

“Children and Youth” in particular is even more complex by virtue of how “new” the topic is. It's not simply a matter that young people have emerged out of nowhere, have suddenly appeared on the international agenda. It's actually that existing structures have been out of step with the needs of the future, with the realities of the present. There is a generational rift, one we have not fully acknowledged or perhaps chosen not to accept. It would not be an exaggeration to say that some of the greatest challenges the world is facing are tied to a disenfranchised, dispossessed and disillusioned young population.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems is that there still isn't an acceptable definition for “youth”. Attributing age parameters to the “youth” category has been problematic, particularly because they are often based on national or local contexts. The United Nations General Assembly defines youth as “those persons between the ages of 15–24 years.” But how do we differentiate between a stage of life and a particular age?

What we do have however is a series of facts:

- 48 per cent of the world's population is under the age of 24.
- By 2030, the number of youth globally is expected to grow by 7 percent, reaching around 1.3 billion.<sup>1</sup>
- These numbers speak for themselves: there is an incontrovertible democratic imperative for including and engaging youth in policy-making at the national and international levels.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Youth Population Trends and Sustainable Development,” 2015, available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/YouthPOP.pdf>

The first point I am making is therefore: the need for a serious mindset shift. We have to stop talking about the “potential” of youth in the foundation of a better future and acknowledge that young people are already active agents of change, positive change, in our world today. We need to take the discussion away from one that relates to “future” realities and ground it in the present, in the current state of affairs.

Having said that I am conscious that some progress has been made to bring youth to the fold.

The adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) in 1995, the appointment of the first-ever Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth (OSGEY) in 2013, not to mention the heavy youth engagement that various UN entities, programmes, and funds have been pursuing, from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Women, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to name but a few.

UNHCR of course has made a significant contribution as well through its Framework for the Protection of Children (2012) and its more recent work targeting the resettlement of children and adolescents at risk (2016).

The most recent multilateral milestone perhaps came in December 2015, when the UN Security Council passed its first-ever resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security (Resolution 2250), an opportunity, I believe, that has great potential at elevating the voices of young people in peacebuilding.

This resolution marked the first time in history that the UN Security Council recognized the positive role of young women and men in the promotion of international peace and stability. This is made all the more relevant by the remarkable adoption of the 2030 Agenda. A crucial part of the announcement was, as you will all remember, that “children and young women and men are critical agents of change” in realizing these goals.<sup>2</sup>

I am not citing these examples to merely outline an important moment in history nor am I giving us an opportunity to pat each other on the back. This progress is all very well but the question I am asking us to think about today is: is it working? What can we be doing better? How do we get the youth inclusion equation right? What can we do better to improve the lives of children and youth on the move?

Let me start by sharing a little bit of my experience. My remarks here today are based on a deep interaction with young people, for a substantial amount of time. My mission in life thus far has been one that is inherently youth-targeted. I talk here, on the one hand, as a public figure who, over the years, has developed a following of 11 million Facebook and Twitter followers, the majority of whom are bright young minds that I engage with regularly and have virtual discussions with, in order to better understand their points of view. I am also here as a scholar of philosophical theology and religious studies, someone who is trying to make sense of the multiple crises that modernity and postmodernity have endowed us with, at a time in history when religious and atheistic ideologies are being used and abused in disturbing ways.

I am here as an Egyptian and Arab who is concerned for the future of my region, one that has been rocked tremendously by political and social unrest particularly over the last six years. I am here as a global citizen who believes the multilateral system has a pivotal role to play and is needed more than ever. And perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52206#.Vszn-0BkYkI>

most importantly, I am here as a father of three children who have made me more aware of my own purpose and who continue to teach me things about myself and the world as much as I try to teach them. So we need to understand children and youth, because they force us to face the rigor of the reality that we have been collectively failing, but also the beauty of the hope that we may succeed as a species once again. These vantage points combined, I hope, will allow me to share some brief thoughts on some of the issues that will be discussed in subsequent sessions: namely, issues around youth inclusion and empowering and engaging youth and children on the move

### **Youth Inclusion**

There is no doubt that inclusion is the cornerstone of a stable and well-functioning society. As noted above, the sheer numbers that youth represent – and will continue to represent – means that there is an imperative to be more inclusive.

But the “system” has largely been failing young people. The 2014 Global Youth Wellbeing Index highlighted a global crisis of overall well-being and exclusion from economic opportunities and spheres of power. It is no surprise that, by excluding youth at the discussion table, their overall needs end up being neglected. It is arguable, therefore, that exclusion results in exacerbating trends like youth unemployment.

Exclusion – in all its forms, political, economic, social, and cultural – is at the heart of some of today’s greatest ills.

A lack of participation in political decision-making and policy formulation means alienation and a pursuit of other – less orderly ways – of instigating political change. My part of the world is a testament to this – from the uprisings of 2011 to the menace that is violent ideology-based extremism, which is an inherently “young” phenomenon.

A denial of access to services - from healthcare and education to housing - means a rise in crime and other forms of social unrest. Discrimination, lack of identity and dignity are some of the primary seeds of today’s forms of violent extremism and ideological unrest.

Exclusion breeds discontent and mistrust of national governments and, by extension, the multilateral system as a whole.

### **Youth Contributions - The Outreach Challenge**

The greater this mistrust, the more young people will be pushed elsewhere to look for alternative means. And of course some have been very successful. The various social, political and technological revolutions that have been pioneered by young people are known to us all.

In the world of science and medicine we know of fifteen-year-old Jacob Barnett, who, at the age of nine, made further developments to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and eighteen-year-old Brittany Wenger, who came up with a new method to diagnose breast cancer.

Young people have not only been behind breakthroughs like Google and Facebook but they have also tweaked these online platforms and turned them into instruments of social justice and governance.

Sites such as Botangle, founded by 18-year-old Erik Finman, and Khan Academy, “the largest school in the world,” founded by then 25-year-old Salman Khan have revolutionized education globally, representing a paradigm shift for children and youth everywhere.

Other platforms like Cause.org, Change.org, and Zoomaal have shown the power of a “global citizenry” to promote and support causes they believe in.

But I am specifically interested in how so many of these contributions have been a direct byproduct of exclusion from formal processes, or a show of protest to existing political structures or perceived and real injustices.

Individuals such as Malala Yousafzai, for example, have made recognizable the larger efforts by youth to stand up to tyrannical groups and urged others to do the same.

Tools and platforms developed by young people online have brought to light critical questions around transparency and corruption.

Groups like WikiLeaks, Anonymous, and other “hacktivist” groups speak to the persistence and determination of young people who feel betrayed by certain realities or excluded from certain discussions. These tools have given youth access to conversations that have traditionally been off-limits, while providing platforms and online communities to change the status quo. We find ourselves here in the uneasy territory of “national security”: a debate best epitomized by someone like Edward Snowden – traitor or hero?

The work of young innovators and peacebuilders that I have alluded to, while often celebrated by the multilateral system, has not necessarily led to the prioritization of youth innovation, entrepreneurship, and social, economic, and political participation at a national or multilateral level.

Furthermore, initiatives to provide new spaces for young voices and meaningful engagement have yet to address the underlying exclusion of youth from existing spaces and spheres of power.

This presents us with what I’d like to call the outreach challenge: admitting to ourselves, when we talk about inclusion, why would young people even *want* to be included in a system that seems, to them, out of step, out of fashion, inefficient or not to be trusted? How do we address such a problem, both when it is a perceived one and when it’s real?

### **Exclusion and Extremism**

I did talk about this last year, and there are theories to understand the persuasiveness of this radical religious discourse, as to why disenfranchised people end up accepting these otherwise twisted ideologies. And it’s very simple. In turbulent times, people lose their sense of identity. And when someone else provides them with a sense of identity and a way to provide continuity over time which is a psychological need, to make sense of the world, a world picture as we say, a framework within which to understand their lives, their loyalty goes in that direction. Very few people are actually scholars by profession, to make the discernment and distinctions needed; let alone without education, so we deprive them of education and then wonder why they end up making less than educated decisions.

At its most severe, the exclusion of youth from policymaking processes and power structures can seriously threaten the fabric of our society.

Economic and social factors can create an environment ripe for manipulative leaders to cultivate violent political ideologies among youth or to recruit or force youth without opportunities into national or regional armed conflicts.

These factors can include access to weapons, which yields violence; a sense of exclusion from political circles, which can drive youth to form underground groups to oppose an oppressive regime through violent demonstrations; and opportunity for illicit financial gain, particularly for youth who are economically marginalized.

As a result of this relationship between youth and violence, youth are often viewed as “potential perpetrators of violence despite the fact that most young people are not involved in armed conflict or violence.” This is a quote from the important Amman Youth Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security, August 22, 2015.

This perception hinders the inclusion of young people as partners in peace and undermines existing efforts to involve youth in peacebuilding.

Effectively addressing youth exclusion requires moving beyond the perpetrator-victim dichotomy and beyond overly securitized policies toward policies that both include and empower youth.

I mentioned earlier that the phenomenon of extremism is driven predominantly by “young” people and - historically speaking - a “young” way of doing things. To illustrate this point, I quote a fellow North African global citizen from Tunisia, who, at a conference in Oslo a few years ago, posed a series of questions about a particularly controversial phenomenon we read about every day in the news but from a very different vantage point. She asked her audience what state in the world today had a leader who was just over forty years old, an average population age of under thirty, no visa required for a visit, a second language that is French and a fully decentralized government. The answer was, strangely, Daesh (ISIL). Of course we all know that ISIL is not a recognized state despite proclaiming itself as such but it does beg the question: have we understood its modus operandi properly? Have we sufficiently and accurately analyzed why such a phenomenon can draw young people and in what way it functions that makes it lucrative to begin with?

## **Education**

The question of violence and extremism is inextricably linked to education. The proven benefits of an educated society, highlighted by Goal 4 of the SDGs, are countless. As I always tell children: a mind that can think clearly and logically from very early on, is much safer from ridiculous ideologies that tell you to unjustly kill fellow men and women, and convince you that it’s a valid thing. So education is the strongest preventative strategy.

Despite these benefits, it is time we asked ourselves why most governments continue to reduce social spending in education and health. This decrease is most significant in youth-dominated developing countries, where over 98 percent of the world's illiterate population lives.

Neglecting education in these societies means most youth are not exposed to global issues, limiting their capacity to participate.

This breeds a chain reaction: as a result of less funding, educational materials remain out of date, often further discouraging enrolment and regular attendance, even when schooling is available.

Education is also a central part of emergency responses. The Syrian crisis, for example, has disrupted the education of youth both inside Syria and in neighboring countries. It would be worth considering how humanitarian programming can be made more systematically focused on education for youth.

### **Gender Inclusivity**

In many regions, youth initiatives and platforms remain dominated by young men. For example, girls in large parts of Africa, Western Asia, and the Middle East experience youth, defined in a particular way, very briefly between the onset of puberty, marriage, and motherhood.

Whereas, in many urban settings, marriage is not a limiting factor, and poor women, even if they bear children, are considered 'youth' for a much longer time.<sup>3</sup> These differences have tremendous implications for the treatment of young women, often reinforcing the lack of investment in girls' education and economic opportunities.<sup>4</sup> With fewer such opportunities, young women make up the bulk of the informal, unpaid labor force.

Furthermore, access to education has a distinct effect on girls and young women, who make up two-thirds of the world's 1 billion illiterate individuals.

In remote schools, Internet access is the only way to facilitate online learning and access to educational content. Yet, again, adolescent girls' access to technology is limited by the societies, communities and families in which they live.

### **Addressing A Dual Challenge: Young *and* Displaced**

I cite these themes as an important backdrop to our specific discussions here today because if we are getting the youth inclusion debate wrong, then we most certainly will not manage to accurately address young people and children on the move whose conditions are even more severe and whose needs are even more acute. In other words, we are actually discussing a dual-headed challenge: the young AND displaced.

It's a troubling fact that just over half (51 per cent) of all refugees are 18 or younger.

Refugee children are at an even greater risk of exposure to the challenges I've alluded to. They are more susceptible to being drawn to violent extremism, they are more susceptible to not receiving a proper education, women and girls are prone to risks when they are on the move or in refugee camps and, of course, they are completely disenfranchised from any national political system – let alone international

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen et al., *Youth and the City in the Global South* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization, "Youth Employment: Breaking Gender Barriers for Young Women and Men," 2008, available at [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_097919.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_097919.pdf).

system – due to the “refugee” or “IDP” status they hold. This should mean that they need to be made even more of a priority.

It is even more worrying that only 50 per cent of the world’s refugee children attend primary school, only 22 per cent attend secondary school and just 1 per cent go on to university.

Many children on the move have never been to school at all or have seen their education interrupted, often for years.

Where schooling is theoretically accessible to them, refugee and asylum-seeking children and youth often cite non-recognition of educational credentials from their countries of origin, cost, language barriers and safety issues as obstacles – along with the need to work to support their families. In addition to formal education, older children seek a wide range of opportunities to learn and build their skills.

So what can be done, for young people – those on the move, and those who are not?

1. Carving a real space for participation/affirmative action:

Devise an inclusive and equitable process for nominating youth representatives at the national level on the basis of topical relevance and local knowledge.

- a. Appoint youth advisers on a regular rather than an ad hoc basis across UN agencies, funds, and the Secretariat to act as relatable and accessible liaisons between the UN and youth communities globally. Such youth advisors should be credible and connected to larger youth movements.
- b. Create leadership programmes in all UN entities for youth beyond entry level posts with the possibility of professional advancement.

2. Targeted messaging and effective communication:

- a. The system needs to be extremely selective and partner with spokespersons who are relatable to the youth demographic. We need to seek the social media influencers rather than their affiliated organization. This is an era where the individual her/himself brings authenticity rather than traditional brands.
- b. The medium is also crucial. We now live in a digital age and it is young people who have created that medium and innovated the language and platforms we use. This is the age of the global citizen.
- c. The system would best benefit from creating online space for interaction between youth and external experts. Indeed, the United Nations is often hailed for its convening power and this is precisely one other avenue worth exploring. These spaces should be a space for dialogue – not monologue i.e. not multilateral messaging in the traditional sense where a message is being disseminated – but a place where ideas can be exchanged, brainstormed and fine-tuned. It’s also worth remembering here that the so-called Generation Z individuals – those born 1995-2010 are, as one commentator has put it “more interested in solving issues than serving needs.” They are a

change-oriented generation that knows we cannot continue down the path we are on by only addressing the symptoms of social issues. As the commentator continues: “They may focus less attention on raising money for college scholarships, but instead work to create sustainable low-cost approaches to higher education. For Generation Z, social change is a career path, not an event.”

- d. Use social media to analyze the impact of UN campaigns and programs on youth refugees, and track youth sentiment and levels of engagement on proposals.
  - e. Engage youth as research partners and conduct research *with* rather than *on* young people.
  - f. Empower the powerless: at the moment, refugees are being treated like the dregs of humanity. Children are dying anonymously in the desert, and at sea. Instead of regarding these people as aliens, they must be seen as worthy human beings. The world cried for the boy who was washed out at sea – but even that did not seem to last. What is needed here is a serious mindset shift: young people should be seen as long-term assets who contribute and enrich societies rather than short-term burdens or threats.
3. Build on existing successes and think innovatively:
- a. Prevent the narrative around youth in peace and security from focusing on young people as threats or perpetrators of violence.
  - b. Develop a youth-led framework for preventing violent extremism by engaging the right groups locally, without trying to make these groups fit into a specific structure.
  - c. Include youth in creating counter-narratives against violent extremism, with a focus not only on religion but on a broader set of factors: economic factors, perceptions of injustice, as well as on positive rather than negative messaging. It’s not just that “this is bad” or “this is wrong”. It’s about appealing to a rational message, and appealing to emotional intelligence. It’s about encouraging an approach based on “knowing” and “empathizing” with the other, one that teaches that no faith should be considered a default faith in the globalized context.
  - d. Support youth leaders to develop these narratives in collaboration with faith leaders.
  - e. Create regional peacebuilding task forces to assist the work of local actors.
  - f. Learn from existing good practices in ensuring “inclusive and quality education”, beginning with the growing number of countries that give refugee children access to their national education systems, and the multiplication of scholarship opportunities for refugee students.
  - g. Devise more flexible learning environments, such as accelerated programmes for children and youth who have had their education interrupted or who have missed out on school altogether, and the development of connected or e-learning opportunities are other positive developments.
  - h. Highlight success stories: Despite the depiction of refugees as criminals or negative influencers, most are law-abiding, well-educated people seeking a better life. To highlight the contribution of

young refugees and children to their host society and amplify these success stories could help change the global narrative.

- i. Encourage a greater sense of camaraderie in refugee environments. Youth across many locations highlighted the multiple benefits of being involved in sports, including the sense of belonging that being on a team brings as well as the physical and mental benefits of exercise, a useful antidote to the growing mental health issues we see in many of today's refugee camps.

#### 4. Prevention and Thinking Ahead:

- a. We hear a lot about this word "prevention": it's a new buzzword. Ensuring that children and young people on the move have access to basic education is the best preventative measure against extremism and violence. Education is the best route to the engendering of rational, empathic individuals. Education is critical, logical thinking is critical. The High Commissioner spoke earlier about how even though the schooling in some places and the teaching wasn't up to par, it still did something; it started the process, rather than the idea of 'just focus on your basic needs', food and drink and that's all. In such a case, we may have saved the life, but we may have endangered many other lives including the person's own when they commit suicide, blow themselves up and take another 50 or 5000 people with them. We need to understand and inoculate against the persuasiveness of radical, ideological-based discourse and violence.
- b. Education for the day after: we must not lose sight that the children and youth who are currently on the move might want to – be able to – go back one day. They need to be endowed with the correct know-how and skill set. In the context of Syria - the greatest humanitarian disaster of our times - we must not lose sight that its future leaders, teachers, doctors, poets, thinkers; indeed a large bulk of its future society is currently living in camps in Turkey and Jordan; in the suburbs of Oslo or London, or worse, in the streets of Paris or Cairo. We must not forget that a day will come where we will be held responsible for who they have become and in what way they are contributing to this world of ours, this global village.

There will come a day, in 10 or 15 years - that's how short a generation has become - when we will be held accountable as global citizens for what we've done about this. So let's do our very best, let's truly know the 'other' - in this case, children and youth. Let's understand the degree of the risk or opportunity - it's our choice - that lies ahead of us. May we all be sincere and may we all be given success.

Thank you.