

UPF Latin American Panel: Youth Need Skills Like Empathy, Cooperation

Mario Salinas

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South and Central America – A panel of young leaders from South and Central America and the Caribbean met in a webinar on July 17, to commemorate the United Nations World Youth Skills Day on the theme "Skills to Build Bridges and Break Down Barriers for Peace."

The moderator, **Mr. Mario Salinas**, UPF secretary general for Latin America and the Caribbean, greeted the guests and panelists and shared the concept of the event. He explained that the UN agenda includes reducing the percentage of young people worldwide who are neither in education nor employment by teaching them skills to increase their productivity in the socio-economic sphere. "UPF, through this forum, also seeks to showcase young people who have made significant contributions in various fields at the national and international levels," he explained.

UPF regional president for Latin America and the Caribbean, **Mr. Eliecer Araya**, then addressed the panel. "The skills of young people are more than technical abilities: they are bridges that unite hearts and barriers that are broken down with values, service and cooperation. He added, "UPF reaffirms that young people are not only the future, but also the living present of our communities. With their energy, creativity, and commitment, young people are protagonists of history and bearers of hope for humanity. Strengthening and validating the skills of young people is essential for UPF because it connects directly with its mission to build peace and promote integral human development."

The first panelist was an engineer, **Mr. Luis Somarriba Rivas**, academic director of the University Institute of Energy in Nicaragua. "The most important bridges we build aren't made of steel or concrete; they're the ones we build between people," he said. "They're the bridges we build between two languages, between two cultures, or even between two people who don't understand each other... being in the middle

isn't a problem; it's an opportunity. It's being able to be a bridge.”

The second panelist, **Dr. Celso Ramón Vázquez Denis**, is a professor, psychologist and research coordinator at the Faculty of Health Research Sciences of Universidad Gran in Asunción, Paraguay. “I want to talk about those very personal situations that, in some way, even if no one applauds them, also build a world of hope and peace,” he said. “Peace doesn't mean that we will never have differences, that we will never face problems or difficult times...Peace is how we choose to act when things don't go as planned. Peace is how we respond when someone thinks differently than we do.”

Dr. María Alejandra Rodríguez Pedraza, an attorney and member of the Inter-American Bar Association, addressed the topic from an educational perspective, stating: “Today, a young person can learn any subject from a cell phone, start a business from their bedroom, or generate social impact using only a computer and an internet connection. However, paradoxically, we also face a crisis of values, empathy and purpose. Information has grown faster than human development.”

In educating young people, she said, “it is not enough to prepare competent professionals; we must develop well-rounded human beings – people capable of combining knowledge with ethics, leadership with humility, and personal success with a commitment to the collective good...We must teach our young people that competing doesn't mean destroying others; that success isn't solely about accumulating wealth; and that true progress is also measured by the positive impact we have on society.”

The next speaker, engineer **Mr. Emanuel García Barragán**, is the elected municipal youth councilor of Chía, Colombia. He opened his presentation with a music video, "Everything Can Change;" the song was written by his father for the visit of Pope Francis to the country in 2017. “It's often said that change comes from the outside, from the decisions of a few,” he said in his speech. “But we young people know something different: change begins when we dare to take the first step. And that step is built on what we learn, on what we know how to do, on the skills we cultivate every day. Here is our voice: we're not asking for change to be handed to us, we're asking to be allowed to build it with our own hands.”

The final speaker, **Dr. Gustavo Pollet**, is a lawyer and professor of law at the University of Buenos Aires, where he teaches courses on law related to industrial property, market and competition, and regional integration. He also teaches at secondary schools. Two concepts guide his work: "To educate is an act of love" and "If you seek peace, sow justice."

In his speech, he pointed out that young people are no longer educated primarily at school and in the home; they now learn from online messages, videos and music posted by unknown people. He warned that vulnerable young minds and hearts are at risk from “artificial intelligence, which generates and creates concepts that society, lacking a critical perspective based on prior knowledge, can take as absolute truth; and artificial emotion, comprised of all media such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc., which impart behavioral patterns that, according to images, lead to true happiness."

He concluded, “Of course, AI and social media are not inherently bad if we know how to discern between good and bad and teach others to do so. If we fail to do so, the effect on society could be chaotic.”