



UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# American Youth Priorities Report

Insights for the 11<sup>th</sup>  
UNA-USA Youth Observer  
to the United Nations | 2022





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UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield | Himaja Nagireddy

## The Youth Observer to the United Nations elevates youth voices in international issues.

The program is an initiative of the United Nations Association of the U.S. (UNA-USA).

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, one American between the ages of 18-25 is appointed to the role of Youth Observer to the UN. As a Youth Observer, they engage young people across the U.S. to understand issues that are most important to them, then represent those perspectives at the UNA-USA during UN and U.S. convenings. Himaja Nagireddy, selected in August 2022, is the 11th UNA-USA Youth Observer to the UN.

This report reflects a four-month undertaking to hear from more than 1,900 diverse young people in 22 states. Through conversations and surveys, youth shared personal stories and concerns about social issues, including progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and universal human rights. Their insights and expertise will help address some of the most pressing challenges of our time, and inform Himaja Nagireddy's platform of engagement, as well as ensure that UNA-USA is serving as an effective liaison between American youth and the UN.

# KEY FINDINGS

Note that much of what was shared during the Listening Tour aligned with Sustainable Development Goals



## Intersectionality

of youth issues through the SDGs and human rights



## Participation

of youth in decision-making processes



## Intergenerationality

Connections among the global network of changemakers



## Equity

Reducing inequities and social injustices



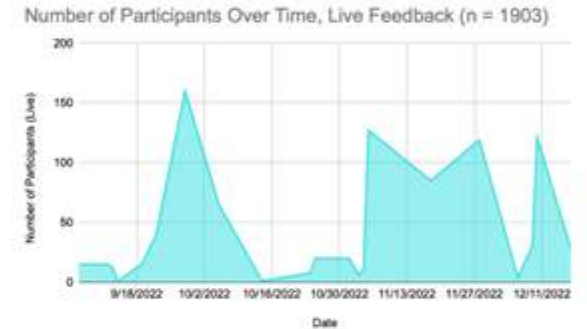
## Participation

**1,903** people provided feedback, with 903 involved in virtual or in-person sessions and 1,000 responding to the online survey.



## Participation Over Time

Number of participants in the live sessions per day over the span of the Listening Tour (September - December 2022)



## Representation

**22 states** were represented (self-identified) among participants.

*\*Location information was not gathered for all sessions (particularly those hosted virtually), and middle America was underrepresented.*



# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE SDGS





## FINDINGS

Many young people said poverty worsened in their community due to COVID-19 and extreme weather conditions from the climate crisis. Food insecurity and lack of access to nutritious food were discussed in almost all Listening Tour stops as a concern at the local, state, national, and international level. Young people also mentioned economic opportunity and work equity as one of the most important human rights, and view poverty as an intersectional issue that is inextricably linked with food and housing insecurity, geography (food deserts), race, gender, age, disability, risk of gentrification or homelessness, and undocumented status.

*I was an undocumented immigrant for most of my life. My family crossed the border from Mexico when I was four years old. We struggled with our undocumented status. My mom couldn't go to therapy to get the mental health support she needed because we didn't have insurance. She enrolled me in private school, working three jobs to afford it – all to protect me. I didn't even know I was undocumented until she told me that I couldn't apply for a driver's license. When I was 17, she was caught by the authorities and deported, banned from entering the U.S. for 10 years. I became homeless overnight. I couldn't afford a place to live and food to eat, let alone go to college. I was living in my friend's closet when I made my first platinum record. I gave everything to my music because I didn't have a plan B. It was a long and hard road, but today, I run a multimillion-dollar production company with three billion streams, a joint venture with SONY, and certification of 40x Platinum. I'm a legalized resident because of DACA, part of the 5% that were fortunate enough. The work I do builds the music culture of Atlanta and the U.S. We develop new artists and leaders of social change. Immigrants like myself have gone through so much – we've experienced unimaginable pain. We channel that pain into everything we do, to try to make some good out of difficult situations. I'm the first millionaire in my family. With my leadership, I work to create an inclusive environment, rich in resources, for people to think, feel, and build something beautiful for themselves and their community. That, to me, makes it worth it.*

**DANNY WOLF (MIGUEL ANGEL FLORES CURTIDOR)**  
Georgia

1



NO

POVERTY





## FINDINGS

Healthcare should be affordable, just, environmentally sustainable, and universal, especially mental health care services, sexual and reproductive health education and resources (e.g., universally-free menstrual products), and LGBTQ+ health care and rights. Bodily autonomy was noted frequently as an important human right, especially the right to abortion. Young people care about body positivity and believe everyone is responsible for promoting inclusion. Young people consider eliminating gun violence a public health priority. Domestic and gender violence also affects many young people in the U.S. and should be addressed. Many young people consider access to the global internet in addition to online privacy and security, a fundamental human right. Bullying is a major issue that continues to affect the health and well-being of students and should be better prioritized. Many young people were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and took on leadership roles in their community to champion good public health practices. Young people call on more prioritization and investments into public health to ensure the health and well-being for all, especially disproportionately vulnerable populations.

# 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING





*As a high school student, I created an organization called HYPE during the pandemic to promote sustainability in four major areas: health, youth, poverty, and education. To address youth mental health concerns – the major silent epidemic of our time – I coordinated a grassroots movement to create a [locally-tailored] app connecting students with supportive and accessible resources.*

**SAHIL SOOD**  
Georgia



# 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

*I advocate for mental health awareness and gender equality through body positivity. Therapy changed my life with my eating disorder and body dysmorphia. I realized that all women are victims of a society that tells them they are not good enough. We are so much more than how we look. It takes an incredible amount of bravery, self-awareness, and self-love to come to the point where you realize you are so much more than how other people perceive you and how they tell you to perceive yourself. We need to stop following the wrong people on social media. Our bodies are not trends. And we need to be educating men as well so they can positively contribute to the movement.*



**JENNA MARKOWITZ**  
Arizona





## FINDINGS

Young people believe access to quality, affordable, comprehensive, capacity-building, unbiased, and language-inclusive education, at all levels, should be a universal right. Many young people call for transforming our education, prioritizing pressing issues such as climate, and promoting inclusive and comprehensive learning. Young people are leading the scientific, technological, entrepreneurial, and artistic advances we need for a more sustainable, equitable, and just future.



*I came to ASU as a design major and joined the Sustainability Committee at Changemaker Central. As part of this, I had to teach others about the SDGs\* and fell in love with them – as an educational tool and a framework for change. I loved seeing people get passionate about the change they wanted to lead in this world. I had conversations and communicated with people – finding where people were working in parallel and bringing them to work together – so we could build a network [with the understanding that the] SDGs require collaboration. The SDGs are an important starting point. They inspire, catalyze, and sustain student-driven social change.*

**LIZZIE QUIGLEY**  
Arizona

\*ASU was ranked #2 in the world by The Higher Education in 2022 for their overall performance and progress in achieving the SDGs.

*I got involved in Model UN in 10th grade because I was instantly drawn to its community and how it emphasized the value of history and international politics in everyday conversations. The very idea of Model UN forces students to research and represent distinct viewpoints from their own, helping us practice nuance in our shared perception of the world. This connects students to a global community and helps them foster an intrinsic empathy. Globalization can desensitize us, but programs like Model UN can make you problem-solve for a better future. This makes you invested in others, and that is the key to solving society's most pressing issues today.*

**RITISHA DAS**  
Arizona



# 4 QUALITY EDUCATION

## FINDINGS

Gender equality is seen as a fundamental human right that we are far from realizing. Women and gender minorities have their rights denied with unequal educational and economic opportunities and compensation, the denial of bodily autonomy, lack of sustained and affordable access to menstrual health products, societal discrimination, etc.

*As a woman of color studying a STEM major in college, I've found gender discrimination to be one of my biggest challenges. There is a clear bias against women in STEM from informal things such as assumptions that women aren't capable of excelling in STEM fields, to systemic issues like wage gaps. I've seen so many peers turn away from STEM because of the discriminatory culture. Encouraging women, girls, and people who are gender diverse is critical since there is a culture that discriminates against them. It is necessary to intentionally provide opportunities for them since they are constantly denied opportunities due to the bias.*

**ARIANNA ROBERTS** Massachusetts



*As a Division I female athlete in college, I have seen people hold stereotypes and discriminate based on gender. I hear people say that men are better than women at sports and that women's sports are easier. However, I know firsthand how equally fierce and demanding women's competitions are to men's. I find such comments disappointing because they negate all the tears and sweat we have left on our journey. Women's sports aren't easier, because, for us, it is just as hard to win anything, if not harder, as it is for men.*



**SOFÍA  
PINEDO  
FERNÁNDEZ**  
Georgia

# 5 GENDER EQUALITY

## FINDINGS

Young people care deeply about climate change and its effect on air, soil (desertification), water, ocean pollution, and on all of Earth's species. They actively advocate for environmental and climate-related social justice and equity, understanding the disproportionate impact these factors have on vulnerable populations, including those living on small island nations, in low- and middle-income countries, women and gender minorities, people in poverty, disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups, and indigenous people.

Young people call for urgent, multisector action to combat the climate crisis, including transformation of the circular economy, sustainable and ethical production and consumption, loss and damage funding, reduction in emissions from fossil fuels, sustainable and ethical renewable energy, and healthy infrastructure.



*I experienced environmental injustice as a young Black kid growing up in Florida with breathing issues. I didn't realize this was a civil rights issue until going to law school and learning that if you are a person of color, indigenous, or live in certain areas, you are more likely to face environmental injustice.*

***Environmental racism will continue to perpetuate and affect the most vulnerable if we don't address it.***



**ABRÉ  
CONNER**  
California

**13 CLIMATE  
ACTION**

*Indigenous people are born activists, because our bodies, our basic existence and survival, is an activist stance. I grew up on my reservation in California, and was there during the largest salmon kill in West Coast history. The day after one of our tribal ceremonies, we woke up to see 60,000 salmon dead on the rocky shoreline of the river. These were salmon that were taken care of by my ancestors for our tribe's health and well-being. I dedicate my life to education and advocacy because I never want something like happen again.*



**BROOK THOMPSON**  
California

## FINDINGS

Many American youth see the U.S. as a major historic and current contributor to the climate crisis and global environmental injustice, therefore bearing additional responsibility and opportunity for the U.S. to be at the forefront of climate action. For many young people, climate advocacy and mental health go hand in hand, and climate uncertainty and anxiety needs to be better addressed.

CLIMATE  
CHANGE  
IS REAL

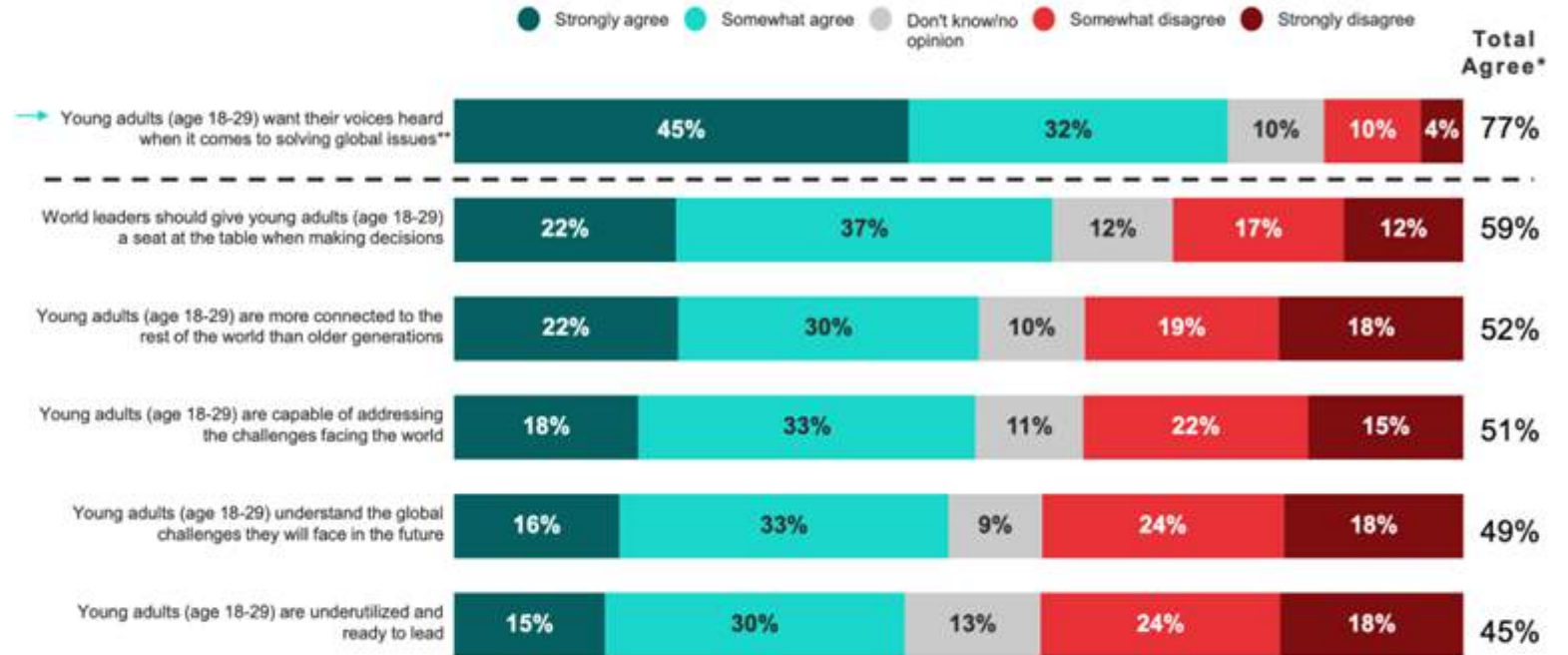
SAVE THE

13 CLIMATE  
ACTION



**77% of young adults agree it is important to have their voices heard to solve global issues.**

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:



\* Total Agree = % Strongly Agree + % Somewhat Agree \*\*Among Young Adults (18-29) only, n = 1351.

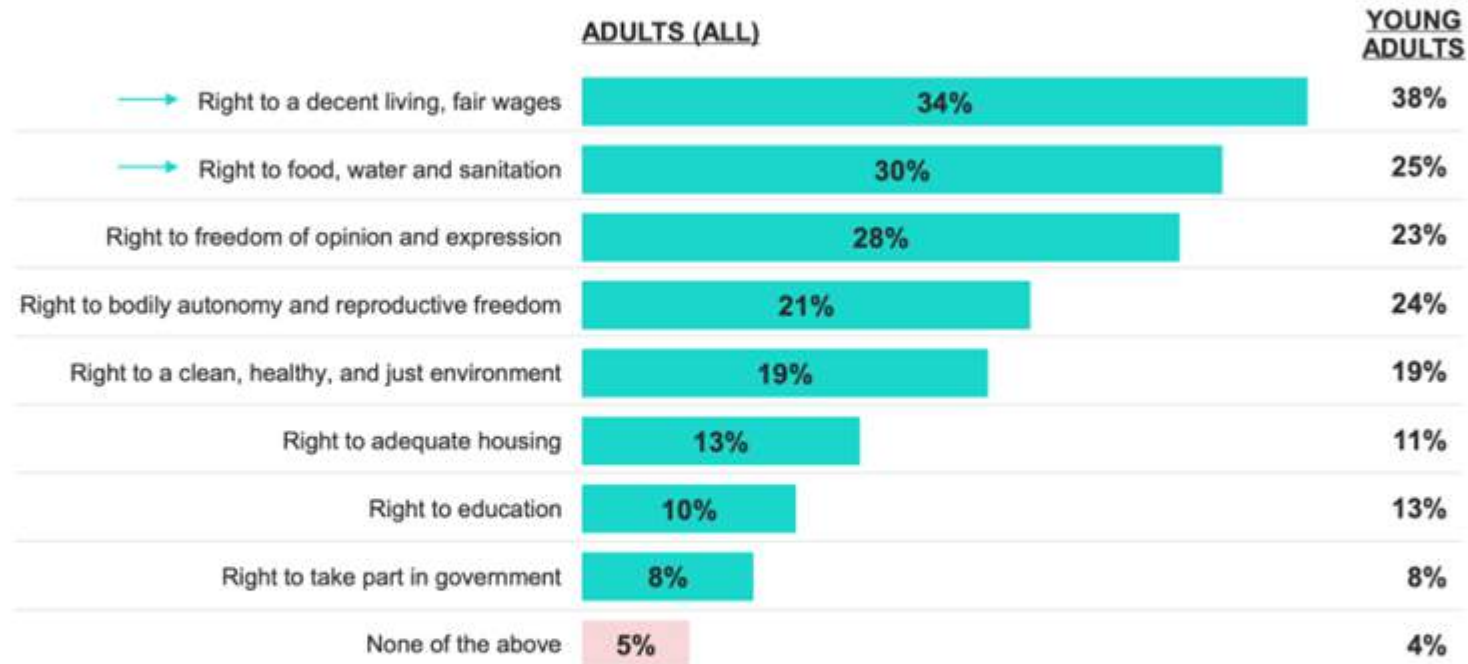
Figure 1

# SURVEY RESULTS



A right to decent living and fair wages is a top priority for more than a third of young Americans across the political spectrum.

From the following list of fundamental human rights, which do you believe is the most pressing priority for lawmakers around the world to address? Please select up to two issues.



Nearly a third of Democrats (31%) and Republicans (30%) believe the right to food, water and sanitation is the most pressing fundamental human right for lawmakers around the world to address.

Figure 2

# SURVEY RESULTS



**Governments promoting human rights for all are a top priority for 36% of young adults; protecting the planet was important for 31% of young adults.**

From the following list of global challenges, which do you believe is the most pressing priority for governments around the world to address? Please select up to three issues.

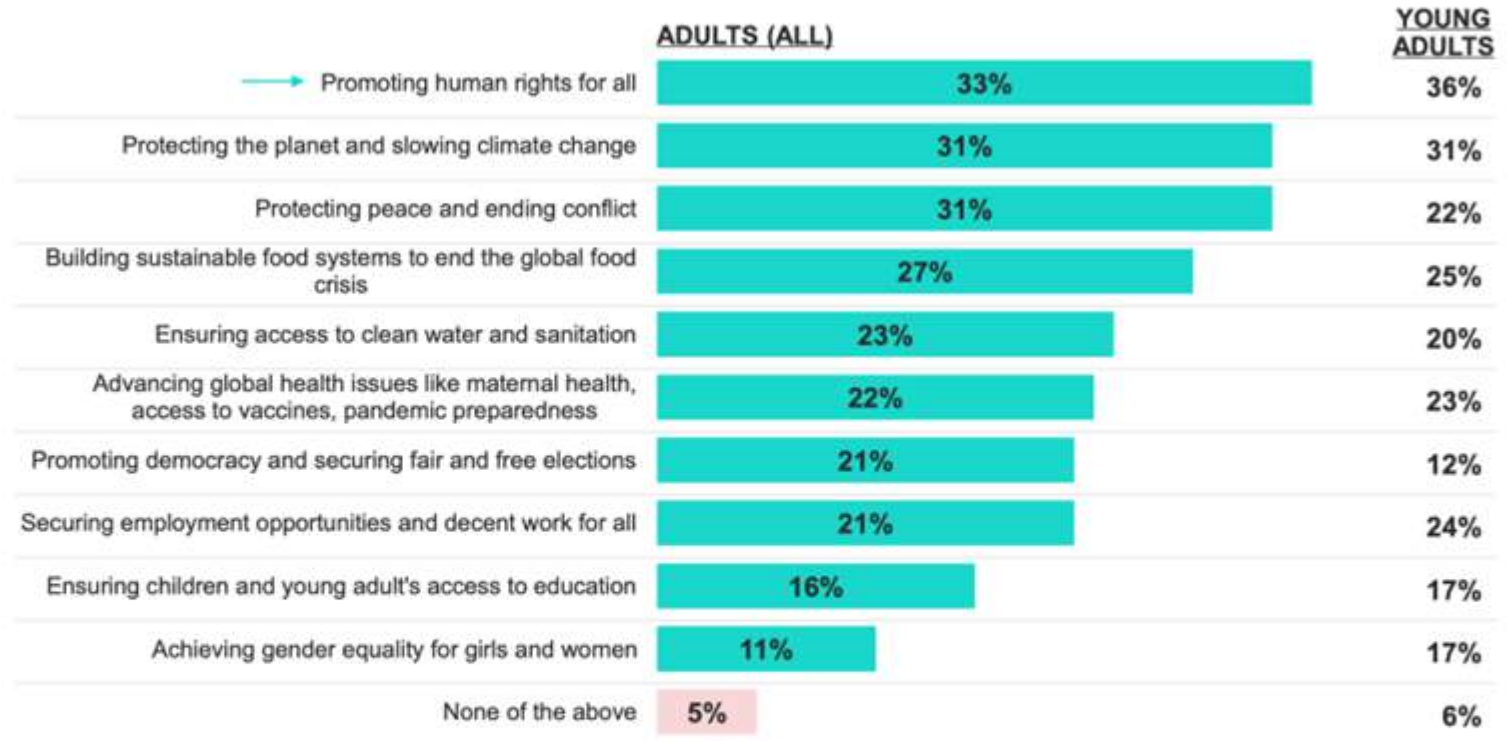


Figure 3

# SURVEY RESULTS





Over 60% of youth believe in their capacity to lead; there is little consensus across generations about how to prepare youth, highlighting the need for cooperation.

Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Total Agree*	Young Adults (18-29)	Older Adults (30+)	(Young Adults – Older Adults)
Young adults (age 18-29) are more connected to the rest of the world than older generations	66%	47%	(-19)
Young adults (age 18-29) are capable of addressing the challenges facing the world	66%	47%	(-19)
World leaders should give young adults (age 18-29) a seat at the table when making decisions	66%	57%	(-9)
Young adults (age 18-29) understand the global challenges they will face in the future	63%	44%	(-19)
Young adults (age 18-29) are underutilized and ready to lead	59%	39%	(-20)

\* Total Agree = % Strongly Agree + % Somewhat Agree.

Figure 4

# SURVEY RESULTS



Young adults support the effectiveness of institutions such as the UN in addressing important issues; 54% of young adults rank the UN as positioned to solve the food crisis.

How are each of the following entities positioned to solve the global food crisis? Please rank the following entities with '1' being the best positioned and '5' being the worst positioned to solve the global food crisis.



Figure 5

# SURVEY RESULTS





This poll was conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of the Better World Campaign and the United Nations Association of the U.S. (UNA-USA), and questions inspired by the Listening Tour session questions were integrated into the poll. The findings were presented at this year's commemoration of UN Day, hosted by the UN Foundation at the U.S. Institute of Peace in October 2022. The year's theme – Nourishing Peace – recognized the conflict and hunger crises escalating around the world.

The poll was conducted October 7-8, 2022, among a sample of 2,210 adults and an oversample of 1,000 young adults (ages 18-29). Interviews were held online, and data were weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on gender, age, race, educational attainment, and region. Results from the full survey have a +/- 2% margin of error. Young adults are defined as ages 18-29 years old; older adults are over age 30.

## SURVEY DETAILS



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## Intergeneration Connections

Connections among the global network of changemakers

- Young people **see the importance and imperative for intergenerational collaboration** to further advocacy agendas. Many participants view the Youth Observer as a vital role in liaising between younger and older UNA-USA members and between youth and seasoned professionals at the UN system.
- Young people sometimes **feel disconnected from global crises but are passionate** about learning about issues, forming intersectional perspectives, and actively playing a role, when appropriate, to meet communities where they are through advocacy and contributing to needed change. Young people work hard to build global coalitions and want to grow these connections, while also emphasizing local collaborative organizing and community efforts to create meaningful change.
- Young people benefit from and **need more peer support systems**. That said, the **burden of responsibility should not fall on youth to create and uphold these systems** without proper resources, mentorship, and help with capacity building from more experienced changemakers.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## Equity

Reducing  
inequities and  
social injustices

- Young people believe that the UN can be a place of **greater representation, greater protection of human rights, and peace and security.**
- **Refugee and immigrant rights** matter to young people and many have dedicated much of their advocacy to providing needed services for these populations in their local community.
- Many resources for young people are outdated, and there are **large gaps in communication** that prevent young people from getting access to public service opportunities they might be interested in; there is only so much students can do to obtain this information.
- Young people feel their **freedom of speech and expression** – in line with the UN’s mission and goals – should be better protected.
- Young people care about their **right to credible news and news literacy.**



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## Participation

Reducing inequities  
and social injustices

- Young people want to meaningfully working with the UN to have an impact in their communities; **they believe in and champion localizing the global goals.**
- Young people believe **civic engagement is critical to youth representation**, especially the right to vote and participate in politics.
- Many young people feel they **don't have avenues to reach out directly to or provide feedback to their U.S. and UN leaders** on important social issues. This emphasizes the importance of the Youth Observer program to facilitate connections and build avenues of UN involvement for American youth.
- Young people **face barriers when participating in, serving as delegates, and taking the lead as negotiators at UN conferences.** Many struggle finding affordable and safe accommodation, food, transportation, adequate accessibility to facilities, gender neutral bathrooms, etc. For those who able to overcome these barriers, many do not feel their attendance has a meaningful impact on decision-making, especially if one is new to these spaces. **People primarily on the frontlines are disproportionately underrepresented or not represented at all.**



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## Participation continued

- Young people have seen that **youth representation is often performative or “tokenized,”** with little decision-making authority and the number of young people asked to represent a large, diverse body often being far too minimal.
- Young people care about **empowering youth**, and many focus their advocacy on pushing the boundaries to allow.
- Young people have a **hard time being heard**. Despite efforts to reach out to school officials, elected representatives, etc., many don't receive the audience they request to contribute their ideas, insight, and knowledge to the work being done to solve global issues. There is also little to no follow-up or action in response to feedback and suggestions shared.
- Many young professionals are interested in pursuing careers of public service but do not have an equitable opportunity to work in the UN, U.S. government, and impact-driven organizations, which often have high experience thresholds for programs, employment, or internships.
- Organizations like UNA-USA are valuable to young people because they **provide approachability and avenues of being represented in the UN**, which can feel exceedingly large, complex, and inaccessible; this provides young people the opportunity to make a greater impact with their engagement.





# Connecting the Dots

## WHAT WE LEARNED

Our results are crucial in informing current U.S. and UN priorities and campaigns. During the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, the UN Youth Office was established to facilitate “full, effective, constructive, and inclusive participation of youth in decision-making.” In the next session of the General Assembly in 2023, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (SDG Summit) will be convened to “carry out a comprehensive review of the state of the SDGs, respond to the... crises facing the world, and provide high-level political guidance on transformative and accelerated actions leading up to the target year of 2030 for achieving the SDGs,” and young people will be consulted and invited into these Summit meetings as important stakeholders.

Furthermore, Commitment #11 of the UN Our Common Agenda: Listen to and Work with Youth, specifically highlights the importance of reducing barriers to youth participation in politics, supporting educational and labor transformations, and thinking long-term by working towards a repurposed Trustees Council, a Declaration on Future Generations, and a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations. Building on this, the UN Foundation Next Generation Fellows and the Unlock the Future Coalition put together *Our Future Agenda* to specifically address the biggest challenges facing young people under the age of 30 – now and in the future – on issues this Listening Tour report covers, including transforming education, jobs and economic opportunity, and climate and sustainability.







# Connecting the Dots

UN Envoy on Youth, Jayathma Wickramanayake, spearheaded the *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign earlier in May 2022, to promote youth participation and amplify young voices in public life, especially since young people are routinely excluded from decision-making processes that directly impact them and their futures.

The U.S. government affirms this position, noting, "Now is the time to think for the long term, to deliver more for young people and succeeding generations, and to be better prepared for the challenges ahead." They recommend we strengthen meaningful and inclusive youth engagement and leadership within and outside the UN.

Current work of the UN Foundation and UNA-USA can also be strengthened with the findings of this Listening Tour. The UN Foundation will be hosting the United to Beat Malaria 2023 Leadership Summit – a youth-focused conference bringing together advocacy, policy, global health, and civics. Youth Observers have been and hopefully will continue to be a part of this annual Summit, recognizing that good health and well-being is a top priority for young people, even more so given the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that financial barriers continue to prevent young people from pursuing internships with the UN, UNA-USA launched a first-of-its-kind scholarship to fund college seniors and recent university graduates pursuing internships at the UN, with an emphasis on supporting individuals from under-resourced and under-represented groups, including those attending historically Black colleges and universities. This UNA-USA Fellowship, announced by Linda Thomas-Greenfield on UN Day 2022, is a step toward creating a more inclusive UN and engaging more young people in fair and just public service leadership.





## NEXT STEPS

# Youth Declaration of Human Rights

Young people across the United States care deeply about human rights and how these rights intersect with the SDGs and other social issues. As showcased in the data and findings herein, young people are also looking for ways to collaborate with each other and older generations, engage more meaningfully with the UN, lead impactful advocacy efforts, and make positive change in their local communities. As we welcome the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2023 and approach the 2030 deadline for realizing our SDGs, there is no better time than now to recommit ourselves to learning about and protecting human rights.

In 1936, the American Youth Congress, with support from then first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, issued a Declaration of the Rights of American Youth, which primarily addressed inalienable rights and economic justice. Three years later, the movement had reached over four million people and 500 organizations. This was a monumental effort that helped contextualize, prioritize, and unify the advocacy for youth rights in response to the most pressing issues of the time. Now, nearly a century later, we recognize that these youth rights and priorities may have changed and may not reflect and do justice to underrepresented and marginalized youth populations.

This has inspired us to use findings from UNA-USA youth to launch an effort to draft a Youth Declaration of Human Rights. The Youth Declaration of Human Rights will use the UN Declaration of Human Rights and elements of the U.S. Bill of Rights as a framework. The Declaration will reflect feedback we have gathered and continue to gather as part of a Spring Consultation Series with the UNA-USA Human Rights Affinity Group, UNA-USA chapters across the country, and other partner organizations. These local consultations – themed on the key findings indicated in this report and reflecting current youth advocacy efforts – will inform articles in the Youth Declaration.



AMERICAN LEADERSHIP  
ON THE **SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**



To everyone who reads this report – thank you. Conducting this Listening Tour has been a life-changing experience. Connecting directly with young people from across our country on the issues that matter to them most - on the issues that they struggle with every day - has been incredibly eye-opening and moving. I plan to do justice to the findings, weaving these Youth priorities into my work for the spring semester. These results, on top of informing our building of a Youth Declaration of Human Rights, will be shared in all the UN and U.S. conferences and high-level meetings that I occupy. In all efforts for the remainder of my term (and beyond!), I will continue to amplify and empower our youth voices and advocacy, with the hope that our calls to action for a more just, equitable, and sustainable world are acted upon. I hope this Listening Tour report inspires you to do the same.

**HIMAJA NAGIREDDY**

**UNA-USA Youth Observer**

