



Conversation with Katja Čič

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about your background, what brought you to the WHO Council, and what it's all about.

Katja Čič: My name is Katja Čič. I am based in Slovenia, and I work for an organization called the International Youth Health Organization. My background is actually medicine, and I jumped into the whole global health sphere when I was a first year medical student, when I joined the Slovenian branch of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, and then spent six years in various roles in that organization. And my last role was actually liaison officer to the World Health Organization, which brought me to the space of WHO. And then after finishing with the studies, I moved on to my current organization, where I work on program content development, advocacy and so on. And this gave me the opportunity to continue on in this global health space that I started engaging in back when I was a medical student.

So I continued working in the WHO sphere. Generations of medical students, but also a few other youth organizations, have been working tirelessly to establish a youth platform within WHO. And that was also one of the biggest agenda points of my term, and it was the term right before COVID hit. But then when COVID ruled the world, my successor was able to finally get a foot in the door and get something real started. Because apparently when all WHO departments were focusing on COVID, the partnerships had some extra time. So they developed this platform, which is called the WHO Youth Council. And the call for the first mandate then opened in 2022. We applied through my current organization, got selected, and now I am a part of the Youth Council.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is distinctive about the International Youth Organization? What is the unique thing that you're able to offer as a part of the group?

Katja Čič: The first thing, which is very important, is that the WHO Youth Council is actually the very first official youth platform that WHO has as a UN agency on a global level. It hasn't had any youth positions outside of just internships and stuff like that. So this is the first time where young people have been invited to the table.

The Youth Council is envisioned as an advisory body directly to the director general himself and the leads of his different departments. But it's a shared leadership system. We are co-led by the multilateral partnerships department, but then also co-led by us, youth.

So we have the space to decide which are the topics that we wish to work on, advise on, and so on, although WHO obviously can reach out to us on any other issue as well if they would like to have a youth voice or an opinion or looking for representatives and stuff like that.

At our first in-person meeting, we decided on some of our core priorities, and we established working groups on those priorities. I work now as a co-chair of the working group on climate change and health. Obviously, climate change and health is one of the core issues that we decided to work on. Some of the others are non-communicable diseases, mental health, universal health coverage.

And then the last one is called Youth Leading for Health, but it actually deals with governance systems and establishing stronger youth platforms and allowing for more meaningful youth engagement in the WHO spaces. So it's like a more horizontal working group rather than according to vertical topics.

We just finished with our two-year mandate. We're in this intermediate space when we're waiting for the next call to open. This has been the first time something like this has happened. So obviously, there was a lot of trial and error, trying, failing, succeeding, and stuff like that. It's been a bumpy road, but I do think that this is a good start to having an officialized and institutionalized youth engagement in the World Health Organization.

Ashley Hopkinson: From your perspective, what led to the success of establishing the working group? And what were some of the challenges in getting this off the ground?

Katja Čič: It took probably generations of young people from medicine, pharmacy, outside issues advocating towards WHO to establish something like this. Because even to this day, WHO has its own accreditation system for non-state actors. That's also where different non-governmental organizations fall, and it's called NSA in official relations. And to this day, only two youth organizations have managed to get this status. The others have not because it is notoriously hard to get there, because you need to prove some technical collaborations. But WHO does not really do a lot of technical

collaborations with youth; at least it hasn't in the past. So that's why the Youth Council is there, to facilitate the technical engagement.

We are still in the process of optimizing all of the different processes. Probably the next mandate of the next Youth Council is going to look slightly different than ours did, because we had to start with one format and see if it worked and adapted on the go. Even the working groups were just an idea of establishing internal brainstorming and working spaces to do something on the topics that we are not just passionate about but that we feel are the most important to young people to be addressed pronto. The working groups work very differently from each other, because not only do they tackle different topics, but also the deliverables and the opportunities they are engaging in are vastly different from each other.

It's very important to understand that while we do call it one thing, it is still in the end quite a flexible structure that was designed in order to learn and grow through things that we experience so that we don't bind ourselves to a very strict unit and then realize it's not working not only for WHO but also for the youth organizations that are part of the Youth Council.

Ashley Hopkinson: I want to go back to the working group that you're a part of, which is climate and health, and if you can tell me a little bit about why the interconnection of climate and health is important to you. What do you think are some of the top issues that we need to work on addressing?

Katja Čič: You're not going to have healthy people if you're not going to have a healthy planet. So we need to figure out the situation about the environment in order to then start investing again in the economy and education and stuff like that. If we don't reinvest in the planet, if we have no space to live, and the climate worsens, what is going to end up happening? We are already seeing these major consequences on health, not just in the areas that are mostly affected by climate change but even in the areas of the West and of the developed countries that put the most emissions into the air. We're seeing not just higher temperatures and heatwaves, but we're seeing floods [and other] extreme weather events.

All of this really affects the young people and their perception of the environment they are living in, because it's very much unsure, when you will be growing up and when you will become an adult, will the world around you even exist anymore, considering the traumas that climate change can lead to, whether for people that are displaced and for people that have lived through extreme weather events.

They often also have this anxiety -- this eco-anxiety or climate anxiety -- not just about the future but also about the present. So we are seeing an effect on young people on practically everything, for example, young couples are deciding not to have children because they are unsure of the future because of the climate. So then, we have a lack of childbirth. There are a lot of consequences across the board, but the most important being the health ones.

We know that if we start working on the environment and climate now, we're going to see a lot of health co-benefits that will be brought together with different mitigation and adaptation measures. That's why we are so vocal about it, because right now it's still not too late, and we still have the chance to turn things around.

But who knows what will happen in five or ten years time? That's why we decided we need to start being proactive and keep pushing for something more, and to not let the current agreements and declaration of the existing climate be the glass ceiling. They need to be the basis from where we can grow further.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the time that you've been with the International Youth Health Organization, have you seen a change in how people are receiving messages about climate and health and the way that you are tailoring messages around climate and health? How do you engage people with this topic? And do you think there's a difference between how you engage young people versus how you engage a different generation?

Katja Čič: Even amongst young people, if you look at children and youth currently, you already have three vastly different generations merged together in this one young group. You have Millennials, Gen Z, and now also the incoming generation, Alpha. All three, totally different experiences, different expectations, different communication styles, even different interests. So whenever you're talking to a different age group, you have to adapt your approach.

And for us, especially coming from these youth organizations—not just the International Youth Health Organization, but also the IFMSA and a few others that I've partnered with in the past—we all take this approach.

It's called non-formal education, where we try to raise awareness or talk with young people. We do it through a bit of a gamified approach, through an interactive experiential methodology where you are not the one preaching to the choir or having a presentation and just giving them the facts, but you are letting them experience facts on their own or figure out a way to guide them from point A to point B so

that they experience things, they learn, they realize, they make connections. And that's what holds the most value, because that's the knowledge and the understanding that they will retain the most.

When it comes to different topics and activities, we're also seeing that there's a slight change in interest depending also on the target group, because even amongst youth, you have different subgroups that have different interests and different backgrounds. So you always have to adapt the approach and the topic to the audience that you're currently speaking to.

It's very hard to generalize, because the idea of youth work is by really specializing your approach to that particular group that you are going to be tackling today. And maybe tomorrow it's going to look completely different, because you're going to be speaking to a very different group of young people. Even if they come from the same country, the same town, maybe the change of the age factor, background, location—anything can be a switch in the dial.

So it keeps you on the tips of your toes, but we have seen that there are a couple of overarching topics that are the most important but also interesting to young people. That's everything from the fact that the emissions are from major companies and that individual actions are more or less just a drop in the ocean, the impact of fast fashion and over-consumerism on the environment, and also protecting one's mental health when it comes to climate change.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is a metric of success for you, whether that's at the International Youth Organization or on the council? How do you know you're getting through to people?

Katja Čič: The progress is definitely there, no matter how small. We still appreciate it. Success, and what you are able to achieve, really depends. If you're looking at local or national level, when you're working directly with young people themselves, you are going to see the impact practically real time, and you're going to see the success and the return in the investment basically within a week or a month of the work that you've done.

But then when you get to the international or global level, the work there is very different because you don't work with young people necessarily, or you partner up with other young people, but the target audience become decision makers and policy makers who you want to make the change.

Because currently, even though everyone's telling us, you guys are the future, we're like, well, we would like to be the future, but you have to make changes now, because we don't have the power to do that right now. That's why on the global scale, you don't see the successes as vibrantly, and it takes a much longer time for something to appear.

Just take into account the establishment of the WHO Youth Council. It has taken 30 years to get somewhere. But because I have been in the space for quite a while and have been to a few global meetings, I have to say that step-by-step, at every meeting, we see that the global climate and health community is able to insert a little piece, and slowly we are getting there. A lot of countries are now also inserting health and checking it when they're working on national action plans when it comes to climate change, adaptation, mitigation. We're seeing a lot of efforts on greening of healthcare systems, a lot of policies and data coming from that.

A lot of progress has also happened in the tobacco field. Just this year, in February, when there was the COP10 of the FCTC [Framework Convention on Tobacco Control], the first environmental tool was basically adopted as an official article to the framework convention. So we now have environmental protection as a part of the smoking cessation efforts, which is huge. Maybe one thing that's lacking, that we don't have as much data on, is alcohol and environment, which weirdly enough has a huge, huge impact not just on the environment but also on the biggest killer, which are the non-communicable diseases.

So there's a lot of these interconnections. What we are mostly working towards as WHO Youth Council and the working group—besides making more space for youth voices in the communities, in the platforms, in the events—topic-wise, what we advocate for is the divestment of fossil fuels, because we see that this addiction to fossil fuels is bringing us to where we currently are. We see that still to this day, countries decide to invest [instead] in adaptation measures, maybe because they're faster and more convenient. For example, early warning signs for hurricanes and stuff like that. But then you ask yourself, what if they had invested in a mitigation measure? Maybe if there weren't hurricanes, you wouldn't need an early warning sign. So have you lost money for nothing?

That way of thinking makes sense to us, the youth, but we see that the politicians are thinking in the opposite way. So we feel as if it's our mission to pinpoint the ways where decision makers are going wrong or just to remind them why they are there, who are they doing this for, what needs to be done. And if we are annoying—at the end of the day, sure, we are annoying, but at least that annoyance will slowly bring us somewhere through policy legislation. So we can be slightly radical in a professional way, if that makes sense.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything else that has come to the surface as something that we're not talking enough about?

Katja Čič: One thing is that future healthcare professionals are at no point educated about climate change and how it affects health. When you have a doctor, a nurse, a pharmacist so underprepared to

dealing with these massive changes, and now you're already seeing influxes of patients coming into the hospital due to climate related reasons—floods, heat waves—how are you going to be able to ask them the right questions as a doctor if you've never been educated that this might be the underlying cause?

Let's say a 60-year-old doctor who graduated 40 years ago and gets a patient from a heat wave. Will they be asking them, "Do you have air conditioning inside? Do you live in a space that provides cooling amenities?" Because you're not going to think of that. You're going to think, "Were you in the sun? Did you put on a hat?"

Even worker safety protection. When it comes to construction workers, what is the legislation for heat protection? And companies think, if we give them a little hat with a little shield, that's heat protection. Sure it is. They need to keep up with how fast the world is changing, but our policies and solutions are not changing as fast.

When it comes to youth-specific interests, they're very varied depending on who you are speaking to or speaking with. For example, we've had some crowd from the IT, the technology section, who are very interested in the NFTs and how much energy they use and how to make that more sustainable.

Then on the other side, you have the more environmental crowd, which is currently, for example, focusing on the plastic treaty negotiations that are going on because the biggest plastic polluters to this day are cigarette butts, plastic bags and straws. So how do we change away from that?

But generally speaking, when we speak to young people, it's about the different connections in terms of, if there's a change in the environment, what can it lead to in the environment and what is the consequence to health? For example, vector borne diseases. For people that live in the areas where communicable diseases and infectious diseases through vectors are very much present, that's where the interest is going to be. But if young people live in an area where there's little to no mosquitoes, then their interest is going to be on other topics.

Because you have to understand, in terms of a young person's mindset and worldview, that your world is very small. It's very likely you live in your own bubble until that bubble bursts and becomes bigger. The more you learn, the more that bubble will become bigger.

But if someone doesn't point out certain issues to you—and that doesn't have to be in-person. It can be through social media, it can be by a young person reading an article, watching a movie or whatever it is. But until that aha moment happens, that bubble will remain very much in place and it will prevent them from doing something actively.

That's why communicating and raising awareness amongst young people is so, so important, because if you make them aware of something and how it is influencing them and their lives, young people will much more likely rally together and join your cause than if you just leave them alone and just say, "Here's information, check it out if you want. If you don't, it's also cool." Nobody will do that. So you have to be very proactive in that approach, in that bubble. So that's where that non-formal education and everything that we do comes into place, because you really have to tailor it to the needs and to the wants of the young people you're talking with.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think about the assumption that all youth are hard to reach? And what would you say to someone who is trying to get youth more engaged in a particular topic?

Katja Čič: So first, about the assumption, I'm well aware of how that goes. But basically everyone who whines about how youth are hard to reach, you always have to ask them, did they ever try to learn how to work with youth or how to get in touch with youth?

Youth work is something super specific and has specific methodology tied to that. It's actually its own course of study, because it ties into behavioral and cultural insights. For example, something a lot of organizations in the WHO Youth Council are constantly advocating, promoting, sharing towards other senior organizations is -- if you want to work with youth, let us know and we will teach you how to work with youth. That's why we exist. We don't exist just to rally young people in our organizations for them to work with; we also can act as a bridge in order to teach other people how to work with youth.

And this was an example of WHO as well. For example, in WHO Europe, we had a consultation meeting because they established their own regional youth network. We had a Zoom webinar with different focal points of departments from WHO, and we were talking about, what are the issues for youth engagement that you're facing? And through all the answers, we realized that there's this glass wall.

On one side, you have WHO staff members who would like to work with young people but don't know how to or who to reach out to. And you have youth organizations on the other side who want to work with WHO but don't really know who to contact. So there's constantly a mismatch.

Now that the youth network is finally there, we started connecting people. WHO Europe even had a course for their internal officers about how to work with young people. And they had some theoretical backgrounds, and they talked with a couple of us from different youth organizations to learn.

So things are improving, but we are still not seeing that in a lot of other organizations that would want to work with youth, because the easiest thing is just to complain that we've tried reaching out to youth, nobody's answering. But did they try the right way? Because if they expect us as young people

to adapt our approach when we are talking to policy or decision makers, and we write the letters, we write the emails, we approach through statements, and we learned all of that, why shouldn't there be a vice versa approach where they learn how to communicate and work with young people as well?

Youth organizations are specifically there to teach about youth engagement, and it goes both ways. We engage with youth, but we also help adult or senior organizations -- however you want to call them -- connect with young people by providing institutional learning to those organizations as well so that they can figure out why youth are not responding to their messages the way they intended. And most likely, it's just generational difference and not the correct approach.

Ashley Hopkinson: If you had the right support in terms of funding or resources, what would you like to see grow and expand and change? How would you create an outreach program to see some of the changes that you want in climate and in health? What would be your dream of what could be created?

Katja Čič: Well, that is probably the most difficult question so far, simply because there's so many things to do, and the problems that would need to be tackled on the way and through the resources are very vast, but also sometimes very specific.

So generally, if something like this happened, one thing is that we would need channels through which we would be able to champion the youth voices and the youth opinions in a better way to decision and policy makers. Whether that means that you would have, I don't know, a future generations commissioner or something like that in every country or in every entity that would have a right to veto or make adjustments or suggestions to laws and policies—that would be great.

But we also would need that person to actually be young, because a lot of the time, we get these champions of youth, and you have someone that's like 50 plus. And you're like, that's great, but that is a champion of youth, that is not a youth representative. So we need to figure out a way on how to do that.

Another thing that I would do if I had those resources available is that around the world, we have so, so many youth innovations by local young people who have developed these solutions that are really making traction and a difference in their local environment. But because we do not have the network to connect or see what other people are doing and how something can be used and implemented in other spaces, even if it needs to be adapted or changed in some way, a lot of these solutions and innovations just go unseen. So I would probably invest a lot of money just in championing and making the youth solutions and activities more visible, maybe as a platform.

For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, in one of the local communities, you have this girl who actually invented a way to create new kinds of sandals and shoes from recycled plastic, and they do it all locally. And in another community, they're actually using old glass bottles in order to make sand that they use for building materials and construction.

All of these innovations are super hard to learn about if you don't specifically meet that young person and just happen to talk about this, because it's notoriously bad that there's not a lot of science or research actually being put online of the youth work.

If you look at the sites that publish literature reviews and research papers, try to see how many of those were published by people under 30 and specifically about youth issues. Not many, or maybe a young person is like author number 15 on the list because they helped with sorting the data or something like that.

We need what youth are doing to be more visible, more scaled, and more invested in so that it can become bigger and create larger changes, because we already have all the solutions. We don't need new ones. We just need to get those solutions that we already have to actually start being implemented around the world.

Ashley Hopkinson: I really like that climate and health are automatically connected, because there are a lot of interdependencies that are obvious but are not necessarily grouped together because the traditional way people work is that medical doctors are over here and environmentalists are over here. Was that intentional on the part of the working group? And why do you think it's important for those two worlds to merge?

Katja Čič: I don't necessarily think that this was an automatic thing, because there have been a lot of people from the health community or healthcare community that have been working towards integrating health into climate and climate into health for decades now.

Still, I was in Dubai at COP28 last year as a health representative. I was talking to some other people and they were asking me, "What are you health people doing here?" And I was like, "Isn't it obvious? If you have climate change, obviously you're going to have health issues coming from that." And then when we started talking and I explained, and they were like, "My God, you should have been here sooner." And I was like, we have been here since COP1, but we just didn't get the space because we got the first health day last year in Dubai.

And it's still very, very hard to get all the people to see the connection, because healthcare professionals don't get educated about climate change. You usually learn about this stuff in NGOs or in

youth organizations that you join for medical students, pharmacy students and so on, where they present the issues of global health, and not in specialized medicine or healthcare, because for those doctors, to this day, they still do not know about the connection.

And then you, as an informed nurse or doctor or whichever healthcare professional you are, you have to go and raise awareness amongst existing healthcare professionals for them to learn about the connections.

For us, it may seem logical, automatic, like, why don't people just go from point A to point B without any loopholes? But it's a lot of hard work, and to this day we are still working on it. And this is a major, major issue that people just don't make the connection. And until you point it out and say heat stroke, they're just not going to make the connection themselves. It's very weird.

Some people will, because they are already inclined to think in that way. But the majority of the people, you actually have to sit them down and just [face] them with the facts in order for them to make a connection. And until they do, they will just be thinking very linearly and very much like a horse with blinders or tunnel vision.

It's very similar to what I was saying with young people being trapped in a bubble, and that bubble bursts. And now the two worlds have merged, climate and health say hello, and you realize how many other consequences and impacts actually are there. But it just takes a lot of individuals that have learned about this, mostly through private individual means, and then go back into their health systems or other communities if they're not a healthcare professional but they're coming to talk about the climate sector and insert health there. And they have to do internal work of raising awareness and fostering understanding and getting other people to connect the dots.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would want to add to our conversation today?

Katja Čič: When I said that organizations don't learn about how to work with youth, there's a simple solution. Find a young person that knows how to do youth work and employ them as a youth consultant, specifically on youth engagement. And they will have someone in-house that would be able to advise them, not just for that young person to be the go-to person for like, "What does youth think of that?"

That young person would need to make surveys and so on because they're not obviously representative of the entire 1.9 billion young people around the world. But they would be able to tell you which approach you can take to get that data or give you the contacts from the youth organizations, youth centers, or youth communities where you can actually send those surveys to get the data. Or if you're organizing an event, they can help you with the non-formal methodology.

Something like this needs to become a norm rather than just not knowing how to do it, and then they just say, I give up. We are just not going to work with youth because we don't know how to and youth are not responding.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much. I'm so inspired by this conversation, and I appreciate your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*