

# IN THIS TOGETHER (?)

Young Peoples' Views on the  
International Economic Order,  
its Flaws, and How to Fix Them

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# CONTENTS

1. Abstract

2. Introduction

3. Methodology

4. Findings

Status Quo

Taking a Stance

Road Ahead

5. Summary

6. About Debating Europe



# 1. ABSTRACT

The world as we know it seems to be in turmoil, and with it the global economy. In an increasingly intertwined world, this impacts young people around the world more than any other group. Debating Europe therefore spoke to 20 young students from all over the world in a series of focus group discussions to understand their perceptions of what does and does not work in the world economy and how the system might have to change. The conversations shed light on ills of the system, give an indication of what the participations would like to change, and show why – or why not – they are motivated to do so.

# 2. INTRODUCTION

With inflation hitting record highs month after month, supply chain disruptions following the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as well as a seemingly unprecedented degree of geopolitical uncertainty, the economic system we are used to is put to a serious litmus test. While facts and data underpin economic downturns across continents, the impact varies widely from one region to another. The cost-of-living crisis that many in what is commonly called the 'Global North' suffer from cannot quite compare with the fundamental impact of food shortages, among other things, in the geographically much larger part of our planet, the so-called 'Global South'.

At Debating Europe, we learnt – not least through recent focus group discussions – that citizens' perceptions don't only matter greatly, but that they tend to diverge from those of decision-makers. In line with our strategic objectives to revitalize democracy and foster a new kind of leadership, we therefore took the chance to speak to a diverse group of young people from all over the world, hoping to understand their view of the world's economy and how to address its flaws.

In early October, we met a group of 20 young international students for a series of in-person mini focus groups, discussing the current economic world order. Through a set of questions, the participants – originating from 14 different countries spread over four continents – critically assessed the current state of world economics and international development cooperation, suggesting changes in thinking and acting for both leaders and citizens. This report summarizes their perspectives.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

To give everyone the chance to voice their thoughts, the participants were split into three groups. To make participants as comfortable as possible, each group was characterized by one feature of homogeneity, while otherwise highly diverse. One group consisted exclusively of students from the Middle East, another was female-only, with the third one held in German, doing justice to participants' preferred language (all students were Germany-based at the time of the discussions). The other groups discussed in English. The groups were led by experienced facilitators, basing their questions on a common moderator guide.

Participants in the half hour-long discussions come from sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Togo), the Middle East (Iran, Palestine, Syria), Europe (Austria, Germany, Poland), Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), and Latin America (Ecuador). They are 20-25 years of age with a majority of female (13) over male (7) participants, predominantly of technical backgrounds. This report quotes them using their first name and country of origin.

## 4. FINDINGS

### STATUS QUO

To kick off the discussions, participants were asked to indicate and explain briefly whether they considered the current economic system in the world fair or unfair. The picture evolving from this was clear: unanimously, the young people perceived the status quo as unjust.

**“The world’s problems are shared with everyone, the profits aren’t**

Interesting nuances to this opinion came through the reasoning. Many invoked the growing gap between rich and poor. Habib from Palestine summed up the common perspective in his group: “There is no middle class in many countries. Either you are very poor, or you are very rich. There is nothing in between.” German Cornelia came to add that “the world’s problems are shared with everyone, the profits aren’t.”

Ruth from Togo explained how, in her opinion, the violent conflict in Ukraine further exacerbates previously existing trends. “The poor get poorer, and the rich get richer,” she said, as Western sanctions would hit the people rather than the governments. This line of thinking led her to another critical observation. She questioned to which

degree, and if at all, leaders are impacted by their decisions: "We have to live with the consequences of that decision, but I doubt that the same applies to the president."

The aspect of power imbalance further highlighted Avishek from Iran. To him, the system is "completely unfair because the US and Europe hold all the financial power," since global financial markets are operating in dollars and euros. Afrah (Syria) seconded this opinion, arguing that the predominant financial power of the US, the EU, and China perpetuates historic ills: "Exploitation from the West is still happening." Grace from Rwanda said: "The current international economic system is unfair mainly because it bases on countries that have had higher power of purchase for the longest time, based on the history of the world." Ethiopian Daniya found it unfair that farmers who produce the food for the world cannot live of their work.

## “ It would be better if the world was not divided, but together

These views preached to the choir in all groups, leading the discussion to the big picture. "Capitalism is the problem," Cameroonian Arold said. Leila from Syria felt she struggled with the system as it is "capitalistic, racist, and patriarchal."

Though participants agreed on what Nuraiym from Kyrgyzstan neatly summarized – "It would be better if the world was not divided, but together" – there was a lack of optimism when it came to whether this would happen any time soon. Ecuadorian Hugo complained that the current system's "conditions are set by some countries and all the other countries have to comply," as Aisha from Kazakhstan concluded: "Every economic system is based on the outcome of exploitation. That's why wealth is not distributed equally."

A notable minority opinion was voiced by Iranian Ali: In agreeing to his peers that the status quo was unfair, he admitted not to have a problem with that. He reasoned that it makes sense for countries to be different if they have different resources. "But we need to be in a range – our current range is too wide" with too many too rich and too many too poor countries.

## TAKING A STANCE

Opening statements were followed by a voting exercise. Confronted with four statements, all participants were asked to indicate from the top of their head whether they would agree or disagree with them, before being given the chance to elaborate.

The first statement reflected large parts of the opening discussions as it read: *Because of the current economic system, rich countries get richer and poor countries get poorer.*

Interestingly, all but one agreed to this statement. The disagreement came from Hugo (Ecuador), who stated: "I think inequality is increasing, but not necessarily wellbeing. So, the conditions are unequal, but poverty is going down, I think." Consequently, he

summed up, “the rich are getting much richer, but the poor are getting a bit richer as well.” The opinion of the vast majority was couched in terms by Polish Magdalena, who didn’t only say that “on a global scale” economic differences between countries are “huge.” She also was convinced this would exacerbate. Rwandan Grace highlighted to her fellow discussants that the system today, indeed, “mostly encourages the status quo to remain as such. [However,] I wouldn’t say the richer are getting richer and the poorer are getting poorer. There are a lot of efforts being made so that things get better. There’s a lot of room for improvement, but we cannot ignore all the steps that are being made.”

The second statement dug deeper into – depending on the point of view – a mitigatory or exacerbating feature of the global market economy: *Free trade agreements put international economic relations on an equal footing.*

## “ We can’t export cocoa and import chocolates, that doesn’t make any sense

With the number of undecided participants being the highest, most of those who took a stance voted against this claim. Remarkably, again, with one exception. Although Grace admitted the potential pitfalls of free trade agreements, particularly that one party might dominate the other, she highlighted the potential that such deals can unfold for both sides of the trade. Grace’s home country Rwanda, she explained, entered into a free trade agreement with Kenya where there was no equal footing at first. However, “Rwanda was also benefiting from the strict rules of Kenya. In the end, it sort of balanced out.” As developing countries are growing, free trade agreements might encourage their growth, she added.

Hugo countered this opinion, arguing that “if you put together a lightweight and a heavyweight, the heavyweight will have a huge advantage. A free trade agreement between the EU and, for example, my country, Ecuador, would not be good at all.” He went on to add another layer to his scepticism as he mentioned that protectionism would be “all over the place. When the US developed, they protected their economy a lot.” Now that the US is economically strong, Hugo said, Washington is suddenly interested in free trade as it benefits its very own economy. He saw similar behaviour in China and the EU, as Palestinian Habib seconded that, to his mind, people’s and state’s self-interest is the “core of the problem.”

## “ Everyone asks themselves: How can I get richer? Only the rich are more successful with that

Statement three – *Current issues such as disrupted supply chains and high inflation have made people aware of the need to change the global economy* – was polarising. One of the three focus groups had an internal disagreement, while another agreed unanimously on the statement. The third one rejected it almost in unison.

Many were visibly conflicted. Luise from Germany, e.g., argued that Europe had learnt its lesson at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, but “forgot it soon after.” Nigerian Grace got triggered by the controversial statement and asked her group:

“Current supply chains should make us think: ‘Do we [Africans] have the resources to produce ourselves? Can we feed us first? Why would that help us?’” She went on to answer herself, explaining that “Africa has the facilities, the mineral resources, the human population, the human resources in order to feed our countries, to defeat food insecurity.” Unreasonable dependence on the states of the Global North, however, got the continent in a situation where “we will have insecurity for the rest of our lives if we don’t change,” Grace argued. Finishing her impassioned argument, Grace wanted to make sure she is not utterly opposed to trade: “Africa can trade. But we shouldn’t always be the importers, we should also be the exporters. We can’t export cocoa and import chocolates, that doesn’t make any sense.”

## “ If there are no poor people anymore, who is going to clean?

Finally, statement four proved to be equally controversial as participants discussed: *It is in the interest of everybody – rich and poor – to trade globally on an equal basis.*

Opinions were divided, yet none of those who voted in favour of the statement felt comfortable elaborating on their thinking. The sceptics, in turn, came to the fore. Avishek from Iran shared his sentiment with the group by saying that he wished for the sentence to be true. However, he could not imagine that poor countries would trust rich ones. He gave the example of the African Union which doesn’t want aid from the representatives of the Global North – be it the EU or the G7. In Avishek’s opinion, they have demanded equal footing which they are yet to see. Afrah (Syria) agreed, yet added that the desire for an equal footing should be understood correctly. Equal treatment, to her mind, is not desired in the Global South as the economic capacities of nations differ. Nigerian Grace took a similar line: “If both parties can see themselves as equal then we can both come to the bargaining table to determine the agreement of trade but if one country is higher and one is lower, I believe that it depends on what kind of resources make them come to the middle ground.”

German Cornelia, who was the only one in her group to agree to the sentence, traced her convergent stance back to her background as a privileged European as opposed to her non-European and, as she said, perhaps less naïve peers. Indeed, participants in her group had no problem calling the issues out frankly. Habib from Palestine reiterated his earlier point that all people, rich and poor, are united by their self-interest: “Everyone asks themselves: How can I get richer? Only the rich are more successful with that.” This doesn’t have to be due to ill will, he added, as people at the subsistence minimum simply must ask themselves “how they can finance themselves and feed their families.” Togolese Ruth was of the firm belief that there needs to be inequality for the system to work. “I don’t think the rich would agree to a truly equal global economy. If there are no poor people anymore, who is going to clean?”

## ROAD AHEAD

The last minutes of the focus group discussions were used to give the participants the chance to make brief exit statements, asking them what, if anything, they can



do personally to contribute to a fairer and more equitable world in economic terms.

Madina from Kyrgyzstan claimed: "The poor will always stay poor, their children won't have a better life. I find that very sad. Why don't we all have the same rights in this life?", she asked rhetorically. Equally despondent was Avishek (Iran): "I personally feel powerless as a citizen, although I have a lot of motivation to make a lot of changes."

**“ I don't have a European citizenship, so I can't vote. But I have so many German and Austrian friends who don't vote. And whenever I have the chance, I tell them: 'Go vote!' That is so important**

The theme of individual powerlessness in the face of a seemingly unequitable system dominated this final discussion. Syrian Leila's perspective spoke to the hearts of many: "It doesn't matter if I am vegan or if I take the bus every day because companies are based on fossil fuels, or the violation of human rights. Where can I start as an individual if there are hundreds of companies that have so much more power than me and don't stop what they do? Of course, I can go to Fridays for Future or start a demonstration with my friends or advocate on social media. But it doesn't matter what I do if others – companies – are doing nothing." Ali from Iran agreed: "How can you, as a common citizen, make a difference? When you make two steps forwards, you are actually already 15 steps behind, just because these big companies hold so much power."

On the other hand, Nemer from Palestine provided a glimpse of optimism. A feeling of togetherness, he found, can give comfort to the individual and thus be the much-needed starting point to tackling big issues. Syrian Afrah, too, couldn't let the sense of pessimism pass without comment. Not only did she express how much she felt motivated to do something, but she also told her group that she goes to demonstrations, takes a cotton bag to do the groceries, and volunteers for an NGO. Most importantly, she urged her peers to "tell people about politics. I don't have a European citizenship, so I can't vote. But I have so many German and Austrian friends who don't vote. And whenever I have the chance, I tell them: 'Go vote!' That is so important. Interest in politics is so important." It was Afrah as well who countered an opinion from Iranian Ali ("The people can change. But the politicians won't, why would they do that? Politicians only listen to the money. They read all our messages, so if they wanted to listen, they could. All the governments are corrupt.") Afrah stated strong NGOs can counter misguided governments and big companies: "If Amazon f\*cks up, you can point that out and make others aware. That's what we have learnt from history: Countries like France and Great Britain f\*cked up an entire continent and no one said a word about it. But now, you can say something about it."

Despite this assessment, Afrah now perceived the countries of the European Union as a beacon of hope. This was "unthinkable after the war, but now they are making so many changes – they are working with guilt from the past, but they are doing something." Iranian Ali took this example to represent "win-win situations instead of zero-sum games," just like the EU. Economic growth that all players in the global

economy strive for, he imagined, should translate into growing together, too: "If you grow percentage by percentage, you can also grow together."

## “ My government does nothing, so what I want to do is to voice these issues, raise awareness

Ruth (Togo) had less faith in state actors. "We shouldn't wait until the governments do something, because the change is not going to come from the governments," she said, calling for (self)-education and lifelong learning. Afrah from Syria, the strong believer in collective action, agreed as she called upon everyone who wants to make a difference: "Go study!" For Nuraiym from Kyrgyzstan education meant not least media literacy: "We live in a media world. And yet the people are not properly informed." Consultancy for the good cause would be the way forward, according to her. Cameroonian Arold was willing to step up himself and "commit myself, to champion" a change for the better by talking to people about politics and financial matters. Kyrgyz Madina was worried about women's and children's rights in her home country. Fearing for her family in situ she decided to speak up: "My government does nothing, so what I want to do is to voice these issues, raise awareness. The government must know that this is important!"

## 5. SUMMARY

The discussions with youngsters from around the world, first and foremost, proved a common misconception wrong. Young people do care. And young people do understand what is going on in the world.

The discussions displayed the unease that many young people feel when it comes to the global economic order. Experiences of migration from underprivileged countries of the Global South – according to current measures established by the Global North like GDP or purchasing power – to a country as well-off as Germany further underpinned these sentiments. While all participants felt the need for systemic change, degrees to which they were personally willing to take action varied widely. Some admitted openly to feel powerless and numbed by the status quo, others were bursting with energy to take matters in their own hands by teaming up and advocating for a change for the better.

Despite flagrant wrongs in the past, Europe – through the impact of the European Union – was seen as a beacon of hope. With its internationally established core competences of setting regulations following a value- and principle-driven approach, participants acknowledged that the EU is strategically well-positioned to lead the young generation's efforts for the achievement of a more equitable economic world order.

## 6. ABOUT DEBATING EUROPE

Debating Europe wants to encourage a genuine conversation between politicians and the citizens they serve – and that means taking citizens' questions, comments, and ideas directly to policymakers for them to respond.

Debating Europe was launched in 2011 and has taken a bottom-up approach from the beginning, with citizens very much in the driving seat of the debate, asking the questions they want answered and putting forward their opinions for politicians and thought-leaders from across the EU and beyond to react to.

Since launch, Debating Europe interviewed more than 3,000 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the 200,000 comments sent in from citizens online, including from over 271,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter. To ensure citizens' ideas and questions match up-to-date formats, focus group discussions are conducted regularly since 2019.

To move beyond the English-speaking bubble, the German platform Debating Europe/de came into being in 2017. In 2021, Debating Africa was launched, adopting the same approach and encouraging a pan-African debate on shared challenges such as climate change, security, trade, and development.

We at Debating Europe, Debating Europe/de, and Debating Africa believe international challenges require international dialogue, which is why we frequently co-operate on joint projects to bring voices from both continents to the table with politicians and experts.

Debating Europe is an initiative of Friends of Europe, the Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive, and forward-looking Europe.



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