

Conference Insight

Reimagined Development: The role of young leaders in development

Joshua Angelo Bata
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There is no veil of secrecy that the world is experiencing heightened tensions, eroding trust in institutions, and growing armed violence and armed conflict. Whether it is a fact of the world today or a subjective appraisal could be tabled for debates, but the lived experiences of millions of people facing existential threats, compounding risks and increased vulnerabilities should be enough to spur a decisive global action. Yet, there is an apparent lack of any meaningful response. In addition, the shifting priorities of traditional donors for development has been seized by the growing need for life-saving humanitarian funding – although the humanitarian gap remains large – if they have not entirely focused on re-armament. In this context, how development is done and what it entails needs to adapt to a multipolar world characterized by polycrisis. While it is not a novel question, the role of young people in development, including what tasks they could or should do as a key actor in re-imagining development in the face of the shifting world is worth revisiting.

The GLODEP Consortium – consisting of Palacký University, Université Clermont Auvergne and Università di Pavia, as well as its academic partners – convened a conference entitled “Reimagining Development: The role of young leaders in development” on June 25, 2025, in Olomouc, Czech Republic. The aim of the conference is to revisit the question on how could the inclusion of young people in development be promoted to enable their full and meaningful participation through the lens of young people engaged in different fields. The conference brought together a diverse panel of young individuals coming from the Czech Republic, Italy, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines engaged in the fields of development, democratization, good governance, humanitarian work, peacebuilding and security – making impact both at their localities and globally. Several panel members were GLODEP alumni and the conference is one of GLODEP’s initiative to nurture connection with its alumni network, to serve as platform for knowledge exchange and to learn from various fields of practice.

This conference insight seeks to distill five key takeaways from the exchanges among the panelists and the ensuing dialogue with the audience to foster shared recognition and understanding on current issues in development and the role of young people in keeping action at the forefront.

Key takeaways

Key Takeaway 1: Engagement of young people is imperative for inclusivity and to support them as an active actor in development. Their seat at the decision-making table should neither be an afterthought, nor a byproduct of development initiatives. It should be a starting point and a greater call for development practices to change. Key to this shift in perspective is to diminish the artificial divide between present and future actors – meaning young people should be regarded as an actor of the present, and not just of the future. This recognition is vital as many of the problems the world is facing is not brought upon by young people, yet they are also confronting these inescapable issues – even experiencing a greater magnitude of its impacts at times. Thus, there should be a recognition that the solution might come from the young generation growing up in a complicated reality.

Many young people have shown that they can be or they already are bridge-builders between policies and practices, between communities and institutions, between the different generations, and between fear and hope. However, when they are excluded overtly or covertly from the table, they have demonstrated that they can also create their own table with decision makers left with no choice but to meet their demands – suggesting that their force is formidable.

With their vibrant energy and passion, they could promote or have enabled shifting mindsets and support community solutions. In this process, it is important that they are supported with tools or approaches that they can use to realize these potentials. Such commitment to young people ensures that they also learn from past mistakes as they navigate their way through the world. In addition, trust that the young generation can act meaningfully in a fractured world is a prerequisite and a key enabler to foster such potential and for them to act with courage.

Key Takeaway 2: Stop infantilizing young people's agency, instead, create spaces for their creativity to feed into development action. Treating the role of young people only as beneficiaries of development contributes to the cycle of unequal distribution of power; amplifying their already unheard or muted voices. No one has trained young people to experience poverty, inequality, insecurity, or even wars, so development action should not be reserved only for those with formal “development training”.

Nevertheless, many young people have shown they possess the technical knowledge and political awareness necessary for development action. They understand resilience and many forms of resistance needed to make highly consequential impact. Such resistance is often shaped by the young generations' sensitivities, which could be characterized by their ability to communicate, mobilize, and innovate action that challenges uneven power structures. History has shown that many young people have been the conduits of change by the constant questioning of the status quo and being able to work above and beyond established conventions.

Key Takeaway 3: The personal experiences of young people should be recognized and be regarded as a guardrail for development action. Many young people grow up and enter adulthood in the context of intractable wars and armed violence, while simultaneously facing poverty, insecurity, instability, exclusion and various forms of injustices. Young people's aspirations for a better world, including their authenticity and curiosity are powerful fuel source of ideas in shaping and defining solutions. This suggests that these solutions are varied, could be small, and could be context-dependent – highlighting a greater call to move away from formulaic technical responses. Development actions shaped by young people's fresh eyes and personal experiences also promote their ownership of these solutions, thereby fostering a greater sense of purpose, responsibility and accountability.

On one hand, many young people have the drive to take action in the face of injustices that they witness or experience. This action often include joining institutions “to work from within”. On the other hand, there is frustration over the failure of institutions that should have been serving the vulnerable and the deprived, which to many young people, is its *raison d'être*. Their experiences and worries mirror the well-known tug-of-war between working from within or from the outside. Yet, this “contradiction” could also be part of the journey in which young people discover how to best formulate action, which includes accepting that many of solutions to development issues are political. In many contexts too, young people from various communities have created solutions outside of these institutions, however small they may seem – such as those related to campaigns, advocacy and peacebuilding – despite having little resources and support.

Key Takeaway 4: Solidarity and cooperation of young people with the disadvantaged or vulnerable groups and the broader community is key to build stronger alliances and gain a wider perspective for action. Young people need to foster connection with the broader community as they turn their ideas into action. While there is a call for greater participation of young people in development action, they should also strive for continuous learning and co-creating solutions with other segments of the society, particularly the vulnerable.

Many young people in development would often feel that their actions have a small impact, while feeling the immense psychological burden and overpowering perception that whatever they do, nothing would change. The reality is that such feeling could be inescapable and overwhelming at some point. This is why it is important for the young generation to connect and build solidarity with others to maintain high morale and have the courage to keep on going.

Relatedly, there also needs a continuous reflection on how development impact is valued and who should define its value – is it the donor or the recipient/stakeholder? The protection of dignity of a single person through small action versus a large scale development initiative with mixed results from traditional evaluation metrics need to be put into perspective. In this sense, the meaning-making of “value of impact” in development initiatives have inadvertently defined what development actions might be worth pursuing. The young generation, in solidarity and cooperation with the broader community, is well-placed to re-define what is worth pursuing.

Key Takeaway 5: While the young generation takes a seat at the decision-making table, they should remain agile and flexible to embrace the uncertainty of the world. Many of the persistent issues that the world is facing today could be traced through the inability or refusal to accept change. More broadly, such approach have left many development problems unresolved and in particular, many young people constantly feel the uneasiness caused by the state of the world. Learning to accept the state of uncertainty as a feature of the world today could keep young people curious yet critical, hungry for learning yet quick to act, while recognizing that the sources of good ideas and inspiration are varied.

The ability to remain agile and flexible could be key to continue creating solutions in the face of dwindling development finance and development space, for instance. It could be a valuable asset to confront old and new development issues emerging from the seeming lightning speed transformations the world is undergoing. To remain agile and flexible also means being able to be reflexive about one's actions, which are needed to maintain openness.

Panelists¹

The GLODEP Consortium Local Director Dr. Lenka Dušková formally opened the conference and recent graduates and alumni of GLODEP, other students of Palacký University, including professors and staff participated in the conference.

The following individuals sat in the panel during the conference who shared their reflections.

From Nigeria, **Lynda Nkechi Emmanuel** is a development and humanitarian worker with expertise in peacebuilding, conflict prevention/resolution, gender and social inclusion, as well as social and economic empowerment.

From Mexico, **José Jeronimo Olvéra Leon** is an economist and a GLODEP alumnus currently working at the World Bank supporting tax and transfer reforms in Latin America. At the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, he contributed to the Financing for Development Reports (2024-25).

Monica Avogadri from Italy is a GLODEP alumna with field experience in humanitarian and development across the Iraqi Kurdistan and Nepal. She currently manages a European transnational project supporting the socio-economic inclusion of Ukrainian refugees with disabilities.

Pavel Havlíček from the Czech Republic is a Research Fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO) where he focuses on Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Russia, and the Eastern Partnership, as well as questions of security, disinformation, strategic communications, democratization and civil society support.

¹ The views shared by the panelists does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the organizations and institutions which they represent or belong to.

Arooj Fatima is a GLODEP alumna and a social and behavioral change Program Manager at White Rice, a civil society organization using behavioral science, storytelling and design-thinking to support parents, children and communities to thrive.

Serving as the panel's moderator, **Joshua Angelo Bata** is a GLODEP alumnus from the Philippines and an Associate Researcher at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research where he conducts research on conventional weapons issues by understanding how arms control and disarmament measures can contribute to peace, security and development.

More information about [GLODEP Conference Panel](#).