



Youth's Role in a Fast-Changing World

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Abstract

Change is an intrinsic characteristic of the universal reality in which the human being is immersed. Not only nature, but also the products of human life in its multiple dimensions remind us that nothing is permanent: everything is doomed to change. Yet, the thought and actions of mankind play a fundamental role in determining the quality of this change: if the current world order is destined to decline, the way in which human beings think and act will influence the quality of the new rising order. In this moment of transition, one actor may prove its strength and become decisive in the construction of a new and more just order, thanks to the tools made available by technological advancement, today more than ever Civil Society can unite to realise that positive change that millions of people today are asking for. But the opportunities made available by new technologies will not be enough to overcome today's challenges. In an increasingly interconnected world in which learning to manage diversity becomes the 'condicio sine qua non' for reaching shared solutions and actions, the concept of collective leadership becomes increasingly central. By analysing recent case studies, this article aims to shed new light on the contribution that younger generations can make in achieving a new type of leadership by working within the framework of a concrete intergenerational partnership.

1. Introduction

World Orders rise and fall. Since the earliest stages of history, humanity has witnessed that many times. Empires decay, cultural systems collapse, norms and values get substituted with new ones; this process rarely takes place suddenly, rather it manifests itself as a relatively slow decline. This process of deterioration has been repeating itself cyclically through history and it will keep being part of our lives as long as we exist on this planet.

For almost 50 years after the end of WWII, the international system consisted of two parallel orders (Haas, 2019). One of these emerged as a conflict between two universalistic superpowers challenging one another in multiple dimensions; this order was based on rough military balance, nuclear deterrence and ideological confrontation. But between the end of the eighties and the nineties, this system unexpectedly collapsed in a matter of a few years, reminding humanity of two of the main characteristics of the reality we live in: impermanence and unpredictability. In all the dimensions of human living, we are constantly reminded that change is inevitable.

The second order that arose from the ashes of WWII was the liberal one: its main actors were democracies that tried to foster the respect of the rule of law—both between and within

countries—through aid and trade (Haas, 2019). Liberal forces aimed at realizing economic growth and democracy within the capitalistic half of the world: economic interdependence between states would have fostered development, making the cost of waging wars too high to be sustained (Haas, 2019).

When the Cold War system collapsed, a unipolar world arose from its ashes and liberalism could be spread globally: new democracies were created, trade barriers fell, multilateralism became more consistent. The US and its allies strengthened the international institutions at the base of the system, many times failing to abide by its rules and abusing their power to take actions that were seen as detrimental by other states, usually small or middle powers that did not have either the influence or the strength to support their positions.

Today, this system is deteriorating and it will soon come to an end. Those weak states of the past are now rising as global powers and challenging the status quo that they were never satisfied with. The current World Order is trembling. But power shifts are only one of the causal factors of this deterioration: authoritarianism and protectionism—sometimes in the form of trade wars—are on the rise worldwide whilst international institutions struggle to cope with the consequences of globalization. The UN security council less and less represents the actual distribution of power in the international system, whilst the European Union struggles to survive as Brexit and disputes over migration and sovereignty take place. Nationalist and populist forces have surged, making smart use of fake news and social media, further complicating the capacity of the system to successfully respond to the destabilizing effects of globalization; among these global issues, COVID-19 is only the latest attempt made by nature to tell us that we are messing it all—and it will not be the last.

Change surely is inevitable. World orders are doomed to disappear, submitting to the laws that regulate the whole universe. But change is by no means a synonym of disorder and catastrophe. The current global order might collapse and obscure times might follow: but nothing is determined, as people make a difference. It is up to us to decide how to deal with this deterioration process and try our best to understand its trends: finding strategies and solutions to concur in the realization of a positive shift from the decaying order to a new and more just one is not a utopian intellectual exercise. If change is inevitable, humanity plays a big role in determining the quality of the change.

In this respect, a **new kind of leadership** is needed to achieve a positive outcome from the fall of the old order and the rise of the new one: the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how young people can contribute in this sense and how a new kind of leadership can be crafted by a strong, cooperative **intergenerational partnership**.

2. Theoretical Background

The future of humanity now strictly depends on our capacity to build concrete cooperation patterns at all levels and in all dimensions. Cooperation, empathy and mutual understanding is the path we must take in order to have as much control as possible over the inevitable transition process we are experiencing. Otherwise, chaos and fortuity will shape the future, misunderstanding and wars will occur, environmental disasters, extreme poverty and

inequality will spread globally, undermining the many steps humanity has made towards progress. As a process, progress can be interrupted at any time to be substituted by regress: history is full of evidence of this. Our capacity to choose cooperation over competition and **collective leadership** over individual leadership is then what would allow us to shape a better world order and keep humanity on the tracks of progress. Would this outcome be guaranteed? Obviously not. Many are the obstacles to be overcome and the result is far from being secured. Idealists have for long been seen as foolish people: they dream of utopian worlds and forget to face the concreteness of reality. My answer to that is that utopia advances the world.

“Shared ideas and decisions should not remain in the theoretical domain: they should turn into action.”

Efforts towards cooperation and mutual understanding must come from all the actors who are willing to make a positive change in the world. Among these actors, today **youth** is increasingly challenging the powers that are working against the goals that humanity needs to achieve in order to avoid the final disaster. But what are the main characteristics of youth today and how can young people contribute to bring about positive change?

Millennials and **digital natives** were born in a hyper-connected world. Before the advent of social networks, millennials were already globally connected thanks, for example, to “pen friends” programs through which young students during the nineties were able to get in touch with their peers from all over the globe. If connecting and getting to know totally different cultures without moving one step away from their home was easy for millennials, it is even easier for digital natives who today can instantaneously communicate with their peers no matter where they are in the world. Globalization has had the positive effect of creating a common cultural background in which young people coming from very different cultures can identify. The opportunities provided by technology and globalization have made these two generations more capable of dealing with diversity and finding common ground for positive communication. Until 2019, taken together millennials and digital natives made up 63.5% of the world's population. Soon, they will be the leading generation of the world. But what about now?

Even if we do not have full power yet, we have the unprecedented opportunity to use the technological tools at our disposal to connect our efforts and build a worldwide network that could work both as a forum to share ideas and as a platform to turn ideas into concrete action.

Such a network would comprise future leaders of the world and would take advantage of the fertile cultural background shared by young people to grow their intercultural communication skills even more. It would challenge them to put themselves in the shoes of one another and would create a common ground for the positive confrontation of different perspectives. Shared decisions would flourish from an intercultural cooperation based on collective leadership and create stronger connections between different countries. For

example, the Erasmus program was used by the European Union to create informal ties between young Europeans so as to build a European identity: this was achieved, as even the results of the Brexit referendum seem to have demonstrated.* But regional identities are not enough: a further step must be taken towards the construction of a global human identity that would allow us to undermine nationalism and populism and find new ways towards the achievement of common interests (as the solution to the climate problem).

Shared ideas and decisions should not remain in the theoretical domain: they should turn into action. Building up such a network would have the purpose of uniting the efforts and strategies of young people in order to help them bring about effective change. It would help different organizations harmonize their activities and boost their capacity to lobby worldwide for the same objectives.

But should young leaders work just by themselves? When talking of cooperation, we should also refer to it as **intergenerational cooperation**: young people are not the only actors willing to change the world for the better; many times older generations have the same objectives and have the knowledge, the experience and the instruments to help younger generations lead their battles. The main international and national organizations are led by older generations: engaging millennials and digital natives would be a win-win strategy. Young people can do a lot of work in terms of reaching new potential audiences and promulgating the mission of the organization. Engaging millennials and Gen-Z would not merely be a communication medium opportunity (Dilenschneider, 2016). Welcoming them to the decision-making process would mean giving space to fresh ways of thinking and new strategies that would enhance the organization's performance. It would mean strengthening the organization's settings and making sure its mission will be taken ahead in the future. Merging fresh energies and ideas with experience and wisdom would definitely be a decisive move, a win-win strategy to achieve the highest level of success (Knapp, 2017).

3. From theory to practice: The Youth Leadership Network and the World Academy of Art and Science

On May 11, 2020, Carlo Luciani, Dora Damjanović, Dina Dragija, Jodi Cullity and I founded the Youth Leadership Network with the intention of reuniting Youth Leaders from all over the world to lend their voices to major international events. We had the right energies and ideas, but we would not have gone far without the strong support of WAAS Acting Treasurer Natalia Pogozheva, who became the "living bridge" between the World Academy of Art and Science and the Youth sector of the global civil society represented by YLN.

YLN was then the outcome of a successful intergenerational and transnational collaboration, representing the first concrete step of a process initiated back in November 2017 under the umbrella of the World Academy of Art and Science. Under the guidance of Natalia Pogozheva (WAAS Acting Treasurer) and Thomas Reuter (WAAS Trustee) and with full support by WAAS President and CEO Garry Jacobs, YLN achieved its first objective,

* Nearly three quarters (73%) of 18 to 24-year-olds voted to remain, falling to under two thirds (62%) among 25-34s <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/03/a-reminder-of-how-britain-voted-in-the-eu-referendum-and-why/>

The Youth Leaders' Online Workshop, which reunited young leaders from every side of the world to provide them with the possibility to lend their unique contribution to the GL-21 project.

We used empathy, mutual understanding and team work as the foundations of our organization, working successfully both with Senior Fellows of WAAS and those young leaders who keep joining us on a daily basis. Collective leadership is the strategy we use to arrive at shared ideas and implement common strategies and actions: making sure everyone's opinion is brought to the table regardless of their age, nationality, gender, culture etc., is what has enriched our vision, enabling us to get the best from every different perspective. Our network keeps expanding worldwide, connecting continents and cultures and empowering young leaders from every region of the world.

Bringing young people's voice to major international stages may be our official objective, but we are achieving many results, among which we can find:

1. the creation of a global forum where the future ruling class of the world has the chance to develop intercultural skills and learn about the advantages of cooperation, empathy, democracy and collective leadership.
2. the creation of a global platform where young leaders are given the chance to take concrete action **now** and speak up their voices.
3. the creation of a real intergenerational partnership, where the leading classes of younger and older generations actually get to know each other and work together in finding wise and creative solutions to concretely address today's problems.

Our organization is young in every sense and still has a long way to go, many obstacles to overcome and lots of challenges to cope with. But no matter how uncertain the future may look like, our set of values is as concrete as our vision is. We are not dreaming of a better world: we are envisioning it. And we have all the instruments and motivation to realize the change we want to see in the world.

4. Conclusion

The world order is changing and change is inevitable. But let us not be victims of chaos and disorder: people matter and the decisions we make in our lives do have an effect on the direction that the whole world takes.

Connecting cultures and nationalities and socializing them into an organization where cooperation and mutual understanding are concrete practices is a successful strategy: soon, many of us will be part of the leading class of our countries. As the current world order is decaying and new powers and cultures are challenging the status quo, it is important that we all understand how to cooperate in order to achieve a peaceful transition from the old order to a new and more just order where global problems affecting humanity can be concretely addressed. The international system has changed and the state is not the only actor to have a voice in the international system. A realist would probably underline that power is still

disproportionately (if not completely) distributed in favor of states: but I do believe that, if well-organized, Civil Society can have an impact on world politics and that the human factor does shape the decisions made at the state level. By engaging young and future leaders of the world into YLN and WAAS we intend to create a common history of peaceful cooperation at the Civil Society level and organize the youth and senior sectors of civil society so as to boost our capacity to have an impact on the changing dynamics of the world order. I am also fairly convinced that many of the young people we are engaging in our network will soon become the political and managerial leaders of the world: by remembering their common history of peaceful cooperation, they will seek to keep cooperating with one another, easing a peaceful transition from an old world order to a new and better one.

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