

Statement by Samantha O'Brien O'Reilly, UN Youth Delegate for Ireland

Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum

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How can we improve youth participation in the implementation of the SDGs at the national level?

It is encouraging to see so many countries represented at the forum today. Many of you may have drafted, or be in the process of drafting, your National Implementation Plans, setting out how you will achieve the SDGs at a national level. In doing this, I trust you will recognise the role of young people. I ask you however, how many of you spoke directly to young people during this process? How many of you asked for their input whilst proposing policies and frameworks for implementation?

The SDGs set out a plan for the kind of world we want to live in. It is ambitious, and it will require innovation and fresh thinking if it is to succeed. If young people are to engage with these goals, if they are to commit their energy to building a sustainable society, they must be empowered to do so.

As government ministers and representatives, you are fortunate enough to have a place at the table that makes these decisions as to implementation. If you do not ask who is not represented at that table, regardless of how noble your intentions, you go against the spirit of the SDGs, of inclusive development. Young people will not be empowered if they are excluded from decision-making processes. It is counterproductive to tell young people that, without their input, the role they will play in implementing the SDGs has already been decided. You cannot expect young people to then wholeheartedly devote themselves to

achieving Agenda 2030 as they will not feel ownership of the SDGs. Agenda 2030 will be achieved by cooperation, not by commands.

When including young people, however, it is easy to fall into the trap of only listening to those who are confident enough to voice their opinions. Formal participatory structures are useful, but ensure that these structures represent a wide range of young people. Agenda 2030 will not be achieved without the participation of young people from all sectors of society. As a youth delegate I undertook a consultation tour, where young people – young people in the care system, young refugees and migrants, young people in the criminal justice system - told me how the SDGs feel alien to them, that they feel excluded from the Agenda 2030 process.

Yet it is marginalised young people like these who are most affected by poverty, by the lack of decent work, the lack of quality education. You will achieve better, more creative solutions to these problems if you involve those directly affected by them. Invite them to government consultations, include their ideas in your National Implementation Plans, build their capacity to innovate, ensure they see the work they do on a local level in the context of their government's commitments on the national and international stage.

Agenda 2030 will never be achieved if it is seen as the sole remit of politicians, of diplomats, of people who already have a place at the table. Build a world that leaves no one behind, but don't just build it for everyone, build it with everyone.

***As delivered by Samantha O'Brien O'Reilly in her personal capacity as a UN Youth Delegate.*