Dialogue of Civilizations and the Role of the World’s Youth

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Let me start with a self-introduction. I am a student at Vilnius University, Department of Communications, and the executive coordinator of World Youth festival on Dialogue among Civilizations, which is taking place in Vilnius, Lithuania on August 20-24th, 2001. I will explain about this event and its significance at the end of my talk.

As a representative of the youth, it is perhaps fitting to begin by defining the term "youth." The United Nations General Assembly in 1995 defined “youth” as those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Accordingly, approximately one billion youth live in the world today -- that is about 1/6 of the world population. About 85 percent of young people live in developing countries, most in rural areas.

Youth constitute a most active and dynamic section of any society, the section that is most receptive of the ideas of novelty and change. Different countries have different laws and age limits for adolescents to be considered as adults. The average age for first marriage world-wide is 22 years, and 31 percent of births are given by mothers of 20 or younger. The social context in which young men and women live greatly influences the course of their lives. Some young people are married and considered as adults in their societies; others are still in school and considered dependant children. Many young people are sexually active and have become parents themselves, but may not have achieved the legal adult age as defined by their country or state.

The dialogue among civilizations represents a wonderful and unique opportunity to raise the various issues of young people across cultures. While there are many differences among the world youth, depending on where they live, developed or developing world and so on, there are still quite a number of common issues that binds them together, such as their interest in new technology, like the internet.

Youth have similarities not only in their interests but also issues like global warming, AIDS/HIV, world peace, drugs and other addiction. These are in minds of a lot of young people around the world and need to be the subjects of dialogue among them.

Looking at some relevant statistics again, about half of all people infected with HIV are under age 25, according to World Health Organization estimates, and in less developed countries, up to 60 percent of all new infections are among 15-to-24-years-olds. These victims often lack sufficient information, let alone health care, regarding the disease inflicting them.

United Nations is taking in consideration that youth should be involved in World issues but whereas it has created program for women and children, there is hardly any oriented toward the youth. In my research I have discovered that a series of projects like “The leaders of Tomorrow Preparing for the Global Challenges and Responsibilities of the Future” as a part of leadership development program was
brought to youth. However I could not find any program in the structure of United Nations with specific orientation toward the youth.

There are certain characteristics of the young people that must be taken into consideration when discussing the issue of Dialogue among Civilizations and all the issues mentioned above:

- **Relative openness**: unlike older adults who tend to have settled ideas about things, young people have an open mind and are more receptive to learning from others, especially in the realm of ideas and cultures. Here you can see a real link between the work United Nations works on and the results that can be achieved: creation of right education, of right view and approach to the others.

- **Informality**: young people are more inclined to socialize in informal setting and, thereby, to engage in informal talks, rather than serious or “strategic” talks or dialogue. The only way we are keeping contacts and make everything happen is friendship. This is a great advantage that reduces the risk of distorted talk and increases the dynamic of dialogue with respect to the search for truth and sincere exchange views.

- **Result oriented**: young people usually get into dialogue in order to get some concrete results us. They have a tendency against stale talks that reminds them bureaucrats or diplomats.

The Year 2001 has been designated as both the year of Dialogue among Civilizations as well as International year of Volunteers, but these two agenda have yet to be joined together. United Nation volunteer program is currently oriented to supports of sustainable human development globally through the promotion of volunteerism and the mobilization of volunteers. Global Dialogue among Civilization program is oriented to create plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programs to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations, including through organizing conferences and seminars and disseminating information and scholarly material on the subject.

I would suggest to join these two points together with youth participation and principle of volunteerism and to start a new voluntarism with a focus on leadership. This would expand the horizon of UN Volunteer program today, which is, as conceived so far, economistic and one-dimensional. The purpose of my proposed new structure – consisting of a network of youth organizations and individuals worldwide – would be to involve volunteers in peace-keeping and peace-building process, and by learning other cultures, other ideas and view, to network for peace purposes. Regarding peace-keeping, according to the UN statistics, the average age of volunteers in peace-keeping operations is 37 years old. This means that the UN has for whatever reason overlooked the role that the world's youth can play in peace-keeping, particularly with respect to the logistics and networking activities essential to maintain peace in crisis zones. The network I propose would function as a unique structure connected through internet portal and knowledge exchange -- and the promotion of friendship/partnerships, that could evolve our understanding of otherness and carry on tolerance to the local communities.

I see the vision of people like friend all over the world and Information technology - information society as a means for communication and understanding all the key issues of dialogue among civilizations. A threat on loosing its own identity can appear, but usually it come back after understanding of significance to show the elements of your own cultural identities and it makes you even more active and more involved in your own culture issues.
As for today United Nations year of Dialogue among Civilizations is going to the end and all three years program is going to be over in 2002, but still no event for youth in the frames of program has been organized, unfortunately.

In order to fill this important gap, we in Lithuania have organized the World Youth festival on Dialogue among Civilizations on August 20-24-th in Vilnius, Lithuania. This festival is going to be a “grassroots” event for youth organized by youth. The objectives of this festival is to create a community of global youth and to start a virtual community for Global youth dialogue promoting the ideas of tolerance of culture, otherness, sub-cultures, minorities and other non-violent behavior. We are going to make it through discussions, debates, common projects of music, dance, discussions and other cultural expressions and cultural program. We are going to use all three key elements mentioned above: openness, informality and result orientation to establish friendship and to initiate the structure of youth dialogue that has not been created until now.

We will host hundreds of young people from more than 40 countries participating in our week-long festival, which is divided into morning workshops on diversity, tolerance, sub-cultures, spirituality and so on, and various cultural and artistic activities in the afternoon. This festival will be the occasion for launching the website above-mentioned, and creating a portal for “Global Youth Dialogue” that will, hopefully, lead to the creation of a whole new "youth volunteers for dialogue."

Finally, I propose that in connection to the idea of new UN volunteerism and the spirit of dialogue among civilizations, a new program on youth world leadership be initiated by the United Nations. Such a program, focusing on the issues of international political economy, war and peace, international organizations, and so on, would be a timely catalyst for the UN and its current efforts to spouse the idea of a UN-focused global civilization.

In conclusion, I would like to invite all of you to participate in our world youth festival -- as guests in case you do not meet our age requirement -- and to help realize its lofty yet realistic objectives for our "global village".