

International Dialogue on Migration  
Youth and Migration: Engaging youth as key partners in migration governance  
28 February 2019, Conference Room 2, UNHQ NY

Ms. Jayathma Wickramanayake, UN SG's Envoy on Youth  
Keynote Address (8-10 minutes)

Director General,  
Madam President,  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking IOM for hosting the International Dialogue on Migration, and for taking the leadership and responsibility to dedicate this multi-stakeholder dialogue to the topic of young people as key partners in migration governance.

The need to empower and create the space for young people to participate in civic and political debates is extremely important, and of course, at the core of my mandate as the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth.

By dedicating this year's International Dialogue on Migration to youth, IOM and partners are showing their commitment to the UN Youth Strategy, Youth2030, which was launched by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last September.

With Youth2030, the UN commits support and strengthen the engagement, participation and advocacy of young people. Young people have always

been front runners, acting in communities, mobilizing and organizing at the grassroots level when it comes to issues affecting our societies. However, they often face challenges in influencing global policy making due to various reasons; sometimes due to lack of space for youth participation, sometimes due to lack of financial and other resources.

In discussions on youth engagement, there is often an underlying notion of placing the responsibility on young people to play key roles in implementing global agreements. But how can you expect youth to own, promote and implement decisions that they had no role in creating?

We have all been witness to what happens when young people have a platform to positively and constructively participate. Young people are creative, innovative, natural problem-solvers, and are already taking informal action to develop sustainable and practical solutions all around the world.

To quote Youth2030 the UN youth strategy, there is a need to improve and expand existing modalities for cooperation and partnership with youth-led organizations, networks and movements, and to engage the most marginalized young people. Dedicating policy discussions like this International Dialogue on Migration to youth issues is an important step on the way.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I just spoke about meaningful engagement – as the Envoy on Youth, I speak about this all the time. And yes, participation in formal policy processes is extremely important. But what shapes policy? Politics. What shapes politics, is public opinion. And this is where I see an equally important role for young people when we are discussing the topic of migration.

Today, as we all know, young people make up the largest generation in history. And young people constitute the bulk of annual migration movements.

It is so often the case that in public debates words like “Migration” or “Migrants” are reduced to abstract concepts. Abstract concepts that are associated with assumptions, myths, and misconceptions about *who* a migrant really is, and *what* their reasons for migrating might have been.

The largely negative narrative on migration and the political polarization the migration debate reflects, deeply worries me. In a time where globalization and heated online debates between anonymous profiles on Twitter and Facebook are pushing identities to the frontline, it is so easy to approach the debate through harmful dichotomies; us, versus them, young versus old, north versus south. Dichotomies that we know are untrue.

It is never an easy decision to leave everything you hold dear behind to embark on a life-threatening journey looking for better opportunities. Young migrants face extreme dangers, abuse and exploitation on their journey – especially young women and girls. And young people are facing the challenges of migration and displacement at a time of intense cognitive, physical and social development. Young migrants often deal with significant psychological stress and trauma.

But they are at the same time extremely resilient and resourceful in times of crisis – and this perspective is missing from the public debate.

Many young migrants are multi-lingual and possesses important cross-cultural skills and knowledge. Many are entrepreneurs, they have technological expertise, motivation to engage with their communities and clear aspirations for the future. So young migrants do have the potential to contribute to host states and improve international responses and help build solutions for their communities.

More recognition needs to be given to the important role that young people play in the achievement of sustainable development and their positive contributions to origin and host communities.

We need to remember that the reality of migration is overwhelmingly positive. Most migration IS regular, desired, and needed. More than 80 per

cent of the world's migrants move between countries in a safe and orderly fashion.

The notion that Migration is essentially a movement of people from the South to the global North is false and it is untrue. South-South migration today is larger than South-to-North migration. For example, there are more African migrants in other African countries than in Europe.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Migration has always been there, and will always be there.

I believe that we must do better, try harder, to nuance the debate and give a human face to migration. And it is my hope that the outcome of the discussions here today will contribute to shape an evidence-based counter narrative that we can all use going forward. An evidence-based counter-narrative that will inform policies on migration.

Because, advocacy - which I spoke about in the beginning of my remarks - is more than a word, it is a call to action. A call to highlight the needs and rights of people and reach those who can help fulfill those needs and realize those rights. I can see no better advocates for the world we want than young people.

With the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration we have been given a framework for the future. As the world changes, as our populations grow or shrink, and as the impact of climate change develops, we will enter new phases in the history of human mobility.

This is nothing inherently to be frightened of: population growth, after all, is ultimately a triumph of development. But it is something to prepare for and cooperate on: we have no excuse to do otherwise. And the Compact provides a strong platform for that cooperation. For it to succeed, we must insist that the rights, needs and capacities of migrant youth is front and center in its implementation, its follow up and review.

That way, young people all over the world – despite where they are coming from– will be able to realize their full potential.

Thank you.