Youth and Peacebuilding
NGO input for the Peacebuilding Architecture Review
UNOY Peacebuilders, March 25, 2015

Youth Matter
Today almost half of the world’s population (48%) is under the age of 24. Of these, more than one billion are defined as youth, being between the ages of 15-24.¹ This is the largest youth population the world has ever known. Developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), have predominantly young populations. Large shares of the world’s young people live in a fragile and conflict-affected state or in a country where levels of criminal violence are very high.²

A young population offers an opportunity for innovation, development and economic growth, but today’s young people are confronted with violence and armed conflict. Unfortunately, a dichotomous viewpoint of youth as either perpetrators or victims of violence is very common. UNOY argues for an alternative viewpoint: one in which youth are recognised as positive agents of change and as advocates for peace.

The positive role that youth play in building peace and transforming conflict must be recognised. This recognition needs to take into account the interrelationship between social justice, sustainable development, human rights and peace as pervasive in the daily lives of the world’s youth. As stakeholders and leaders, the inclusion of young people in peacebuilding processes ensures a relevant, representative and active category of society is equipped to positively contribute to peace and security.

Youth at the Frontline of Peacebuilding
Limited economic, social and political opportunities are strong contributing factors driving youth to participate in armed conflict. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that this does not reflect the majority of the youth population, and that many young people in conflict and post-conflict countries are working for peace. Only a minority of young people turn to violence in any context.³

Young people can be protected from violent conflict by offering them a possibility to shape their futures through participation in issues that concern them, including peace and security, and the provision of quality educational and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, young people’s resilience to social and political pressures pulling them towards violent actions needs to be supported.

¹ Secretary-General’s Report to the General Assembly, A/36/215, 1981
² UN-HABITAT. (2012). Youth 21: Building an Architecture for Youth Engagement in the UN System, Youth Unit, UN-HABITAT, p.7
Youth Participation is Crucial
Currently, the motivation to incorporate youth in issues of peace and security is born primarily out of a perception of youth as a potential security threat, instead of a desire to work with youth as equal partners. There is also a tendency by decision makers to talk about youth, rather than work with youth. Infrastructure and institutions need to acknowledge the needs and aspirations of youth to ensure meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding processes, and to offer meaningful avenues for young people to shape the future of their countries.

Ensuring the active, systemic, and meaningful participation of youth in issues of peace and security is a demographic and democratic imperative. It is also a way of preventing armed conflict. Studies show that social exclusion is an important factor that triggers a relapse into violent conflict. Furthermore, participation in decision making supports young people’s resilience in the face of social pressures, giving them a sense of belonging.

Young men’s and young women’s participation in peacebuilding is a largely untapped resource. Their actual contribution and further potential, as a key to durable and inclusive peace, stability and economic prosperity, should be valued, recognised, and supported. The inclusion of young people will have an influence on all social, economic and political sectors at the family, school and community levels of society.

There must be a shift from distraction to interaction and from passive partnership to participatory partnership. This shift needs to alter the perception of youth as sources of conflict to seeing them as resources for peace and development, and from asking them to wait to asking them to lead the way. Young people need to be included as partners for peace.

Youth as Key Actors in Peacebuilding
Young people are already involved in their communities to constructively and inclusively address conflict. The generational divide that exists in all communities necessitates the inclusion of youth to reflect the dynamism of society and the issues it faces. Youth offer a number of key attributes to positively and effectively engage with conflict.

- **Young people are open to change.** Young people have a greater potential of having inclusive, compassionate and dialogic worldviews while adults often have set dogmatic discourses.
- **Young people are knowledgeable about their peers’ realities.** Young people know the needs that exist among peers based on their own experience and close contact with others.

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4 UN Youth. *Youth and Armed Conflict*, United Nations, p.1
• **Young people are future-oriented.** Peace “depends on whether the next generations accept or reject it, how they are socialized during the peace process, and their perceptions of what that peace process has achieved.”\(^7\)

• **Young people are idealistic and innovative.** Young people have historically been the vanguard of social change. Young students or activists started and led many revolutions. Young people often have the creativity, initiative and time to develop more peaceful ways of being together.

• **Young people are courageous.** Young people in conflict situations are less risk-averse. They can either react and create their own future or keep quiet and give up.

The capacities of youth and the possibility of youth leadership in preventing and resolving conflict are crucial to building sustainable peace.

**UN Peacebuilding Architecture and Youth**

The UN peacebuilding architecture can better address youth and peacebuilding in a variety of ways.

1. **Youth should be highlighted as a priority area across the work of the entire UN peacebuilding architecture.** The Guiding Principles on Young People’s Participation in Peacebuilding should serve as a base from which to mainstream youth in peacebuilding in the UN Peacebuilding Architecture.

2. **Youth representatives should be included in the formulation of policy and strategic direction of UN peacebuilding bodies.** There should be permanent mechanisms, such as a Youth Advisory Council, through which youth can directly engage with the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Commission at the policy level (including in the field) through other UN bodies that operationalise peacebuilding projects.

3. **The Peacebuilding Commission should establish an engagement strategy with youth civil society organisations and ensure that the young people and youth organisations consulted are representative of their broader communities and societies.** This engagement must occur across peacebuilding processes in general and not limited to youth-specific issues.

4. The Peacebuilding Commission should include male and female youth leaders or youth-led organisations (at the national level) to hold positions on the National Steering Committee to represent and reflect the populations that interventions intend to serve.

5. **The Peacebuilding Fund should prioritise programmes that engage youth** as active agents of change across all sectors and consider the active presence of youth as a criterion and asset.


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6. **The Peacebuilding Support Office should institutionalise youth as a transversal theme** in its structure, staffing and future strategy, to more effectively operate in the framework of the IANYD (UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development).

7. Substantive and logistical support such as funding, promotion and facilitation should be provided to civil society-driven efforts that enhance the role of youth in peacebuilding.

8. Mechanisms to measure and report on the role of youth in peacebuilding should be established, utilising current work already underway by civil society\(^8\), UN agencies and national governments.

**About UNOY Peacebuilders**

UNOY Peacebuilders is a global network strengthening sustainable youth-driven peacebuilding. We connect 60 youth peace organizations across 40 countries.

Our goal is to create a world where young people have the opportunity and skills to contribute to peace. We work to strengthen youth-led peacebuilding initiatives, facilitate a safe space for dialogue and conflict transformation, develop the organizational capacities of our members and to bring the voices of young people to policy makers on a regional and global level.

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\(^8\) Global Partnership of Children & Youth in Peacebuilding. *Evaluation Summary: Multi-agency, multi-country, multi-donor evaluation on children, youth participation in peacebuilding (3M)*, [https://sites.google.com/site/gpcypeace/research](https://sites.google.com/site/gpcypeace/research)