

# Youth, Peace and Programming for Change: Critical reflection between the University, the Headquarters and the Field

Sukanya Podder, Saji Prelis and Joseph Jimmy Sankaituah

## Abstract

Post conflict peacebuilding activities generate the hope for fresh opportunities, access to services, and sustainable livelihoods among youth even when the state is indebted to donors and remains mired in corruption and incapacity. The disappointment that follows reminds us of what historian Jay Winter (2006) describes as '[minor utopias](#)'. Such an utopia is often how young people experience peacebuilding. The disappointment to deliver on the part of the state and international organisations is partly due to the nature of design, funding and rationale for youth and peace projects. How can we shift the narrative from disappointment to critical empowerment? Based on our academic, policy and practical work with children and young people, we argue that such a shift requires a transition from instrumental programming, as projected in the theory of change underlying a specific project effort, to thinking about long-term and cumulative effects of different projects. Meaningful youth engagement in post-conflict societies demands a long-term commitment to [youth-led and adult supported processes](#) that emphasise youth inclusion and not simply donor facilitated participation in short-term projects. Without establishing a two-way communication between youth needs and formal institutions, without [repairing citizen-state relations](#), the gains of short-term technocratic peacebuilding will not be transformative or long-lasting.

## Policy Recommendations

- National youth coordinating structures should be created by an Act of Parliament It would enable them to operate as a civil society organisation without political interference.
- International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) should move away from direct implementation of donor funded projects to building new ways of working through national and local youth led organisations to ensure long-term impact, scalability and sustainability
- Donors should restructure grant making processes, and adopt a more participatory process to ensure access for young people working in the informal sphere, without registered organisations.
- By shifting peacebuilding efforts from youth involved to youth led initiatives that are mentored by adults, a more sustainable and intergenerationally collaborative programming path can be devised.
- Finally, the UNSCR2250 should be defined more clearly along the lines of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), so that states can charter an implementation plan for the next ten years with clear indicators.

## Introduction

On 9 December 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution [2250](#) (UNSCR 2250), was adopted unanimously, and is the first international policy framework to recognise the important and [positive role young people](#) play in preventing and resolving conflict, countering violent extremism, and building peace. The Security Council more recently adopted Resolutions [2419](#) (2018) and [2535](#) (2020) which recognise the [role of young people as partners for peace](#). This trio of resolutions represent the youth, peace, and security policy framework in international politics. The concept of youth empowerment, and youth as partners for peace lies at the foundation of the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda. In this essay, we adopt a critical lens trying to engage with and unpack how empowerment operates in the context of youth and peacebuilding from three different vantage points. These include that of an academic working on peace and conflict issues with a focus on youth, a policy maker and practitioner leading on global advocacy on YPS, and a country office director of a large international peacebuilding INGO. We take the headquarters level, as one representing the figurative or literal understanding of concepts by policy makers and peacebuilding organisation bureaucrats based out of New York, Washington D.C. and London. The university represents the arena for critical thinking on the concepts emanating from global policy deliberations. While the country office offers a more real-time and bottom up experience of the practical application of these concepts. Each perspective offers an useful vantage

points for explaining and reflecting on the global policy and practice of youth and peacebuilding.

## Youth as a conceptual category

First a note on terminology. Although there is overlap, there are important distinctions between the terms 'children', 'youth' and 'young people'. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) has defined 'youth' as the age between 15-24 years. However, there is no single agreed definition. For example, the lowest age range for youth is 12 years in Jordan, and the upper range is 35 years in a number of African countries including Sierra Leone. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF use the term 'adolescent' for those aged 10-19 years, and young people for those 10-24 years. There is also a degree of overlap between the international definition of youth, and that of children. The [UN convention on the rights of the child](#) (UNCRC) (1991) defines a child as everyone under the age of 18 unless the law of a particular country is applicable to the child, in which case [adulthood](#) is attained earlier. On the one hand, young people are viewed as powerless, and in need of protection much like children. On the other hand, they are feared as threats to security: dangerous, violent, apathetic, and a 'lost generation'.

The dominant framework for children emphasises [protection](#). It privileges the victim frame. This protectionist framework also informs the peacebuilding projects with children in the post-war period. UNICEF, UNDP and various INGOs like Save the Children, Search for Common Ground, the International Rescue

Committee, War Child among others focus on the rehabilitation of child soldiers, and children affected by conflict through projects relating to their [education](#), mental health, and early childhood development. Policy discourses on youth present a more polarised discourse. Youth and young people as a conceptual category are 'othered' in the discourse on conflict. They are characterised as vandals or perpetrators of criminal and political violence rather than as victims in need of protection. Such a negative or securitized framing has encouraged interventions aimed at keeping youth busy or off the street through a range of short-term vocational and educational projects to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate [ex-combatants](#) and [child soldiers](#). In recent years, the predominantly negative framing around youth has shifted toward acknowledging their important and positive role in peace processes. There is also growing recognition that youth are not a homogeneous category. They present a great diversity of lived experiences.

### **Youth and post-conflict peacebuilding**

The Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security entitled the '[The Missing Peace](#)' (2018) captured the views of 4,000 young people. It recorded that nearly a quarter of the world's 1.8 billion people aged 18 to 29 years live in extremely fragile and conflict affected states. Some are recovering from conflict, others are in the midst of negotiating peace. A [trust deficit](#) in the government, multilateral organisations and the civil society sector characterises youth experiences. For the most part, [youth focused peacebuilding](#) is rooted in an over-confidence in

[employment creation](#) as the panacea for peaceful intergenerational relations. Short-term projects focused on vocational training, approach young people from a [securitised lens](#), of keeping them busy and off the street. These approaches focus on the immediate needs of offering stop-gap training. They are neither focused on sustainable livelihood generation nor do they invest in building young people's [relationship with the state](#). Once donor flight sets in, considerable structural barriers continue to inhibit the process of meaningful employment creation. With formal sector employment scarce, young people rely on the civil society sector, or turn their activism and training into meaningful employment through creativity and entrepreneurship.

Post-war contexts become the site for both [youth-focused and youth-led institutions](#) and efforts. Youth focused structures and institutions are set up by national governments and by adults for young people, while youth-led efforts are those that are both set up by, and led by the youth themselves. Youth-led efforts typically focus on engaging in capacity building of fellow youth, advocacy for youth inclusion in the political process, social cohesion activities between conflicting groups, and organising events and campaigns to raise awareness for community issues. Youth-led endeavours are run on almost entirely a volunteer basis, as they tend to be at the bottom of the funding priority list and often need proper capacity training to monitor and evaluate their work. Approximately 60% of [youth-led group's annual operating budget](#) is US\$ 10,000 or less. However, these challenges mean that youth can be more creative in their funding and

operational strategy, mobilising community resources, and corporate social responsibility funds to mobilise their peers to strengthen trust and accountability within their communities. In several African countries like [Nigeria](#) youth are forming social movements from different walks of life. In [Cameroon](#), they organised the first national symposium in 2018 to voice youth concerns and forge a national plan of action. These youth networks are organically formed without any support from the government. They have relied on peer to peer engagement, mentorship, and collaboration to advance emerging youth agendas.

We illustrate these categories further by drawing on examples from two post-conflict cases with a large youthful population: Sierra Leone and Liberia. In Sierra Leone, successive governments have placed youth employment and empowerment at the heart of their peacebuilding discourse, yet 18 years after the war ended, approximately 70% of youth remain in unemployment or underemployment, with illiteracy widespread and educational opportunities beyond the reach of many. The youth aligned All People's Congress (APC), government in power between 2007-2018, made little effort to change the socio-economic situation of youth. [Millions of dollars](#) were spent in their name, yet only a small portion of young people felt consulted in the design of programmes or benefited from [their implementation](#) in the long run. The reasons for this lack lies in: first, the limited scope of youth focused programmes, and second, due to the nature of donor funding disbursements.

### **Scope and access**

Most peacebuilding and development projects have a limited scope, they are designed for a specific target population or a sample thereof. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sierra Leone has been supporting a graduate internship programme. It involves a three-month long internship placement in various organisations that allows youth to gain work experience and a stipend of US\$100 per month. The scale of this project is simply not enough. In 2016, over 1000 applications were received for 400 placement positions. Similarly, the Youth employment support (YES) project funded by the World Bank was designed in a regionally sensitive way, to ensure that a specific quota of young people in every region of Sierra Leone could be enrolled on it. The programme also encouraged female participation, to the tune of 40% out of a total beneficiary sample of 9,000 youths. To be more representative of youth diversity, the YES program targeted three categories of youth: 'youth with low levels of education,' 'youth with high levels of education' and 'youth within rural areas.' Although a well-thought through project, the simple fact was that, the target of 9,000-youth was still a very small number, given the large numbers of youth requiring similar support. Therefore, even if programmes like the YES project were to continue for a long time, they can only help a limited number of young people (Interview, National Youth Commissioner, Sierra Leone 2017). This fractured support would mean a large majority would continue to be left out. While most projects identify beneficiaries transparently, and according to set criterion, cheating, or biased enrolment due to favouritism and corruption cannot

be ruled out. Therefore, the question of entry or access into peacebuilding and development programs is an important one. It is also one of inadequate scale or the inability to scale and sustain scaled efforts.

## Funding

Second, is the structure of funding for youth focused peacebuilding. Many young people thrive in the civil society sector, taking part in peacebuilding projects offers them access to new networks, friendships and potentially work opportunities. A UNOY mapping study, found that 97% of youth led organisations are staffed by [volunteers](#). To multiply the benefits of training and capacity building, donor funds need to be invested into small scale, locally run programmes over longer timelines. The UN, and donors like the UK's Department of International Development (DfiD) work with national governments to secure their buy-in, while disbursing funds for thematic projects through consortia including INGOs and local civil society partners.<sup>1</sup> They do not directly mobilise youth or engage with youth problems through organisations like the National Youth Commission.

For donors and various peacebuilding organisations, participatory approaches to development are unwieldy. Youth-led solutions on the contrary, require a large diversity of small-scale grants and programmes that are locally specific. The funding ecosystem prioritises competition over cooperation, a trend that tends to concentrate power in the hands of

[international](#), rather than local actors. According to one statistic, only [2.1%](#) of total global funding goes directly to the civil society in the Global South, and even less so to youth peacebuilders. Activities for young people that are locally relevant may not align with donor themes, they may require unfunded time or resources (volunteering, community donations), but can be positive in the long-run. For example, new forms of [associational life](#), and youth led associations that emerged after the civil war in Sierra Leone struggled to find funding support with the arrival of the liberal peace. Associations like the [Movement of Concerned Kono Youths](#) (MOCKY) which has played a constructive role through mediation in miners' disputes over pay and job contracts made valuable local contributions but did not speak to, or align with donor priorities. To maximize the role of these organic efforts, peacebuilding organisations needed to funnel funding to support the development of youth led and youth serving initiatives and organisations rather than chasing donor funding that perpetuates a manufactured rather than an authentic peace.

## Institutional responses

From an institutional perspective, in Sierra Leone, a trio of institutions, the Ministry of Youth Affairs, a National Youth Commission and a Presidential Youth Aide, have been established. The Ministry of Youth Affairs promotes policies of political governance for youth in line with the government's political agenda. It is responsible for organising programmes to

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<sup>1</sup> DfiD has been rolled into the UK's Foreign ministry and is now called the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

bring youth on board and to develop the national youth policy together with a national youth council. The Presidential Youth Aid is a political appointment which addresses youth issues as part of the political party's agenda. The Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA) supervises the work of the National Youth Commission, and the Youth Aid of the President advises him about youth issues. A National Youth Council has been set up by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. It offers an example of a youth-focused or youth serving national structure. The key organisational coordination point is the National Youth Commission, which works with the government, the United Nations agencies, various civil society actors and the youth themselves. It has established youth structures to encourage their participation, such as district and chiefdom youth councils (Interview, National Youth Commissioner, Sierra Leone 2017). These include 16 political districts; 16 district chief councils, 190 chiefdoms and Chief youth councils. The entry point for young people to access the resources and opportunities offered by the National Youth Commission, is to belong to a youth organisation, which in turn is constituted by various sub-youth organisations or sections. Representatives of all the constituent youth organisations, or sections, come together at a two-day conference every few years to conduct elections for selecting a seven-person committee. Women are encouraged to take part as well. At the Chiefdom youth council level, there is a 30% quota for women (Interview, National Youth Commissioner, Sierra Leone 2017).

In 2017, a two-day conference brought all chiefdom executives together to elect the

district youth council executive. These structures are mandated through the National Youth Commission, to be able to capture the authentic voice of young people. Over 2,000 youth groups and youth serving civil society organisations (CSOs) from across the country have registered with the National Youth Commission creating a national network that if properly developed, could facilitate the bottom-up integration of youth ideas, and views into national policy, and the top-down distribution of resources to enable these to develop youth throughout the country. Much like the other institutions, it remains accountable to the political leaders and the state authorities, and has been the target of political co-optation over the years.

In Liberia by contrast, the Federation for Liberian Youth (FLY) is the national structure created by an act of Parliament to represent youth and student organisations in Liberia. The government through the national budget provides a financial subsidy to FLY and other youth and youth serving organisations like the Liberia National Student Union (LINSU), Mano River Union Youth Parliament (MRUYP). As the umbrella organisation coordinating their activities presents a novel model of institutionalisation through the establishment of district and county youth secretariats. These structures hold the potential for mobilising youth and linking their demands into the formal sphere and utilize their energy into productive ventures. As a CSO, oversight over FLY's operations is exercised by an elected Board. FLY's leadership is elected once every two years by representatives of its member organisations at a general assembly. A 2008 mapping of youth

organisations sponsored by the United Nations Mission in Liberia and United Nations Development in Liberia, identified a total of 205 youth organisations set up and managed by youth themselves (Interview with former President of FLY, 2017).

### **Informal but not marginal?**

When the space within which youth operate is political and politicised, youth led CSOs interact with, and adapt to the regime or politics in ways that allow them to survive and potentially thrive. There arises a deep contradiction in how best to institutionalise and formalise youth initiatives in ways that can inform policy transformation. On the one hand is the fear of co-optation. Setting up of youth structures can be counterproductive if the motive is to make them accountable to state authorities and not to an independent committee or to the very constituents that those structures represent as is the case in Sierra Leone. How to strike a balance between maintaining autonomy and being able to link into the formal policy structures?

Genuine and transformative participation takes time and must address the question of intergenerational peace. The sociologist Mannheim (1988) argued that people who share a significant experience like a civil war, develop a shared sense of social and political consciousness. The vision for social change is therefore generational. Each generation develops distinct attitudes and values to issues such as building sustainable peace. Young people's peacebuilding experiences are situated within a social landscape of power, rights, expectations and

perceptions. Instead of taking an indirect approach to youth participation through informal, short-term projects that are politically non-controversial; peacebuilding projects with children and young people need to be applied in incremental ways, for building young people's civic engagement with formal institutions and [local government](#) actors.

Some donors who fund formal peacebuilding projects are starting to take note of the informal networks of peace that youth create. That young people organise themselves via horizontal leadership models with a deep connection to local communities. Their model has a core strength of endogeneity although they are not formally recognised or may not have the means to register their organisation formally. Participatory donor funding which allows youth to be included without having registered entities is being followed by USAID and some other philanthropic agencies. For example, USAID's [Youth Excel](#) initiative, has youth representatives on the board to review grant applications. It aims to remove the structural barriers to access funds for youth organisations that do not have the wherewithal to adhere to donor accountability rules. Willingness to engage with the informal space of youth activism, also encourages policy makers to think about the concept of youth empowerment and intergenerational responsibility more critically.

### **Critical youth empowerment**

It is assumed that young people who take part in peacebuilding activities can become empowered, they can become constructive change agents in society

through civic engagement. The reality however is that, individual youth, youth groups, and communities will not experience empowerment in the same way because of the intersection of other potential [power inequalities](#) in society (race, class, gender, culture, language among others). To harness youth's potential as change agents in the long-term requires that more responsibility and power be given to youth. By allowing young people to apply peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills in ways that allow them to exercise control and agency over their life outcomes, and that of others, and to achieve [structural change](#) in society.

Unless youth experience positive individual outcomes incrementally through participation and inclusion in community change efforts, [empowerment education](#) through media and advocacy will have limited long-term effects. In Kyrgyzstan, Search for Common Ground (SfCG), an international peacebuilding INGO that takes a societal approach to conflict transformation, implemented the *Jashstan* programme. This initiative was multi-tiered. It has utilised youth clubs, civic engagement workshops, leadership training, and a reality TV show involving 162 youth peacebuilders in 27 communities. The viewership for the show reached millions. In a viewership survey of 1,530, 85% of surveyed participants confirmed that their knowledge and skills in peacebuilding and conflict resolution improved significantly from the programme. The [evaluation](#) of the program found that when focusing on youth, it is important to design programs that involve parents from the beginning of the process, and that are reflective of the gender and ethnic demographics of the

area. What is necessary is critical youth empowerment, whereby youth actions can create meaningful change in organisational, institutional, and politics, structures, values and norms. This requires a mutually constituted process of trust based partnering between adults and youth. Adults must be willing to facilitate and enable youth empowerment as much as youth must be willing to learn and adjust to the views of the older generation. This requires critical awareness of the visible and invisible structures and processes that make up social institutions and practices by incorporating reflection on both sides.

### **Intergenerational responsibility**

By enhancing intergenerational responsibility and thinking forward about sustainability, donors, INGOs and national governments must allow young people to have uninterrupted rather than ad hoc access to mentorship, materials and technical support. [Vivek Maru](#), the founder of Namati, the legal empowerment organisation that has been instrumental in [land grab reversals](#) in Port Loko district of Sierra Leone, notes that even when the political system is corrupt and the leaders cannot be trusted, it is important not to abandon the formal political institutions including the justice system. People can be empowered to transform those institutions to make them fair, more accountable, more democratic. In that same vein, youth led CSOs must interact with, and adapt to the regime or politics in ways that allow them to survive and potentially thrive.

On the part of the formal institutions, there is a need to examine the attitudes, ideas,

and actions related to power-sharing. Youth inclusion is one of the cornerstone aspirations of the UNSCR 2250 on youth, peace and security followed by UNSCR 2419 (2018) and UNSCR 2535 (2020). Adults play an important role in determining inclusion. Whether it be the nature and extent of power-sharing, access to resources, and accepting young people's critical consciousness. Young people must "have a seat at the table", youth delegates and high-level Government officials told the Economic and Social Council at its eighth annual Youth [Forum](#). In 2017, 2.2 per cent of the world's parliamentarians were under 30 years of age, and 0.9 per cent of parliamentarians are women under [30 years of age](#). Adults need to share power with youth in ways that shift assumptions about adult privilege, superiority, wisdom and encourage young people creativity, energy and responsibility to manifest. This will help foster youth's positive contributions to community development, socio-political change, and encourage a critical citizenry where youth feel valued, respected, encouraged and supported. Political turnover and adequate access to leadership for youth in political parties, can provide youth with the scope for independence and creativity in politics.

## Conclusion

The systems in which youth operate have considerable power over empowerment outcomes. During the past year, the COVID 19 pandemic has created serious setbacks for people's livelihoods, education and socialisation including that today's generation of young people across the Global North and Global South. Globally, [76.7% of youth engaged](#) in the informal

economy are experiencing the brunt of the pandemic's economic effects. In India, where over 80% of people are in the informal sector, the [headlines read](#): "A lockdown is an order to starve." The pandemic will likely further reduce young people's access to many basic services and opportunities, such as healthcare, livelihoods, education, and more, thereby compounding the structural and psychological "[violence of exclusion](#)" that many youths already experience in conflict-affected contexts. As societies seek to build a new post-pandemic normal, governments have the unique opportunity to amplify young people's ability, and to improve trust.

Based on our critical reflection on youth and peacebuilding programmes, we feel a shift away from merely investing in training youth in peacebuilding and conflict resolution behaviours, through implicit engagement is necessary. What is needed is explicit engagement, an incremental model, whereby the training is utilised. In simple terms, while training youth in peacebuilding is important. Training without opportunities to practice the skills learnt is not so helpful. Training young people in conflict management or mediation skills for example is a start. Supporting them as young mediators is the next step and ensuring they have a role to play in local communities a community-mediators can further strengthen their role and youth identities. [Community youth mediation networks](#) can further be recognized by the formal organisations like the Ministry of Justice as [legitimate resource for managing grievances](#) and help reduce the caseloads of the formal courts system. This type of systematic thinking,

and long-term vision of linking the formal and the informal is how we can bank on peacebuilding interventions and promote further development in society and governance.

This is how young people, instead of becoming instrumental agents for peacebuilding rhetoric, they can become the agents of peace themselves. Change agency cannot manifest fully unless there are power shifts such that young people are recognised as capable civic actors. For their agency to fully manifest, the older generation, their aspirations, and expectations around change must also be taken into account. Youth experiences of conflict and peace are embedded in various ecosystems that influence and socialise them. These include the family, community, schools and peers. The needs of peace across generations and across these important ecosystems has to be centred in peacebuilding. Without adopting an ecological model of youth empowerment, one that identifies parents, peer groups, schools and the media as the primary transmitters of social norms and political [orientations](#), as well as prejudicial [attitudes](#) an incomplete process of sensitisation and advocacy takes place. Importantly, the resilience demonstrated

by youth – men and women, and families in societies ravaged by war, must be mainstreamed in the context of more explicit engagement. Adopting an [ecological model](#) encourages us to turn our attention to the local settings in which intergenerational dynamics of resilience are embedded. International actors must observe and learn from and where possible mainstream the creativity and energy of the youth for peacebuilding. Enhancing their innate capacities for peace-making through training and capacity building interventions can provide a more resilient, authentic, and sustainable narrative for empowerment.

*Sukanya Podder, PhD is Reader in Post-War Reconstruction and Peacebuilding at King's College London, UK.*

*Saji Prellis, is Director of Children and Youth Programmes, Search for Common Ground and the co-chair of the UN-Civil Society Working Group on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding.*

*Joseph Jimmy Sankaituah, is Country Director, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Search for Common Ground.*