

The [United Nations Department of Public Information \(DPI\)](#) hosted [Intergenerational Dialogues on the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) to raise awareness of the high value that youth and older persons can bring to implementation of the SDGs, and foster a shift in the perception of youth and older persons — from beneficiaries of social policy to agents of social change

This event was held 1 August 2017, at the United Nations headquarters in New York, New York, United States.

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### **Intergenerational Dialogues Conference**

I had the opportunity to attend the Intergenerational Dialogues on SDGs, a unique experience that brought together people of all ages to inspire and collaborate for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With both a young and older co-chair, we were reminded that mentorship requires a renewed focus on consistency, communication, and solutions. The [United Nations General Assembly President, H.E. Peter Thomson](#) inspired us with his own story of starting at the United Nations at well over 60 years old, and spoke on the renewed goals that changed the direction of humanity, the SDGs and [Paris Climate Agreement](#), recognizing that their success rests on the commitment from all generations. He called for the need to erase negative stereotypes and prejudice that exists between generations and work together instead. This was followed by the [United Nations Youth Envoy Jayathma Wickramanayake](#), whom I found particularly helpful in reframing intergenerational dialogue, asking participants to stop thinking in binaries of old vs. young, and shift our perspective to working in solidarity with each other. In particular, she stressed the need to recognize youth as thinkers (not just focusing on experience), reject tokenism, and engage youth as partners in dialogue and decision-making processes. We also had the opportunity to hear from people of different generations who were working toward SDGs in their own community; for example Brianna Perez, who shined a light on physical and mental health by sharing her own journey, and explained how she related to [Joseph Feinhold](#), a Holocaust survivor, over their love of the violin which helped her to a better place of well-being. She stressed that the first thing we must do in these discussions is listen to understand, instead of listen to respond.

Following the opening plenary, we chose the next two side sessions, I attended the Healthy Living, Physical and Mental Wellness session and Gender Equality Session, led by [Dr. Padmini Murthy](#), Global Health Director of New York Medical College, addressing ageing, oral health, and non-profit work. In our discussion on ageing, [Dr. Jane Baratt](#) of the International Federation of Ageing reinforced that ageing starts at birth, and the decisions made in the formative years of our lives have a significant impact on our later life. She also highlighted that ageing is not just about our bodies changing, but how the

environment that surrounds us (such as housing and the importance of ageing in place), vaccinations, screening and access to treatment, and the impact of being born in a disadvantaged area, are factors that impact ageing. She stressed that “longer life is a poor prize when quality of life is compromised.” These issues are intergenerational, and the solutions need to be as well. For example, with the issue of housing, Dr. Baratt shared an initiative in the Netherlands where they have created intergenerational housing that brings young people to live in the same accommodations with older generations.

We also heard from [Shermin Luo](#) who, among other ventures, cofounded the [Global Youth Mentorship Initiative](#). It was very inspiring to hear from another youth leader, and hear about the opportunities and challenges of creating youth-led programming. She talked about the increase of mental health concerns among youth and the need to address both the social and emotional factors that impact youth. The programming for their mentorship initiative supports students in creating positive, healthy relationships with mentors and educators, ensuring youth-led long-term support. Mental health has been a running theme throughout the day, with solutions being found within intergenerational mentorship.

Oral health was not primarily a concern I thought about when thinking global health or intergenerational issues, however [Academy of Dentistry International](#) quickly changed my mind. Similar to Dr. Baratt, he linked the negative impacts of poor oral health across the lifespan, providing evidence for decreased academic performance and the links to systemic health issues such as diabetes, obesity, and pneumonia. Oral health is a prime example of how the SDGs intersect, as poor oral health (SDG#3) is a major indication of poor nutrition (SDG#2).

The discussion then geared toward actions and solutions that could be put in place to address some of these issues. There was significant discussion on the need for knowledge-sharing platforms across Member States to exchange opportunities, challenges, and activities that are using intergenerational strategies. Also, we need more opportunities, platforms, and channels of communication between youth and older generations that go beyond the use of technology. It was important to recognize that youth wanted to have more of these opportunities while also acknowledging the insight of older generations. Overall, the discussion was enlightening and really changed the way I looked at ageing, oral health, and intergenerational mentorship.

In the afternoon session, I attended the dialogue on Gender Equality: Opening the Door to Full Inclusion. The panelists were asked how the breakthroughs of inclusion in society for some marginalized groups could be replicated and sustained. Interestingly, Alyson Humphrey from [UNWOMEN](#) identified that some young women felt that the “youth movement” was gender-blind, leaving little space for women’s groups to participate meaningfully. Therefore the youth movement needs to be engendered and the women’s movement needs to create spaces for youth. In addition, she focused on the multifaceted approach, where multiple actors and strategies would speak up, as youth can’t do this alone.

Charles Whitley of the Permanent Mission of the European Union (EU) to the United Nations highlighted the successes achieved by young people. For example, increased women in tertiary education and working with the ombudsmen in the EU to address the inequitable policies of unpaid internships.

Lastly, we heard from Janice Peterson, Chair and Co-founder of the [Huarirou Commission](#), who spoke at length about her experience in fostering women’s empowerment at the grassroots level. She stressed that the “poor do not advance if they don’t see themselves as agents,” therefore it is important to provide women with the power to represent themselves in their communities and institutions. This was

rooted in the idea of listening to people on the ground, ensuring that problems and solutions are community-led. I found it most interesting when she recognized that women's empowerment can sometimes be seen as a "Western ideal" and reminded us to be aware of the changes to narrative that take place surrounding women's issues. The narrative, she stated, needs to be localized and venture beyond the typical "women's issues" because women have opinions and solutions on all of the challenges our society is facing. Overall, the discussion was fascinating and really opened up my mind and understanding of gender equality and how it has progressed over time.

Some of the action items from this conversation include:

- Need more ways to engage boys and girls
- Increase women in elections by creating opportunities for engagement in the political process
- Collaborate with NGOs, media, and other stakeholders to achieve gender equality
- Increase access to the United Nations to further support grassroots movements in empowering themselves
- Promote LEAP framework of UNWOMEN (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/youth-leap-into-gender-equality>)
- Encourage discussions of gender as a spectrum instead of binary
- Include and engage men in the solutions
- Give youth a seat at the table

Although I didn't have an opportunity to attend all of the sessions, the notes were shared with the full assembly and here are the main points I gathered from each dialogue:

### **Breaking the Intergenerational Cycle of Poverty**

- SDGs should be added to the school curriculum, which should also include human rights
- Local government should organize spaces for youth dialogue
- Use technology to create virtual currency
- Need for more substantial knowledge transfer
- Intersectionality — Foster a better understanding of race and class, specifically how it intersects with poverty
- Need to match needs in the job market to technology
- Identify and address barriers locking people into intergenerational poverty (e.g., right to vote, prejudice that poverty is a choice)
- Collaborations through sport can lead to peace
- Gaps remain in addressing poverty among elderly populations

### **Access to Employment Throughout Life**

- Gender remains a barrier for women to access adequate employment opportunities
- Quality education remains expensive in industrial countries and jobs are often not readily available
- Tasks vs. Jobs – youth are asked to do work that is task-focused and not related to jobs, therefore plan for future protection in employment diminishes

- Older generations face discrimination; each person's ability to work varies, and those who wish to continue can experience prejudice. On the other hand, some who want to retire can't due to financial instability.
- Need to create new skills development to address gaps in job market
- Create meaningful opportunities for work
- Increase mentorship bilaterally, and shift from the stakeholder perspective to the shareholder perspective

### **Sharing Responsibility for the Planet**

- Use technology to amplify voices of those unheard, use it for story-telling
- Innovation can play a key role in closing the gap between generations
- Use technology to drive people toward action
- Need more safe spaces for people to fail so that innovation can thrive
- Technology is not innately good, as innovation brings on risk

### **Social Media:**

**#NGODialogues**