

# TESTIMONIES from YOUTH on the ECOSOC Youth Forum 2024 Side Event

***“Towards a Global Standard for Meaningful  
Youth Engagement in the Pact for the Future”***

**April 18, 2024**

Organized by the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace & UN Youth Delegates and Youth Representatives of Austria, Czechia, Denmark, the European Union, Ireland, Kenya, Malta, Switzerland, and the United States of America; co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Ireland and the European Union to the UN

On April 18, the ECOSOC Youth Forum side event at the European Union Mission to the UN, co-organized by youth delegates and representatives from 10 countries, aimed to reinforce and redefine genuine youth engagement in critical discussions. This initiative, aligned with guidelines set by the UN Secretary-General, focused on two main objectives: reaffirming the importance of involving young people in significant dialogues and developing actionable strategies to enhance youth participation. The event included identifying challenges, sharing effective practices, and promoting proactive engagement, all intended to influence ongoing high-level discussions at the UN and ensure that decision-making processes at various levels are inclusive and responsive to the perspectives of youth.

Moderated by Marvin Huber, the UN Youth Delegate from Austria, this event featured introductory remarks from youth representatives of the three co-sponsoring organizations, including Giulia Tariello (Permanent Mission of the EU), John Koester (UN Advocacy Advisor, IAYSP), and Mohammad Naeem (Permanent Mission of Ireland). It also highlighted contributions from global youth who participated in the “Global Call for Video Statements” orchestrated by the organizer to allow those who could not make it to New York to share their perspectives. They highlighted not only the need for geographical need and including traditionally left voices but delivered strong messages towards decision makers such as “Meaningful engagement can be enhanced only if we reach full inclusive participation of youth, meaning of course more speaking opportunity for the most vulnerable!” from **Alexia Gaube** and “It is not just about being heard, it is about being actively involved in the decision making process!” from **Thomas Zenebe Woldemariam**.

*Next follows a collection of testimonies from young attendees at the side event:*

During the discussion, participants had the opportunity to ask their questions and express their perspectives. A common sentiment that emerged from American youth was the

feeling of hopelessness amid the political divisiveness. One 17-year member of the audience named **Audrey** voiced her perspective on behalf of youth in New York City. She stated “Many of [the youth] are disheartened and very angry almost with the current situation. Some of my friends are 18 and they are registered to vote, however they will not be doing so because they are frustrated with the outcome... time and time again of how each election comes out.” She expressed frustration over how “our local legislation seems too out of reach” and those who do engage with politicians on behalf of youth might do so out of career aspirations instead of being genuinely interested. She asked “how do you rekindle hope and democracy? Because it is something that I notice, as a problem, not only of getting youth into these seats and into these rooms. But they're just in general, not willing to. Because what is the point... How do you rekindle hope in this generation?”

**John Koester** explains that he is noticing a contrast among young people across Europe, Africa, and Asia who remain passionate for civic engagement and eager to express their views, their counterparts in the US seem to be grappling with growing disillusionment. He notes that this decline in the US is likely driven by political polarization, eroding trust in public institutions and waning faith in the effectiveness of social activism. This trend is concerning given the significant electoral influence of US youth, not only on the national level but also internationally, as their votes have the potential to impact lives globally. Despite these challenges, John recounts the inspiring determination of a thousand youths who overcame funding and travel obstacles to voice their concerns at the UN. Even when confronted with logistical setbacks at the UN which delayed the entry of many young attendees, they remained committed to making their perspectives heard and ensuring their representation at the international forum.

Even more inspiring was seeing the passion and energy that can result from youth working together. John says that: “Our event on April 18 was co-organized by official youth representatives from 10 countries which was such a pleasure to be a part of.” One of the panelists, **Nudhara Yusuf**, remarked on this saying “what other situation would we get 10 countries to agree on something to do an event together? I mean that is such a statement to what using young people as catalysts for convening is all about, because in no other context would we be able to convene so many people from around the world to do something together.” John states that “what YSP is trying to do is to empower youth to take ownership in their community so they can become young peacemakers through their own unique abilities because everyone can contribute. To bring peace, it starts with us individually. Through this event, we sought to provide a platform whereby the youth can be directly heard by civil society, the UN, and its Member States.”

Serving as moderator of the side event, **Marvin Huber** observed the event served to finally shift from the "Why" of youth engagement towards the "How". In this regard, he

outlined that whilst standards of meaningful youth engagement have been compiled at multiple times, the goal of the event was to put best practices under the spotlight and get youth to explain on how to act on them. One of the outcomes in this regard was a list of qualities upon which every event could be checked for meaningfulness. Apart from this Marvin outlined that there is a fundamental shift needed to see youth as equal partners in all policy and decision-making, not just given the representation gap and the long-term impact on the youngest generations but also simply as the scale of the global crisis requires every bit of motivation, action and drive. Marvin stated "It is simply too late for pessimism, there is no time. Thus, it is the time for action!"

**Ka-young Choi** shares her experience:

“I had the privilege of supporting and attending the side event, I was honestly taken aback by the sheer magnitude of the Youth Forum. I had no prior experience of attending the annual UN initiative, so I was pleasantly surprised to see young leaders from across the globe come together to connect, learn, and discuss the needs of the world and their potential solutions. I was made more aware than ever that there is an entire generation of youth that has the passion and means to make substantial, positive changes in the world and their respective communities. It breathed hope into my spirit. While there were quite a few points made during this event that flew over my head, something that was made very clear to me is that the future is bright and in good hands. The youth are ready to actively work towards establishing dynamic, structured, and inclusive spaces within organizations and governments to ensure that their voices are a part of the important choices being made. It was inspiring to witness so many young people make great efforts to attend the Youth Forum and this specific side event.”

When asked to share her experience from her perspective as a participant during the youth forum and the side event, **Maya Alexis Mele** shares that:

“For any youth, the forum presented itself as an empowering, collaborative, and captivating experience. Youth from across the globe came together to discuss prevalent issues often deserted under institutions' radars, conveying their potent experiences with decision-makers and leaders. The forum not only aided in uniting youth but ensured that young people acquired a seat and a say at the table. One side event beautifully nourished these positive elements of the forum, *Towards a Global Standard for Meaningful Youth Engagement in the Pact for the Future*, a panel hosted by UN Youth delegates featuring various eloquent speakers. At this event, attendees had the unique opportunity to hear directly from youth about the role our community could play in shaping the outcomes of the Pact for The Future. Even UN Youth delegates who couldn't be physically present were given a platform to share their thoughts through pre-recorded speeches, ensuring their voices were not silenced. The event was designed to foster audience participation, addressing the many unanswered questions and concerns of the youth through insightful

responses from expert speakers. It was a pleasure to be a youth involved in the occurrence of this event, and thus, feel as though I was not only a token voice but an individual harboring distinct stories and experiences to convey.”

Another participant, **Montserrat Fregoso Fonseca**, writes:

“Participating in the side event was a transformative experience for me. As a 27-year-old activist from Mexico, I found myself deeply engaged in discussions about the pivotal role of youth in shaping our collective future. However, amidst the inspiring dialogues and exchanges of knowledge, one glaring issue stood out – the lack of financial investment in youth. It's not enough to invite young people to these spaces; we need sustained financial support and long-term commitment. Many of us juggle student loans and early adult challenges, making it difficult to participate without financial aid. This creates a system where access to these forums becomes a privilege rather than an inclusive opportunity. If we truly want youth to be decision-makers and problem solvers, we must ensure their meaningful participation by providing fair compensation for their invaluable contributions. Additionally, it's crucial to recognize that raising awareness about access to these spaces is just as important. We need diverse voices and inclusive, accessible information. Hearing from other young people enriches the conversation and ensures that the solutions we develop are truly representative of our global community. Despite the challenges, I am hopeful for the future of youth engagement. We are a generation passionate about creating positive change, and when given the resources and support, we can accomplish remarkable feats. It's up to us to continue advocating for our rights, speaking up loudly, and pushing for tangible action. Together, with adequate financing behind our efforts, we can address pressing global issues and build a brighter future for generations to come.”

In conclusion, the side event emphasized the urgency of integrating young voices into decision-making processes to tackle global crises effectively. Attendees, including young leaders from diverse backgrounds, shared their challenges, aspirations, and proposed actionable strategies aimed at enhancing youth participation at all levels. The dialogue highlighted both the disparities in youth engagement across regions and the collective enthusiasm to overcome these through collaboration and innovative approaches. The testimonials revealed a clear call for more inclusive, structured, and financially supported opportunities for youth, reflecting a broader commitment to empowering the next generation to shape a more equitable and sustainable future. This event not only sparked discussions but also laid down a framework for ongoing engagement, ensuring that youth voices are not just heard but are instrumental in shaping global policies and actions.