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Statement as Delivered

Youth Representative (Delegate) Statement to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (77th Session), Item 25 ‘Social Development’, 3rd Plenary Meeting, as part of the Australian Delegation

Thank you honourable Chair, to the Third Committee, and to the Australian Government for the humbling honour to speak as Australia’s Youth Delegate. I acknowledge the traditional owners from the land of which I have travelled today and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Let me begin by reading a message shared to me by one young person, “*You have choked our rivers and poisoned the air. Skinned our forests and surrounded us in stone. You bled the Earth dry like a parasite, dying alongside our hopes, dreams and aspirations*”. Throughout this year, I have been learning about the best of what is, the areas of concern, and what could be for young people living in Australia. I have read this poetic decree first because it is an echo of many youth voices today, who while holding aspirations for a more accessible world, are still grappling with the myriad of changes in our environments and awaiting movement on the 2030 Agenda. My message today is one about the need for both non-tokenistic and transformative action on advancing human rights, to embed the 2030 Agenda meaningfully, and retain our hopes for the future.

Young people have acknowledged that, despite not a homogenous experience, health systems are providing further opportunities to access treatments and services promptly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic partnerships and negotiations within the international community, and a move to Indigenous-led conversations on representation are also a positive change. However, they still point to the persisting issue of prolonged delays in accessible employment and economic opportunities, unequal distribution of youth-centric education initiatives in areas historically excluded, limited cultural knowledge transmission for Indigenous youth and truth-telling to all communities, ongoing issues of street and sexual harassment, and the implementation of climate policies at both local community levels and aid for partner states. These concerns don’t operate in silos.

“Please look after my world. I can’t do much now, but when I’m older I want to feel safe and happy. The environment is so important to me, we need to be doing everything we can to protect it”. This message from a young person in Victoria shows hope, but also the feeling of helplessness, stagnation and deterioration. So, it is now a time to prioritise a rehaul in the approaches to achieving the 2030 Agenda in a manner that is applicable to all the contexts of young people living in Australia and globally.

Yes, we are well-placed to address social challenges impacting our lives, demonstrated by widespread global mobilisation. But we need to engage the voices of those who are often depicted as the “non-convenient”, who like myself, may have many layers of barriers to break. We need to recognise the ongoing struggle, leadership and voice of Indigenous peoples, including youth in our path forward. Supporting our full participation and partnership in social, economic, and political life is key to advancement on norms on gender, health and economic security, increasing all aspects of wellbeing, and creating safe and secure communities that meet the self-identified needs of young people.

One young person from regional New South Wales shared that they felt like they were *“becoming burnt out from trying to share [their] perspectives and being unable to make positive change”*. It is on us collectively to look to deeper engagement with community groups and formalise integrative learning environments for young people to actualise solutions in their own ways. As one young 16-year-old person said, they want *“the opportunity to be heard in a world that cares, because their ideas are legitimate, but their problems are real and severe”*. To me, transformative action is to be responsive and accountable, and this goes beyond just having a seat at the table. A seat is only one part. Young people need to feel like they are able to take the table by the edge and shake it when they feel like their words are falling to the side. They need to be able to establish or bring existing tables. They need to be able to speak alongside voices of all generations and have active feedback mechanisms easily accessible to the majority. Let young people build tables not for you, but with you, because these are indeed our tables too. Thank you.

– END STATEMENT –

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