



## Sam Nemat Vaghar

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Executive Director, MCN

Dearest Colleagues, Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Dr. Betsee Parker, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Dr. Sonia Sachs, Siamak Sam Loni, Gabriella Marino, Federica Petrini, John Farrugia, and colleagues in this room and beyond these walls - it is a tremendous honor to be here at the Vatican. My name is Sam Vaghar and I serve as Executive Director of Millennium Campus Network – MCN – a global student network helping to address humanity’s greatest challenges – and based in Boston, Massachusetts.

In reflecting upon the theme of our Symposium, the focus on our role as stewards of our planet for a more fraternal and supportive society, I affirm the insight shared by Monsignor Sánchez – that “the current crisis is a crisis of values.” If that is the problem threatening us, then I submit that the values we must affirm – empathy, humility, inclusion - are those that uphold dignity in our interactions with people and planet.

A major force for shifting values is youth leaders committed to justice. As Pope Francis conveys to the world in *Laudato si'*, “Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.” I’ve come to realize this truth – that youth leaders are willing to stand up for what is right– and often have throughout history. We can study how the bold Ella Baker and young colleagues like Charlie Cobb in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came together to help tackle segregation and uphold civil rights in the United States. We can point to the remarkable role that young leaders – including Nelson Mandela – a leader who began his activism in his own youth - played in ending apartheid. And in the mid-1980’s in my country, the US, 155 campuses mobilized to divest from South Africa during apartheid, helping to shift national and international public opinion on this injustice. History makes it clear: **Youth alone do not change the world – intergenerational social movements that embrace youth leadership do.**

I come to the Vatican at this precarious time to share the message we all know to be true and must conclusively prove – that it is time to make a sizeable investment in youth leadership. That convenings like this Symposium matter and that it is up to us inside and outside of this room to build upon this foundation – to ensure that every young person advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – every young leader far beyond this venue - has the support they need to carry out this shared work. As you asserted at this Symposium last year Professor Sachs, the precise support needed for youth leaders to meaningfully engage must be clearly defined; and then, we – all of us - as advocates must be indefatigable in advocating for it.

My journey into this space began at 19 years old. I read two books that changed my life. The first was *Mountains Beyond Mountains* about the work of Dr. Paul Farmer and Partners in Health. The second was *The End of Poverty* by Dr. Jeffrey Sachs. It was the final section of that book that spoke to me – a clear blueprint for what we as individuals could do to meaningfully engage with the world’s poorest communities. I put down the book, picked up the phone, and cold-called Professor Sachs. Two days later, I was in New York, meeting with your team Professor Sachs. What is remarkable – and still astounds me to this day – is that you and your team would give me the time of day – I was a young student at Brandeis University, wide-eyed and ingenuous, and you were willing to engage and mentor me. You saw the value in me as a potential young leader in this social movement, as you see in every young leader in this room today and in thousands more you personally engage with across the globe. Thank you for believing in me when it mattered most and for embracing youth agency. So we went on to host our first global conference at MIT in 2008 with 1,000 young leaders, with Professor Sachs, Dr. Farmer, John Legend, and more – these leaders joined our Board of Advisors and helped us launch the Millennium Campus Network, or MCN. A decade into this journey, we have connected and trained over 5,500 undergraduates committed to social impact from 300 universities across the globe. Undergraduates like Netia McCray, who utilized our training and took her engineering prowess from MIT to create a do-it-yourself solar power USB charger for mobile devices. She convenes teens in Cape Town, South Africa, and Boston, Massachusetts to assemble the chargers. Netia then invites the teens to submit their own designs in pitch competitions. She has turned her organization Mbadika from a student venture into a full-time organization, and trained 1,000 youth so far – helping youth tap into their entrepreneurial abilities to help chart their own futures. Netia’s story is just one of 5,500 in our alumni community to date.

In every country I've traveled, and in most personal interactions I've had, young leaders have two requests: funding and jobs. There are 1.8 billion youth ages 15-24 and north of 100 million university students in the world today. No single organization could secure funding for every promising youth-led initiative and jobs for every young leader. And so at MCN we looked to root causes – to the gaps, that if addressed, would enable more undergraduate leaders in particular to be better positioned to leverage funding and secure jobs with social impact for themselves. We identified three gaps – a lack of training, a lack of connections, and a lack of recognition. And so our newest programming model we plan to embark on in 2018 centers on addressing these three gaps by convening, challenging, and celebrating student leadership for dignity of people and planet. We will meet students where they are at, utilizing our core curriculum (refined over the past five years) to help existing student leaders convene locally, campus by campus. Through these convenings over a semester, students will be trained in hard and soft skills - learning how to write budgets and business plans, and how to manage their respective teams. These students - our Millennium Fellows – will have time and space to reflect on core values – empathy, humility, inclusion. Most importantly, the lived experiences of student leaders will guide the conversations. We will then invite these students to take collective action to advance the SDGs. Imagine one concrete example: Fellows on a campus working with university administration, faculty, staff, and peers to create a campus-wide inclusion strategy (advancing SDG Target 10.2), ensuring students of all backgrounds on campus feel safe, secure, and able to contribute to the community. With proven impact at the campus level, we will invite these students to plug into larger intercollegiate campaigns – the types of existing campaigns run by leading organizations like SDSN Youth. And when students create impact locally and globally, we will celebrate their work by formally recognizing them as Millennium Fellows – a designation that will be known to universities, funders, and employers.

If students form grassroots communities grounded in ethical, collaborative leadership – they can live out what Pope Francis calls upon us all to make real. In a profound declaration in *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis shares this truth: “The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging. In this way, any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life.” Pope Francis powerfully affirms what I have spent a decade discovering; that if we help young people meaningfully engage in each community within a “network of solidarity and belonging,” we create the conditions for “a dignified life.” We will come so much closer to the vision Pope Francis outlines for us when we are deeply intentional in how we invest in grassroots youth organizing.

If I could make two special appeals to communities that can meaningfully support this work, they are these:

1) To philanthropy: we need sizeable investment in youth leadership – not solely a one way relationship asking youth to support a particular cause – but also investing in the personal and professional growth of youth leaders as a worthy goal itself. Consider this fact: According to research by McKinsey, major foundations have donated just 1% of their funds to leadership development for social sector organizations over the past two decades. Imagine what happens when we instead choose to prioritize investment in the potential of people – starting in their formative years. Imagine what that does to their spirit – to their resolve and commitment – when they begin and for a lifetime after. I can tell you firsthand – when leaders like you Professor Sachs – chose to believe in me when I was 19 – when you chose to mentor me and advise MCN - it gives me the resilience to carry on a decade later and make social impact a lifetime commitment. We need philanthropy to follow your lead – placing trust in a generation of youth leaders just as you did in me.

2) To higher education: we need you to meet demand. Many of you have seen the 2014 Gallup Purdue Index – a survey of 30,000 recent college graduates that found only 3% had all six types of experiences during their undergraduate years that correlate with great lives and careers after graduation. To put it simply, there were two areas identified as the missing pieces in the undergraduate experience: mentorship and experiential education. Students are asking for support and avenues to engage. Whether you do this internally or seek external partners – consider embracing the agency of your students. Draw on the rich history of student activism; it has contributed to civil rights, the end of apartheid, the environmental movement, and so much more; can you create space to help your student leaders tap into their power? Can that be part of the DNA and ethos of your institution? With such an ethos and programming to support it, what kind of alumni can your institution cultivate for your community and for the world?

3) And one thought I keep returning to that I wanted to share with youth leaders here and beyond- may we be both humble and resolute. We all have so much to learn from our elders and from each other; humility is our greatest tool to learn from the history and environment that shape us. And let us be resolute – knowing that we have real value to share – that whatever gaps we have in lived experience, we can compensate for, in the words often shared by you Sam Loni, in “enthusiasm, idealism, and creativity.”

And so I am here to be a resource to every leader in this room if I can, with the hope that I can learn from each of you as well. For all undergraduates, MCN is a resource for you and I invite you to join our community. And I would be remiss if I did not recognize the extraordinary leadership of our partners at SDSN Youth for being a transformative network in this space. I am also here in my advisory capacity, advising the Executive Director of UN Women. There is no question that women young and old face systemic sexism and oppression; we all know this and I won't "mansplain" what is not my lived experience. But I want to offer UN Women as a resource – and for all young people and all young people of faith – to know that UN Women is especially keen to work with you – and I would love to help connect the dots. As a young man, I have fallen short – I have made mistakes – and my time with UN Women has taught me that in particular, all of us identifying as male in this room and beyond have significant work to do to uphold the dignity of all genders; I am grateful to UN Women for leading on this work and spotlighting resources like MenCare and the Barbershop Toolbox to help us learn more. And I hope that for all of us youth of faith – that we can work at the nexus of feminism and faith to ensure our worship affirms our values.

If anyone doubts that belief and investments in youth leadership are worthwhile, let me offer one final example. It seems particularly fitting at the Vatican to reflect on my nation's history and on a transformative young individual of the Catholic faith who overcame discrimination to leverage youth leadership for the globe. At a time of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States, the young, visionary John F. Kennedy became President. In his short life, he transformed millions more. President Kennedy and his colleague Sargent Shriver created the Peace Corps; this idea was mocked as a "juvenile experiment" and a "Kiddie Korps." That small idea has led to over 200,000 Americans, at an average age of 28 years old, engaging with communities in 139 nations – transforming the social fabric of our nation and its relationship with our world.

In his inaugural address, President Kennedy called on Americans to ask what they can do for our country; he called on all people to commit to the freedom of humanity. But in words perhaps lesser known from his inaugural address, he shared a charge almost unquestionably informed by faith: "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." May we realize that we are all interconnected, sharing our common home, and that when we are able to see each other, we find ourselves. Thank you.