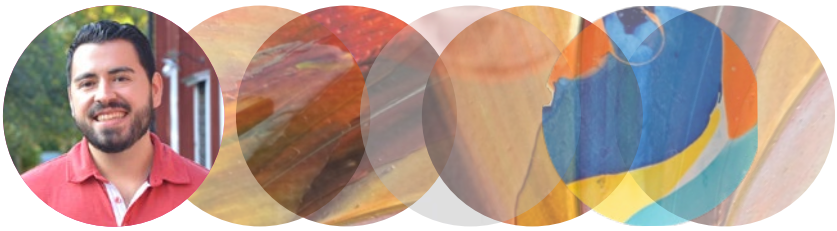


Nisreen Elsaim

Nisreen Elsaim is the former Chairperson of the United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. She started her environment and climate activist work in 2012 and was the Chair of the Sudan Youth Organization on Climate Change, where her regional and international work included mentoring young people. Nisreen holds a bachelor's degree in Physics from the University of Khartoum and is pursuing a master's degree in Renewable Energy.



José Alvarado

José Alvarado is a Programme Officer at Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation where he works on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, intersectionality and climate action. His experience includes coordinating roundtable discussions on the Sustaining Peace agenda focusing on the United Nations community. Previous experience includes working at several research institutions and publishing articles on gender and peace processes, arms transfer controls as well as climate change and peace. José is a Rotary Peace Fellow and holds a master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from Uppsala University. Before moving to Sweden, he worked for the United States government in Guatemala and on social issues in the non-governmental sector in Mexico, Central America, and Colombia.

Nisreen Elsaim gave this interview in her personal capacity and the article does not necessarily reflect the view of the Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change.

Climate change is intersectional: It impacts almost everything

Nisreen Elsaim is interviewed by José Alvarado

Introduction

Increasingly United Nations resolutions, declarations, and statements lift up youth as there is a growing realisation that young people, who in many countries constitute the majority of the population, must be given space to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

Mass broad-based social, political, environmental, and cultural movements such as #FridaysForFuture[1], Big Six Youth Organisations,[2] and initiatives like #ForYouthRights[3] continue to create momentum, pushing a global youth agenda in the multilateral arena forward. Decades of knocking at the door, protesting outside conference halls, and gathering in street marches built up to the Secretary-General of the United Nations appointing the UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change in July 2022. Their goal is to focus attention on 'practical and outcome-focused advice, diverse youth perspectives and concrete recommendations, with a clear focus on accelerating the implementation of his Climate Action agenda'.[4]

This group, brought together under the first system-wide youth strategy, Youth 2030, and the Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda, comprises youth voices and engages at the highest level in the UN as the organisation strives to fast-track international climate action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their collective experience includes climate change networks, advocacy, research, inclusive language, human rights defenders as well as the critical task of protecting and recording social and cultural heritage. Above all, the group represents youth from Africa, Europe, Melanesia, North and South America, and South Asia. In order to compensate for their size, their mandate is to also maintain wide levels of consultation with global youth networks to gather views from outside the group that could inform their advice to the Secretary-General.[5]

'We have seen young people on the front lines of climate action, showing us what bold leadership looks like, says António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General.[6]

In this interview Nisreen Elsaim, the first Chairperson of the United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change explores intersectionality. She speaks to the concept from a climate change activism perspective, touching on the lack of green energy, geographical inequalities, and the many challenges youth are facing when it comes to mobilising participation.



Picture: Adobe stock photo

Can you share with us your views on your United Nations experience and how it resonates with you in the context of intersectionality? Your role as Chair, speaking for youth, how does that resonate with you?

The main thing is that the issue that I am working with – 'climate change' – is an intersectional issue itself. I think it is very important for us to consider intersectionality, especially [with] the issue of climate change. It's not a standalone issue; it impacts almost everything. Finding holistic solutions to the problems that climate change causes and ultimately trying to stop climate change made us talk about other issues. For example, peace and security, economic growth, conserving culture, (etc).

I think one of the things that also made our work, let me say harder, is the youth itself. We are talking of a very wide range. We are not only talking about nationalities, we basically talk about the whole globe, but of course, in the same nationality, we might have different cultures. Even the youth themselves, in different ages and different stages - they have different needs and different perspectives. And in order for us to help them grow, not only personally but also to help the communities around them, all of this work requires a lot of intersections and a lot of connections, a lot of linkages, between the different themes and the different interests. Of course, managing the diversity itself is also a huge challenge. But every component comes with its own complexities, and I think it's hard and a lot [of] work, but I think it makes the work valuable. Challenging these complexities and making all of these intersections work is what makes our work mostly valuable.

Can you give us an example of how you do it?

Yes, for example in our own advisory group we are seven members functioning in six time zones. We have Moslem, Sikh, non-religious, LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender queer/questioning] groups, a Christian, an economist, a physicist, a researcher, a student and senior young people, almost mid-career. So, in our group itself, managing diversity … is really hard. But it is what makes our group really special. We were able to make successful decisions and manage a diverse group by meeting everywhere and we have been working together on this for two-and-half years now.

Nisreen, your country Sudan is often ranked as one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change. As a leading figure on climate and security issues, how have you engaged with the concept of intersectionality in your context?

Climate change is the perfect storm; it impacts everything. All sectors: food, water, energy and even human security are triggering conflicts. Many issues in sub-Saharan Africa are triggered by climate change, where 70% of the population are in agriculture or [are] pastoralists. It is mentally frustrating, impacting gross domestic product, exported goods and water. Of course, there is also drought and water scarcity. We are lucky to have the Nile, but clean water is still a huge problem, and its access is difficult for nomads and pastoralists in rural areas.



Picture: Adobe stock photo

In Sudan, only 30% have access to electricity and 70% live in darkness. Renewable energies are not integrated in local policies. We are using charcoal as a burning fuel and cutting trees. Charcoal production increases greenhouse gases, emitting CO_2. Deforestation, where the wood is freely available to make charcoal and the charcoal is used to barbeque and make food. It is taken to urban cities from rural areas. While urban centres emit more, rural areas are affected more. There are no markets, no water, and deep inequality that impacts communities. It must also be said that because of the politics in Sudan, there is also an impact on climate change.

Which groups are experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality due to climate change? Could you provide examples?

Climate [change] does not segregate. It does not understand borders. It is a cross-cutting problem where everyone is affected. And, of course, we are affected at all levels. Like [the] COVID-19 [pandemic]. Adaptation efforts do not work if the big emitters continue working as they are. Because of global emissions we are all connected. We need holistic solutions, otherwise, adaptation does not work. Everything is interlinked. Charcoal [production and use] is an example. Household chores [in Sudan] are performed by women and girls. Some have to walk five to ten kilometres for their water. It is the same for dry wood for fuel, and this exposes women and girls to gender-based violence. They get raped and abused a lot and face domestic violence if they fail to get water and firewood. They are scolded by their families. It is one of the most heart-breaking situations.

Another example is [how] during the devastating floods in 2020 [in Sudan] two ladies went into labour and could not get to the hospital. We had to fly a midwife to them. Luckily it went well, but this would not be the case all the time. The impact of climate change puts the burden on women and girls as well. They do not go to school because of the impact of climate change. In many areas the women grow the crops, and they don't own the land. They are only workers there. If the crops fail, they do not get anything for their efforts.

You are a climate action activist and Chair of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. What is your perception of global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change?

I always say in sessions and at multilateral events that the Sustainable Development Goals are about leaving no one behind, but in reality, a lot of people are already being left behind. It is good to have a plan, but if you do not have parameters and enforcement mechanisms, these plans ring hollow. [One can say this about the] Paris Agreement as well. There is a lack of political will for sustainable development. Everyone is about doing it for themselves; it is the opposite of leaving no one behind. Some of the slogans are not realistic.

I have always said that there should be a plan for action [to deal with climate change] but if there are no strict rules or enforcement mechanisms to implement the SDGs' programme of action, there will be more meetings every year and reports, but no actions because there is no way to implement. I don't want to say that the United Nations is weak, but it is less effective that way.

How can we better connect these international processes to the regional, national and local levels to combat the climate crisis?

As you mentioned earlier, I've worked at different levels. I started young at the grassroots level and then negotiating with my country and the African Group of Negotiators[7] [on climate change] at the medium level. [Now] most of the work comes from bilateral influence through the UN Secretary-General. It is important to understand how to influence policy and try influencing it at the international level. I'm sure you've heard of the butterfly effect. If something happens in Fiji, it will have an effect in Sudan as well. Governance structures are also important to connect the different levels. There are four pillars of good governance structures which apply here: political will, strong institutions, laws and legislative processes, and stakeholder engagement.

What are the factors that must change in society for you and other population groups?

We have electricity cuts. There are villages that are less than an hour from the city with no electricity. There are huge gaps between supply and demand. We are without electricity, five to six hours daily. I have a solar battery that lasts for four hours, but we manage. There is also a relationship between climate change

and health. For example, there is also a health impact when we have floods. A lot of the time sewage water mixes in with drinking water. There is the risk of cholera, diarrhoea and bilharzia. In essence, communities are vulnerable due to a lack of development.

What solutions do you propose to enable the change that is needed?

Good governance structures are necessary. We must follow the four pillars of climate: political will, strong institutions, laws and stakeholder engagement, including the private sector, civil society organisations, ministries and academic institutions.

Can global climate framework processes create conditions to address the intersecting disadvantages and oppressions people experience because of the climate crisis?

[In Sudan] we have not had a government since 25 October 2021. This makes it extremely hard to trust actions and start anything working if there are not governance structures in place to make climate action sustainable over time.

How do you keep hope?

We don't have the privilege to lose hope. I can't go out to the Bahamas and wait by the sea and wait for the world to end. We have to keep going and do what we are doing.

Civil society organisations are emphasising the intersection of social and environmental injustices and the disproportionate impact climate change has on some groups over others, yet there is limited data to make these connections. How can we improve local level data collection to better understand people's unique experiences?

There are four ways from my own perspective:

1. Documentary films are strong tools and can be visually impacting. Documentary films usually bring people to the place, and it helps to put people in the other's shoes.
2. [Keeping track of] History, not only about science and data but also feelings and emotions; these are human reactions from someone with actual experience.
3. It is important to have institutions that collect data. To create and build the capacities of these institutes, basically teaching them how to fish. Give them tools to collect data and make sure that they are updated in modern ways to collect data. Contact points and institutes in different areas [to reach marginalised groups] are also important. There are [also] surveys and different ways to [evaluate conditions] based on geographical location. [This is] not completely accurate, but it gives you an idea of the situation. While the [academic] institutes provide more accurate data.
4. Freedom of access to information and [to] the internet. Using tools like surveys, Google forms and SurveyMonkey[8] can also create greater engagement with populations at risk.

Notes:

[1] https://fridaysforfuture.org.

[2] https://bigsix.org.

[3] Youth Forum, 'A global youth movement #ForYouthRights: challenges and next steps', https://tools.youthforum.org/policy-library/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Mobilising-the-global-movement-ForYouthRights-Report_-final.pdf.

[4] United Nations, 'The Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change' (New York, United Nations, accessed on 09 March 2023), https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action/youth-advisory-group#.

[5] United Nations, 'United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change Selection criteria for second cohort: 2023-24', (United Nations, New York, 2023), https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/yag_2.0.pdf, accessed on 09 March 2023.

[6] See note 4.

[7] 'The African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change (AGN) was established at the first Conference of the Parties (COP1) in Berlin, Germany in 1995 as an alliance of African member states that represents the interests of the region in the international climate change negotiations, with a common and unified voice'. See African Group of Negotiators on Climate Change homepage: https://africangroupofnegotiators.org.

[8] SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.co.uk/) is a service that can be used to create online surveys.

Conclusion

Around the world communities are experiencing the devastating impact of multiple crises including violent conflict, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted societal systems and exacerbated inequalities and poverty. Intersectional approaches ask us to recognise that different factors in a person's life, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and migratory status interact to compound advantages or disadvantages and to mitigate the impacts of this on the overall risk of being left behind.

The contributors to this volume highlight different strategies for and experiences with applying intersectional approaches in policy and practice. While illuminating distinctive contextual examples, they all emphasise the imperative of starting from a holistic understanding of why and how people are marginalised and argue that the least that can be done is to listen to the voices of those directly impacted by and typically excluded from decision making processes that affect their lives.

In the volume examples are presented of how intersectionality is being operationalised, brought out in four diverse and interrelated themes — data, multilateralism, financing, and climate change. The contributions identify gaps and success factors as well as areas that require greater attention moving forward as we strive to accelerate the application of intersectionality in policy and practice. Intersectional approaches to data for instance is identified as a factor that is essential to derive a nuanced understanding of drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation among population groups in any context that allows for designing programming that can effectively address needs. While much more work and funding are still needed, it is important to recognise positive initiatives and progress that can serve as inspiration to go further.

Operationalising intersectionality — challenges in its application

This volume set out to identify efforts where intersectional approaches have been used to identify and address intersecting inequalities faced by people and their communities. The examples clearly indicate the inherent potential of applying intersectional approaches by practitioners and policymakers to advance peace, human rights, and sustainable development.

Still, some of the contributions raise awareness about potential challenges in its implementation. The first has to do with **brokering change within a society without doing harm**. Development processes might require including or prioritising different sub-groups and individuals to have a truly intersectional perspective, but it may be at odds with local customs or trigger historical grievances. When external actors fail to exercise caution against possible negative responses by local populations, their actions can lead to individuals getting hurt or a rejection of the efforts instead of achieving substantial change.

A second challenge has to do with **how to balance the constraints of scarce resources**. How do we meet the needs of those furthest left behind if they only account for a very small proportion of the population? Allocating resources in the most efficient way, to reach as many people in need as possible, is a starting point for multilateral action. Some of the contributions in this volume suggest that in a push to reduce inequality, there may be situations where addressing the needs of a broader group is considered the better option. They argue that 'the nuance of intersectionality may or may not be as important as being pragmatic in pushing forward the evolution of broader societal change'. As articulated by the Life & Peace Institute, '… the subtleties of intersectionality may sometimes appear to be a luxury when considering the levels of needs of broader groupings in society'. Again, priority should be given to those furthest left behind, but how thin can the cake be sliced before we must deal with considerations of efficiency?

Thirdly, there is the challenge of **the price, time and effort required for applying intersectionality**. Even among those who support the concept and application of inclusion, the discourse is often fraught with concerns about participatory processes being slow and resource intensive. The perception that an intersectional way of working will take longer and incur greater cost given that it requires more qualitative insight prevails. As such, it is difficult to guarantee that the application of such approaches and outcomes fits into set budgets and time constraints. This is a valid concern that must be addressed so that more voices are heard and deeper analyses made as this is an essential step towards intersectional responses by different agencies, organisations and institutions mandated to address the multiple issues.

Framing a new mindset – looking ahead at the future of intersectionality

The importance of inclusion is widely recognised in various international normative frameworks and agendas. Still, the commitments that have been made by the UN system and its member states risk remaining platitudes if intersectional approaches are not applied. Putting them into action can lift up the poorest and groups whose rights are repeatedly and egregiously violated. In the words of professor Kimberlé Crenshaw herself, 'intersectionality has been the banner under which many demands for inclusion have been made, but a term can do no more than those who use it have the power to demand'.[1] The effective application of intersectionality requires courageous and principled leadership to push for the maintenance of or, indeed demand the deeper analyses that holistic, intersectional approaches bring.

Through this volume, the Foundation aims to contribute to a better understanding of the concept and application of intersectional approaches in policy and practice We strive to advance its practice by sharing insights and lessons, recognising that the representation of these contributions merely scratches the surface of a deeply complex topic. Our ambition is to catalyse

and promote dialogue among those who are convinced of the merits of intersectionality and seek to promote it as well as with sceptics whose concerns deserve to be heard. It is understood that they may agree with the normative rationale for intersectional approaches but dismiss it as a luxury to be deprioritised to meet greater levels of need among broader groups in society.

In order to strengthen the application of intersectional lenses and approaches in practice we need to learn from more examples, in particular from practitioners in the global south. In follow up work to this volume, the intention is to use the Foundation's platform to highlight further examples and to facilitate exchanges to learn from these experiences. Through this, we hope that a more nuanced vision of peacebuilding and development that is firmly anchored in human rights for all will be fully realised.

Notes:

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Why intersectionality can't wait', article in press. (Washington, Washington Post, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/, accessed on 27 February 2023.