2023 UNCTAD Youth Forum Report

Abu Dhabi, October 2023

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Overview of the UNCTAD Youth Forum 2023

The 4th UNCTAD Youth Forum took place on the occasion of the 8th bi-annual UN World Investment Forum, hosted by the government of the United Arab Emirates, in Abu Dhabi, from 16 to 20 October 2023.

Under the overall theme of Investing in Sustainable Development, youth aged between 18 and 30 years old gathered and exchanged views on three main topics, namely the greening of industries, reimagining education and technological innovations. All sessions had youth speakers and moderators, with the exception of some invited guest speakers. The youth also benefited from skills development sessions, including areas such as artificial intelligence within the FinTech space, as well as engaging in workshops focused on negotiations and public speaking. A number of youth participants presented youth-led initiatives such as the UNCTAD Youth Action Hubs initiative.

The public sessions of the World Investment Forum were open to the youth and many participated therein, of which the highlight was the session on Investing in Youth Entrepreneurship – Millennials and Gen Z as business trailblazers during which UNCTAD and the Commonwealth Secretariat announced the launch of an upgrade of the jointly published Policy guide on youth entrepreneurship in 2024.

The youth held an interactive discussion with Ms. Rebeca Grynspan, Secretary-General of UNCTAD on the influential role of youth voices and their capacity for innovative contributions to drive sustainable development.

The opening of the Youth Forum was conducted in the presence of UNCTAD Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Pedro Moreno, and UAE Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture and Youth, Mr. Mubarak al Nakhi, who underscored the importance of youth engagement in global forums and its impact on the formulation and implementation of policies. They also encouraged the youth participants to prepare a youth declaration. A youth representative spoke at the closing session of the World Investment Forum thanking UNCTAD and the Government of the UAE for having welcomed youth at the event and announcing that a youth declaration, presented below, was prepared.

In total, about 500 youth from over 80 countries successfully registered for the 4th Youth Forum.

YOUTH DECLARATION 2023

This declaration contains the priorities and recommendations of youth who participated in the fourth UNCTAD Youth Forum. The forum provided a platform for youth to engage in discussions around pressing global issues and the tools needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly in terms of trade and development.
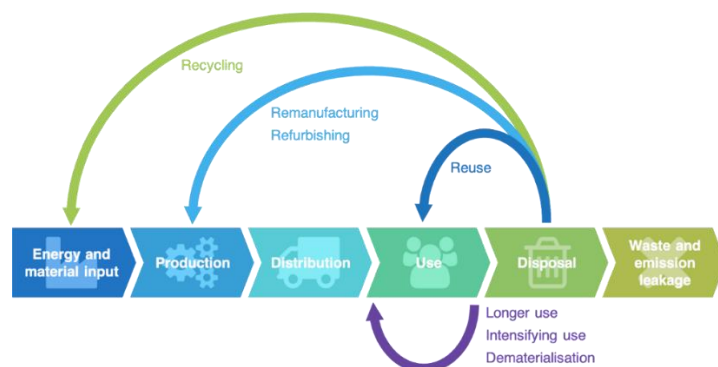
Youth participants engaged in discussions on selected topics they deemed to be the most crucial to young people under the three themes of greening of industries, reimagining education and technological innovations. Under each theme, suggestions and policy recommendations are included to be proposed to member States at the conclusion of the World Investment Forum.

I. GREENING OF INDUSTRIES

1. The essence of the greening of industries is driven by the urgency and severances of the current and foreseeable existential crisis of mankind, as commonly being referred to as the 'Climate Change' crisis. Throughout the course of the industrial revolution, we have been inadvertently causing detrimental effects on the environment and ecosystem, oblivious to the non-linear degradation resulting from our economic activities.

2. This kind of green industrialization aims to decouple economic growth from negative environmental externalities by maximising the application of clean energy, sustainable inputs, and green-production technologies.

Circularity, sustainable production, and consumption

3. Amidst the global challenges associated with waste management, earnest consideration should be given to the adoption of the circular economy as a pivotal framework for production and consumption. Currently positioned as an alternative to conventional linear economic models, the circular economy facilitates the comprehensive closure of the supply chain loop, entailing the regeneration and conversion of products into primary materials for subsequent cycles of production.

4. Sustainable consumption and production involve not only the product itself but the entire process along its value chain, encompassing everything from the initial design and the sourcing of upstream raw materials to downstream distribution, consumption by end-users, and the disposal at the end of its economic life. It is crucial to incorporate sustainability considerations into the product's design right from the beginning.

5. One example that demonstrates the "non-green" industry is the Fast Fashion industry. Despite its share being approximately two per cent of the total apparel industry, its substantial contribution to environmental pollution stems from the production of affordable apparel units. Besides emerging start-ups which are adopting circular economy models, other stakeholders play imperative roles on shaping ecosystems and economies. The transformation of the fashion industry toward a circular economy model is estimated to hinge on the involvement and collaborative efforts of four major key players, with government interventions being crucial. The figure below suggests key actions for each player to take to ensure a move to sustainable fashion.

Source: Geissdoerfer et al. (2020).[1]

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[1] Geissdoerfer, Martin & Pieroni, Marina & Pigosso, Daniela & Soufani, Khaled. (2020). Circular business models: A review. Journal of Cleaner Production. 277. 123741. 10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123741.

6. There is a need to rethink businesses success metrics, incorporating their impact on the planet and society alongside the traditional focus on financial bottom lines. Business models should have value-oriented systems in place instead of just being product or service centric.

Renewable energy

7. Greening industries by renewable energy involves transitioning from fossil fuel-based energy sources to renewable sources such as solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal power. Below are some steps that industries can take to promote renewable energy adoption:

   7.1. Conduct energy audits: Start by conducting energy audits to assess the energy consumption patterns and identify areas for improvement. This helps in understanding the current energy usage and potential opportunities for integrating renewable energy sources.

   7.2. Set Renewable energy goals: Set clear and measurable goals for transitioning to renewable energy. These goals can include targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing the share of renewable energy in the energy mix, and improving energy efficiency.

   7.3. Invest in renewable energy infrastructure: Install renewable energy infrastructure on-site or partner with renewable energy providers to source clean energy. This can involve installing solar panels, wind turbines, or geothermal systems to generate electricity or heat.

   7.4. PPAs: Enter into power purchase agreements with renewable energy developers. Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) allow industries to procure renewable energy directly from the developers, ensuring a reliable and clean energy supply.

   7.5. Energy efficiency measures: Implement energy-efficient technologies and practices to reduce energy consumption. This includes upgrading equipment, optimizing processes, and implementing energy-saving measures like LED lighting and insulation.

   7.6. Employee engagement and training: Educate and engage employees on the benefits of renewable energy and energy conservation. Provide training programmes to promote energy-efficient practices and encourage employees to adopt sustainable behaviours in their daily work routines.

   7.7. Supply chain integration: Encourage and support suppliers and vendors to adopt renewable energy practices. This can involve incentivizing renewable energy adoption in the supply chain and working with suppliers to optimize energy efficiency.

8. Green building: designing structures to have positive impact on the environment, including design by using sustainable materials, implementing energy efficient systems, incorporating renewable energy resources, that will help to build sustainable cities and sustainable, so we can reduce carbon emissions, conserve resources, and create healthier and liveable space for people to create greener future with spending less.

9. For example, given the rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and the ongoing digital revolution (see point 26), it is imperative to consider the digital carbon footprint that these activities generate. The shift to online businesses escalates data storage, leading to alarming increases of energy usage in data centres. Powering data centres

through renewable energy and promoting responsible data storage and consumption can be beneficial.

Green CSR Financing

10. We must address a pressing issue that green companies, particularly those involved in tree plantations and land restorations, often struggle to secure the necessary funding through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Many companies utilize CSR motives as means to enhance their public image and market themselves. Consequently, they tend to allocate CSR funds to causes that are closely aligned with their customer base, such as healthcare and education. Unfortunately, tree planting and land restoration projects are frequently relegated to the backburner. This delay in support hampers the progress of these environmentally crucial initiatives. To rectify this situation, we propose the implementation of a dedicated ratio within every CSR funding allocation that specifically supports green initiatives. By establishing this ratio, we can ensure that green companies receive the financial backing they need to continue their vital work in environmental conservation and restoration.

Promoting green initiatives

11. Advancing the development of green initiatives requires substantial awareness and education efforts. Here we can think of the implementation of targeted incentive schemes for businesses to incorporate green solutions, the promotion of green practices in public procurement, alongside comprehensive awareness campaigns and education efforts on sustainable practices.

Sustainable reporting and ESG performance measurement for Greening Industries

12. Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles revolve around the importance of screening of investments in alignment with corporate policies that promote responsible and sustainable practices. To effectively realize ESG objectives, it becomes crucial to establish clear and transparent guidelines for defining, monitoring, and measuring ESG.

13. Standardized ESG reporting framework: Develop a standardized ESG reporting framework for global adoption, including key ESG indicators and disclosure requirements, enhancing transparency and comparability in sustainability reporting.

14. Incentivize ESG reporting for businesses: Promote government incentives and regulatory measures to encourage ESG reporting by offering tax benefits, access to financing, and recognition for sustainable achievements, fostering accountability and transparency.

15. Harmonization of ESG metrics and reporting standards: In our pursuit of greening industries, we recognize the urgent need for the harmonization of ESG metrics and reporting standards on a global scale. To achieve this, it is imperative to facilitate collaboration among industry stakeholders, standard-setting bodies, and regulatory authorities. By aligning various ESG reporting frameworks and metrics, reporting burdens on businesses can be reduced while ensuring consistent and reliable ESG data. This harmonization will simplify the assessment of companies' sustainability efforts and make it easier for investors, consumers, and other stakeholders to compare and evaluate performance.

16. ESG performance verification and certification: To bolster the credibility of ESG reporting, we propose the establishment of an independent ESG performance

verification and certification system. This system would involve third-party audits to validate the accuracy and completeness of ESG data reported by businesses. Companies that successfully undergo verification and meet predefined sustainability criteria could receive ESG certification, demonstrating their commitment to responsible practices. Such certification would offer tangible benefits, such as improved access to capital, enhanced reputational value, and increased investor confidence, thus incentivizing more industries to engage in sustainable reporting.

17. ESG reporting for SMEs: Recognizing the pivotal role that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play in the global economy, we advocate for tailored ESG reporting frameworks and support mechanisms designed specifically for SMEs. These businesses may face unique challenges in reporting ESG data due to limited resources and expertise. Therefore, it is crucial to develop simplified reporting guidelines, provide training, and offer financial incentives to help SMEs integrate sustainability practices and report their ESG performance effectively. By extending ESG reporting support to SMEs, we ensure that a broader spectrum of industries participates in the transition towards sustainability.

18. ESG reporting technology innovation: As industries progress toward greener practices, the development and implementation of innovative technology solutions for ESG reporting are essential. We propose the creation of advanced ESG reporting platforms and tools that streamline data collection, analysis, and disclosure. These technologies can help businesses more efficiently report on their ESG initiatives, improving the accuracy and timeliness of data. Embracing ESG reporting technology innovation can also make it more accessible and cost-effective for industries of all sizes to participate in sustainability reporting, further accelerating the greening of industries.

II. REIMAGINING EDUCATION

19. Advocating for quality education globally is an essential component of sustainable development. Education prepares and nurtures individuals capacities, fostering societal progress and the build of resilient communities. However, large parts of the young population, especially in developing countries, face barriers in getting the skills necessary to escape poverty and realize their full potential. Reimagining education opens a door to addressing the challenges of quality education and accessibility globally. This involves seizing current opportunities, such as harnessing the power of new technologies, to establish robust educational frameworks.

20. To concentrate efforts at the local level and extend initiatives nationally, it is important to categorize and identify the distinct needs and challenges. This allows for the implementation of tailored solutions for quality education globally:

    20.1. Tailored education: Each nation may have unique educational challenges, such as access to infrastructure, and cultural contexts that require tailored solutions.

    20.2. Quality education as a universal problem: Recognize that quality education is a problem that persists across all segments and demographics. While specific challenges may vary, the goal should be to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all.

    20.3. Injecting resources into educational centres and ensuring that the investment is utilised optimally: Increasing funding for education is crucial to address resource gaps and improve the quality of education. The procedure of injection

involves allocating a higher budget to educational centres, including schools, universities, and vocational training institutions.

20.4. De-privatizing education and promoting incentives: Address the commercial aspects dominating private education. Explore ways to incentivize private institutions to prioritize quality education over financial gains. This can be achieved through policies that reward institutions for their commitment to inclusive and equitable education.

20.5. Building infrastructure to support education in the digital world: While some parts of the world are adopting and embracing technology rapidly, access to the internet is still an issue for a large part of the world as approximately 3.7 billion people do not have access to a stable and affordable internet connection in 2020.[2] We need to build plans and allocate resources to help build infrastructure to support digital education.

Achieving education for all

21. Recommendations to advance the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) include:

21.1. Cultivating a mindset shift and evolving education: Promote a mindset shift among students, educators, and policymakers by campaigning for the importance of education, learning how to learn, and embracing interdisciplinary courses that prioritize practicalities over theories. Renewal of books and topics can also help keep education relevant and engaging.

21.2. Infrastructure development: Ensure that educational institutions have adequate infrastructure, including facilities for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. Examples of countries that focus on STEM education can serve as inspiration for other regions.

21.3. Teacher training and development: Invest in comprehensive teacher training and development programmes to enhance the quality of instruction. This includes exploring alternative systems such as the BTEC (a system of education without exams) and addressing teacher shortages through recruitment and retention strategies.

21.4. Transparency and quality assurance: Establish robust quality assurance programmes to monitor and evaluate the quality of education.

21.5. Digitizing education and addressing the digital divide: Recognize the importance of digitizing education but ensure that it is accessible to all. Bridge the digital divide by providing underprivileged students with access to digital education at home and school.

21.6. Engage parents in their children's learning process through online and offline activities.

21.7. Inclusive education and vocational training: Promote inclusive and equity education that caters to the diverse needs of students, including those with and without disabilities and from all communities. Expand vocational training options to prepare students for a wide range of career paths and reduce the emphasis on memorization-based education.

22. Final considerations underscore the necessity for proper planning, coordination, and collaboration between government bodies, educational institutions, civil society

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[2] See https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf

organizations, and the private sector. It is essential to consider local contexts and tailor the implementation strategies accordingly.

III. TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

23. The UNCTAD Youth Declaration of 2021 advocates for improved technological infrastructure and access to reduce the digital divide between youth in developing and developed countries. This divide not only stifles economic growth but significantly hampers youth participation and innovation, crucial ingredients for tackling global challenges like climate change and educational disparities. The following recommendations extend this previous dialogue while acknowledging recent advancements in AI.

Digital Divide

24. We recognize the progress made in narrowing the existing digital divide among geographical locations, gender, socioeconomic groups, ages, and educational categories. Inequalities persist and remain a significant challenge as our dependence on new technologies grows. We firmly believe that access to new technologies plays a vital role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. These technologies have proven to be essential for promoting upward mobility worldwide. Therefore, we call for increased investment from both the public and private sectors to further bridge the existing gap. We also emphasize the continuation and expansion of government-led democratization of educational programmes that reduce inequalities.

Cyber Security and Safety

25. Cyber security and privacy deeply shape the conditions affecting youth economic prosperity and well-being. We recognize that the unintended consequences of technological advancements such as unprecedented data exposure and privacy violations increasingly put young people at risk. Of great concern is also the ongoing gender-based harassment and proliferation of exploitative materials on the internet. We firmly believe that youth require additional protection since their demographic is the most impacted by the rapid evolution of technology. Therefore, we call for global cooperation in the establishment of proactive measures, robust risk management frameworks, and transparent, protective policies. These actions are essential to empower youth and secure their economic and social well-being.

Artificial Intelligence

26. We recognize that artificial intelligence is a disruptive fast-growing technology that has the potential to alter the social fabric significantly. AI has varied applications across fields and can push the boundaries of what we can develop or know. The emergence of an artificial general intelligence (AGI) system in the near future is a double-edged sword that calls for timely regulation pursuant to its use and risks with accountability and systems monitoring obligations. We firmly believe that as inheritors of such a future with this emerging technology, the collective youth of the world must have a say in the development of national AI policies at the government and international organizational level to provide long-term insight and further our common agenda as was mentioned at the WIF. Therefore, we call for safety regulations and guardrails on artificial intelligence systems that have been informed by youth. Channels and platforms should be created for tech access to be leveraged in startups and upskilling.

Stimulating tech development

27. We want to emphasize the importance of fostering a favourable environment for youth-led start-ups by both local and national governments. It highlights the potential of these start-ups to drive innovation, particularly in technology. To achieve this, we call for a collaborative approach between governments and youth, involving the creation of infrastructure, access to data, and the presence of skilled individuals. We also stress the need for a friendly and attractive environment to draw in talent and youth, including social networks and amenities. We would like to encourage governments to share knowledge and data with start-ups to leverage their combined resources for innovation.