

Elizabeth Zhang



Distinguished delegates, esteemed colleagues, and fellow youth advocates,

Last year, I had the privilege of being an exchange student in Italy. I arrived with the goal of expanding my academic experience, but what I gained went far beyond the classroom. I witnessed how education, when deeply embedded in a community's values and culture, becomes so much more than just schooling. It becomes a shared commitment to growth.

However, I also realized how much we take quality education for granted. My classmates and I regularly scrutinize literature and history, learn several different languages, and explore STEM with access to labs and mentors. Yet, across the world, seventeen percent of children were still out of school as of 2020, according to UNESCO.

That number is not just a statistic; it's a global emergency. Education is more than a right; it is the foundation of all sustainable development. It enables children to be informed citizens that grow into the compassionate leaders of tomorrow. Without education, the future falters.

Over the years, many well-meaning efforts have attempted to address this matter. One of the most notable was the “One Laptop per Child” initiative, which aimed to revolutionize education by distributing affordable laptops to underprivileged communities between 2005 and 2014.

The goal was bold and inspiring, but the results were mixed. Why? The program overlooked a simple, critical truth: technology alone is not a solution—especially when it is not in alignment with local context.

Laptops were delivered to children who had never used them before in communities with no internet access and no local technicians or teachers trained to integrate digital learning into their classrooms. Even though each device cost less than a standard computer, it was still far too expensive in places where families lived on less than 2 US dollars a day. When devices broke down, there was no plan for support. The results? A project that brought hardware without the means to maintain it in the long term.

At a 2005 UN meeting, African representatives shared that clear water, not laptops, was their community’s most urgent need. This reinforces the truth that when designing solutions, we must begin by listening.

We must ask: what does education look like through the eyes of a child living in that village at that moment?

When considering potential solutions, I found inspiration in ancient Rome, where education often came in the form of tutoring sessions where a teacher would lecture a small group of students. I realized that this arrangement had the potential to work in modern day underprivileged communities thanks to one invention: the radio.

It may not sound high-tech, but the radio is a simple, cost-effective alternative that can deliver education where laptops cannot.

First, radios run on batteries. They do not require internet or electricity, which are still luxuries in many areas.

Second, one radio can serve multiple children, an entire family, or even a whole village, making it scalable and inclusive.

Third, radios have a fairly gentle learning curve. Children need not navigate complicated interfaces. Once they learn how to use the main buttons on a radio, all they must do is listen and learn.

We must be careful, nevertheless, to not repeat past mistakes. We cannot simply deliver radios and then disappear. If we want real change, we need long-term support. That means community integration. We need to work with local educators and parents to create engaging, age-appropriate lessons in local languages.

Utilizing already established radio stations in the area to broadcast our content, we can also collaborate with local universities that have student-run radio stations so that students in higher education also have an opportunity to give back to their community.

We must create moments in which children gather not because they are told to, but because they are genuinely excited to learn.

To those of us who have been fortunate enough to study all our lives, it's easy to forget that for millions, education is not a burden, it's a dream. We may grumble about exams, essays, and early mornings but there are children in the world who would give anything for the chance to grumble about school.

So today I ask: what if we shifted our definition of innovation from “newest” and “advanced” to “most critical”, “most needed”?

We must stop asking “What can we give?” and start asking “What do *they*, the people that I am trying to help, need?”

Let us support solutions that are not only technologically clever but also people-focused, locally led, and culturally rooted.

We need more than advanced machinery to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal Number Four, Quality Education for All. We need intercultural awareness.

Let us build an education landscape for future generations that starts not on our computer screens, but in the minds and the hearts of the children that we aim to serve.

Thank you.