

In Iraq, UN Youth Envoy says young people are 'most valuable force we have to shape a better future'

12 August 2017 – As [International Youth Day](#) events kicked off worldwide today, at a special event in Iraq, the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Jayathma Wickramanayake, pledged to do everything in her power to ensure the voices of youths, including those working to build peace, are heard.

Today, thousands of young women and men work tirelessly, often under very dangerous conditions and with very little support or recognition, to build peace and promote security for all, Ms. Wickramanayake, told the event, which was hosted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Iraq.

The event, in Baghdad, is part of the [newly-appointed](#) Envoy's first international mission. Her activities have touched on the theme of the 2017 edition of the Day, 'Youth Building Peace,' dedicated to celebrating young people's contributions to conflict prevention and transformation as well as inclusion, social justice, and sustainable peace.

As one of the most youthful countries in the world with over 60 percent of the population under the age of 25, Iraq despite the many challenges it faces is uniquely positioned to harness the potential of its young generation to promote peace and prosperity.

Challenges will remain however, and continue to obstruct a path to development and peace if they are not matched by offering young people real opportunities for education, employment and civic participation.

[Young people] are the most valuable force we have to shape a better future, Ms. Wickramanayake said, and added, in a [message](#) directed to the young people of Iraq: The United Nations is with you and I, as your Envoy, will do everything within my power to ensure that your voices are heard.

The event, organized in partnership with the UN Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)) Country Office in Baghdad, convened over 1,000 young people from all over Iraq and was attended by Abed Al-Hussein Abtan, Minister of Youth and Sports of Iraq, and Lise Grande, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Iraq.

Reconciliation is right now and without doubt the highest priority in Iraq, said Ms. Grande and the key to ensuring that reconciliation is sustainable is ensuring that youth are involved in every reconciliation meeting, every reconciliation initiative and every reconciliation conference.

For his part, Mr. Abtan called on Iraqi youth to play the true role in contributing to all aspects of life in order to create an advanced Iraq that conveys a positive picture to the world.

RELATED: [Youth can play 'critical role' in creating a peaceful world for generations to come](#) UN chief

While in Baghdad, Ms. Wickramanayake met with young people from different backgrounds to discuss issues affecting Iraqi youth, with a particular focus on young women, internally displaced young people, and young people who are neither in employment, education, or training.

In addition, she met with the Officials of the Ministry of Youth and the Heads and Officials of UN Country team and the UN assistance Mission for Iraq ([UNAMI](#)) and discussed further avenues to strengthen youth focused programmes.

INTERVIEW: Meet the new UN Youth Envoy, Jayathma Wickramanayake

11 August 2017 – Hailing from Sri Lanka, the second-ever United Nations Youth Envoy is no stranger to rolling up her sleeves to get things done.

Before taking on her role as UN Youth Envoy, 26-year-old Jayathma Wickramanayake worked diligently in her mother country to transform the youth development sector. From 2013 to 2015, she served as a Senator at the Sri Lankan Youth Parliament and from 2016 to 2017 as Secretary to the Secretary-General of the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

Now working at the UN, her dedication to including youth globally comes out in force as she vows to do everything in her capacity to strive towards making the UN an inclusive system in which all youth is welcomed.

Speaking to UN News, she stressed that as Youth Envoy, she wants to ensure that all youth have a home at the United Nations.

UN News: Can you elaborate on your role as UN Youth Envoy?

JW: Since my school days, I have been very active in community work – volunteering both in and outside of school. When I entered university, the Sri Lankan Ministry of Youth Affairs organized the first-ever competition to select emerging young leaders in the country. I became the runner up. I was then invited by the Youth Ministry and the UN Country Team in Sri Lanka to contribute to different programmes and policies being drafted at that time, such as the National Youth Policy of Sri Lanka, the Youth Employment Action Plan and the World Health Organization's Noncommunicable Disease Prevention Programme.

AUDIO: The steps Ms. Wickramanayake took that transported her from Sri Lankan youth activist to UN Youth Envoy. Credit: UN News

Little by little I became introduced to the UN, including by becoming part of the UN Volunteer force.

In 2012, when Sri Lanka started the Youth Delegate Programme, I was selected as one of my country's first Youth Delegates to participate in the UN's 69th General Assembly.



Jayathma Wickramanayake speaking at the National Youth Council of Sri Lanka. Credit: Media Unit, National Youth Council of Sri Lanka.

In preparation, I travelled around Sri Lanka for a month, speaking with different young people from a variety of communities to formulate a statement on the issues they wanted the UN to hear, which I subsequently delivered to the Third Committee [Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee].

As I was finishing my tenure as Youth Delegate in 2013, Sri Lanka was preparing to host the 2014 World Youth Conference, for which I was appointed to the International Youth Task Force that advised on its programme, proceedings, agenda, and declaration.

At that time, 74 million youth globally were unemployed and there was a huge gap in terms of school-to-work transition, which underscored a need for skills development.

For about one year and a half I worked on the Conference with a team of energetic young people from 10 parts of the world, including 10 Sri Lankans. I then worked closely with the UN and the Sri Lankan government to adopt the resolution to declare World Skills Day.

Back in Sri Lanka, I started a grass roots youth organization with other Sri Lankan former UN Youth Delegates called Hashtag Generation to build the capacity of young people to participate in politics.



The Youth Envoy gives her first public remarks in her new role during World Youth Skills Day at UN Headquarters in New York. Credit: Jess Walker

UN News: What inspired you to take on the role of UN Youth Envoy?

JW: I served as Youth Delegate during the formulation process of the [SDGs](#) [Sustainable Development Goals]. In the UN, I saw how young people came together with diverse ideas, proposals and plans of action to weigh-in on framing the future development agenda.

This is a time in history that we can really make a change

I also recognized that there is a need for the UN to engage young people and get their perspective on how the world should look in 2030 because, ultimately, it is the youth who will lead the implementation of this agenda.

I think this is a time in history that we can really make a change because the future will depend on the implementation of the SDGs, and young people will have a crucial role to play.

The new Secretary-General's vision, which is to place youth at the centre of the UN's work, also inspired me to become engaged in the process as the Youth Envoy.

UN News: What are some your goals as UN Youth Envoy?

JW: The terms of reference under the Secretary-General's vision for young people focuses on the meaningful participation of youth across the four pillars of the UN's work, namely development; human rights; peace and security; and humanitarian action.

My goal would be to ensure that young people have a voice in all of these processes at the UN, with a special focus on the participation of girls and young women.

Institutionalizing youth participation in the UN is important because, as a Youth Delegate, I saw young people working hard on the ground – but without access to UN discussions that institutionalize youth participation. Instead, they often participate in very informal ways through their networks, non-governmental organization or during side events at forums that take place at the UN.

There is a need to formally recognize youth as partners in core processes at the UN. For example, when a government brings a delegation to negotiate a declaration on, say, peace and security, we can always include a youth delegate – ensuring that there is space for young people in the meeting room.

UN News: You have been in office for less than a month. Can you tell us about what you have already done in your first weeks here?

JW: It was quite iconic because I started my tenure as the Youth Envoy on 15 July, World Youth Skills Day, for which I had worked to adopt the pertinent resolution.

That and the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), where my office in partnership with other UN actors and Member States organized many events around youth and skills development and the engagement of young people in voluntary national reviews of the SDGs.

So, my first week was full of activities around the HLPF and gave me the opportunity to meet different stakeholders who were in town at that time.

On my fourth day in office, I had a special meeting with all the youth representatives, who were in New York for the forum. I was able to get their ideas of how they see the role of Youth Envoy and what they expect from me. It was a very good experience.

UN News: What has surprised you about the job so far?

JW: Not sure I would call it a surprise, but in this role, every day I meet young people who work tirelessly on the ground, who sometimes sacrifice their lives, compromise so much for causes that they believe are true.

It really inspires me, and on a daily basis. I think that is the best part of this job!

UN News: What do you foresee as your biggest challenge?

JW: There is a growing rhetoric about young people's participation in formal processes. While everyone acknowledges that they should have a seat at the table, when it comes to implementing this, most often we take a step back. We find excuses not to include youth in discussions about investing in young people, or to find avenues for young people from different backgrounds to participate.

I see the challenge is actually converting this talk to work.



The Youth Envoy addresses a High-Level Luncheon on the demographic dividend – organized by the President of the General Assembly, President of Economic and Social Council and the UN Population Fund. Credit: Eddie Wright

UN News: What changes do you think the UN needs to make in order to reach and be more relevant in young people's lives?

JW: There are two approaches that we can adopt. Firstly, I think the UN has a responsibility to go to young people and meet them where they are. We cannot expect all youth from different communities, religions and ethnic backgrounds to come to the UN.

For example, this International Youth Day, 12 August, I am celebrating with young people in Iraq, where the theme of "Youth Building Peace" is very relevant in their national context. I come from a region that is constantly affected by conflict, and have personally seen the effects it has had on young people. In Iraq, I will meet with close to 1,000 youth, discussing the problems they are facing.

There, I will also convene meetings with the Government and other stakeholders to see how we can resource youth development in Iraq and devise methods to constantly and substantively engage young people in preventing conflicts as well as in post-conflict reconciliation activities.

There is a need to see young people not as a liability but as an opportunity

Most often the UN jargon is not very familiar to the young people doing good work in advancing the lives of youth in their villages and communities. By taking the UN closer to young people I do not necessarily mean physically, but through new technologies, such as social media, to connect with youth in a language they can understand.

The second approach is to have the UN system look at young people. Today they comprise more than half of the world's population – the largest youth population in the history of the world. There is a need to see young people not as a liability but as an opportunity, and to see how we can proactively engage them in all discussions, at all levels.

[After four years of conflict, uncertainty lingers for displaced Ukrainians – UN refugee agency](#)

11 August 2017 – As the conflict in Ukraine enters its fourth year, nearly 1.6 million internally displaced people are struggling to find safety, adequate housing and access to employment, according to the United Nations refugee agency.

“Sporadic exchanges of fire in areas near the line of contact continue to damage civilian infrastructure, leading to [new humanitarian needs](#) and creating risks of displacement,” said Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, at today's regular press briefing in Geneva.

“Safety and security remain major concerns for nearly 800,000 people living near the Line of Contact in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in the country's east,” he added.

In June, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine recorded more than 1.1 million crossings of the dividing line in eastern Ukraine “sparking UNHCR's concern about difficulties over civilians' freedom of movement, particularly while crossing the conflict line.

“There are frequently long queues and subsequent delays at checkpoints. Those waiting to cross have limited access to basic services, such as drinking water, latrines, weather shelters and medical care,” the spokesperson noted.

Mr. Mahecic pointed out that this creates additional hardships for those with limited mobility and specific needs, especially older people and mothers with children making the journey.

“Since the beginning of 2016, nearly 586,000 retired and elderly people residing in the conflict zone lost access to their pensions as a result of verification procedures introduced by the Government of Ukraine. This has affected the most vulnerable groups, as many of them depend on pensions and social payments as their sole source of income,” he stated.

“Those living in non-Government controlled areas are required to register as internally displaced persons with the Ukrainian authorities in order to have access to their rightful pensions and social payments,” he continued.

UNHCR and partners advocate for displaced people to have full access to Government services and payments, and de-linking pensions and social benefits from residences.

The agency also maintains that at least 40 communities near the dividing line have limited access to medical services with some 150 healthcare facilities damaged since the start of the conflict and medical personnel have left the area.

Noting that in 2017, UNHCR helped to repair 89 schools, Mr. Mahecic stressed that “children in affected zones have limited access to education due to the security situation and damaged school buildings with at least 700 damaged since the conflict began, including 55 schools this year alone.

Earlier this year UNHCR received first-hand testimonies of displaced people while conducting focus groups with conflict-affected population including women; orphaned children; persons with disabilities and medical conditions; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and intersex people throughout 10 regions of Ukraine.

Along with problems of security, access to basic services, and livelihoods, residents of frontline communities told of civilian houses being used for military purposes.

“The stationing of combatants and weapons in residential areas places civilian populations at risk during fighting,” Mr. Mahecic underscored.

In conclusion, the spokesperson stressed that UNHCR continues to call on all conflict parties to protect civilians and their communities from fighting and shelling, and to restrict the use of civilian homes for military purposes.

UN agency sounds alarm as drought-stricken herders in Ethiopia face massive livestock losses

11 August 2017 – Drought has devastated herders' livelihoods as it exhausted pastures and water sources, the United Nations agriculture agency said today, stressing that supporting them to get back on their feet and prevent further livestock losses are crucial in the Horn of Africa country, where hunger has been on the rise this year.

The drought has led to a significant number of animals dying or falling ill, particularly in the southern and south-eastern regions of the country, as other areas recover from previous seasons' El Niño-induced drought, [warned](#) the Food and Agriculture Organization of the [\(FAO\)](#).

FAO pointed out that drought-hit pastoralists face reduced milk production, rising malnutrition, and have limited income-earning capacity and severely constrained access to food.

Some 8.5 million people – one in 12 people – are now suffering from hunger; of these, 3.3 million people live in Somali Region, said the UN agriculture agency.

The current food and nutrition crisis is significantly aggravated by the severe blow to pastoral livelihoods. For livestock-dependent families, the animals can literally mean the difference between life and death – especially for children, pregnant and nursing mothers, for whom milk is a crucial source of nutrition.

With up to two million animals lost so far, FAO is focusing on providing emergency livestock support to the most vulnerable pastoralist communities through animal vaccination and treatment, supplementary feed and water, rehabilitating water points, and supporting fodder and feed production.

It is crucial to provide this support between now and October – when rains are due – to begin the recovery process and prevent further losses of animals. If we don't act now, hunger and malnutrition will only get worse among pastoral communities, said Abdoul Karim Bah, FAO Deputy Representative in Ethiopia.

By providing supplementary feed and water for livestock, while simultaneously supporting fodder production, FAO seeks to protect core breeding animals and enable drought-hit families to rebuild their livelihoods.

In addition to FAO-supported destocking and cash-for-work programmes to provide cash for families, animal health campaigns will be reinforced to protect animals, particularly before the rain sets in – when they are at their weakest and more susceptible to parasites or infectious diseases.

Funding appeal

FAO urgently requires \$20 million between August and December to come to the aid of Ethiopia's farmers and herders.

FAO has already assisted almost 500,000 drought-hit people in 2017 through a mix of livestock feed provision, destocking and animal health interventions, thanks to the support of the Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden through FAO's Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities, the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund, as well as FAO's own Early Warning Early Action fund and Technical Cooperation Programme.

[Iraq: UN refugee agency steps up humanitarian support for families returning to Mosul](#)

11 August 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency has been stepping up its assistance for people, including thousands of returnees, in the Iraqi city of Mosul, which had until recently been the scene of a fierce battle for control between terrorist fighters and the Government forces.

'Our field assessments show that the returning population of Mosul needs assistance of every kind, but the shelter needs are the most pressing, particularly in the western part of the city,' said Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), at the press regular briefing in Geneva.

Many neighbourhoods in the west have been extensively damaged or totally destroyed during months of fighting,' he added.

Mosul was liberated from control by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist organization in July.

UN partners say that of the 54 residential districts in west Mosul, 15 suffered destruction or heavy damage, another 23 areas are moderately damaged, while further 16 neighbourhoods sustained light damage.

Mr. Mahecic said that mines, unexploded ordnance and related devices pose massive risks for the city's residents, especially children, welcoming the ongoing mine clearing efforts by the authorities and the UN Mine Action Service.

Returning families also face challenges in accessing basic services and utilities – accessing water, electricity or fuel in parts of Mosul can

be difficult and very expensive, he added.

So far, according to government figures, some 79,000 people returned to battered west Mosul — one out of every ten people who were forced to flee from this part of the city. Also, the government says, more than 165,000 people have now returned to the considerably less damaged east Mosul, where day-to-day life is gradually resuming.

However, managers in the camps for internally displaced persons in east Mosul estimate that at least 200 families have moved back to the camps after finding living conditions difficult in Mosul.

Reasons cited for their return include lack of shelter; high rental prices; a lack of livelihood opportunities and limited basic services such as electricity and water.

Since the end of the military campaign to retake the city, UNHCR has distributed shelter kits to more than 3,200 families in east and west Mosul while also providing cash assistance to some of the most vulnerable displaced Iraqi families.

Large numbers of IDPs and returnees are also missing key civil documents. UNHCR and partners are providing legal assistance and supporting local authorities to reissue civil and identity documents to displaced families in the camps, including birth and marriage certificates.

Given the scale of the destruction in Mosul, particularly in the western sector, humanitarian needs will remain high, the spokesperson said.