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The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in the Context of the United Nations

by

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Strengthening the Positive Role of Youth in Peace Processes

Globally, there has been a rise in violent conflict and an increase in

civilian casualties since 2010. The majority of conflicts involve low-income countries. According to UN estimates, in 2020, 90 per cent of the world's 1.85 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 were living in developing countries. Given the increase in armed conflict over the past decade, it is now estimated that more than 25 per cent of youth are exposed to violence and conflict.

Although the impact of war and conflict on youth has long been known, and youth organisations have made a significant contribution to prevention, mediation, and reconstruction in many conflict situations, the United Nations Security Council did not address the issue until 2015. Since then, however, the issue has garnered increasing attention with impressive momentum. Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and 2535 (2020) have created a legally binding framework and formally placed the issue on the Security Council agenda. Despite the continued need to improve the implementation, progress has been made with an effort that extends beyond lip service, and ensures that youth can actively engage in formal peace processes and continue their constructive grassroots work unimpeded, thus gaining recognition and support as important actors in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Youth in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations

As early as 1996, the UN-mandated report on children in armed conflicts, presented by Graça Machel, Mozambique's former Minister of Education, focussed international attention on the situation of children and young people in conflict regions. The report focussed primarily on children and young people as victims of armed conflict.

Today, 25 years after that first report, and despite increased international attention and the development of legal norms, most of the challenges remain, or have been exacerbated by changing conflict structures. In the 1990s, a trend of targeting civilians surfaced and intensified with the rise of intra-state conflicts shaped by

non-state conflict actors, whose goal is often the control of natural resources, as well as with attacks by terrorist organisations and transnationally operating organised crime networks.

According to estimates by the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, tens of thousands of child soldiers continue to be used by both national armed forces and armed groups in over 20 conflicts worldwide. As documented in a recent report by Save the Children, sexual violence is being perpetrated against civilians in 22 of the 54 active conflicts worldwide, with the number of attacks on children and young people increasing each year. Although women and girls are the primary targets of sexual violence, young men are also increasingly being strategically targeted and abused – e.g., in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), South Sudan, and Syria. Armed conflict also impacts young people's access to and duration of educational opportunities, their physical and mental health, and their nutrition. Conflicts also force children and youth to become displaced within their own countries, or even flee across national borders. UNHCR statistics show that 42 per cent of displaced persons registered in 2020 (82.4 million refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide) are children and adolescents under the age of 18.

Young people, however, are not just being forcibly recruited as child soldiers in armed conflicts. The rise of Islamist terrorist groups in recent years has also revealed the vulnerability of young people to violent extremism. It is important to emphasise that the majority of young people in regions at risk generally reject violent extremism. It has been documented, however, that it is primarily male youths who feel themselves attracted to extremism. Even if the underlying motivations are diverse, and often socio-economic in context, inadequate political responses frequently contribute to further marginalisation, and in some cases also stigmatisation, of this vulnerable segment of youth, so that extremist organisations find fertile terrain for recruitment. Increasing radicalisation of youth by extremist groups and terrorist organisations was a key factor for UN Security Council members, particularly Jordan, to put the issue of Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) on the Council's agenda in 2015. This started with an open discussion at the Security Council in April 2015 on the role of youth in countering violent extremism and promoting peace.

UN Resolution S/RES/2250 (2015) – the Foundation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

The first Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security (Amman), organised by the Kingdom of Jordan in August 2015, put the issue firmly on the UN agenda, including on that of the Security Council. Jordan used its non-permanent seat on the Security Council to lay a foundation for the recognition of youth as important actors in preventing and resolving conflicts, and to call for their inclusion in peace processes through UN Resolution 2250 (2015). Specifically, the resolution called for greater participation of youth in peace processes through their integration, support for local youth peace initiatives, consultations with youth by Security Council members during visits to conflict regions, and strengthening the capacity of youth to engage in peace and conflict resolution mechanisms. In the resolution, the protection of youth in conflicts, as well as in the post-conflict context, was linked with a call to member states to protect civilians, especially youth, and their human rights within their territories, and to end impunity for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Resolution 2250 places a much stronger focus on youth as actors within conflict than do subsequent resolutions 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020). For Jordan in 2015, the issue of youth in conflict was primarily related to the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and counterterrorism. To prevent acts of violence, terrorist violence, and extremism, member states are encouraged to invest in both the quality of education for youth, so as to promote their participation in political processes and social structures, as well as to provide opportunities for their socioeconomic participation. The resolution also pays special attention to creating employment opportunities for youth in the context of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes to prevent further youth marginalisation via educational and employment opportunities.

For Jordan, the issue of youth in conflict was primarily

related to counterterrorism.

Resolution 2250 already attempts to walk a tightrope in order to meet the interests of permanent members, such as Russia and China, in the fight against terrorism and extremism, while simultaneously gaining their approval for a more inclusive approach to peacekeeping. On the other hand, however, the stigmatisation of youth as potential perpetrators of violence (primarily young men) or indeed as victims ought to be countered, and their positive contributions to conflict prevention and peace work – as well as the significance that such engagement can have for the UN’s peace architecture – should be emphasised.

The resolution’s call for the Secretary General to submit a progress report to the Security Council, and to include implementation steps in this report, ensured that the issue could not easily fall off the agenda again due to political interests of Security Council members.

Hindering youth participation in social and political processes increases their distrust of those in power.

Independent Progress Report “The missing peace” and UN Resolution S/RES/2419 (2018)

This independent progress report, commissioned by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, could not be delivered until March 2018 due to its elaborate methodology; therefore, its recommendations were not debated in the Security Council until April 2018. The report was impressive, comprising a broad, global consultation process of more than 4,000 young people to ensure that not only

elites, but also those who contribute at the grassroots level, are given a voice. The progress report sought to counter the narrative often cultivated by governments that youth are a problem to be addressed, when instead they need to be seen as partners in peacebuilding. The report's authors argued that three misperceptions in particular led to policymakers often overreacting and resorting to restrictive measures, thus directly contributing to youth alienation:

- the demographic bulge of young people in a society leads to an increase in violence,
- the high number of youth among refugees, migrants, and internally displaced persons makes them a burden or risk for host communities, and
- youth are per se susceptible to being targeted by terrorist organisations.

Moreover, the authors also see insufficient evidence that youth unemployment leads directly to violent conflict. Rather, they argue, it is horizontal inequalities, lack of justice, and identity-based factors that must be considered as causes of conflict. For many young people, the report notes, educational opportunities are far more important than employment opportunities. The report also warns that hindering youth participation in social and political processes not only increases their distrust of those in power, but can also lead to complete youth disengagement from the formal processes of political decision-making and policy formation.

The report extensively documents the numerous and highly diverse peacebuilding activities of youth in different phases of conflict, and vis-à-vis different phenomena of violence (political conflict, violent extremism, organised crime violence, sexual and gender-based violence), thus strongly underlining the positive added value that youth involvement can have in the international security architecture. The authors call on both UN member states and Security Council members to invest more in building the skills and capacities of youth, as well as their networks and organisations, and to involve them in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes in the YPS context.

After Jordan in 2015, it was the two non-permanent Security Council members Peru and Sweden in 2018 that once again put the issue of Youth, Peace and Security on the Security Council agenda, and managed, despite shifting geopolitical constellations, to pass another legally binding resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter: S/RES/2419 (2018). However, the negotiations on this were far more arduous than the unanimous adoption of the resolution would suggest. As with many other issues, such as climate and security, China and Russia expressed the view that Youth, Peace and Security was better placed in other UN bodies and did not necessarily belong on the Security Council agenda. Russia also took issue with the approach of linking Youth, Peace and Security to the 2016 Sustaining Peace agenda S/RES/2282 (2016), although it is precisely this agenda that envisions a broader range of peace actors, and their integration into existing structures to build peace and security. Russia, like the US under the Trump administration, would have liked to see a stronger focus on countering violent extremism among youth. Security Council members, such as France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Peru, and the Netherlands, who were primarily concerned with the resolution's emphasis on the positive role of youth in conflict prevention and peace processes, and who wanted to codify greater support in this area, took issue with the classification of youth as agents of violence that this would entail. In terms of funding youth peace and security initiatives, Resolution 2419 was restrained, only asking member states to consider the needs and participation of youth in peace efforts.

Even with regard to the possibility of support from the Peacebuilding Commission, the resolution was curtailed and merely recommended that the Commission involve young people in discussions and consultations on peacebuilding at the national level. Far more so than the previous Resolution 2250, 2419 takes the United Nations itself to task for consulting youth, particularly in Security Council meetings, and involving them in decision-making processes. Representatives of the United Nations and its agencies, including Special Rapporteurs and Special Envoys, are urged to become much more aligned and coordinated than they have so far been on the needs of youth in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. It also requires the Secretary-General to provide information in his reports to the Security Council on progress in engaging youth in peace processes (including demobilisation, disarmament, and reintegration programmes) and to submit an addi-

tional report on the implementation of Resolutions 2250 and 2419 by May 2020. Progressive Security Council members would have liked to see the latter establish an annual reporting requirement on YPS to firmly anchor the issue in the Security Council. However, a majority could not be achieved in support of this measure, or at least such was the case in 2018.

Although the commitment of member states to YPS does not yet match the commitment to Women, Peace and Security (S/RES/1325 (2000)), and no national action plans have been called for thus far, Resolution 2419 at least calls for regional and subregional organisations to establish both the policy framework and the necessary programmes to promote youth involvement. The African Union (AU) has set an example for rapid implementation by managing to integrate the YPS agenda into the institutional processes of its peace and security architecture in the context of “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want” and the “Silencing the Guns” initiative. The first AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) meeting on YPS in November 2018 mandated the development of a continental framework for YPS, and launched the Youth for Peace Africa Programme by the end of 2018. In addition to an envoy for youth, the AU Commission appointed five regional youth peace ambassadors. A study completed in 2020 also comprehensively documented youth contributions to peace and security in Africa.

South Africa also used its seat on the UN Security Council to put YPS back on the agenda from an African perspective, and to adopt a presidential statement as Chair of the Security Council in December 2019. Adoption of a presidential statement requires unanimity in the Security Council, yet controversies revealed the growing resistance in the Council, especially among the permanent members (P5), to moving the issue forward. Explicit references to climate change provoked objection from the United States, as well as from Russia and China. China and Russia were further bothered by demands to protect human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, and found support from among the elected members. Even the attempt in the Chairman’s statement to revisit and reinforce the regular involvement of youth in Security Council consultative processes, as called for in Resolution 2419, was watered down with the phrase “where appropriate”, and limited to restrictive thematic areas due to opposition in the Council.

From Political Declarations of Intent to Concrete Steps of Implementation

Since 2015, non-permanent members of the Security Council in particular have ensured not only that the topic was discussed, but also that progress was made despite resistance. As an agenda item under “Preserving International Peace and Security”, elected member Peru facilitated a discussion in July 2019 on progress made in the implementation of the YPS agenda. The UN’s own actions were emphasised, in addition to positive initiatives of youth in conflict (Cameroon: training of 600 mediators for communal conflicts; Libya: minority youth dialogue on peace and stability). The UN Verification Mission in Colombia is considered exemplary as it developed a strategy for youth engagement, established a network of focal points in subordinate structures, and succeeded in engaging youth in nonviolent campaigning in the upcoming local elections through cross-party youth dialogues. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq is also considered as a best practice for its work with youth on tribal conflicts and arms control, as well as involving them in political decision-making processes.

At the Security Council meeting in April 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres presented his own assessment of the implementation of the YPS agenda and the five pillars defined in Resolution 2250. Guterres had already highlighted how important he considered the issue to be during the 2018 General Assembly by presenting “Youth 2030: The UN Youth Strategy”, where he advocated for including youth in all areas of UN work (sustainable development, human rights, peace and security, humanitarian assistance). In his report to the Security Council, Guterres drew a link between a lack of opportunities for youth participation and development, which leads to frustration and mistrust of policymakers, and provides a breeding ground for targeting by extremist groups. Despite initial progress, structural barriers to formal involvement of youth in political processes, elections, and peace processes remain, even though opportunities for youth to make an impact are manifold, and could increase the legitimacy of these processes.

Despite initial progress, structural barriers to formal youth involvement in political processes remain.

One of Guterres' demands is, therefore, to also involve youth more in dialogues at the local, national, and international levels, to support their existing activities in monitoring ceasefire agreements, and in conflict mediation at the local level, and above all to make even greater use of the opportunities for involvement through social media. In particular, the potential for youth to influence conflict parties not only at the negotiating table, but also through external pressure remains too often untapped, or indeed, deliberately blocked by decision-makers. Young women are particularly affected by this, as they are marginalised on the basis of both age and gender, and also face intimidation, harassment, and, in some cases, violent attacks in the political arena.

The Security Council resolutions aim not only to support the peace work of young people, but also to protect them in violent conflicts. In his report, Secretary-General Guterres also explicitly points out the threats which young people are exposed to in their peace work, and in their efforts to protect human rights. Intimidation and attacks affect young people, and in some cases their families as well, and they often go unpunished. Guterres, therefore, appeals to the member states to pay more attention to human rights violations against youth, to prosecute them legally, and to strengthen their networks and organisations in the sense of the partnerships called for in the resolutions. In the context of prevention, Secretary-General Guterres stresses that the creation of employment, education, and development opportunities should be understood as part of the prevention agenda, and seen as investments in peace and security. In this context, he noted that it is also important to ensure that youth have a say in policy formulation in all policy areas that affect them, such as health and education.

Guterres believes a similar approach is also needed in the area of disengagement and reintegration. In the Central African Republic, the DR Congo, Mali, and Sudan, the UN is involving former youth combatants in the design, planning, and implementation of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes. The goal is to reduce the potential for violence by employing a holistic approach, especially at the local and community levels. The Secretary-General sees a need for improvement in this area, particularly in the inclusion of young women, who – although their numbers in armed units are increasing – are often not yet sufficiently addressed in the formulation and implementation of DDR programmes.

With regard to the work of the Security Council, Guterres recommends systematic inclusion of youth in country-specific and thematic discussions, and greater consideration of youth as peacebuilding actors when updating the mandates of UN peacekeeping missions. Between 2015 and the end of 2019, only 24 per cent of peace mission mandate renewals included references to the role and importance of youth in peacebuilding. There is now a youth engagement coordinator in 14 of the 22 UN political missions. For actual peacekeeping missions, the record is far worse: only 3 of the 13 blue helmet missions have a YPS point person. The Security Council itself tried to live up to its commitment to hold appropriate consultations during at least half of its visits to the areas of operation.

Half of the youth organisations active in peace and security operate on an annual budget of less than 5,000 US dollars.

At the member state level, the issue of YPS developed good momentum. National coalitions and platforms were formed in conflict states, such as Afghanistan, DR Congo, Central African Republic, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. A “Group of Champions” was formed in 2017 under the leadership of Jordan and Norway. Countries

like Colombia, Nigeria, and the Philippines are in the process of developing national action plans in line with the Women, Peace and Security theme, thus creating a binding political framework at the country level. Despite this progress, there is still a need for improvement in the actual involvement of youth in peace negotiations that goes beyond an observer role. Too often, one hears from youth organisations represented in peace processes that: “We may be sitting in the same room, but we’re not at the negotiating table.”

In addition, member states at both the national and UN levels must ensure that funding opportunities for youth peace activities improve. Fifty per cent of youth organisations active in peace and security operate on an annual budget of less than 5,000 US dollars. A key donor for YPS activities is now the Peacebuilding Fund, which UN member states sponsor through the Peacebuilding Commission. The annual Youth Promotion Initiative increased the distribution from 2.7 million US dollars in 2016 to 20.4 million US dollars in 2019. Moreover, with the development of a strategic action plan on youth and peacebuilding, the initiative established not only a binding but also a verifiable framework, including the definition of core activities, and associated variables for measurement. Forty per cent of funding goes directly to civil society organisations for their activities and to strengthen their capacities. Despite this progress in the UN context, which concerns operational measures in addition to the legal framework set out in UN Resolutions 2250 and 2419, Secretary-General Guterres sees the need for further action by the UN. In his review, he points out areas for improvement, such as: the integration of the YPS agenda into UN strategies, planning documents, and conflict analyses; the protection of youth peace activists; and the establishment of coordinators and focal points for YPS at the country and regional levels, as well as at headquarters in New York.

Anchoring Youth, Peace and Security on the Security Council Agenda – UN Resolution S/RES/2535 (2020)

In order to give more binding force to the Secretary-General's demands in addressing the shortcomings in implementing the YPS agenda, France as a permanent member of the Security Council and the Dominican Republic as an elected member drafted another resolution, S/RES/2525 (2020), which was unanimously adopted in the Security Council in July 2020 under the German presidency. The formulations in the resolution regarding the protection of human rights, access to justice, the integrity of rule-of-law institutions, the creation of a safe environment for youth to engage in peace activities, and the protection of civil and political spaces are extremely positive, albeit surprising given the growing confidence of autocratic regimes such as Russia and China. In the context of the resolution, the Secretary-General is urged to take into account the needs of youth peace activists within the framework of the Common Agenda on Protection for the UN System, in particular those working with the UN. The members of the Security Council also call on all UN institutions to expand youth participation in all areas of the YPS agenda and, in particular, to strengthen the capacities of youth in relation to their peace activities. Focal points are to be appointed for this purpose.

The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda is now to be incorporated into all UN strategic and planning documents.

In accordance with Resolution 2535, the peacekeeping missions should include guidelines for developing a strategy to implement the YPS agenda, and incorporate it into all strategic and planning documents of the UN. Plus, civil society and youth organisations are to be given a greater voice in Security Council briefings. With regard to the call for more youth involvement in formal peace processes, and the need for policy initiatives to create improved frameworks for peacebuilding (economic development, training opportunities, employment opportunities, and political participation), Resolution 2535 reinforces the demands of previous resolutions. By stipulating that the Secretary-General must report on the progress of

the YPS agenda every two years, Resolution 2535 places YPS firmly on the Security Council's agenda for the first time, and urges member states to show greater commitment and political will in its implementation.

A Positive Balance Sheet and Encouraging Momentum

Considering that little more than five years have passed since the adoption of Resolution 2250, and comparing it to the slowness of other processes, it can be said that the importance of youth to conflict resolution, their positive peacebuilding work, and the need for their inclusion in official processes has now found international consensus. Resolutions 2250, 2419, and 2535 established a legally binding framework for the YPS agenda, which must now be operationally implemented by the UN, the members of the Security Council, and by the international community of UN members.

With the European Conference on YPS (2018), the EU consultation process on “The Missing Peace” (2018), and the European Council conclusions on the role of youth in establishing secure, united, and conflict-free societies, the European Union has gone beyond mere political symbols early on. The EU's commitment is also exemplary in the operational sphere. The European Instrument for Stability and Peace has already made it possible to implement over 60 programmes that strengthen the role of youth in crisis management and peacekeeping.

At the member state level, and this includes Germany, far less importance is attached to the issue. Youth delegates attending events at the UN General Assembly in New York can indeed generate interest in the United Nations in Germany. However, the YPS issue requires a much more strategic approach. Finland, which in 2021 became the first EU member to adopt a national action plan on YPS, is playing a pioneering role here.

Structural changes, especially at the national level, need to increase youth participation in political processes, improve their capacities, and increase funding opportunities. As the discussions on implementing the YPS agenda in the Arria formatin September and December 2020 in the Security Council demonstrated, the

topic is enjoying a boom, as it is helping to shape the paradigm shift in peacekeeping towards inclusive processes and the involvement of diverse actors. Much preparatory work for the establishment of a YPS agenda has been done in the area of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which has already taken into account another marginalised group in peacekeeping. Moving into the future, it will certainly be even more necessary to coordinate both agendas, especially in their implementation, to prevent the cannibalisation of funding opportunities or a competitive situation. Both agendas clearly intersect, and the needs and opportunities of young women need more attention in all five pillars of the YPS agenda. When it comes to YPS, the elected members of the Security Council have shown that it is possible to set off a positive motion in the area of peace and security and to build consensus even in times of new geopolitical rivalries. The momentum needs to be sustained – the issue needs to continue to be moved forward; it should not only reappear on the agenda of the Security Council when the next report of the Secretary General is presented.

– *translated from German* –

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