

# “We will listen to and work with youth”: How can the international community and youth interact together?

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For the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, the international community, in the body of the UN, announced 12 points of commitment to respond to current and future challenges. Particularly, Point 11 recites: “We will listen to and work with youth” (United Nations 2021, 7). Since I was a young student in school, particularly high school (and I must say, it was some time ago, but not too long ago), I have always heard adults telling us that we, the youth, were the future of our country; the future of our society; the future of our world. In a way, it has always seemed to be a way of palming responsibility off on someone else, in this case the younger generations. I will also admit that I never fully understood this kind of statements. I did understand the literal meaning, of course, but I could never quite get what, in practice, was expected of us. This was especially so because the same adults that would somehow encourage us to work consistently, to take initiative, to be active, and so on, would be the same people telling the youth off every time some of us would try and act upon that encouragement. In psychology, this is called double-binding, which is typical academic language for saying that the message we convey is rather confusing because contradictory and notwithstanding what we do, it will always be wrong (e.g., Visser 2003). Therefore, no pressure at all; the future depends on us, we are not really sure about what we have to do, but, hey, we, the youth, are the Z-generation, what can possibly go wrong.

As a matter of fact, I would have several points highlighting how things could go spectacularly wrong. However, one journal article would not be enough to cover all of them. Besides, I actually believe that turning the tide, if there is a tide to turn at all, is not as difficult and impossible as we might be thinking. For the sake of simplicity and for the sake of readers' time, I will only focus on the two verbs of point number 11: listen to and work with. More specifically, the question that I would like to ask and start answering

today is reported in the title of this short piece: how can the international community and the youth interact together?

There are different points which would be worth exploring and I will do so in different and subsequent written pieces. Therefore, today, I will only focus on one aspect: social division. This is also a major topic in social sciences, and I will not be able to unpack all its different features here, especially because I aim to make this a short and reflection-provoking piece. My short answer to this question is that first of all, it would have been more helpful, I believe, if UN's point number 11 was worded along the following lines: "We will all listen to each other and will all work together". The point is that the international community and the youth are not two separate entities, as it currently seems from the wording of point 11. The international community and the youth are the same thing, in the sense that the youth is part of the international community, and the international community comprises the youth as well. Surely, it could be argued that the international community could be a metaphor for the 'adults', the older generations, who are currently leading our society. It could therefore be argued that point 11 wants to be an encouragement, it wants to push the 'adults' (whoever these might be and whatever this might mean) of the world to listen to the youth and to what they have to say. This can definitely be a useful encouragement. Nevertheless, I do see some limitations in this statement.

Firstly, the statement seems to consider the international community and the youth as two different entities, when they are not. Additionally, a second limitation is that it leads to the belief that the problem is only that it is the 'adults' who do not listen and who do not want to work together with the youth. From the way I see it, this is only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is that, broadly speaking, the youth also does not listen to and does not want to work together. For example, in the job sector, it is not unusual – in fact, it is rather common – to hear young workers stating that 'older' colleagues should be pushed to retirement to leave their position to the youth. This is just one example, but I could mention others, such as the protests led by several environmental groups to draw attention to current environmental challenges. By this, I do not mean to downplay the important issues that both examples highlight – precariousness for the youth in the job sector and the important environmental challenges, respectively. Rather, I intend to emphasise a logic based on social division and where each group tendentially attempts to overtake the other (e.g., Rosenberg 2015; Sclavi 2003). I do not believe that this is because of bad faith. Rather, I believe that this is

because we, as members of society, are simply socialised in a cultural environment which tends to divide, instead of uniting.

In fact, if we think about recent and current challenges – e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, economic and job crises, environmental issues, the war in Ukraine, and others – we have not really operated under the listen-to-each-other-and-work-together principle. In fact, we have done exactly the opposite; we have been dividing society into groups, and more specifically, 'good groups' and 'bad groups'. Throughout the years, some scholars (Rosenberg 2015; Gilligan 2001) have observed that the ultimate aim of distinguishing things, behaviours, and people into different categories is to distinguish between an absolute 'good' and an absolute 'bad'. I do not have the space here to explore this in detail, but what I want to emphasise is that by doing so, we keep people separated from one another and, on top of that, we constrain individuals (and ourselves as well) into unchangeable categories (Morin 2015). This results into an oversimplification of individuals' identities, if not even their nature, with significant implications. For instance, Rosenberg (2015) and Gilligan (2001), among others, noted that categorising, and by specifically categorising into 'good ones' and 'bad ones', contributes to a process of dehumanisation of those classified into the so-identified 'bad' categories. These scholars (ibid.) have observed that this plays a key role in people's radicalisation processes and, therefore, in the rise of violence in society.

By this, I do not intend to say, by all means, that there is deliberate intention of escalating protests into violence. What I mean is that the risk of further societal division, which can then potentially lead to violence, inheres in this logic. To make this point clearer, I report below a quote from an Italian former militant of a leftist armed organisation, who actively participated in the leftist armed struggle of the so-called 'years of lead', which occurred officially between 1969 and the mid-1980s.

[...] At that time, if [politics] was done in the way that we saw as the most serious and most radical, most consequential and most logical, doing politics inevitably meant to quickly turn relations into inimical ones. It was a trap. And I can say this by also referring to my personal experience. When someone asks me: 'but why did you make that choice?', it is difficult, very difficult for me to answer that question. In fact, there is always a before, a before, and a before for why that choice has been made, and the beginnings are usually very normal. For instance, we asked for a faculty library so that consulting books would have been easier: this is not an alibi, but surely, we found barriers, an absurd and stupid way of conceiving power relations.

Therefore, clash after clash, in a continuous process towards radicalisation, the process that is typical of the logic and tone of discussions in assemblies got triggered: the one who succeeded in making a bigger hole into a smaller one, always and inevitably succeeded in winning [...]. It was clear that if in the mid-1970s, someone from the [Red Brigades] had said, 'Well, let's stop, let's see, let's find a different kind of relation with some [political] forces', they would have been judged as a filthy traitor, expelled, there would have been a faction of that group that would have continued even more strongly...and so forth and so on. At that point, the mechanism of enmity, once triggered, cannot be stopped [...].

(Bertagna, Ceretti, and Mazzucato 2015, 109)

In a simplistic summary, the Italian former militant shows the process leading to outbreak of the leftist armed struggle. The former militant states that what led many of them to choose the armed struggle and, therefore, violence, was essentially a divided society and believing that, in our society, only the strongest, the most powerful would win. In this case, winning means to be able to implement a specific kind of socio-political idea(I). We tend to have a conflictual approach when it comes to social relations, which in turn leads us to try and identify who in this society is our friend and who in this society is our enemy to fight. Under this perspective, there cannot be any cooperation, but only conflict, as once 'the enemies' are identified, the following step is to engage in a sort of arm wrestling, if not even in a proper struggle with the counterpart (Rosenberg 2015; Scavi 2008; 2003). This happens, and again, I make it somewhat short and simplistic, because we are used to seeing people through the lens of socio-political categories. If on the one hand this helps us understand this complex world around us (Ferguson and Halliday 2020; Hogg 2016; 2014), on the other hand, not only does it lead to oversimplification and also misunderstanding, but also to have a rather distorted idea of what our counterparts are trying to say or where their point of view is coming from.

Therefore, to conclude, I believe that if the UN aims to get the international community and the youth to interact together, a first step to take would be to rephrase point number 11 of its Common Agenda along these lines: "We will all listen to each other and will all work together".

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