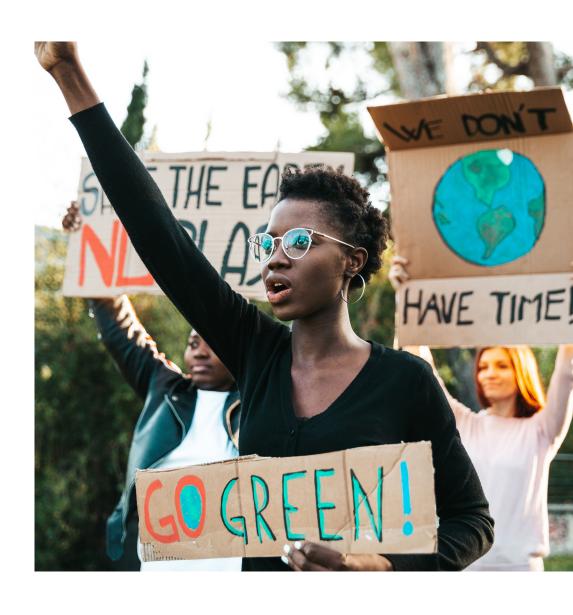JUNE 2023
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"We Need to Act Now"
The Global Concerns Shared by Young People

TONY BLAIR INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL CHANGE

GENERATION GLOBAL

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Introduction

In 2022, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) consulted with young people participating in its Generation Global programme to understand what concerned them the most, what needed to change and how young people could contribute to making a difference. Generation Global is a global citizenship programme that has supported more than 600,000 young people and trained over 15,000 teachers from more than 40 countries in the skills of intercultural dialogue. Using questionnaires and discussion groups, we asked our network what they thought were the most pressing issues for policymakers to address – and while our young people come from many countries, their responses showed consensus across borders. We also collaborated with One Young World to understand how its network of young ambassadors view key global challenges; these findings mirrored the top concerns identified by Generation Global.

Our consultation identified consensus among young participants on the following priorities:

- **Better education.** Young people highlighted increasing disparities in access to education, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing inequalities. They also prioritised the quality of education, concluding that existing systems focus too much on scores and not enough on global challenges or preparation for everyday life.

- **Meaningful action on climate change.** Young people indicated that, while they are aware governments are taking steps to address climate change, they believe that action to date has been insufficient and is often tokenistic. They see the threat from climate change as both long-term and immediate, amid discernible changes in regional climates. Young people called for stronger measures to limit carbon emissions, end deforestation and support those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

- **Greater social inclusion, especially for women and religious minorities.** Young people noted that structural obstacles continue to impede women's agency. Misogyny is limiting opportunities for women when, for example, the education of boys is prioritised over that of girls

due to their perceived greater earning potential. While there has been progress on legislation and policy aimed at enhancing women's rights, in practice women still face barriers in employment. Many young people also identified respecting personal religious choices as important, with religion seen as an important part of individual identity but less a part of the public sphere.

While urging policymakers to act on these priorities, young people also believed that these issues would be taken seriously only if younger generations were meaningfully included in policy-setting processes.

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The Global Issues Uniting Young People

Seeking a Role in Decision-Making

Our consultation revealed a common set of priorities among the young people who participated. A lack of access to high-quality education emerged as the biggest issue. Climate change, the adverse impacts of which will affect young people most acutely, was also a key concern. Women's rights and issues of identity featured prominently, demonstrating that enabling pluralism and equal rights is a common goal.

However, young people shared the view that they were not being heard by policymakers, and that their generation's hopes and concerns for the future were being marginalised. This perception drove some participants to work energetically to make their voices and ideas heard and left others disillusioned and frustrated.

"This is something youth are fighting for a lot. Us speaking out is really important because we are the next generation and what's going to keep this society alive. For them to shut us up is very heartbreaking. Whenever someone speaks out there is a stigma attached, which we are trying to break out of. I'm really proud of the youth that keep on speaking out."

Youth participant

PHILIPPINES

Some participants were aware of initiatives to promote youth inclusion in policymaking. National and international bodies, for example, are increasingly recognising the value of young voices and institutionalising representation, including the OECD's advisory board Youthwise, the European Union's EU Youth Dialogue, the UN's Youth Delegate Programme and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's youth body YOUNGO. Youth movements are also developing at the grassroots level across issues including climate change, racial equality and women's rights.

"Climate change is not just a crucial problem in India or the Philippines – it's a global problem. We should all be doing something against it … There are many youth leaders and activities, but if they could work alongside governments to formulate policies together, then there could be a benefit for the whole world."

Youth participant
INDIA

The consensus among young participants was that those in power should recognise and include youth movements in their decision-making and work together towards shared goals. Our consultation showcased the wealth of ideas among young people and demonstrated their desire for more than just a seat at the table; they are ready to speak up and influence global change.

"The problem has to do with government priorities. There is a lack of action from the people who have the power to make big changes."

Youth participant
UK

Education and Information Literacy

Access to a quality education emerged as a major concern among young people. Challenges were compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, when students had to adapt to new forms of learning. In India, Indonesia and Mexico, participants said that when state schools closed, many young people did not have the devices and connectivity needed to continue their education online, worsening educational inequalities.

Inequalities in Access to Education
Participants in India, Jordan, Indonesia, Mexico and the UK raised concerns about the quality of state-school education. Globally it is estimated that 260 million young people are not attending school and 53 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read or understand a simple story by the end of primary school. In the world's poorest countries, this figure is

as high as 80 per cent. Indeed, concerns around access to good education were raised most often by young people from developing nations, though they also remained important to participants from wealthier economies.

Young people flagged up the urban-rural divide as a factor in access to quality education. Participants in India, Jordan and Indonesia noted that because wealth is concentrated in cities, better schools and universities are more often found in urban areas; the result is that people from rural areas are less likely to be able to access quality education.

Young people's assessment of "quality education" was linked to how well they felt it prepared them for global challenges and career goals. Participants from India, Indonesia, the US and the UK argued that education was often too focused on textbook learning and aimed primarily at passing exams, rather than teaching students about important global issues. Some participants, including in Jordan, noted their concerns over climate change, but felt that the subject was not sufficiently widely taught. Young people also mentioned the absence of critical life-skill topics such as financial literacy in formal education. Respondents in the US, UK, Mexico and Jordan felt that, as a result, education did not equip them with the skills necessary for navigating life.

"In school there should be more emphasis on real-life situations and world experience. School should open students up to new things and different cultures. Right now there is a lot of focus on exams, which... will help you in one certain area of life but not others."

Youth participant

Education and Employment

While participants in some countries felt that their education did prepare them for the job market, they were concerned about the availability of jobs. In Jordan, India and Indonesia, young people perceived societal and/or family pressures to go into particular fields of study or jobs. Students noted that they were often pushed into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, based on the assumption that STEM subjects provide more employment stability, with the ultimate goal of them becoming doctors or engineers. But they felt this was leading to a mismatch between the number of jobs in these fields and the young people seeking to fill them, resulting in high unemployment. However, concern over finding jobs was not limited to those studying STEM subjects; young people were also concerned about employment prospects for those studying humanities.

Some participants felt that competition for jobs would drive them overseas. Young people in Mexico and Jordan noted that the same jobs offered in more affluent countries often pay more; consequently, the most talented young people are being drawn abroad by the promise of higher salaries. They made a clear link between subject-matter choices, jobs and brain drain.

"I'm very privileged as I go to a private institution in Mexico and the university attached to the school is internationally recognised ... so I'm not worried about job offers in the future, but this is a one-in-a-million position, others aren't so lucky. Mexico is difficult, here we work the longest hours and get the least pay. Public education is not adequate."

Youth participant

MEXICO

Leadership and Action on Climate Change

Climate was a key priority identified by participants and, in discussion groups, climate change was the issue most frequently raised, including by those from India, Indonesia, the UK and Mexico. One Young World's network revealed a similar level of concern. There was a palpable sense of frustration at the perceived lack of urgency on the part of governments and global leaders when it came to taking concrete steps to address this issue.

"Climate change is such a burden on the youth and all our leaders are frankly very old and making long-term targets. They won't be around then, so who do we hold accountable? There is an anxiety among all youth that the world will end. The 7- and 9-year-olds should not have to march on the streets to make the politicians hear."

Youth participant
INDIA

Young people's concerns about climate change were linked to their lived experience; participants discerned real and alarming changes to their regional climates. In Asian countries such as India, Indonesia and the Philippines, participants highlighted rising temperatures and noticeable changes in weather patterns.

"I can see where I am it's 47°C, there are obvious changes in temperatures ... We need to focus on people who are being affected and can't handle it."

Youth participant
INDIA

However, young people from India, the UK and the US felt that there was poor awareness of the impacts of climate change, including among young people. Participants from Jordan and Indonesia felt they did not know enough about climate change and that as a topic it rarely featured in public discourse or at school.

Yet some young people, including those in US, India and Indonesia, are actively supporting climate-change initiatives. A US participant was supporting a local mayor's climate-action team, an Indonesian participant was taking part in a decarbonisation programme and an Indian participant was involved with Greenpeace. Young people noted barriers to involvement, however; participants in India said that while women want to campaign for action on climate change, safety issues mean that they cannot.

Overall, participants were alarmed by the consequences of not doing enough to address climate change and frustrated by a lack of progress by political leaders. They called for effective action and inclusion in decision-making.

"I am worried about the attitudes some people have towards climate change – it is essentially negligence. Some old people say, 'It will pass' and that it is just another story in the news – but we need to act now!"

Youth participant
UK

Inclusion of Women and Religious Minorities

Young people shared concerns about the structural barriers some members of society face in their pursuit of equal rights and equal participation. Participants were keenly aware that, despite indications of progress, women and religious minorities still face significant challenges to inclusion.

Inclusion for Women and Girls

Young people in the Philippines and Mexico felt that male-dominated power structures still do not offer equal opportunities for women and that prevailing outdated thinking about the role of women in society is a significant barrier to their advancement.

Participants in several countries raised gender-linked wage disparities as a concern. One participant in Mexico noted that families tend to prioritise boys' education as they are seen as having higher earning potential to support the family. A participant in Indonesia said that some girls believe they do not need to try hard at school because "one day they will just get married and have children". Participants in India, the UK and Mexico attributed pay disparities to outdated stereotypes that are difficult to break down.

Young people also felt there was a clear class divide when it came to expectations for and of women. A participant in Mexico noted that women who attend private school and receive a better education develop more ambitious aspirations. A UK participant argued that women from poorer backgrounds receive less exposure to female leaders and that their horizons are limited by reduced awareness of opportunities. Participants in India and Indonesia highlighted a rural/urban divide in gender equality – with women's rights and opportunities more likely to be restricted in rural communities compared to urban environments.

Where there are signs of progress, participants pointed out that women's rights are not the same in practice as they are on paper. There was general consensus among participants from India, Indonesia, Jordan and Mexico that rights are now more equal in law and that progress has been made over the years with regard to policy. However, in practice women do not generally enjoy equal rights, nor are they treated and respected equally where rights do exist.

"Differences between men and women have been reduced to a very low level, however there is still the example of giving the same opportunities – women cannot access some services. Discriminating on these very small things is what affects bigger things in the future. Females want to be treated equally and don't want to feel disadvantaged."

Youth participant

INDIA

In India, Indonesia, Mexico and Jordan, young people felt that while it is becoming easier for women to get good jobs, women in prominent roles are not respected in the same way as men.

Participants highlighted public portrayals of women as a barrier to their advancement. In the UK, respondents noted that popular media continues to be sexist, while an Indian respondent felt that while efforts are being made on equality, progress is slow due to entrenched stereotypes that are reinforced in the public realm. UK participants felt that sexist media coverage and stereotypical representation of women in popular culture limits the numbers of women seeking public office.

"[Indira] Gandhi belonged to an influential family and that is the reason she was India's first female prime minister and the reason we haven't had another ... When a woman who is successful through her own merit and capability becomes prime minister, that will be progress."

Youth participant

INDIA

Participants from India cited sexual harassment and sexism as major barriers to women's equal participation in public life; they said this prevented young women from participating in popular movements.

Inclusion and Religious Belief

Across discussion groups, there was a fairly equal split between participants who were religious and those who were not. Jordan was the only country where all participants said religion played a significant role in their daily lives.

Of those who were religious, respondents from India who were Hindu and from Jordan who were Muslim felt that religion shapes the way they see the world and guides the decisions they make. Students from India, Jordan and Mexico said religion plays a significant role in their respective countries and feeds heavily into their history and culture. Some participants raised social disparities linked to religion; respondents from India noted minority religions are inadequately represented in positions of political leadership.

"In India there are so many religions. Each religion is preaching about love and faith. Religion binds us together in India, but in certain circumstances it also divides us, so we cannot ignore the effect religion has on communities."

Youth participant

INDIA

Participants in India, Indonesia and Jordan noted that different religious beliefs can be a source of friction in their respective countries, highlighting religious intolerance as an issue. In Jordan, participants felt that misperceptions of Islam fed into discrimination.

Young people in Jordan said that they would welcome opportunities to have more regular engagement with people from different religions to enhance their own understanding of different faiths. One Indonesian student said they have little direct personal contact with non-Muslims but do have that opportunity online and outside school. One Jordanian participant said they had no opportunity to learn about religions other than Islam.

"We only really learn about Islam in my experience. Sometimes other religions are mentioned but in general ... I had many misconceptions about other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism... It's just not something we learn about, which is just sad."

Youth participant
JORDAN

Broadly speaking, youth participants viewed religion as a personal belief and less consequential in public life, leading to demands for greater tolerance of minority faiths in their countries.

03

Conclusion

The consensus shared by this diverse network of young people highlights the importance of addressing climate change, education and social inclusion. It is imperative that policymakers recognise their voices and concerns now, for their benefit and the long-term benefit of society as a whole. With meaningful youth inclusion, and the passion and innovation they bring to policymaking spaces, we can make significant, accelerated and long-lasting progress in tackling climate change and achieving equality in education and social inclusion – and equip a generation of young people with the means to continue this progress throughout their lives.

This consultation was carried out by Fiona Dwinger, Emman El-Badawy, Matthew Godwin, Lucy Hayter, Clara Korsgren, Rory MacLeod, Joanna Slattery and Shayan Talabany with Generation Global's network of young people.

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