

EPISODE 41. WE ARE HERE NOW: YOUTH SHAPING GLOBAL HEALTH

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Garry Aslanyan [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to the Global Health Matters podcast. I am your host, Garry Aslanyan. The world is witnessing its largest youth generation ever with half of the global population under 30. A sustainable future hinges on the meaningful engagement of young people. If you have not yet listened, I encourage you to listen to the previous episode, "Pockets of Optimism: Empowering Youth to Improve Mental Health". In today's episode, you will hear from three charismatic young voices in global health. Together we will delve into the crucial role young people can play in shaping health related decision making today and in the future. I am joined by Inês Costa Louro, Aloyce Urassa and Hamaiyal Sana. Inês is a first-year medical doctor from Portugal and the vice President for External affairs of the International Federation of Medical Students Association. Aloyce is a public health scientist from Tanzania and chairperson of the African Leaders Malaria Alliance Youth Advisory Council, and Hamaiyal Sana is a Pakistani medical doctor and vice chair of the World Health Organization's Youth Council. Thank you everyone for joining me today. I want to start our conversation by asking each of you briefly to share with our listeners how you have used your voice in global health. Maybe we can start with Inês, your experience.

Inês Costa Louro [00:01:56] I am currently the vice President for External affairs of the International Federation of Medical Students Associations. I work with our members, medical students from all over the world, and I try to collect and connect their views on several global health topics, namely public health, planetary health, medical science and so on. Besides the IFMSA, I am also part of youth networks in the WHO regional Office for Europe, and in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. These networks are also a great platform for me to speak on behalf of my own generation, on behalf of youth, and in these two particularly, mostly about substances prevention. It is great to have several opportunities to bring our perspective to the table.

Garry Aslanyan [00:02:45] Great. What about you Aloyce?

Aloyce Urassa [00:02:47] On my side, bringing my youth, using my voice for global impact, it has been a journey as well. I can speak at the moment where I am sitting on the chair of the African Leaders Malaria Lancet Advisory Council, utilizing my voice to advocate for meaningful youth engagement in the fight against malaria, particularly ensuring that their voices reach the high level. I have also been sitting at the Global Fund Advocates Network as a speaker for representing youth voices in the fight against malaria, and also ensuring that we have a contribution as the largest part of the population, we are over 60% of the population globally and for Africa I am sure we are over 65%. We need to ensure that our voices are heard in terms of ensuring that health systems are strengthened, and we are responding to key components of diversity, inclusion and equity.

Garry Aslanyan [00:03:46] Hamaiyal.

Hamaiyal Sana [00:03:47] I would say similar to my colleagues, I started my journey in health policy and advocacy and research as a medical student. This led me to serve as the liaison officer to WHO for medical students for a year around 2022 to 2023. This was also around the time when I got lucky to work with some of the bright young minds that had been working with the WHO secretariat for two years to establish the WHO youth Council, a one-of-a-kind advisory body inside the WHO. I have been serving as

a vice chair of the WHO youth council and trying to be a part of the youths' efforts to sort of see the first rendition of the WHO efforts that make youth partnership a reality in the system.

Garry Aslanyan [00:04:36] I am really impressed with all of these things you are involved in. Hamaiyal, you mentioned WHO youth Council. Can you tell us more how the council influences some of the technical work WHO does?

Hamaiyal Sana [00:04:50] The WHO Youth Council is an advisory body that has been established inside the WHO's network, the bulk of our work is mainly focused on giving advice to different technical work that WHO does, and also the advocacy work that WHO does. We have established focal persons inside the youth council, which work together with these departments and contribute to different kinds of avenues, like consultations that happen or technical documents that go out from these departments or to be part of WHO delegations to external meetings like Conference of Parties for Climate Change or the international parliamentarians meetings. Currently we have 22 youth led groups that are part of the council, as you can imagine, we have a wide range of health and non-health, policy, research, technical expertise in the Council as a whole.

Garry Aslanyan [00:05:46] It is good to hear that there are many opportunities for the Youth Council to engage with different areas of WHO. Aloyce, do you believe that the voices of you and your colleagues have made a tangible impact on the work of the Africa Leaders Malaria Alliance? Maybe you could share some specific examples of successes you have experienced.

Aloyce Urassa [00:06:07] The African Leaders Malaria Alliance is a coalition of heads of states, the 55 heads of state within the African Union, which was formed to champion for the fight against malaria. As of 2021, ALMA had a component of prioritizing youth engagement as key priority areas in its priority agenda. This agenda was signed as a decision of the heads of states. The youth voices are really heard and taken into consideration by the heads of state. I would say to a large extent, my voice and the voice of the team I lead, and the youth groups are really being heard, and we have managed to recruit and train over 3000 young people across the continent who are interested to support the malaria agenda. We have also successfully launched formal youth groups on malaria and entities in ten countries so far, and more countries are expressing interest. Whenever they speak, whenever they bring our contributions to the table, there is high interest from the programs of malaria programs, NTD programs, but also heads of states are responding and supporting them. We have good examples from Congo and Uganda. In my view, yes, our voices are being heard, but there is a need for further action to put more of our voices and ideas into action and to yield more impact in community and global level.

Garry Aslanyan [00:07:41] We had an episode on malaria if our listeners want to go back and listen. It was clear that getting malaria out of the continent is not going to be that easy and we need all different efforts and engagements at different levels. What you mentioned clearly is in that direction. Inês, when you and I first spoke, you said we do not need to be the leaders of the future, we are here now. So often the voices of young people are deferred to the future and not always being fully engaged with now at the moment. In your role that you mentioned as the vice President of the External Affairs for the International Federation of Medical Students Associations, how do you think that the culture of big organizations can be shifted to really embrace young voices now, beyond sometimes may be perceived tokenism?

Inês Costa Louro [00:08:44] Now my words are coming back to haunt me. In a more serious tone, I really stand by what I said. I do believe we are the leaders of the future, and in a few years, we will be leading our countries. We will be the voices in global health, not just the young voices, but right now, we are viewed as people who can provide some inputs in solutions for future problems and not always about

what is happening now. I do believe that there needs to be a shift. I think a small shift could be to actually start participating and collaborating in capacity building and building resources together and not just showing us different resources that are not always adequate for the generation at hand. There are things that are already happening within some big organizations that I think are the key to youth engagement. For instance, I mentioned the network that I was part of, the WHO European region and also right now, the United Nations Youth Office actually has a similar idea, which is, there are youth groups in each of these networks that are working together with the people behind them to build the strategy. We are not only asked to, here is a problem and what are your inputs in solving this problem? but we are actually asked to build the strategy together. I would say that this is actually what needs to be done, and to generally start valuing what we can bring to the table because a lot of us are actually researchers. We have a lot of background in several, several topics that are being discussed right now. The mentality also needs to shift, not only to see us as youth voices and youth opinions, but also as fellow experts.

Garry Aslanyan [00:10:39] That is a very good point you mentioned, so a question to all three of you. What are the unique perspectives or experiences, technical experiences, or expertise that young voices like yours offer in global health. Inês maybe you can start, and then we go around.

Inês Costa Louro [00:10:57] Even the speakers that you have here today, you look at us and we all have different backgrounds. We are from different regions of the world, and we come from different communities. That is the most valuable thing about all of us. No one knows our communities like we do. No one knows our generation like we do. It is always a different perspective that we bring to the table. We are perseverant, we are creative, we are ready to discuss, to have out of the box ideas, to bring new perspectives to the table that you cannot get elsewhere. A very relevant thing that we have not spoken about today yet is that we live in a world where not only the future, but also the present is digital. We live in a digital world. Who better to navigate us in this digital world than us? Our generation. We are digital natives. We need to help navigate this digital transformation of health and the digital transformation of the world. Those would be three highlights that I would like to see for now.

Garry Aslanyan [00:12:05] Hamaiyal.

Hamaiyal Sana [00:12:06] I would echo my colleagues here and say that youth are not a homogenous group, so every perspective matters and making sure that you appreciate and acknowledge that every background is important in decision making tables is, I think, the first change of perspective that we need. And oftentimes we see that because of budget constraints or because of time limitations, we often find ourselves in boxes which are restricted to just having a few voices. When I look at what my background has given me in these spaces, it is exactly that. Acknowledging my background of working in the small town of Kota, Pakistan, and then now when I sit at these tables in Geneva or in Pakistan or in Boston, I realize that these normative approaches are just simply not cutting it. We need to have those positions or those positions in power in our country to actually see the way that we have approach education, digital access, and also leadership skills that have been invested in and sort of do a perspective change and also an investment change that has to happen to foster bright minds and also make sure that every voice is counted. In these high-level positions, all of these opinions and ideas need to be taken together and we need to foster all backgrounds and all expertise to make a future that is for everyone.

Garry Aslanyan [00:13:40] What about you, Aloyce?

Aloyce Urassa [00:13:41] For me, it is indeed not any solution that is being offered to the community. It is not community led unless youth have been involved and have been given a meaningful position to co-create that solution. When it comes to perspective or professional contributions that young people are

offering on the table, I look at, for instance, an example when we tried to run a Malaria innovation essay competition and we received over 680 submissions from both Francophone and Anglophone Africa. When you read all these insightful ideas that young people are presenting and examples of the things that they are doing at the community level, it is really massive. It is only that most of them have not been formalized to be documented as part of the contribution that they are making in their countries. When I look at the nature of youth led events that are happening across the continent and globally, it is no longer just talk shows. It is young people presenting what they are already doing on the ground. You will see abstract presentations, not of abstract ideas, but of actionable things that they are doing on the ground as researchers, as innovators, as digital communicators. But again, when we can see a clear difference, when you find youth led organization or youth led communication department, it is quite different in terms of reach, how many people our age, the simplicity of the messages, innovative approaches in terms of the messages they create on TikTok video shows, even on YouTube. It is not just a way that is really interesting and attractive for many people to engage. There is a lot of contribution that is an expert contribution, that professional contribution that young people are bringing on the table. In Kenya, for instance, malaria youth champions have been utilizing, conducting roadshows and they reach more people with messages, more people in testing, more people with vaccines than any other traditional ways that have been used, such as moving door to door. People just use simple things like playing football, even just this week, the launch of our malaria champions in Nigeria, and they just brought together young people from different teams, and they played football. Those mass of spectators were not only watching the football, but also being educated on malaria and many other things that young people are really doing.

Garry Aslanyan [00:16:14] It is clear that youth are engaging with communities in innovative ways that are driving positive change. In your countries, have you observed any interest from your governments in actively engaging with and listening to young people?

Hamaiyal Sana [00:16:31] For Pakistan, I can say that we have come a long way in youth engagement, but it is still in its infancy. There is still a long way to go to actually see a formalized sector of youth engagement. We have seen that there is a bigger emphasis on well-being of young people, and also populations in terms of policies that have come out in the recent years. That is promising, but at the same time there is a lack of engagement of the said young people in the formulation of these policies. It is mostly a fundamental issue that we do not have a formal way of approaching. How do we consult young people in our governments? Do we have tools and platforms, for example, like digital platforms that take feedback from young people? One thing that is important to mention is Pakistan's National Youth Parliamentarians initiative that has been there for quite some time. That is a good avenue for a lot of bright minds to get involved, and then also the youth delegate program, which is a very big opportunity for all governments to include young people in their permanent missions when they go to large meetings like the World Health Assembly in Geneva. Pakistan actually took 1 or 2 youth delegates this year to the World Health Assembly. That shows a level of commitment and also opening a door to ensure that this is a sustainable investment that we can see for the years to come.

Garry Aslanyan [00:18:03] Interesting. Pakistan also includes now youth delegates on the W.H.O. delegations. What about Portugal, Inês?

Inês Costa Louro [00:18:11] My answer to your question is it really depends. Like in Pakistan, there are not really any formal mechanisms to actually ask youth what we have to say about several things regarding our country. However, if you are part of a youth organization, like a big youth organization, like our National Youth Council or like our National Medical Students organization, and you are insistent you do not take no for an answer. It is not impossible to actually schedule meetings with parties, with the government, with the ministries and so on. When we do manage to schedule them, we are listened

to, this is the good side of it. To add to what Hamaiyal has just said, this past World Health Assembly, IFMSA always has a delegation to the assembly, but as a non-state actor we have reduced number of budgets, so what we did is we tried to prepare our delegates with their permanent missions and we were actually extremely successful in doing this. We had ten informal youth delegates, ten people who in the weeks leading up to the World Health Assembly, actually managed to join their countries delegation and kind of kickstart a youth delegate program in their countries.

Garry Aslanyan [00:19:26] What about Tanzania, Aloyce?

Aloyce Urassa [00:19:29] Similarly for Tanzania, they are really not very formal structures to communicate, as we also do not have a National Youth Council. It is the same approach as Inês just mentioned, that is just being pushy enough to be that young in person and I have seen young people excelling through those strategies, including the National Medical Students Association. They have really been engaging in a number of events, sending their delegations to different high-level events, including the discussion forum, the general five-year strategic plan, where they had even their president as an official speaker at that event. It all depends on how much the youth decides to raise the bar, but also how much integrated the programs are and collaborative, like not trying to avoid duplications, not having 10 different groups of youth asking for the same thing, but rather combining efforts and pushing it together. This is our call to action. This is what we need. This is the support we need. This is what we are bringing on table.

Garry Aslanyan [00:20:28] I am curious to know whether you would have any assessment or some kind of constructive suggestion for current global health directions and may have some things that you have observed in regard to key global health issues and you think they might be done differently or you have any recommendations. Who wants to tackle that?

Hamaiyal Sana [00:20:50] If I may, I would also like to say that fundamentally, the way or I could say historically, the way that youth has been engaged in global health has been mostly done towards the end processes of the decision making. You will see youth being engaged for advocacy campaigns or towards making sure that their names are being added in technical documents or policy documents. We now need to see young people as equal partners when we engage them in these processes instead of reaching out to young people to sort of support a campaign or give input to a campaign or an idea, we can instead include young people when these agendas are being set. That is one constructive feedback I would like to share through this podcast.

Garry Aslanyan [00:21:36] Okay, great.

Aloyce Urassa [00:21:37] On my side, I would look at my suggestion of feedback to the global leaders. One is there has been a lot of discussions, the signing of declarations, commitments, launches of different programs, but at global level there has really been a great response and visibility of what they are doing, but at community level, there is little to nothing that is being done. It is very important, whenever there is a global declaration on an agreement, there should be clear mechanisms. Yes, as Inês mentioned, like having national health assemblies where the countries discuss and localize the global declarations to solutions that will really be helpful and impactful at community level. Furthermore, when it comes to youth engagement, young people are not a threat to the positions of the global leader, it is rather a complementary strategy, and also a safety measure towards the future because we are talking of the long term agendas, like in Africa, we have agenda 2063, it is definitely these young people who are being prepared for leadership now, who will really take a strong lead and will also be accountable for things that are being put in place at this moment.

Garry Aslanyan [00:22:56] Okay. One last issue I wanted to bring up. It is more on the equity in young voices. It is clear that young people are engaged, but there are still a lot of gaps and majority may still be from high income countries, and a couple of you are linked to the International Federation of Medical Students Association, which is for medical students and then there is probably a huge gap when it comes to other health professionals, nurses, community health workers, etc. How can we be more equal and have some equity in how young voices are heard? Maybe we go backwards with Aloyce, Hamaiyal and then Inês.

Aloyce Urassa [00:23:40] In order to successfully have it in terms of youth engagement, the first thing is that it must be really intentional. That is the key leaders and youth leaders themselves should be really intentional to ensure that there is gender balance, but so there is inclusion in terms of geographical representation and there is clear support, for instance, if you are planning a youth led event, or an implementation project, to ensure that you have a budget to support youth coming from marginalized communities, from the most vulnerable groups, and not just telling young people that we are encouraging you to participate while there is no clear mechanism on how they will participate, but also there should be local promotion of these opportunities because most of them are promoted through high level platforms or social media where some of the youth who are the most affected might not have access to. Also on gender issue, which is more pressing, I can say we have this good example from our youth champions. We are launched in ten countries, but none of those have a female leader, but then we changed that all, by ensuring that we specifically pushed the countries to ensure that at least they train a few young ladies to take over the leadership, but also encourage them, approach them vigorously. We need female leaders in these positions. Hopefully by next week we are going to have Namibia launching its first malaria youth group and the top two leaders are both female, very vibrant, very active, and in the hope, they will really deliver and inspire other women to take such opportunities once it reaches their countries.

Garry Aslanyan [00:25:26] Okay, Hamaiyal and then Inês.

Hamaiyal Sana [00:25:30] Fundamentally what I have seen many times is that there is a big disparity in how young people actually engage with these opportunities, because oftentimes you would see that there is a call out, for joining a delegation of medical students or nurses or health workers to Geneva, and they would most often ask then, we do not have the financial support, how will we navigate the visa process and who will actually be there to support us to like sort of prepare for this meeting? That is the first level of screening that many young people do and that cuts out a big majority of voices from other spheres. We can, and we should invest in making sure that there is fellowships and scholarships available in which young people can actually take part in their capacity building and global health policy and diplomacy and research work, then also making sure that there is an onus on all of the global health stakeholders to make sure that there is a decision making it able to be had, to have young voices from all walks and from all backgrounds through well-planned meetings and well-thought out logistics so we do not leave anyone out.

Inês Costa Louro [00:26:48] Hamaiyal, you really took a lot of my words out of my mouth. What I really want to focus on would be financial support and visa issues. Those are the things that actually prevent a lot of youth from participating. If a big organization like WHO, like a UN entity, actually take proactive steps in these issues, a lot of visas can be rewarded to young people that otherwise would not be able to travel, to attend a conference or any other kind of events. That should be a first and foremost step going towards equity, inclusion and diversity. Another thing that you said is the financial support, most of us, if not all of us, do all of this voluntarily. We have our studies to pay for, or, we are starting our first job, so going to a country that is very far away from ours, paying for flights and accommodation and food and everything, is actually something that is quite hard. It is not possible for all of us to be able to

support ourselves. I have something else that I want to mention, which is youth in general sometimes have some disbelief in big organizations. Why do I say this? Because I have even been through this recently, sometimes we invest a lot of money, a lot of days to attend, delegations attend events only to stay behind a glass window or to stay in an overflow room and watch the main event happen through a YouTube livestreaming, and to do that, we could be doing it at home. It is also about time to change that, to change this narrative, and if you want to engage youth, we need to be there.

Garry Aslanyan [00:28:34] I am inspired by your passion and confidence. What advice would you give to young people who are listening and wondering how they can find the courage to step forward and make their voices heard? Maybe all of you could share some examples you have experienced.

Aloyce Urassa [00:28:52] There is no reason to be worried or to be afraid of your potential. There are people out there who are really eager to know what you can bring to the table and know what you have is never too small to be presented. I remember when I started engaging in these global platforms, my English was not that easily understood because I started learning English when I was 13. I started engaging in these platform's where you have to express yourself in English. My English was poor, my grammar was poor, but still my confidence took me somewhere. I remember my first trip outside the country when I went to learn about advocacy and health, and health systems strengthening. When I presented, and I was really deeply inside very worried, but on my face I tried to be confident, and show I knew what I was saying, and from there people saw something, my passion in the fight against malaria and I have grown, and I am now serving as a technical lead for a big organization in the continent, having to present before different private sectors, persuade them to give resources to the organization and countries, something which I did not imagine when I was starting. It is never too late to start. The best time is now. You will never be as young as you are at the moment. Do not ever be afraid to start.

Hamaiyal Sana [00:30:17] It is very important for every young person to realize that. Historically, young people have been the biggest drivers of change and changing the status quo. So, in a way that also humbles you into thinking that you might not be the one solution as a young person to this big problem, but if you are there working together with other young people from different parts of the world, having a shared problem or a shared structural challenge that we are all facing, it creates a movement that becomes important for all the global stakeholders to pay attention to. That in a way takes the spotlight off one person feeling the breadth of doubts and challenges and imposter syndrome that hangs in the back of the head of most of us. It is very humbling when you work with other young people and realize that we are not very different from each other, and then also finding ways how we can build on that and create a community that is shaping the future for ourselves and for the coming generations.

Inês Costa Louro [00:31:19] I could not agree more with both Aloyce and Hamaiyal. We have been catalysts to a lot of change, even not just historically, but now we have seen WHO youth council. We have as young people, been precursors in some of WHO resolutions, change can be made if you make your voice heard. I do believe there is this space for every one of us to speak our minds and to start a movement. People perceive us as the future, and sometimes we do as well. Sometimes we are our biggest enemies, thinking that, okay, yes now I am 25, I can contribute more in five years when I am 30 and where I am taken more seriously, but we are not just the future, we are the present, we are here now. Now is definitely the time to be loud and to start a movement, start a change.

Garry Aslanyan [00:32:14] I have truly enjoyed my conversation with these three dynamic young individuals who are not just preparing for future leadership roles. They are already stepping into them today. Community engagement in health is critical, and Aloyce emphasized that involving youth is key aspect of this effort. Inês urged countries to establish more formal mechanisms for youth engagement, such that unique experiences and creative perspectives of young people can enhance projects,

proposals, and policies. Hamaiyal advised that intentional efforts and practical support are essential to ensure youth voices are included equitably. Global Health Matters is very pleased to have so many young listeners. Let us hear from one of them.

Matthew Carvalho [00:33:10] "Hi, my name is Matthew Carvalho and I am currently a JD candidate at Georgetown University Law Center. And I am an avid listener of the Global Health Matters podcast as a student and a young learner myself, I appreciate the engaging and dynamic way that the podcast can take some of these larger, broader concepts that affect our daily lives and break them down in a way where we can really have a longer and more robust conversation across a variety of perspectives and a variety of speakers. I appreciate the nuance that the podcast brings to these different, complex, and sometimes difficult topics, and I really look forward to seeing what comes next".

Garry Aslanyan [00:33:51] Thanks for your message, Matthew. I wish you all the best with your studies. I know many of our episodes are used at universities and global health classes, so very happy to know about this as well. I also know that many of our listeners are young professionals. They approach me at conferences and meetings and to say hi. It is really great to know that our audience is really inclusive of youth around the world. To learn more about the topics discussed in this episode, visit the Episodes web page, where you will find additional readings, show notes and translations. Do not forget to get in touch with us via social media, email or by sharing a voice message. And be sure to subscribe or follow us wherever you get your podcasts. Global Health Matters is produced by TDR, a United Nations co-sponsored research program based at the World Health Organization. Thank you for listening.