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Ideas 4 Action



SOCIAL IMPACT

How Youth Can Help Solve the World's Toughest Problems

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 Global Focus  Podcasts, Video

Strategic partnerships and innovative ideas from young people are playing a crucial role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 with the ambitious aim to end poverty and hunger, reduce inequality and tackle climate change. In a conversation with Knowledge@Wharton, Mahmoud Mohieldin, senior vice president for the 2030 Development Agenda, United Nations Relations, and Partnerships at the World Bank Group, and Djordjija

Petkoski, a senior fellow at the Zicklin Center for Business Ethics Research at Wharton, discuss why programs such as Ideas for Action, a joint initiative of the World Bank Group and the Zicklin Center, are important tools to engage the youth in development issues.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Knowledge@Wharton: Mahmoud, where do things stand in terms of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Mahmoud Mohieldin: If you measure it by the number of presentations and submissions to the United Nations System through ministers of finance and development, it is on the increase. Many more countries have committed to presenting their plans for the 2030 agenda this year. That will bring the total of submissions and presentations to more than 110 countries. That's more than half of the membership of the U.N., which is 193 countries.

If you look at the practical level — at how many countries have done better in terms of designing their own national plans, designing their own budgets to deal with the SDGs — I would say not all of those who submitted have done that. There is always a difference between what's actually happening and the official presentations and the measure of that is how many countries have incorporated the SDGs in their budgets. You will be surprised to see that only a very small number of countries have done that so far. The justification could be that it's only the third year since the launching of the SDGs, that some of the lines of business are continuing, but without naming or renaming them under the new SDGs. But coming from a finance institution, we take matters more seriously when we see that government plans are reflected in their budget priorities.

The third level, which is more important than the other two, is the local level. To what extent have you seen improvements in people's lives, or in the policies and institutions addressing their concerns since the launch of the SDGs in 2015? The SDGs are about more inclusive growth, better social development, and better consideration for environment and climate change issues. Again, not all countries have done that at the local level.

“Coming from a finance institution, we take matters more seriously when we see that government plans are reflected in their budget priorities.”

–Mahmoud Mohieldin

There are some good, bright cases. I was in Colombia recently and saw good progress there. There are other Latin American countries, including Mexico, which have taken this issue seriously. There are countries in the East, like China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, which have good investments in the connection between the central level and the local level. India has done well on that front, as well. In Africa, there are many issues that are constraining governments, but countries like Rwanda are doing very well. This doesn't mean that others are not doing well. I'm trying to give examples of exceptional progress in terms of the commitment of the leadership and translating this commitment into localized solutions.

Knowledge@Wharton: Are you happy with the progress until now?

Mohieldin: It depends on the performance at the country level. It's not my happiness but the people's happiness that matters here. If there is improvement at the local level, if people are more engaged, and if one can see better impact on reduction of poverty, improvement on health and education services, and the rest of the 17 goals, every development agency and its staff like me are happy with the progress.

Knowledge@Wharton: Djordjija, one of the initiatives that you and the Zicklin Center have been collaborating on with the World Bank Group and other partners is Ideas for Action, which is a way to inspire young people to come up with ideas to make the SDGs a reality. How is that program coming along?

Djordjija Petkoski: Last year we were surprised because we doubled the proposals. This year we tripled the proposals. This clearly demonstrates tremendous interest from young people to be part of this process, to own the process, and at the same time, to come up with actionable ideas. What Mahmoud was referring to is that the government is signaling commitment to these issues, but the implementation will not happen just because the government engages. You have to engage the private sector. You have to engage young entrepreneurs. And that is what we want to do. In addition to students, we have young entrepreneurs and young professionals. They are not only putting pressure, they are also making the CEOs of their companies comfortable that they have young people working for them who can come up with innovative ideas.

We have over 2,100 proposals. The number of teams was four times higher than that. We had examples of business associations like the German-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce which utilized the network of companies to engage the young professionals to generate ideas. In Eastern Europe, a pharmaceutical company called Hemofarm used this as a platform not only to generate ideas to make itself more sustainable, but also to communicate to the government that corporations can get engaged if they have additional and critical knowledge of how to deal with these issues.

Knowledge@Wharton: What are some of the reasons that drove this increase in participation?

Petkoski: I think it's the philosophy of the program — that it is not just about competition. It is a platform for learning, a platform for exchanging knowledge and for building critical local partnerships. We have made some major breakthroughs, for example in Egypt, and that was driven by the Ideas for Action Egypt Club. A major breakthrough in Nigeria was driven by the Ideas for Action African Club.

Knowledge@Wharton: Mahmoud, how does the Ideas for Action program fit in with what you and the World Bank are trying to achieve with the SDGs?

Mohieldin: One of the main things that came out from the U.N. discussions on the SDGs and one of the main things that we are pushing at the Bank is the issue of partnerships. It's one of the goals of the Sustainable Development Agenda. In our case, it's about how to rely on our own competitive advantage when it comes to finance or knowledge, but realizing as well that others have their own competitive advantages in their fields. For example, partnership with Wharton as a place of excellence for knowledge and academia, partnerships with the business sector, partnerships with young people who have their own ideas and their own ways of challenging the status quo.

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— Djordjija Petkoski

The Ideas for Action initiative actually started from here. I was invited by Djordjija four years ago to one of his classes. Based on the exchange of ideas and discussions, I called him on my way back to Washington, D.C., and said, “Why don't we start having all of these ideas

deinstitutionalized rather than having them come out from a seminar or a lecture? Let's not limit it to Wharton. Let's make it a big platform." And so the idea developed. This is the fourth year. We have thousands of participants from around the world, from more than 120 countries, coming with their proposals.

Knowledge@Wharton: Do you think that it is primarily the developing countries that should be focusing on the SDGs, or is this also something for the developed countries to focus on?

Mohieldin: The main thing about the SDGs, in comparison to its predecessor the MDGs or the Millennium Development Goals which ended in 2015, is that the previous goals were mainly focusing on the developing countries, on human development. They had only eight goals. The new and the more challenging aspect of the SDGs is its universality. They are addressing the challenges in the poorest of the countries as well as the challenges of progress and maintaining what you have and improving on it in the most advanced of the economies.

Knowledge@Wharton: Djordjija, how do you select which are the best ideas that should be focused on and prioritized?

Petkoski: Those who make the selections are very motivated to do it. It's an opportunity for them to understand the ground realities. People from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) or the World Bank who select the projects in a particular country get a pretty clear idea of what, from young people's perspectives, are priorities for these countries. There are different layers of selection, and in each layer the young people get feedback on how to improve their proposals. So it's a mutual learning process. The final proposals end up in the book which is published by the World Bank. So, yes, the selection takes time. But if you don't look at it as a mechanical process, but as a process of learning and providing feedback for those who are participating, it's very fulfilling.

Knowledge@Wharton: How do you see the role of innovation, and science and technology in the implementation of the SDGs and also in the ideas that are proposed through initiatives like Ideas for Action?

Mohieldin: The STI, or science, technology and innovation, were included in the documents of Addis [Addis Ababa Action Agenda], which are basically the documents relating to the implementation of the SDGs. There is a full chapter on that. Addis happened in July 2015. But because of the fast changes that are happening in the areas of science and technology and innovation, and the discussions about the implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, if you were to write this chapter today, it would be completely different in terms of how to handle it, the kinds of partnerships required. In the Addis Agenda, it would seem that it was primarily

the responsibility of the government — perhaps to partner with centers of excellence and the private sector. In reality, you can see who is driving the change. Yes, government is involved in different aspects. It can incubate and support and give a good platform for the flourishing of new ideas and better technological solutions. But it is the private sector businesses and academia which are behind all of these new ideas.

I think rather than dealing with STI as a separate sector, it should be mainstreamed and integrated in every aspect of work, including how to get better data by using big data solutions and other means to get better evidence of what works and what doesn't work. In finance, we must consider how we look at the use of technology — mobile money, crowdfunding, new technologies like blockchain with its good and as well as controversial outcomes. Or, how can technology enable a hospital or a clinic in a remote village to get the best ideas and solutions in health care from the U.S.?

Knowledge@Wharton: Djordjija, from your perspective of the Ideas for Action program, how do you see the role of academic institutions in making these kinds of initiatives successful?

Petkoski: Let me step back before directly answering that question. Recently, the Zicklin Center organized an event related to blockchain. There was an interesting presentation from a colleague from MIT who said, “Most of the destructive innovations in this space come from people between 24 and 28 years old.” So you ask the question, “What kind of education did they get before they got there?”

“Rather than dealing with science and technology and innovation as a separate sector, it should be mainstreamed and integrated in every aspect of work.”

–Mahmoud Mohieldin

I think from an academic perspective we have at least two challenges. One is to go beyond the traditional boundaries, because in the space of blockchain you see people from the technology side and also lawyers to make sure that they don't get in trouble. But business people are not there. I would argue that there is a disconnect between the most exciting technological solutions and the real needs on the ground that they can address. I think that Silicon Valley is already feeling it. There are no major new ideas coming from there because there is no major change in terms of identifying the problems that can be handled.

On the academia side, one big benefit of this whole initiative is that while we capture the reality on the ground, we also get an understanding of what are the gaps in terms of knowledge and skills that these young people face when they deal with these ground realities. For academics, identifying these gaps is a good reminder that they need to be more focused and careful about how we are preparing the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs.

Knowledge@Wharton: Mahmoud, could you share your thoughts on how innovation and science and technology cannot only empower women, but also bring about greater gender parity around the world?

Mohieldin: The problems related to inequality, discrepancy and unfairness against women are not just in the developing countries, but in many of the advanced economies as well. One of the new initiatives that we are trying to develop and launch during the spring meetings of the World Bank and the IMF in April this year is to link the SDGs to women entrepreneurs. The program is called SDGs and Her. It is in partnership with the Zicklin Center and the Wharton Business School, and with the U.N. System, through the participation of the United Nations Development Programme, U.N. Women, a variety of economic commissions of the U.N. System and the business sector.

We are focusing on the roles of women as entrepreneurs and how through their own micro-enterprises they are investing their time, their efforts and their talents in order to bring some solutions to the poverty of their families and the poverty of their neighborhoods.

Knowledge@Wharton: Djordjija, how would this fit in with the work that you're already doing for Ideas for Action? Where would you like to see this initiative go?

Petkoski: There is a tremendous complementarity because many proposals we receive are from young girls and women. Also, through this engagement, we would like to utilize [Ideas for Action] not just as a competition for good ideas or for recognizing women who have been successful so far, but also for utilizing the resources that Wharton and other academic institutions have — to provide a platform where they can better equip themselves to take a leadership role.

You cannot separate the fact that women are not equally paid — in parallel we have to address: Are they equally equipped? Do they have an opportunity to get access to knowledge that will make them more creative and more productive? And it's not just about the women, it's about their families, about encouraging their daughters to get in this space. So, from our perspective, this is something we would like to take up strongly.

Knowledge@Wharton: Over the next 12 to 24 months, how would you like Ideas for Action and the SDGs and Her initiative to progress, and what contribution would you like to see them make to the SDGs around the world?

Mohieldin: Next year will be the fifth year for Ideas for Action, so we hope for more progress in terms of both quantity and quality. We are happy with the enormous progress in quantity, and we hope to reach not just the 120 plus countries, but the whole membership of the World Bank and the U.N. System.

We are also very much impressed by the quality. We need more in terms of having ideas that can become workable and scalable solutions. Regarding SDGs and Her, while it is following in the good footsteps of the Ideas for Action, given the importance of the role of women — especially young women — and micro-enterprises in the economy, we need to see a big start for this initiative.

Petkoski: I would like to go beyond the heroic entrepreneurs, people who have changed the world, solved global problems. We would like to see more progress at the local level, initiatives which are driven at the local level, solving specific local problems, because that will be a key contribution to solving the bigger problems.

What I'm really after is more in terms of implementation, and through that implementation, shaping the ecosystem inside the country, and even below the local level, so that more ideas — not necessarily generated through Ideas for Action — have a chance to succeed.

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