



US Foreign Policy's Youth Agenda

by Maria Otero, Former Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights,
US Department of State



Early on in her tenure, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton identified youth issues as an urgent priority. Before the Arab Spring, she recognized the importance of empowering today's young people as drivers of social and economic progress and understood how quickly the volatile mix of rising expectations and unmet needs can shift the balance of power across entire regions.

That early vision has led to far reaching changes within the State Department that have sparked innovative strategies to place the concerns and aspirations of youth at the top of the global agenda. I participated in early discussions around how to shape the State Department's first ever youth policy, and am pleased to see the many ways in which this framework is guiding our efforts. For the first time, we are directly and intentionally engaging young people in a meaningful dialogue to ensure their creativity and entrepreneurial mindset can inform our policies and programs. We are finding new ways to bring the much-needed assets of young people to the table, while also building the capacity of our embassies to expand their youth outreach.

For example, in December of 2012, I joined Secretary Clinton in Dublin, Ireland to mark the establishment of our 50th youth council. These youth councils, supported by our embassies and consulates, are concrete demonstrations of how young people are being engaged as we shape our efforts in each country. The State Department acknowledges that young people must help solve the challenges they and their communities face. Through the honest dialogue they foster, these youth councils are one way to help them do so.

We are also placing far greater emphasis on improving the economic prospects of today's youth. The Arab Spring revolutions underscored the urgent need for governments—including our own—to better respond to the enormous pent up frustrations of those who simply want to earn a decent living. This is an issue close to my heart, as much of my career was in microfinance. I have seen how young people can become disillusioned and inactive when they lack the skills, opportunities and networks to find success in the marketplace. USAID, our partner in expanding employment and

civic engagement opportunities, recently issued its own youth in development policy that further strengthens this focus on economic opportunity as a critical element of holistic, integrated youth empowerment.

Providing greater protection and security for young people is another significant priority. We've learned that when security issues do arise—be it counter-terrorism, human trafficking, ethnic or religious violence, human rights abuses—young people are very often at the very center of those conflicts. Now, when we are helping countries to protect their citizens overall, we work to ensure they are incorporating youth-related concerns into those efforts. As countries engage in elections, for example, we need to ask: are young people being shut out of the electoral process? How can we make sure they have a voice in emerging democracies?

To sustain these new strategies, Secretary Clinton established the Office of Global Youth Issues to move this youth agenda forward and coordinate activities with our embassies. Zeenat Rahman, the Secretary's Special Adviser on Global Youth Issues, is adding new energy to our efforts.

This past October, for example, the State Department joined leading global companies and NGOs in launching the Youth Livelihoods Alliance (YLA), which seeks to identify, promote, and further develop innovative solutions to the youth unemployment crisis. We understand the power of multi-sector alliances to help extend our diplomatic reach beyond the traditional corridors of power. To have a real impact on any global challenge, we must mobilize the resources, knowledge and innovation that only the private sector and civil society can provide. YLA offers us such an opportunity.

With youth populations swelling and young people driving global events in unprecedented ways, we cannot afford to adapt slowly to this new landscape. At the State Department, we've launched an historic effort to elevate young people's issues on the world stage and implement policies that empower them as productive citizens and global change makers. This is no easy task. But if living in a more stable and peaceful world is a goal we all share—then there is surely no higher priority. **Y**