

**STATEMENT BY H.E. MR. MIROSLAV LAJČÁK, PRESIDENT OF THE  
72<sup>ND</sup> SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AT THE WINTER  
YOUTH ASSEMBLY**

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*Excellencies, youth delegates, colleagues and friends,*

Welcome to the United Nations! I'm excited to see so many young people in this General Assembly hall. And, honestly, I would like to sit down, and listen to you. But, you have decided to share your platform with me – and with other people like me. And that speaks to the core of this Assembly. Because, it not only provides a space for young people to talk to one another; it also ensures that policymakers and governments are here to engage – and to listen.

Let me start by addressing the elephant in the room. We know that young people are not only the leaders of the future. They need to be leaders now. But, we do not always see this in practice. Few young people hold traditional leadership roles. They are rarely included in decisions regarding policies or budgets. And that is the unfortunate reality we face.

But that is also what makes the examples of youth leadership and activism from around the world even more inspiring. Young people are not always given policy space. But they carve it out for themselves. They are not always invited to sit at the table. So, they stand beside it instead. They are not always allowed in rooms and halls of power. Which makes them shout louder, from outside. And they are not always given a platform from which to speak and influence. But, through technologies or innovations, they create their own. Young people have the agency. They have the ideas. And they have the solutions. They should not have to fight to use them – or to share them. They should not have to bang down our doors, and demand to be heard.

We need to start throwing these doors open – and going out, to knock on theirs. We need to start doing this urgently. And, we need to concentrate on four main areas.

The first is our planet. Unfortunately, the future of our planet is uncertain. Climate change threatens to make our earth unliveable. Access to modern energy is still a challenge for millions of people. Poor planning has turned urban centres into hubs of human suffering. Far too many people do not have access to clean water or a basic toilet. And, at the same time, we are running out of fresh water sources. We continue to consume at an alarming rate, while our increased production pollutes the environment. And, various species of plants and animals are at risk of disappearing forever. This is an urgent intergenerational priority. But, there is a clear lack of intergenerational solidarity.

People in power today have a duty to mitigate, and prevent, for tomorrow. That is why they adopted the 2030 Agenda. And that is why they agreed to be bound by the Paris Climate Agreement. So, we have a window of opportunity. But, it will not stay open forever. Because, by the time today's children become tomorrow's policy-makers, the chance to prevent or mitigate could be gone. They may, instead, only have the option to adapt to – or even survive – the problems that we created. This window of opportunity has already started to close. Indeed, some people and governments have already been forced into adaptation mode.

But, climate change is not a problem we can adapt our way out of. That is why we need urgent action. And, thankfully, young people know this. They want to mitigate, and prevent. And, they are not waiting for those in power to act. They are making moves on their own. They are innovating. They are seeing problems, and creating solutions. Apps to track national implementation of the Paris Agreement. Manufacturing processes that eliminate waste. Volunteer platforms to protect endangered species. These are just some of the many exciting initiatives designed by young people. The leaders and decision-makers need to get behind innovations like these. And they need to do more to bring the ideas and creativity of young people into mainstream policies.

The second area in need of urgent focus is sustainable and inclusive growth. Because the SDGs aim both to secure our planet's future – and to transform the lives of people living on it. Youth is not referenced in every Sustainable Development Goal. However, no single goal can be achieved without young people. We need your ideas. We need your innovations. We need your solutions. And we need your advice. And this is true across the board – from energy and poverty, to urban planning.

But, I want to focus, in particular, this evening, on education and employment. We often hear about how the Millennium Development Goals led to achievements in education. But, this success cannot hide the very real gaps that remain. We cannot talk about education without talking about its quality. It is not enough to ask how many children are sitting in classrooms. We must also ask how, and what, they are learning. According to UNESCO, only half of the world's children have basic proficiency in reading and mathematics by the time they leave school. And, the link between education and employment is clear. It is clear in logic. And it is clear in the figures. Over 70 million young people do not have jobs. And yet, some 40% of employers globally are finding it difficult to recruit people with the skills they need.

We cannot just call for more education, or more employment. We need to go deeper. We need to understand the barriers. We need to talk to young people. Including those who have left school early, and struggled to find work. Or those who want to work – but have not been able to find a job. Or, indeed, those who have excelled in the workforce – and want to help others to do the same. And, we need to support young people who are innovating the sectors of education and employment.

For example, a 27-year-old Afghan woman, named Mursal Hedayat. She created an online hub for refugees to train and work as language teachers. Or Shougat Nazbin Khan

– who is using digital tools to make education more accessible in rural Bangladesh. Or, Foster Awintiti Akugri, who runs a platform for future “techpreneurs” – and, at age 23, just became the youngest social entrepreneur to participate in the World Economic Forum, in Davos.

We also need more cooperation and partnership. We need to link up governments, businesses, civil society and the United Nations. And we need to use these links to tap into opportunities for education, skills, training and employment. These issues are not confined to SDGs 4 and 8. They can contribute to the achievement of the entire 2030 Agenda. They can avoid young people turning to irregular migration, out of desperation. And, they can help to prevent the conditions which lead to the growth of violent extremism and conflict.

And this brings me to the third area I want to focus on this evening: peace. Without peace, no efforts for our planet, or for the lives of people, can make any difference. For too long, we looked at young people as perpetrators of violence. We saw them as the rebels. The terrorists. The troublemakers. However, the international community has started to realise something important: the vast majority of young people are not involved in violence – of any kind. More and more policies and programmes reflect the role of young people as a resource for peace – rather than a source of conflict. In December 2015, the United Nations Security Council also called for a greater role for young people in peace and security.

But, despite this positive trend, young people are still shut out. They are not at the table, during peace talks. They are not given enough support to scale up valuable prevention efforts. They are not properly included in national reconciliation processes. They are not consulted about efforts to counter terrorism and extremism. This applies, in particular, to young women. And yet, despite these hurdles, young people are still out there – working for peace. They are bringing members of rival communities together. They are mediating in local disputes. They are organising peaceful marches. They are reaching out, and helping to prevent radicalisation.

The United Nations must do more to learn from them – and to support them. Some of these remarkable young people are involved in the first United Nations study on Youth, Peace and Security. This includes Malual Bol Kiir, who is advocating for an inclusive peace process in South Sudan. Or Hajar Sharief, who founded an organisation to support the role of women in Libya’s political transition. This study is in its final stages. Its recommendations must be reviewed by the United Nations and its Member States. And they must be translated into action.

Furthermore, in April, I will be organising an event on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, here, in this very building. I want young people on the panel – giving their ideas – and asking their questions. And I want to ensure that young women, in particular, have a platform.

My final point is about the role of multilateralism in our world. There are attempts to weaken this role. We need to resist them. But we cannot do this without you – without young people. And that is why we need to bring the United Nations closer to people – young people, in particular.

Since becoming President of the General Assembly, I have reached out to many young men and women. From townhall-style question and answer sessions with university students, to live Twitter chats with young people from around the world. Some of them had questions about the United Nations. Some had suggestions. Some even had criticisms. But, overwhelmingly, what I have observed is the belief of young people in the values and principles of this Organisation. And also, their passion to be more involved in it.

In recent years, our world has faced serious challenges. From climate change and terrorism, to the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War. All of them are global in nature. And they demand global governance, and global action, in response. But, at the same time, moves are being made to erode the multilateral framework – which we have spent decades building up. So, the stakes have never been higher. We need to make champions of multilateralism seen – and heard. And I hope that I am speaking to a room full of them this evening.

And so, friends, colleagues, I am very grateful to be a part of this Youth Assembly. I want to thank the organisers: The Friendship Ambassadors Foundation, and the governments of Austria, Mongolia and Slovakia. This Assembly allows young people to share their ideas. More importantly, it allows the rest of us to listen. And, most importantly of all, it gives us a chance to stand up for the role of the United Nations in our shared future. I hope to continue the momentum we have seen this evening. On 30 May, I will be convening a youth dialogue. It is intended to be innovative and interactive. And it will give us even more opportunities for people like you to talk – and for people like me to listen.

However, this evening, I will finish as I began: by addressing another elephant in the room. This Assembly is not enough. The youth dialogue, in May, will not be enough. And, frankly, nothing we are currently doing is enough. For too long, we have prevented young people from playing the roles they are capable of. We have talked about youth inclusion – without taking action. We have stressed the need for young voices to be heard, while hogging the microphone ourselves. We have said that they should be given more space – without budging an inch. We have invited them to sit at the table, but failed to change the seating plan. And, in doing so, we diminished their innovation, creativity and agency. Because, young people are not looking for charity. They have their own power. Their own ideas. And their own solutions. It is time we stop shouting them down – and time we start listening. This Assembly allows us to do exactly this. But we need to do it more. Our planet depends on it. Our multilateral system depends on it. And our futures depend on it.

*Thank you very much.*