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Research Report

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Youth-led peace: The role of youth in peace processes

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
I. The roles of youth in peace processes	6
II. Challenges and barriers to youth-inclusive peace processes	13
Deficit labels and insufficient capacity-building opportunities.....	13
Local resistance to youth leadership and international involvement.....	14
Socio-economic barriers and financial challenges.....	15
Exclusionary political structures and tokenistic inclusion.....	16
Under-representation of diverse youth identities.....	18
The need for protection and psychosocial support.....	18
III. The complexity of ‘inclusion’ in peace processes	20
What does inclusion mean?.....	20
Resisting ‘essentialism’: The diversity of youth identities.....	24
Beyond ‘tokenism’: Meaningful inclusion.....	25
Securitisation of peace and inclusion.....	25
IV. Moving forward: crucial steps for youth-inclusive peace processes	27
References	32

Introduction

More than 600 million young people live in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (Wilton Park, 2017). Despite being deeply affected by violence in a myriad of ways, young people's voices are not heard, nor included in the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The 'youth bulge' is seen as a driver of instability, and young people are typically portrayed as perpetrators of violence or potential 'spoilers' who should be protected from radicalisation and extremism (see, for example, OECD, 2011). The active role young people play as peacemakers, mediators and peacebuilders at grassroots and local levels are under-acknowledged and they are often not included in official peace processes. Beyond peacebuilding, young people display ownership, agency and leadership in diverse areas that are of significance to local, regional, national and international peace and security, ranging from climate change to tackling inequalities. Yet, the achievements of young people are hindered due to the absence of adequate recognition, protection, funding and meaningful partnerships.

This report highlights the key themes, findings and recommendations of the project *Youth-led peace: The role of youth in peace processes* led by the University of Glasgow. The objectives of the project were to:

- examine the barriers to and strategies for youth-inclusive peace processes
 - take stock of the progress of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda
 - investigate and emphasise the significance of youth leadership as peacemakers, mediators and peacebuilders at grassroots and local levels
 - explore the pathways for promoting and investing in youth leadership in peace processes through meaningful partnerships, capacity-building and protection.
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The project involved two key activities:

1. **Consultations** with youth-led peacebuilding organisations in August–September 2020: The consultation process comprised a questionnaire and focus group meeting, with participants from eight youth-led organisations in Afghanistan, Kenya, Liberia, the Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, and Turkey.¹
2. A **knowledge exchange workshop** held at the University of Glasgow, 29–30 October 2020: The workshop on the role of youth in peace processes brought together representatives from the United Nations (UN) (including the Office of the UN Secretary General’s Envoy on Youth, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UN DPPA); the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); conflict-resolution organisations (Beyond Borders Scotland, Search for Common Ground, Interpeace, Initiatives for International Dialogue, Conflictus Conflict Resolution Training); and youth-led peacebuilding organisations (United Network of Young Peacebuilders, Youth without Borders Organisation for Development Yemen, Human Rights Agenda Kenya, Afghans for Progressive Thinking, Generation Peace Youth Network Philippines, Never Again Rwanda, Young-Adult Empowerment Initiative South Sudan, and Young Peacebuilders of Turkey).²

Based on findings and insights from the consultations and the workshop, this report provides an overview of the diverse contributions of youth to peace processes (Part I) and discusses the challenges and barriers young peacebuilders face while working towards peace (Part II). We then explore the multiple dimensions of inclusion in peace processes (Part III) and chart potential avenues for future research, policy and practice in light of lessons learned from youth-led peace initiatives (Part IV).

1. The consultations were conducted following an ethical assessment; the participants were provided with the option to request anonymity or confidentiality, and a focus group meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participant organisations are named, or explicit or attributable quotes are included in this report only where this has been approved by the respective participant.

2. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule. The report reflects the authors’ accounts of the discussions, which do not necessarily reflect the views of the workshop participants.

I. The roles of youth in peace processes

Young people take on active roles before, during and after conflict. They work towards conflict prevention, build peace during conflict, deliver humanitarian support, and participate in post-conflict peace, truth and reconciliation processes. In addition, the work of young people cuts across different levels and spheres of engagement within, around, and even in the absence of, an official peace process. They reach out to and cooperate with individuals, families and communities, their peers, and national and international actors.

Box 1: What is a peace process? An inclusive definition

An inclusive approach to peace-making requires an inclusive understanding of what constitutes a 'peace process'.

Often the term 'peace process' is understood narrowly as an official, national process of conflict resolution between the main parties to an armed conflict – either two or more states, or a state and one or more non-state armed groups. Formal peace negotiations and resultant peace agreements are at the heart of this conceptualisation of a peace process.

Broader definitions consider a peace process as 'a mixture of politics, diplomacy, changing relationships, negotiation, mediation, and dialogue in both official and unofficial arenas' (Saunders, 2001, p. 483) involving multiple tracks of diplomacy at the local, national and international levels, characterised by non-linearity between phases and tracks of a peace process. Adopting a broad definition is essential to capturing the diversity and complexity of interactions between actors, phases, structures and layers of peace-making and peacebuilding activities.

Beyond national peace processes, local peace processes which involve 'locally based actors' and 'address local conflict dynamics within a part of the wider conflict-affected area' (Wise et al., 2019, p. 2) are also gaining significance. This is particularly the case in protracted conflicts, such as in Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Syria and Yemen, which have proven resistant to traditional conflict-resolution methods centred around main conflict protagonists.

The experiences of the young peacebuilders we consulted attest to the diversity of youth engagement in peace processes. These young peacebuilders are involved in a range of activities to heal their communities from the consequences of violent conflict, to address the root causes of conflict to prevent its relapse, and to build a lasting culture of peace in their societies. The contributions of these young peacebuilders to peace processes in their countries include wide-ranging and varied activities. The following are examples that showcase their work:

1. Initiatives for conflict resolution, peace-making, mediation and dialogue activities, broadly understood as:

- working towards building social cohesion for peaceful coexistence between groups that historically have found themselves in conflict
- acting as mediators and peacebuilders at grassroots and community levels
- setting up spaces where shared visions and understandings are co-constructed
- designing initiatives to challenge misconceptions, reduce prejudices, mitigate hate speech and develop respect for others
- opening channels of communication and building networks with other youth, including the most marginalised
- advocating for human rights and dignity and against violence in any form.

The cases of the Anataban Campaign in South Sudan (Box 2) and the youth dialogue initiative in Somaliland (Box 3) are powerful examples of the work young people lead that has a positive impact in their communities and beyond.

Box 2: The Anataban Campaign in South Sudan

With South Sudanese civil society raising the consciousness of an active citizenry through workshops and information sessions, including in refugee settlements in Uganda, the youth and next generation of South Sudanese are leveraging their collective power to hold leaders to account. This is exemplified by the Anataban Campaign, which has been more politically vocal than other South Sudanese peace organisations. Anataban is an artist collective that utilises the power of arts to raise awareness and foster public discussions on key issues for local peacebuilding such as government accountability and redressing social injustices. The collective also imagines a shared vision of a peaceful South Sudan that society should collectively work towards. For example, the group launched the online campaign #SouthSudanIsWatching to put pressure on leaders to implement the 2018 peace agreement, and the hashtag has been used throughout the world. Young peacebuilders also organise concerts, street theatre, graffiti, poetry readings and other artistic events, with South Sudanese youth re-claiming a public platform to express their grievances and shape a future South Sudan.

Box 3: Bringing youth representatives from conflicting parties together in Somaliland

The Somaliland Youth Development and Voluntary Organization (SOYDAVO) described their experience of bringing together a group of young men and women from warring clans: *‘We opened a seven-day long discussion on prevention of violence and de-escalation of conflicts with 30 young men and women, who had taken part in the latest violent conflict in the district. These young men and women have never gone to school. They were often praised [for] their role in the conflicts by their fellow clansmen and women. Changing this approach requires time and a proper way to present your arguments. [T]his has been possible with the support of the understanding we had in the context and the life examples we have used including destruction of properties, productive communal assets, loss of lives and animals. The young men and women are now peace ambassadors in their villages and they have moved to the urban cities in Somaliland so that they don’t find themselves again engaged in the conflicts.’*

2. Initiatives for healing the traumas of violent conflict and reintegrating survivors and ex-perpetrators:

- providing psychosocial support and safe spaces to help youth overcome the traumas developed due to violent conflict they have experienced and its aftermath
- supporting the reintegration of ex-perpetrators into society through counselling and developing life skills.

Working on healing trauma is a critical step for young people to be able to contribute to and lead peace processes. The case of a youth peacebuilding organisation in Rwanda (see Box 4) showcases such work.

Box 4: Dealing with the past, paving the way for the future

Never Again Rwanda (NAR) was founded by students who identified the challenges for youth in post-genocide Rwanda. They saw the merits in establishing platforms to engage youth to promote peace and to work on the important issues for youth relating to post-genocide life. NAR focuses on youth engagement within the community, to create spaces for peace, working specifically with youth from survival, ex-perpetrator and returnee backgrounds. For instance, NAR has created safe spaces for youth through closed groups of 20 to 30 individuals who have shared their traumatic experiences and have received necessary support in return, such as psychotherapy. The absence of a platform before this to share views on barriers to safety, inclusion and participation had previously limited youth participation in decision-making. NAR also works to empower young people in Rwanda to become active, critical-thinking citizens.

3. Initiatives to strengthen capacities and skills:

- conducting relevant research to develop their understanding of issues and supporting change in their local communities and societies
- equipping themselves and their peers with various skills, including: critical thinking, skills to establish income-generating activities and to drive socio-economic development, skills to lead and contribute to a truly pluralistic and tolerant society, and skills to participate in security and peace-making efforts at official levels.

One of the project participants explained that their youth-led peacebuilding organisation trained many *'young peace builders who now act as peace mediators amongst their peers in schools and communities'*. Projects of the Young Peacebuilders of Turkey is another powerful example of the leadership young peacebuilders showcases in developing initiatives to strengthen their peers' capacities, networking and skills (Box 5). The work of another organisation in Kenya (Box 6) also demonstrates the role of skills training at the intersection of peace education and prevention of radicalisation and conflict.

Box 5: The Youth, Peace and Security School in Turkey

Young Peacebuilders of Turkey, the first youth-led peace organisation in the country, held a 'Youth, Peace and Security School' in January 2021. This first-of-its-kind project brought 35 youth participants aged between 18-29 with experts from academia and NGOs to address the issues of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, digital peacebuilding, and the role of youth in peace processes. The objectives of the School were to enhance the knowledge and skills of youth participants, as well facilitating networking and advancing Youth, Peace and Security as an academic field. In addition to holding the Youth, Peace and Security School, Young Peacebuilders of Turkey aim to raise awareness about the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in Turkey by organising workshops and seminars for youth participants, translating the key UN resolutions into Turkish, and leading projects aiming to increase social cohesion.

Box 6: Working with secondary school peace clubs in Kenya

Human Rights Agenda (HURIA), a leading youth-serving non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kenya, implemented a youth-led project of peace education in secondary schools in the country. The aim of the project was to create awareness and impart skills amongst students and teachers in identifying and responding to early signs of radicalisation. Through the project, HURIA reached out to 1,803 students and strengthened existing peace clubs in 21 secondary schools.

4. Initiatives centred around official peace processes

One action taken by youth in the context of official peace processes is advocacy for inclusive peace negotiations and processes. Youth forums such as the National Youth Jirga (Forum) in Afghanistan are an excellent example of this (see Box 7). Such forums bring young people together, which allows them to create a shared vision of peace in their country, to define their role in building peace, and to outline the steps they need to take to work together and the support they need to receive to be able to do this.

Box 7: The National Youth Jirga (Forum) of Afghanistan

The Forum brought together 100 youth representatives from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan for a three-day conference held by the National Peace Jirga to discuss the Afghan peace process and the role of youth. Young Afghan men and women, who can often feel disenfranchised from the country's legislature, gathered to discuss how to bring about peace in the country as well as ways to improve education and address unemployment. The Forum culminated in the adoption of a resolution that focuses on the role of young people in shaping the future of the country, which has been shared with the Afghan government and the international community.

Other actions include raising awareness about the YPS agenda and the UN resolutions on youth-inclusive peace processes among youth and adults, as well as contributing to the creation and development of YPS policies. Awareness of the existence of such official documents and processes is essential to mobilise communities and receive their support in building peace. Work by Afghans for Progressive Thinking (see Box 8) to localise UN Resolution 2250 on YPS (UN Security Council, 2015) provides a useful example of how this can be done.

Box 8: Promoting UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and fostering youth role models in Afghanistan

Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) are a youth-led professional organisation with members in 34 provinces across Afghanistan. They work to promote youth leadership, education and a culture of peace, and have impacted and inspired 40,000 students to build a vision for a just and inclusive Afghanistan. APT collaborated with the United Network of Young Peacebuilders and other Afghan youth organisations to advocate for UN Resolution 2250 which was passed in December 2015 (UN Security Council, 2015). APT then followed this by localising the Resolution across the provinces: for example, they invited local authorities and government officials to attend an event and panel discussions about the importance of the document. Further to this, in 2018 APT initiated the role of an Afghan Youth Representative to the UN Programme. The first and second youth representatives briefed the UN Security Council and conveyed the message of Afghan youth and how they are striving for peace.

Although participation of youth in official peace processes remains limited due to the barriers explored below, in some settings young people have shown leadership by engaging in official peace negotiations as members of negotiating teams, members of technical committees that have assisted negotiating teams, and as youth representatives in various consultations.³ The role of youth in South Sudan's High-Level Revitalization Forum⁴ (HLRF) is but one powerful example (Box 9).⁵

Box 9: Peace leadership of young peacebuilders of South Sudan in the High-Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF) and beyond

In April 2020, Gatwal Gatkuoth, founder of the Young-adult Empowerment Initiative in South Sudan, briefed the UN Security Council during a conference on Youth, Peace and Security. Emphasising the role young people played in South Sudan's peace process through their participation in the

HLRF, Gatkuoth put forward recommendations on how international actors can support young people's contributions to peace in South Sudan and beyond. Through their role in the peace process, young people in South Sudan facilitated the inclusion of young refugees in the negotiations and increased youth participation in governance structures, as well as monitoring the peace talks and putting pressure on the conflict parties, including through social media campaigns.

A peacebuilding organisation in the Philippines offers an example of youth engagement and leadership (see Box 10),⁶ demonstrating how young people can effectively advocate for youth-inclusive peace, engage with non-state armed groups and the government, and create a space within which they can work towards peace in collaboration with various stakeholders, including local and international actors.

Box 10: Youth leadership during the negotiation and implementation of the Peace Agreement for Bangsamoro

GenPeace, a youth peacebuilding organisation in the Philippines, organised a Dialogue with the key stakeholders in the Mindanao peace process, including the leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, in October 2008 to present the Youth Peace Agenda and Action Plan. The Youth Peace Agenda called for the protection of youth caught in the crossfire, addressing the needs of the internally displaced persons, and recognition of the youth as an important and distinct stakeholder in the peace process.

GenPeace actively campaigned for the Youth Peace Agenda since 2014 to achieve the inclusion of provisions in the Bangsamoro Organic Law, the law implementing the peace agreement, on youth participation in governance and to increase representation of youth in

3 For more examples of the role of youth 'in, around and outside the room' in peace processes, see Altiock & Grizelj (2019, pp. 17–34).

4 To read more about HLRF, see Verjee (2017).

5 To watch Gatwal Gatkuoth's speech at the UN Security Council, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9jAPI7axA>. For more on the post-agreement experience of youth in South Sudan, see page 15 in Part II of this report.

6 For more on this case study and the BARMM Youth Development Plan, see <https://peace.gov.ph/2019/06/barmm-youth-ensured-of-key-participation-in-bangsamoro-governance/>

decision making at all levels. These provisions aim to ensure that youth rights are respected and protected, to create an enabling environment to promote lasting peace, and to promote the rights and participation of indigenous peoples and women's rights in peace agendas.

Leading the advocacy on Youth, Peace and Security in the Philippines, GenPeace supported the government effort in crafting the Bangsamoro Youth, Peace and Security Agenda by spearheading the consultation process in June 2019 with one hundred and three youth representatives from 76 youth-led organisations contributing to the formulation of the Agenda to guide policymakers and service providers to integrate and adopt action points in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes for youth in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), including the BARMM Youth Development Plan (2019).

Acknowledging and supporting the diversity of youth engagement in all phases, layers and tracks of national and local peace processes is vital. The perseverance and hard work of young peacebuilders inspires others and creates change. They connect and engage with young people who would otherwise not be included. They create a community of likeminded peers where there is a void, distrust and suffering to turn things around and give hope. Yet, they do all this in contexts where they face one challenge and barrier after another – which we turn to in Part II.

The meaningful political contributions of young people to the prevention of violence, and to sustaining and building peace are not only about their representation in political forums, participation in established policy and practice, or participation in formal peace processes. A narrow focus on the notion of inclusion fails to recognize where young people take independent initiatives, and define the platforms through which they can better express themselves politically for peace and security – arenas of direct participation. These are not spaces where young people are being “included” or “invited in” – they are spaces that young people have invented or made their own.

(UNFPA & PBSO, 2018, p. 74)

II. Challenges and barriers to youth-inclusive peace processes

The findings from our consultations point to six main categories of challenges and barriers that hinder youth leadership in peacebuilding and thus diminish the prospects for youth-inclusive peace processes. These challenges are not independent of each other; they are interconnected and have a cumulative effect in many contexts.

Deficit labels and insufficient capacity-building opportunities

The accounts from our consultation participants were replete with **deficit labels** used by others for young peacebuilders – that young people are perceived to be *‘inexperienced’* and *‘inadequate’*, and therefore unable to take on an active role in the determination of the future of their societies. In their experience, an overwhelming focus is placed on **credentials** at the neglect of the **practical and lived experience** of youth. For example, as one young peacebuilder pointed out, they face *‘[e]xclusion from decision-making circles at all levels, citing my lack of experiences and education background. This [approach often overlooks] my practical field experiences.’* At the same time, another participant explained:

it’s very clear that young grassroot peacebuilders lack critical peacebuilding skills and tools ... but it’s indisputable that they also possess rich local knowledge and understanding of the conflicts International organisations should not overlook young peacebuilders for their lack of formal skills and instead should forge ‘genuine partnerships’ where they can feel their knowledge, efforts and initiatives are valued and supported.

The deficit labelling is at times coupled with an expectation that youth should adopt ‘adult’ or ‘formal’ categories, language and objectives, or that they should be represented by more ‘capable’ others/adults. A young peacebuilder referred to *‘the business of doing things on behalf the young peacebuilders’* and pointed out that they *‘should be given the platforms to tell their own stories to the world ... by themselves’*.

Nevertheless, there was widespread acceptance among the respondents that there is a need for greater and more accessible capacity-building opportunities for youth. The lack of opportunities to develop the **skills** and acquire the **knowledge** that youth need to lead, engage and partner with peers and other stakeholders and to communicate with international audiences, including high-level officials, was emphasised as a key challenge. This includes limited or no opportunities to develop capacities such as project design and implementation, engagement/communication with diverse

stakeholders, fundraising, grant writing, advocacy, needs assessment, conflict resolution, conflict analysis, conflict management and mediation. **Inaccessibility of international and national platforms and funds** that could support capacity development, collaborative learning and financing was also highlighted. A young peacebuilder pointed out that this is particularly challenging for the *'inclusion of youth at grassroot levels given the fact that their access to resources is limited'*.

Some young peacebuilders were also doubtful as to whether existing platforms and spaces are built on **genuine partnerships** and cooperation between actors that have a shared vision, including partnerships between youth and international organisations, national/local government and other actors, whereby young people are seen as an **equal partner**.

Local resistance to youth leadership and international involvement

Local resistance to youth-led and youth-inclusive peacebuilding activities emerged as another major challenge for young peacebuilders. The **stereotypes about youth** play a significant role in this resistance. Young people are often viewed as troublemakers or only recipients of support instead of active agents of change. For example, one youth peacebuilder shared that *'the [young] generation [they] belong to is considered to be the perpetrator of violence and corrupt[ion] instead of a peace maker'*.

In addition to entrenched prejudices against youth, the **generational gap** and **dominance of elders and hierarchies** across many contexts emerge as challenging factors, where youth are expected to obey and not question the wisdom and decisions of particular figures. As one peacebuilder pointed out, one challenge is the *'hierarchy gap between old and young people, where youth are culturally perceived as not being able to hold decision-making responsibilities'*. As they further explained, the issue is not only with youth not being accepted as an active participant in decision-making activities, but that *'decision-makers do not listen to young people'*, which maintains *'a structure that does not take into account the expectations, goals, dreams and work of young people'*. Similarly, in another context, a youth peacebuilder explained:

A cultural mindset that exists toward youth in government and outside the government needs to change – a change that would question the myth that only age brings wisdom. While age does bring wisdom, it does not mean young people cannot lead. ... Wisdom of the aged and education of the youth must be utilised in our country. Both are needed. I believe our people need to understand that youth can lead – we are leading already. Similarly, youth must understand that people of age and life experience are valuable. One without the other is not sufficient.

Having more elected young officials does not always help, as one peacebuilder shared. They explained that they *'do not voice out challenges youth face. Rather, they go with what their party leaders say.'*

Another driver of local resistance is that peacebuilding/peace-making work may not be seen as important compared to other **local priorities**. One youth peacebuilder explained:

Carrying out peacebuilding activities is not an easy job [here]. The problem is that people will view your activities as something that is less important and often you will become a victim of social and economic challenges.

Local resistance to the role of youth in peace processes may be combined with **resistance to international intervention and top-down peacebuilding**, as the discourse that young people bring to their local contexts may be viewed as a ‘western’, ‘foreign’ and ‘liberal’ intervention. As one peacebuilder explained, *‘local people don’t actively play a role in peacebuilding initiatives and they often view [them] as ... imposed by others’*. The participant maintained that *‘local people ... need to feel part of the processes where they propose solutions, contribute to the design of the peacebuilding activities’*.

Another participant emphasised that **local ownership** and **relevance** becomes a concern when relations with international actors are built. They pointed out that international partners should *‘allow the young peacebuilders to come up with their own initiatives and support those projects rather than asking the young peacebuilders to implement the project that has been designed outside [the country]’*. They went on to explain that many peacebuilding *‘organisations ... cannot make any difference in the society ... because the programme that they are working on is designed by the donors and that does not address the current challenges in the country and ... does not eliminate the root causes of the problems’*. Another young peacebuilder pointed out that international programmes are often *‘timebound and tied with deliverables’*, while *‘peacebuilding is a process’*.

A young peacebuilder elaborated on the varied implications of local resistance to their work:

It is not easy to train young and former clan militia on TVET⁷ and life skills. It requires funding and buy-in from the parents and local communities. You will be often associated with the NGOs and your contribution will not be valued since you are being funded by western international NGOs. Local fundraising is absolutely impossible.

Socio-economic barriers and financial challenges

Limited financial resources available to youth organisations is a major barrier to their active participation in peacebuilding, peace-making and conflict resolution. As one young peacebuilder explained, *‘many youth organisations cannot make the expected effect and are closed down in a short time because they do not have enough funds’*. Another one shared that *‘[s]ome of the key challenges I face include not being able to reach a desirable amount of youth given our minimal resources’*. It is rare for youth organisations to receive sustainable funding for local, bottom-up initiatives.

⁷ TVET stands for technical and vocational education and training.

Youth also find it hard to navigate the **bureaucracy of funding bodies and donors**. For example, one peacebuilder shared that:

... there is a very lazy bureaucratic structure. This causes young people to reach the necessary resources late. For example, when a young person applies to an official institution for a project, he deals with dozens of application papers and procedures. At the same time, it goes back and forth between dozens of institutions for bureaucratic reasons. This slow system needs to be changed and accelerated.

Another young peacebuilder highlighted their *'inability to compete with well-established [international NGOs] with experienced human resources'* when it comes to accessing peacebuilding funds. These issues are of particular concern to those youth initiatives and organisations that are new as they not only compete with more established and more connected organisations and individuals, but also have to prove that they are not a threat to the government.

Financial support is particularly crucial for young peacebuilders facing **structural socio-economic barriers**. Despite the commonly held assumption that young people who participate in peace processes are from elite groups in society, our consultations provide at least anecdotal evidence that this is not the case across the board. Many young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, young minorities, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and young (relatives of) victims of conflict overcome the structural barriers and play significant roles in peacebuilding at local, national and international levels. The young peacebuilders acknowledged that, although limited, there is financial support and other resources for youth to initiate peacebuilding activities; however, the broader circumstances young people have to live in and conditions they are exposed to hardly get addressed. Young people struggle to participate in and contribute fully and effectively to peacebuilding if they live in abject **poverty** and struggle on a day-to-day basis. In such circumstances, simple implementation of platforms for youth engagement will not work if youth do not have access to food and decent shelter. As one peacebuilder explained, in contexts where there is hunger, youth become dependent on politicians, which in turn determines what they say and do.

Exclusionary political structures and tokenistic inclusion

Youth are traditionally **under-represented in political structures** across local, national and international levels. Such exclusion from decision-making, particularly in the field of peace and security, is a particular concern to young peacebuilders and hinders their presence in peace processes as decisions about process and conduct are taken without their involvement. A young peacebuilder maintained that *'young people should be involved in decision-making processes by holding important positions at governments or international organisations. Quotas can be set for young people.'*

Young peacebuilders also referred to the barriers they face when it comes to **engagement with official peace processes**. A participant shared that:

[T]he voice of the young men and women who are actively involved in everyday peace initiatives are missing from the [peace] process. There is absolute need for youth to lead peace initiatives and prevention of violence, since the ... people who are [most] involved and affected by conflicts are youth.

This participant also maintained that *'young people should be in the room and should get directly involved in the official peace processes'*.

The participants appeared to attach a significant role to **international organisations and actors**. They expect international actors to step in and support local and national governments in creating effective and context-sensitive policies, laws, spaces, mechanisms and initiatives that can meaningfully include youth and their voices, as well as offering them the support they need to work together. One peacebuilder suggested that international organisations *'need to focus on reaching out and targeting local government actors/national government/national peace committees so that they are also aware of the positive contribution of youth agency and create the necessary policies/laws for them to engage'*. In another peacebuilder's experience, this has already worked in their context and they believe it can have a similar impact elsewhere. As they shared, because of international organisations' engagement in their country:

... today the youth cannot be ignored by the government and elders in the society. Youth has received recognition that does not exist before. Most people today view youth as agent of change that can lead the society toward prosperity.

As the peacebuilder explained, this was done by:

bringing [youth, elders and government officials] in one room and to be part of the discussion and hearing each other's perspective. Today, youth are part of the discussions where there are high official government officials are present.

Finally, the participants emphasised the significance of **sustained inclusion** of youth within peace-making through to post-agreement implementation, including constitutional, transitional justice, and development reforms. The experience of young peacebuilders in the context of the South Sudanese peace process was referred to in this respect: although youth representatives were involved in the official peace negotiations (through the inclusion of youth representatives in the HLRF) that led to the conclusion of a major peace agreement in 2015, the post-agreement process was not inclusive of youth and led to a perception among young people that they had been cast aside.

Under-representation of diverse youth identities

The young peacebuilders we consulted expressed concerns about the under-representation of certain youth groups in peace processes. In their experience, **hard-to-reach youth, young women and youth belonging to particular ethnic groups or with certain political inclinations** are often excluded from the conversation despite their heightened vulnerability and lived experiences. One young peacebuilder shared that:

Young peacebuilders who live in remote areas do not get the equal opportunity [compared] to young peacebuilders who live in the capital ... For example, youth who live in the provinces ... never get the chance to voice their thoughts, attend the events and get funding.

They maintained that as there are a lot of differences within countries, *'it's important that the young in all parts of the country should be given the chance to speak on behalf of their region not the whole [country]'*. Similar concerns were voiced regarding young refugees and IDPs and young women.

Another young peacebuilder pointed out that youth working on certain issues can be disadvantaged. For instance, they explained that, despite the evolving nature of contemporary armed conflicts and the prevalence of 'resource-based conflict', *'environment advocates, IDP rights advocacies and local peacebuilding work are not really supported'*.

Politicisation of inclusion and the preferential treatment of youth groups that align with the political views of those in power are also challenging to young peacebuilders. In many contexts, the inclusion of young people in peace processes and projects is selective and politicised as powerful actors choose who should represent youth. A peacebuilder explained that such dynamics exist also at the local level, as *'communities also have existing gatekeepers who may at times not share the information [with national and local institutions] on local peacebuilders actually doing the work'*.

The need for protection and psychosocial support

Young peacebuilders live and work in **unsafe environments** where space for civil society organisations and freedom of expression is curtailed by state and non-state actors. One peacebuilder described *'non-democratic and oppressive policies implemented by the government'* as causing youth to *'be afraid and not to contribute enough'*. Similarly, others mentioned *'insecurity, closing civic spaces and curtailed freedom of expression by the state'* and *'security risks especially from the perpetrators of violence in communities'* among their concerns. Young peacebuilders also struggle to find space to carry out their activities as national governmental and non-governmental actors do not support them and even prevent their activities and meetings from taking place.

The connection between insecurity, protection needs and participation is evident. In the words of a young peacebuilder, *'many youth choose to **walk away from peace processes to keep safe**. They become targets for their views and participations in the peace and mediation processes.'* In some contexts, even the word 'peace' itself has negative connotations: another young

peacebuilder explained the difficulties they faced while they set up a youth platform and reached out to young peers, who *'did not want to participate because the word, 'peace' was in its title'*.

Emphasising **protection needs**, young peacebuilders mentioned the lack of *'funding to create programmes and pool funding to support youth under attack'*, and that *'[i]nternational organisations can increase advocacy on the protection of the youth from the states' repression and reprisals'*.

In conflict zones, security risks such as regular attacks on public spaces, educational institutions and civilians take a **psychosocial toll** on young people. Young people living in conflict and post-conflict societies do not have resources to overcome the **trauma** of living through violent conflict that continues to have an adverse effect on their mental health and precludes their active participation in peacebuilding and society. In this context, participants also emphasised the need for continuous psychosocial, economic and life-skills support, as well as counselling, for *'youth disengaging from violent groups'* and *'former child soldiers and ex-youth fighters'*. As one peacebuilder explained, the psychosocial toll, absence of appropriate support and continuous insecurity *'[take] away the hope from us and the passion we have'* for peace.

III. The complexity of ‘inclusion’ in peace processes

The young peacebuilders we consulted described various practical challenges to youth leadership in peacebuilding and youth-inclusive peace processes. During the consultations and the knowledge exchange workshop, participants also unpacked the complexity of conceptualising and implementing inclusion in peace processes. In this part, we revisit the notion of inclusion and explore three notes of caution on **essentialism**, **tokenism** and **securitisation** in peace processes.

What does inclusion mean?

The UN Guidance for Effective Mediation defines ‘inclusivity’ as ‘the extent and manner in which the views and needs of parties to conflict and other stakeholders are represented, heard and integrated into a peace process’ (UN, 2012, p. 11; see also Box 11 for a list of key international declarations and guidelines on inclusive peace processes). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide ‘an overarching framework for action for states and other actors to work together toward conflict prevention and peace’ (UN & World Bank, 2018, p. 6). They also tie peace to inclusive institutions and decision-making in Goal 16, which includes targets to ‘[d]evelop effective, accountable and transparent institutions’ and ‘[e]nsure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making’ at all levels (UNGA, 2017, pp. 21–22).

Box 11: Key declarations and guidelines on inclusive peace processes

On inclusive peace negotiation and mediation:

- UN, Guidance for effective mediation (2012)
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Enhancing gender-responsive mediation: A guidance note (2013)
- OSCE, Mediation and dialogue facilitation in the OSCE: Reference guide (2014)
- African Union (AU), Mediation support handbook (2014)
- UN, Guidance on gender and inclusive mediation strategies (2017)
- European Union (EU), Concept on peace mediation (2020)

On youth inclusivity:

- Amman youth declaration on youth, peace and security (2015)
- UN Security Council, Youth, peace and security resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), 2535 (2020) (see also Box 11)
- United Network of Young Peacebuilders, Guiding principles on young people's participation in peacebuilding (2016)
- AU and EU, Abidjan youth declaration (2017)
- EU, Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society (2018)
- AU, Continental framework for youth, peace and security (2020)

Note: All available online from the respective organisational repositories.

The call for inclusion in international peace-making policy extends to civil society, women, youth, minorities and Indigenous groups. Further, it is based on the assumption that inclusivity 'increases the legitimacy and national ownership of the peace agreement and its implementation' and 'reduces the likelihood of excluded actors undermining the process' (UN, 2012, p. 11). As such, inclusion (and exclusion) in peace processes is shaped both by normative and pragmatic considerations, taking into account the impact of inclusion or exclusion of a group on the legitimacy and success of a peace process and its outcomes (Lanz, 2011).

Box 12: UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (UN Security Council, 2015)

- Understands 'participation' as 'inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local, national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict' (para 1)
- Exhorts Member States and all relevant actors (including international organisations, NGOs, and non-state armed groups) to 'take into account, as appropriate, the participation and views of youth' in conflict resolution, the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction (para 2).

UN Security Council Resolution 2419 (UN Security Council, 2018)

- Adopted following the publication of the Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, *The missing peace*, and builds on its key recommendations to:
 - invest in and empower young people's capacities and leadership
 - develop collaborative and meaningful partnerships with youth
 - challenge the structural barriers against youth inclusion in local, national and global levels
- Urges the UN Secretary-General and his Special Envoys to take into account the views of youth and to facilitate their equal and full participation at decision-making in discussions on the maintenance of peace and security, peacebuilding and sustaining peace
- Expresses an intention to invite youth-led organisations to brief the Security Council.

UN Security Council Resolution 2535 (UN Security Council, 2020a)

- Emphasises the significance of inclusive partnerships with young people
- Aims to diversify youth participation by encouraging 'full, effective and meaningful participation of youth without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, disability, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (preamble)
- Entrenches the YPS agenda within the UN system by requesting the submission of a biennial report by the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of the associated Resolutions.

The emergence of the YPS agenda through the adoption of Resolution 2250 by the UN Security Council (UN Security Council, 2015) was the first milestone towards challenging the exclusionary and securitised approach to youth in peace and security (see Box 12). This was the outcome of a youth-driven advocacy process supported by a broad global coalition of UN agencies, civil society organisations and youth-led organisations (Berents & Prelis, 2020). The unanimously adopted Resolution recognises, for the first time, that 'young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security' and that 'their marginalisation is detrimental to building sustainable peace' (UN, 2015, (n 5) Preamble, para 2). The UN Security Council expanded on the YPS agenda through Resolutions 2419 (UN Security Council, 2018) and 2535 (UN Security Council, 2020a) (see Box 11). The agenda is integral to the 'sustaining peace' approach adopted by the UN, which is built on an integrated approach to conflict prevention, peace-making, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, human rights and development, and considers local ownership and civil society leadership (including that of women and youth) as indispensable to lasting peace (UNGA, 2016a, 2016b; UNGA & UN Security Council, 2018). Beyond the UN, the agenda includes initiatives and frameworks developed by regional organisations and civil society, including youth-led organisations and initiatives (see Box 11).

Translating the policies of inclusion into practice requires reflection on important questions so that policies can be effectively adapted and they can respond to unique local contexts. As illustrated in Table 1, these questions can be placed into three broad categories: 1. what does inclusion mean? 2. who is being included? and 3. what are they being included in?

Table 1: Unpacking inclusion	
Core questions	Sub-questions
What does inclusion mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the different forms and modalities of inclusion? • How broadly or narrowly should inclusion be conceptualised? • How are different forms of inclusion connected? • How should different forms of inclusion be realised in practice? • How should questions surrounding inequality be addressed?
Who is being included?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whom do individuals and groups included in peace processes claim to represent? • Do these individuals and groups have the authority and knowledge to speak on behalf of the people they say they do? • What voices, perspectives and interests are not being represented? • What barriers to representation exist? • How can barriers to representation be overcome? • How can the different identities, needs and interests of youth be balanced, and what implications do these differences have for understanding inclusion?
In what way are they being included?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which phases, structures and processes are conducive to youth inclusivity? • Are participating individuals and groups able to meaningfully participate in decision-making? • How should different understandings of peace be accommodated and reconciled during a peace process and its aftermath? • What role(s) can and should young people play in post-conflict societies?

Resisting ‘essentialism’: The diversity of youth identities

Young people stand out as a truly unique societal group in the inclusion agenda: youth is a transitional phase of life and an identity that all people will belong to during their lives. As such, youth represent ‘a microcosm of wider society’ (UNFPA & PBSO, 2018, p. 12) with diverse identities, ideologies and views falling under this large umbrella. Therefore, we should resist an ‘essentialising’ approach that portrays youth as a homogenous group.

Broad-brushing youth either as a weak group that is over-susceptible to victimisation and radicalisation, or a group that is essentially peaceful or ‘progressive’ is detrimental to meaningful youth inclusivity. For instance, the objective of emphasising the peaceful nature of the majority of youth should not lead to the exclusion and stigmatisation of youth who have participated in violence yet may show agency and leadership for a peaceful transition. Research demonstrates how young ex-fighters have later taken on active roles in politics, community activities and provision of public goods in post-conflict contexts (Bellows & Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). Peace processes that are inclusive of such young people may enable and encourage their shift to becoming active, peaceful and responsible participants of society.

Treating youth as a homogenous and monolithic group is also misleading. Young people, of course, do not all have the same interests, experiences, perspectives and beliefs, either within or across societies. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that individuals and groups who have been included in peace processes – even if they are able to meaningfully influence decision-making – have the authority to speak for ‘youth’ more generally. Youth, furthermore, may be only one reference point around which individual or collective identity could be constructed and mobilisation might occur, in addition to class, caste, race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, political views or social/cultural group belonging and their intersections. These differences may in fact mean that the interests of one group are disconnected from, or possibly even at odds with, those of another. Even within a group it is wrong to assume that representation based on identity equates to representation of perspectives.

Young people, like everyone else, possess agency to determine what they value and how their interests could best be pursued. It must also be remembered that young people are not separate from the political dynamics of the societies in which they exist. ‘The local’ too has its own politics (Suthaharan & Rampton, 2015); when it is generalised and differences are ignored, fundamental questions of power cannot be meaningfully engaged with. Not recognising the plurality of voices that collectively constitute ‘the local’ can, and has resulted, in hierarchies and systems of exclusion, exploitation and repression. Youth have historically found the possibilities for inclusion limited. Peacebuilding must facilitate, not limit, these possibilities. To unpack ‘the local’, we must consider the plurality of young people’s voices across different communities. There is thus a need for imagining new political and governance structures to bring the youth voices from various locations into the formal political realm and for them to feed into peacebuilding debates.

Beyond ‘tokenism’: Meaningful inclusion

Acknowledging the complexity and intersectionality of youth identities is essential for inclusive peace processes. Still, there is a danger that what appears to be inclusion can simply be tokenism if those involved have little or no influence on decision-making. This could be because their voices are silenced or ignored, or if the voices and perspectives that are chosen as representative of youth are simply those that already agree with predetermined aims of the peace process, or of (liberal) peacebuilding in general, and are merely present for symbolic reasons or to add a sense of legitimacy to how peace is designed and implemented.

Achieving youth-inclusive peace processes demands adherence to certain principles surrounding equality, political empowerment, agency, human rights and even peace itself. Different understandings of peace rest on certain normative underpinnings; indeed, even critical treatments of ‘the local’ are often themselves highly normative (Randazzo, 2016). The very notion of youth-inclusive peace processes, of course, rests on the assumption that both peace and youth inclusion are goods that should be promoted. This normativity should be acknowledged and explored in discussions about conflict, peace and inclusion, and centring youth voices in these discussions is essential. For meaningful inclusion, the diversity of youth views, no matter how divergent and critical, should be listened to as part of the debates.

‘Youth’ should not become a box to be ticked in peace processes. Nor should youth be seen merely as representatives of ‘youth issues’. Instead, attention must be paid to what youth voices express, how they envisage the objectives of the transition to peace, which relationships they aim to transform, and what solutions and resources they offer.⁸ What youth can do for peace is important, but meaningful inclusion requires reflecting also on what peace can mean and do for youth.

Securitisation of peace and inclusion

The increasing securitisation of responses to conflict and political violence pose a significant challenge to meaningful inclusivity in peace processes. Many project participants pointed to the tensions between the policies and practices of counterterrorism (CT), prevention of violent extremism (PVE), countering violent extremism (CVE), and inclusive peacebuilding. The perception of youth as victims, spoilers or perpetrators in CT, CVE and PVE is in contrast with the focus of inclusive peacebuilding policies on the positive contribution of youth to peace and security. It should be noted, however, that the seeming contrast stems partly from an erroneous understanding of PVE and the conflation of PVE and CVE: unlike CVE, which responds to specific violent actors through de-radicalisation and counter-narratives, PVE’s focus is on addressing social issues and threats that lead to engagement of individuals with violent extremist groups (Christodoulou & Nesterova, 2020).

Nevertheless, as practice shows (Christodoulou & Nesterova, 2020), programmes referred to as ‘PVE’ tend to be hijacked by security actors who prioritise security measures (e.g., identifying ‘at risk’ individuals and referring them to ‘experts’) at the neglect of human rights and genuine

⁸ For a relational approach to inclusion in peace processes see Hirblinger & Landau (2020).

community engagement to prevent radicalisation and/or engagement with violent extremist groups. In educational spaces where CVE and PVE programmes are often implemented, security agendas of surveillance of ‘at risk’ youth lead to their exclusion, breach educational autonomy, violate trust between teachers and students, and affect students’ lives and learning experiences (Chrisodoulou, 2020). If anything, such treatment of students (from particular minority groups) may lead to their engagement with violent extremist ideologies and groups.

In addition, although the CT, CVE, PVE and peacebuilding agendas relate to different aspects of youth experiences and are all necessary in their respective contexts, the policies, tools and mechanisms employed by the respective communities may contradict and undermine each other. For instance, securitisation stigmatises engagement with individuals and entities involved in, associated with, or at risk of resorting to violence, although engagement and negotiation are essential to peace-making (Olcay, 2020). As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism has recently highlighted, armed conflict and terrorism are increasingly conflated, leading to further shrinking of the humanitarian and peace-making space (Ní Aoláin, 2020, para 13).

Relatedly, amid the current pushback against multilateralism and human rights, it remains difficult to achieve international consensus around the concept of ‘sustaining peace’, and the connected Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and YPS agendas. The adoption in December 2020 of twin resolutions on the 2020 Peacebuilding Architecture Review is but one manifestation of this (UNGA, 2020; UN Security Council, 2020b). Reportedly, some Member States opposed giving prominence to WPS and YPS in the resolution, as well as resisting the mention of the nexus between peace and human rights (Security Council Report, 2020). In this climate, it is evident that the achievements of youth-led peacebuilding organisations and the YPS agenda to date should not be taken for granted. Increasing political buy-in for youth inclusivity in peace processes across the international spectrum, taking any opposition seriously and localising youth inclusivity, would be timely and urgent considerations.

IV. Moving forward: crucial steps for youth-inclusive peace processes

Much work remains to be done to fully incorporate young people into peace processes as agents of change; to recognise and support the contributions they make to building and sustaining peace; and to ensure that conflict and post-conflict realities address their needs and interests. Based on our consultations and knowledge exchange workshop, we identify the following steps as particularly crucial:

Support young peacebuilders, youth organisations and youth-led peace initiatives through equal partnerships and direct representation

International, national and regional actors should establish genuine, horizontal partnerships with young people as equal partners. Inclusion of young people in peace processes means that they are not simply sitting at the same table as decision-makers, but that they themselves are decision-makers who contribute to, shape and drive the discussions. While young peacebuilders may lack some skills, they have a lot to contribute from their lived experiences.

Instead of focusing on 'representing' youth voices to diverse actors and the wider public, international, national and regional actors should create or support youth-led platforms for youth to represent themselves. Such platforms may include, but should not be limited to, knowledge exchange programmes and activities, peer networks, media outlets, and high-level meetings, forums and other such events. These platforms can be supportive places for advocacy and voicing concerns that young peacebuilders have and can also help to bring youth from different locations to network and start working together for peace and justice.

International actors, ranging from international organisations to conflict-resolution organisations, should also lead by example to enhance the direct representation of youth, and not only through policy. This means including youth in all levels of decision-making within their own teams that provide assistance, good offices and mediation services in peace processes.

The YPS initiatives and frameworks constitute a significant development for the recognition, promotion and facilitation of the role of youth in peace and security. Yet, there is more work to be done. The efforts of the UN for gender parity and mainstreaming in senior leadership of special political missions, peacekeeping operations and UN Resident Coordinators is exemplary, albeit slow-moving, in this respect (UN Women, 2020). A similar commitment to progress on youth inclusivity across the UN and by other international actors active in YPS would be welcome.

Provide financial resources to support youth initiatives independently of official peace processes

Young peacebuilders' access to financial resources remains limited, which makes it challenging for them to engage with other actors and design and implement their own initiatives. Where opportunities exist, they involve engaging local young people in projects designed by international actors who, in many cases, may not know the local landscape as well as local peacebuilders do. It is thus critical to prioritise the support – including financial – of local, youth-led projects. Such initiatives can be more effective at addressing local problems as they can secure local buy-in and ownership. The Youth, Peace and Security Fund, recently initiated by Search for Common Ground in partnership with the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, is a positive example.⁹

Furthermore, financial resources should be easily available to youth peacebuilding organisations at different levels and should, where possible, provide capacity-development support to manage budgets and projects effectively. Whatever form financial support takes, there should be guidance provided to youth in how to navigate bureaucratic structures (e.g., application papers, procedures) so that they can receive such resources on time. Financing of youth initiatives should also be long-term and uninterrupted to ensure the sustainability and impact of projects. As financial support is often only available to well established organisations – leaving new organisations and emerging actors with no support – funding should be ring-fenced for new youth-led initiatives and organisations.

Facilitate the development of skills and competences in young people that are relevant in their contexts and meet their needs

The skills and competences that young people need to effectively engage with diverse stakeholders at different levels and to lead and contribute to peace processes and initiatives differ across contexts and depend on young people's backgrounds. Targeted research needs to be conducted with and/or by young people to determine their specific needs and the support required instead of using a skill set pre-determined by those in more powerful positions as a frame of reference. Our participants identified several key skills that have aided them in their work towards peace. These include, but are not limited to:

- critical-thinking skills to make informed decisions and effect change
- skills to engage in mediation and official peace processes, especially when high-level officials are involved with whom youth may have to communicate
- skills to mobilise financial resources
- skills to manage projects in conflict and post-conflict settings, such as planning and executing projects; building and sustaining networks; assessing, managing and mitigating risks; and analysing local conflict and its dynamics, among others
- skills to lead and work with others as a team member, including conflict-management, communication and problem-solving skills

⁹ See <https://www.sfcg.org/the-youth-peace-and-security-fund/>

- skills to raise awareness and advocate change among different groups
- skills to raise awareness among young people about their rights, freedoms and the protections already in place
- skills and knowledge to conduct research and to collaborate with diverse actors on designing, implementing and evaluating research projects
- skills for socio-economic advancement to help young people out of the poverty that prevents them from becoming active members of their communities.

Create safe spaces for young people to work together, learn from others, and receive necessary support and mentoring from experts

Protecting youth from all forms of violence and threats is essential for their participation in public life and peacebuilding work. The efforts of the Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding (WG-YPB),¹⁰ under the auspices of the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, has kick-started a much-needed dialogue on protection. In this respect, creating safe spaces for virtual and face-to-face interactions can support young people in various ways. In such safe spaces young people can share experiences and knowledge, devise effective ways to collaboratively advocate change, and design initiatives together for stronger impact with their peers locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. Mentoring by peers and other actors in their communities is another initiative that can support young people in their peacebuilding work.

Young people should also have access to a support system for the mental wellbeing and health of those who have gone through traumatic experiences, with access to formal counselling provided by trained professionals as well as informal peer-to-peer counselling. Providing psychosocial and emotional support to youth who have disengaged from violent groups and preventing their demonisation and dehumanisation should be a priority. While this should help to address any trauma caused by conflict, it should equip youth with skills for self-care also.

Incorporate diverse backgrounds and needs of young people in research, policy and programming

We should be mindful of the background young people come from, including their socio-economic status; religious, cultural and ethnic/racial belonging; location; gender and sexuality; and other characteristics. This is important as not all young people have the same opportunities or face the same barriers, and they live in very different conditions. The multiple identities of young people also mean that they will have different capabilities and skills, and thus the contributions that they can make to peace and what they might need from peace processes will vary. Identifying, acknowledging and incorporating such differences in policymaking, planning and research is essential to ensure everyone is heard and participates, and that specific, targeted policies and programmes are constructed.

¹⁰See https://www.youth4peace.info/About_GCYPs

Support capacity strengthening and mindset change of local and national authorities and gatekeepers

Young people are often faced with stereotypes and lack of trust from older generations as they are viewed as a source of conflict and as lacking experience and knowledge. Changing the perceptions and attitudes of local actors towards youth is necessary to 1. address any stereotypes about young people so they are seen as assets who can contribute to solving local problems, and 2. improve engagement between actors and the support provided to young people at local and national levels. Focusing on the capacity development of local actors is critical to ensure local buy-in and recognition in laws, policies and programmes; to support operationalisation of international instruments and change in policy and practice from the grassroots to the national level; and to ensure that peace processes have space for youth-led peace initiatives.

Develop a research agenda around the role of youth in peace processes that places their agency, voices and perspectives at its centre

Finding ways to meaningfully integrate marginalised groups in official spaces and to create more informal spaces for them to express their views, articulate their interests and share their experiences is a crucial task for peacebuilding scholarship and policy. This requires engaging with major questions surrounding voice and the generation of knowledge, and demands avoiding broad generalisations and recognising the multiplicities that define identity. Young people are neither exclusively victims nor perpetrators in conflict, nor sources for economic growth or potential instability. They do not all have the same interests, needs, experiences or perspectives on what peace should entail. Individual voices must be placed within their social, economic and political context, and should not be used to feed totalising narratives that are devoid of context. An effective approach to ensure that these questions are addressed, and that programmes are developed based on local evidence, is by designing and conducting research together with youth groups.

An urgent objective for this research agenda should be to develop a robust evidence base around youth-inclusive peace processes. There is an emerging body of empirical data on the role of youth in peace processes in both policy and academic literature. Yet, the data is not sufficiently extensive, comparable and systematic. A crucial step towards a robust evidence base is to map existing youth-led peacebuilding organisations. As our participants noted, in some places, national and local institutions may not be aware of existing peacebuilders operating in their areas. It is thus necessary to map existing individuals, initiatives and organisations in order to support them and scale up their activities while also trying to collaborate with gatekeepers and ensure their support. Furthermore, any additional policy and advocacy step or episodic strategies relating to youth inclusivity should be taken in light of a deeper understanding of the types, dynamics and impact of youth engagement to be developed through both quantitative analysis and in-depth case studies, including on the inclusion of youth (and other often marginalised groups) in local negotiation and mediation processes.

Address the different forms of exclusion and marginalisation that youth face

As our participants noted, young people cannot lead and/or engage in peace processes if the environment they live in does not allow them to do so. This includes young people living in poverty and unsafe environments, having no access to healthcare and quality education, and lacking access to vital social and physical infrastructure, all of which disadvantages them and hinders their full participation in public life. It is important to subject all forms of exclusion and marginalisation to critical scrutiny, regardless of where young people come from and in what forms this exclusion takes. Doing so requires engaging with questions of power and dealing with hierarchies and structural inequalities – a task that should be at the heart of peacebuilding scholarship, policy and programming.

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