

GAC Youth Consultation For the Sustainable Development Goals

On June 28, 2016 Joshua Mazur and I (Alison Bloom) attended the Global Affairs Canada (GAC) Youth Consultation on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to gain an insight into where youth believe Canada should focus its international development efforts. This consultation involved youth around Ottawa, the Minister of International Development, the honourable Maria-Claude Bibeau and her private secretary, along with other GAC employees. This was a chance for youth to speak on their expertise on how they believed Canada should assist in reaching the SDGs. There were seven themes, including: health and rights of women and children; clean economic growth and climate change; governance, pluralism, diversity and human rights; peace and security; responding to humanitarian crises and the needs of displaced populations; poverty, inequality, vulnerability and fragility; and delivering results: improving effectiveness, transparency, innovation and partnerships.

There were about 80 youth at this consultation, and we were split up into thematic groups. I was in the group health and rights of women and children, while Joshua was in the group poverty inequality, vulnerability, and fragility. Each group was asked to freely discuss two questions, and following this a rapporteur would present the information to Minister Bibeau. I was the rapporteur in my group.

My group was asked two questions which created a lot of discussion and creative thinking. The first question asked:

How can Canada's efforts to support well-being and empowerment better benefit children and youth, including in the education sector?

We came up with three themes from this question, the first was creating meaningful engagement and sharing the power we have coming in as foreign development workers. This would require engagement with different groups including; youth, local communities, women and girls, men (to empower them to empower women) and the most vulnerable groups. Canada should base all projects off of these engagements, but this would require more flexible funding.

The second theme was to address the root causes of inequality to address the problems at hand. The term *intersectional feminism* was discussed, as it would include race, gender, class, and access to resources (etc.). Some examples we came up with were abortion and menstrual hygiene which are really important issues right now. If there is no access to abortion or no toilets for menstrual hygiene, girls are not able to go to school. We discussed how Canada should integrate the root cause approach into the theory of change approach.

We discussed how Canada could do this within the education sector and came up with a number of things which included; entrepreneurship, ICT, innovation, and teaching soft skills such as teaming, leadership and confidence. We emphasize the importance of getting kids into the classroom, but then also ensuring that the activities within the classroom are of quality.

The second question was as follows: *What are the gaps in health, education and social protection systems that must be addressed in order to better reach adolescent girls and boys and how can Canada play a meaningful role in closing these gaps?*

The first thing we discussed was increasing countries capacity to collect legitimate, non-binary statistics, including LGBTQ+ communities and young people. Canada should be empowering communities through self-monitoring while also being culturally and contextually sensitive, and creating local ownership.

Canada needs to be a leader in creating advocacy spaces for young people through political and diplomatic channels, they need to tap into the know-how of local Canadian NGO's to do this. This should be through a rights based approach.

Canada needs to become more accepting of risk and increase the flexibility of funding; this is so projects can be innovative. Many other groups discussed the need to be allowed to fail and learn from their mistakes. We also would like to see Canada ear mark funding for youth-run organizations.

The last thing we discussed was for Canada to keep youth involved and integrate them into the professional sphere with paid positions both for Canadian youth and internationally. Minister Bibeau has already begun to address this by announcing the International Youth Internship programs which will have Canadian NGOs providing work term opportunities.

As mentioned, Josh participated in the breakout session on poverty, inequality, vulnerability and fragility. GAC was particularly interested in youth conceptions of who the most vulnerable aid recipients are and where these recipients are located. Operationalizing services for these people can be streamlined, but only once those involved are pinpointed. Not much was said of addressing inequality, as the political situations in differing geopolitical spheres would greatly impact the outcome of any equality-based development policy.

Fragile states were of particular concern to GAC. Both youth conceptions of what a fragile state looks like and what services could be offered. Here, Josh would have liked to see more group focus on humanitarian efforts in active war zones, but likely due to recent media attention on the refugee crisis, fragility and vulnerability largely focused on a narrow group of refugees in the West.

I was very impressed with GAC for having such an open conversation with us about these issues and how Canada needs to be an actor and a role model to help the world reach the SDGs. Global Affairs Canada must be commended in both this consultation process they have undertaken and their department-wide approach to women's rights. The department is now developing policy through a feminist lens. This approach is widely supported by development experts and has been determined to be a catalyst for economic growth and human rights worldwide. I am looking forward to seeing what they change and how they implement some of these ideas. It was exciting to have a voice; GAC is headed in a very exciting and new direction.

Alison Bloom was the Co-Chair of the 2016 National Student Commonwealth Forum, a programme of the Royal Commonwealth Society Ottawa Branch and attended the event on behalf of Jenny Stodola, Vice-Chair Youth of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada. Joshua Mazur is a Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada but was at the event in his capacity as one of the National Youth Delegates of Canada to the Commonwealth Youth Council. The opinions expressed in this piece are of the authours and not necessarily of the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada.