

# Voices Of Resilience: Delivering Inclusive Climate Action

The 2025 Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum







# Zayed Sustainability Prize

## A Global Call For Transformative Solutions

The Zayed Sustainability Prize, a tribute to the visionary legacy of the UAE's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, stands as a beacon of hope and progress for sustainable development. This prestigious award honours and empowers those who are driving transformative change across the categories of Health, Food, Energy, Water, Climate Action, and Global High Schools.

Each year, the Prize rewards organisations and high schools for their groundbreaking solutions, fostering innovation on global challenges. Over the past 17 years, through its 128 winners, the Prize has positively impacted over 400 million lives worldwide. By recognising these innovators, the Zayed Sustainability Prize inspires countless others to amplify their efforts, creating a positive ripple effect.





# Contents

06	<b>Voices Of Resilience</b> <b>Delivering Inclusive Climate Action</b>	20	<b>Charting Pathways For Economic Growth</b>
08	<b>Keynote</b> Senator Dr. Joyelle Clarke, Minister Of Sustainable Development, Environment, Climate Action & Constituency Empowerment, St. Kitts & Nevis	24	<b>Voices From The Ground</b> Dr. Ricardo Affonso Ferreira, Co-Founder, Expedicionários Da Saúde (Eds)
10	<b>Building A Resilient Future Together</b>	28	<b>Data For Sustainability And Systemic Change</b>
16	<b>Inclusive Philanthropy For Empowered Communities</b>	32	<b>The Power Of Youth In Action</b>





# Voices Of Resilience

## Delivering Inclusive Climate Action

Across the Global South, communities on the front lines of climate change require bold solutions and sustained collaboration to build resilience. The Zayed Sustainability Prize has long championed this cause, providing funding that empowers grassroots solutions and amplifies local innovation.

Beyond financial support, the Prize has fostered another essential ingredient: collaboration. Climate resilience is not just about technology and investment—it requires the engagement of local voices, youth, and marginalised and Indigenous communities to ensure that solutions are context-driven and sustainable. Strengthening these connections is key to delivering meaningful, long-term climate action.

The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum served as a key platform for advancing global dialogue on innovative climate technologies and sustainable solutions.

The Forum placed a special emphasis on the critical role of local and youth voices, particularly from the Global South, in shaping resilient responses to climate challenges.

The discussions convened 15 exceptional sustainability leaders to underscore the need for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and scalable action, with a spotlight on practical solutions that are already driving transformations at scale.

This report captures the insights and recommendations shared during the Forum and offers inspiration and pragmatic pathways for policymakers, businesses and civil society to strengthen climate action and improve the resilience of those most affected by the climate crisis.





“

It could be a future of burnt homes, flooded rooms, or a future where the sun shines brightly on the children of tomorrow if we choose to build resilience today, here, and now, together.

– Dr. Joyelle Clarke

”



## Keynote

The Zayed Sustainability Prize Forum opened with a keynote from Hon. Senator Dr. Joyelle Clarke, Minister of Sustainable Development, Environment, Climate Action & Constituency Empowerment of St. Kitts & Nevis. Dr. Clarke delivered a compelling call to the global community to leverage inspirational platforms such as the Zayed Sustainability Prize to explore emerging solutions, embrace innovative choices, and unlock new opportunities for sustainable progress.

Dr. Clarke stressed that the current moment needs more than mere incremental nudges to reignite the march for climate action, climate justice, and solidarity with youth energy.

She shared the commitment of St. Kitts & Nevis to long-term sustainability, with a focus on future-proofing their economy and society for generations to come. Efforts include cross-sectoral policies and initiatives led by multi-ministry coordination, robust regulations, green finance and modern technologies.

Dr. Clarke reminded the audience of their responsibility as leaders and urged them to embrace a new toolbox to co-create opportunities for justice and solidarity.

She emphasised the critical role of youth and women in climate action and decision-making processes to build a sustainable future. She said that youth are the true voices of resilience, adding that “every person under the age of 18 has the right to participate in decision-making processes that impact them.”

She praised the UAE’s commitment to climate action and acknowledged the importance of solutions and partnerships in support of sustainable island states.

She also spoke about St. Kitts & Nevis championing economic growth balanced with social equity and environmental conservation in the Caribbean. Through thoughtful policies and scalable initiatives, the country is advancing clean energy, sustainable tourism, biodiversity conservation and community engagement.

“

Our responsibility is to leave this world a better place, better than we met it.

”



# Building A Resilient Future Together

The triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss requires urgent and inclusive action at all levels of governance and citizen participation, including marginalised communities, local leaders and youth. The traditional knowledge and time-honoured sustainable practices of Indigenous communities are also integral to transformative solutions.

This theme of the Forum's first panel, moderated by journalist Charlotte Kan, explored innovative approaches to strengthen climate action through local leadership. Distinguished speakers H.E. Razan Al Mubarak, President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN); David Nicholson, Chief Climate Officer of Mercy Corps, and Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, Co-chair of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change, examined strategies to empower grassroots leadership in sustainability and climate resilience.

**Developing concerted local, national and global responses to climate-related challenges across sectors and communities will help reduce preventable losses**

Nicholson defined resilience as coping with, adapting to, and thriving in the face of the climate crisis. A resilient community is prepared for, and capable of adapting to and recovering from, anticipated hazards and disruptions.

The UNFCCC's Global Goal on Adaptation emphasises the need for integrated solutions across key sectors such as agriculture, water systems, biodiversity, urban infrastructure, health systems, and livelihoods.

However, gaps in data and a limited understanding of complex, overlapping risks has led to reactive policies, weak institutional capacities, and inconsistent implementation.

Nicholson spoke about harnessing technology and data-led solutions to enhance community resilience, stressing the need for anticipatory action. He said that predictive modelling and other technologies that help identify climate risks and guide proactive behaviour changes must be developed and distributed equitably.



He illustrated his point with examples of Mercy Corps projects like the Managing Risk through Economic Development (M-RED) programme in Nepal, which combines traditional knowledge with innovative technologies such as AI to inform early warning systems, strengthen infrastructure, and diversify livelihoods. He explained how Mercy Corps uses geospatial data to help pastoral communities in Kenya adapt to drought-impacted grazing conditions.

Recognising the importance of such solutions, the UNFCCC notes that developed countries must support technology transfer and capacity building in developing nations as part of the National Adaptation Planning process.

Strengthening data and technology sharing across borders will not only enhance climate resilience but also direct critical funding to developing countries, enabling them to make risk-informed decisions.

**Embracing Indigenous wisdom will unlock expertise and technologies to build sustainable resilience**

Indigenous knowledge systems such as the use of climate-resilient crops and traditional farming methods in India, endogenous systems to respond to disasters in The Philippines, and community-conserved areas in Brazil are examples of communities adapting to a changing climate. Such systems should be documented, adapted and scaled to enhance local resource conservation and strengthen communities.

Ibrahim passionately referred to Indigenous people as the guardians of the world's ecosystems, saying, "we represent 5% of the world's population but protect more than 80% of the world's biodiversity."



She spoke of their deep understanding of nature, which, combined with their traditional and inherited practices, has sustained their communities for generations and made them resilient to hazards like droughts, floods and hurricanes. “We can observe cloud positions to predict if it is going to be rainy to the floods, or not enough, to drought.”

“

We do have the best technology ever, the technology that does not need power, does not fail when there is no battery, the technology of nature.

– Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim

”

H.E. Al Mubarak, echoed Ibrahim’s sentiment and said that “this incredible community of individuals steward a quarter of the Earth’s territories that contribute to the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, pollination, food security, and yes, indeed, climate.”

The Global Goal on Adaptation underscores the urgency of including Indigenous voices in decision-making and resilience planning, recognising their deep-rooted knowledge in adapting to environmental changes.

Building on this, the UNFCCC is calling on countries to integrate community-specific resilience action plans for vulnerable communities and Indigenous populations within their Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans, ensuring these efforts are formally recognised and effectively implemented.

Ibrahim shared her experience of working with the government of Chad to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their National Adaptation Plan. She hoped that the 2025 UNFCCC COP30 in Brazil will steer dialogue and decisions to popularise such inclusions.



H.E. Al Mubarak, also reflected on ways to mainstream local and Indigenous people with genuine agency, saying that “their voices need to be heard, recognised and valued.”

IUCN is working with Indigenous communities worldwide to integrate their knowledge into global standards, particularly for nature-based solutions.

H.E. Al Mubarak, added that the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund supports a global, Indigenous-led study to advocate for the inclusion of traditional knowledge and expertise in international forums.

**Delivering resources to real change agents amplifies their impact on conservation**

H.E. Al Mubarak, called out the disparity between the significant contributions of Indigenous people to environmental protection and nature-based solutions compared to the limited resources they receive and consume.

“

With everything Indigenous communities are doing, they receive less than 1% of global climate and nature finance.

- H.E. Razan Al Mubarak

”

She said that acknowledging and rectifying injustices, such as the lack of land rights of Indigenous communities, and exploring diverse sources, like philanthropies and the private sector, are crucial to unlock funding.

She noted that while some investments may not yield financial returns, they would lead to gains through the lives and species saved by maintaining the integrity of the planet.





Ibrahim added that with less than 1% of the world's climate money, it is challenging for Indigenous peoples to continue protecting 80% of the world's biodiversity.

She used a soccer analogy to explain that just as superstars Ronaldo and Messi are paid fairly for scoring goals, Indigenous people should receive fair financing for being the best players in safeguarding the environment.

#### **Investing in the inclusion of women, youth, and local leaders will amplify last-mile gains**

Lasting impact comes from investing in inclusion and recognising the diverse contributions of all members of society. Mainstreaming resilience needs leadership and best practices from the grassroots to the global level.

Grassroots organisations, often led by women and youth, create tangible impacts through their work on income generation, education, and community development.

Ibrahim spoke of her work with Indigenous women in Chad. She said that empowering women improves social justice and is a key strategy to build resilience in the face of resource scarcity and extreme weather.

On a similar note, Nicholson talked about the need for youth engagement in driving innovation and climate action. He addressed youth unemployment in the context of climate change adaptation, saying "we need a new generation of jobs for young people in ways that allow them to generate income in the face of climate risk."

“

More than half the people on the planet are young people... the people doing the work, driving the solutions, very often come from the younger generations.

– David Nicholson

”

Nicholson listed some of Mercy Corps' initiatives to deliver youth employment. For instance, Youth Impact Labs in Jordan provide young people with training and access to online resources, while the Green Generation supports young leaders across Sub-Saharan Africa who are involved from local-level climate innovations to advocating for policy changes at international forums like COPs.

To maximise the impact of such initiatives, policymakers, financiers, industry leaders and civil society must work together to build resilience through inclusive processes – ones that uphold the principles of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), and ensure that no community is left behind.



# Inclusive Philanthropy For Empowered Communities

Philanthropic funding is vital in driving inclusive, far-reaching and sustainable transformations. Grants are moving beyond traditional charity to innovative models like impact investing and venture philanthropy, which fund initiatives that generate measurable social and environmental benefits while ensuring financial sustainability. Structured collaboration, transparency, and technology integration are essential to scaling such philanthropy.

In this conversation moderated by journalist Charlotte Kan, Anita Otubu, Senior Director for Universal Energy Facility at Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL), and Deborah Backus, CEO of Clean Rivers, explored the evolutions of modern philanthropy, highlighting the value of community-centric approaches, and the need for innovative financing mechanisms to support impactful and replicable projects.

Despite an estimated US \$1 trillion in global philanthropic capital—primarily in grants with some impact investments—this represents just 1% of global GDP. If strategically directed towards development, impact philanthropy could unlock five to seven times more public and private capital, helping driving meaningful, long-term change.

## Shifting towards results-based philanthropy will help catalyse public and private funds

Otubu spoke about the growing shift in philanthropy toward results-based financing, where funds are disbursed upon achieving predefined milestones.

She cited the example of SEforAll's Universal Energy Facility, which has secured US \$45 million to fund mini-grid and standalone solar projects for productive use. Payments are released at key milestones such as the arrival of major equipment on-site, the technical commissioning of mini-grids, and sustained electricity supply over a defined period. Such milestones ensure effective project delivery of "fit for purpose" infrastructure.

Otubu highlighted several advantages of blended finance, including its ability to leverage private capital, ensure project sustainability by requiring grantees to secure equity and debt, enhance funding capacity, and extend benefits to more communities.



She noted that the Universal Energy Facility had already connected over 65,000 people in Africa to electricity, emphasising that philanthropic grants should serve as a catalyst—kickstarting and accelerating market-driven solutions.

“The beauty of results-based financing is that it can leverage existing market mechanisms, essentially promoting blended finance.”

— Anita Otubu

This approach is gaining momentum, with blended finance transactions now exceeding US \$200 billion annually, demonstrating how strategic philanthropic capital can attract commercial investment and scale sustainable impact.

## Improving transparency, accountability and outcomes of philanthropic funding will make it a more credible financing mechanism

Innovative financial instruments, such as Sustainability-Linked Bonds (SLBs), are rapidly gaining traction. These results-based mechanisms mobilise private capital for public services, tying repayment to measurable social and environmental outcomes.

While these instruments are not traditional bonds, they serve as mechanisms to mobilise private capital for public services, often incorporating concessional and risk financing to drive social and environmental outcomes.





Backus called for innovative financing models to support sustainable solutions like those undertaken by her firm Clean Rivers. She said that investments to the tune of US \$17 trillion are needed to tackle these challenges, and philanthropy is not enough. It is essential to explore various funding pathways to attract more donors and drive larger-scale impact. She acknowledged that philanthropies often struggle to balance lending frameworks and funding goals with maximising impact. She cautioned against rigid frameworks that could exclude smaller and grassroots efforts.

Citing the Clean Rivers initiative, which uses land-based waste management systems built on circular economy principles, Backus said philanthropy should prioritise accessibility, cross-sector collaboration, community involvement, and technology integration.

Having spent many years working with educational technology and low-resource communities, Backus appreciates the value of technology for impact at scale from both the donors' and the communities' perspectives. She added that "technology can be as simple as text messages on feature phones."

Otubu and Backus both insisted on multi-stakeholder collaboration to effectively address complex challenges.

Otubu said that challenges such as providing electricity to over 600 million Africans who still lack access that cannot be achieved by one organisation. Collaboration offers novel avenues to source knowledge, finance and innovations, and create enabling situations.

She cited SEforALL's initiatives such as the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet (GEAPP) and Mission 300, which are linking philanthropists, development banks and governments to accelerate progress towards energy access for 300 million people by 2030.

The increasing quantity, quality and credibility of philanthropic capital is creating new opportunities for impact. To maintain this momentum, it is essential that development efforts help distribute the costs of financing more equitably.



# Charting Pathways For Economic Growth

Sustainable economic growth depends on integrated strategies that balance developmental priorities, environmental challenges and social equity. Innovation and capacity building in key sectors like food, health, and energy play a vital role. To navigate ongoing transformations effectively, it is essential to conduct comprehensive assessments and implement tailored solutions that drive meaningful progress.

Moderator Maryam Rasheed, Senior Analyst at Economist Impact, led a discussion with H.E. Majid Al Suwaidi, CEO of Alterra, and Dr. Vera Songwe, Chair and Founder of the Liquidity and Sustainability Facility, on future-ready strategies to achieve resilient economic growth, particularly in the Global South.

Rising debt and economic instability pose significant challenges to sustainable development, particularly for developing nations. According to UNCTAD's 2024 report, "A World of Debt," global public debt reached a record US \$97 trillion in 2023, with developing countries' debt growing at twice the rate of developed nations. Today, they hold one-third of total public debt, amounting to US \$29 trillion.

Meanwhile, the World Bank estimates that 700 million people still live in extreme poverty. With the years 2020-2030 at risk of becoming a "lost decade" due to compounding global crises, urgent interventions are needed to address this polycrisis and prevent further setbacks in economic resilience and poverty reduction.

Dr. Songwe highlighted the direct link between macroeconomic stability and local resilience, noting that 60% of African countries are in debt distress, while even G7 nations face high levels of indebtedness. Economic pressures—from inflation to mounting debt burdens—are significantly hindering efforts to alleviate poverty and build long-term resilience in vulnerable communities.

“

The macro conversation is important because inflation is the fastest creator of poverty, the fastest creator of the inability to build resilience.

— Dr. Vera Songwe

”



Dr. Songwe cited an example of the World Bank undertaking a major round to raise resources for the poorest countries. "Though the contributions of some countries went up, due to the inflation and the exchange rate, the resources raised were much smaller."

H.E. Al Suwaidi agreed with the need for more macro-level dialogue at multilateral forums. With wealth concentrated in areas where it may not have the maximum impact, he said that the Global South had not received the resources it needs to take big strides in sustainable economic development.

## Accelerating local action will create appropriate pathways for global solutions

H.E. Al Suwaidi spoke about fostering local growth, driven by those who understand the needs and contexts of their communities, markets, energy sources, resources, and ecosystems. He said that achieving scale requires moving beyond small projects and empowering local entrepreneurs to build solutions tailored to their environments.

He explained that the UAE developed rapidly by choosing solutions that work for its specific environment. "We had to refine policies to make efficiency or development standards that suited the UAE." He called for Global South leaders to engage the grassroots.

Dr. Songwe added an example of a young Kenyan innovator's project to design cooking devices that were malaria-resistant, stressing the need to scale initiatives with co-benefits.



Achieving a balance between jobs, economic growth, and sustainability is essential for long-term economic stability. According to IRENA, cost-effective renewable energy not only expands access to power but also drives job creation and economic development, fostering greater social equity.

**Using concessional capital to leverage private investment will spur growth in developing countries**

Dr. Songwe said that financing strategies must solve systemic barriers that hinder investment in developing countries. Concessional capital, which is cheaper and informed, helps mobilise private investment. “We must ensure that everyone brings the right capital at the right time, so the stacks make it faster to move.”

In 2022, international concessional finance—including grants, technical assistance, first-loss guarantees, and low-interest loans—reached US \$81 billion, marking a 50% increase since 2019. Most of this growth came from development finance institutions, with 33% from bilateral sources, 30% from multilateral institutions, and 26% from government funding.

Dr. Songwe said issues such as currency risks, capital controls and altered regulations act as investment dampeners. “It’s a US \$1.5 trillion task for emerging markets and developing economies, and if we don’t do it, the cost of adjusting to the climate is exponential.”

H.E. Al Suwaidi advocated for innovative financial models that incentivise both public and private capital in the Global South. He cited Alterra’s success in combining blended finance and strategic partnerships to scale investments for climate action in the region.

He added that governments should help de-risk investments and attract the private sector by taking on some of the risk via guarantees and first-class capital.

Dr. Songwe spoke about global initiatives like the UAE Consensus, which focuses on finance and inclusion, to support community-level sustainability, equity and resilience.

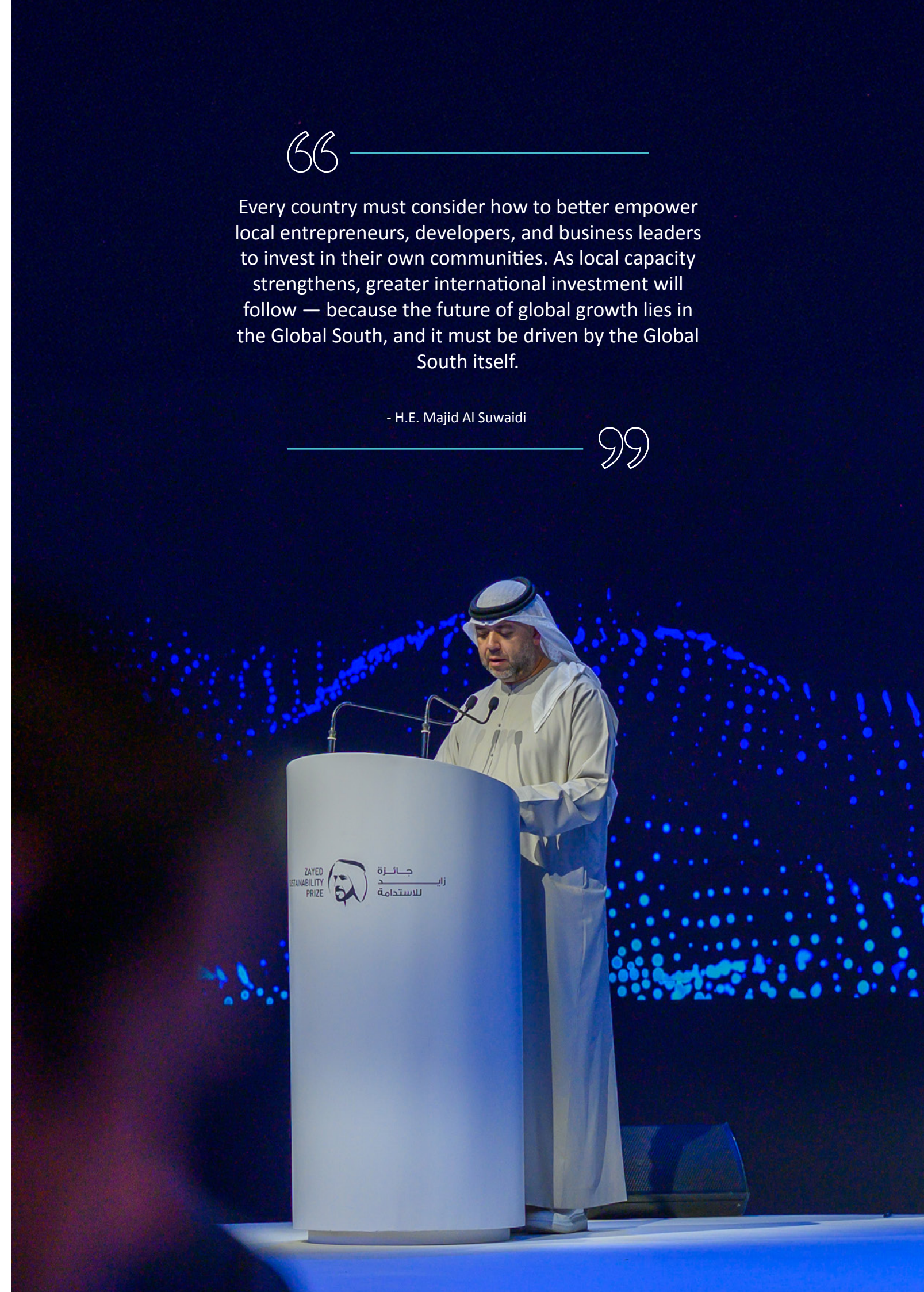
“Most importantly, it’s the ambitions of the people,” she said, adding that the UNFCCC should rally stakeholders to find an optimal mix despite competing goals and demands.

“

Every country must consider how to better empower local entrepreneurs, developers, and business leaders to invest in their own communities. As local capacity strengthens, greater international investment will follow — because the future of global growth lies in the Global South, and it must be driven by the Global South itself.

- H.E. Majid Al Suwaidi

”





# Voices From The Ground

**Dr. Ricardo Affonso Ferreira**  
Co-founder, Expedicionários da Saúde (EDS)

The Amazon, known for its extraordinary biodiversity and Indigenous heritage, plays a vital role in global climate stability and the well-being of the millions who call it home. However, scientists warn that it is approaching a critical tipping point. If degradation continues, it could lead to significant ecosystem changes, affecting regional weather patterns, water availability, and biodiversity—all of which are closely tied to the health, livelihoods, and food security of Amazonian communities. Protecting the Amazon is not just about preserving nature; it is about safeguarding the people who depend on it.

The people of the Amazon already face existential threats from deforestation, disease, and limited access to healthcare.

Dr. Ricardo Affonso Ferreira, Co-founder of Expedicionários da Saúde (EDS), winner of the 2023 Zayed Sustainability Prize in the Health category, believes in the transformative power of high-quality and timely healthcare. For a quarter century, he has been on a passionate journey to bring medical services to the neediest.

“My experience in the Amazon rainforest exposed me to the unique challenges faced by the isolated Indigenous communities. They had no facility for surgical care, mostly needed for hernias and cataracts. They get blind in the forest very, very young and they cannot carry weight.”

Dr. Ferreira became aware of the profound impact that accessible healthcare can have on their lives. Living and working alongside these communities, he learned that true progress comes from understanding specific needs and collaborating to find solutions together.

At EDS, Dr. Ferreira and his team work with Indigenous communities to identify and implement sustainable solutions for their unique healthcare needs. This philosophy helps align their efforts with the priorities of the communities.

“My work focuses on providing surgical care to remote Indigenous villages with a mobile surgical centre. We bring a fully equipped hospital into the heart of the rainforest, performing crucial procedures like cataract surgeries and hernia repairs. This eliminates the need for these communities to travel to distant cities, ensuring they receive timely care while in their familiar environments.”

The mobile centre has five rooms and conducts up to 500 surgeries a week, with services like examinations, labs, ultrasound, general surgery, ophthalmology, gynaecology, dentistry and endoscopy. The team treats diseases like cancer and has an anatomical pathologist to take immediate decisions. EDS also has a programme with only women patients, doctors and nurses.



EDS collaborates with the communities during emergencies like earthquakes and floods, distributing glasses and medicines. “We take care of people within a 500-kilometre radius who come to us, in small or big boats, or helicopters.” During COVID, EDS built 260 infirmaries to care for Indigenous people.

Restoring sight to an elder or enabling someone to return to their daily activities after a hernia repair brings immense joy and strengthens the bonds within the community. Dr. Ferreira estimates that EDS has carried out over 10,000 surgeries on 55 expeditions and donated over 8,000 sunglasses.

“One of the most rewarding aspects of this work is witnessing its immediate, positive impact on individuals and families: they can see again, they can carry weight again. This changes people’s lives.”



The challenges are significant. The Amazon's vastness and limited infrastructure make logistics complex. EDS relies on a dedicated team of volunteer doctors, nurses and support staff to make a difference.

"Technology can be crucial role in expanding our reach and impact. Telemedicine, Starlink, etc. can connect remote communities with specialists in urban centres, providing access to a wider range of medical expertise."

Indigenous communities have been historically marginalised, and their priorities and contributions overlooked, due to political and socio-economic imbalances. Their land and resource rights have been encroached upon, their decision-making diminished, and their traditional habitats, cultures, practices and wisdom systemically eroded.

It is essential to help Indigenous communities adapt to the grave impacts of climate change and build their resilience while respecting their identities, rights and needs.

Impactful programmes like that of EDS can help institutionalise and mainstream such efforts when supported by adaptation planning and financing at all levels of governance that account for the unique circumstances, capacities and practices of each Indigenous community.

Dr. Ferreira's journey has reinforced the importance of connection and empathy. "Come with us. Help us. We need money. We need support. By listening to and learning from the Indigenous communities, we can build trust and work together to create a healthier and more sustainable future for the Amazon and its people."





# Data For Sustainability And Systemic Change

Open and transparent access to data, combined with collaboration between governments, citizens and businesses, is essential for informed decision-making and accountability in building resilient ecosystems. Leveraging data-driven approaches, enhanced by technologies like AI and blockchain, can transform how we address socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

In this dynamic discussion moderated by Wendy Lam, CEO of Capsule Technologies, Ma Jun, Founding Director of the Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs, and Gonzalo Muñoz, Co-founder of TriCiclos, explored ways to simplify and democratise data to foster better coordination and consensus among governments, cities, citizens and businesses.

## Driving transparency and public participation helps activate positive feedback loops

Jun spoke of “radical transparency” and public participation in driving environmental governance, emphasising that access to information is crucial.



He reflected on the origins of his work over two decades ago, when China was suffering from severe air, water and soil pollution, which exposed hundreds of millions to health hazards. He acknowledged the challenges of working with multi-level governments and profit-centric industries but insisted that issues of such magnitude can only be solved with collective all-stakeholder participation.

“

I believe that we can tap into the success of using data to mobilise people and also motivate the market-based solutions to tackle this issue, to address climate action and pollution control and biodiversity protection.

- Ma Jun

Muñoz complimented Jun’s efforts to leverage transparency, public pressure, and ownership to build corporate accountability amidst China’s tight administrative controls and staggering economic growth.

Muñoz shared his experience in the food industry, where he was struck by the immense waste of resources, to illustrate how businesses can be incentivised to embrace sustainability for their own benefit.

2024 United Nations report estimates that over 1 billion tonnes of food were wasted in 2022, with about 19% lost in supply chains and 13% lost at the retail and household levels. Food waste costs about US \$1 trillion annually in wasted resources like land, water, energy and labour, and accounts for 8-10% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Beyond the waste of resources and environmental impact, food loss represents a missed opportunity to help address global food insecurity, which affects one-third of the world’s population.

## Improving cooperation leads to positive competition

Muñoz said that companies must move past the traditional and unilateral focus on profit—as defined by their monetary profit and loss accounts—as the sole metric of success. Boards must be sensitised and informed that the well-rounded success of a company depends on its value creation, which includes contributions to society.

”





Muñoz suggested that businesses adopt a “triple bottom line” model that defines their success by profit as well as environmental and social impact, and embed this commitment into their corporate vision and laws.

“

Profits are for companies what oxygen is for humans. We need it to survive. But no one can tell you, you came to the world only to breathe.

- Gonzalo Muñoz

”

Jun and his team prioritised collaboration over confrontation as a strategy to promote transparency and public participation within China’s tightly regulated system.

They created the Blue Map water quality database of rivers, lakes, drinking water sources and coastal seas. The app, with over 3.8 million users today, is a publicly accessible platform compiling environmental quality metrics, discharge data, and corporate records from 20,000 monitoring stations.

An hourly air quality index launched in 2013 and supported by the government through a change of law, had all of China’s 338 major cities and municipalities reporting by 2015.

Jun said that introducing pollution indices and corporate performance rankings encouraged positive competition, incentivised better practices, and helped shift the attitudes of major multinational brands, state-owned enterprises, and thousands of SMEs across sectors and supply chains toward greater environmental responsibility.

Beyond self-regulation, Jun emphasised the importance of legal compliance, asserting that businesses violating the law should not be allowed to operate.

Jun and Muñoz urged countries, companies and communities to adopt transparent, data- and consensus-led collaboration models to yield all-around economic, social and environmental benefits.



# The Power Of Youth In Action

Today's youth are informed, innovative, and leading climate action. Their impact is evident in youth-led initiatives driving sustainability, the role they play in advancing climate education and resilience, and their efforts to amplify their voices in policymaking to shape a more inclusive and sustainable future.

In the final session of the Forum, Latefa Al Mansoori, Environmental Assessment Analyst at Environment Agency Abu Dhabi and Chairperson of Al Dhafra Youth Council; Archana Soreng, former member of the United Nations Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change; and Youth Ambassadors of Zayed Sustainability Prize, Muku Madzivire and Isabella Sutton, joined moderator Helen Watts of Student Energy for a dynamic discussion on the opportunities for young people to lead transformative and sustainable change.

## Improving youth representation at policy high tables will create new leaders

The UN estimates that over half the world's population is under 30, yet their representation in leadership remains strikingly low. A 2021 Inter-Parliamentary Union report on Youth Participation in National Parliaments found that only 2.6% of political decision-makers are under 30, with young women making up less than 1% of that figure.



Recognising this gap, the panel emphasised the urgent need to remove barriers that prevent youth from actively shaping policies, calling for greater inclusion to empower young leaders and foster innovation.

Madzivire, drawing from his experience as former President of Zimbabwe's Junior Parliament, stressed that the best way to represent a community's interests is to give them a seat at the table and involve them in discussions. This requires platforms that recognise and value young people's ability to tackle complex challenges.

He added that youth representation has a compounding effect as young people draw inspiration from the efforts and achievements of their peers. This creates possibilities, instils confidence, and builds aspirations. He noted that youth-to-youth mentorship is a powerful but under-utilised tool.

Seeing peers at decision-making tables inspires others and helps de-stigmatise youth, reinforcing their role as equal contributors to shaping the future, which is the ultimate goal of the youth representation.

- Muku Madzivire

Soreng echoed Madzivire's sentiment by reflecting on her unique experience of being part of the UNSG's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. Her most profound takeaway of having a seat at the global table? "If there is intent, there can be more spaces where young people are seen and heard."



She envisaged a world where young voices are genuinely valued and amplified, with such inclusion and recognition being the norm. She credited the pioneers who have paved the way for today's youth to access and influence these forums and pledged her commitment to continuing the effort.

The call for greater youth inclusion is gaining global attention. The 2024 UN Declaration on Future Generations emphasises the need for equitable representation, urging country delegations and multilateral bodies to ensure that youth from both developing and developed nations, as well as diverse cultures, races, genders, and social backgrounds, have a voice in decision-making.

**Restructuring education will help train new experts to nurture sustainable economies**

Building capacity today is essential for a resilient, sustainable, and equitable future. However, despite decades of progress, over 250 million children and youth remain out of school, according to UNESCO's 2024 report. This challenge is largely driven by underinvestment in education, particularly in low-income countries.

Sutton said poverty in her home country of The Dominican Republic impedes access to education for children and youth in their formative years, leading to a vicious cycle of missed opportunities. This motivated her to initiate educational projects that equip vulnerable young people with the knowledge, skills and ambition to address pervasive challenges like climate change and inequality.

Sutton and Al Mansoori emphasised the importance of embedding sustainability into all areas of development, beginning with its integration into educational curricula and teacher training.

Al Mansoori stressed on the importance of having sustainability as a pillar of education in developing countries to help create enablers like scholarships and avenues for deeper youth engagement. This, she said, would lead to root-level solutions to the intensifying global challenges, many of which stem from historical actions like the industrial revolution

“It is very important to have an environmentalist in each and every engineer, in each and every scientist.

- Latefa Al Mansoori

Sutton spoke of the power of experiential learning in shaping perspectives on sustainability. She added that beyond academics, education brings awareness and understanding of current issues and instils the ability to develop innovative solutions. It also fosters responsibility, discipline and resilience, enabling youth to take leadership as the present and future stewards of the world.

**Amplifying young Indigenous voices will help unleash the potential of traditional wisdom**

Soreng delved into the facets of being a young Indigenous woman from a developing country. She drew attention to the historical and systemic marginalisation of Indigenous communities and their heritage. She asserted that their time-honoured knowledge and community-led practices, if recognised and respected, would be invaluable in building resilient agricultural systems and sustainable industries, and improving resource efficiency.

The evidence supports her confidence. Worldwide, prioritising development models that blend traditional wisdom with modern technologies are helping solve complex global challenges while fostering social innovation and equitable progress.

“Indigenous people need to be approached from a deep sense of love, respect and solidarity. This must be a continued action, which requires institutional changes to make their voices heard and to make them part of decision-making spaces.

- Archana Soreng

**Investing in the agency of youth will help drive positive change at scale**

The Declaration on Future Generations recommends institutionalising and mainstreaming “science and strategic foresight, long-term thinking and planning, and evidence-based decision making” to unlock the potential of youth to shape our collective future. However, this needs adequate allocation of resources for youth- and Indigenous-led initiatives.

Soreng illustrated the resource gap with data: of the US \$811 billion global philanthropic giving in 2022, only 2% was directed towards climate mitigation action, and within that, only 0.7% went to youth in the Global South.

The 2020 World Youth Report reflects these deficiencies, and notes that limited access to start-up funds is a major challenge for young entrepreneurs.

Al Mansoori said that youth-led startups could offer fresh perspectives and innovations that better suit novel situations. She proposed more intergenerational collaboration to incubate new ideas and translate them into high-impact, tangible actions.

Sutton added that youth too need to become leaders and break the cycle of “leaving things for tomorrow” assuming that someone else is going to think for them.

“Young people have so many fresh ideas that we haven't heard before. They have boundless energy, of course, but most importantly, they have the want and urgency to take action.

- Isabella Sutton

Madzivire agreed that young people should become partners with immense potential, and not merely be seen as beneficiaries needing support. He concluded that young people also must take on the responsibility to craft the future they want, starting now.



