



# In the Vanguard

## The Role of Youth in an Ever-Advancing Global Society



A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community





**“In the young people of the world ...  
lies a reservoir of capacity to transform  
society waiting to be tapped.”**

~ The Universal House of Justice,  
world governing body of the Bahá’í Faith

**I**n the young people of the world  
lies a vast reservoir of capacity  
to advance the constructive  
transformation of society.

Experience has consistently demonstrated that the desire to bring about positive change and the ability to render meaningful service to the common good are characteristic of the period of youth, irrespective of background or personal circumstance.

In places where this potential has been recognized and conditions created to release it, new patterns of interaction have begun to emerge between generations. This has opened space for youth to take their rightful place in carrying forward the good work of those who came before them. They have similarly taken up the vital service of mentoring those younger than themselves in devoting their precious energies to social progress and transformation.

To speak of “youth” conjures a range of sometimes divergent conceptions—a constituency to be engaged, for example, a thematic area to be addressed, a demographic category to be quantified or even commodified. “Youth” also refers to a period inherent in the human lifecycle, distinguished by particular qualities and capabilities, on the one hand, and unique opportunities to shape the future, on the other.

From this latter perspective, the work at hand is not to assert the importance of young people over other populations. Rather, it is to draw as fully as possible on the potentialities of this stage of life,



for the betterment of all. *“The point isn’t necessarily to create a youth movement,”* said one young person from Brazil. *“The point is for young people to be at the heart of an everybody movement.”*

Recognition of the vital contributions to be made by young people is growing at the United Nations and, more broadly, within the multilateral system of international organizations and processes. This can be seen in both small shifts and larger structural advances, such as the launch of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Youth Envoy’s Office in 2013 or the creation of the United Nations Youth Office in 2022.

Alongside these advances, a still more profound rethinking of the attitudes and assumptions related to the period of youth will be needed if greater masses of the world’s young people are to contribute their full share in devising solutions to humanity’s most pressing challenges. Before young and old alike, then, rises a critical need and an unparalleled opportunity: undertaking a widespread exploration of the role to be played by young people in the advancement and transformation of society.

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# Coherence between global and local

## Drawing upon youth at every level

**“What the generality of a society’s young people do or don’t do shapes the way its elements are organized, the way its communities function, the progress it is able to make, or not. In very real ways, the future possibilities open to any population depend on how its young people view the role of their generation in society and what purpose shapes their individual and collective actions.”**

*~ a young person from Jordan, who supports youth development efforts throughout the Middle East*

While often lauded as the promise of the future, youth are also frequently framed as a looming threat—of mischief, protest, violence—or a potential problem to be solved. Fundamental contradictions thus emerge around the way young people are conceived and the role they are to play in society. Such contradictions are detrimental to youth themselves, but also to the communities and institutions that shape and are shaped by them.

The United Nations could benefit far more from the vital qualities young people possess: their altruism and acute sense of justice, their vitality and vigor, their flexibility of mind and creativity, their desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Acknowledgement of these capacities abounds. Yet the multilateral system tends to silo young people’s engagement around certain issues alone rather than broader societal challenges; to structure opportunities for participation in ways that are more symbolic than substantive; to place youth in demanding situations without the necessary training or support.

Overcoming these patterns will require fundamental changes in how young people are understood, viewed, treated, educated, and supported—both within intergovernmental institutions, but also within societies and local communities. Meaningful change at the international level is dependent on parallel processes of transformation at the local level.

The vast majority of the world’s billion-plus young people will make their first and most immediate contributions to the common good by improving conditions in their local environment. It is within their

own neighborhood or village that most will acquire the experience, capacities, and attitudes on which subsequent efforts to shape society at the national or international levels will be founded.

Of critical importance is leaders and policymakers at the United Nations developing an increasingly detailed vision of the role youth can play in advancing robust processes of social transformation. For theirs is the responsibility to foster the environment, through national and international policy, that allows such transformation to emerge.





## Building capacity at scale

### Youth engagement and a path of organic development

**“The way that a community views youth is a reflection of the community itself. If the community has no vision of itself, no sense of direction, then youth will be seen as a menace, a source of crime, and so on. But if there is a sense of future in the community, a sense of direction and progress, then young people are seen as resources. They are seen as the energy that is going to move the community toward its destination.”**

*~ a young person from Zambia, who supports youth-focused social action efforts across Southern Africa*

To overcome the many challenges facing humanity—establishing sustainable relationships with the natural world, for example, or eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty—the international community needs capable young leaders not by the tens and dozens but by the hundreds of thousands.

Doing so systematically, year after year, calls for a deep shift in paradigm—from one focused primarily at the level of the individual to one working with groups and whole communities. How do entire populations—and not just small numbers of exceptionally motivated or connected individuals—come to function as effective actors shaping their societies’ development? And what is the distinctive role that youth, alongside other populations, can play?

These are questions that the worldwide Bahá’í community has explored through a range of community-based initiatives,

some of which have gradually grown in scope and impact. One program for the moral empowerment of young adolescents, for example, serves some 300,000 young people in 35,000 neighborhood- and village-based groups, in 180 countries. A network of 330 national and regional training institutes, dedicated to developing capacities central to the advancement of civilization, has enabled youth and adults together to sustain several hundred thousand community-building activities at any given time. These welcome the participation of some two million of their neighbors, friends, family members, and co-workers.

Such figures are undeniably modest when compared to the overall population of cities and nations. Nevertheless, places that have built the capacity to sustain thousands of community-building activities in a relatively small geographic area offer a window into possibilities that emerge when growing segments of a population arise in



coordinated action to advance the common good. Voices from youth and young adults involved with these efforts are heard throughout this document.

Endeavors that grow in scale and impact, particularly those that prove sustainable over time, consistently begin as smaller initiatives characterized by certain qualities. These include individuals’ ability to develop new capacities and learn, to explain the significance of their efforts and inspire others to become active supporters, to accommodate and coordinate growing levels of complexity. Often initially sustained by a core group of just a few dedicated individuals, such efforts begin on a modest scale and grow as capacity within the local population develops.

Service of this kind is not necessarily glamorous. Setbacks are not uncommon, and—working household to household and family to family—even successes are often numerically limited, at least in early stages. Yet when sustained over time, such efforts can exercise significant influence on the larger population. Indeed, it can inspire multitudes to arise in action, thereby impacting broader patterns of culture and behavior. As one young person who works with networks of youth across the Indian subcontinent commented:

**“Youth coming together and undertaking small constructive projects for the development of the community have drawn people together, people of many different backgrounds. In this way, these small groups of youth become the glue of the community. They become the catalyst that inspires adults to also take action.”**



## ‘Like light to the youth’

### Convictions that sustain commitment

**“It can sometimes feel lonely, working for change. Youth have taken a lot of strength from being connected to a core of other young people who share similar convictions and are making similar efforts. Having peers to talk through struggles with and explore common questions has allowed them to know that they aren’t alone, and to build connections that sustain them in times of need. The gatherings in our neighborhood have seen a lot of tears, but also many, many joys.”**

*~ a young person from Australia, who works with youth in both the school system and community-based initiatives*

Training has been foundational to the initiatives described above. Such training might well include elements of basic skills, technical capacities, or particular bodies of knowledge. Yet countless young people look to their societies and, aside from economic challenges and material hardships, they also see standards of basic decency waning and capacity for good-faith dialogue ebbing. They see leaders and institutions of all kinds discredited by corruption and inadequacy. They see notions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, increasingly dismissed as irrelevant in favor of the pursuit of self-interest and the struggle for power. And they are convinced that no amount of material or technological advancement will make up for the absence of trustworthiness and honesty, generosity and camaraderie, commitment to truth and a sense of responsibility.

Qualities of character such as these are the building blocks of a stable social order. For this reason, young people’s ability to

better their communities has been greatly enhanced by programs that assist them to apply constructive moral and ethical principles, in action, to advance both personal growth and social transformation. Participation in training of this kind has assisted youth to protect themselves against forces that would manipulate their sense of identity according to the vested interests of others: for example, those that would define them primarily as consumers to be satiated, voters to be persuaded, or viewers to be entertained.

Such programs have similarly helped young people hold and deepen convictions about the kind of individuals they can become and the kind of societies they can call into being—convictions that a peaceful and just world is possible, for example, that deep change for the betterment of society can be consciously advanced, that the capacity for nobility is inherent in the human spirit. The practical application of such ideals is explored through study of educational materials, discussion of key concepts, and



practical acts of service. Understanding is refined through ongoing processes of consultation, where those involved can hold differing views without falling into animosity and disagree while still collaborating to find points of consensus.

To acknowledge the importance of building capacity is not to suggest that youth are lacking or fundamentally dependent on those who are older. To the contrary, youth themselves have, in many cases, provided the lion’s share of the support described above. Thousands of young people have acted as volunteer teachers, tutors, facilitators, mentors, and trainers—of children younger than themselves, peers their own age, and adults sometimes decades their senior. The relationship that emerges between youth and training, then, is reciprocal. Young people can benefit from opportunities to develop their innate talents and capacities, just as systems for training often come to rely heavily on the abilities, energy, and vision of youth.

If the objectives above seem, on first consideration, overly philosophical, experience has shown just the opposite. When assisted to explore issues of moral purpose over time and at depth, youth have demonstrated far greater capacity to overcome setbacks with resilience, to remain free from cynicism and bitterness in the face of adversity, and to protect hope and maintain a spirit of joy even in times of difficulty. Such qualities allow young people to sustain efforts for social change, not just for a year or two, but over the course of an entire lifetime. *“Certain concepts become like light to the youth,”* said one young person who works with youth across the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

**“The idea that you are here for a particular purpose, that this purpose is to develop yourself and contribute to the development of your community—these principles become a light that shines on every aspect of a young person’s life. It helps them navigate life and understand challenges and difficult social conditions.”**



# Ordering the affairs of humanity

## Youth and the multilateral system

**“What is our understanding of the significance of the period of youth in the life of society? What unique roles and responsibilities do they have in building vibrant and socially cohesive communities? What kinds of communal and institutional spaces help young people shoulder their share in the transformation of society?”**

*~ a young person from Germany, reflecting on work with youth and their families across Europe*

In few arenas are the contributions of capable youth more needed than in ordering the affairs of humanity more effectively and coherently at the international level. Less attached to the systems of the status quo, which they had little role in establishing, young people tend to have more imaginative space to conceptualize alternatives to present-day realities and work to bring them into being. But how is the United Nations and its associated agencies to best draw on strengths of this kind?

This question is often answered in terms of amplifying voices and providing access. Numerous decision-making spaces would undoubtedly benefit from greater numbers of young people. Yet the needs of the moment will not be met merely by introducing young voices into “old” systems. Rather, entirely new models of organization, communication, and governance are needed.

Young people have enormous capacity to develop such models, both among themselves and through interactions with other generations. *“We can’t always point fingers when things are not working well, or only give recommendations to others,”* said one young person who is involved in a variety of youth networks and coalitions at the United Nations. *“Each of us is responsible, in our own spheres of influence, to make a contribution that is inclusive, empowering, and unifying.”*

Numerous young people on the international stage are well aware of the need and the power of continually refining their own functioning. In a recent series of gatherings for youth within the United Nations system, for instance, young social actors themselves identified the need to be listening and learning from one another and from the lessons generated by past generations, as much as promoting their own plans and projects.



They noted the importance of avoiding the excesses of a culture of celebrity, including preoccupation with visibility, following, profile, and buzz, which tend to elevate a select few while tacitly disempowering many others. And they emphasized that youth-focused spaces need to constantly include new representatives and voices, and not be allowed to collapse down to a small circle of “regulars.”

Without dismissing the significant impact that young people can have through their own networks, coalitions, and initiatives, it must also be acknowledged that international organizations and spaces often engage youth primarily as attendees rather than protagonists. Significant reform of those spaces will therefore require the partnership of those, often at more advanced points in their career, who hold positions of power and influence.

Many youth-focused reforms have been proposed by various actors, from establishing a permanent Commission on Youth, to improving integration of youth delegates into United Nations processes, to Member States’ formulating national

youth policies and consultative bodies. Such proposals are best understood not as ends in themselves, but rather as means to achieve more overarching objectives—for example, ensuring that policy-making processes are informed by a rich and intergenerational variety of perspectives.

Knowledge and insights, to give a further example, need to be shared from those with more experience in a given area to those with less. How is this to be accomplished, more and more effectively, within the United Nations? Support of this kind might well follow traditional patterns of young people drawing on older colleagues with more experience. Yet understanding and age are not intrinsically linked. Systems of assistance must therefore be ready to accommodate cases in which it is younger people who represent the reservoir of practical experience, and older colleagues who are in need of assistance. In such cases, those associates would need to be prepared to listen, learn, and grow in light of new realities, as youth themselves are often required to do.



# Passage to maturity

## Youth and the path ahead

Today's generation of youth inherits a world undergoing change and turmoil in ways never before witnessed. Humanity has never held more power to shape the physical world on planetary scales, for example, yet climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution pose existential threats. Digital technologies are evolving at a pace scarcely imagined even in recent years, opening vast possibilities but adding further uncertainty to a world already destabilized by gross inequalities, growing polarization, and social fragmentation.

The world order that emerged when the United Nations was founded has brought great advances, its clear limitations and inequities notwithstanding. That order, though, is teetering now and needs to be both renewed and improved. The turbulence and commotion of contemporary life is indicative of systems and structures, inherited from the past, that have proven themselves ill-prepared to address the demands of the future. Humanity is thus being challenged to leave behind ways and habits that have ceased to meet its needs and to equip itself for an age whose challenges and opportunities increasingly demand the wisdom and responsibility of maturity.

In a parallel process of coming of age themselves, young people have a crucial part to play in helping humanity navigate this tumultuous passage to maturity. Youth should no more be romanticized than any other group, and they are far from monolithic. Yet young people have repeatedly proven their readiness to take on a significant measure of responsibility for the well-being of those around them and for the advancement of their societies. Numerous forces, destructive and distracting, can act as obstacles. But these are, at most, only able to obscure the phenomenal potential of youth, never destroy it.

The shifts needed for humanity to advance to its next stage of development are civilizational in scale and scope. Meeting their demands will require vast exertions on the part of every people and population—youth not least among them. Unleashing the full capacities of each generation of young people, then, is a pressing concern for all. How is the period of youth, brimming with possibility, to play its fullest role in the great endeavor of bringing about an ever-advancing global society? The perspectives offered above, drawn from the experience of local communities around the world, start to shed light on questions of this kind. Let us continue learning together.



**“Youth ... are once more summoned to the vanguard of a movement aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the world.”**

*~ The Universal House of Justice,  
world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith*



# Bahá'í International Community

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