



UNA ★ USA

San Francisco Chapter

Helping Young Professionals Align Their Careers With The UN Sustainable Development Goals: A Collective Narrative

On August 25, 2018, a group of experts and young professionals gathered at the War Memorial Veterans Building in San Francisco for a participatory session on helping young professionals align their careers with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (UN SDGs).

This session was organized as part of the UN Humanitarian Day by the [United Nations Association of the USA, San Francisco Chapter](#) (UNA SF) in partnership with the [United Nations Association USA Marin County Chapter](#), [Young Professionals in Foreign Policy](#), [World Affairs](#), and [WeRGenR](#).

To set the context for the session, [Dr. Marco Tavanti](#) from the [University of San Francisco](#) moderated a panel discussion with [Dr. Mark Ward](#) from the [University of Washington](#) (a former U.S. Government and UN Official), [Dorothy Ngutter](#) from the [U.S. Department of State](#), [Manuel Manga](#) from the [Institute for Evolutionary Leadership](#), and [Galina Fedorova](#) from the [Gooddler Foundation](#).

After that the participants engaged in small group conversations and on a tailored [World Café](#) process to discuss what advice can help young professionals who want to align their careers with the UN SDGs and what organizations need to consider when supporting such young professionals with events and programming. The process was designed and facilitated by [Fyodor Ovchinnikov](#) from UNA SF. Small group conversations were summarized by [Edward Espinoza](#), [Erika Nguyen](#), [Francesca Ginexi](#), [Ian McCuaig](#), [Karen Melander-Magoon](#), [Meredith Stevenson](#), and [Todd Erickson](#) and turned into a collective narrative—a text that links individual insights into a cohesive whole with minimum change of the original language—using the [Collective Narrative Methodology](#).

Collective Narrative

We are all grateful to the San Francisco Chapter of the United Nations Association of the United States of America for organizing this wonderful event to help young professionals align their careers with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We are very grateful for the wonderful panel and the great ideas shared by the panelists. The insights that emerged in our Global Cafe conversations were amazing.



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Advice for Young Professionals

Think Systemically

We discussed how important it is for young professionals working on UN Sustainable Development Goals to think in systems. These goals are dealing with complex problems that are very interconnected, so the idea of systems thinking and the capacity to think systemically about the big picture are important. In this context the advice on Evolutionary Leadership was very helpful.

Start Where You Are

We also discussed that in addition to thinking systemically it is very important to act small, to start somewhere, to volunteer, to get in action at an early stage. We stressed the importance of getting your foot in the door, taking that first internship or that volunteer work and getting that really great experience at whatever position or whatever field you are looking into, then either doing contract work or taking the next step, whatever it may be, and finding your trajectory from there wherever you would like to go in your career.

We were particularly struck by this idea of just getting your hands dirty and just starting somewhere. The younger generation sometimes overthinks things too much, so the advice for young professionals is that when you start something somewhere, a door will open that you didn't even know was there - so don't overthink it. Young professionals need to both think big and act right now where they can.

Design Your Path

Besides that, we talked about limitations of different organizations, NGOs, and corporations. Young professionals need to be clear about what they have in mind for their career, and chase the type of organization they want to work for that would help them reach their goals. They can take a more design-centered approach by identifying which aspect of the humanitarian sector and Sustainable Development Goals speaks to them and why, understanding the landscape, and figuring out how their current or potential skillset can fit within that.

There are a lot of organizations that are out there that young professionals can get involved in. For example, Amnesty International was mentioned a couple of times as having similar goals to those of the United Nations. In our discussions, we emphasized the importance of collaboration.



Learn How to Collaborate

Complex problems cannot be solved by any one sector, discipline, or school of thought - we all have to collaborate to work on global goals, so young professionals need to build skills for collaboration, and as they advance in their careers and become in charge they need to think about people at the very bottom who are supporting them.

Build Technical Skills

Also, while being collaborative and systemic is important, as individuals, young professionals need to develop technical skills such as learning a second or a third language: if a young professional is going to collaborate, there needs to be clarity around what they will bring to the collaborating table.

We found it very interesting to feel the importance and the very great responsibility with which young participants are trying to branch into careers that really help develop UN Sustainable Development Goals. To us, that responsibility was very indicative of a great youth population that is out there to change the world.

Advice for Organizations Supporting Young Professionals

In terms of things to consider when putting programming together for young professionals to work on the Sustainable Development Goals we discussed the importance of combining this broader, higher level discussions about the SDGs alongside more practical workshops, trainings, and events whether that is hearing from other young professionals who have gone down similar career paths or having practical workshops that explain the landscape of the humanitarian sector.

Show the Big Picture

To help young professionals get oriented in the larger landscape of opportunities, it is important to consider the breadth of industries as well as the breadth of geographical areas: different organizations, different companies that focus on particular areas of the world. It is also important to considering different roles and to include not only people with international relations background but also people who have more technical expertise or more legal expertise because there are roles in humanitarian action for them as well.



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Understand Your Audience

With such breadth, choosing the most helpful topics requires understanding of the audience, so organizers can either survey the members or those who will be attending the events, find out what fields they have worked in, where they are coming from, what populations they serve, and get a little bit deeper dive into the demographics of the audience. For example, a healthcare professional who is at least aspiring in this direction would need programming and career opportunities that are that specific.

Include Young Professionals in Planning

It is very helpful to involve representatives of the young professionals community in developing events. It may not necessarily be a full-time staff person, but checking ideas with a focus group of young professionals to see if this is something they or their colleagues would be interested in could help choose the right direction.

Engage Local Organizations

We also thought that leveraging the existing network of nonprofit organizations, professional organizations in the Bay Area and encouraging them to promote career opportunities for young professionals who want to work on SDGs would be a good idea. In addition to that, getting more involvement from universities and just communicating directly to students that may be interested in these careers is also important.

Choose Speakers with Radical Transparency

When inviting speakers representing different economic sectors to talk about career opportunities for young professionals, it is very valuable to invite speakers with radical transparency who do not focus on dualistic perspective of different organizations or different issues but are going to give radical critique about those organizations or different issues.

Offer Guidance on Practical Steps

We also discussed how important it is for organizations and for advice to include practical steps to help young professionals figure out how they can start right where they are, start building experience from the bottom up. Many young participants have very idealistic ambitions but they are not sure what step to take: the idea of small steps rather than big steps to begin with, get your feet wet, volunteer your way through was very present in our discussions.



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We talked about helping young professionals explore specific career opportunities, identify the skills that they will need to do this work, places where they can get those skills, and also opportunities to get into action, to actually get into practice and do the work, and have those experiences. More than just speakers, young professionals need specifics: they need to know where to go, what to do, what skills to develop, who to go to, what organizations are out there for them.

Connect Global Goals with Local Opportunities

Another important theme was connecting the local aspect of humanitarian action with the bigger picture. We talked about how engaging the more local aspect of the UN Sustainable Development Goals would be helpful, how young professionals can start within their local community adjusting larger issues. For example, many people do not even know that they have opportunities to work with refugees here in San Francisco, and we also have a lot of other issues here that need help like the Tenderloin homelessness issue. We felt that it was really important for organizations to provide young professionals with opportunities to create sustainable development and work on issues in their community right where they are along with helping them think more globally.

Innovate and Keep Going

Other ideas included inviting younger speakers with early career success promoting SDGs in the world to inspire other professionals of their age group or having an event at which young professionals would be able to table with many people to get help with figuring out what they can do. We also discussed the importance of mentoring and of learning about people's personal journeys and we highlighted how some of the insights from today were really important in that sense.

We also talked about repeating what was done today and maybe have monthly discussion groups on specific topics with some pre-reading. In our conversations we discovered that there actually is such a program that has been planned by the UNA SF and the University of San Francisco - the Young Professionals for Sustainable Development Seminar Series - so this idea will be realized right away.