

PEACE AND SECURITY

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IS KEY

How to strengthen youth as peace actors

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Recognizing that youth are a diverse and intersectional category is key to designing inclusive frameworks with access points and specialized approaches for marginalized groups including refugee, female and transgender youth.



By re-establishing trust in political institutions, adopting a rights-based approach and providing a roadmap for youth participation, states create conditions for the promotion of sustainable peace.



Flexible funding to localize efforts and decolonize aid can shift the balance from youth-centered to youth-led, for long-term structural impact in peacebuilding.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IS KEY

### How to strengthen youth as peace actors



Despite Security Council Resolutions on the YPS Agenda, implementation from policy to practice continues to be gradual. The relationship between State and youth is critical to prevent the YPS Agenda from becoming a tool to advance securitization. Strengthening political agency through capacity building, institutional structures, financing the YPS Agenda, and cultivating civic and political space remains indispensable for young people's participation in peace processes. The role of youth and the means available to engage meaningfully with the State apparatus need to be defined more clearly.



Social and political demographics are key to designing effective ways of political participation. Distinctions between urban/rural youth, refugee youth, marginalized or vulnerable youth groups require a tailored approach. Channels of participation should be open, accessible, and responsive to cultivate dialogue with youth as political actors. For refugees and diaspora youth, there is an urgent need to explore and device channels beyond advocacy and activism for political participation in conflict resolution and peace processes.



State strategies to engage with youth should address core drivers of conflict, develop a national roadmap for YPS, and engage youth constituencies in defining national policies. Questions raised on social justice should form a basis for substantive debate, rather than being repressed, profiled or co-opted. ›Decolonizing‹ aid and flexible funding can enable youth-led initiatives to define their own priorities and programs without depriving them of their agency. Allocating financial resources, garnering political will, and using evidence-based knowledge is required for institutionalization and operationalization of the agenda at national and subnational levels.

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It is widely understood that when it comes to armed conflict, youth are one of the most affected groups. Violent conflicts not only affect the ability of young people to access education, livelihood, and employment, but also their participation in public and political life and therefore a say in the building of their future. Despite being key stakeholders, however, youth across the globe remain on the margins or excluded from participatory peacebuilding processes.

With the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 in 2015, the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda came to be formalized, recognizing the essential role of young people in the realm of peace and security. The subsequent resolution 2535 (2020) was particularly key as it urged Member States to amplify the voices of youth in decision-making and peace processes and recognize their essential and positive role in building and sustaining peace.<sup>1</sup> In that regard, Finland was the first country to announce a national action plan (NAP) on YPS in August 2021, followed by Nigeria in November 2021, and more recently, Philippines in June 2022. While the United Nations has continued to engage Member States by producing guidelines for country-level operationalization at the High-Level Global Conference on Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes in January 2022, the YPS agenda continues to move from policy to implementation as Member States explore ways to incorporate YPS in NAPs. While the formulation of NAPs continues to gain traction, the discussion on how to strengthen youth as peace promoters is particularly timely as the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on September 8, 2022 to establish a United Nations Youth Office, to further support Member States in advancing the YPS agenda and to ensure system-wide collaboration, coordination and accountability.<sup>2</sup>

At its core, the YPS agenda concerns young people's political agency and their role as political actors. The role that young people play in political processes therefore largely depends on perceptions of youth in the given context, existing civic space and channels for political participation, institutional structures, and the relationship of youth with political actors and the State.

Many theorists argue that a »youth bulge« in a declining socio-economic society can contribute to social unrest and conflict due to competition over limited resources and opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Others argue that the »youth bulge« is in fact a way for political elites to shift attention away from the inherent contradictions of a global capitalist order, framing it as a problem of surplus populations who might pose a security threat.<sup>4</sup> Insufficient opportunities as a result of inadequate resources combined with social injustices are

thought to potentially contribute to the radicalization of a segment of youth. However, responses to preventing violent extremism in the past have tended to focus on the problem of youth expression and youth resistance for the current socio-economic order, rather than examining the legitimacy of the criticisms and the underlying factors that cause youth to find channels of expressing grievances.

While promoting a culture of civic and political participation through peace, dialogue and strategic negotiations and partnerships is crucial, it is also important to ensure that these channels and methods of communication are effective and remain open and accessible. It is when existing mechanisms of communication between the State and its population are ineffective or unresponsive that the argument of youth at risk of radicalization comes into play; and even then, the response should not be limited to de-radicalization of youth but on improving means and ways of interaction with the aggrieved population to address core needs.

This paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of youth, their agency as political actors, and what is needed in terms of funding from national and international partners as well as support from political institutions to enable and empower their equal and meaningful participation in peace and political processes.

## 1 YOUTH: AN INTERSECTIONAL AND DIVERSE CATEGORY

While age is usually the primary determining factor defining youth, the criteria of who is considered a youth depends on different variables across countries and societies. As all societies cannot be said to have the same conditions and services available to their populations, contextual definitions of youth allow for fluidity depending on the local situation. In conflict and post-conflict societies, young people may be coming out of situations that are not conducive to the pursuit of education and employment, and therefore the definition of youth when determined according to age needs to consider the time needed to build capacity and access such opportunities allowing for an empowered transition from childhood to adulthood.

Youth in itself is not a homogeneous category. Differences in age, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, caste, education should also be taken into account. It is also important to be sensitive to gender dynamics across the spectrum and avoid stereotypical assumptions about the roles and aspirations of young women, young men and young transgender people in conflict. In addition to social demographics, political demographics also play a role, as civil society youth may not necessarily represent all youth. For example, most fighters at the forefront of conflict may not be considered as integrated members of civil society, yet are primarily youth. Furthermore, the experiences of youth in towns may be different from those in rural areas, who have different roles and responsibilities.

1 S/RES/2535 (2020), United Nations, Security Council; available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2535> (last accessed on 9.11.2022).

2 UN decides to establish Youth Office, in: *Xinhua News*, 8.9.2022.

3 Urdal, Henrik (2006): A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 50: 607–629.

4 Sukarieh, Mayssoun and Tannock, Stuart (2017): The global securitisation of youth, in: *Third World Quarterly* 39: 854–870, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1369038.

In this regard, refugee youth are in a complex position as most formal channels of political participation require citizenship. They face dual challenges to participation in peace and political processes, both in their countries of origin due to conflict or persecution, as well as in their host countries due to institutional barriers. Once they flee from persecution, there are no remote channels for their participation in conflict resolution processes of their country of origin except through advocacy and activism. Peace processes in areas of conflict do not provide channels for refugee and diaspora youth. However, if there is any hope for refugees to return to their countries of origin, it is vital to secure their buy-in for the conflict resolution process. Once refugee youth are situated in their host country, they are not considered political stakeholders there. Therefore, without a right to vote, and with structural barriers that prevent them from political participation, they are left on the peripheries. This is particularly worrying given that 52% of all displaced persons are between the ages of 18–59.<sup>5</sup> This could have wide ramifications for how future generations may continue to face barriers to participation in political and peace processes.

Even within refugee youth, one needs to be mindful of marginalized and vulnerable groups. Young refugee women or differently-abled youth, for example, face additional challenges. Programs and processes designed for youth participation must account for such diversity. In order to ensure true inclusivity, intersectional analyses to address factors impeding the full recognition of the contributions of marginalized and vulnerable youth groups need to be undertaken.

It is imperative to explore channels for refugee youth to participate in conflict resolution, peace and political processes.

## 2 YOUTH: ATTRIBUTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

The dual perception of youth as both spoilers and drivers of peace places them in an ambiguous position, especially vis-à-vis the State and its security apparatus.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, while increased global attention on youth has brought about positive acknowledgement of the role of young people in peace and security, it has also been critically highlighted as a sign of global securitization of youth as a social group.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that promoting the ideal of »youth as peacebuilders« is a method used by global political elites to elicit youth support for the current international social and economic order.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while engaging youth directly in

peacebuilding programs, especially pertaining to preventing violent extremism and anti-radicalization, it is important to examine the work being done within the peacebuilding framework, and whether youth have any say in identifying issues and developing programs, disregarding which may result in youth peacebuilders becoming a tool for advancing the securitization agenda. To avoid this risk, it is all the more important to pay attention to questions of social justice being raised by youth. On the other hand, the perception of youth as threats or spoilers of peace who are the first to be recruited by parties in conflict or are at risk of radicalization is highly problematic. It is worthwhile to carefully scrutinize the promotion of YPS as an agenda to »prevent violent extremism« and »counterterrorism«.

While global securitization legitimizes the use of violence by the State against young people who are often seen as threats, youth groups have also resisted their securitization through a range of strategies, often through participation in public and socio-political rights-based movements and campaigns. However, resistance to securitization has often been met with State repression, detention, arbitrary arrests and other forms of State-sponsored violence, often under the guise of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism.<sup>9</sup> Rather than acknowledging the substantive grievances or viewpoints of youth groups who challenge the status quo, they are profiled ideologically as »at risk« of extremism or radicalization and who need to be »restored« or »reintegrated« into society and taught to embrace the prevailing order or state of affairs.<sup>10</sup> In the process, the focus is diverted away from substantive debate to cooption of dissent<sup>11</sup>. The common State response that follows is increased surveillance and interference to monitor the lives of those who may question the role of the State and security apparatus. This particularly applies to refugee youth, who are often seen as at greatest risk of radicalization and thus heavily surveilled and monitored. Their experiences of being first-hand witnesses and conflict-affected populations is seen as a threat, thus taking away their agency as legitimate and equal members of society entitled to exercise civil and political rights.

## 3 EMPOWERING YOUTH: THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The perception of young people concerning the role of the State in promoting peace and security is increasingly complex. The relation between youth and the State is crucial in advancing the YPS agenda, with an added need to clearly define the role of youth at the interface of State-society

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR *Statistical Yearbook 2009*; available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/4ce5320a9.pdf> (last accessed: 9.11.2022).

<sup>6</sup> Ensor, Marisa O. (ed.) (2021): *Securitizing Youth: Young People's Roles in the Global Peace and Security Agenda*. Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Sukarieh, Maysoun and Tannock, Stuart (2017): The global securitisation of youth, in: *Third World Quarterly* 39: 854–870, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1369038.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Altiok, Ali (2021): Squeezed Agency: Youth Resistance to the Securitization of Peacebuilding, in: Ensor, Marisa O. (ed.): *Securitizing Youth: Young People's Roles in the Global Peace and Security Agenda*. Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press: 74–92; available at: <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978822412-005> (last accessed on 9.11.2022).

<sup>10</sup> Baker-Beall, Christopher, Heath-Kelly, Charlotte, and Jarvis, Lee (eds) (2015): *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Coy, Patrick G. (2013). »Co-Optation«. *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

relations.<sup>12</sup> With the rise of authoritarian regimes, a general lack of trust in national institutions and political establishments prevails. Political distrust among young people and policymakers is a major obstacle for effective youth inclusion in peacebuilding.

There is an increasing understanding across youth movements globally that peace cannot be achieved without justice, accountability and respect for human rights. For young people, a rights-based approach is gaining traction where values of justice are non-negotiable. This can be demonstrated by movements all over the world with young people at the forefront, such as the Future Coalition, Black Lives Matter, Climate Action, and March for Our Lives, among others, which also make praiseworthy efforts at mainstreaming gender at the core of their activism. There is a growing perception that the pursuit of peace is intrinsically linked to these parallel struggles, without which peace is just not sustainable. In short, young people's participation in these movements is what is promoting civic engagement and active citizenship, and is indicative of their active agency as political actors.

To restore and maintain young people's trust in established institutions, the State should uphold a positive human rights record and ensure that values of justice are enforced by rule of law both within and outside of State institutions. By trust building and demonstrating with tangible policy planning and implementation that young people's voices are heard, the State can begin to include youth as partners and stakeholders of political and peace processes.

Furthermore, strategies should address the drivers of conflict such as poverty, unemployment, resources, and access to educational and economic opportunities. This is key, because as long as the foundations are not in place, the conditions for youth to be able to participate and sustain their engagement will be difficult.

YPS cannot be effectively implemented without guaranteeing full and meaningful participation of young people in decision-making. This involves engaging youth constituencies in defining country strategies, inclusive national policies, and peacebuilding processes that are reflective of their needs and aspirations. In that regard, State actors should first and foremost explore if there is a dedicated national framework or roadmap for YPS in place, or whether the YPS agenda is incorporated in both national and state level action plans and political processes. If not, State actors should actively lobby to integrate and incorporate the YPS agenda in relevant frameworks.<sup>13</sup>

However, when it comes to developing a framework or financing youth in peace and security, the State needs to play a central role in prioritizing the YPS agenda during the allocation of financial resources, which again depends on political support. Therefore, garnering political will for the YPS agenda among internal and external stakeholders is another task for the State. This can be advocated for by appealing to shared values as well as through the presentation of evidence-based knowledge on the impact of youth inclusion.

If a national framework and roadmap for youth's inclusion and participation exists, it should be institutionalized and translated into policy through laws tabled by Members of Parliament to ensure continuity and accountability in the implementation of the YPS agenda, especially in the event of any change in governing parties and policymakers.

Finally, the State can actively design and implement youth-focused projects through youth inclusion in peace projects or service delivery targeting their needs such as education and employment opportunities, vocational training, and other support services.

## 4 EMPOWERING YOUTH: THE ROLE OF FUNDING

Apart from allocating portions of the regular national budget cycle to advancement of the YPS agenda, ministries and government agencies should also partner with external stakeholders including private sector, international cooperation partners, and philanthropic institutions to seek support for financing the implementation of the YPS agenda.<sup>14</sup>

However, when it comes to financing activities and organizations one must be aware of the power asymmetry and complex dynamics that arise with donor relations. Funding can be a medium for tilting the scale towards localization, or it could be the means that deepens asymmetry and dependency in terms of access to resources and defining priorities. Financiers must actively be mindful to »decolonize aid« by empowering young peacebuilders with the agency to utilize their knowledge, skills and local expertise to define project priorities and strategies, including control over resources and project implementation.<sup>15</sup> In that light, it is necessary to shift the focus from »youth-centered« to youth-led initiatives, and the sustenance of these initiatives. The question is how to identify existing initiatives and youth networks and effectively support them, without depriving them of their agency.

Secondly, there is a need to acknowledge that funding is required not just for specific projects, but for continued operations of these initiatives, which includes administrative

<sup>12</sup> See the agenda for the High-Level Global Conference on Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes; available at: <https://www.un.org/youth-envoy/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Agenda-High-Level-Global-Conference-on-Youth-Inclusive-Peace-Processes-2022-Final-2.pdf> (last accessed: 9.11.2022).

<sup>13</sup> Global Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security (2022): *Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-level: A Guide for Public Officials*. New York: Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, Seth B. (2014): The Challenging Dynamics of Global North-South Peacebuilding Partnerships: Practitioner Stories from the Field, in: *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*. 9(3): 65–81. doi:10.1080/15423166.2014.984571.

costs. Many small-scale youth-led organizations particularly at grassroots level may be unincorporated or unregistered, which closes the door to donations and therefore their only access to funding is through small grants or awards. Funding structures therefore need to be flexible to build sustainability at local levels. Youth-led organizations should be allowed to define their own priorities and strategies and long-term planning and programming. Funding organizational operational costs in addition to project implementation costs is all the more important when one of the risks of being a youth-led volunteer-only organization is that it can exclude young people from marginalized backgrounds who cannot afford the time and costs to volunteer. To make resources youth-friendly, procurement procedures should be kept simple, and grant schemes should be tailored for small-scale organizations. In addition, donors and granters should make available support mechanisms such as mentorship and training opportunities for financial management.<sup>16</sup>

Understandably, there will be a need to address donor concerns about the high transaction costs and risks of funding a large number of smaller projects or organizations. This can be addressed by adequate mapping of local actors and how they tie in together to achieve common goals and expected outcomes.

Following project implementation, financiers should note that conflict prevention and peacebuilding are not always easy to measure in quantifiable ways. The fruits of peacebuilding efforts may be slow and long-term, whereas funding is often provided for short-term projects. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation quality indicators should be flexible enough to account for differential impact at a cultural and structural levels. The extent to which youth were involved in the design, planning and implementation of the project should also be included, as this can be an indicator of local capacity building. For lasting impact, sustainable and long-term funding should be explored.

## 5 CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the YPS agenda has not only found increasing support among Member States and international bodies as being instrumental for sustainable peace, but that Member States have demonstrated and committed to its operationalization. Following organized advocacy by civil society networks, international organizations and global partnerships working to implement the YPS agenda, the UNGA resolution on financing peacebuilding adopted on September 8, 2022 recognized the role of young people and youth-led organizations in peacebuilding, and the need for multi-year, risk-tolerant and flexible funding to sustainably finance their efforts. While it is encouraging to see the mainstreaming and inclusion of the YPS agenda internationally,

the core challenges to its full implementation remain at the national and local levels.

In line with the above considerations, this paper thus provides the following recommendations to support young people as promoters of peace:

- When defining strategies, include youth from the planning stage, and not simply at the implementation stage. Ensure consultations are held in partnership with both public and private sectors.
- International partners and actors should promote national ownership by directly supporting youth, as well as through advocacy with national governments and actors to make available resources to give youth access to opportunities through domestic structures, and not only through international interventions and side projects.
- Nurture young people's skills in leadership, mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution, and communication. Create opportunities for young people to capitalize on their experiences and assets.
- Consult young people representing diverse backgrounds at all stages of designing national and sub-national frameworks, action plans, policies, project development and implementation, and service delivery.
- Develop specialized committees within the State apparatus dedicated to the monitoring and implementation of the YPS agenda at all levels. Allocate clear roles, responsibilities and resources.
- Define clear objectives and targets adapted to contextual realities to enhance youth participation in peace and political processes.
- Provide mechanisms for protection of youth alongside strategies to increase their participation.

<sup>16</sup> Global Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security (2022): *Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-level: A Guide for Public Officials*. New York: Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth.

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