

Mobilising young leaders

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KATHERINE ELLIS is Director of Youth Affairs at the Commonwealth Secretariat. In this intergovernmental role, she leads a team with responsibility for supporting the Commonwealth's 53 member governments on the social, political and economic empowerment of their young people (aged 15-29 years). The Commonwealth's youth development work includes technical assistance and capacity building, especially regarding youth policy, building of youth networks, and promotion of the youth work profession.

2015 is a critical year for global development – the Global Goals for Sustainable Development were formally launched in September, setting the overall framework on development for the next 15 years, and the upcoming 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) will strive for consensus on global action to counter the rising threat of climate change.

At the same time, young people are calling for a larger role in global development and democracy, keen to contribute their talents and ideas to the grave issues that the Global Goals and COP21 seek to address.

At the Commonwealth Youth Forum (CYF) in Malta, three hundred young leaders (aged 18-29) from across the Commonwealth will come together to explore the key issues facing their generation, and determine their role in implementing the Global Goals. The agenda will feature issues of climate change mitigation and adaptation, quality and fit-for-purpose education, peace-building and social cohesion, and youth employment and entrepreneurship.

Held in the lead up to the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the CYF is a five-day gathering of official youth representatives from our 53 member countries, leaders of various pan-Commonwealth youth networks, and other outstanding young Commonwealth citizens. Held under the theme 'Adding Global Value...#WhatNext?', the 2015 Forum will be the first major gathering of Commonwealth young people since the launch of the Global Goals.

These young people are expert, active and credible actors in the Commonwealth policy space. They are the representative voice of the more than 1.2 billion young people in the Commonwealth – over 60 per cent of its population – and consequently, their input is recognised and valued, and they have real influence. Our Commonwealth Heads of Government meet with them as part of CHOGM, taking into account their priorities, and recommendations before their final communique is agreed. The young leaders also ignite action themselves on return to their countries, with and through their significant youth constituencies.

The first ever Commonwealth Youth Forum took place 20 years ago in Edinburgh. Since then the youth-led model has been adopted by a range of organisations and international summits, in recognition that global policy decisions need to reflect the needs, aspirations and opportunities provided by young people.

Many young people are skilled, well-informed and motivated, and are already making a difference every day in all fields of work and as leaders in their communities. They play an integral part in advancing development, democracy and peace, and in promoting Commonwealth values.

It is not hard to find examples of outstanding young Commonwealth leaders – such as Ms Gulalai Ismail from Pakistan, the 2015 Asia Region Winner of the Commonwealth Youth Awards. Gulalai is one of the foremost youth advocates for gender equality in her region. Now 26, at just 16 years old she established an organisation called Aware Girls to encourage political participation of young women within remote Pakistani communities.

Another shining light is Mr Julius Shirima from Tanzania, aged 26, the 2015 Pan-Commonwealth Youth Award Winner. He founded Darecha, a micro-venture capital fund and entrepreneur network that helps young businesspeople turn enterprising concepts into profitable ventures. As a result of his efforts, thousands of young people in his country are today empowered, generating income and enjoying meaningful work.

Gulalai and Julius are not alone in their efforts – there are thousands of young leaders and activists just like them, working in different spheres to drive meaningful and sustainable change. There are also many who are leading national, regional and global level bodies to engage and include other young people, inspiring and mobilising them to drive development.

The Commonwealth also plays an important role in connecting these young agents of change through pan-Commonwealth networks focused on issues such as education, entrepreneurship, climate change, sport as a development tool, gender equality, and human rights and democracy.

The CYF is the premier platform that brings the youth leaders from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Americas, Pacific and Europe together face-to-face to explore their concerns and ideas, build and solidify their regional and global connections, and decide on their priorities recommendations for the years ahead.

Although young people will inherit the world delivered by the Global Goals, they are not merely passive beneficiaries until that point in time. Rather, they are dynamic actors in development and democracy who deserve recognition, resources and respect. **E**