

**Communiqué / Official Report**  
**Misk-UNDP Youth Forum**

**15 September 2017**

**Background**

The Misk-UNDP Youth Forum convened at the Plaza Hotel, New York City, on 15 September, during the week of the 2017 UN General Assembly under the theme of “Promoting Tolerance for Peace and Sustainable Development: A Dialogue with Youth”.

The Forum was co-hosted by the Misk Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Misk Foundation is the non-profit philanthropic foundation established by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, to discover, develop and empower Saudi youth to become active participants in the global knowledge economy. UNDP is the UN's global development network that works on the ground in 170 countries and territories, supporting their own solutions to development challenges and developing national and local capacities to help them achieve human development and the Sustainable Development Goals.

450 attendees from more than 50 countries, 80% of whom were under 35 years-old, attended the Forum. They took part in discussions, workshops and panels focused on extending inter-cultural understanding, developing more tolerant societies and the use of creativity and technology to tackle some of the world's most pressing problems including preventing and combatting extremism and supporting the inclusion of refugees within societies. The action-oriented platform brought together youth leaders, multi-lateral organisations, civil society and world leaders to create a path towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Continuing impact**

To maximize the Forum's practical impact, three Youth Rapporteurs were tasked with acting as official observers and will take the ideas and recommendations of the day's proceedings to a special Misk-UNDP Youth Roundtable Working Group at the United Nations in New York on Saturday 16 September 2017. The Forum resolved to take the recommendations forward to international organizations such as the UN General Assembly in due course. The Roundtable Working Group brings together youth representatives, government officials, and UN leaders and will take the ideas from the Forum Workshops directly to the UN, including the UN General Assembly, to provide a bottom-up perspective on how youth can play a central role in building more tolerant and peaceful societies, as well as achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

**Interactive workshops explored key themes**

The Youth Rapporteurs reported back to the Plenary about the discussions and recommendations agreed during three highly interactive workshops, addressing the three key themes of the event, as follows:

**1) Building Tolerant and Peaceful Societies**

Attendees to the workshop identified a key solution to be the need to have diverse members of society engaged in the civil, social, and political discourses to inspire younger generations. They

also noted the importance of volunteer engagement, connecting globally and the rise of social entrepreneurship. They further noted that civil society organizations are engaging youth within their work. Finally, they emphasized building bridges of dialogue using social media to connect globally.

Facilitator: Noëlla Richard, Global Youth Policy Specialist, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP

Speakers:

- Mourad Wahba, UN Assistant Secretary-General, UNDP Assistant Administrator, Regional Director for Arab States, United Nations Development Programme
- Fatima Zaman, Countering Violent Extremism Advocate, Kofi Annan Foundation and the Extremely Together Programme, United Kingdom
- Aashish Khullar, UN Major Group for Children and Youth
- Jonah Obajeun, Extremely Together Young Leader, Kofi Annan Foundation, Nigeria
- Noura Y. Mansouri, Visiting Scholar, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Saudi Arabia

## **2) Social Media for Bridging Divides**

Attendees noted the key challenges as being understanding and respecting other cultures, that false information may not provide accurate conceptions about a specific culture, country, or a religion and that it is difficult to verify the reliability of news. They further noted that anonymity encourages people to act as if they were no consequences and moral standards when speaking their mind, leading to the incitement of violence and the spread of extremist views. It was stated that people sometimes follow social influencers without giving thought to their credibility, knowledge, or biases. The workshop noted that truth is somewhat subjective so it is hard to ensure truth online. They added that it is important to be responsible with the online identity and that this should be linked with real-world identity.

In discussing bridging divides, the group recommended using social media as a platform for education about human diversity, culture, and beauty. They further recommended encouraging positive people to spread acceptance and tolerance. The workshop noted that social media can be used for mass mobilization for great causes - humanitarian response, peace building, solidarity, and protection. Also, that it can transform small initiatives into large social movements through fast dissemination of information. The group called for accountability of tech companies in being more aware of users' posts.

Facilitator: Lakshitha Saji Prelis, Director, Children & Youth Programs, Search for Common Ground, Sri Lanka/USA

Speakers:

- Adwa Aldakheel, Business Woman, Professional Stock Trader, Aerobatic Pilot & Entrepreneur, Saudi Arabia
- Eric Li, Co-Founder & President, We Care Act, USA
- Abdullah Naif, Founder, Saudis for Peace, Saudi Arabia

## **3) Inclusion of Refugees**

The workshop assessed the biggest challenge as being access to services and basic human needs - healthcare, employment, education, legal, and services for those with disabilities. It added that

another factor is a feeling of exclusion and marginalization – for example being judged by locals due to stereotypes or labelled as a refugee instead of as a person with a story. Additional issues discussed were family separation, displacement, tracing and reunification, difficulty transferring professional credentials, language barriers, mental health and psycho-social well-being as well as uncertainty about the future - status, citizenship, residence, struggle with identity "stuck in limbo".

The workshop concluded that the following can help ensure that refugees thrive:

- Reduce stigma and remove harmful labels
- Fostering opportunities for collaborations - connections between refugees and host communities, peer mentoring between families, and opportunities for refugees to volunteer in the community
- Use new technologies for inclusion - accredited mobile education, mobile health that's easily accessible and free, and using social media to change the narrative
- Long term support for psycho-social needs via support groups
- Integration into workforce with private enterprises through tax incentives.

Facilitator: Lara Setrakian, Co-Founder & CEO, News Deeply, USA

Speakers:

- Melissa Fleming, Head of Communications and Public Information, UNHCR
- Ahmed Badr, Founder, Narratio, Iraq
- Jem Stein, Founder & Director, The Bike Project, United Kingdom
- Zaineb Abdulla, Vice President, Deaf Planet Soul, USA
- Koang Doluony, Executive Director & Founder, Omaha Talons, South Sudan

### **Keynote speakers**

Misk Foundation Senior Adviser, Fahd Hamidaddin, emphasized the importance of global citizenship at a time of environmental, social, political and economic challenges and that Misk believes in the entrepreneurial spirit of innovation among young people. He noted the Misk Foundation's mission to empower young people in Saudi Arabia, in the Arab world and internationally and Misk's pride in partnering with UNDP for this important Forum.

H.E. Abdallah Y. Al-Mouallimi, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations spoke about how the Sustainable Development Goals are essential reading for every young man and woman. He spoke about the importance of Vision 2030 within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as it moves from dependence on a commodity and develops a society that is more cohesive in its approach to social and cultural development issues. He noted that young people in Saudi Arabia are better informed, better educated and better connected throughout the world than ever before and paid special tribute to the young women of his country, who represent 60% of the college population. He noted that these young women are going to come into the workplace and will make a dramatic difference to the way Saudi Arabia develops. He noted that the Forum was a particularly opportune moment to come together to discuss tolerance, peace and sustainable development.

Officials from UN organizations set out ideas on the key themes. Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, noted that we have a responsibility to respond to narratives and change negative stories about people. She stated that no one is born evil and that we should use our environment and the tools at our disposal for good. She further asserted the importance of

incorporating youth as part of the decision-making process, changing the traditional way of interacting so that the older person has to adapt.

Welcoming the opportunity to partner with Misk, UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner stated that never in the history of humanity has there been so many opportunities to push the frontiers of knowledge. He noted that the UNDP is increasingly invested in ways to connect with young people, enabling them to see possibilities and to achieve the ambition that no one will be left behind, which forms part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He urged young people to pick one Sustainable Development Goal and apply it in their communities.

Mourad Wahba, UN Assistant Secretary-General, UNDP Assistant Administrator, Regional Director for Arab States, United Nations Development Programme, spoke of the responsibility to challenge negative narratives about people, use the environment and the tools at our disposal for good and incorporate youth into the decision-making process so that older decision-makers adapt.

Former US Secretary of State, Madeleine K. Albright, praised the holding of the Forum and noted that every generation has its challenges. She emphasized two megatrends that present opportunities but also have downsides. The first megatrend is globalisation, the downside of which is that people do not know where they belong and who they really are. Patriotism is a very positive aspect, but nationalism is dangerous and hyper-nationalism very dangerous. Dr. Albright noted the second megatrend as technology which has helped humanity but has completely disaggregated people's voices. She reflected that in the modern media people must remember to look up information from multiple sources and noted that in the past people would listen to the news and a sense of the common view would develop. She noted that now everybody must do their own filtering using multiple sources, despite the most outrageous people often receiving the most attention.

Addressing how cities can help build a more peaceful, prosperous and tolerant world, Michael R. Bloomberg, Founder of Bloomberg LP and Bloomberg Philanthropies and three-term Mayor of the City of New York noted that cities have always promoted the kinds of interactions that nurture tolerance. He asserted that youth are often called the millennials but said that he regards them as the "metropolitan generation". He stated that cities have always promoted sustainable development and they are homes to the most promising solutions. As more and more cities are working together, cities will continue to grow, and the metropolitan generation will have to lead the way. He noted the work of Bloomberg Philanthropies with the Misk Foundation on knowledge transfer.

## **Key topics**

Addressing the theme of **reconciliation in the face of terrorism**, Kowthar Alarbash, a Saudi Arabian writer, spoke movingly of her son dying while attempting to stop a terrorist attack. She said that while she was mourning she had written a letter of condolences to the mother of her son's murderer and described "revenge, hate and savagery" as the "children of extremism," demanding that this stop.

During a panel addressing **how to prevent violent extremism**, Nicola Benyahia, a Counsellor & Founder of the Families for Life charity, whose son was radicalized by ISIS, proposed family centres where parents can go for advice if their child is being radicalised without fear of stigmatisation. Hajer Sharief, Co-Founder, Together We Build It, urged the Forum to focus on

promoting positives rather than talking about negatives. She further asserted that the focus must be communicating global resolutions to youth people and enabling them to communicate back to policy-makers. Arizza Ann S. Nocum, Overall Head, KRIS Library, set out the work done in her organization's libraries, in which "peace zones" are created where people from differing backgrounds can interact and receive the tools and education they need to avoid extremism. Steven Siquera, Deputy Director of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, noted that there is not one single cause of violent extremism and that there is a mix of societal factors that intersect with a wide range of triggers. He suggested that we need to find better alternative messages and alternative paths for young people, given that for each young person who turns to violence, there are thousands of young people whose legitimate passions are not given the opportunities to flourish.

Addressing a panel on **how leaders can empower the next generation to create tolerant and peaceful societies**, Laura Londén, Deputy Executive Director (Management) & Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations Population Fund, noted that young people should not be referred to as "young leaders" but as "leaders who happen to be young". She said that the "youth bulge" is not a challenge to be tackled, but is an opportunity that can be harnessed if young people have opportunities. She noted that for societal reasons there is often an intergenerational cycle of impoverishment due to lack of education which has a negative impact on many societies.

Lujain AlUbaid, Co-Founder & CEO, Tasamy for Social Entrepreneurship, from Saudi Arabia, noted the importance of active mentorship and giving young people role models, particularly from their own communities rather than foreign countries. She emphasized the importance of leadership, particularly for a generation that expects lots to be done for it. Muna AbuSulayman, Philanthropist and Co-host of Kalam Nawa'em at MBC, commented that in the Middle East, access to knowledge has been severely curtailed due to the quality of education that young people receive. She stated that 95% of the Arab world does not speak English and pointed to work that Misk is doing to expand databases of knowledge into Arabic. Brandee McHale, President of the Citi Foundation & Director of Corporate Citizenship at Citi stated that people in the social development sphere and policy makers must learn from the private sector concept of "failing fast". She suggested that organisations must rethink their current recruitment emphasis on credentials in talent pipelines and instead look for people with the most potential, such as refugees.

Addressing the **power of creativity**, Maher Nasser, Director, Outreach Division, UN Department of Public Information, highlighted that beneath negative headlines are hundreds of positive stories of people overcoming intolerance. He noted that art and music do not require translation as they are a universal language. Mishaal Ashemimry, Aerospace Engineer & Founder, Mishaal Aerospace, Saudi Arabia, asserted that the world has no choice but to come together and noted that her own field of engineering would benefit if people from different countries truly collaborated thereby helping the advancement of science, technology and humanity reach a new level. Artist Ahmed Mater, Director of the Misk Art Institute, Saudi Arabia, stated that creativity is central, that science follows imagination and it should not be a sideshow. He noted that without imagination no one will build the great societies, and that without the mutual understanding and pluralism within cultural values, cities can create ghettos. Neelofa, Actress & Media Personality, Founder & Managing Director, NH Prima International Sdn Bhd, of Malaysia, noted the importance of celebrating multiculturalism and spreading positive values in an open environment.

Ahmed Badr, originally from Iraq, and Mohamad Hafez, originally from Syria, discussed their joint art project, "UNPACKED: Refugee Baggage". Ahmed Badr noted art's ability to speak when words fail. Mohamad Hafez stated that the shortest distance between two people, is the story and that in

telling the stories of refugees, by humanizing refugees, he wants art to “do the speaking”, giving a “voice to the voiceless”.

Bjørn Ihler, an Extremely Together Young Leader, Kofi Annan Foundation, Norway, spoke of surviving the 2011 massacres on the island of Utøya. He noted that the biggest problem that the world faces is “bubbles”. He stated that he lives in a bubble, speaks to people in the same bubble and asserted that other people living in different bubbles have a different understanding of the world. He is seeking to “burst” such bubbles.

**ENDS**