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Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Intersessional seminar on the challenges and opportunities of young people in the field of human rights

Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

The present report was prepared in accordance with resolution 41/13 of the Human Rights Council, in which the Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize and convene, during the first semester of 2020, a full-day intersessional seminar focused on the challenges and opportunities of young people in the field of human rights, with the participation and involvement of youth-led and youth-focused organizations. Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Council decided, by its decision 45/113, to postpone the seminar until the first semester of 2021 and requested the High Commissioner to submit a report on the seminar prior to its forty-ninth session. The intersessional seminar was held online on 12 April 2021. The present report summarizes the contributions made by panellists, States, youth-led and youth-focused organizations and other civil society organizations as well as the conclusions and recommendations identified during the full-day seminar.



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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 41/13, the Human Rights Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize and convene, during the first semester of 2020, a full-day intersessional seminar focused on the challenges and opportunities of young people in the field of human rights, with the participation and involvement of youth-led and youth-focused organizations. Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Council decided, by its decision 45/113, to postpone the convening of the intersessional seminar until the first semester of 2021 and requested the High Commissioner to prepare a report on the seminar and to submit it to the Council prior to its forty-ninth session.

2. The intersessional seminar was held online on 12 April 2021. The seminar, which was organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), was divided into four sessions, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. The morning sessions consisted of opening remarks, followed by a panel discussion on the challenges and discrimination faced by young people in the realization of their rights. The afternoon sessions consisted of a panel discussion on youth mainstreaming in human rights mechanisms and next steps on youth and human rights at the international level, followed by closing remarks. For the two panel discussions, States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other observers were encouraged to intervene, following the panellists' opening remarks, by asking questions, making comments and sharing challenges, good practices and recommendations on the way forward.

3. The present report contains a summary of the proceedings and the conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the intersessional seminar. The programme of the seminar, the list of panellists and the interventions from the list of speakers are published on the OHCHR website.¹

II. Summary of the proceedings

A. Opening remarks

4. Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, delivered an opening statement. Jayathma Wickramanayke, the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, and Joaquín Alexander Maza Martelli, the Permanent Representative of El Salvador to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, delivered opening remarks.

5. In her opening statement, the High Commissioner said that young people had been standing up for universal rights, including the right to a healthy planet, the right to live in freedom from discrimination and the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Nonetheless, she emphasized that young people still faced barriers and challenges in the realization of their human rights because of their age.

6. The High Commissioner noted that in the 2018 report on youth and human rights it had been concluded that young people encountered challenges and suffered from discrimination in a number of areas, including participation in politics and public decision-making, the transition from education to employment, access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health care, and conscientious objection to military service.² She remarked that the transition to adulthood was particularly challenging for young people with disabilities, young migrants and refugees, and those in conflict with the law and in conflict situations, adding that age often intersects with and multiplies discrimination based on other grounds, preventing young people from enjoying equal opportunities and substantive equality.

7. She underlined that COVID-19 had magnified existing inequalities, with a devastating impact on young people, as evidenced by the Global Survey on Youth and COVID-19, in

¹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Youth/Pages/IntersessionalSeminaronYouth.aspx>.

² A/HRC/39/33, para. 88.

which it had been reported that the impacts of the pandemic on young people are systematic, deep and disproportionate, particularly for young women, younger youth (ages 18–24) and young people in lower income countries.³

8. The High Commissioner highlighted the support of her Office for the implementation of the United Nations Youth Strategy, Youth 2030, citing the deployment of a network of youth officers across five field presences and United Nations Headquarters, aimed at developing closer partnerships with young people and youth-led organizations in order to promote human rights with and for youth.

9. In her opening remarks, the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth stated that young people faced numerous challenges and barriers in exercising their human rights, underlining the importance of identifying potential next steps at the Human Rights Council to protect and promote the human rights of youth.

10. She emphasized that the United Nations Youth Strategy included protecting and promoting the human rights of young people and supporting their civic and political engagement as one of its priorities, in order to scale up United Nations action at the global, regional and country levels to promote, defend and uphold the human rights of youth. The Envoy recalled the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights, which also targeted young people as key partners in a number of priority areas, such as climate action and future generations, civic space, new frontiers and a common agenda for protection.⁴

11. Stating that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated many existing human rights insecurities, the Envoy put forward three recommendations to place young people's rights at the heart of building back better.

12. Firstly, she encouraged Member States and representatives of human rights mechanisms to consider how they could ensure the mainstreaming of youth rights in their existing work in order to address those human rights violations and concerns specifically affecting youth. Additionally, she encouraged consideration of how to guarantee the participation of diverse groups of young people in such mainstreaming processes, especially young women, indigenous youth, youth in rural communities, youth with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth and youth without access to technology.

13. Secondly, she urged the Human Rights Council to consider possible methods to improve and institutionalize the participation of youth in its work in a permanent, structured and meaningful way, citing existing practices of youth participation in the work of the Security Council. She suggested, for example, the holding of an annual forum mandated by the Human Rights Council or an annual panel or day of discussion during sessions of the Council, with clear follow-up and accountability mechanisms to implement findings and recommendations put forward by youth.

14. Thirdly, the Envoy called on the Human Rights Council to consider additional recommendations, such as those included in the report of the High Commissioner on youth and human rights, and to consult with young people on the relevance of the recommendations in resolving the challenges imposed by the global pandemic.⁵

15. In closing, the Envoy highlighted that young people worldwide had taken to the streets and dominated online spaces demanding climate action, racial and gender equality, democracy and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights. She called on institutions and Governments to improve protection and safeguarding of young people, who were often viewed as a threat when demanding their human rights, and to ensure that no young person was left behind.

16. In his opening remarks, the Permanent Representative of El Salvador stated that the numerous challenges and forms of discrimination facing youth in the enjoyment of their human rights, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, should continue to be a priority for States and for the work of the Human Rights Council. He underlined that the

³ See <https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/campaign/COVID19-survey>.

⁴ See <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights>.

⁵ A/HRC/39/33.

entire United Nations human rights system should guarantee the urgent mainstreaming of human rights challenges for youth and highlighted the role of the intersessional seminar in further developing dialogue with youth-led and youth-focused organizations so that they could contribute in a constructive and inclusive manner to the various processes that take place both at the multilateral level and in national policies, programmes and initiatives.

17. The Permanent Representative underlined that the voices of youth must be heard in all decision-making processes, particularly in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He underscored the need to address youth in vulnerable situations in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on education, decent work and access to high quality health-care services, in particular mental health services. He stated that the opinions of youth organizations must be taken into consideration when decisions are made with regard to young people's human rights and emphasized the need to protect the work of young human rights defenders. In closing, the Permanent Representative reiterated the commitment of El Salvador to comprehensive youth development and to the continued promotion of the issue of youth and human rights within the United Nations system.

B. Challenges and discrimination faced by young people in the realization of their rights

18. The panel discussion was moderated by Imma Guerras-Delgado, Child and Youth Rights Team Leader at OHCHR. The panellists were Nerima Wako-Ojiwa, Executive Director of Siasa Place, Kenya; Niall O'Higgins, Senior Economist at the International Labour Organization, Poppy Stanbury, Advocacy Coordinator at Stichting Choice for Youth and Sexuality; Tania Rosas, founder of the Origin Learning Fund (Fundación El Origen) and young leader for the Sustainable Development Goals; Tahere Siisiialafia, Chairwoman of the Pacific Youth Council; and Gift Dzorai, National Director of the Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network.

19. Ms. Wako-Ojiwa spoke about the challenges that young people face with regard to civic engagement and participation in public life, highlighting similarities between the global situation and her experience in Kenya. She explained that a large youth population combined with a high unemployment rate constituted a barrier to youth participation, as young people needed to focus their time on finding work and securing their livelihoods.

20. In addition, Ms. Wako-Ojiwa underlined that cultural barriers and patriarchal norms could impede the realization of the right of young people to participation in decision-making, in particular the participation of young women. For example, in countries or communities where decisions were predominantly taken by older men, young women might not feel comfortable in participating in decision-making processes and their participation might be challenged as going against traditional culture. She underscored the need to change the narrative on youth and to shift mindsets towards the acceptance of youth participation. She regretted the role of ageism, for example when youth engagement on social media was not regarded as a legitimate form of participation compared to more traditional methods, such as town hall meetings, despite the need for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasized that limited and underfunded civic education posed a further obstacle to participation, especially when combined with lower literacy rates.

21. Mr. O'Higgins noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had disproportionately affected youth, in particular young women, with those aged 15–24 having been hardest hit by unemployment. He described a triple shock to young people owing to disruptions in education and training, restrictions on new job vacancies and job and income losses for young workers, who were concentrated in the most heavily impacted economic sectors and in less secure forms of work, with limited eligibility for stable employment or income support.

22. Mr. O'Higgins highlighted that the pandemic had reinforced a pre-existing trend in the workplace; the shift from long-term employment to short-term, task-based jobs. Despite certain advantages for youth, the gig economy could be a driver of inequality in youth labour markets. There was a risk that the expansion of short-term employment could promote insecurity and instability, including poor pay, lack of access to social protections, occupational safety protections and health care, and to recourse mechanisms if job-related

problems arose, as well as difficulty in validating work experience gained. Mr. O'Higgins called for large-scale investment in job creation for youth, with a focus on the most vulnerable, extended access to social protections, both in and out of the gig economy, and a redefining of the employment relationship in the gig economy, qualifying those employed as dependents rather than self-employed workers.

23. Ms. Stanbury described access to education and information, services and an enabling environment as prerequisites for youth in the realization of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Unsafe abortions, high rates of HIV infection and new sexually transmitted infections affect youth, in particular young women in developing countries. She underlined that the three main barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services were: (a) negative attitudes and stigma from health-care workers, particularly for certain groups such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community; (b) discriminatory laws and practices requiring parental consent; and (c) cultural norms around the use of contraceptives or sexual activity. The COVID-19 pandemic had created additional barriers for youth in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, especially for youth living with their parents.

24. Ms. Stanbury emphasized that criminalizing abortion violated basic human rights, as reaffirmed by United Nations treaty bodies and the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and led to an increase in unsafe abortions, which had had a disproportionate impact on the most marginalized women and girls. She highlighted the need to ensure an inclusive, intersectional approach to accessing safe abortion, accounting for the intersecting forms of discrimination and varied levels of stigma and shame faced by different groups of young women. She called for meaningful youth participation in decision-making at all levels to promote access to sexual and reproductive health rights and safe abortion.

25. Speaking from her experience growing up in the La Guajira region of Colombia, Ms. Rosas explained that the main barrier faced by indigenous youth in realizing their right to education was the perception that education was predominantly designed for, and primarily available to, a privileged minority. In Colombia, only 29 per cent of registered indigenous students finish high school and only 5 per cent gain access to higher education, with women comprising 70 per cent of those who are left behind. She noted that the school dropout rate due to the COVID-19 pandemic had led to increased gender-based violence, forced marriages and teenage pregnancies, underlining the role of education in fighting poverty, upholding sustainable development and breaking the cycle of oppression.

26. Ms. Rosas presented her work on promoting literacy through community-focused solutions, including the offline learning application O-lab, developed by the Origin Learning Fund. The application was available to youth in schools and communities in vulnerable areas and was tailored to accommodate the needs and the native languages of rural communities. Through partnerships with NGOs, local governments and educational institutions, the O-lab application could help provide access to inclusive, quality digital education across the region and beyond. She expressed the hope that O-lab could help to provide a global solution to inequality through inclusive and empowering education, in particular for oppressed groups.

27. Ms. Siisiialafia said that structural minimalization and marginalization of youth voices are the two underlying factors hindering youth development and the realization of youth rights in the Pacific region. She defined structural marginalization as the lack of understanding of how to situate youth rights within the broader human rights framework and within the context of the region's sociocultural dynamics. She explained that hierarchical and patriarchal value systems assigned social status based on age, gender and lineage, thus subordinating children and youth to the extent that they cannot participate in decision-making processes. Despite a growing emphasis on youth empowerment and leadership, efforts were often limited to youth-specific processes, impeding young people's ability to meaningfully shape their communities. Moreover, she stated that notions of youth as future leaders were disempowering as they failed to acknowledge the role of young people as current protagonists in society.

28. Ms. Siisiialafia stressed that a human rights-based approach to youth development was needed in order to realize the Sustainable Development Goals. She called on

Governments and development agencies in the Pacific to renew their efforts, not solely to address the cross-cutting impacts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic on youth, but also to meaningfully engage young people as equal partners, key stakeholders and experts in youth development processes.

29. Mr. Dzorai noted that youth in alternative care are subject to age-based discrimination, given that at ages 16–18 support abruptly came to an end, meaning they have to live independently and secure their own livelihoods. He regretted the scant recognition that care leavers received at the international level, despite the multiple legal, policy and programming challenges they faced. For example, acquiring documentation, such as birth certificates, national identity cards or citizenship status, presented specific difficulties for young people leaving situations of alternative care. Other challenges included poor educational outcomes, lack of adequate housing or accommodation and lack of support mechanisms, as a result of which a high percentage of care leavers became involved in the criminal justice system.

30. Mr. Dzorai called for the removal of age-based criteria to access or to remain in alternative care, proposing a life-stage criterion as being more appropriate. He underlined the need for affirmative action programmes to specifically target youth leaving care situations and recommended the establishment of an international aftercare fund and an international care-leavers council. He also proposed the establishment of a special rapporteur on alternative care and aftercare by the Human Rights Council and called on the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure that States address alternative care and aftercare programmes in their reports.

31. In the ensuing discussion, contributions were made by representatives of Austria, China, India, Nepal, Tunisia and the United States of America, as well as by United Nations youth delegates from the Bahamas, Czechia, Germany, Namibia, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Ukraine. The Ombudsman of Bulgaria and representatives of the Youth Affairs Agency of Uzbekistan, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the World Health Organization also took the floor. In addition, representatives of the following NGOs spoke: the International Disability Alliance; International Falcon Movement – Socialist Educational International; the National Youth Council of Spain; Terre des hommes fédération internationale; and the independent think tank Youth Policy Lab. Contributions were also registered but not delivered owing to a lack of time from representatives of Egypt and Morocco and from the following NGOs: Association of Solidarity through Humanitarian Imperative Actions, Care Leaver Austria and the International Human Rights Council.

32. Participants described national efforts and measures to promote and protect the human rights of youth. These included: legal or institutional frameworks for meaningful youth participation, including constitutional provisions for youth; the development of national youth policies or strategies; initiatives to promote youth employability and entrepreneurship, including job creation and access to credit; and consultations or conferences with young people to ensure that their voices were heard.

33. Participants acknowledged that young people constituted a large portion of the population in many countries and regions. Some participants referred to ageist attitudes towards youth and to ageism more broadly as prevalent global phenomena that manifested themselves in the workplace, in health care and in political systems. Participants underlined the specific challenges faced by young people in the realization of their human rights by virtue of their age. The need for more systematic evidence gathering and mapping of the impacts of policies on young people's realities was underlined.

34. Many participants emphasized the importance of meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes at all levels, from the development and implementation of policies to peacebuilding processes, as well as in efforts to prevent, resolve and recover from global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of broadening youth participation and leaving no youth behind in order to strengthen United Nations mechanisms and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals was stressed. Measures such as citizenship and human rights education, lowering the voting age to 16 and the introduction of quotas for youth in political parties, parliaments and other decision-making bodies were suggested.

35. Several participants stressed that the right of young people to decent work was hampered by the proliferation of part-time, short-term contracts, the lack of entry-level jobs and precarious working conditions, including zero-hour contracts, undeclared work and unpaid and unregulated internships. It was emphasized that lack of employment opportunities prolonged the transition of youth to autonomy, negatively affected their access to other human rights, including the right to health, the right to adequate housing and the right to participation, and in some circumstances led to a brain drain. Some participants underlined the importance of improving mental health facilities and support for youth, particularly in schools, universities and youth centres. In this regard, the long-term mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted.

36. Other participants discussed the challenges for young people in conflict with the law, as the abrupt transfer of youth from juvenile justice systems to adult justice systems upon turning 18 years of age disrupted reintegration and educational processes. Citing Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden as examples of countries where juvenile justice systems extended protection to youth beyond the age of 18, as well as neuroscience studies on developmental psychology showing that full maturity was reached at around age 25, the need for special approaches to better accommodate youth in criminal justice systems was emphasized. The need to provide alternatives to military service for young people in realizing their right to conscientious objection was also underlined.

37. Several speakers welcomed the role of young people in calling for social justice and promoting human rights. The challenges young people faced in the civic space, where their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly are often curtailed, were mentioned. The need to promote a safe and enabling environment for young human rights defenders and young peacebuilders was highlighted.

38. Participants discussed the additional barriers and challenges for youth in vulnerable situations, including those facing multiple forms of discrimination. The importance of an intersectional approach to the subject of human rights of youth was stressed. Specific groups mentioned by participants included: young women and girls, youth with disabilities, migrant and refugee youth, care leavers, youth in conflict with the law, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth, indigenous youth, youth facing difficult family environments, youth living in remote areas and internally displaced youth.

39. There was broad consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic had further exacerbated existing human rights challenges and discrimination faced by young people. Some participants stressed that the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic were most severe for youth in vulnerable situations, particularly in the global South. It was noted that the digital divide placed young people without access to the virtual world at a particular disadvantage, as the shift to virtual and online spaces made realization of their human rights increasingly dependent on digital literacy and access to digital technologies. The active participation of young people in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts was also noted.

40. In response to the input from participants, Mr. O'Higgins emphasized that not all young people had been equally impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had increased inequalities among youth. He stressed the long-term impacts of the pandemic on young people's wages and the need to avoid creating further inequality within youth labour markets by ensuring decent work and quality jobs. Ms. Stanbury highlighted that access to safe abortion was very difficult for the majority of young women and girls globally, while unwanted teenage pregnancies were the second leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19. She stressed that young women and girls and gender non-conforming youth were critically affected as a result of inadequate sexual and reproductive health rights, underscoring the need for meaningful youth participation.

C. Youth mainstreaming in human rights mechanisms and next steps on youth and human rights at the international level

41. The panel discussion was moderated by Imma Guerras-Delgado, Team Leader, Child and Youth Rights Unit, OHCHR. The panel began with a video message from Akmal Saidov, Director of the National Human Rights Centre of Uzbekistan. The panellists were Alfonso

Barragues, Deputy Director of the Liaison Office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Geneva; Paulína Jalakšová, member of the Board of the European Youth Forum; Anya Gass, Youth Advocacy Advisor at Plan International; Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, member and Rapporteur of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and Balal Mazour, Member of the Content Committee of the World Youth Forum.

42. Mr. Saidov noted that, as stated in the United Nations Youth Strategy, the 2 billion young people alive today, nearly 90 per cent of whom lived in developing countries, where they constituted a significant portion of the population, were an important resource worth investing in. The COVID-19 pandemic had affected youth in particular; the multifaceted challenges that they faced required comprehensive responses from States and the international community. He emphasized the importance of understanding youth perspectives, urging international organizations and the United Nations to give young people a seat at decision-making tables.

43. Mr. Saidov welcomed the innovative responses of young people to global challenges, including climate change, racism and COVID-19. He reiterated the commitment of Uzbekistan to broader implementation of human rights of youth, explaining that his Government had established a Youth Parliament, an agency for youth affairs and an inter-agency council under the aegis of the Prime Minister. He called for greater international attention to the human rights of youth, recalling the initiative announced by the President of Uzbekistan at the seventy-second session of the General Assembly for the elaboration of an international convention on youth rights and the subsequent establishment of a Group of Friends for youth, as well as the proposal that Human Rights Council establish a mandate for a special rapporteur on youth rights.

44. Mr. Barragues recalled that Governments and other stakeholders, gathering at the Nairobi Summit in 2019 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, had committed themselves to fulfilling the human rights of youth. A recent study he had conducted for UNFPA revealed uneven youth participation in United Nations human rights mechanisms, while the mechanisms themselves had issued few youth-related recommendations. For example, from 2007 to 2019, only 1.8 per cent of all recommendations emanating from the universal periodic review and treaty body review processes had addressed adolescents and youth, and that they had been focused on protection, education and health, with empowerment and employment receiving less attention. He cautioned against an imbalanced focus on protection as opposed to youth empowerment.

45. Mr. Barragues called for improved mainstreaming of youth rights across the work of the Human Rights Council and United Nations treaty bodies. Suggestions included the establishment of a youth forum under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, an annual dialogue on intergenerational inclusion and human rights and the development of working modalities, including virtual participation, enabling diverse youth voices to be heard. He encouraged broader engagement of the treaty bodies with youth organizations; youth-friendlier processes; the inclusion of youth rights-related questions in the list of issues; and support for youth-led organizations in order to promote a better understanding of, and further engagement in, the review processes of the treaty bodies.

46. Ms. Jalakšová underscored that economic crises had disproportionately affected young people, who faced obstacles during their transition to independence and struggled to be recognized as rights-holders and to access their human rights. She spoke about the limited impact of youth mainstreaming in existing United Nations human rights mechanisms to date, noting that, despite some progress following the efforts of the European Youth Forum and other organizations, very few recommendations specifically targeted youth. She explained that the inaccessibility and complexity of United Nations human rights mechanisms, combined with financial barriers, limited the engagement of youth organizations.

47. To involve youth systematically and meaningfully in human rights process, Ms. Jalakšová encouraged: States to involve youth when drafting national reports for their universal periodic reviews and treaty body reviews; special procedures mandate holders to consult youth representatives during country visits; and treaty bodies to address youth-specific issues through questions and concluding observations. She proposed the elaboration

of a legally binding international convention on youth rights, accompanied by a monitoring mechanism to be developed in collaboration with young people. As intermediate steps, she suggested that the Human Rights Council consider establishing a special procedure mandate on youth rights or an open-ended working group tasked with developing non-binding rules or standards on youth rights, with the participation of youth representatives.

48. Ms. Gass highlighted the importance of meaningful youth participation, which should be systematic and institutionalized through safe and inclusive spaces that facilitated youth leadership and co-ownership across the United Nations system. She underlined that gender stereotypes, often intersecting with disability, socioeconomic status or level of education, posed specific barriers to the right of young women and girls to participation at all levels. To facilitate youth engagement in United Nations human rights mechanisms, she called on States to provide funding for youth-led groups that oftentimes could not access funding opportunities, as well as to consistently engage with young people at the national level throughout the entire cycle of human rights review processes.

49. Ms. Gass proposed three recommendations to the Human Rights Council. First, she encouraged the Council to mandate the inclusion of a youth speaker in all panel discussions, learning from similar efforts to ensure gender parity. Second, she suggested the modification of special procedures mandates to include an age dimension in order to promote their ongoing engagement with youth. Third, in order to strengthen youth representation in the Council's decision-making processes, she proposed the establishment of an annual youth forum that to provide input to Council resolutions and discussions or the expansion of Youth Delegate Programme to promote meaningful and diverse participation.

50. Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye emphasized that institutionalizing meaningful youth participation in all decision-making processes beyond those specifically affecting youth was imperative. Tokenistic participation pushed youth out of formal structures and towards informal, self-organized movements where they often faced intimidation, threats and harassment. She underlined that while treaty bodies were interested in addressing the human rights situation of youth, providing examples from the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, she noted that information was lacking.

51. Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye called on the treaty bodies to proactively collaborate with youth-led movements to obtain information on the human rights challenges of youth prior to State party reviews and to facilitate youth participation during their sessions. She suggested the incorporation of youth issues into the list of issues prior to reporting and through questions to Government delegations during State party reviews. She recommended organizing thematic discussions on youth and inviting the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth to the sessions of the treaty bodies and to the annual meeting of special procedures mandate holders. She encouraged the identification of youth focal points across all treaty bodies and relevant special procedures mandate holders to discuss youth mainstreaming, in partnership with youth organizations. She proposed that the United Nations enhance its outreach and communication to younger generations, including through collaboration with public figures.

52. Mr. Manzour spoke on behalf of the World Youth Forum, which had been established with the support of President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi of Egypt as a global platform bringing together youth from around the world to discuss issues of international concern. To date, the Forum had welcomed over 1,500 young people from over 165 countries to share their visions and to promote intercultural dialogue and peace. A prominent initiative had been the World Youth Forum Labs, an arena for start-up pioneers to share experiences and discuss innovative solutions with diverse stakeholders.

53. Mr. Manzour explained that human rights had emerged as a key message during discussions at the World Youth Forum on social, political and economic issues related to youth, with a focus on political empowerment, health and social protection, as well as on the human rights of migrants and refugees. The Forum had prioritized youth political empowerment and participation in decision-making, advancing recommendations to enhance the participation of young people in and their contribution to development, including in post-conflict regions, while acknowledging their social responsibility and the value of their role as volunteers. He called for greater international cooperation and measures to protect young

people from threats and challenges, in particular in the context of COVID-19, so that they could effectively and productively contribute to reconstruction efforts.

54. In the ensuing discussion, contributions were made by representatives of Argentina, Greece, Italy, Kazakhstan, Malaysia and Romania, as well as the European Union, and by United Nations youth delegates from Australia, Czechia, Namibia and the Netherlands. Representatives of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights of Brazil, the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe, the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs of the Russian Federation and the United Nations Development Programme also took the floor. In addition, representatives of the following NGOs spoke: Alliance Creative Community Project; the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA; Education Above All Foundation; Green Hope Foundation; International Federation of Medical Students Associations; International Lesbian and Gay Association; The *Lancet* and Financial Times Commission on governing health futures 2030; and Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association.

55. Participants discussed potential next steps on youth and human rights at the international level. Proposals ranged from improved youth mainstreaming in existing human rights mechanisms to the creation of new spaces, frameworks or instruments, in consultation with young people and youth-led organizations. To promote improved mainstreaming in existing human rights mechanisms, participants proposed, inter alia, a greater focus on youth in resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly; the inclusion of recommendations on youth in the context of the universal periodic review process and treaty body reviews; and increased attention to youth by special procedures mandate holders. The need to view equality for youth rather than youth mainstreaming as the end goal in and of itself was stressed. Several participants underlined that young people should be recognized as rights holders, including in youth mainstreaming processes. It was emphasized that the complexity of human rights mechanisms, as well as the lack of technical knowledge and financial support for youth organizations to engage in such mechanisms, posed a barrier to youth participation. Furthermore, while youth organizations were encouraged or asked to mainstream youth rights using existing human rights mechanisms, they were not sufficiently supported to undertake such efforts.

56. Some participants highlighted that existing international human rights laws and mechanisms were not sufficient to ensure protection for and respect of youth rights, emphasizing possible alternatives, including: that the Human Rights Council request a discussion or dialogue with the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth on progress achieved in the implementation of human rights of youth in the context of the United Nations Youth Strategy, to be held on the fifth anniversary of the launch of the Strategy; the creation of a system for structured and meaningful participation of United Nations youth delegates in human rights mechanisms; the organization of a one-off forum or meeting, with the objective of producing a specialized toolkit or guidelines for Governments, focusing on issues that affect youth; the establishment of an annual youth forum, possibly combined with a youth network, under the auspices of the Council; the establishment of a special procedures mandate on youth rights by the Council; the development of non-binding international standards on youth rights; and the elaboration of a legally binding international instrument on youth.

57. Participants underlined that young people were not always aware of their human rights, that their rights were being violated or how to seek redress. Several participants recalled the importance of human rights education programmes for fostering knowledge and advocacy about human rights among youth, as well as nurturing a culture of human rights within communities.

58. There was broad consensus on the critical role of active and meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes, including in human rights bodies. Participants reiterated that young people should be engaged as equal partners in all matters that affected their lives. Some participants emphasized the need to move away from tokenistic approaches to youth participation towards working for and with youth, bearing in mind local realities. Other participants stressed that digital infrastructure, improved digital access and digital tools for youth were critical to promoting the meaningful participation of young people.

59. The importance of safe and inclusive spaces for youth in vulnerable situations was highlighted, while the need to address intersecting forms of discrimination against youth was reiterated. In the context of the unprecedented environmental crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to recognize the rights of future generations was emphasized. Recalling the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth, several participants called for targeted, large-scale policies focusing on those in the most vulnerable situations.

60. Participants cited good practice examples and national initiatives on youth mainstreaming and youth participation, referring, *inter alia*, to: co-management structures in which youth had an equal say in shaping policies, programmes and priorities; the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme; quotas for youth representatives in electoral political party lists; the introduction of a youth development index to assess the implementation of youth policies at the local level; the creation of a consultative council for adolescents to provide input on relevant governmental policies; consultations with youth organizations in the elaboration of COVID-19 recovery and resilience plans; lowering of the voting age; and the establishment of a youth parliament. Other participants underlined a number of efforts, including national or regional youth policies, initiatives focusing on volunteering, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, technical and vocational education and training and meetings focused on intergenerational dialogue.

61. In closing the discussion, Mr. Barragues noted that there was still much work to be done to ensure youth participation and engagement. He stressed that the subject of the human rights of youth was a cross-cutting, transversal agenda item that should permeate all dimensions of the work of the United Nations. Responding to questions and comments from participants, he underlined that UNFPA had updated its youth strategy in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and stressed that any measures to mainstream youth in human rights mechanisms should take the diversity of youth identities into account. Ms. Jalakšová stated that the specificities of youth as an age group should not act as an obstacle to the enjoyment of their fundamental rights and freedoms. She underlined the need for involving young people and youth organizations in all decisions regarding next steps on youth and human rights at the international level. Ms. Gass welcomed the high level of youth participation in the discussion, including from United Nations youth delegates. She emphasized that young people should participate in all discussions, not only those focused on youth, as well as the importance of young people's involvement in every stage of decision-making processes. Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye underscored the need for establishing dedicated mechanisms and structures for youth participation. Citing the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth as an example, she stressed the central role of institutions that acted as a resource hub for young people in establishing systematic communication and trust with youth. Mr. Mazour underlined the importance of the investment in training programmes for youth to realize their potential. He reiterated the role of the World Youth Forum as a bridge for communication between youth and decision makers.

D. Closing remarks

62. The Permanent Representative of Portugal to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Mr. Rui Macieira, delivered closing remarks. He emphasized that all States had the obligation to remove the barriers to the enjoyment of young people's human rights. He stated that mainstreaming youth in human rights mechanisms, such as the treaty bodies and the universal periodic review, as well as in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and outcomes of United Nations conferences, was a good starting point to address the challenges young people faced in the realization of their human rights.

63. Mr. Macieira reiterated that young people face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, with additional challenges for youth in vulnerable situations, in particular young women and girls. He highlighted the role of quality and inclusive education as well as the right to health in the realization of human rights of youth, underlining the need for investment in human rights-based health services and support, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health rights, free from stigma and discrimination. He acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated young people's access to the labour market

and stressed the importance of ensuring decent work for youth. In closing, he reiterated the commitment of Portugal to the full enjoyment of human rights by youth, including through its role in initiatives on youth at the national and intergovernmental levels.

III. Conclusions

64. Young people face specific barriers and challenges in the realization of their human rights by virtue of their age, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, including among youth. Moreover, the situation of young people worldwide demonstrates the interrelatedness and interdependence of human rights of youth, including, in particular, unequal access to education, lack of decent jobs and precarious working conditions that jeopardize their right to decent work, prolong their transition to autonomy, negatively affecting their human rights, including their rights to adequate housing, health and participation. There are additional obstacles for young people in vulnerable situations, who often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, in particular young women and girls, youth with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth, migrant, refugee and internally displaced youth, young care leavers and youth in conflict with the law. The digital divide has placed young people with little or no access to digital tools and virtual platforms at a particular disadvantage, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

65. The involvement of youth and youth-led organizations as equal partners in decision-making processes and in human rights mechanisms at all levels is a prerequisite to ensure the full realization of human rights of youth and to combat discrimination against young people. Promoting meaningful youth participation can facilitate progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which recognizes young people as critical agents of change, and can support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

66. Evidence indicates that United Nations human rights mechanisms lack a sufficient focus on youth due to several factors. Firstly, information on human rights challenges and discrimination faced by youth is not always readily available. Secondly, the complexity of United Nations mechanisms and processes, which often require technical knowledge and financial resources to ensure effective communication and consistent engagement, hinders youth participation in human rights processes and reviews. Targeted capacity-building and sustainable financial support for youth-led and youth-focused organizations could promote greater youth participation and more effective youth mainstreaming in the work of the Human Rights Council and other United Nations human rights mechanisms.

IV. Recommendations

67. A number of recommendations addressed to Member States arose during the discussions of the intersessional seminar. States should consider implementing measures, as well as introducing new legislation or amending existing legislation, aimed at promoting the realization of human rights of youth at the national level. Examples of such measures include:

(a) **Right to employment and social protection:** ensure adequate resources for youth in social protection systems and recognize the right to decent work for youth, with a view to regulating non-standard and precarious forms of work and prohibiting unpaid internships;

(b) **Right to participation:** consider the introduction of quotas for youth in political parties, national parliaments and other decision-making bodies, as well as lowering the voting age to 16;

(c) **Right to health:** invest in free and easily accessible health services for youth and students, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health services;

(d) **Access to justice:** establish juvenile justice systems for youth in conflict with the law, *inter alia*, by extending safeguards for children in contact with the justice system to young adults aged 18–21, as well as for young people aged 21–25;

(e) **Access to alternative care:** replace age-based criteria for accessing or remaining in alternative care with criteria linked to individual circumstances and criteria;

(f) **Human rights and citizenship education:** develop human rights education programmes aimed at increasing young people’s knowledge of human rights and the space to exercise those rights, as well as tools and mechanisms enabling youth to seek redress when their rights are violated.

68. In the context of the unprecedented environmental crisis and building on the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, Member States should consider recognizing the rights of future generations.

69. Additional recommendations addressed the role of States in promoting meaningful youth participation in human rights processes and mechanisms at all levels. For example, States should assess and consider ways to involve youth during the preparation, drafting and follow-up to national reports for the universal periodic review process and treaty body reviews, as well as the expansion of the Youth Delegate Programme, aimed at facilitating the engagement of youth delegates during sessions of the Human Rights Council.

70. United Nations treaty bodies should consider how to further collaborate with youth-led and youth-focused organizations in order to obtain information on the challenges to the human rights of youth prior to State party reviews, and also how to facilitate youth participation during sessions of the treaty bodies. Additionally, the treaty bodies could consider addressing youth-specific issues in the list of issues prior to reporting, as well as through questions addressed to Government delegations during State party reviews. The relevance of planning thematic discussions on youth, including with the participation of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, should also be assessed.

71. Special procedures mandate holders should consider engaging with young people and youth organizations in the context of their work, including country-specific visits and thematic reports. Mandate holders should assess the possibility of extending an invitation to the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth in the context of their annual meetings.

72. Panellists and participants recommended the following measures for the Human Rights Council to consider and assess, with the aim of promoting youth participation in intergovernmental human rights processes and advancing the human rights of young people at the international level:

(a) Establishing an annual youth forum to ensure permanent, structured and meaningful youth participation, feeding into the discussions of the Human Rights Council, including the adoption of Council resolutions;

(b) Establishing an annual panel, an annual day of discussion or an annual dialogue on youth or on intergenerational inclusion and human rights;

(c) Elaborating a legally binding international instrument on youth rights, in partnership with young people and youth-led organizations, to be accompanied by a monitoring mechanism;

(d) Creating a special procedure mandate on youth rights under the auspices of the Council;

(e) Creating an open-ended working group, with the aim of developing non-binding rules or standards on youth rights, in partnership with youth representatives;

- (f) **Including an age dimension in special procedures mandates and to encourage the engagement of mandate holders with youth;**
 - (g) **Including a youth speaker in all panel discussions taking place at the Council;**
 - (h) **Extending an invitation to the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth for a discussion or dialogue with the Council in order to take stock of progress achieved in the implementation of human rights of youth in the context of the United Nations Youth Strategy, for example on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of its launch.**
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