

Elders+Youngers: building a sustainable and more equitable world for all

Final report – August 2012



Three Elders and the four 'Youngers' participating in the Elders+Youngers dialogue in the run-up to Rio+20. From left to right: Marvin Nala, Sara Svensson, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mary Robinson, Pedro Telles, Esther Agbarakwe. *(Cristina Lacerda/The Elders)*

A global dialogue between generations

In the spring of 2012, The Elders teamed up with four young activists to discuss the change needed to secure a sustainable future for our planet.

When The Elders was founded by Nelson Mandela, he told the group to reach out to those who feel marginalised and forgotten, in particular young people. With [Elders+Youngers](#), The Elders seized upon the opportunity to work with young people to amplify the essential message of sustainable development: to meet today's needs without compromising the needs of future generations.

Through their conversations, Elders and Youngers told a story about the urgent need for an inter-generational outlook on the biggest problems we collectively face, the important role of young people in building a more sustainable and equitable world, and the need for the current generation of leaders to make the right decisions now as a matter of urgency.

The inter-generational dialogue was designed in partnership with the [Global Campaign for Climate Action](#) (GCCA) and was spread over more than ten weeks: in the run-up to the UN Conference and Sustainable Development (Rio+20), during the summit itself and for several weeks afterwards.

Debating the future of our planet, in-person and online

The project was based on online and face-to-face debates between four of the Elders – Gro Harlem Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu – and four ‘Youngers’, Esther Agbarakwe from Nigeria, Marvin Nala from China, Pedro Telles from Brazil and Sara Svensson from Sweden, all prominent activists in the global environment and sustainability movement.

Elders and Youngers first came together in Norway in May 2012, when Marvin and Esther, together with Pedro and Sara via Skype, attended the biannual Elders’ meeting. Later, Marvin and Esther joined Gro Harlem Brundtland, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu to discuss global sustainability issues at a public debate in Oslo. In June in Rio de Janeiro, all four Youngers joined Gro Harlem Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Mary Robinson in a series of events at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20.



Elders and Youngers at a public debate in Oslo, May 2012 (Jeff Moore/The Elders)

In between these in-person meetings, Elders and Youngers used video, blogs and social media channels to debate the critical issues at stake in building a more sustainable future. Some of the discussion themes were: [People, profit and the environment – can we balance them all?](#); [Does GDP make us happy?](#); [How to create the change we want?](#) and a concluding discussion, post-summit: [Rio+20 didn't go far enough - what now?](#). The discussions were

open to the global online audience and generated an unprecedented number of comments on The Elders' website.

A [live blog](#) also covered Elders and Youngers' day-to-day activities, statements and impressions during the Rio+20 summit itself.

Engaging a global audience, targeting decision-makers

Sustainable development is a huge subject that many people find hard to grasp, let alone relate to their everyday lives. With this in mind, the Elders+Youngers dialogue wanted to connect everyday issues to the big choices faced by world leaders while highlighting the precious opportunity offered by the Rio+20 summit to take bold steps towards a more sustainable future.

During Rio+20, Elders and Youngers spoke publicly at a range of civil society events and meetings organised by the UN: at [Rio+Social](#), an interactive event organised by the UN Foundation and Mashable; at a panel discussion organised by Nobel laureates and the UN's Global Sustainability Panel; and at the UN Partnerships Forum, which took place during the high-level segment of the summit (20-22 June). They also held a press conference that provided an accessible narrative thread that the media could pick up.

Media-wise, Desmond Tutu also promoted the Elders+Youngers project in blogs for the [Huffington Post](#) and the [Rio+20 official website](#). The importance of an inter-generational approach to global problems was also communicated through joint interviews with Elders and Youngers: Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Pedro, for example, appeared together on Globo News, and Gro Harlem Brundtland was interviewed with Esther and Marvin by Chinese, Indian and Latin American media outlets. The Youngers also spoke separately to the BBC World Service, Radio France Internationale, O Globo and the Norwegian public radio.



Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Pedro Telles in conversation during the Rio+20 summit (*Cristina Lacerda/The Elders*)

The project was promoted through two videos – one to present the initiative, called [What kind of world do we want for our great-great-grandchildren?](#), and [Elders+Youngers: it's our future, it's our time](#), shown in Rio at the Elders+Youngers press conference and Rio+Social. Short interactive video Q&As, where Elders and Youngers responded to questions sent in via social media by Elders' and Youngers' supporters, were also produced during the summit.

The Elders' team and the Youngers actively used social media to amplify their messages and connect The Elders with new audiences. This was also an opportunity to work with young campaigners who are already active on social media to bring their intergenerational dialogue to new audiences, particularly in Brazil, China and Nigeria.

Marvin, for instance, facilitated The Elders' access to China's biggest social network – Sina Weibo – which has 300 million users (The Elders' website, Facebook page, Twitter feed and YouTube videos are not accessible in China). Pedro posted much of the dialogue in Portuguese on his own blog, and Esther and Sara spread the message to their networks in Africa and Europe.

During the two-month duration of the Elders+Youngers project, the traffic on The Elders' website increased by 56 per cent, to 43,000 visits. Enthusiastic sharing of our content by users on Facebook and Twitter, combined with the increased activity generated by the project, meant the message reached hundreds of thousands of people.

What next?

The relationship that developed between Elders and Youngers was compelling and rewarding to observe. This clearly wasn't a mentoring project, it was a genuine effort to create an intergenerational dialogue and, while they did not always agree, Elders and Youngers found more in common in their outlook than perhaps any of them expected.

More importantly, Elders and Youngers alike seemed visibly energised by their exchanges and ready to move on from the disappointing outcomes of Rio+20 to seize future opportunities to advance sustainable development. They all stressed how inspired they were by the impressive civil society showing in Rio, and eager to capitalise on this growing movement in innovative ways – as Esther puts it in the last week of discussion: "Rio+20 gave us a stronger belief in ourselves, in our ability to fight harder for the future we want with a new, different approach."

In response, The Elders also highlighted the need to maintain momentum and build on Rio+20's small victories. Gro Harlem Brundtland argues that "the Rio+20 outcome document is far from perfect, but it is what we have. Let us take the good parts and run with them." Mary Robinson adds: "there is an opportunity to influence the substance of the Sustainable Development Goals – we have to make sure there are strong targets and commitments made by governments, that these are measurable, and that they will be ready for the MDG Summit of 2013 that will review the Millennium Development Goals."

As to the success of the Elders+Youngers initiative itself, the Youngers felt it had been able to convey messages about sustainable development “in a very successful and positive way” while highlighting “the cross-generational importance of sustainable development”, both “online and offline”. As one Younger put it, “the most successful aspect of the [...] initiatives was the fact that [the] dialogue truly happened.”

They felt the project could have been improved by increasing the amount of actual ‘face time’ for discussion in private, to try “to create more moments for the Elders and Youngers to be together for a few hours and talk with no rush”. Limited time was also thought to have been a concern in relation to the disappointing outcomes of Rio+20. One Younger suggested that “our tremendous efforts may have come a bit too late, [...] when the negotiation had been almost doomed to fail”.

But this also indicates the potential impact they ascribe to initiatives such as Elders+Youngers, praising the project’s ability to tap into “the revolutionary power of youth” in a world that is “changing crazily fast”.

In their own feedback, the Elders welcomed the seriousness with which the Youngers undertook the assignment, engaged with its spirit and did not hesitate to share opinions that were bold and challenging in the substance of the dialogue, while also contributing new perspectives and ideas from youth organisations at the grassroots.

The Elders’ team also appreciated the Youngers’ active input in the practical workings and implementation of the initiative itself, throughout the dialogue. The lessons learned from this fruitful collaboration will be applied to the Elders’ future work and engagement with young people.

Selected resources

Meet the Youngers:

- [Esther Agbarakwe's blog](#)
- [Marvin Nala's blog](#)
- [Pedro Telles' blog](#)
- [Sara Svensson's blog](#)

Videos:

- [Elders+Youngers: live debate in Oslo](#)
- [What kind of world do we want for our great-great-grandchildren?](#)
- [Elders+Youngers: it's our future, it's our time](#)

Photo stories:

- ["You are going to succeed where we failed": the Elders meet the 'Youngers'](#)
- [Bringing intergenerational dialogue to Rio+20](#)

Elders+Youngers discussion threads:

- [People, profit and the environment - can we balance them all?](#)
- [Is sustainable development a luxury we can't afford?](#)
- [How to create the change we want?](#)
- [Does GDP make us happy?](#)
- [Are girls better at saving the planet than boys?](#)
- [Rio+20 didn't go far enough - what now?](#)

Elders+Youngers during Rio+20:

- [The Elders+Youngers' live blog](#)
- [Video Q&A: Fernando Henrique Cardoso & Pedro Telles](#)
- [Video Q&A: Mary Robinson, Sara Svensson and Marvin Nala](#)
- [Video Q&A: Gro Harlem Brundtland and Esther Agbarakwe](#)

Elders+Youngers in the media – selection:

- Press release: [Rio+20 must rescue the future, Elders and 'Youngers' tell today's leaders](#), 17 May 2012
- Global Voices: [Elders Call on Youth to Help Lead the Way at Rio+20](#), 23 May 2012
- Huffington Post: [For the Future of Our Planet, a Dialogue Between Generations](#), blog by Desmond Tutu, 8 June 2012
- BBC Network Africa: [When I grow up, I can be an Elder one day](#), Esther Agbarakwe speaks to the BBC World Service about the Elders+Youngers project, 8 June 2012
- NBC news: [Twenty years later, will world make good on Rio Earth Summit's 'broken promises'?](#), interview with Gro Harlem Brundtland about Elders+Youngers, 19 June 2012