

Youth Between Symbolic Celebration and the consequences of Global Challenges

Youth Beyond Celebration: Investing in the Generation Shaping Tomorrow

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The United Nations celebrates International Youth Day on the twelfth of August each year, a date adopted in 1999 to highlight the issues and challenges facing young people worldwide. Yet despite this formal designation, many countries have chosen different dates to honor their youth—some linked to national occasions, others to educational or social events—resulting in a global landscape marked by inconsistency. This variation reflects the absence of a unified vision for the role of youth in shaping the future, and underscores that symbolic celebration alone is insufficient in a world undergoing rapid economic, educational, climatic, and technological transformations.



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The future is built not through celebration, but through policy, empowerment, and meaningful youth engagement.”

*H.E. Dr. Abdulla Belhaif
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Amid this diversity, a fundamental question emerges: What have we truly offered young people? And can an annual day or a forum suffice in a world reshaping itself at unprecedented speed, while youth stand at the center of these shifts without having a meaningful role in defining their own future?

Today’s young generations face a fragile global economy that offers limited opportunities. Youth unemployment exceeds 20 percent in Europe and reaches 45 percent in

South Africa, while temporary work and unstable digital economies continue to expand. Structural shifts in the global economy, coupled with the absence of clear policies for transitioning toward a sustainable economic model capable of generating new jobs, leave young

people with constrained choices and push many toward migration, unemployment, or precarious work. In this context, discussions about youth empowerment risk becoming mere slogans unless translated into economic policies that embrace digital transformation, support innovation, and restructure labor markets.

Education—presumed to be the gateway to the future—faces a widening gap between its outputs and the demands of the modern world. Rigid curricula, weak digital infrastructure, and the lack of integration between education and sustainable economic development leave millions of young people unable to compete in a world driven by technology and advanced skills. In India, for example, more than 250 million students struggle with inadequate digital infrastructure, limiting their ability to participate in the emerging global economy. Education that fails to keep pace with technological and environmental change loses its essential role in preparing a generation capable of confronting the future.

The greatest challenge threatening the future of youth, however, is climate change and environmental degradation. Rising temperatures, increasing natural disasters, and deteriorating ecosystems are reshaping human life in terms of food security, health, housing, and social stability. The world has witnessed stark examples: the 2022 floods in Pakistan affected 33 million people and destroyed thousands of schools and farms; drought in the Horn of Africa threatens the lives of more than 20 million young people dependent on agriculture and pastoralism; and seasonal wildfires in Southern Europe disrupt tourism, local economies, and youth employment. Air pollution kills more than seven million people annually, according to the World Health Organization, reducing life expectancy in some cities by three years. These figures are not abstract—they are indicators of an increasingly fragile future that demands decisive, not symbolic, action.

At the same time, digital transformation and artificial intelligence open vast opportunities for youth, yet threaten millions of traditional jobs. Scientific reports indicate that a quarter of jobs in the United States may be replaced by artificial intelligence within the next decade. The dominance of major corporations over data and the spread of misinformation create complex social and political environments that young people must navigate without adequate digital literacy. Technology is not inherently dangerous, but it becomes so when policies fail to ensure its use for the benefit of future generations.

Despite this global uncertainty, a ray of hope emerges in countries that have moved beyond symbolic celebration toward genuine investment in youth. The United Arab Emirates stands out through practical policies and active institutions, and the Emirate of Sharjah offers a particularly ambitious model through the Quarter of a Century for Creating Leaders initiative. This initiative does not treat youth as a group requiring temporary support, but as a long-term leadership project extending over twenty-five years, during which skills are built, capacities refined, and the relationship between youth, society, and the state reshaped through integrated programs in leadership, innovation, identity, and community engagement. It reflects a strategic vision that recognizes that building the future begins with building people, and that investing in youth is not

a short-term initiative but a sustained pathway that produces a generation capable of leading economic, social, and environmental transformations.

The UAE has also presented a global model in engaging youth in environmental action—not through events alone, but through training programs, project funding, and enabling youth participation in international climate negotiations. The UAE Youth Climate Program stands as a leading example, allowing young people to participate in global climate conferences, including COP28, making them part of the international dialogue on the planet's future. Young Emiratis also lead initiatives in smart agriculture, water management, and environmental innovation, positioning them at the forefront of the transition toward a sustainable economy.

These models are not mere celebrations of youth; they are investments in them. They affirm that the future can indeed be brighter when younger generations are given the tools and spaces they deserve. Youth are not simply an age group—they are a social, economic, and intellectual force capable of leading major transformations when empowered.

International Youth Day must be a moment of reflection, not a passing celebration. The future of coming generations is being shaped today, in a world facing unprecedented economic, educational, environmental, and climatic challenges. Unless global policies shift from symbolic recognition to genuine investment in youth, the risks ahead will exceed the capacity of societies to adapt. Yet the positive experiences—such as those of the UAE and Sharjah's long-term leadership initiative—demonstrate that the future is built not through celebration, but through policy, empowerment, and meaningful engagement of youth in confronting the world's greatest challenges, foremost among them climate and the environment.

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