

Young voices in development

The youth component of EU Development Days brought together activists, entrepreneurs, and development practitioners from geographically diverse backgrounds to tackle the issues facing youth today. Including young voices represented an approving acknowledgment of the vitality that youth must – and willingly bring – to the debate.

Energetic and innovative, young people involved at the heart of their communities as agents of change shared their stories and insights in high-level panels, debates and workshops. Proclaimed as the leaders of tomorrow, young leaders demanded their seat at the table as ambassadors and representatives of their generation, shaping the world today.

While the demography of Europe is changing with low birth rates resulting in an ageing population, the rapid growth of youth populations in much of the developing world has created an urgency to integrate them into the workforce. While this presents its own questions of implementation, it provides important opportunities to rethink many of the challenges the world is faced with – from inclusiveness and inequality to irregular migration and ecology.

Youth are key in reaching the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a brainstorm organised to this end, along with a photo exhibit on the role of sexual and reproductive health for youth in their realisation lining the corridor of one of the main entrances. Beyond the SDG's, youth's unrivalled capacity in adopting new technologies for change was unequivocally heralded as a beacon of hope, providing news means of reaching the most ambitious goals to date.

From a session on how to make agriculture more attractive to young people to a panel on female genital mutilation comprised of women from affected communities, youth focused events provided a comprehensive coverage of the economic to the social.

Discussions on empowering youth through entrepreneurship education provided the necessary counterpart to questions of radicalisation and community focused solutions enacted by young people in support of the most vulnerable. While each youth event focused on concrete development themes, the synergy between these sessions provided a clear message: In an interconnected world, a holistic understanding is key to building a way forward.

The youth activities lounge provided a space for young people to come together, providing mindfulness sessions on both days to take a moment for self-awareness amid the bustle of the conference. The lounge also featured a range of games to raise awareness of gender inequality – such as a giant snakes and ladders gender sensitive board game for the European Week of Action for Girls – and 'Post-it to Myself' sessions engaging men in discussions on gender equality.

The interactive tone set by these activities fit closely with the design of the conference itself, with participants remaining approachable and enthusiastic to discuss and collaborate long after the sessions had ended.

While people gathered to share ideas, the solutions presented were not just talk. Youth representatives and organisations working for youth empowerment attended on behalf of vibrant movements for change, often originating in the hearts of beneficiary communities.

For western-based organisations responsible for youth focused agendas, the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes took centre stage amid proclamations of their importance as active agents and partners in shaping their own lives.

Regardless of the level at which organisations functioned, Development Days 2017 provided a platform for reflection and the sharing of insights gained from the real work of building stronger communities being conducted outside of the conference walls.

The Global Village – a collection of stands showcasing projects, large and small, far and wide – boasted a visible youth presence along with presenting projects both for and by young people. From the One World Youth Summit, providing an opportunity for young people to work together and with world leaders, to stands dedicated to ending violence against women and girls, links between the global and local were evident throughout.

With colourful visual prompts, photo booths, and virtual reality headsets the Global Village's youth component matched the importance of the ideas to appealing and engaging aesthetics.

The youth participation was not just celebrating what can be achieved when people of all ages come together – it stood, more importantly, as acknowledging how much still remains to be done. Youthful optimism was tempered by a sober understanding of existing limitations and obstacles, in turn challenged through calls to break traditional power structures in favour of dynamic and responsive modes of organisation.

Building for a better future was presented as requiring not just innovating new approaches that work, but being honest about the short fallings of ones that do not. As raised in a panel on youth entrepreneurial education, having the freedom to make mistakes and the honesty to acknowledge them is what allows for real-world learning. This provides a strong foundation for the successes to follow.

Youth conscious agendas were clear from the outset of the conference being mentioned by heads of state in the opening session. The conference ended on much the same note – that a prosperous youth means a better future for everyone.