

# UNLOCKING the POWER of the NEXT GENERATION to DELIVER the SDG 16+ AGENDA

Cohort 2030 Initiative Meeting Summary ▶ The Bellagio Center, Italy

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Convening partners ▶

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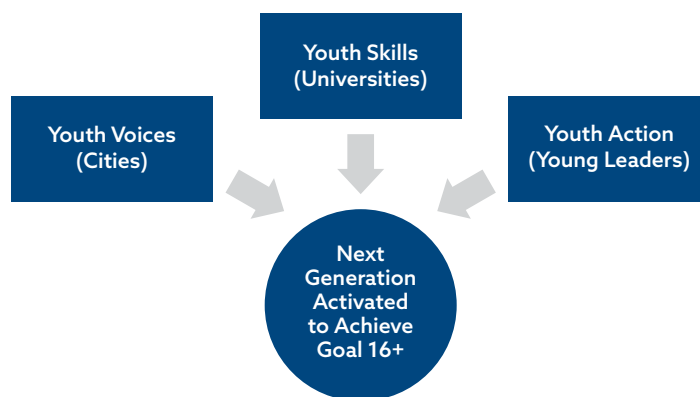
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## OVERVIEW

In 2015, global leaders representing 193 United Nations member states agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that set bold targets to end poverty, improve health and education, combat climate change, and more by 2030. Of these, SDG 16 prioritizes “promot[ing] peaceful and inclusive societies...provid[ing] access to justice for all and build[ing] effective, accountable and inclusive institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

SDG 16 should not be viewed in isolation; at least 7 other goals and multiple targets and indicators pursue related or identical issues. For example, creating peaceful societies requires eliminating violence against women and girls (5.2), creating safe public spaces (11.7), and combating human trafficking (8.7). For this reason, the term SDG 16+ emerged to reflect a clustered approach to achieving more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.<sup>2</sup>

### The Cohort 2030 Initiative: A place-based approach with young people at the center



What if today’s youth—the largest youth generation in history—were to mobilize around advancing SDG 16+? And what if universities and city governments were to engage and support youth in upholding values such as equity and inclusion that young people care deeply about? The Cohort 2030 initiative, designed by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) in collaboration with Sarah Mendelson from Carnegie Mellon University, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation, seeks these outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://medium.com/sdg16plus>



From July 23-25, 2019, the Cohort 2030 initiative convened 20 representatives of city governments, universities, foundations, NGOs, and youth-led organizations from 9 countries to explore what a place-based approach to engaging the energy and idealism of youth around SDG 16+ could look like.

Held at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy, the meeting built on ideas generated at a similar event in 2018 attended by 18 young adult leaders from around the globe—all driving change related to the SDGs. The decision to focus the Cohort 2030 initiative on the SDG 16+ agenda emerged from multiple consultations and analysis, including input from these youth, and the observation that among the SDGs, this cluster of goals was receiving much less attention.

This report highlights a number of effective practices shared at the 2019 conference, along with recommendations from participants on how to build the initiative's place-based approach.

## WHY YOUTH, WHY NOW?

Today's youth are already playing essential roles in achieving the 2030 Goals and are uniquely suited to advance SDG 16+. Young people born after 1980, what we refer to as "Cohort 2030," are distinct from other generations in a number of ways including "native fluency in technology that could be deployed to solve societal problems; attitudes favoring diversity, gender, and LGBT rights; intolerance of corruption and inequality; concern about climate change; and a strong preference for ethically sourced products."<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, today's youth express frustration with formal institutions about which they feel powerless to influence. As Ashok Regmi, IYF Director of Social Innovation, posed to conference participants: "What do you do with a generation that has a certain set of values but can't interact with the very systems that are meant to support their needs?"

This lack of faith among youth in formal institutions—and their concern about escalating inequality—was reflected in IYF's 2016 *Global Millennial Viewpoints Survey* of 7,600 youth in 30 countries:

- » 67% of surveyed youth felt government didn't care about their wants and needs;
- » 81% felt corruption was a major problem in their country;
- » 94% felt everyone should have equal rights regardless of color, race, gender, age, or religion;
- » 91% felt the economic divide between rich and poor was too wide.

At the same time, youth expressed a strong desire to contribute to their communities: 84% believed they had an obligation to help those less fortunate.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://medium.com/sdg16plus/young-people-the-sustainable-development-goals-and-the-liberal-world-order-what-is-to-be-done-fc648e3b2d21>

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.iyfnet.org/library/2016-global-millennial-viewpoints-survey>

**"What do you do with a generation that has a certain set of values but can't interact with the very systems that are meant to support their needs?"**

—Ashok Regmi, International Youth Foundation



What factors move youth from caring about a social issue to getting actively involved? When asked what motivated them to take action, 39% of the 2,100 young social entrepreneurs applying to IYF's global YouthActionNet program in 2017-18 responded being personally impacted by a social challenge in their family/community; 25% reported being exposed to a social issue through a volunteer opportunity; and 21% said they were influenced through knowledge gained at their school/university. The remainder cited having a role model (4%), inspiration from faith/religion (4%), and the influence of family/peers (7%).

At the heart of the Cohort 2030 initiative is helping universities and municipal governments engage and support youth in realizing their values for a more peaceful, just, and equitable world.



**"SquashSmarts uses sports to create safe spaces. Sports becomes the entry point for youth to grow in other ways."**

*—Nabilla Ariffin, SquashSmarts*

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The SDGs offer a framework—and a common language—for uniting diverse communities around shared goals, prompting a growing number of cities to embrace the SDGs in their planning and reporting around sustainable development.<sup>5</sup>

Summarized below are brief descriptions of how conference participants—including youth, municipal and university leaders, and technology experts—are advancing the SDG 16+ agenda in their work. Through a place-based approach, the Cohort 2030 initiative seeks to create Communities of Practice (CoP) aimed at adapting and scaling what works in creating more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

### » Catalyzing Young Changemakers

Around the globe, dedicated young leaders are pioneering innovative solutions to urgent local challenges. Many use youth-friendly approaches—sports, art, technology—to engage their peers. At Bellagio, three young leaders, working in Colombia, Iraq, and the United States, shared their efforts to build more peaceful and inclusive societies. Ultimately, Cohort 2030 seeks to strengthen and connect such youth-led initiatives, while inspiring more young people to lead positive change.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/07/09/a-handbook-to-help-cities-report-local-progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

**"Art reminds us of what we can create together."**

*—Leonardo Párraga, BogotArt Foundation*

### SquashSmarts, Inc., USA

Nabilla Ariffin grew up playing competitive squash in Malaysia. Now, as Community Impact Director of SquashSmarts, she applies her passion for the game to improving the lives of Philadelphia's underserved youth. An out-of-school program, SquashSmarts provides academic support, leadership skill-building, athletics, and workforce development to young people from ages 7 to 17. "SquashSmarts uses sports to create safe spaces," said Ariffin. "Sports becomes the entry point for youth to grow in other ways."

### Rasan Organization, Iraq

In his role as Co-founder and Deputy Director of the Rasan Organization, Ayaz Kado works to improve the lives of women, youth, and the LGBTQ community in Iraq. Among its activities, Rasan provides services to victims of gender-based violence, supports economic empowerment projects for women, and works with community leaders and youth to advance LGBTQ rights. As part of its advocacy work, Rasan's art program produces theater, murals, and films on gender equality.

### BogotArt Foundation, Colombia

"Art reminds us of what we can create together," said Leonardo Párraga, Co-founder of the BogotArt Foundation in Colombia. BogotArt uses art to encourage marginalized communities to "imagine a new reality." Through large-scale mural projects, for example, BogotArt mobilizes citizens to capture their visions of a sustainable future. Most recently, Párraga helped spearhead a letter writing campaign, *Cartas por la Reconciliación* (Letters for Reconciliation), with a message of peace. With ex-combatants poised to reintegrate into Colombian society, the campaign helped foster communication—and empathy—among youth on opposing sides of the conflict. "It was

**"The SDGs are universal; they apply to everyone and every country. Mayors see the value add of this agenda... because they like having a common framework with which to engage their peers."**

*—Ambassador Sarah Mendelson, Carnegie Mellon University*

an opportunity to change the narrative from being stuck in the past to being able to define the country we want to live in," he said.

## » Mobilizing Municipalities

The Bellagio convening highlighted innovative efforts led by city officials to mobilize citizens in Buenos Aires, London, New York, and Orlando around the SDGs, and particularly in achieving greater social equity. "The SDGs are universal; they apply to everyone and every country," said Ambassador Sarah Mendelson, Professor, Carnegie Mellon University. "Mayors see the value add of this agenda in many parts of the world because they like having a common framework with which to engage their peers."

### New York

Soon after the international community committed to the SDGs in 2015, the New York City Mayor's Office adopted the goals as a framework to discuss and share its *OneNYC strategy* for sustainable development. OneNYC is rooted in the SDG approach of "no one left behind" with equity as a guiding principle. In 2018, the City took the added step of conducting the first Voluntary Local Review (VLR) at the municipal level, mirroring the reporting process required by UN member states. Since then, other cities have followed suit.

"We don't see the SDGs as something new to implement but as a common language to have global conversations about, and to learn from other stakeholders," said Alexandra Hiniker, Program Director for Global Vision/Urban Action for the City of New York, in sharing the city's comprehensive approach.



### London

While the SDGs are not part of "daily conversation" within London's City Hall, "fostering just and inclusive communities is inherent in our work," said Lea Kreitzman, Director of External and International Affairs for the Mayor of London. To tackle an increase in hate crimes and non-violent extremism, the Mayor's office launched the "*London is Open*" campaign in 2016. Videos produced for the campaign seek to nurture a sense of civic identity and inclusion and target a young audience, with over six million views to date.

The City also facilitates *several programs* aimed at engaging youth voices. One of these, a *Peer Outreach Workers* group, comprises 30 youth, ages 15 to 25, who are "commissioned by the Mayor to engage, inspire, and gather the opinions of other young people in the capital." Another is *Talk London*, an online platform where 45,000 citizens to date have shared their views on housing, the environment, safety, jobs, and more.

**"Fostering just and inclusive communities is inherent in our work."**

—Lea Kreitzman, Mayor's Office, London

## Orlando

"When most people think of Orlando, they think of Disney World," said Chris Castro, the City's Director of Sustainability and Resilience. "What they don't know is the Mayor's commitment to become the most environmentally-friendly, socially-inclusive, and economically-vibrant city in the Southeast United States." Orlando began integrating the SDGs into its 2018 Community Action Plan, creating 100 key performance indicators that align with the Global Goals.

To engage community voices, the City partnered with *Ideas for Us*, a local nonprofit with global reach, to create an Orlando IDEAS Hive. The Hive invites citizens representing diverse disciplines and ages to monthly "Think + Do Tanks" to generate concrete ideas for community action. Each event aligns with a specific SDG and features an expert presentation, followed by an action project. One citizen-led innovation, for example, tackled food insecurity through edible landscaping.



## Buenos Aires

Like New York, the City of Buenos Aires aligned its development agenda with the SDGs, creating 59 targets and 180 indicators around 16 of the Global Goals. Through a comprehensive management platform, it now tracks over 1,300 initiatives, practices, and policies. In 2019, the City became the first in Latin America to conduct a Voluntary Local Review.

"Buenos Aires wants to be a more integrated city that promotes the talents of the community, strengthens climate action, and promotes gender equality," said the City's Under Secretary for Strategic Management and Institutional Quality Alvero Herrero. SDG 16+ is seen as a facilitator for achieving other goals, he added, with the City adopting new measures related to open government, accountability, and citizen participation. Youth engagement is also viewed as critical. Through the "My Vote, My Choice" initiative, youth learn about their rights and responsibilities as first time voters. In 2018, more than 165,000 young people participated.

The SDG 16+ agenda is also clearly visible in the work of the Office of the Federal Public Defender. "We're making rights more accessible to people," said Public Defender Nicolas Laino. "The more people know about social problems, the easier it is to solve them." The Office is currently running two public campaigns: one educates children in schools about their rights, while the other promotes the role of public defenders.

**"As we train and expose students to questions related to injustice, the end game is peace and nonviolent conflict resolution. It's not just an end, it's the way."**

*—Dr. Frederick Knight, Morehouse College*

## » Engaging Universities

Universities are essential to achieving the Cohort 2030 initiative's vision of equipping students with the knowledge and skills to build more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. The Bellagio convening brought together university leaders from Ghana, South Africa, and the United States to share best practices in preparing and empowering students as social justice advocates and change leaders whether they aspire to be lawyers, accountants, or medical professionals.

### **Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), Pittsburgh, USA**

"We are actively exploring the creation of a university-wide initiative that would commit us to issue a Voluntary University Review of the SDGs," said Professor Sarah Mendelson. She explained that the initiative's structure (not yet adopted at the Bellagio convening but announced on September 9), included the Provost as lead, supported by a steering committee on which she sits, and a larger advisory council composed of students (including a Bellagio participant), staff, and faculty. Mendelson explained that CMU is focused on raising awareness of the SDGs and that efforts to achieve sustainability also encompass the SDG 16+ agenda. Finally, she discussed her engagement with officials from the City of Pittsburgh on the SDGs (leading to the Mayor's announcement on October 4 that the city is aligning its plans with the Global Goals).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.bizjournals.com/pittsburgh/news/2019/10/04/mayor-peduto-pittsburgh-will-adopt-un-sustainable.html>

### **Spelman College, Atlanta, USA**

"We're trying to build better societies, and education is the way," said Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence, who founded and directs the *Social Justice Program* at Spelman College in Atlanta. The program is a reflection of the university's motto "A Choice to Change the World" and equips students with an understanding of how to effect change at the social, political, and policy levels. Annually, ten rising juniors are selected as Social Justice Fellows, who receive training in social justice advocacy and policy implementation. Fellows also participate in book discussions, colloquia, and social project design activities.

### **Morehouse College, Atlanta, USA**

"We feel a responsibility to not just train and educate our students but to have a bigger impact," said Dr. Frederick Knight, who directs the Institute for Research, Civic Engagement, and Policy at the Andrew Young Center for Global Leadership at Morehouse College in Atlanta. Equipping men to lead lives of leadership and service is integral to Morehouse's mission. Required courses such as "Politics and Protest" and "Disability and Race" prepare students to carry out capstone projects around leadership and social justice. Just as important is equipping students with tools to nurture peace within themselves as a foundation for fostering greater peace in society at large. "As we train and expose students to questions related to injustice, the end game is peace and nonviolent conflict resolution," said Knight. "It's not just an end, it's the way."





### Ashesi University, Accra, Ghana

Started in a rented home in 2002, Ashesi University has grown into one of the most respected institutions of higher learning in Africa, with 1,000 students hailing from 20 countries across the continent. Its goal: to achieve nothing less than “an African renaissance driven by a new generation of ethical, entrepreneurial leaders.”

“What makes leadership different at Ashesi is the inclusion of ethics and entrepreneurship,” said Abdul Mahdi, the University’s Dean of Students and Community Affairs. With students growing increasingly frustrated at pervasive corruption within political and economic systems, in 2008, they led the charge for a university-wide Honor Code. First year students must now achieve consensus on whether they will abide by the code, which stipulates that they will not cheat on exams or allow others to cheat.

Experiential learning and community service are integral to education at Ashesi. “When you learn something in the classroom—and there’s a platform for you to practice it—you own it,” said Mahdi.

**“When you learn something in the classroom—and there’s a platform for you to practice it—you own it.”**

—Abdul Mahdi, Ashesi University

### University of Pretoria, South Africa

How do you actively engage students in learning about human rights? One approach originated with the Moot Courts Competition in South Africa. Through the competition, students engage in a simulation of a court case. “It’s a role play,” explained Christof Heyns, Professor of Human Rights at the University of Pretoria. “It’s all about experiential learning.”

Since its inception in 1992, 845 teams from 125 universities in 45 African countries have participated in the competition, with similar programs operating in other parts of the world. A modified version is also now being implemented at the secondary school level, with university students serving as mentors. “There’s an element to the gaming part of it that captivates young people’s imaginations,” said Heyns. Part of what makes the mock courts effective at teaching human rights, he added, is that students have to argue both sides—and really understand divergent perspectives within a conflict.

The University of Pretoria has also emerged as a significant research partner in documenting the country’s progress toward the SDGs, and in 2018, it helped to coordinate South Africa’s first Voluntary National Review. “We realized we could work with policymakers to connect research [being done at the university] with policy,” said Dr. Thomas Probert, the University’s Head of Research of Freedom from Violence.

**"Digital tools can reinforce inequality and social gaps... Our mandate is to develop digital products and services for those that don't have the access."**

*—Eduardo Clark Dobarganes, Government of Mexico City*

## » Leveraging Technology

Technology has a vital role to play in the Cohort 2030 initiative—from engaging youth voices in policymaking to connecting young leaders who are mobilizing around SDG 16+. The Bellagio convening highlighted effective uses of technology to capture public opinion, monitor human rights abuses, and create safe virtual spaces where youth can connect and share.

Eduardo Clark Dobarganes serves as Director General of Technology and Intelligence for the Government of Mexico City and is tasked with delivering on the Mayor's promise to put "Mexico City first in accountability." Clark creates technological solutions that inform and enable citizens to interact with government—and streamline communication between government agencies. One recent initiative provides the public with access to digital justice channels so they can track cases involving family members.

"Digital tools can reinforce inequality and social gaps if you're not careful," he cautioned. "Our mandate is to develop digital products and services for those that don't have the access more affluent people do."

Anjali Mazumder, Lead on AI and Justice & Human Rights for the Alan Turing Institute in the UK described its deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor human rights abuses. She discussed how AI is being used to identify both the victims and perpetrators of modern slavery, while informing efforts to predict and prevent human rights abuses.



Headquartered in the Netherlands, [RNW Media](#) is a leader in creating digital communities for social change. It uses online media to provide young people with access to information, encourage their active participation, and ensure their voices are heard with the goal of making their societies more inclusive. Its Citizen's Voice (CV) program operates in restrictive settings (e.g., Burundi, China, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Yemen) to create youth-led media platforms and capture youth voices. Through CV, freedom of association and communication are transferred to the digital space, creating what is in effect a new town square. "It's not just about technology, it's about meeting young people where they are," said CV Program Manager Nigel Pedlingham. Inclusion stands at the heart of everything CV does, including building inclusive editorial teams, content, and communities.

## THE WAY FORWARD

In discussing practical steps for implementing the Cohort 2030 initiative at the local level, Bellagio participants offered the following recommendations:

### 1. Prioritize applied learning and equip students to influence formal systems

To prepare youth for their role as global citizens, learning needs to extend beyond the classroom. While experiential learning is standard practice in most public policy Masters programs, this approach could usefully extend to undergraduate education as well. Students benefit from access to experiential, project-based learning that exposes them to injustice and inequities in communities and challenges them to think through or develop solutions.

That said, professors focused on delivering academic content are not always prepared—or have the time—to create experiential learning activities, said one attendee. The same goes for students who are under pressure to perform according to traditional academic standards. “It’s going to require investment and training for experiential education to be institutionalized,” said Morehouse College’s Frederick Knight. Others emphasized the need to train young people in advocacy skills and how to constructively engage public officials on urgent policy matters.

### 2. Leverage the SDGs as an advocacy tool for equity and inclusion

The growing international consensus around the 2030 Goals offers an unparalleled opportunity for cities, universities, youth, and community groups to become part of an urgent, time-bound global mandate rooted in local contexts. The SDG 16+ agenda offers a valuable tool for generating interest among funders and exerting pressure on public officials to align their priorities accordingly. The Cohort 2030 initiative benefits from leveraging the unifying power of the SDGs in advancing the values of equity and inclusion.

### 3. Make the Global Goals relatable through elevating local issues and human interest stories

The language used by the UN to describe the Global Goals poses a barrier to igniting the energy and passion of youth. “How do you get the young generation excited about what is essentially a wonky framework?” asked Alexandra Hiniker. She and others urged that the Cohort 2030 initiative prioritize issues of local importance (e.g., gun safety, combating hate speech), while driving progress toward the 2030 Goals. Moreover, the larger issue of how populations understand “sustainability” needs to be addressed. This agenda is not just about the environment and climate, emphasized Mendelson, pointing to the challenge of messaging the Goals’ complexity and interrelatedness.

### 4. Avoid politicization of issues

Participants cautioned against getting too aligned with a political party or administration in advancing solutions related to the SDG 16+ agenda given the risk of making inroads with one administration only to have progress thwarted by a successor. The agenda is and needs to be viewed as non-partisan, urged Mendelson. Yet this framing is easier said than done. Rooting the initiative within universities was seen as one way to avoid political minefields.

### 5. Maximize the power of technology

Critical to the success of the Cohort 2030 initiative will be using technology to capture youth voices, survey young people about their passion points related to SDGs, and build online communities where youth can safely express their views and collaborate. As the Cohort 2030 initiative builds Communities of Practice, technology will also play a vital role in the sharing of key lessons and tools.





## 6. Build local ownership

"This is a meta-concept that needs to be locally-driven," emphasized IYF President and CEO Susan Reichle. But what does local ownership look like? It depends on the context. In Africa, participants underscored youth distrust of government, recommending that the Cohort 2030 concept be introduced first through respected universities that, in turn, can connect with trusted government officials. By contrast, Latin American representatives suggested a city-led approach would likely be most effective in the region. In determining the best direction for local implementation, participants stressed the importance of conducting a thorough landscape analysis in prospective locations and to form strategic partnerships early-on with those local organizations committed to advancing the SDG 16+ agenda.

## NEXT STEPS

Based on input from the conference participants, the Cohort 2030 initiative is being refined in dialogue with potential place-based partners. Next steps include conducting landscape analyses and developing locally-based Steering Committees within prospective cities. Conversations are also ongoing with like-minded organizations and funders to support implementation of the initiative's next phase.

**"This is a meta-concept that needs to be locally-driven."**

*—Susan Reichle, International Youth Foundation*



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