



# **Challenges, Impacts and Benefits of Increased Youth Participation in Sustainable Development in Australia**

*Supplementary report for SDSN Youth Australia/Pacific Senate Inquiry Submission*

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## Introduction

This report was produced by SDSN Youth Australia/Pacific with the aim of providing insight into the relationship between youth in Australia and the Sustainable Development Goals. This report will give a detailed outline of how the individual SDGs have impacted young people, and how they will continue to do so. This breakdown is then used to provide an analysis of the potential youth have in Australia to advance the progress of the SDGs, followed by discussion of the changes needed at a legislative level to facilitate youth participation.

## About SDSN Youth Australia/Pacific

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network Youth (SDSN Youth) was launched in 2015 to empower young people globally to create sustainable development solutions. Through education and cooperation, it aims to amplify the tremendous energy and capabilities of youth in generating broader buy-in for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDSN Youth educates young people about the challenges of sustainable development and creates opportunities for them to use their creativity and knowledge to pioneer innovative solutions for the SDGs. In addition, SDSN Youth creates platforms for young people to connect, collaborate and integrate their ideas and perspectives into national and regional pathways for implementation of SDGs.

SDSN Youth was established as a SDSN Australia/Pacific initiative, and was launched as a global initiative of SDSN in June 2015. SDSN Youth activities in Australia/Pacific region focus some key areas:

- Supporting the work of SDSN Australia/Pacific, in particular activities around SDG localisation.
  - Providing national coordination for youth around the SDGs, including the 2016 [National Youth Summit](#) on the SDGs, and Youth sector consultation towards [Australia's Voluntary National Review](#).
  - Supporting local participation in global SDSN Youth programs, including Local Pathways Fellowship, Global Schools Program and the SDG Student Program.
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## Section 1: Placing Youth at the Centre Stage

### 1.1 Definition of Youth

In line with Security Council Resolution 2250, 'youth' is defined as the age group encompassing 18-29 year-olds.<sup>1</sup> The 2016 Census of Population and Housing by the Australian Bureau of Statistics counted about 4.5 million Australian youth residents, representing about 19.8 percent of all Australian residents.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Definition of Sustainable Development

One of the most widely accepted understandings of 'Sustainable Development' is adopted from the Brundtland Report in the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). It defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".<sup>3</sup>

Sustainable development emphasises that the economic, social and political decisions we make today can prevent irreversible detrimental effects. It highlights that the 'future generations', or today's youth, are one of the key stakeholders affected by such damage and have a vital role to play in contributing to the process of national and international sustainable development.

### 1.3 The potential for youth participation

Youth participation in the economy, politics and community of Australia can have profound consequences for development and social inclusion within society at large. Australian youth have displayed exceptional capability in volunteerism and activism. Over 500,000 youth said they spent time doing volunteer work - a figure that has continued to grow over recent Censuses (just under 395,000 in 2006 and around 450,000 in 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Young people display early stage entrepreneurial behaviour up to 1.6 times more frequently than older demographics. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) now estimates that youth worldwide are nearly two times more networked than the global population as a whole. At the same time, in 2013 the youth literacy rate at the global level has been measured at 91 percent, compared to an adult literacy rate of 85 percent, and intelligence test results have been rising for decades in Australia, illustrating that the current youth generation are the most educated generation ever.<sup>1</sup>

However, when we talk about the role of young people in achieving the SDGs, we often forget that they are not simply there to be creative and mobilize support. Youth are also incredibly skilled, and many of them are already contributing to the 2030 Agenda through their actions and undertakings in educational programs, charity initiatives, research and enterprise.

### 1.4 Youth awareness of the SDGs

[AIESEC's 2016 YouthSpeak Living in Australia Report](#) found that only 29% of Australian young people knew of the SDGs.<sup>33</sup> When we consider the audience that this survey examined were likely to be people who are already somewhat interested and engaged in the sustainable development space, this statistic becomes more worrying.



### **1.5 Political representation of youth**

Underlying these issues is the lack of political representation among youth in current governance systems. The Commonwealth Secretariat and the Institute for Economics and Peace in the inaugural Australian Youth Development Index (YDI) reported that political participation among young people saw the largest jump with an increase of 7.5 per cent and civic involvement rose by 10 percent across Australia.<sup>27</sup> Australia also tops the Global Youth Wellbeing Index 2014 that focused on how this age group fuelled societal and governmental change around the globe in recent years.<sup>28</sup>

Despite their enormous potential for contributing to political decisions, there has yet to be a channel for Australian youth to be politically legitimised. The current Australian government has 42 ministers with an average age of 51. There is only 1 federal minister (2.3% of all ministers) below the age of 30.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that close to 9.1 million people (38.5%) out of the entire Australian population are below the age of 30.<sup>2</sup> This shows a major disproportion in terms of youth representation in government.

## **Section 2: Impact of the SDGs on Youth**

Because there is a low representation of youth in government, young people, often more than most, are subject to the decisions of policy makers. As a result, the decisions made about the SDGs in Australia will have huge impacts on the livelihood of its youth. This section will explore the way decisions in the past have impacted youth, and provide insight into how this may progress into the future.

### **2.1 Poverty, Hunger and Employment (Goals 1, 2, 8)**

Goals 1, 2 and 8, referring to poverty, hunger and employment, have an enormous impact on young people. Youth unemployment is now at its highest point in 40 years at 18%, which has some ripple effects on poverty and hunger.<sup>5</sup> The support framework is also failing youth, with 51.8% of people receiving Youth Allowance under the 50% of median income poverty line.<sup>6</sup> According to Foodbank Australia, “Young Australians, including children, are more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population.”<sup>7</sup> Generations Y and Z, who make up 28% of Australia’s population, represent 38% of the food insecure people in Australia.<sup>7</sup>

The overall impacts described by these statistics are alarming. Young people often can’t find work, and Centrelink payments can be insufficient. These same young people are frequently without a stable home, and consequently face crippling food insecurity. It’s clear that the challenges faced by young people Australia-wide are sometimes not being adequately considered by policy-makers. If these facts are not compelling enough, there are also consequences beyond the direct impact on youth. A recent study at Swinburne University discovered that youth homelessness is costing the Australian economy \$626 million every year, which is more than is being spent on addressing this issue.<sup>8</sup>



## 2.2 Quality Education (Goal 4)

Quality Education, Goal 4, arguably has a greater impact on youth than any other SDG. Though this report does not necessarily analyse the impact of the SDGs on young children, it is prudent to look at the progress of primary and secondary education in Australia in such a way that sheds light on how well it facilitates children to become successful, self-sufficient young adults.

In UNICEF's latest report card, Australia was ranked 39<sup>th</sup> out of 41 middle-high income countries in achieving SDG 4 – placing us in the bottom 7%.<sup>5</sup> While this statistic is shocking, it becomes evident once a deeper analysis of Australia's internal progress in education is considered. Most alarmingly, only 71.7% of Australian 15-year-olds are reaching the baseline standards set out for reading, maths and science.<sup>9</sup>

Similar reports have discovered equally worrying statistics – the annual NAPLAN test, for students from year 3 to year 9, has shown *backwards* progress in some areas<sup>10</sup>. While there is evidence to suggest that there has been some improvement between different year 3 cohorts, tracking the same cohort's results from year 3 to year 9 shows some concerning figures. For example, 16.5% of current Year 9 students were below the benchmark for writing, yet within the same group only 2.8% failed to reach the benchmark when they were in year 3.<sup>10</sup> The education system isn't even friendly to high-achieving students, with a greater than 10% drop between students in 2011 and 2017 in a high achieving writing band.<sup>10</sup>

Although there are some positive trends in Australia's education data, this is still not enough. Most domains in Australia have around 90% of their students reaching the National Minimum Standards (NMS), yet vulnerable communities such as those in the Northern Territory only have 55.7% of their students reaching the NMS.<sup>11</sup> On top of this, NMS only provides an insight into *adequate* performance for students, and gives no indication that these young people are being set up to excel.

Another indicator for Australia's poor progress in reducing the education gap appears in the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre's report on education inequality in Australia, which states that "the report makes it clear that many of today's young children will not receive a 'fair go' in accessing education opportunities, for no other reason than family background, demographic characteristics and geography".<sup>12</sup>

## 2.3 Linking Education to Poverty, Hunger and Employment

It is a reasonable assertion that a student's progress into university can depend on the quality of their primary and secondary education. With this in mind, one conclusion is clear: it is becoming difficult for young people, particularly in vulnerable communities, to progress into higher education. This both directly and indirectly leads to some of the outcomes previously outlined for goals 1, 2 and 8, since tertiary education can provide a means for students to break the cycle of poverty and gain employability. This is, however, a two-way street, since homelessness and hunger provide significant barriers to achieving satisfactory outcomes in tertiary education.



Consequently, these issues cannot be treated exclusively. Improvement in education and an increase in governmental intervention into youth homelessness and poverty are both vital to opening doorways for youth to excel in education and the workplace.

#### **2.4 Gender and Social Inequalities (Goals 5 and 10)**

Just like in any other demographic, gender discrimination among youth can hold women back from achieving their full potential. Australia's progress towards SDG 5 is therefore of paramount importance. Mission Australia's annual report into discrimination surveyed 22,000 young people, and showed that one in four had experienced discrimination in the last 12 months with gender being the most commonly cited reason.<sup>13</sup> This discriminatory mindset leads to a massive workplace inequality – in fact, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency found that working women earn \$27,000 less than men.<sup>14</sup> Combining this with the aforementioned education gap experienced by students in vulnerable situations, Australia's progress towards goal 10, reduced inequalities, can be considered unsatisfactory.

#### **2.5 Energy Affordability and Economic Growth (Goals 7 and 8)**

Furthermore, two of the most important factors in the world that young people will inherit are SDGs 7 and 8, clean energy and economic growth. Australia is tracking quite poorly on this, with only 4.6% renewable energy in final consumption and 12.6% of youth not in employment, education or training.<sup>15</sup> This has a significant financial impact on youth, a phenomenon that is only expected to grow – particularly when it comes to renewable energy. As inefficient coal plants continue to close without renewable infrastructure readily in place, electricity prices have soared to borderline unaffordable levels.<sup>16</sup> Progressing towards renewable energy targets has been shown by ROAM consulting to save Australia's more than half a billion dollars in 2020.<sup>17</sup>

#### **2.6 Impact of the SDGs on Young Indigenous Australians (Goals 3, 4, 10 and 16)**

When considering the impact that SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) have on youth in Australia, there are no issues more pressing than those faced by young Indigenous Australians.

From the perspective of SDG 4, it is important to note that Indigenous children attend school at only a rate of 83.2%, 10% lower than other children. More alarmingly, only half of indigenous children are attending school 90% of the time, 26% less than non-indigenous children.<sup>18</sup> It's not surprising, then, that the outcomes are less than ideal – in fact, Indigenous students are not achieving minimum standards for reading and numeracy in 7 out of 8 possible NAPLAN categories.

The most astounding fact among any impact the SDGs may have on youth in Australia concerns SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). The world's highest single demographic suicide rate belongs to young Indigenous men. 90 out of every 100,000 Aboriginal men aged 25-29 commit suicide.<sup>19</sup> Just as appallingly, the Mission Australia Survey found that 10% of young Indigenous men rate their happiness at 0 out of 10.<sup>13</sup>



The Justice System is also failing Indigenous Australians. The facts are these: Indigenous Australians are imprisoned at more than 12 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, they are more likely to be repeat offenders and to be charged with violent crime.<sup>20</sup>

The overall inequalities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in Australia are already stark when considering the immense discrepancies in education, health and justice. This damage is magnified by the lack of employment available for Indigenous Australians as a means to break this cycle. The current non-indigenous unemployment rate sits at 5.8%, while the indigenous unemployment rate is 20.8%.<sup>19</sup>

## **2.7 Environmental Impacts**

Young people will be inheriting the planet as the workforce transitions over the next few decades. Consequently, the state of the environment and climate will have a substantial impact on the livelihood of youth globally.

Australia's performance in environmental sustainability practices is a cause for concern. Per capita, Australia has the highest rate of Carbon Dioxide consumption in the world.<sup>34</sup> Only 8.4% of Australia's energy production comes from renewables, and the average Australian produces around 20kg of e-waste every year.<sup>35</sup>

## **2.8 Conclusions**

There are a number of statistics that illustrate the fact that youth are underrepresented in Australia. Young people can face crippling circumstances in the form of hunger, homelessness and educational underperformance, and young women are confronted with a substantial wage gap. Australia is also heading towards a climate in which renewable energy is the only way young people will be able to afford climbing electricity prices. This paints a stark picture as to why the SDGs have a worrying and substantial impact on young people in Australia, and consequently why government must increase its engagement with young Australians.

# **Section 3: Why young people are well-suited to make a considerable impact on the SDGs**

Young people, despite adverse circumstances, are one of the most well-equipped demographics for advancing the SDGs. Youth are naturally creative, idealistic, ambitious, and willing to live through their values. This segment analyses young people's capacity to take these ingrained characteristics and turn them into tangible impact on the SDGs.

## **3.1 Idealism, Entrepreneurship and Volunteering**

Three quarters of millennials consider a company's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) Policy when deciding on their place of employment, and two thirds may refuse employment on this basis. 75% would take a pay cut on these grounds, and 83% would be more loyal to a company with a strong CSR portfolio.<sup>21</sup>



The recent Australian Census also found that youth are becoming more and more invested in inclusion and social justice, with more than 500,000 people between 15-24 volunteering in the 12 months prior to the census and more than 151,000 youth providing unpaid support to disabled people in the two weeks pre-census.<sup>8</sup>

This is also visible in the recent flourishing of youth entrepreneurship. While this demographic doesn't quite fit the definition of youth, the fact that the majority of Australian businesses are owned by entrepreneurs aged 25-34 speaks volumes about young people's capacity and drive to forge their own path.<sup>22</sup>

### **3.2 Implicit Contributions**

A variety of youth organisations provide an insight into the implicit impacts young people can have. Take the Oaktree Foundation – while their mission statement doesn't explicitly make reference to the SDGs, their efforts to end poverty have been nothing short of remarkable. Oaktree is among Australia's largest youth-led organisations, and through their belief that extreme poverty is unacceptable under any circumstance they have driven immense change in nations such as Cambodia and Timor-Leste.<sup>23</sup> There are many other youth organisations contributing to the SDGs around Australia, such as AYCC (Australian Youth Climate Coalition) and the 75 different organisations who attended the National Youth Summit. Ultimately, their goals are achieved through the empowerment of young people to act on their core ideals and beliefs.

### **3.3 Explicit Contributions**

There are also many youth organisations that demonstrate the explicit impact that youth can have on the SDGs. This has been demonstrated in a series of Case Studies submitted for the Youth Consultation on Australia's Voluntary National Review (VNR). Pujiman is a youth-run Indigenous cultural heritage preservation project, which aims to address SDG 11 through engaging young people and championing Indigenous Australians' ancient blueprint for environmental sustainability.

The Australian Medical Students Association's Gender Equality project aims to address SDG 5 by matching young female medical professionals to mentor them as they transition into the workforce. On top of this, they have implemented policy changes into the AMSA which increase focus on affirmative action, blinding applications, balancing guest speaker numbers and implicit bias training.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network Youth (SDSN Youth) was formed in 2015 to increase youth engagement across all SDGs. Their core aim is to educate young people about the SDGs and provide platforms where young people can "connect, collaborate and integrate their ideas and perspectives into national and regional pathways for the implementation of the SDGs".<sup>24</sup> The SDSN Youth now have more than 400 member organisations from over 70 countries, and have launched a wide variety of global educational initiatives in order to empower young people.

### **3.4 Empowerment through Economic Citizenship**

Youth are clearly idealistic and hard-working – yet there must be more done to facilitate this. Once youth are empowered, they can have a powerful impact as demonstrated in the case studies above. This raises an important question – how can youth be empowered?





The World Economic Forum asserts that giving young people “economic citizenship” would “help national policy-makers and leading youth-serving organizations achieve many of the SDGs and sub-targets in the drive to create a viable economic and social system for the future. Economic Citizenship is the participation of a citizen in their economy, and that anyone who possess it should then have the autonomy to exercise their “economic, social and cultural rights”. The WE Forum goes on to state that economic citizenship would facilitate young people towards achieving SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11 and 16.<sup>25</sup>

A combination of idealism and empowerment for youth, then, is a key mechanism for driving change towards the 2030 agenda. This becomes more important when considering the sheer volume of youth today – 7.55 million Australians are under 24,<sup>4</sup> and with a 1.4% population growth rate this number can only rise by 2030.<sup>26</sup>

## Section 4: Charting the way forward

Following from the discussion in previous section, we draw the following key conclusions:

- Failure to implement SDGs or make sufficient progress towards them will have a significant adverse impact on young people’s livelihoods.
- There is a lack of political representation among youth in Australia’s current governance systems which needs to be addressed.
- Young people are one of the most well-equipped demographics for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Taking these conclusions into consideration, we propose the following recommendations to the Government:

### **Need to increase SDG awareness among Australian youth**

We believe educational institutions are instrumental mediums to create awareness of SDGs, particularly among youth. Schools and universities must rally behind the education of SDGs by integrating SDGs into the national curriculum.

- For example, launching a national SDG Day among schools and universities nationwide sends a strong message to present governmental commitment to the SDGs.
- The [Global Schools Program](#) by SDSN Youth is one such initiative that is aimed at driving SDG awareness in schools. Some of these resources are currently operational, and can be scaled up or directed into high schools and/or universities.

### **Need to increase political representation of youth**

Youth are well placed to advance SDG implementation at the highest level with their idealism, resourcefulness collaborative nature. Meaningful youth participation and leadership require young people and youth-led organizations to have an enabling environment and relevant programmes and



policies. Realising young people's right to participate and be included in democratic processes and is also vital in ensuring the achievement of the SDGs.

We call for the re-establishment of a Ministry of Youth Affairs to fill the political needs of youth. The functions of this ministry may include, but should not be limited to:

- Identifying gaps in SDG impacts, challenges and implementation for youth in Australia.
- Gathering youth input on the implementation and creation of national policies
- Working with Future Generations Commission (as suggested by Oaktree) to facilitate a check-and-balance system in policy implementation.
- Assisting the Education Department to integrate SDG education in schools and universities.
- Supporting youth groups across advocacy, business, research and entrepreneurial sectors to aid in their achievement of SDG-oriented goals
- Providing financial and human resources to youth educational groups who implement the SDGs
- Reporting regularly in ensuring all stakeholders are held accountable in accordance with measures recommended in this report.

Echoing Oaktree's recommendation, we also strongly advocate for the establishment of a Future Generations Commission. The Commission functions to work independently to develop key areas for youth action. It organises grassroots effort led by the people to help identify gaps in SDG implementation especially pertaining to youth policies. At the same time, the Commission will work alongside the proposed Ministry of Youth Affairs and other partners to support data collection and rally support for policy implementation in preparing for emerging trends. This commission ultimately ensures accountability and meaningfulness of national, state and local initiatives.

### **Supporting greater youth contribution to the SDGs**

- *Policy initiatives* – Youth can support local governments by discussing and presenting solutions for communities and regions. Incentivising young innovators to tackle specific topics can also serve as a more direct approach to achieving SDG targets at the local level.
- *Data collection* – Youth have the capacity to educate many demographics in society. Existing local youth organizations are a valuable resource in the collection process, especially for those working across multiple regions. In addition, building capacity for impact assessment could help youth organizations and social businesses become key contributors to broader data collection efforts under the SDG indicator framework, thereby actively participating in the monitoring initiative.



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