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The World's Youth Call for "Arts for Humanity"

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From left to right: Milad Rahmatullah

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Sinai, Egypt is a fascinating place.

Sitting between Africa, the

Mediterranean, and the Middle

East, it exists “where civilizations meet.” This theme echoed throughout the halls of the International Congress Center in Sharm El Sheikh last December during the World Youth Forum.

Under the auspices of His Excellency President Fattah Abdel el-Sisi and through the substantial investment of the Egyptian government—millions of Egyptian pounds—the [World Youth Forum](#) hosted over 7,000 young people from over 180 nations. This group of under-30 creatives, entrepreneurs, budding diplomats, and others offered diverse perspectives on myriad topics, including artificial intelligence, blockchain, international affairs, peace, food security, and the arts and creativity. After several days of workshops and discussions, they announced 10 recommendations for the United Nations and governments around the world.

The focus on the arts and creativity, of particular interest to every El Sistema program, permeated the entire event. This was due to the central placement of its participants through the World Youth Theatre, which performed every night, and the entertainment aspects of the opening and closing ceremonies, which hosted such dignitaries as President al-Sisi and his wife, the Crown Prince of Jordan, and many more ambassadors and diplomats.

The pinnacle session of this strand, titled “The Arts in the Human Space,” gave a platform to notable artists and cultural leaders, like Nigerian singer and entrepreneur Banky Wellington; Somali-American hijabi model Halima Aden; Zambian filmmaker Musola Catherine Kaseketi; and Egyptian Chair of the Board of Voices of Youth, Ms. Iman Talaat. Together this panel presented their projects, which use the arts to engage with community development and social issues. Though not El Sistema by definition, many employed the basic principles we share.

Banky, as he is known to his Nigerian fans, spoke directly to our interests—focusing his time on the way he has used music to drive entrepreneurship and community improvements throughout Nigeria. He gave meaningful advice to young creative leaders:

1. Music can empower youths to take control of their lives.
2. By investing in the arts, you create a chain of employment.
3. Never stop learning—and as you learn, never stop teaching.
4. Leaders don't just amass followers, they create more leaders.

Later that evening, those same musicians and cultural leaders took to the stage for the opening ceremony, where they performed the [World Youth Forum theme song](#). Written by a group of young Egyptian Musicians, the chorus went: “We are the ones that create. We are the super power. This is the hour. We are the future ‘cause we are the youth!” I left feeling inspired and empowered—and ready to do my work in new ways back home.

On the concluding day of the Forum, all of the young people in attendance gathered together for a session hosted by President el-Sisi, who read out the [10 recommendations](#) (and the ways that Egypt’s government would commit to them). One of the items focused squarely on creativity:

“ *Recommendation 9: Launching a global initiative titled “Arts for Humanity.” “I want to issue a call for a new initiative focused on the arts in humanity. This will be a platform for young artists to create identities for their countries in an effort to increase cooperation and encourage institutions to call on creative innovators around the world to enable this process.”*

President el-Sisi went on to outline his plan to host a platform calling on the world's creative youth to submit documentaries that tell stories of creative social change in their communities and countries.

I now ask my colleagues in the El Sistema world: What role can we play in this movement? Can our programs, young people, teaching artists, and supporters be featured on this new platform? Can we opt in to the messaging of the “arts for humanity?”

Global gatherings like this—or even the [World Alliance for Arts Education](#) conference, which published the 2019 Frankfurt Declaration calling for more centering of arts education practice on youth and social change—encourage us to define our role. I would challenge our field to be at the center of the dialogue, helping to drive the seismic shifts that may be coming. It is essential that we find the balance between local program administration and reaching the world's broader networks of decision-makers and influencers.

I am increasingly curious to see what happens with the recommendations from the World Youth Forum, specifically this new “Arts for Humanity” program. As it develops, I would encourage the El Sistema global community to consider their involvement by telling their stories, highlighting the transformative power of music, and showing world leaders (and future leaders, like the young people gathered at the 2020 World Youth Forum) what we know to be true.



Africa

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