

The voices of children in the global health debate



In the face of imminent threats arising from climate change, commercial marketing of harmful products, and pervasive inequities, the new WHO–UNICEF–*Lancet* Commission¹ makes a compelling ethical and economic case for investing in the world's children. The Commission advocates for children to be at the centre of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for the protection of their health and rights. This agenda is essential and urgent to avoid mistakes that could cost a generation the chance to grow up safely, happily, and with abundant resources. Crucially, the Commission recognises children and adolescents as active agents with rights to freedom of expression, dignity, and citizenship: decision makers in their own lives and in society at large. Integrating young people into decision making contributes to a more cohesive and egalitarian society, catalysing our ability to create a sustainable and healthy future.

As young adults who grew up in low-income and middle-income countries and members of the group of Young Leaders for the 2018 *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development,² this vision strikes the right chord. We have seen, and sometimes experienced first-hand, the challenges of children and adolescents growing up in some of the poorest parts of the world. To different extents, we have faced challenges to our health and wellbeing, which impaired our ability to function in the world. We have risen. And everywhere we look, other young people are rising. From Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai to climate activist Vanessa Nakate, from educational rights activist Thandiwe Chama to mental health campaigner Victor Ugo, young people are expressing their powerful voice for their future, their society, and their planet.

But young people's expression of agency requires more than a motivation for civic duty. A commitment to participatory leadership must be made by those who hold substantial influence. The WHO–UNICEF–*Lancet* Commission identifies several adult-made barriers to engagement, including discrimination against young people, a lack of trust in their views, and reluctance from overburdened authorities to take on additional tasks. We stand with the Commission in advocating for investments to address social norms that ignore

children's voices and to create policies that promote the full and effective participation of young people.

As proposed by the Commission, children and adolescents can support monitoring and social accountability of SDGs, mobilise governments to adopt new health and sustainability policies, and help design and lead programmes and interventions. Because our problems are vast, complex, and interconnected, effective participation in tackling these problems requires innovation. U-Report, a social platform created by UNICEF, and other digital tools galvanise young people's engagement at an unprecedented scale. New qualitative methods, such as photovoice for participatory photography,³ provide a window for navigating local complexities. Researchers, policy makers, and international and local organisations must work closely with young people to develop such tools and understand their own aspirations for engagement. For instance, in partnership with UNICEF, our group of Young Leaders for the *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development is using

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For more on U-Report see
<https://www.unicef.org/innovation/U-Report>



Young Leaders for the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development/illustrator, Josefina Schagorodsky

U-Report to identify how and where young people wish to be involved in advancing the goal of promoting mental health and wellbeing in their communities and wider society.

Alongside scalability, a need exists for inclusive tools that allow for genuine and meaningful engagement from children in rural areas, ethnic minorities, gender and sexual minorities, those exposed to poverty and violence, and those who experience health challenges. In our work with the *Lancet* Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development on the My Mind Our Humanity campaign, arts-based approaches have allowed us to engage young people from a range of backgrounds, both face-to-face and online. Poetry and music have created safe spaces for sharing deeply personal experiences of mental health challenges and supporting each other. These approaches have allowed us to challenge stigma by reminding young people of our shared humanity. The potential of arts-based and digital tools to foster inclusive engagement and participation is important, and our capacity to empower young generations is dependent on our ability to harness these and other resources to understand their values and experiences.

The WHO–UNICEF–*Lancet* Commission invites us to think holistically about children and their rights to be heard and respected, and emphasises the role of community engagement in promoting the health and development of the world’s children. Children’s participation goes far beyond formal, high-level platforms. Having a voice—or lacking one—defines every relationship and interaction children experience at home and in school, work, leisure settings, and other spaces they inhabit. Children are empowered when they feel safe and welcome at home and school; when they

have someone to talk to if something is wrong; and when family, friends, and teachers hear their concerns and appreciate their ideas. Indeed, family togetherness and connection to one’s culture are crucial for health and wellbeing, according to the children consulted by the Commission, from communities across New Zealand, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Argentina. The potential of shared experiences to harness children’s health and wellbeing is enormous. By fostering a culture of connectedness and mutual respect, we meet children’s needs for self-esteem and confidence and strengthen their ability to make a difference.

The WHO–UNICEF–*Lancet* Commission presents a candid assessment of the threats children face and the sombre implications for their future. But the Commission also presents a clear vision for making a better world, for them and with them. Too often have we seen young people sidelined while those who have the power to make a change hesitate. For too long have young people been silenced, mocked, and judged for their bold ambitions to challenge the status quo. We will not be deterred. Now and always, the voices of children will call for an inclusive, fair, and sustainable future.

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- 2 Patel V, Saxena S, Lund C, et al. The *Lancet* Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *Lancet* 2018; **392**: 1553–98.
- 3 Wang C, Burris MA. Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Educ Behav* 1997; **24**: 369–87.

For more on My Mind Our Humanity see www.globalmentalhealthcommission.org/youth-campaign