

BUILDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR ALL: THE ELDERS ENGAGE WITH BRAZIL'S YOUTH

Introduction

Founded by Nelson Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, The Elders is a group of independent leaders working together for peace and human rights. The Elders held their biannual meeting in Rio de Janeiro in October 2011, to debate current global challenges and set their work programme for the coming months.

Given the importance they always attach to engaging with young people, the group enthusiastically seized the opportunity to meet with around 50 students, entrepreneurs, activists and other dynamic young people aged between 18 and 26. The aim of the event, entitled "Building a Brighter Future for All: The Elders Engage with Brazil's Youth," was to have an open dialogue on a selection of issues of concern to Brazil, as well as the world, and to transmit the results to Brazil's leaders and policy-makers. The young people were selected from across Brazil and came from a wide range of backgrounds. Most were already change-makers in their own communities. All had something important to say about their country and the challenges, as well as opportunities, it faces.

The Elders that participated in the meeting were:

- **Martti Ahtisaari**, former President of Finland; Nobel Peace Laureate and expert in international peace mediation, diplomacy and post-conflict state building.
- **Ela Bhatt**, a pioneer in women's empowerment and grassroots development, founder of the more than 1 million-strong Self-Employed Women's Association in India.
- **Gro Brundtland**, first woman Prime Minister of Norway and former Director-General of the World Health Organisation.
- **Fernando Henrique Cardoso**, Former President of Brazil; acclaimed sociologist and global advocate for drug policy reform.
- **Jimmy Carter**, former President of the United States, Nobel Peace Laureate and veteran peace negotiator.
- **Mary Robinson**, first woman President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- **Desmond Tutu, Chair of The Elders**, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Nobel Peace Laureate and a veteran anti-apartheid activist and peace campaigner.

This report details the conclusions from the four key themes of discussion:

- Environment and Sustainable Development
- Empowering Women and Promoting Gender Equality
- Building a Fairer Brazil: Race and Multiculturalism
- Tackling Violence: the Role of Government and Society.

Key messages from young people to Brazil's leaders

The young people were enthusiastic about discussing the challenges facing Brazil, and also came up with some practical solutions. A strong, recurrent theme was the importance of

education: across the board, there was a consensus that a good basic education for all and access to further education played a unique transformative role in society. They agreed that improving education for all should be the top priority for Brazil.

Other important messages included:

- A wealthy Brazil is a protected Brazil, one that protects the environment. Government and business should ensure that this is a top priority.
- Greater information and awareness of women's rights and gender equality are vital – you cannot go back to ignorance once you are illuminated!
- Does Brazil need to come up with a new national slogan to reflect a national vision? Ideas that were mentioned: "Building a more inclusive Brazil"; "Brazil: a country for all"; "A Brazil of social justice"; and "Brazilians never give up!"
- On tackling racism and ending discrimination: "We have lots of laws against racism and if you ask a Brazilian they will say they are not prejudiced. It's always someone else. But this hides the racism."
- Urgent action is needed to change the way in which women are portrayed in the media: end stereotyping and the degradation of women. Schools should make promotion of a culture that respects women a top priority, both in the values they transmit and in academic curricula.
- On sustainable development: "Open the windows of your offices and see the suffering that land speculation brings to your people. A wealthy country is not just a country without poverty it is also a country that values its natural resources. We need economic growth, but we also need to preserve the environment."
- On race and multiculturalism: "Half of the population considers itself black, but they are not represented in the legislative assemblies and the National Congress. They are excluded from the decisions that affect their lives."

Environment and sustainable development

The young people felt that while Brazil is going in the right direction economically, on the environmental side things were not so good. One young man said, "Sustainable development is still pending in Brazil." Many young people felt that while Brazil did have some good environmental policies in place, hopefully the "Rio+20" UN Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012 would bring additional international pressure on decision-makers to improve policies further. Some young people felt that companies needed to think more about sustainability issues and be more "eco-correct" in their practices. The Government should introduce greater incentives – and penalties – to encourage this policy of ensuring environmental sustainability.

In addition, the need for practical measures to translate ideals into action was raised. For example, many young people felt that the importance of recycling needed to be reinforced and that sustainable agriculture practices should be taught more widely.

One of the Elders, Gro Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway and former Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, noted how equity and the need for inclusive development had been raised in the discussions; these are goals that The Elders are actively working for. Dr Brundtland said she would be leaving Rio with the strong

impression of great enthusiasm and determination of the young people to work to protect the environment. Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson said how impressed she had been with the level of discussion, particularly by the interest and motivation of the youth. She heard how this was due, in large part, to support from their families, and access to education, an advantage that some of their parents had not had.

Empowering Women and Promoting Gender Equality

In regard to the status of women in Brazilian society, most of the young people felt it was important for women to have the tools they needed to fulfil their potential, for example, through access to microfinance. It was acknowledged that while the availability of finance is necessary to economically empower women and men, it is not the only requirement. Transfers of income, cheap loans, decent jobs and business creation were also said to be vital. "Together, these actions can actually close the gap between women and men, the bottom and the top, and between the haves and have nots," said Ela Bhatt, founder of the more than one-million-strong Self-Employed Women's Association in India. Referring to the lively group of young people she had met on her table, Ela Bhatt paid tribute to their seriousness in discussing these issues, and to the fact that they brought new practical ideas to the goal of advancing gender equality in Brazil. When talking about rights for women, workers, foresters and other Brazilians, Ela Bhatt underscored her belief that it is important to also recognise responsibilities; the two always go together.

Given the Elders' focus on tackling child marriage around the world, The Elders were interested to learn that, while this is not a problem in Brazil, the issue of child pregnancy is prevalent. Young people referred to 12 year-olds already dating and the fact that single motherhood at a young age, was widespread in Brazilian society. Related to this, there was discussion of the impact that the portrayal of women in the media has in the early sexualisation of young girls. One young woman asked "How can we bring young girls back to childhood?" Many young people spoke about the "macho atmosphere" that prevails in Brazil and how women are degraded in the media.

Regarding Brazil's political life, many young people felt that politics was still dominated by men. They noted that, while there is a female President, only nine per cent of members of Congress are women. It was felt that women could add new values to government and politics. Specifically, one young woman spoke about how women could administer the public sector. She said "They have to do this at home; women have an embedded capacity for managing!" The young people suggested that the Government's Secretariat for Women's Rights should have a higher profile and be better understood, and should do more to publicise the rights of women.

Former US President Jimmy Carter encouraged the young people to remember that whatever dimension of society or the economy they want to improve – the workplace, home ownership, education or healthcare – the key is equality for women and the protection of the rights of girls and women.

Building a Fairer Brazil: Race and Multiculturalism

The young people felt that, overall, social and racial problems were currently not being addressed as well as they could be. The need to look at the underlying causes of racism and discrimination, not just the symptoms, was highlighted. In order to promote greater social and racial harmony, many young people thought it important to find more economic opportunities for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those living in favelas. Many participants believed that the key was to direct support to young people who were heading down the road towards a life of criminality. Economic factors were highlighted as one of the main reasons that drive young people to get involved with drugs.

Education was seen as being the best means to bring about change on this issue. In the classroom, a greater emphasis on the different roots of the Brazilian people was said to be urgently needed. The current, Western-orientated syllabus was felt to not necessarily reflect or relate to people of different origins and cultures. Through the inclusion in basic education of elements from the different cultures and groups that constitute Brazil, it was suggested that over time a new consciousness would be generated. Changes in the curriculum and textbooks, while transforming teachers and classrooms into the principal means for the construction of a more inclusive society, was felt to be vital. It was felt that in the northeast of the country in particular, in basic education insufficient value is given to the contribution that black and indigenous people make to the building of Brazilian society.

From elementary school onwards, young Brazilians should be aware of the cultural diversity in which they exist so that they know their history and their background and can find their place in the melting pot of diversity that is Brazil. Asked how the public education system, particularly at the university level, could better promote greater diversity, some young people felt that US-style “affirmative action” programmes, involving quotas, did not work as well as they could in Brazil. Others felt they were inappropriate.

Specific recommendations for action to build a fairer Brazil included the need for the media to better reflect Brazil’s diversity. One young person spoke of the need to “give voice to black people who rarely see themselves on TV or hear their voices on the radio.” Another young woman said: “I come from a low income family, I’m black. I was in the newspaper when I organised a film festival and when my community read my name they were so excited. They thought – why can’t I do that too.”

Former President of Brazil Fernando Henrique Cardoso spoke of the excellent discussion he had participated in on these sensitive issues, particularly, the way in which the young people expressed their views so well and listened to each other. He underscored the importance of opportunity and hard work in building a fairer Brazil. Reflecting on the discussions, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of The Elders, commented: “It is important that your thoughts are publicised and that people know you are not crazy and you have a dream for this land. You have not allowed yourselves to be defined by your problems. It warms my heart listening to you. The future of your country is in your hands, and it is in very good hands.”

Tackling Violence: the Role of Government and Society

The majority of young people who discussed the issue of tackling violence in Brazil felt that things were still not moving in the right direction. Investment in education, tackling drug trafficking and domestic violence – which, it was stressed, is also a terrible form of violence – were critical to dealing with the problem effectively.

Asked what practical changes were needed to tackle violence, it was suggested that schools be opened up to local communities. Some young people thought that schools should involve all sectors of society, and could be open at weekends, for example. Others felt that, ideally, education should not only be about individual growth, but also help to create a more equal and balanced society. Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland, noted that there is no age limit for learning and for being heard. He urged teachers and parents to allow for a genuine exchange of ideas.

Many young people felt that the current school design is not attractive or pleasant, and that too many public schools look like a prison. It was suggested that companies should partner with schools to improve the physical environment. Other ideas put forward were that the Government should do more to encourage and support schools in providing sport and cultural activities for young people as an alternative to criminality and violence.

Discussion of how the drug culture is considered “cool” challenged young people to think about how an alternative cool culture could be developed. Young people held different views on whether decriminalisation of drugs would be a good or bad thing for society and in decreasing violence in Brazil.

Martti Ahtisaari said that he wished politicians from other countries could see this example of how to have a civilised dialogue when there were different points of view. He added: “I leave Brazil knowing that the future of the country is good. I see that you will all play an important role in your society and the development of your country because you realise that this is not achieved by governments or local authorities, but that all of us can make a difference in our societies.”

Conclusion

Reflecting on the Elders’ discussions with young Brazilians, Mary Robinson spoke of her hope that the young people came away feeling affirmed, knowing that so many of their peers are also working on these issues and feel equally committed to bringing about positive change in the country.

Archbishop Tutu summed up the sense of excitement and positivity emanating from the meeting with Brazilian young people when he said: “I was bowled over by the quality of the young people in my group. The world is in very good hands. Us oldies can move out feeling a little more reassured! It was truly exhilarating to sit together with you. It is phenomenal to know that there are people of your calibre saying ‘This is our world and it’s going to become a better world.’ So I say: go for it!”