STATEMENT

BY RITA IZSÁK-NDIAYE

RAPPORTEUR/MEMBER BY THE UN CERD COMMITTEE

I would like to welcome this thematic discussion focusing on youth, recognizing that indeed the situation of youth and their specific challenges often get sidelined in general human rights discussions. One of the reasons is the actual lack of participation of young people in decision-making structures which was also identified as the most serious challenge for youth during the morning session. As I am here today in my capacity as a current Treaty Body member and also as a former UN Special Rapporteur, in my short statement, I will focus on participation in the work of the UN, keeping in my mind that the inclusion of youth is absolutely critical in local, national and regional levels as well.

Considering the percentage of young people in total populations — which depending on how we define youth, can be between 16-40% — it is not only a moral imperative but a smart strategy to include them into all decision-making processes, and not only into those which relate to youth specifically but into all which have an impact at the society as a whole. Youth participation should be institutionalized across all decision-making structures so that their challenges, viewpoints and aspirations are taken into considerations and reflected in important decisions. However, through my work with various youth groups, I learned that even when young people are offered a seat at formal decision-making tables, it is often out of sheer tokenism where their participation is symbolic but not meaningful, which may make them disappointed and push them to quit these structures. And it is often because of such experiences that young people find themselves in informal, non-hierarchical peer movements, trying to influence decisions not from the inside but from the outside.

The youth activists in the Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, or the EndSARS movements managed to get their messages across through such self-organized and community-based movements. However, they often paid a high cost. Many of these peaceful protesters encountered sociocultural stigma, various kinds of threats, including political and online harassment, police violence, excessive use of force and some of them tragically paid with their lives. In the *People Power Under Attack: 2020* report, CIVICUS has named youth again as one of the five groups most commonly exposed to assaults on fundamental freedoms in civic space. So it is important that the UN will work towards a dedicated guidance on the protection of young people, including those who engage with the UN, as part of a new common protection agenda for the UN system.

It is rather hard to assess how Treaty Bodies are dealing with the question of youth, because apart from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, treaties have no explicit articles mentioning the youth. But there is no doubt that Treaty Bodies are generally interested in the human rights situation of youth and are committed to address youth concerns. I screened through the annual reports of my Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination from the past 10 years and it is obvious that we often dealt with the youth in our Concluding Observations and various decisions under the Early Warning and Urgent Action procedure. In year 2012 for example, six different CoBs addressed youth: including concerns about lack of ID cards; the need for awareness-raising for young people on racist hate speech; welcoming a Youth Employment Package; we expressed concerns about racially motivated violence risen particularly among young people; about the killings of young minorities and lack of investigation; and we welcomed the establishment of the youth human rights association. Moreover, in our last General Recommendation on Racial Profiling, we explicitly mentioned youth in the context of community policing.

The level of engagement in the Treaty Body system with any specific group or topic largely depends on the actual information we receive and hence, the quality of questions we can pose to the States parties who appear in front of us. Therefore, if we want to ensure that the perspectives of youth are reflected in various CoBs and other documents and that youth issues get mainstreamed in various UN mechanisms and monitoring mandates, we must find ways to better cooperate with youth advocates, groups, organizations and movements and improve our access to youth-related specific information. We also must pro-actively indicate to the states that we are interested in hearing from them about youth issues.

However, we need to also be self-critical. In order to attract the youth and expect them to cooperate more closely with us, the UN, we must also become more reliable, more useful, more accessible, more inclusive, and more relatable. It became clear during my work with youth that unfortunately they often consider the UN as a remote and careful establishment which has little interest in their everyday struggles. Many of young people would not even name the UN when asked about potential partners and allies in their fight for racial and climate justice, and other human rights priorities. Much has to do with the lack of our presence and visibility at grassroots levels and in informal movements and also with the way we communicate. I have long been advocating for a reform in our communication systems, including how we use and engage via social media. Young people nowadays appreciate short creative posts, if possible in a video format, with clear messages. But we still keep on publishing 10700 words long technical reports which are difficult to locate on our confusing websites, not only for the public at large, but also for ourselves within the system. I believe we need to find better and more efficient ways in transmitting UN core values to young generations and raise awareness on our important work so that they also become more inspired to work with and for the UN.

Therefore, I have a few practical recommendations:

* Find focal points in each treaty bodies and also in the most relevant special procedures mandates and organize joint meetings with youth organizations where we sensitize ourselves on youth concerns and can identify the most effective methods to mainstream youth issues;
* Encourage TBs and SP mandates to organize thematic discussions and side events on youth issues (good example: the 10th session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues dedicated to youth)
* Invite the SG’s Youth Envoy to each Treaty Body and the annual meeting of SP mandate holders for a discussion regarding shared concerns in those specific rights aspects;
* Incorporate questions regarding youth into the list of issues prior to reporting to stimulate the State parties considerations of this matter;
* Reach out proactively to youth groups and movements to seek information on the status and human rights challenges of youth before State party reviews and facilitate their actual in-person participation in the sessions which would also allow more informal and interactive discussions with them;
* Keep youth issues on the agenda of State party reviews and ask relevant questions from government delegations;
* Encourage youth advocates to apply to positions within the system (I was 30 when I was appointed SR);
* Continue considering improving our communications, including by hiring young communication experts (the newly established Twitter accounts are good first steps);
* Think about collaborating with well-known public figures who can bring UN messages to youth in an authentic way.

Thank you for your kind attention!