

Youth Statement for RFSD Closing Plenary 2023

30th, March 2023, Geneva and online

Dear Excellencies, colleagues from civil society and youth groups. My name is Arina Loginova and I'm pleased and honored to present the key messages from youth on SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17 in the ECE region.

It is difficult to simply speak on behalf of the young people in our region because we are not homogenous. Youth in the ECE region are diverse and have diverse lived experiences, whether due to race, geographic location, class, ethnic background or religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, are living with disabilities, and a range of other issues and identities that shape our everyday lives.

However, you ask, **why is it important to listen to the voices of young people in the decision-making process? Why should decision makers listen to us? Who are we?** We may be young, but we bring new insight, creativity and expertise. We are not just beneficiaries, we are **rights-holders** and we are already leading accountability and action in our communities. We are entrepreneurs, students, activists, interns, scientists, advocates, journalists, volunteers. But most of all, we are citizens of this region, grappling with the inheritance of the decisions of the past and fighting for a future that we deserve.

In fact, **the question shouldn't be why should** we listen to young people, the question should be: **How** can we systematically and equally include young people at all levels of decision making and in the design and development of policies and programs that affect our lives?

I'm privileged to have the opportunity to come and speak here in front of you, to have had access to clean water and sanitation, wireless connection, electricity, heating, transport and financial resources. But I also speak on behalf of my peers that cannot afford menstrual products in a remote village and have to miss classes because they are menstruating. On behalf of a student that has to walk five kilometers to have wireless connection and access university classes. On behalf of a young female social entrepreneur who hasn't received enough funding and has to forcibly close her business. On behalf of a young trans person who is running from hooligans in his neighborhood. On behalf of a climate activist that was deprived of citizenship for climate strikes and advocating for clean energy in his country. On behalf of a disabled young person who cannot leave his house without a third person help because the entrance of his building doesn't have a wheelchair-friendly infrastructure and

young women who don't feel safe to walk the streets at night. Finally, on behalf of a young refugee who had to leave her or his motherland to stay safe.

I recognize very clearly that I am privileged.

But should it really be a privilege to be treated equally, with dignity, and with access to our basic rights? **NO, these are fundamental human** rights that must be applied to all, without distinction to any. As young people, as a *movement*, we stand in solidarity with those who are being left behind, whose voices are not heard today, but whose futures are at stake.

So, we call on all stakeholders including national and local government for actions regarding the SDGs under consideration as follows:

- To combat stigma and discrimination around menstruation and the sanitary health and needs of all young people.
- To decrease politicization of water and climate change issues, especially in the region of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. Access to clean water is not a left or right issue, it is not pro- or anti-government, it is a basic human need.
- To include rural areas in sustainable infrastructure investments, they must not be isolated and we cannot focus only on cities. All young people, regardless of where they live, should have equal access to public transportation and opportunities.
- To achieve the Paris 1.5 degree target and a sustainable and renewable energy transition, we need a Fossil Fuel Phase Out as soon as possible, by 2030 at the latest.
- To support young scientists with grants, networking and conference opportunities, engage in research and become active at the science-society-policy interface.
- To support youth initiatives on computer and informational literacy and bridge the digital divide.
- To stop the humiliating practice of unpaid internships. All internships should be fairly paid and all young people given meaningful opportunities for decent work.
- To increase funding for youth-led projects in the non-profit, social entrepreneur and advocacy sectors. This can be achieved through the creation of grant programs, crowdfunding initiatives, and partnerships with private sector organizations.
- To involve young people in VNR processes and support youth-led accountability initiatives at national, regional and global levels.
- And finally, to stop **persecution against peaceful youth activists - including human rights advocates and environmental defenders** who are trying to deliver a better future, when leaders have failed to do so.

Our youth perspective considers not just our view on the numeric and statistical progress of the goals, but our lived experiences and day to day realities. For us, the SDGs are not about the beautiful words and statistics, it is what we see in the world around us that tells us that

the job is **not** yet done. It is about the specific cases of discrimination, inequality, sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia that prevents us from fulfilling our potential. It is about the efforts we **invest** and the action that we **demand** of States and all stakeholders to ensure that we live in a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable planet, made by and for all of us.

You are speaking a lot about the **future**. Future projects, future programs, investments, partnerships, innovations. I want to remind you that **we are the future. Young people are the future.** That is why we are so sensitive to the Agenda 2030 implementation, that is why the SDGs cannot just be another failed commitment - a moment of 'what could have been'. The decisions you take now - on everything from water and sanitation through to sustainable communities - will determine what kind of future awaits us.

We encourage **you** to **invest** in young people, listen to our concerns and empower us to lead. Across our region, young people in all our diversity are stepping up and ready to deliver transformative action to secure a better future. And we need you to include us - as partners in development and allies working with a shared desire and common agenda for a better world.

Only by coming together, can we arrive all together to a better future and leave No One Behind.

Thank you!
