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Protection needs of young peacebuilders at the field level: Global Policy Considerations

Side-Event for the PoC week | 24 May 2024, 8:30am-10:00am

Summary Note

The need for comprehensive protection mechanisms for young people in conflict zones is increasingly recognized as crucial for sustainable peace and development. This side-event brought together representatives of governments, the UN, and civil society to discuss the protection needs of young peacebuilders working at the field level, take stock of the current protection frameworks, and jointly develop concrete recommendations for strengthening global policy on the protection of young peacebuilders.

The event centred around the following discussion points:

Rising protection needs of young peacebuilders are context-specific and require comprehensive assessments, frameworks and their implementation.

Rising conflicts around the world pose severe risks to all civilians, with young people being particularly vulnerable. Youth, defined by the United Nations as persons between the ages of 18 and 29 years, face increased digital threats, armed conflicts and the shrinking of civic space ([S/2024/207](#), Section B). On average, research from the UN Youth Office found that 65% of respondents to their survey indicated awareness of threats young people face when they enter the public sphere as peacebuilders.¹

Young peacebuilders are often subject to misinformation, violence and intimidation by the national actors. They are disproportionately affected by and face the horrors of war, resulting in both physical and mental life-long suffering. Local peacebuilders highlighted the lack of access to legal protection and legal services. Further, destruction of civilian and critical infrastructure resulting from increasing violence globally has disrupted young people's access to services like healthcare and education. At the same time, young peacebuilders face limited access to resources for their work, with most youth-led organisations operating on less than \$5,000 USD per annum. This results in severe restrictions on their work, with a heavy reliance on volunteerism, and, in particular, it limits their ability to effectively respond to their own protection needs and the protection needs of young people in their communities.

¹ <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Advancing-the-YPS-agenda-in-UN-PKOs.pdf>.

The threats faced by young peacebuilders differ depending on the context. For example, in the context of armed conflict², young peacebuilders require the existence of specific arrangements for swift relocation and trauma healing. Therefore, the policy on protection for young peacebuilders needs to be tailored to different contexts.

The lack of data on specific threats faced by young people, and a lack of disaggregated data around the different and added barriers faced by marginalised youth prevents tailored action on prevention. This is exacerbated by an exclusion of young people from policy conversations.

“The lack of comprehensive data on specific threats faced by young peacebuilders hinders the development of effective prevention strategies.” - H.E. Ms. Joan Cedano, *Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations*

Protection of young people can amplify their important contributions to sustainable peace

Despite this context young people continue to demonstrate bravery, resilience and impactful action. Speakers and participants highlighted YPS national coalitions to promote peace and security in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, youth-led efforts to promote intergenerational dialogue, young women in northern and western Uganda raising awareness on SGBV including within refugee communities, and youth indigenous-led efforts to strengthen community dialogues and protect indigenous land rights. Youth-led civil society, including in the MENA region, also drive innovative dialogue through arts which help break down barriers between communities, helping to build resilience to violence.

“Young people so often demonstrate resilience, courage and resourcefulness and have the potential to help us all think about a very different world. So how can we actively engage them and help them build peace.”- Ian McFarlane, *Director, Communications and Strategic Partnerships at United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*

Policy frameworks and funding for protection of young peacebuilders is lacking.

The current scope of the UN Security Council resolutions on the protection of civilians does not feature adequate protection frameworks for young people. The first UN Security Council resolution on the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda ([S/RES/2250](#)), on the other hand, calls for the protection of civilians, including young people, during armed conflicts, and emphasises the need for measures to prevent violence against young people, including their recruitment and use in hostilities. In 2020, the Security Council’s resolution 2535 further underscored the need for a comprehensive international framework to address the immediate protection needs of young people in conflict and post-conflict settings and requested the UN Secretary-General to develop a dedicated guidance on the protection of young people ([S/RES/2535](#), OP22).

Speakers called for building on existing policy language and strengthening policy frameworks for protection of young people. They called for a comprehensive framework for the protection of young people, and a convention on the rights of young people. They also highlighted the importance of policy language to improve financing for protection. They emphasised that there are several upcoming global policy processes which offered an opportunity to strengthen policy language on protection of young people, including the Summit of the Future and 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review.

² Examples highlighted include conflict in Sudan, which has resulted in a four-fold increase in attacks on schools, the Uganda DRC border where attacks claimed the lives of over 40 students, and the ongoing violence in Gaza.

Participants stressed the need for increased and more flexible funding for young peacebuilders' work. In particular they emphasised the need for more timely funding, including through emergency response vehicles, as well as through allowing reallocation of funding to protection needs during emergencies.

"Young peacebuilders in the MENA region are working on youth empowerment, constructive conflict resolution, mediation, and trauma healing. Imagine if young peacebuilders could do this work freely and safely? How much will the communities and the world receive in return? The potential benefits are almost impossible to measure." - Amar Al Moussawy, *a young artist promoting the social good and member of the Youth Advisory Board, UNDP Country Office in Lebanon*

Global policy framework on protection of young people should build on lessons learned from existing protection initiatives

"We have an obligation to go further and be more concrete, to operationalize the commitment made within bodies such as the United Nations Security Council. We're not only talking about wishful thinking, we absolutely need to be concrete." - Ms. Diarra Dime Labille, *Head of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations*

Participants highlighted several initiatives which are working to strengthen protection of young people. These includes programmatic efforts:

- The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations has included youth protection as a key priority in its strategy and included a YPS indicator into the report framework for the Department. UN peacekeeping operations are actively enhancing protection measures. MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, for instance, partnered with Community Alert Networks, which includes youth leaders, to enhance early warning capabilities and community-based protection. This collaboration enables MINUSCA to effectively prevent and respond to physical violence against civilians.
- UNFPA highlighted their efforts to strengthen protection mechanisms for young people, with an emphasis on mitigation, prevention and response to SGBV within the humanitarian architecture. UNFPA together with UN Women and UNAOC has also developed a joint program to strengthen the capacity of young women peacebuilders and young women-led organisations. The second phase of this pilot will focus on West Africa and the Sahel.
- El Salvador highlighted the development of urban centres for well-being and opportunity run and administered by young people from the communities. They provide safe spaces for activities, training and engagement between children and parents. They also emphasised the importance of PBF funding in El Salvador, highlighting a PBF project which provided a safe space for women-led intergenerational dialogue to engage young people so they could better understand the impact of the war.

Speakers also highlighted efforts to build the evidence base to strengthen informed policy to support protection of young people:

- Initiatives such as the first-ever global report on protecting young people in civic space: "*If I Disappear*" and the global research on youth with disabilities are crucial to ensure an

up-to-date evidence base that can be used for targeted advocacy and policy development to strengthen young people's protection.

- Finland emphasised the role Member States must play in identifying best practices and highlighted Finland's NAP and recent mid-term evaluation report on its implementation as one example.
- UNFPA highlighted its substantial efforts to engage young people to inform policy development.
- Justice Call, a youth-led organisation from the MENA Region, published a paper on good practices in digital peacebuilding with an emphasis on protection.³

Recommendations Moving Forward:

In light of the upcoming political opportunities with the Summit of the Future, 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) and 2025 Anniversary of the YPS Agenda, speakers and participants identified several recommendations to respond to the urgency of young people's protection needs:

- 1. Better included young people and young peacebuilders in policy development and decision-making processes.**
 - a. Include young people as equal partners based on comparative advantages of each stakeholder.
 - b. include young peacebuilders across the decision making cycle with a feedback loop, from strategic action to implementation to assessment and follow-up.
- 2. Strengthen policy language on Youth, Peace and Security and protection:**
 - a. Include language on YPS and protection in the Pact for the Future, including integration of YPS into Chapter Two on Peace and Security.
 - b. Develop a dedicated guidance on protection of young people and a comprehensive framework for their protection.
 - c. Integrate focuses on protection of young people in other Member State bodies including the Peacebuilding Commission, the Security Council and the Group of Champions of YPS.
 - d. Ensure YPS and a focus on protection of young people is integrated into the Peacebuilding Architecture Review including through regional dialogues as inputs.

"Make sure your needs, your views, and your vision are incorporated in this [peacebuilding architecture review] process." - H.E. Ms. Egriselda López, *Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations*

- 3. Improve data collection to develop evidence informed policy and funding**
 - a. Collect data disaggregated by age, gender and disability to better understand the specific barriers and capacities of diverse young people in conflict settings.
 - b. Develop robust monitoring mechanisms to document violence and harassment faced by young people, including through the allocation of resources for youth-focussed reports.

³ <https://www.gppac.net/files/2023-04/Tech4YPS%20Best%20Practices%20Paper.pdf>

- c. Share best practices on initiatives to support and strengthen the protection of young people.

“Collecting data disaggregating data by age, gender and disability is essential to understand the specific barriers and capacities that young people face.” - Felipe Paullier, *Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs*

“In New York we are doing our part with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to revitalise the Group of Champions of YPS. I hope that this group will be one tool to provide a platform to gather active Member States to share experiences, lessons learned and good practices.” - H.E. Mr. Lauri Voionmaa, *Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations*

4. Improve dedicated funding for young people’s protection

- a. Increase allocations of funding dedicated to protection and ensure this funding is accessible to young peacebuilders.
- b. Invest in youth-led actors to build creative approaches to building safe spaces for young people.
- c. Include protection within budgets for all peacebuilding projects.
- d. Develop emergency and rapid response windows for young peacebuilders.
- e. Strengthen policy language to systematise funding for protection.

5. Build a holistic approach to protection

- a. Invest in collaboration between the different stakeholders with different areas of expertise (e.g. capacity building, trauma support, early warning) including local CSOs, INGOs, the UN system, donors etc.

“The United Nations and multilateral organisations should create a holistic approach to protection of young people through youth focused policies and guidelines and prioritise programs that focus on capacity building and training, tailoring them to the specific need of young peacebuilders.”
Nyuon (Suzy) William, *South Sudanese human rights lawyer and 3rd Cora Weiss Peacebuilding Fellow, Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP)*

6. Improve adaptation of global policies to national contexts

- a. United Nations Country Teams should advocate for inclusion of protection language in national legal frameworks with particular emphasis on freedom of expression and assembly.
- b. Member States should develop and finance National Action Plans on YPS, with particular emphasis on protection pillars.

7. Strengthen the capacity of young people and institutions

- a. Invest in capacity programs to provide young people with the skills and knowledge to navigate risks, and to capacitate government institutions and to strengthen protection of young people.
- b. Invest in mentorship platforms to provide guidance and support to young activists and peacebuilders.

8. Improve monitoring and accountability of commitments

- a. Organise a voluntary reporting process/commitment ceremony for the YPS implementation as an opportunity to celebrate the 2025 Anniversary of the YPS Agenda.