



# AUSTRALIA



AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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## UNGA THIRD COMMITTEE

1 October 2019

## Debate on Social Development

**Statement by Kareem El-Ansary**

**2019 Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations**

(Check against delivery)

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Thank you, Chair.

It is a privilege to address you today as Australia's 21st Youth Representative to the United Nations.

There is a Greek proverb that says: "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in". This fundamental idea has underpinned human development for centuries. The idea that we are only caretakers of the present, that the decisions we make today will impact future generations; an idea that four years ago inspired 193 countries to adopt the 2030 Agenda, the most ambitious commitment to sustainable development we've ever seen.

Today, we've made progress, but so many of us young people remain uncertain about our futures.

Over the past six months, I've travelled across Australia listening to thousands of young people. I've been to every state and territory, from our most remote communities, to our bustling metropolises, visiting schools, technical colleges, universities, community groups, places of worship, hospitals and detention centres. I've laughed and cried with young Australians and have seen how the systems we've built are both enabling them and failing them.

But I've also seen the incredible capacity that young people have to change the world. How so many young people are leading and shaping their communities every day, with pragmatic and creative solutions.

The message I deliver today on behalf of young Australians is one of hope. But at this crucial moment in time, this hope is tempered by fear. We're afraid that we are not acting fast enough to address the critical issues of today and worse, that we don't have a say in our future.

Young people across Australia spoke to me about the crippling stigmas that still surround mental health. In regional and rural communities, they spoke about a lack of opportunity in education and employment. About disparities in healthcare, public infrastructure and an unbalanced justice system. They spoke about the rising cost of living, unemployment, difficulties in finding safe housing and an education system that is struggling to prepare us for the real world.

They shared stories of discrimination. I met young migrants who feel like aliens in their own country; young people with disabilities who struggle to access public spaces and basic services; members of the LGBTQI community who feel isolated, alone and at times, even unsafe; indigenous Australians; members of the oldest continuing civilisation in human history, who battle racism and dispossession every day and live with the pain of generations past.

I met a 10 year old indigenous boy whose traditional language is one of hundreds that are disappearing, who learns nothing about his culture in school and who is 15 times more likely to be incarcerated than his non-indigenous peers.

I met a 19 year old Muslim girl who changed her name just to get a job interview and a 12 year old boy with autism who was driven to tears because he felt helpless and alone in a school that didn't understand his needs.

Across the entire country, young people spoke of their fear of climate change, a fear shared by millions across the world who are now fighting for their futures. I met young farmers who couldn't feed their livestock due to drought and in the same state, people who were rebuilding their homes after devastating floods.

This year, I met thousands of young Australians who with one voice, simply asked to be included.

But there is hope. Young Australians believe in our ability to build a better world and we have ideas to contribute right now. We see ourselves as global citizens and know that the path to sustainable development is one that must be paved together. We have before us an unprecedented opportunity to realise the untapped potential of the largest, most diverse and most educated generation in history.

As decision-makers, you are not only the caretakers of the present but architects of the future. We need you to plant those trees. We invite you to include us in the conversations that are shaping our lives. Embrace our ideas and solutions. As young people, we want to work with you, we are ready to work with you but you need to want the same.

In 2030, I may have children of my own. When they look back at this time in our history, what will they see? A world divided? Of inequality, environmental catastrophe, where the generations are at odds? Or will they recall a time when the generations came together and with determination met our greatest challenges?

That history is ours to create.