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Annual Competitions that Award Students for Striving for a Better Future:

A Conversation with Elena Baturina, Founder of a Philanthropic Think-Tank

by **Hillary Latos** — in [Philanthropy](#)



Elena Baturina and her BE OPEN think-tank are among those working to accelerate the global shift towards more sustainable practices. A former President of an international construction company and a long-standing member of the Forbes Billionaires list, she founded this philanthropic initiative in 2012 to “support the promising minds of younger generations, and act as an incubator for bright ideas.”

Today, Baturina is known as a consistent advocate for creative education, innovation and sustainability. Together with BE OPEN, she has run a series of international competitions for young creatives, each focusing on a specific SDG, one at a time every year since 2019.

First of all we are interested in Elena's personal view, as an entrepreneur and philanthropist, on society's prospects of achieving sustainability in the foreseeable future. And she is not entirely optimistic: "I believe that in recent years, the intention to transform economics, businesses and processes into sustainable ones has become an absolute emergency. And realistically speaking, we are very far from reversing, and slowing down may be our best shot right now. But that only means we must work harder." Embracing sustainable practices, however, has the power to positively influence the environment, society and the economy. These practices can help slow, stop or, with enough effort and persistence, even reverse the damage caused by overuse of natural resources, pollution and irresponsible consumption.

As for her motivation behind starting the student competitions as a way to contribute to the SDGs, it comes from a desire to raise awareness and educate about the SDGs by offering the youth access to additional resources. Through these competitions, BE OPEN recognizes and rewards the best design ideas from young people worldwide, encouraging them to self-educate, do research, build networks, and learn how to present their ideas. "These competitions provide a platform for discussions, idea exchanges, and self-education. We aim to boost young people's confidence and help them realize their importance in shaping the future."

Both BE OPEN and its founder are content with the results over the years: "Every year we collect an ever growing massive number of submissions from students and graduates from all parts of the world. And a great portion of them are consistent, thoughtful, meaningful, well-researched and innovative. It is a common misconception that people in their student years do not take policy-making or sustainability issues seriously. They know that these things are decisive for their future."

This generation, Baturina believes, is more responsible and aware than previous ones. "They do have to carry more on their shoulders, but I rejoice at seeing their incredible commitment, responsiveness and audacity in how they approach whatever problems we ask them to tackle."

Elena's opinion of this year's winners is very high. Talk to any of our **finalists** or winners and you'll see "how much they are emotionally and intellectually invested in their solutions, each being rooted in good thinking, proper research and great intentions." Of course, nobody expects them to change the world overnight, but their ideas are about taking steady, practical steps that can work globally.

The first prize, Redefining Global Healthcare, is a comprehensive, sustainable, tech-driven and community-led solution to reorganize healthcare systems in ways that can scale worldwide. Ecovironment is a youth-led social enterprise tackling plastic pollution by recycling waste into construction materials, while also creating green jobs and educational opportunities for children and young people. AGASA is a visionary photobioreactor that combats urban carbonization with microalgae that absorb CO₂ far more efficiently than land plants, with the added benefit of turning algae biomass into biofuels — plus plans to integrate solar panels, IoT and AI.

Her vision for the future of these competitions is rooted in great intentions as well: “Our vision is to create a foundation of knowledge for young people to navigate the challenges ahead. By providing opportunities for creative expression, collaboration, and learning, we hope to inspire them to take ownership of shaping the future.” By using digital tools, strong partnerships and proper accreditation, BE OPEN hopes to expand this impact and help equip the next generation with the skills they need for a better tomorrow.

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