



# AUSTRALIA



AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

E-mail [australia@un.int](mailto:australia@un.int)

150 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York NY 10017-5612 Ph 212 - 351 6600 Fax 212 - 351 6610 [www.AustraliaUN.org](http://www.AustraliaUN.org)

## Third Committee

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## Social Development

### Statement by Mr Dan Ryan Australian Youth Delegate Australian Mission to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

I come from the 'land down under'. The earth's largest island, with some of the world's most diverse flora and fauna. Our society is as diverse as our natural landscape. We are a young nation of migrants that is also home to the world's oldest continuing culture.

Our cultural diversity enriches our social tapestry and fosters a peaceful and tolerant society. Australia is home to people who identify with more than 270 ethnicities, speak more than 260 languages and observe all of the world's religions. It is a democratic country that celebrates and embraces religious and racial diversity.

Within our country, there are equally diverse youth experiences and narratives. There are young people living in very rural and remote areas receiving primary and secondary education over the internet through School of the Air, to inner city kids living in thriving cosmopolitan cities rivalling that of New York. In Elliot, at the top of the Northern Territory, young Australians study horsemanship as part of the secondary school curriculum while in the cities, urban youth debate the merits of lowering the voting age.

As the youth representative on Australia's General Assembly delegation, I travelled over 35,000 km on a listening tour and engaged with over 6,000 young people to hear about their experiences. What struck me most was that wherever you live, whether you are in a rural community in outback Australia or at a privileged city school in metropolitan Sydney, whether you are a refugee newly arrived in our land, or an Indigenous child in a remote community, we are all interconnected. We have shared concerns and aspirations, and we express these through social media. Social media allows us to connect and share our experiences, not just within our own countries but globally. It allows us a common

meaning and understanding that transcend nationalities and national borders. It is a new phenomenon that inexorably shapes, impacts and influences the lives of this generation.

The world has in recent times started to see the magnitude and power and potential for change that social media can deliver. We have seen social media help to catalyse democratic movements, help spread early warnings of impending natural disasters – saving lives in the process – and to push private sector companies into using more ethical work practices. It has enabled civil society actors operating in dangerous environments to get messages out from behind closed doors to the rest of the world. And it has been used to mobilise the citizens of the world to apply direct political pressure for greater focus on achieving the Millennium Development Goals – an endeavour I am proud to be involved in through the Global Poverty Project which seeks to make the end of extreme poverty the legacy of our generation.

The social media landscape that we are growing up with is a powerful force. The digital revolution has helped bring people together from across the globe and find a sense of community, friendship and kinship that transcends national boundaries. However, new media are not immune to old problems. Regrettably, we have seen violence and intolerance are just as common in the virtual world as the real world. At a local level for young people this can manifest as cyber bullying. After I delivered a speech at a school in outback Australia, a fifteen year old girl said to me, “what people said about me on Facebook, it made me feel unsafe and like nobody loves me...sometimes I would even self-harm”. What should be our response to cyber bullying and similar problems? The solutions are the same as those that we have off-line: consciously dedicating ourselves to promoting a culture that treats people with tolerance, respect and human dignity. By respecting people we strengthen their resolve and empower them to participate in society.

We must also be alert to the digital divide. As more and more information, business, education and services are transacted online, we need to ensure that technological literacy doesn't become a further point of difference or disadvantage. Social media and the digital revolution not only cross national, economic, and disadvantaged boundaries but also generational divides and we need to ensure that older populations experience the same benefits as younger people.

Social media has the capacity to enrich people's lives, promote development and empower people, particularly youth. Over the past 24 months we have seen the power of youth voices across the globe, and the importance of engaging youth in meaningful discussion. And we need to ensure that we use this correctly. It is vital that the international youth of today have opportunities – that they can convert education advantage into employment and economic gain. This will lay the foundation for future growth and development.

Social media can be used by community and government leaders to connect with young people, hear their concerns and engage them on issues that directly affect them including

substance abuse, mental health issues and breakdowns in family structures. Increasingly the world's political leaders are using digital platforms to engage directly with the public, including through Facebook and Twitter. At a community level, individuals and groups are using technology to share socially innovative solutions to the problems they face, including through the website that I developed as Australia's UN Youth Representative which has been a valuable experience that I would recommend to others.

As recognised by the Secretary-General, youth are a transformative force and have the potential to act as agents for change. The international community should give greater attention to this issue and promote a structured process for youth voices to be heard at the decision-making table.