

29th LISBON FORUM

HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMIC CRIMES:
YOUTH AT THE FOREFRONT

16-17 OCTOBER 2023



REPORT

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Co-located
to the European Union



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
Co-located and co-organised
by the Council of Europe



129
Participants

47
Countries



49,61% Male

+



50,39% Female

+

273433

NUMBER OF PEOPLE
REACHED ON THE
SOCIAL MEDIA

REPRESENTATIVES OF:



OF WHICH **44** YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES

Abstract

The 29th edition of the Lisbon Forum brought together 129 stakeholders from 47 countries around the theme: “**Human Rights, Environment, and Economic Crimes: Youth at the forefront**”. This interregional event gathered representatives from national governments, parliaments, local and regional authorities, civil society, youth organisations, academia, and media. 34% of the participants were young people.

Building on the Council of Europe’s priorities as defined at the Reykjavik Summit in May 2023, the 29th edition of the Forum focused on the linkages between economic crime, human rights, and the environment, with an emphasis on the role that young people play as agents of change in the fight against corruption for the protection of the environment.

Since 1994, the Lisbon Forum of the [North-South Centre](#) is a chief yearly event that provides a platform for interregional exchange between representatives of government, parliament, regional and local authorities, and civil society – *the quadrilogue* - on the global role of the Council of Europe in the areas of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In line with the mandate of the North-South Centre, the Forum has a global vocation, with priority focus on the Southern Mediterranean region and Africa.

The Lisbon Forum also channelled the voices of a group of 250 young activists and representatives of youth-led organisations who gathered in Spain during the North-South Centre’s [University of Youth and Development](#) on the theme “youth, peace and climate change”.

The following report provides an overview of the main conclusions and recommendations that resulted from the discussions of the Forum.

Acknowledgements

The North-South Centre wishes to thank the conference’s general rapporteur, Ms. Alexandra Kodjabachi, for providing this report; the moderators, speakers, and participants to the 29th Lisbon Forum; and the Ismaili Centre for their hospitality and valuable support in organising this event.

This event was organised in the framework of North-South Centre’s projects based on voluntary contributions from Malta, Portugal, and Spain, as well as with the support of the joint programme of the European Union and the Council of Europe “Protecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy through shared standards in the Southern Mediterranean” (South Programme V), co-financed by both organisations and implemented by the Council of Europe.

All material pertaining to the Forum (including the programme, speaker’s biographies, speeches and photos) is available at the [Lisbon Forum webpage](#).

Why are the “Youth at the Forefront”?

Over the course of the one and half day conference, **five reasons** have emerged:

1. Youth are **active** on the ground.
2. Youth have **energy, fresh perspective, and drive**.
3. Youth are **digitally savvy, innovation-driven, and entrepreneurial**. These traits allow them to leverage the power of technology and entrepreneurship to solve problems.
4. Youth have a **track record of achievements, courage, and capacity to disrupt status quo**. In Seychelles, young people cleaned up rivers and ocean shores and got single-use plastic bags banned. In Mauritius, they fought against bottled water and installed public drinking fountains, inspiring the government and hotels to follow suit. In Portugal, 6 young people took 32 countries to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for failing to protect them against climate change. Many more examples were shared.
5. Youth have **skin in the game**, as they are currently suffering and will disproportionately suffer from the mistakes of previous generations and the alarming deterioration of the environment.

Conclusions on Climate

When it comes to climate, contributors reached consensus on **three key points**:

1. There is a **sense of urgency**. The droughts in Libya and Morocco and the wildfires across Europe are none but a sample of the disastrous state the environment is in. This begs a question: what's next? Collective action or collective suicide?
2. The problems we face are **complex and multidimensional**: connections between environment, corruption, and human rights abound.
3. **Intergenerational dialogue** is useful and necessary. Each country has its specificities and its historical background. Youth can also benefit from hearing the experiences of the environmental and human rights activists of the 1970s and 1980s.

Panellists and speakers also evoked the different **gaps** that need bridging:

1. The **gap between developing and developed countries** breeds inequality and imbalances across areas because of the disproportionate environmental risk.
2. There is a **mismatch between action and responsibility**. One opinion focuses on the critical importance of individual responsibility (every single person needs to commit to solving the problem and not just the activists). Another underscores the overwhelming responsibility of corporate actors compared to the “10%” that individuals may be accountable for.
3. There is a **gap between statements and commitments** made in high-level events and **a reality that doesn't live up to promises and expectations**.
4. There is a **gap between the intentions** behind some spaces created to enable youth engagement and the **tangible impact** these platforms have on pushing things forward and putting ideas into action.

Conclusions on Corruption

Although the global cost of corruption mentioned is believed to be around 2.6 trillion USD, the **definition of corruption still lacks clarity and unity**, but it's essentially characterised by huge profits, low levels of detection and low penalties. We can witness the consequences of corruption as it erodes the fabric of society, violates human rights, hinders progress, and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. But how to address it?

1. To curb corruption, speakers underlined the importance of **institutional structures, policy, legal frameworks, independent bodies, collaboration with peers, use of technology** (including machine learning to proactively identify high risk cases), as well as the right **systems and processes**.
2. Speakers stressed the positive impact of **preventive measures** to curb corruption and environmental crimes, citing successful examples of initiatives from civil society to protect wild-life species and the environment locally. **Public-private partnership** should also be promoted, as well as **making multinational companies responsible for their actions** worldwide, as a large coalition of NGOs in Switzerland currently promotes, to have transparency and accountability of the social and environmental impact of their operations abroad.
3. Finally, an active and **independent media** is paramount to report on economic crimes and cases of corruption.

What's at the nexus of climate, corruption, and youth?

It was self-evident to all stakeholders that **human rights are central to the work on anti-corruption** and that the **cost of corruption is devastating to the environment**. How? Many examples and stories showed how the two intersect. For instance, fraudulent environmental impact assessments can lead to water and soil contamination and, eventually, public health issues. With illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, resources end up depleted and the very livelihoods of local fisherfolk communities become at risk.

As we navigate complex problems, the link between environment, corruption, and human rights becomes clearer. This connection is strengthened via **the establishment and evolution of institutional and legal frameworks**. However, it seems that **a clear definition of and an agreement on what an environmental crime is lagging** – some would say it should perhaps precede the adoption of robust legislation to ensure sound implementation and enforcement. Finally, given the transnational nature of environmental crime, **cross-border collaboration** comes highly recommended.

All this seems to echo what was said on day 1, that if **youth involvement** is indeed essential in the fight for a healthy and sustainable environment, it can be **amplified and made even more impactful via institutions**.

Leveraging the power of institutions and legal frameworks

Many **institutions and networks** were mentioned or represented at the Forum:

- The Council of Europe, along with its North-South Centre

- The European Court of Human Rights, an international court of the Council of Europe currently studying the case filed by the 6 young Portuguese people against 32 European countries, a historic first where so many countries are forced to defend themselves in front of an international court.
- GRECO with its 48 member states that monitor each other institutionally and legally.
- The UNCAC Coalition
- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
- The European Committee on Social Rights

As for the **legal frameworks and other valuable resources** that can serve as tools for human rights defenders against environmental crimes, the list is still growing.

- The United Nations Convention against Corruption (2005)
- The Bern Convention or Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979)
- The European Convention of Human Rights
- The European Social Charter
- The Human Rights Act - whose article 2 (Right to life) underlines the positive obligations of state to protect people's life such as in cases of land planning and emergency relief policies and article 8 (Right to respect familial and private life) that covers the effect pollution, hazardous waste or water contamination can have on families.
- The Reykjavik Summit Declaration of the Council of Europe (2023)
- The report connecting the role of local authorities to sustainable development: "Towards a green reading of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.
- A new Council of Europe Convention on the protection of the environment through criminal law (coming soon)

Protecting those who protect human rights

As young people get involved in the fight for a healthy and sustainable environment, it is important not only to ensure they are well-equipped with tools and resources but that they remain safe, especially when their activism can have dire repercussions. **Protection mechanisms**, such as the ones established by ProtectDefenders.eu, offer **much needed support** in a variety of situations, from defamation cases all the way to actual life threats and imprisonment.

Acknowledging roadblocks

Despite great advancements, **challenges** abound. At the Forum, three key limitations were identified and expressed:

1. **Ineffective law enforcement and lack of political will.** Examples were given of plans of action adopted by governments with regards to climate and the environment, yet deadlines were not met, and measures were not implemented.
2. **Impunity.** Suggestions to curb it involved dialogue, partnerships, and increased accountability.
3. **Shifting priorities.** In some countries, contextual priorities (eg: war, oppression, etc) mean fighting environmental crimes can take the backseat.

What's next?

The Forum discussions led to the exploration of what governments, institutions, and networks need to do to ensure effective youth engagement at the forefront and how young people can shift things forward.

Recommendations for governments, institutions, and networks

1. Recognise **youth as** innovators, scientists, experts, entrepreneurs, whistle-blowers, in other words, as **critical partners and fellow decision-makers**, not as mere relays, beneficiaries or objects of protection.
2. Understand that **all young voices matter** and not just a select few.
3. Enable **interregional collaboration** between young people.
4. Enable **intergenerational collaboration**.
5. Create space for the youth and **empower** them to occupy that space and **manage effective and difficult negotiations** to claim rights.
6. Give young people the **tools and legal frameworks** that will strengthen their position and support them as they advocate for a healthy and sustainable environment.
7. Focus on **education** to get young people to effectively contribute to shaping policy.
8. Include youth in the **full cycle of policymaking**: go beyond initial consultation and move towards involving them in policy implementation.
9. Have the **humility to ask youth what they think** and to **accept their input** and guidance.
10. **Diversify involvement**. There's the opinion that many young people prefer not to engage in institutionalised politics, hence the need for different avenues for political engagement outside traditional political parties (at the level of Town Council for instance). But there's also the opinion that young people need to be involved in the political life not just as activists and advocates but as actual politicians and members of political parties.
11. Bring youth and their input to the **international discussions**. This is also important for young people from countries that are not necessarily members of some international communities and institutions.
12. Ensure **financial support**, especially for countries and regions that are disproportionately impacted by environmental risks and for projects that invest in the long-term (such as strategic litigation).
13. Make **whistleblowing and corruption reporting easier** and **more accessible** (especially in places where internet connection is difficult, for example).
14. Avoid the trap of **tokenism**.

For all these recommendations to be possible, enabling conditions are necessary:

- **Increased political will** and the courage to create open space for dialogue.
- **Decreased bureaucracy** as complex bureaucracy may hinder political participation.

Recommendations for the Youth

1. **Collaborate**. An audience intervention showed how a coalition of 250 organisations in Kenya encouraged the government to talk with them, accept their policy proposition and even fund their initiative.
2. **Create communities** of youth who believe in themselves.
3. Amplify messages and voices through **coalitions and networks of networks**.

4. Be a **bridge**: youth with access to power, those who have a seat at the table, need to act as a bridge with the youth who don't have the same access. That bridge must **be two-directional** to ensure all voices are heard and represented.
5. Create opportunities for **multiplication effect**.
6. **Share information** with your peers about opportunities for support and protection (such as Protectdefenders.eu for example).
7. Balance **local implementation** with **global partnerships**.

Rule of Law Youth Network

Based on the recommendations above, one of the main outcomes of the 29th edition of the Lisbon Forum was the announcement of the creation of a **Rule of Law Youth Network (ROLYN)** to capitalise on the energy and motivation of the Forum participants, so that they can remain connected, continue to inspire each other, and support each other's efforts, long after the event. The RoLYN will aim to empower a group of young activists to defend human rights, democracy, and the rule of law as fundamental principles, and enable cooperation at the regional level.

The work of RoLYN in 2024-2025 will focus on promoting and raising awareness on interlinkages between corruption and environmental degradation. Up to 20 youth representatives from North-South Centre member States and partner countries from the Southern Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa are sought for this programme. More information about the RoLYN [here](#).

This event was organised in the framework of the North-South Centre's project "All Informed, All Concerned" funded by the governments of Portugal and Spain, with the support of the joint programme of the European Union and the Council of Europe "Protecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy through shared standards in the Southern Mediterranean" (South Programme V), co-financed by both organisations and implemented by the Council of Europe.

