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New Frontier in YPS on its  
5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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# CONTENTS

- **INTRODUCTION** **4**  
*ALI ALTIOK*
- **DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING FROM LATIN AMERICA** **8**  
*LAURA HENAO*
- **TRANSFORMATIVE RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE  
THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE MALDIVES** **16**  
*MOHAMED HOODH IBRAHIM*
- **YOUTH AGENCY IN PEACEBUILDING IN POST-JASMINE  
REVOLUTION TUNISIA** **22**  
*SHADI ROUHSHAHBAZ*
- **BUILDING PEACE IN CENTRAL ASIA: VOICES OF YOUTH FROM  
KYRGYZSTAN** **28**  
*KANATBEK ABDIEV*
- **THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST YOUNG  
PEOPLE** **34**  
*CAMBRIA C. KHAYAT*
- **FINDING NEW WAYS TO MOBILISE YOUTH FOR PEACE IN  
VOLATILE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPES** **39**  
*ABIY SHIMELIS*

## **NEW FRONTIERS IN YOUTH, PEACE & SECURITY ON ITS 5TH ANNIVERSARY:**

### **FROM YOUTH VOICES TO YOUTH AGENCY**

There is a growing interest among peacebuilding institutions to define priorities, challenges, and aspirations of young people. This new knowledge production trend has mostly targeted young people as passive subjects of study and information providers. Among peace and security scholars, there is hesitancy to collaborate directly with young peacebuilders. To counter youth exclusion from knowledge production processes, this Journal of Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) is the first of its kind: a platform for research on YPS by youth.

MARCH 2021

# INTRODUCTION

ALI ALTIOK

We recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250, which formalised the global youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda. From a policy perspective, there are many noteworthy achievements to celebrate. In 2018, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adapted its second YPS Resolution 2419 to foster youth participation in peace processes. Then, in 2020, with the adoption of the Resolution 2535, the UNSC requested biennial reports from the Secretary-General on YPS and urged governments “to protect the civic and political spaces”. The former ensures that the YPS agenda will remain on the agenda of the Security Council and the latter offers precedent setting language for future resolutions.

## **YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

The global YPS agenda has paved the way for the production of new knowledge on the peace and security priorities of young people. In many ways, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (Simpson 2018) played a pivotal role in the creation of this new knowledge about young people. The Missing Peace study consulted 4230 young people through 263 focus group discussions, six national, and seven regional consultations. Particularly through inclusive partnerships built between the UN and civil society organisations, international peacebuilding organisations and scholars published dozens of reports, thematic papers and case studies to shape the key messages of the Missing Peace study (youth4peace.info, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the YPS agenda attracted scholarly interest from a variety of disciplines. Particularly, the YPS agenda became central to ongoing debates around securitisation of young people (Williams 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock 2017; Ensor 2021). Although the global YPS agenda fostered knowledge production about young people, young people have rarely had the opportunity to produce or own this knowledge. Up until now, consultations have been the most common method to realise youth participation in knowledge production processes in the YPS field. Focus group discussions, interviews and online discussions have been other popular methods among peacebuilding institutions and scholars to study peace and security concerns and priorities of young people. These methods are tremendously valuable in their amplification of the voices of young people. Yet, these methodologies limit the participation of young people in knowledge production processes to passive forms, as they only allow young people to shape research outcomes in data collection processes (Ergler 2017).

## **YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY RESEARCH NETWORK**

In fall 2019, we started building the Youth, Peace and Security Research Network (YPSRN) to move from passive to active forms of youth participation in knowledge creation processes with support

from the United Networks of Young Peacebuilders. The YPSRN has three main objectives.

First, it fosters youth participation in knowledge production processes influencing the global YPS agenda. It provides a platform for young peacebuilders and researchers to collectively produce knowledge that is owned by young people themselves about the past, present and the future of the YPS agenda. Second, the YPSRN aims to sustain knowledge and learning on youth and peacebuilding. Since 'youth' is a transient category, young peace advocates are being replaced by their peers in every generational cohort. This leads to loss of institutional memory, knowledge and networks (Simpson 2018, 59). To prevent this loss, the Network facilitates intergenerational transmission of knowledge among young peace advocates and practitioners. Third, the YPSRN aims to expand the boundaries of knowledge by shaping the youth, peace and security agenda through recognising the diverse lived experiences of young people as a form of knowledge. When recognised, the lived experience of young people is predominantly framed in relation to their experience of direct violence, as victims or former violent offenders. This dominant but narrow perception "erases and denies the multiple experiences of youth as peacebuilders who negotiate complex systems of risk and oppression to act for peace at local, national, and international levels" (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015). The Network members consciously focus on experiences of young peacebuilders to generate knowledge to guide the YPS agenda at all levels.

## **THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY**

The Journal of Youth, Peace and Security is edited, peer-reviewed and published by the members of the YPSRN. While the first issue of the Journal is written entirely by YPSRN members, the second issue of the journal will be open to submission from young authors who would like to publish in relation policy, practice and scholarship of youth and peacebuilding. We encourage young authors to reach out the members of YPSRN as they develop their ideas.

I am grateful to all authors who worked under tight deadlines, were receptive to critical feedback on their drafts and offered reviews of each other's work. The Journal will publish short articles from young scholars, practitioners and advocates who are engaging with the issues related to youth and peacebuilding on a yearly basis. Our goal in creating a journal only for young contributors is to cultivate a culture where young people can influence peace and security processes through knowledge production.

### *Contributions to the first issue*

In this first issue of the Journal, contributors deal with the following broad questions. What are the gaps and achievements of the Global YPS agenda at its fifth anniversary? What is your vision for the 10th anniversary of the Global YPS Agenda?

Contributions to this issue mostly take a critical stance by pinpoint the gap between global policy documents and the peacebuilding challenges young people face. Some articles draw on interviews and focus group discussion with young people in Colombia, Kyrgyzstan and Tunisia. Other articles rely on literature reviews and personal experience in direct action. The articles suggest new directions for the multilateral system, governments and young peacebuilders to move the YPS agenda further and harness the transformative resilience of young people for peace.

Laura Henao (Center for Research and Popular Education), in her article titled 'Decolonial feminist peacebuilding from Latin America', reports on states' involvement in the instigation and continuation of multiple forms of gender-based violence experienced in Chile and Colombia. Relying on social theorist Boaventura De Sousa Santos' work, Laura argues that three layers of oppression, namely capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy put young women at risk of violence in their interaction with state institutions. She recommends that the YPS agenda first needs to embrace and support youth movements, raising their voice against these three forms of oppression to truly protect young women from all forms of violence.

In his article, 'Transformative resilience of young people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the Maldives', Mohamed Hoodh Ibrahim (Maldives Island Conservation Project) takes a critical approach to a youth-specific participation mechanism, namely the National Youth Council in the Maldives. His article demonstrates that though young people played a key role in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, their demand for transformative change has not been listened to through the National Youth Council. Mohamed's article reminds us that availability of youth-specific participation mechanisms doesn't necessarily empower young change-makers but dilutes their ambitions for change especially when these mechanisms are not governed with democratic principles.

In the following article, Shadi Rouhshahbaz (PeaceMentors) shares similar observations about formal youth inclusion and participation structures. In her article, 'Youth agency in peacebuilding in post-Jasmine Revolution Tunisia', Shadi shows that while young people prefer to stay outside of formal political spaces, they create their own political space and generate new forms of politics to build positive forms of peace. Based on 15 interviews and two focus group discussions with young peacebuilders in Sousse and Tunis, her article sheds light on how the global YPS agenda influenced the peacebuilding landscape in Tunisia.

Kanatbek Abdiev (independent consultant), in his article titled, 'Building peace in Central Asia: voices of youth from Kyrgyzstan', shares key findings from his own research project which evaluates the international peacebuilding interventions targeting young people. Kanatbek draws on the interviews he conducted with participants of international peacebuilding programmes, NGO staff and government representatives. His paper shares that peacebuilding programmes financed by external donors provide personal skills to young people, but it is unclear whether they have any impact on preventing conflicts or building peace. To improve the peacebuilding impact of these programmes, Kanatbek suggests that from planning to evaluation young people should be included as decision-makers.

In the following article titled, 'The Climate Crisis is a Form of Violence against Young People', Cambria C. Khayat (Desmond Tutu Peace Lab) raises critical questions to the member states of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Cambria argues that as UNSC members avoid the hard truth about the devastating impact of climate change, they are doing a disservice to young people and future generations. From Cambria's perspective, if the UNSC is serious about protecting young people from violence, it should first recognise that not acting on climate change is a form violence against young people and future generations.

The final article, 'Finding new ways to mobilise youth for peace in volatile social media landscapes' by Abiy Shimelis (African Artist Peace Initiative), reports on the ways through which contemporary media and communication technologies interact with conflict dynamics in Ethiopia. Algorithms used by social media companies foster ethnic polarisation and fuel interethnic tensions and violence. Nonetheless, Abiy argues that when peace advocates engage with social media tools carefully, they can still mobilise masses of young people for peace.

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# DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING FROM LATIN AMERICA

LAURA HENAO

**HOW CAN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA BE ADDRESSED WHEN STATES ARE NOT SET UP TO PROTECT YOUNG WOMEN, OR EVEN WORSE, WHEN STATES ARE THE SOURCE OF VIOLENCE? WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES FOR SECURITY LED BY MANY YOUNG WOMEN?**

**The challenges and inequalities that young women face based on their gender has been recognised by the United Nations (UN).**

The adoption of three Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on youth, peace and security reflects this. UNSCR 2250 (2015) has a broad focus on youth, peace and security. UNSCR 2419 (2018) further recognises the essential and positive role of young people in peacebuilding. And the most recent, UNSCR 2535 (2020), highlights the importance of increasing and assuring the participation of youth in conflict resolution and implementation of peace processes. These reinforce existing resolutions UNSCR 1325, 2493 and 2467, all of which focus more heavily on gender within the realm of peace and security. Each resolution outlines the need to prevent violence and discrimination against women and youth due to their gender. These resolutions, however, have a limited capacity to address structural forms of violence experienced by young women and the ways that they overcome them. My article will look beyond the resolutions to discover what is happening in practice. For example, how can gender-based violence in Latin America be addressed when states are not set up to protect young women, or even worse, when states are the source of violence? What are the strategies for security led by many young women?

To understand the challenges some young women are facing I will look at two countries. The first, Chile in which



the state has been complicit in violence against women not only through impunity but also by its police force (Tapia Jáuregui 2019). The second country I will focus on is Colombia in which there are also many examples of violence exerted by the state (Parkin Daniels 2018), not only because of the armed conflict context, but in a non-war context with non-lethal violence (BBC News 2020). Many of the policies designed to improve security currently focus on the people involved in violence directly and government positions, neglecting the initiatives proposed by peacebuilders.

Against this background, I will outline different ways gender-violence affects women, through three layers of oppression; capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Following this, I will highlight the ways that some young women in each country (Chile and Colombia) are challenging the traditional ways of understanding security. They are using peacebuilding to face the three different -but interconnected- forms of oppression.

## **THE EMBODIMENT OF VIOLENCE – SUFFERING**

Society imposes a heavy burden on women. This can be physical violence, mental violence, emotional violence, or a combination of them. Especially in Latin America, a region in which social conflict takes forms of exploitation and dispossession. For example, women can be treated as objects by male drug traffickers or be violated, not because of sexual pleasure, but because of the fact that they are perceived as a body that deserves violence (Segato 2013). This kind of violence is suffered by women and transgender women.

When addressing this topic, we have to pay attention to the multiple forms of non-lethal violence (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2019) that disproportionately impact young women. These include threats to their social standing and links to their community, verbal abuse with terms like “*perras*” (bitches) or “*putas*” (sluts), the disappearance or rape of young women as a form of domination over their bodies, daily violence in their homes, and “*micromachismos*” (subtle acts of violence that happen daily and are often overlooked). *Micromachismos*, such as sexist jokes, although relatively minor compared to some other forms of violence, reinforce a discourse of oppression against certain social groups. These practices of gender-based violence are sustained by three forms of oppression: *capitalism*, *colonialism* and *patriarchy* (De Sousa Santos 2017).

## **THREE FORMS OF OPPRESSION**

Oppression affects women in different ways, depending on their situation and background. For example, the resulting gender-based violence would be different as a result of being Afro (Davis 1981), being poor, having a disability, or being young. Each characteristic can result in more violence against women, what some scholars name intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Haraway 1995). In order to understand oppression and privilege between social groups, we must make the impact of violence visible. This violence mirrors three interconnected forms of oppression, namely, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

Within these, the concept of security often has a narrow definition that state protection is only from external attacks or attacks by citizens, instead of a practice to foster all forms of life. This narrow interpretation leaves many people unprotected. It legitimises some physical coercion, violations of privacy, and militarisation over bodies and places in which citizens have only experienced living in a state led by the armed forces but do not feel protected. In this scenario, there are seldom conditions for the development of peace initiatives.

## *Capitalism*

The violence that stems from *capitalism* can be found in the exploitation and the violation of human rights. This is particularly frequent in contexts where there is no state government to protect women and the local communities are not in a position to stand up to ruling figures, or where the state perpetrates violence against its citizens. Young women and young people are most likely to suffer this kind of violence. For example, in 2003 journalist Graciela Atencio highlighted that crimes (including some homicides) perpetrated against young women in Ciudad de Juárez, México were committed in places where there is no state to guarantee the protection of young women's rights. They are instead discarded by illegal cartels, such as the drug cartel, and despised by the government. Usually, crimes happen in poor neighbourhoods or remote areas. In these places, women are treated as merchandise or as a way to send a message to enemies. Author Maria Salguero explained; "To harm him you have to kill those who hurt them the most: their sisters, their mothers" (Becerril 2019).

## *Colonialism*

*Colonialism* breeds violence affecting not only women's bodies, but it also has an impact on the spaces that they live in, for example, their home or land (Cabnal 2015). This is commonly seen when young women resist the exploitation of natural resources in their community and their land is dispossessed. For example, in some regions of Colombia (such as Chocó) the increase in conflicts over land (Cortés 2020) produced devastating effects on the environment and the displacement of people, the majority of them women. This kind of violence is the result of two things. First is a lasting legacy from colonialism which still results in a depiction of young ethnic women as people who are lesser and deserve to be disposed of. The second is the segregation of some people from the politics of protection (Mbembe 2011).

## *Patriarchy*

Many young women suffer forms of abuse intended to teach them their place in society as one not equal to male counterparts (Segato 2013), for example, through discipline violations. This is frequently found in Latin American countries where there is drug trafficking or armed conflict. In these countries, many young women (and young transgender women) are violated by armed actors as a punishment for their existence. It is a way to "contain, censor, discipline, and reduce" women to being nothing more than a body to use (Segato 2013). In the same vein, in non-war contexts, women suffer domestic violence and many forms of non-lethal violence that affect them extremely.

## **A WAY THROUGH**

Many of the policies designed to improve security currently focus on extremism, the people involved in violence directly and government positions. They usually neglect the initiatives proposed by peacebuilders or human rights defenders, as highlighted by young people in *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (Simpson 2018). This doesn't just limit the progress of the global youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda, it may inadvertently contribute to injustices and oppressions by securitising young people (Maysoun and Tannok 2017). It could position them either as supporters of the global social and economic order or as part of extremist agendas, without understanding the wide spectrum of roles young people play and their work to overcome these typecast positions in society.

In spite of these varied routes of oppression, there are still young people resisting injustices.

The global feminist movement and young women from grassroots organisations are proving that other approaches to sustaining peace can work. These include making visible other forms of violence (including those inflicted by the state) and showing that young women are viable agents of change.

The next section will look at two examples of decolonial peacebuilding strategies led and developed by young women. These are examples of ways that, if expanded, we can create a better and inclusive world.

## **CHILE: PERFORMANCES FOR GENDER PEACE**

A group of four Chilean young women, *Las Tesis*, translate feminist theories into performance art. One example of this is their anthem "*Un violador en tu camino*" (*A rapist in your way*). It highlights the violence perpetrated against women as a way to denounce injustices. Their performance has raised awareness of the issue. It went viral on social networks, has been included in global media, for example, BBC News, and has been performed in dozens of cities around the world. The anthem was highlighted in a variety of countries including, Colombia, India, Turkey, France and the USA.

*Las Tesis*'s work especially resonates in areas close to home, where there are abysmal femicide rates. Over half of the 25 countries with the highest levels of femicides are in Latin America (Nowak 2012). All this violence is not only exerted as a post-war result (Pearce and Perea 2019). The rates of sexual violence against women are extremely high in the region. More than a quarter of women in Haiti reported experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime (Bott, et al. 2012). The report also mentions high rates of emotional abuse and controlling behaviours by partners as important forms of violence that are widespread in the Region.

This peacebuilding movement doesn't only focus on Chile, but violence against women across the world. They highlight flaws in the justice system that result in women not just becoming victims but also being re-victimised and facing the disdain of the authorities to protect them (Tapia Jáuregui 2019). They help others to understand the violent situation some women are trapped in. Understanding is the first step to change. *Las Tesis* has a powerful voice in this aspect. In "*Un violador en tu camino*" they include the lines: "*el violador eres tú... el estado opresor es un macho violador*" (*you are the rapist... the oppressive state is a male rapist*).

They have inspired others to speak out against the patriarchy. As their performances grew their audience so did the number of people sharing their own stories of abuse via social media. One of the young women of *Las Tesis* said: "*A rapist in your way* got out of our hands, and the beauty is that it was appropriated by other women" (Pais 2019). According to Paula Cometa (BBC News 2019), another member of *Las Tesis*: "the hymn went viral because systematic violence is generalized, and the song is a 'cry all we have to give.'" In Chile, the action went further; young women replicated the performance, in addition, women protested under the motto *Las Tesis Senior* (Abramovich 2019).

Each of these small actions helps us to understand the role of young people as peacebuilders, creating civic spaces for addressing problems hidden for centuries, resisting against the violence of the state security conservative bodies, and defending human rights, all of this against the stereotypes of youth as troublemakers, as passive victims, or as perpetrators (Altiok forthcoming; Simpson 2018).

## COLOMBIA: WOMEN STRIVING FOR CHANGE IN LOCAL AND NATIONAL PEACEBUILDING

Grassroots organisations are sometimes the first to take a stand against the three oppressions. They are small and versatile. This is evident in Colombia, even in the midst of a violent conflict, and with great personal risk to the women involved. Numerous rural community groups, some led by young women, are facing that risk head-on. They have developed strategies to defend their human rights, claim their reparation and obtain legal land tenure (Henaó-Izquierdo and Guerrero 2019).

These groups function despite illegal armed groups having a presence in their communities and making clear the risks to women. For example, during the worst years of the armed conflict, in the region of Chocó (1997-2003), the illegal armed groups (paramilitaries and guerrillas) regularly abused young women. Sometimes, they were killed for being with someone from the public force or a guerrilla. Women suffered disproportionately. They made up 88% of the people who suffered crimes against freedom and sexual integrity (Unidad de Atención y Reparación Integral a Víctimas 2020).

It was found that not only your gender could place you at greater risk, but also your race with prevalent colonial links to the abuse. Black Colombian women were more likely to be sexually assaulted. This is due to continuing colonial practices in which their body is perceived as an object without value, that must be colonised and hypersexualised (Quintero et al. 2020). This violence reflects a modern-colonial system, in which women, many of them young, suffer from racialised, colonial and capitalist gender oppression (Lugones 2011).

Nevertheless, young women, including those from black (Afro) communities, are working in Chocó to overcome these challenges. They are seeking to eliminate all forms of violence against women. For example, each year local campaigns mark the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. One example is the collaboration between three groups; *Movimiento Feminista por la Paz: Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, *Red de Mujeres Chocoanas* and *Red Juvenil de Mujeres Chocoanas*. They urged supporters to sing a song that reminds them that there is female support during times of difficulty with the aim of creating a sense of togetherness and solidarity with other women (Red Departamental de Mujeres Chocoanas 2015).

Colombian women have also taken steps to redress gender inequality in peace processes. They have taken seats at negotiating tables, both nationally and locally. A key focus has been land restitution or the protection of their environment. At the national level, some of them took part in the peace process between the Farc-Ep and the Colombian government, such as the Afro lawyer Nigeria Rentería, recognised as an important woman in black communities. She has advocated for women and Afro communities throughout her career. At the local level, more and more women are involved in key decisions, including in Riosucio (a municipality of Chocó). A negotiation was required to create an environmental plan to protect a national forest reservoir which is part of an Afro collective territory (Bulla, Henaó-Izquierdo and Merchán 2020). In this negotiation, women struggled to find their own place in the middle of patriarchal communities. In the end, they were able to represent their communities despite participation inequalities between men and women in Afro communities.

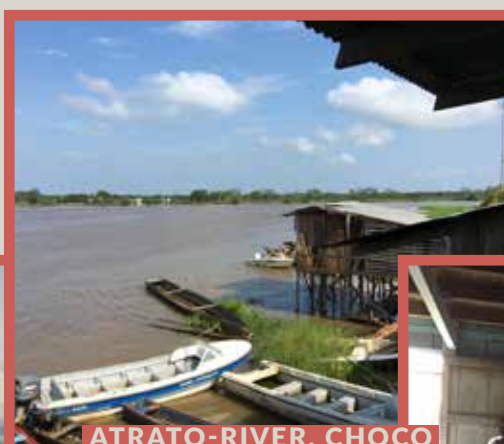
In the same way, Afro (young) women are also creating and strengthening groups of support to face violence, in which talking about their lives and problems helps them to create a common narrative for protection (Salamanca, et al. 2020). For example, women from ethnic grassroots organisations such as *Consejo Comunitario de La Larga y Tumaradó* and *Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios del Bajo Atrato* took a practical step to improve safety. They created collective

protection groups in WhatsApp. These neighbourhood groups are building a community network and highlighting changes needed. They also have direct contact with human rights organisations to denounce human violations and protect their territory. As one young leader from Chocó expressed: “We are giving a firm message on the importance of eliminating all forms of violence against us as women. We are no longer being silent. And we are an example to many other communities, as we can also face the state to demand our rights.”

## THE SUBVERSION OF VALUES TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL CHANGE

The three forms of oppression, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, permeate the daily life of many young women in Latin America and place them at risk of violence. As the case studies show, young women are determined for that to change, speaking out, even if they are still in a position of risk. They are taking action to redress the power relations they face and to help to prevent violence against women, particularly young women who are disproportionately affected. They are raising awareness, building support networks and taking active roles in decision-making to protect their communities and territories. These initiatives are transforming the problems of women, communities and territories, by the power of grassroots unity, and spreading a powerful message. Many young women are at the forefront of the changes.

The aim of these examples is clear: to eliminate all forms of violence against women, against Afro groups, against young women and against everything that tries to remove the status quo. These actions are crucial steps leading to lasting peace. The YPS Agenda should embrace and further support peacebuilding initiatives/movements led by many young women that seek to address conflict and violence against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. They are the ones creating peace at the local level, transforming the stereotypes and showing how young people are important agents of change. They are not scared of the structural violence, also exerted by the state and won't accept it for future generations of young women. We need more state-level decision-makers to embrace the UN resolutions designed to change the current situation. We need to protect and amplify the voices of these young women. This is a crucial step to address conflict and violence resulting from capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. That way we can create peace at the local and global level.



**ATRATO-RIVER, CHOCO**  
CREDIT: HENAO-IZQUIERDO



**ATRATO-RIVER, CHOCO**  
CREDIT: HENAO-IZQUIERDO



**ENVIRONMENTAL  
NEGOTIATION**  
CREDIT: HENAO-IZQUIERDO

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# TRANSFORMATIVE RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE MALDIVES

MOHAMED HOODH IBRAHIM

**MORE THAN 40% OF  
YOUNG WORKERS  
WERE EMPLOYED  
IN SECTORS THAT  
WERE NEGATIVELY  
AFFECTED BY  
COVID-19 (UN ILO  
2020 B). THIS HAS  
MEANT THAT YOUNG  
PEOPLE HAVE  
HAD TO ADAPT TO  
THIS CHANGING  
SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
LANDSCAPE  
THROUGH MEANS OF  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
AND CREATIVITY.**

## Reasons for meaningful inclusion and building back better

This article will explore the key findings of my research and experience in engaging and empowering young people from the Maldives. It has evolved with the backdrop of a five-year international shift towards greater youth inclusion in policy and decision-making.

When viewing the global youth policy landscape the unanimous adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on 9 December 2015 is a milestone event. This resolution was the first to recognise the important and positive role of young people in the service and promotion of international peace and security. In the following five years the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda progressed at pace. There were various consultations to engage and empower young people. The UN Security Council adopted two additional resolutions on the topic, UNSCR 2419 (2018) and UNSCR 2535 (2020). Additionally, two key reports were released. The first assessed UNSCR 2250; the Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (Simpson 2018). It is important to recognise that this captured over four thousand young people's views and voices. The second assessed progress to date; the Report of the Secretary-General on youth, peace and security (UNSCR 2020).

To assess our progress it is important to understand the



resolutions remit, as well as their limitations. For example, UNSCR 2250 mainly focuses on five pillars for action; participation, partnerships, prevention, protection and disengagement and re-integration. Thus emphasising the role of young people in peacebuilding. The Missing Peace (Simpson 2018) went further, highlighting the need for economic inclusion of young people as key stakeholders in order to strengthen peace processes. It recognised this role is crucial, not just in terms of reliable employment but also in being able to take ownership of the economy and development processes. Yet, the study argued that youth should also be considered as key stakeholders in sharing economic resources and power. This means the concerns of young people go beyond just jobs to the question of ownership in the economy and meaningful engagement in development processes (Simpson 2018).

Two years after the study was published, UNSCR 2535, highlighted the vital role of young people in preventing and resolving conflict. This is in addition to building and maintaining peace, while still strongly calling for the inclusive representation of youth. This continued effort at the international level to align and further encourage the actions of nation-states towards achieving YPS goals half a decade after the first momentous resolution, demonstrates that the YPS agenda is still very much a backburner issue for countries. In the context of local and national implementation, it still remains to be seen how much young people are valued and included meaningfully in the decision making processes. States often demonstrate youth engagement through mechanisms that only work for youth on the surface level. When this veneer is scratched, it is often apparent these mechanisms are biased and marginalise large segments of the youth population. For instance, His Excellency Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives' statement on the occasion of the 55th Independence Day of the Maldives highlighted the need to involve youth in diversifying the economic activities of the Maldives (The President's Office 2020). However, this call for inclusion has not materialised into an open, meaningful, and democratic mechanism to promote youth involvement. In the same year, freedoms and safe space for young people to raise concerns have shrunk (Munavvar 2020). In contrast, there has been a high degree of cynicism among young people about state institutions according to the Democracy Survey by Transparency Maldives in 2015 (Transparency Maldives 2015). The likelihood that this cynicism and crisis of confidence in institutions still remains in 2020 and will beyond is significant, if not high.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 slowed progress. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic includes the loss of 305 million jobs worldwide (UN International Labour Organization (ILO) 2020 a). COVID-19 has detrimentally impacted the financial standing of young people, in particular. More than 40% of young workers were employed in sectors that were negatively affected by COVID-19 (UN ILO 2020 b). This has meant that young people have had to adapt to this changing socio-economic landscape through means of entrepreneurship and creativity. This paper will try to examine youth reliance as exhibited in activities such as adaptation, entrepreneurship and creative problem-solving. It will look at the reasons for expanding meaningful youth engagement and how tokenism or instrumentalisation of youth participation blocks youth resilience. Especially in the ways that an unrepresentative state youth body can hamper meaningful youth engagement. This can be seen in National Youth Councils that have tenuous links with the youth population at large and do not have a legitimate mandate to affect the will of those whom they must serve.

## **YOUTH RESILIENCE IN COVID-19 RESPONSE**

In order to fully grasp youth resilience, it is helpful to look at the definition. The Missing Peace stated that,

*“the resilience of young people may be more transformative in character, through driving political change, rebuilding damaged relationships, and even addressing the underlying causes of conflict and preventing its violent manifestations. Standing at the “crossroads” between risk and resilience, young people have a unique perspective on the factors that may enable them to address their experiences of marginalization and exclusion through either positive or negative manifestations of resilience.” (Simpson 2018, 33)*

Resilience is often highlighted in times of conflict and disaster. This was evident and widespread in the global response to COVID-19. Governments swiftly brought young people to the frontline for urgent action. For example, young people were used in contact tracing, sample collection and rapid response teams. As a result, we are seeing the amplification of young people’s roles as a means of risk mitigation for society. This is in part due to young people having significantly higher chances of survival and recovery thus being viewed as being less impacted by the disease (UNFPA 2020). For this reason, young people can tackle jobs that other people cannot or do not want to perform (Raajje.mv 2020).

Young people functioned as key actors to absorb economic shock and adapted themselves to the new economy. In particular, young people innovated new services and industries, disrupting existing business models that were paralysed by the pandemic. They went on adapting to the new normal faster than other segments of the population. Across the globe, young people absorbed the main brunt of the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in the Maldives, according to the UNDP Rapid Livelihood Assessment: Impact of Covid-19 Crisis in the Maldives, there was a massive loss of jobs with data from all economic sectors. Out of the 7,500 people surveyed 44% reported a complete loss of income, 24% reported no-pay leaves, and 32% responded being partially salaried (Ibrahim et al. 2020). This included more than 50% of employment complaints registered at the Ministry of Economic Affairs Job Center by young people under the age of 30 (Aiham 2020). Around the globe, job losses hit the young more than other age groups. In the UK, workers under 25 were more than twice as likely to have lost their job as older workers. Education is another area heavily hit with schools shut for weeks or months on end. In Kenya, schools stayed shut for nine full months (Inman 2020).

Young people recognised the need for change and demanded transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic to build back better, taking the opportunity to evolve in a positive way. The global call by young people to rebuild society along more equitable lines were heard and amplified by the Maldivian youth. Specifically in terms of deeply scrutinising the status quo of state funding, especially for key underserved areas.

The one mechanism that is supposed to allow young people to speak with policy-makers in the Maldives is the National Youth Council, established in 1980 (Mir Sarfaraz 1983). It remained on the back foot amidst calls for changes from the wider youth population, through other channels, like social media. Young people did not see the council as a space to champion their concerns. For most young people this council is an unfamiliar and alien mechanism. The only large visible activity came in the form of a reoccurring town hall meeting. The council has yet to demonstrate being effective in listening, engaging and addressing youth issues. This lack of engagement is reflected in the 47% of youth aged 18-35 responding that the country is heading in the wrong direction according to the Public Opinion Survey: Residents of the Maldives 2019 (International Republican Institute 2019).

## **YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MALDIVES PUSHING FOR POSITIVE CHANGE**

The need to emerge from the pandemic in a better way was acutely visible through the campaigns of young people in the Maldives. Young people demanded that the government fund their

safety from crimes such as gender-based violence, harassment and rape by defunding sectors perceived by young people as over-budgeted, namely law enforcement and defence. They want to see increased funding to programmes such as women's shelters, mental health centres and robust social services. They argue that social service and mental health services are crucial to a healthy society, but are currently under-funded (Malsa 2020).

The destabilising effect of COVID-19 has resulted in more young people being engaged in various roles including, but not limited to, the national emergency response. Young people have been filling in the gaps in services and voluntarily supporting the national efforts to combat the disease with activities such as contact tracing, psychosocial support and joining rapid response teams (Mihaaru 2020).

Further, young people have also been leading the charge on improving transparency and accountability of state institutions by endeavouring to use the Maldivian Right to Information law to its maximum potential by exposing questionable state official's salaries and bringing to light wasteful spending habits of taxpayer-funded state-owned enterprises. These efforts are part of a push by young people to standardise remunerations, including salary and allowances, for political appointees in the Maldives. These young people are publicising the remuneration data in order to build public consensus towards changes to these practices, offering transformative changes, building a culture of new open social norms and analysing the existing status quo and culture in the country. While for some this is a radical call for change, for others it is already high time these changes are implemented.

Young people in the Maldives have demonstrated how resilient they are by stimulating the economy and opening up new avenues of economic activities. This has taken the form of young vendors forming home-based businesses in food preparation, and the creation of artwork, among many other services. Additionally, young people voiced their concerns and demanded grace periods in the implementation of home-based business regulations, demanding changes to the existing regulations to reflect the small home-based operations, and revisions to the health and safety guidelines to reflect the small production numbers. These demands were so loud and so numerous that they were successful. A grace period was added and young home-based workers were offered leniency in regulations. This allows young entrepreneurs to register and comply.

## **WEAK STATE RESPONSE**

In the Maldives, much like other small island states with significant reliance on the tourism sector, the economic impact has been devastating. This single pillar economy has been a driver of massive change and development in the country over the past decades. Up to 40% of the economy usually comes directly or indirectly from the tourism sector. That wasn't possible in 2020 and has meant that the economic ripple has spread across the country. There have been mass evictions, families migrating to rural areas, a 1% rise in unemployment in 2020 when compared to 2019 according to ILO estimates (Plecher 2020). This has highlighted the weakness of an undiversified national economy structure (Ibrahim et al. 2020).

Historically, state bureaucracies are slow at adapting to new challenges. Even before COVID-19 arrived on the shores of the Maldives, youth engagement mechanisms utilised by the state relegated young people to nominal roles and token functions in the state apparatus. Current policy instruments, mechanisms and documents often do not go far enough to capture the creative ways in which young people contribute to society and respond to change. In the wake of COVID-19 societies were scrambling to figure out basic needs, while young people were offering innovative technology solutions utilising widely accessible social media platforms in new ways. For example, disseminating useful health and safety information to counteract growing paranoia

and xenophobia towards the local vulnerable migrant population. These actions stabilised the society by creating understanding, education and compassion for each other based on our common humanity, when our fear and hate could have easily torn us apart.

In addition, young people built temperature scan tools, and automatic hand sanitiser dispensers (Naseem 2020). They even created medically complex machines such as ventilators using the information available on the internet and the parts available locally (MV+ 2020). Taking on volunteer roles, they were at the forefront, supporting efforts to educate workers on hand hygiene, precautionary measures and other important pandemic efforts such as contact tracing (Mihaaru 2020). Meanwhile, the state woefully struggled in the procurement of these lifesaving emergency medical devices.

One common thread through these stories of resilience is the absence of inclusion and meaningful engagement at the policy and decision-making level. In the Maldives, this responsibility should fall on the National Youth Council. This mechanism has been inadequate and unable to raise or resolve the concerns of young people to decision-makers. In its current form, the National Youth Council does not represent those it was designed to serve. This is for three reasons. First, it does not hold the power to influence decision making. Second, its members are not representative of young people in the Maldives. Members are not elected, instead, they are chosen by ministers. Thirdly, there has not been proactive championing to close this gap from within.

## **ENGAGING YOUTH AND MEANINGFUL INCLUSION FOR A BETTER FUTURE BEYOND COVID-19**

The will of young people in the Maldives is currently lost in the hierarchy of power and state bureaucracy. While institutions claim to be working towards inclusion in policy and decision making, the percentage of young people meaningfully engaged by state institutions is limited and the role of young people in negotiating better meaningful engagement is purposefully left weak by the state.

This can be changed by equitable efforts by state institutions to broadly engage with youth, from all areas, with particular attention paid to draw in those currently underserved in the rural areas and inner city centres. Further, adopting a mechanism where the National Youth Council becomes an elected body by young people instead of being an unfamiliar group of young people that need not engage with the broad youth population. Since the council is currently appointed at the preference of a minister instead of democratic elections, this change has the potential to make it a body that is truly representative of young people with a powerful platform and mandate. However special care must be taken to ensure these changes do not fall into the trap of being token changes.

Continuing to nominally engage youth, such as is the case in the Maldives means that youth are not included in solution creation and the vast potential of youth engagement for the benefit of society, is lost. Ultimately this means that society is poorer for neglecting one of the most important segments within. Young people have proven in 2020 that their contribution to the Maldives is both worthy and substantial. The years to come should see their greater integration into our decision-making process to reflect this.

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# YOUTH AGENCY IN PEACEBUILDING IN POST- JASMINE REVOLUTION TUNISIA

SHADI ROUSHAHBAZ

***TIME AND  
TIME AGAIN,  
[YOUNG PEOPLE]  
DEMONSTRATE  
THEIR AGENCY IN  
THE POLITICAL  
REALM THROUGH  
THEIR RESILIENCE  
AND LEADERSHIP  
CAPABILITIES IN  
ORDER TO ENSURE  
THAT THEY ARE  
ARCHITECTS OF  
THEIR OWN FUTURE  
AND THAT THEY CAN  
CONTRIBUTE TO THE  
COMMUNITIES THEY  
LIVE IN.***

**This article will explore the ways that young people are building positive peace and taking an active role in leading grassroots peace-building.**

I will show how they achieve this, despite their desire and ability to drive change (agency) often being limited due to their exclusion from decision-making spaces. Time and time again, they demonstrate their agency in the political realm through their resilience and leadership capabilities in order to ensure that they are architects of their own future and that they can contribute to the communities they live in. The data has been gathered from 15 interviews and two focus group discussions in Sousse and Tunis. It speaks volumes about the creativity and persistence of young people for building peace despite them experiencing systemic exclusion and challenges that they face in their context.

## **THE TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH PEACEBUILDING SINCE THE JASMINE REVOLUTION**

The lives of young people in Tunisia have undergone dramatic developments and transformations in the decade since the Jasmine Revolution that initiated the Arab Spring. Back in 2011, the young people who participated in protests and supported the democratic transition of Tunisia envisioned a mutually supportive rapport with their new government that would grant them a seat at the table and a voice in building positive peace in their communities. Young people were the driving force behind the Revolution, yet they continue to experience a spirit of political disenchantment and disillusionment due to exclusion from governance, access to the labour market, and economic development policies.

Parallel to the post-revolution democratic transition in Tunisia, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted the landmark resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security (YPS). Prevention is one of the five action pillars of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250, highlighting the importance of Member States facilitating “an inclusive and enabling environment in which young people, including youth from different backgrounds, are recognised and provided with adequate support to implement violence prevention activities and support social cohesion” (UNSCR 2250 clause 10). It also “stresses the importance of creating policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts, including social and economic development, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, and provide youth employment opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education, and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement” (UNSCR 2250 clause 11). These two articles encourage viewing young people as allies and equal in taking responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security of their contexts.

There are numerous benefits to youth inclusion at the political level. It enhances the effectiveness of policymaking and decision-making, improves services design, autonomy and creates more opportunities for action on the part of young people (Government of Scotland 2020). “Ultimately, the youth of today are paving the way for the foundations of a better world. This does not only apply to policies that affect them directly now such as education but to decisions that impact the future such as the environment, culture and language, and representation” (The Social Change Agency 2019).

Yet, after an era of democratic transition that was sparked and supported by youth, the Tunisian government is still struggling to address the expectations of young people. The scarcity of work opportunities following high education and vocational training, coupled with exclusion from decision-making processes (Deman and Saidani 2017) exacerbates “youth frustrations, thereby driving rather than mitigating conflict and alienation” (Lopez et al 2016, 10). This frustration leads young people to build their own version of positive peace, independent from their state. They do this by creating safe and inclusive spaces in the civil society sphere, as confirmed by the findings of *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (Simpson 2018).

Considering the parallels between the objective of the global YPS agenda and the dire need for youth inclusion to achieve a successful democratic transition, the Tunisian context provides an ideal condition to assess the adoption of UNSCR 2250. It is a context that offers an opportunity to explore whether, and how the resolution has influenced the relationship between Tunisian youth and their government. A key to this is to better understand youth-centred peacebuilding approaches in Tunisia. Therefore, in the summer of 2019, I conducted fifteen interviews and two focus group discussions with young peacebuilders based in Sousse and Tunis. In this article, I will share the key findings. These suggest that in spite of reduced political agency due to exclusion from decision-making spaces, youth take a more active role in leading grassroots peacebuilding. This speaks volumes about the resilience of young people for peace despite their extensive exposure and experience to the systemic challenges they face in their contexts.

## **YOUTH DISENCHANTMENT: POLITICAL EXCLUSION AND ECONOMIC DEADLOCK**

The Jasmine Revolution highlighted the important role young people play in social and political change. The Revolution is often commemorated with the self-immolation of a young street vendor in Sidi Bouzid who was protesting the precarious working conditions and unemployment rates as a young person in Tunisia.

Since the revolution, it has been recognised that youth are critical in inspiring and spearheading the process of political change. Their role, and in turn, their priority for post-revolutionary political transition has been proven. Youth has become a group that “embodies dynamism and positive change as it had been repressed and mistreated under the authoritarian rule” (Paciello, Pepicelli and Pioppi 2016, 6). However, while at the beginning youth showed up in numbers for political participation as protestors, volunteers and election observers, their representation has gradually declined over time. The years since have left them as disenchanted and disillusioned observers who are reluctant to vote or participate in political processes and instead work with civil society rather than politicians to create change in their society (Syeed 2013).

Part of this political disillusionment was caused by the gradual alienation between young people and the new government. Tunisian law requires all election lists to include at least one person under the age of 30. However, there is no specification or requirement to list youth at the head of a list. Therefore, in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections, many political parties listed women and young people lower on their candidate lists, making it less likely they would be elected (Carter Center 2013). In that election, only 5% of those topping the candidate lists were under 30 (ibid). Not considering youth as equal in politics resulted in less than 20% of people aged 18 - 35 years voting in 2014 parliamentary elections (Amor 2018).

Another part of the disillusionment has been due to the economic challenges that young people face. One of the main driving forces behind the revolution was the burden of unemployment and economic challenges which remain a huge obstacle in the livelihoods of youth today. Many young Tunisians from both the urban and rural areas are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). According to the World Bank, one in three young men in rural Tunisia and one in five in urban Tunisia are NEET (World Bank 2014). Numbers are higher for young women. Half of the young women in rural Tunisia are NEET (ibid); about a third in urban areas (32%). Moreover, millions of young Tunisians are forced to work jobs in which they do not need to use their education, skills, creativity, and potential. Instead, familial connections, bribery, nepotism, and regionalism determine who has access to decent jobs (ibid).

Despite all of this, young people have not been passive in the face of exclusion. They have demonstrated their agency in the spaces they can access. Cardozo et. al (2015) have defined youth agency as the space to manoeuvre available to young people (in their 2nd and 3rd decade of life) in developing conscious or unconscious strategies that either support or hinder peacebuilding in relation to the broader cultural political economy context. In the Tunisian context, young people have turned to activism to exercise their agency.

Youth movements have developed into three types of organised entities to ensure the sustainable outcome of their revolt through maintaining their agency: newly founded youth-driven political parties; non-governmental civil society organisations; and finally unstructured youth groups working together, reporting and informing the public on developments and violations, in the hope of safeguarding the ‘right to know’ (Halaseh 2012). Since Halaseh’s 2012 research, in Tunisia, youth participation in civil society organisations and unstructured youth groups have been much more active than the youth minority who engage with political activism (Syeed 2013).

## **YOUTH AGENCY AND PEACEBUILDING ACTIVITIES FOR POSITIVE PEACE**

While the Tunisian government struggles to address youth political exclusion and economic challenges, young people still have a vision for their country, which is viewed as a model of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa. To make this vision a reality and deliver the many



unfulfilled promises from the side of the Tunisian state, young people have sought to mobilise their efforts into creating civic spaces such as youth collectives and civil society organisations. Even if excluded from decision-making, in these spaces, youth can create their vision for a safer and more tolerant society with respect for gender equality, human rights, intercultural solidarity and environmental protection and a reduction in corruption. These collectives and organisations can provide the space to build positive peace and social cohesion in the Tunisian context.

The young activists whom I interviewed and those who participated in my focus group discussions all pointed towards an agreement on Tunisia not being a country at peace unless compared with other neighbouring countries such as Libya where continued violent conflict means that peacebuilding efforts are more likely to manifest in maintaining negative peace. A 23-year-old volunteer, who coordinated intercultural exchanges in her organisation, stated, “When we have western interns and volunteers coming to Tunisia, they consider it a safe country in the MENA region full of interesting food and camels. But as a young woman fluent in three languages, I still feel very little security for my future in this country.”

Given their extensive experience in working at the grassroots level, Tunisian youth have a deep understanding of the term peace, well beyond the definition of absence of war. They have identified the need for developing positive peace in their country, a condition in which sustainable peace is built on justice for everyone in a society. They are determined to build positive peace in Tunisia through creating safe spaces for debate and expression of dissent around the current status quo as well as for mobilisation and capacity building in peace education.

At the young age of 19, a queer activist highlighted the importance of creating these spaces by describing the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, an open space for debate and discussion on queer identity and sexuality. He found it imperative to be active in the civic space for creating safer living conditions. “Without these spaces, visibility, sensibilisation, mobilisation and influencing legislations that violate Human Rights, such as Article 230 of the Tunisian Criminal Code (Mchirgui 2016) would be impossible,” they explained.

To overcome the barrier of invisibility and infantilization and to promote solidarity between citizens, several organisations, including InnoPeace, have organised events focused on providing space for youth to share their stories and speak up about the injustices that they have faced. This could be as a result of misgovernance in various sectors such as sexual reproductive health and rights, citizen protection and gender. Human Library Events are great examples of that. Readers can borrow human beings, serving as open books, and have conversations they would not normally have access to. Every human book from the bookshelf represents a group in the society that is often subjected to prejudice, stigmatisation or discrimination because of their lifestyle, diagnosis, belief, disability, social status, ethnic origin etc.

Other organisations such as Ambassadors for Dialogue also opened spaces for critical debate and dialogue while also conducting capacity building workshops for refining various soft skills for young people. There are still certain youth groups and civil society organisations such as IWatch that monitor the performance of politicians and demand accountability by creating websites and ‘meter’s for elected politicians and political parties but they remain a minority compared to the other groups (Khlifi 2015).

## **THE YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA: FROM RECOGNITION TO IMPLEMENTATION**

Tunisian youth have been at the forefront of peacebuilding and positive transformation in their societies just like most young people from around the world. However, given their limited

political agency, in many cases, they have not yet been able to create systemic change. “While profound social transformation takes time, this generation is still wrestling with how to move beyond street protest and have a lasting impact on politics and governance” (Honwana 2019, abstract). What young people have developed instead, can be described as resilience, creativity, and adaptability alongside their will for change and their determination for building peace and social cohesion. Their involvement at the decision-making level is not only beneficial but crucial to their context.

Implementing the global youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda should be seen as something mutually beneficial for governments and young people in all countries, including the ones with democratic transitions or peace negotiations. Research demonstrates that increased youth agency and genuine youth inclusion at the decision-making level can catalyse peacebuilding efforts (Altiok and Grizelj 2019). This narrative is also relevant in the Tunisian context for bringing about a long-lasting positive impact when overcoming development challenges in Tunisia. Such relevance is high enough that on December 9th, 2020, during the Arria-Formula Meeting on Capitalizing on Intergenerational Dialogue to Build and Sustain Peace and Enhance Social Cohesion at Community Levels, the Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations stated:

*Tunisia has always put youth at the top of its priorities. It is stipulated in its Constitution. Youth are an active force in building the nation, and [Tunisia] underscores that the state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realizing their potential support. [Tunisia] supports them to assume responsibility and strives to extend and generalize their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development. We firmly believe that young people play a vital role in the development of their societies. This role is a multi-dimensional one in which the political, the economic, the social and the cultural interact harmoniously and inclusively. This is the spirit that drives our political philosophy and our approach to this theme. In closing, I would like to reiterate our steadfast commitment to the promotion of youth work and participation in shaping the present and future of our region, and in achieving the aspirations of our populations to peace, security, dignity and prosperity. We reiterate our engagement in implementing the YPS Agenda. (DIRCOZA 2020)*

Therefore, the importance of the YPS agenda and recognising the significance of youth agency is not hidden from decisionmakers, including Tunisian authorities. Yet, young people, including myself, wonder how much more time, research and resilience is needed before governments, such as the current Tunisian government, go beyond lip service and take it upon themselves to make youth-inclusive policies and engage young people where they rightfully have a say and influence: at the decision-making level.



**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION ON BROADENING THE SPACE FOR YPS, TUNISIA**

CREDIT: OENDRESA IBRAHIMI

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# BUILDING PEACE IN CENTRAL ASIA: VOICES OF YOUTH FROM KYRGYZSTAN

KANATBEK ABDIEV

***THE CURRENT  
CHALLENGES FACED  
BY KYRGYZSTAN  
TO PROVIDE A  
STABLE AND SECURE  
ENVIRONMENT  
FOR GROWTH AND  
DEVELOPMENT ARE  
MAKING YOUNG  
PEOPLE LOOK  
FOR ALTERNATIVE  
SOURCES OF  
STABILITY AND  
SECURITY.***

## **Challenges and recommendations**

With the adoption of the United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on youth, peace and security in 2015, Kyrgyzstan welcomed a number of international programmes and projects on youth peacebuilding and conflict prevention processes. These projects involved thousands of young women and men in varied activities. They included a focus on understanding values of tolerance and democracy, analysing roots causes of local security issues and finding solutions. These projects included youth-led mini-projects designed to resolve their own issues, and running advocacy campaigns to attract attention and engage authorities for bringing change. Nevertheless, there is still a knowledge gap on whether these projects are contributing to sustainable development, building peace and enabling young people to become more resilient and prone to future conflicts.

In this article, I will discuss the key findings from my master's thesis, which evaluated the international peacebuilding efforts in Kyrgyzstan. In the thesis, I focused particularly on the peacebuilding initiatives aimed at young people in southern Kyrgyzstan implemented during the period of 2015-2019. I assessed the effectiveness of the peacebuilding projects in relation to the prevention of violent conflicts and peacebuilding. I achieved this by researching the implementation of youth peacebuilding projects and by evaluating the methodology and approach used by international organisations, as well as by surveying project participants, NGO staff and government representatives.

## **POST-CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING IN KYRGYZSTAN**

Kyrgyzstan has suffered from social divisions along with political, ethnic, regional, clan and religious conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These fractures have culminated in several violent clashes of 1990 (inter-ethnic), 2005 (tulip revolution) and the most recent, in 2010 (revolution and inter-ethnic), leaving many dead and injured. Perceptions in society that extremist views are beginning to gain ground has also fuelled further discrimination and marginalisation of some groups. The current challenges faced by Kyrgyzstan to provide a stable and secure environment for growth and development are making young people look for alternative sources of stability and security. The vulnerable segments of the population (including young people) are looking to religions, ethno-nationalist and criminal structures for opportunities, provision of order and values. The national government's response (which is often aggressive and suppressive at the cost of freedom values such as religious plurality and human rights) is not achieving an aim of countering radicalisation and extremism, but instead contributing to further alienating the population. The issues of corruption, weak institutions and bad governance are instigating the existing problems and increasing conflict potential in communities. To fully understand, how peacebuilding initiatives are being implemented in southern Kyrgyzstan, it is important to research the approach, methodology and activities, as well as young people's perception and opinion on participating in such peacebuilding projects.

## **POST-CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING IN KYRGYZSTAN**

After reviewing the implemented projects, including interviewing those involved (project participants, staff, experts and representatives of local government), it is obvious that international organisations are doing a vast majority of work in preventing conflicts and building peace in southern Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, both the organisations and their project beneficiaries face incredible challenges during the implementation of peacebuilding projects. All of these obstacles in implementation were categorised into three sets.

### *Violence of Exclusion*

The first set of challenges covers issues identified by young people during the implementation of peacebuilding initiatives. They highlighted the issues by answering brief questions on youth participation in peacebuilding projects, their current understanding of peacebuilding and their experience with international interventions. This has helped us to gain an understanding of whether the projects were successful and effective.

First of all, the activists I interviewed frequently identified their exclusion from project design as one of the main weaknesses of these programmes. Exclusion of young people from the design stage led to poor understanding of the logic behind activities, content difficulties and parents' disapproval of their participation. Inclusive project design could minimise these challenges.

Secondly, the majority of local government representatives recognise that peacebuilding initiatives are useful and more long-term projects with stable funding needed. Nevertheless, some of them still perceive international and local NGOs as agents of the west and critically assess their approach to peacebuilding. Furthermore, the short-term nature of conflict-prevention interventions prevents national stakeholders from engaging with international actors. Close involvement of national stakeholders from the very beginning, at the design stage, would solve this problem and contribute to creating local ownership over peace processes.

### *Short-termism/time*

Moreover, the problem of time and funding has been central for young people. As one of the young people noted: "There has not been sufficient time and resources to support the

sustainability of initiatives undertaken by young people. For example, I, together with my youth association, started debating clubs, youth leadership classes and advocacy campaigns. However, the project ended in three months, we could not monitor the results of our youth advocacy campaigns or follow-up activities to inform the local government representatives.” The limited funds and a demand from donors to see immediate results in organisations designing short term peacebuilding projects. However, rushing to demonstrate the impact of peacebuilding curtails the positive impact of the work. Donor-requested time limitations increase the likelihood of instigating and relapsing into conflict (Anderson 1999, 124).

This problem is also visible from a study of project documents and interviews with project staff of several NGOs. The first and foremost problem for staff in implementing peacebuilding activities was the lack of time. Proper preparation for workshops and capacity building activities, as well as follow-up monitoring of results and advocacy, takes a significant amount of time. Speeding up the processes is counterproductive and may cause exhaustion among project staff.

This issue can be resolved by setting a minimum length for project activities and ensuring donors understand not only how long a project takes to run, but why.

### ***Needs Assessment***

The focus of projects was regularly driven by donors. For example, addressing the issue of countering violence without conducting prior needs assessment research. Although there is a justification that “youth and women’s groups are often seen as channels through which donors can gain access to at-risk communities for counter-messaging and anti-radicalisation campaigns”(O’Farrell and Street 2019), nevertheless, this approach will not to empower youth and instead, “undermine participation in political and peacebuilding processes, social movements, as well as expressions of dissent”(Street and Northedge 2018), since in most cases they fail to involve young people in the design and implementation process of project interventions.

The identification of a further set of challenges became possible from the interviews with local government representatives and independent experts. At a glance, it seems that the government is not interested in partnership with NGOs and international organisations. It even boycotted peacebuilding initiatives by not participating and avoiding meetings with project staff. However, further discussions helped to delve into their point of view and the reason behind the unwillingness to engage with NGOs.

Firstly, they cannot see the impact. Local governments and administrations do not understand why aid money goes to capacity building activities. They do not understand how it helps to build peace. According to them, it would help more if the development aid were spent to buy equipment for local schools, which need computers and books.

Secondly, the peacebuilding capacity of local government staff has not been developed. They need training on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict-sensitive development. Peacebuilding interventions, which include capacity building, youth empowerment and inclusion have a much higher probability of sustainability and long-term success. Whereas programmes that focus only on security and democratisation have a likelihood to maintain peace on a short-term basis or whilst the funding comes from donors. Therefore, inclusion and engagement, as well as capacity building of all stakeholders responsible for peace will have a greater impact and contribute to sustainable peace.

### ***Outdated Trainings***

Next, peacebuilding is an approach in constant change, conflict dynamics fluctuate as well as

new information technology (IT) based solutions are introduced to enable new working methods to be utilised. However, the programme delivery tools remain traditional and NGOs often use outdated training methodology that is not interesting for young people. Although the local staff of international organisations push to introduce interactive and IT-based solutions for workshops, nonetheless decision-makers in headquarters often remain silent. It is necessary to revisit lessons learned and use the existing knowledge about what makes peacebuilding work and succeed, but often a lack of leadership fails innovations.

### *Ecosystem of “Usual Suspects” Assessment*

A third criticism of the peacebuilding and conflict prevention projects is that local staff often involve the same groups who already have engaged with similar projects in the past and were active in promoting and building peace. Surprisingly, most donors did not monitor nor control that implementing partners (local NGOs) targeted and engaged active young people who did not directly participate in the violence. They also often failed to involve excluded or marginal groups who are at risk to become violent. Peacebuilding literature confirms that meaningful engagement of vulnerable groups who exploit limited political and social capabilities and strengthening their resilience through education and empowerment will positively result in producing sustainable peace (Ibid).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

By researching peacebuilding projects aimed at young people and implemented by international organisations during 2015-2019, this piece attempts to identify how international organisations are implementing peacebuilding initiatives in southern Kyrgyzstan and if they actually contributed to peace. Based on an analysis of the peacebuilding projects it can be concluded that the activities of donors and organisations in the area of peacebuilding have a generally positive impact on the development of leadership, mediation and critical thinking skills of the youth. However, it is difficult to evaluate if they contribute to peace and prevent conflicts. Moreover, the peacebuilding initiatives need to be adjusted and include changes dictated by local needs. Nevertheless, this research identified several positive outcomes and valuable recommendations for donors, NGOs and international organisations on how to increase the efficiency of their programmes. Recommendations for improvement of peacebuilding and conflict prevention projects suggest the incorporation of programmatic, policy and systemic changes.

Firstly, peacebuilding projects should consider implementation on a long-term and systemic basis that will allow local stakeholders to have enough time to understand conflict dynamics, develop mediation skills and build sustainable peace. Furthermore, while the bulk of funding goes to the policy analysis and research, civil society remains underfunded (Duckworth 2016), hence, supporting and funding organisations and initiatives aimed at youth will allow them to set agendas and design appropriate responses to evolving needs while developing change champions, leaders and role models.

Second, donors must recognise that failing to include local government representatives in their projects often lead to problems with further implementation of such projects. Local project staff and young project participants face incredible challenges when dealing with the unwillingness of the administration to cooperate and co-organise social events. Inclusion, in the initial stages of the project and co-design of the programme activities, will increase the efficiency of the projects and contribute to building the capacity of local government staff. It will also enhance the sustainability of peace interventions. As Bush K.D (2004) concludes, “the long term effect of building strong local institutions is the capacity for municipal governments to respond quickly, to defuse potentially violent situations and to become partners in mobilizing peace resources

before, during, and after violent conflict erupts.”

Third, international organisations need to assist in the inclusion of youth into decision-making processes that can positively influence peace processes. According to discussions with young people, a lack of participation leads to distrust and a low level of confidence in their abilities to solve problems. In turn, this leads to isolation and involvement in various violent groups or seek alternative security providers such as gangs and extremists. Today, youth make up more than half of the population in Kyrgyzstan and at the same time is the most vulnerable group in many contexts. Therefore, developing and implementing inclusive youth policies, strategies and programmes to tackle the growing social, political issues leading to violent conflicts should become a priority for the government, local and international organisations.

## CONCLUSION

In the last five years, peacebuilders all over the world celebrated the adoption of important documents. The key ones are the UN Security Council Resolutions 2250, 2419 and 2535 on youth, peace and security, and the inclusion of a sustainable development goal on peace, justice and strong institutions which are dedicated to the positive role that youth and women can play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Nonetheless, without supporting and funding local capacities for peace, building skills of local stakeholders and creating opportunities for young people it is impossible to prevent violent conflicts. Resolutions and rhetoric must be followed by action. Therefore, national governments, international organisations and decision-makers need to move towards “ensuring substantial support for youth organisations, initiatives and movements focused on peace and security” (Simpson 2018, 118). Not only must they include youth in decision-making for the allocation of financial resources, but also support youth-led organisations in building their capacity and provide methodology and guidance for planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting of youth-led initiatives. Therefore, the global YPS agenda should focus on tailoring international peace funding to local needs, more efficient monitoring of YPS related projects and amplification of voices of youth-led initiatives in order to bring about positive changes to the actions of decision-makers at the national and international level.



**WORKSHOP ON  
TOLERANCE AND  
DEMOCRACY**



**YOUTH CAMPS ORGANISED  
BY SAFERWORLD**



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# THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE

CAMBRIA C. KHAYAT

**ALTHOUGH MANY  
FORMS OF VIOLENCE  
HAVE GENERATIONAL  
IMPACT,  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
VIOLENCE IS  
ESPECIALLY  
HARMFUL BECAUSE IT  
WORSENS OVER TIME.  
A FEW HEAVY RAINS  
TODAY COULD  
BE AN ENTIRE  
NEIGHBOURHOOD  
UNDERWATER IN 20  
YEARS.**

**The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250, on youth, peace and security, encourages the significant and meaningful role of youth in peacebuilding and decision-making at all levels of power.**

This unanimously adopted resolution has been enacted for the past five years, yet it has failed to follow through in one primary area: the prevention of environmental violence against youth. This article will demonstrate how the climate crisis and environmental degradation is a form of violence most targeted towards future generations, including but not limited to, the youth.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT**

Environmental conflict is increasing as human harm to the planet increases. It is affecting more people, more deeply around the world every year. However, the understanding of environmental conflict is often narrowed to the dispute and competition over scarce resources that become limited due to a decrease in the overall quality of the ecology. It explains that this, in turn, has effects on the quality of life and access to resources. Although this is true, there is a much more intersected and complex approach that realises the longevity and future of environmental conflict. Stephan Libiszewski explains that environmental conflict is, “a conflict caused by the environmental scarcity of a resource, that means: caused by a human-made disturbance of its normal regeneration rate” (1992, 6). This definition is given depth

with the explanation of different variants of scarcity. He explains the difference between physical scarcity, geopolitical scarcity, socio-economic scarcity, and environmental scarcity. By realising the differences and intersections between these types of scarcity, environmental conflict gains a more thorough background that can explain the practical and intersectional effects of environmental degradation. It is seeing ecological issues for the true impact and burden they have on people and the potential for future burdens as well. For example, unchecked burning of fossil fuels can lead to more extreme weather that can destroy infrastructure in places that have low ability to rebuild. In this example, the long-term destroyed infrastructure can lead to high pollution, weak economic growth and job stability, and high poverty rates.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL VIOLENCE**

Environmental conflict manifests as environmental violence in the way it harms ecosystems and the inhabitants' potential for life and development. When we speak about violence, we often refer to visible harm and destruction. However, violence can be invisible, as Galtung (1969) famously argued in his paper *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*. Environmental violence that stems from environmental conflict is a form of slow violence as it inhibits individuals from reaching their maximum potential in life. For example, developing countries receive waste from wealthy countries. This dangerous industrial waste violates the individuals of the recipient country and takes away the potential for local development. In the Gambia, for example, "the dump-site is located in a densely populated area, visible to the residents. . . .the smoke from burning debris is the biggest issue, which covers parts of the residential areas, affecting also the life quality of the population" (Ferronato and Torretta 2019). When there are mass amounts of waste in a region, it can affect the air, food and water quality, thus continually harming the health of the individuals and the environment.

## **GENERATIONAL IMPACT**

Although many forms of violence have generational impact, environmental violence is especially harmful because it worsens over time. The temporal dispersion of the violence slowly spans across generations. Rob Nixon explains the generational effects of climate violence as slow violence: "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility" (2011, 2). It grows stronger as environmental degradation continues to worsen. The impact of violence is felt by future generations stronger as the impact grows. A few heavy rains today could be an entire neighbourhood underwater in 20 years.

Marvin Soroos explains this in the context of human rights stating, "the principle of environmental justice is closely related to a growing recognition that people have environmental rights because a polluted and degraded environment jeopardises the enjoyment of other human rights, such as the right to health, and accordingly to life itself" (2016). By explaining that environmental justice is a universal human right, it gives not only individuals, but also businesses and governments, the responsibility to protect the environment, and clean up past mistakes. Environmental violence is a violation of the human right to live in safety and a form of structural violence that is targeted at future generations. The youth and younger generations will experience the effects of the climate crisis more severely than older generations.

## **FAILURE OF UNSCR 2250**

Security Council Resolution 2250 does mention the possible forms of structural violence (UNSCR 2250 clauses 7, 10, 13, 15), but it does not acknowledge the full extent of its effects, particularly in the forms of environmental violence. There is a failure of the Security Council, and global policy-makers as a whole, to truly acknowledge the harmful effects of environmental

violence while incorporating youth into the policy-making process.

In addition, UNSCR 2250 omits climate change, as a form of violence against youth. In fact, it fails to mention the phrases, “climate change”, “climate crisis”, “environmental”, and “ecology”. This demonstrates the lack of understanding of environmental effects and the inability of various Security Council members to reach a consensus on how to best address the crisis. The Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy explains: “The debates are thus not only focused on the different effects of climate change on national and international security but are also influenced by discussions of the responsibilities, capacities, and authority – the very legitimacy – of the council and the lack of reform of the Security Council in a changing world” (Nora Hardt and Viehoff 2020, 10). The Security Council members have become consumed with the politics and burden of the issue, rather than the climate itself. Through distractions of terminology and politicisation, some have lost touch with the ultimate goal to end the climate crisis and save lives. As the climate crisis worsens, and the global community continues to surpass deadlines for emissions caps, the future of environmental degradation may appear very bleak. By not acknowledging this truth in the resolutions or finding a consensus on the negative impact of climate change, Security Council members are doing a disservice to young people. Ultimately, young people are going to live in a destroyed world for much longer than adults writing the resolution. The youth will have to solve the problems when they are experiencing the life-threatening effects that were caused by the lack of effort and policy enforcement.

This lack of proper prioritisation and unity in policy was evident in the follow-up resolution on youth, peace and security, namely UNSCR 2535. The resolution says that “young people play a unique role in strengthening the national, local and community-based capacities in conflict and post-conflict situations to prepare for and respond to increasingly frequent and severe weather events and natural disasters, as well as to public health challenges that affect young people’s life and their future, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and in this regard, encourages member states to support and integrate youth into decision-making processes in these regards” (UNSCR 2535, 2020).

### **RECOGNITION BUT NOT UNDERSTANDING IN UNSCR 2535**

Five years on from the first youth, peace and security resolution, there is only a subtle recognition of the climate crisis in the latest YPS resolution. However, it fails to put this in the context of future generations and only focuses on a narrow threat of the climate emergency in “weather events and natural disasters”. Moreover, UNSCR 2535 refers to the effects of climate change as “weather events and natural disasters” as opposed to terminology that indicates a human-induced climate change.

It is crucial moving forward that resolutions indicate a human-induced climate change and the actions needed to solve the situation. Furthermore, UNSCR 2535 acknowledges the effects that the climate crisis and environmental degradation will have on youth stating that there will be, “public health challenges that affect young people’s life and their future”, but has yet to fully follow through with individual states on the integration of youth into the decision making and policy writing process. Some of this is due to the lack of unity on the UN Security Council; China and Russia continue to raise concerns about the relevance of youth, peace, and security to the Security Council (Security Council Report, 2020).

On the other hand, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently stated, “We have seen young people on the front lines of climate action, showing us what bold leadership looks like. From school strikes to demonstrations to new innovations, we have seen the power of young people to create change” (2020). He also encourages states to take up the burden and create

action. This reminder demonstrates the need for follow-ups at the state and local level in order to ensure proper implementation of UNSCR 2250.

In order to see changes in climate decision-making, young people need to be integrated into the decision-making process on issues related to climate change at all levels. The climate emergency is interconnected throughout all aspects of our lives as are its devastating effects. The inability to solve the climate crisis and environmental degradation, which can manifest in the form of improper language within policy, is a form of violence against youth.

## **YOUTH AS LEADERS OF CLIMATE PROTEST**

Despite the hurdles and slow progress at the state and international relations level, youth activists are making strides in solving the climate crisis. Young people have been leaders of the climate protest movement for many generations, realising that they will feel the burden of the climate crisis through more severe effects than the older members of society. In recent years that youth activism has taken a step, change in pace as the effects of climate change are felt more acutely, often due to social media which has allowed the awareness of the damaging effects to become more clearly visible. Greta Thunberg began a global school strike by making a personal isolated stand which then inspired others around her to follow her leadership. She raised awareness for the impending climate crisis. In less than a year and a half from her isolated stand, “she has addressed heads of state at the UN, met with the Pope, sparred with the President of the United States and inspired 4 million people to join the global climate strike on September 20, 2019, in what was the largest climate demonstration in human history” (Alter 2019). She was able to recognise a need to solve issues of the environment through true example and action. For example, through Thunberg’s leadership, some businesses and schools have committed to cutting carbon emissions. Many have recognised the issue, but few have been able to make it solvable; Thunberg demonstrates a life lived sustainability in the current world.

Thunberg is not alone as a youth pursuing climate justice. Zero Hour is a national movement in the United States, led by young people, that focuses on the urgency of the issue. It has attempted to sue the United States government for reckless injustice in regards to the climate crisis. The demands of the movement place youth voices in the middle of the conversation to promote racial justice, climate justice, economic justice, and equity. Both Thunberg and the Zero Hour movement demonstrate that despite the lack of action by power holders to solve the climate crisis, youth are serving as leading activists for peace through justice. They realise that environmental violence will have a generational impact and harm them in the future. They are ready to change it through advocacy for the Green New Deal policy, social media campaigns, and youth presentations at schools and community centres.

## **THE TIME FOR CHANGE**

In five years there have been three resolutions on youth, peace and security, which reflects a push for change. Although they have not yet been fully successful in the implementation of climate action, it is evident that youth continue to be changemakers, despite the reality of environmental violence towards them. Their leadership in climate movements demonstrates their commitment and capability to address environmental violence, and their ability to claim space and push for radical change. The climate crisis and environmental degradation is a form of violence most targeted towards future generations and the youth. The United Nations, governments, and other power-holding institutions must recognise the effects of slow environmental violence on the future. After this recognition, if action is taken, there will be more accurate language throughout future resolutions, more unity within the Security Council, aggressive environmental action taken, consensus on created resolutions, and meaningful incorporation of youth into the decision-making process. The youth are the leaders of today. The time for change is now.

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# FINDING NEW WAYS TO MOBILISE YOUTH FOR PEACE IN VOLATILE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPES

ABIY SHIMELIS

**WHAT SHOULD  
BE THE NEXT  
GROUND-BREAKING  
INNOVATION IN  
PEACE ADVOCACY?  
TO WHAT EXTENT  
CAN CREATIVES  
INFORM SENSITIVE  
SOCIO-POLITICAL  
DISCOURSES  
AND CULTIVATE  
CONSTRUCTIVE  
SOCIAL MEDIA  
CULTURE?**

The digitalisation of the media presents new challenges to the global youth, peace, and security (YPS) agenda, calling for innovative approaches to peace advocacy.

While peacebuilding is a slow and painstaking process, modern digital media technologies, like social media, capitalise on consumers' shorter attention span for profit, especially that of younger generations. Polarised narratives are becoming more widespread as more people absorb information through narrow bubbles of this medium. This is made worse by the ease to spread misinformation or disinformation, further breeding online hate speech across and among communities. Historical facts and objective figures are manipulated and misconstrued, while ill-processed opinions rush to justify polarised statements. This trend discourages both deeper individual and social-cognitive processes, which should have ideally laid the fertile grounds for constructive peace conversations. Clearly, new and innovative methodologies are needed to cope with the evolving media consumption culture of the 21st century. To address these challenges, this paper is presenting novel and radical approaches to peace advocacy.

What should be the next ground-breaking innovation in peace advocacy? To what extent can creatives (musicians, filmmakers, animators, choreographers, producers, etc.) inform sensitive socio-political discourses and cultivate constructive social media culture? In this article, I will introduce an unconventional peace advocacy approach,

which I hereby refer to as the Three Cs (creative arts, creative communication, and cultural diplomacy), that seeks to facilitate experimental and cross-cultural learning that inspires young people to envision and co-create new, shared and progressive paradigms. Taking Ethiopia's social media culture as a contextual case, I will reveal links to potential applications of the Three Cs within ongoing efforts to de-escalate rising ethnocentric rhetoric. I will argue that the barriers that divide multi-ethnic communities can be broken down with these innovative peace advocacy approaches. In turn, new ways of thinking can be adopted which will enable young people to progress in exciting and imaginative ways, free of the ill-constructed divisions their parents have faced. Through this paper, I seek to highlight areas that the global YPS agenda should strategically prioritise in the coming few decades, should it wish to ensure transformative change to the next generation of youth cohorts in media and communication disciplines.

## **ETHNOCENTRIC POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Over the past few years, Ethiopia has been going through massive political shakeups and socio-economic reforms. Following the overthrow of the Ethiopian Monarch in 1974, almost every political faction that took part in post-revolutionary Ethiopia made appeals to the principle of self-determination of nationalities (Levine 2000). This has been shaping political narratives ever since. It culminated in the 2018 reforms towards an open and free press. That year, for the first time in 14 years, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recorded no journalists behind bars in its annual census and the country ended its block of over 260 websites and ban on media outlets forced to work in exile (Mumo 2019).

Social media and the internet can play a key role during such critical transition processes. It can empower people to scrutinise, critique and shape different narratives; and further, mobilise massive social and political movements. From the perspective of Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, social media platforms provide the public the "freedom to share in order to make the world more open and connected." (Jacoby 2018). This idea was supposed to empower citizens and ordinary people to participate in public and political affairs. Facebook and other social media platforms have increasingly enabled individuals and groups to express their views and opinions in the past decade. However, players within Ethiopia's political landscape use social media platforms to spread their messages, intertwined with their own perceived ideals and definitions of peace (Center for Global Peace Journalism 2018). With a lack of appropriate channels for public discussion in the mainstream media, platforms, like Facebook, play a critical function for providing the default space for political exchange. This was evident during the 2018 state of emergency (Skerjald and Gebru 2020), which was declared for 3 months after ethnic tensions arose in the central part of the country. Among the measures taken by the government were restrictions on traditional media activity. Government agencies, private media companies, CSO's, NGO's, political and self-proclaimed activists each try to inadequately define what peace is, to whom and what it should look like. The ownership of these peace narratives inevitably, and often sadly, promote biased views, institutional affiliations and ethnic slants, either implicitly or explicitly inferred (Center for Global Peace Journalism 2018). These biases are then further being spread as facts through social media.

## **GLOBAL DIGITAL REVOLUTION MEETS LOCAL ETHNIC DIVERSITY**

The predominant fears and concerns pertaining to the social media culture in Ethiopia revolve around the amplification of ethnocentric politics (Skerjald and Gebru 2020). Consequently, any steps taken for peace are quickly diluted by two factors: one local, the other global. This dilution is a result of a clash between the, now deeply embedded, local ethnocentric sentiments and the global digital revolution, which amplifies polarisation among social groups through its market-driven algorithms (Orlowski 2020; Zuboff 2019).



Let's start with unpacking the impact of the digital revolution. Social media companies fundamentally turn our human experience, attention and choices into commodities to be sold in the digital market (Zuboff 2019). This commodification process largely relies on algorithms that are breeding social polarisation. This polarisation, in turn, can lead to hate speech, misinformation and other forms of violent expressions (Jacoby 2018).

Polarisation through algorithms used by social media companies is not unique to Ethiopia. 200-year-old democracies and internationally respected media have not been immune from polarised political divergence. "News emerges not from individuals seeking to improve the functioning of democracy but from readers seeking diversion, reporters forging careers, and owners searching for profits", states James Hamilton (Klein 2020). Amidst this skew, social media algorithms further amplify constructed divides, unsettled grievances, and unexamined subjugation rhetoric (Jacoby 2018). These algorithms are not designed to be conflict and context-sensitive to different locations, cultures and social groups either. In fact, during fragile political transitions, they are easily manipulated to mobilise people towards violence. In Ethiopia's case, these polarising algorithms harm the peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups. As a result, digital activism is simplifying complex historical and socio-cultural issues into a few tweets and lines, further inflaming the larger political discourse through the power of opinions, not facts.

More than 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia, along with their historically shared triumphs and tragedies, have organically coexisted for millennia (Isaac 2013). Contrary to this historically peaceful coexistence, the power of social media tools has presented a new challenge to this coexistence. Representations by only a few ethnocentric political figures quickly gained momentum as they often find it convenient to justify their viewpoints using ethnicity. These social media celebrities readily promote ethnocentric divisions, construct activism and public opinion that breeds ethnic conflict and violence. This ethnocentric populism often made in the name of greater national unity, first starts by intensifying loyalties along lines of ethnicity, clanship, language, locality, race, religion and/or tradition (Geertz as cited in Levine, 2000). This vicious dynamic between social media algorithms and the ethnocentric political elites has put the precious, but fragile, peace at risk. This is one of the main challenges for sustaining peace in Ethiopia but often overlooked by international peacebuilding actors.

## **DIGITAL DIVIDE**

There is also a digital divide, between those with access to this new media, and those without. It in turn plays a key role in the amplification of divisive ethnocentric narratives and disinformation, which fuels subsequent events of violence. Facebook is the default social media platform for the majority of Ethiopian internet users (Facebook Community Standards 2019). Despite this, in March 2019, only 5% of Ethiopian's were Facebook users (NapoleonCat 2020). This digital divide enables only a handful of privileged and mostly urban few to shape and construct narratives that are often amplifying ethnocentric rhetoric within a newly budding social media culture. Misinformation and disinformation became rampant, particularly during the fragile political transition period that started in April 2018. Fabricated news falsely reported the 'resignation of the prime minister away from the Ethio-Eritrean peace agreement' (Facebook Trusted Community Standards 2020) and the 'demise of the Tigrayan regional government head' (Borkena 2019), among many other similar incidents.

The race among individuals to assert their competing and conflicting views through social media platforms magnifies uncertainties and anxieties during transition processes. Competing interpretations of facts floating on the internet hinder citizens' ability to find trustworthy information, scrutinise socio-economic reforms, cross-examine facts and analyse political decisions. This negative impact of social media recently led to an increasing number of critical

inquiries by various stakeholders, including the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The Commission questioned the social net worth of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Facebook Community Standards 2020). In the absence of enough CSO vigilance and fact-checkers that can validate objective facts, resentments explode through anger, hate speech and misinformation which can increase ill-informed political opinion and activism on social media.

## **OWNERSHIP OF PEACE ADVOCACY**

How can young people advocate for peace in this new digital media landscape? There are obvious challenges for young people to occupy this space for peace advocacy. In the Ethiopian context, for example, institutionalised peace advocacy falls in the hands of few players i.e. largely state media and private media companies. This ownership framework makes it prone to political and ideological biases, rendering the core message of peace a highly subjective, contentious and often cliched subject. These actors often manipulate the concept of peace advocacy for greater visibility, political purposes or investment returns among politicians. As a result, institutions, political elites often co-opt or instrumentalise youth involvement in peace advocacy for self-promotional purposes, instead of “peace” itself.

As our current media culture enables elites and social media celebrities to abuse the word “peace” for personal and political benefits, we are eroding any chance of giving young people the space to express their views on what peace is, from their own perspective. The term peace is misused by elites, constantly featured in mottos, icons, hand-signs, gestures, white doves all in the attempt to visualise peace. While these cliché illustrations are useful in creating relatable symbols and languages for many powerful campaigns, they are far from mobilising masses of young people for peace and effectively confronting the challenges social media polarisation poses.

## **THE THREE CS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATIVE PEACEBUILDING**

If we would like to mobilise masses of young people for peace advocacy instead of ethnic conflict and violence, then we need to start using unconventional communication strategies. In Ethiopia’s case, young people under the age of 25 constitute 60% of the population. They are a powerful demographic. Formal institutions need to be non-prescriptive in defining what peace and peacebuilding mean, while creating the space for young people to construct and advocate for their own perceptions of peace.

Our main goal should be to guide young people to mutually narrate individual peace stories that eventually merge towards collective peace consciousness. However, limitations in self-perception and the absence of sufficient spaces to correlate identity create barriers to a co-created future. When combined, the creative arts, creative communications and cultural diplomacy (the Three Cs) make up a single approach to facilitate experiential and cross-cultural learning that inspires young people to envision and co-create new, shared and progressive paradigms.

The goal of the Three Cs is to design creative contents that seek to develop character strength grounded in self-awareness, intellectual humility and openness to correlate shared struggles and opportunities among cultures. The intervention challenges individuals to look beyond pre-existing attitudes, worldviews, and skills that normally define their default roles in often inefficient and unjust systems. The Three Cs aim to create emotional appeal and non-prescriptive content that is informed by cognitive science and channelled through artistic expressions; and therefore, can become a powerful interdisciplinary tool in mass youth mobilisation for peace.

First, the Three Cs are aimed at facilitating horizontal (peer-to-peer) advocacy among young

people. The underpinning principle is primarily based on respecting the agency of young people in peace advocacy at all levels, while using *arts, creatives and cultural heritages* as the raw input to collectively visualise peace. So far we have considered some of the challenges that make it difficult to mobilise young people for peace advocacy within the social media landscape i.e. issues of ethnocentric politics, what social media algorithms favour, the digital divide and who owns peace advocacy.

The approach postulates that a healing process should take place to recover from the silent, yet incremental, traumas of social media. The goal is to first allow or make it easier for young people to envision the possibilities of peace, before attempting to prescribe what it should look like. In doing so, creativity is leading the evolution of activities and advocacy creation without being underpinned by set definitions. At the same time, the focus is shifted towards shared triumphs and tragedies, as opposed to our differences. This is achieved by drawing on research from the world of sociology, anthropology and learnings from history. For example, the visual juxtaposition of various post-monarchical liberation movements and the deliberate visual framing of their wider historical significance to nation-building is often dismissed due to ethnic polarisation. However, these facts can carefully and positively be framed within large spheres of reasoning such as the building of a new multi-ethnic Greater (*Talakitwa*) Ethiopia so as to help young people picture their ancestral linkages, commonalities of struggles and shared opportunities (either past, present or future) often intentionally dismissed due to narrow political bias.

Short video skits, reels, TV shows, music videos, animations and illustrations that depict younger multi-ethnic communities co-creating artistic expressions, partaking in sportive tournaments, or engaging in cross-cultural exchanges are a few examples under which contents of the Three Cs can be creatively framed to illustrate new paradigms of coexistence. Rather than amplify stories of subjugation led by feudal elites, content can focus on efforts to achieve the in-gathering of people with deep historical affinities. For example, content that creatively depicts the coalition of forces that defeated the Italian invasion of 1896 was a powerful testimony to the symbolism of an independent multi-ethnic Ethiopian polity (Levine 2000). This is observed to have triggered positive feedback from the polarised ends of some political opinion leaders, signalling the possibilities of constructive dialogues.

Second, the three-Cs can artistically highlight the engagement of the young multi-ethnic generation in non-political, social, economic and even global affairs. Content can take inspiration from activities related to institutions that are “group-blind”, such as the Red Cross or Human Rights organisations. Content can draw attention towards other forms of differences that crosscut ethnicity and reflect viewpoints along other lines, such as occupation, economic opportunity, business, innovation, ICT, and competitive functions like sports, music, debate forums and talent shows channelled through traditional broadcast and digital mediums.

Lastly, it is essential to consider novel and unconventional financing mechanisms in peace advocacy that attempt to decouple the creative content from institutional affiliation. The Three Cs make a clear distinction on its distribution channel, separate from institutionalised affiliations in the form of sponsored messages or commercial visibility. For example, commercial media and advertising in its fundamental design seek to easily attach association to a certain brand by promoting a certain product, service or lifestyle. From a commercial perspective, it is normal for mainstream media to produce content to appeal to a certain market segment and achieve brand loyalty. Although the proposal to decouple a sponsor’s name or institution label from the advocacy message further makes it difficult for the Three Cs to work, the challenge presents a rarely explored field that has strong potential to neutralise mentally constructed ethnocentric divides.

## CONCLUSION

It is often said that we are living in times of ever-increasing misinformation and the capital economy's race for the mass's attention. Such challenges call for unconventional approaches to counter hatred, bigotry and heavily polarised mental divisions created between people over centuries and borders. Peacebuilding requires creative and well-researched advocacy content that can emotionally appeal to the hearts of people while also intellectually challenging them to take self-driven initiative. Intellectual humility and intuitive reasoning might be our attempt to evolve from armchair politics to a more subtle, non-prescriptive approach for breaking down mentally constructed divides. Over the past few decades, ethnocentric rhetoric amplified by social media algorithms has scored negative social net worth within Ethiopia's media landscape. The digital divide exacerbates the challenge. In the absence of enough platforms that can moderate constructive and peaceful dialogues, such resentments can eventually explode in the form of anger, hate speech and misinformation as tools to vent out ill-informed emotions.

Ultimately, the underlying rationale for the Three Cs is to create more enablers for young people to see shared commonalities and opportunities. It seeks to amplify self-driven action, cultural curiosity and intellectual humility rather than over-simplified and prescriptive narratives of peace. This requires intensive research in the field of development communication, character development and multimedia engagement that speaks to the contemporary aspirations and needs of young people, and therefore worth investigating. The Three Cs model recognises and values the emotional experience of young people in promoting peace, social justice and development. Our goal with this experience-based and cross-cultural learning is to help young people to build new mental paradigms that cultivate progressive, exciting and imaginative thinking towards peaceful causes. By using arts, culture and creativity, we challenge young people to envision and co-create progressive paradigms. Building constructive ideas, formulating businesses, promoting a culture of peace and non-violence are all within the reach of intuitive reasoning and intellectual humility that effectively communicates across languages and cultural barriers. The expected impact is the diffusion of ethnocentric and political tensions within Ethiopia's media landscape, given proper research, talent acquisition, production quality and non-affiliated financing mechanisms.

Finally, I encourage the wider global peace and security agenda to increase its curiosity, technical emphasis and resource to create enabling conditions for the Three Cs to operate. I further call for a global YPS agenda to seriously consider the role of the Three Cs in producing innovative content design and media placement strategies that inspire fresher insights in peace advocacy within today's volatile social media. It is high time we acknowledge the need to apply radically fresh, culturally nuanced and innovative financing approaches to peace advocacy. Like all great ideas that were once considered odd, the abstractness of the Three Cs approach compels me to suggest further research and emphasis by the global YPS community.



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# BIOGRAPHIES

YPS RESEARCH NETWORK



## ABIY SHIMELIS

Abiy is a sustainability researcher and creative communicator from Ethiopia. He uses development communication as a creative tool that empowers understanding among people. He is a senior member and former Country Coordinator for the African Artist Peace Initiative (AAPI) - a Pan-African network of Artists that mobilizes creative talents for peace advocacy and social justice. He co-founded Addis Sustainable Life as his first creative enterprise that distributed up-cycled and biodegradable paper products, while sensitizing communities about eco-friendly packaging. Abiy is a One Young World Ambassador, recipient of the Resolution Award to Socially Responsible Young Leaders and currently a Chevening Scholar at the University of Leeds, UK.



## ALI ALTIQ

Ali is an independent researcher and advocate on youth and peacebuilding. He co-authored the global policy paper, *We Are Here: An Integrated Approach to Youth Inclusive Peace Processes* for the Office of the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth. He worked as a researcher, the UN Secretariat supporting data analysis and narrative development of *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, mandated by the UN Security Council under Resolution 2250.



## CAMBRIA C. KHAYAT

Cambria is currently studying economics, international studies, peace and conflict studies, and Spanish at Butler University. She is passionate about global sustainable development, particularly the reversal of the climate crisis, international peacebuilding, and education. Her motivation stems from her belief that governments, institutions, people, and systems can and should improve. Through her work with the Desmond Tutu Peace Lab, One Solution Global, the Center for Urban Ecology and Sustainability, studying climate change at the UN Headquarters in New York City, and teaching English abroad, she is building a broad portfolio that she intends to apply to global sustainability.



## HOODH IBRAHIM

Hoodh is a communications expert, public relations manager, and aspiring political scientist, who pioneered the founding of a youth-led NGO: Dhi Youth Movement. In 2017, Hoodh founded and chaired the committee for the Maldives National Consultation on Youth, Peace, and Security in collaboration with UNFPA Maldives. And Hoodh authored the meeting report for this YPS National Consultation. Currently, Hoodh wears many hats: Board Director at Maldives Island Conservation Project, Executive Director at Huvadhoo Association for Tourism, and Chairperson at Junior Chamber International Maldives.



## KANATBEK ABDIEV

Kanatbek has vast experience in youth empowerment, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention. Having worked in international organizations and NGOs on the most pressing security issues—including human rights, countering/preventing violent extremism, democratization, gender, and rule of law—Kanatbek intends to contribute to the development of vulnerable communities, to help them overcome existing problems. With all of this experience, Kanatbek has developed several strengths, from not-for-profit projects and volunteering to fundraising with businesses and international donors; from project management, monitoring and evaluation to conducting research and writing analytical reports and reviews.



## LAURA HENAO

Laura is a researcher and peacebuilding practitioner, specializing in human rights and international humanitarian law. She led accompaniment processes of social organizations in Colombia, and developed methods to strengthen peace capacities, monitor social mobilization for peace, and build networks among peacebuilding actors. Currently, her work focuses on mediation and peace initiatives at CINEP/PPP (Center for Research and Popular Education/Program for Peace). She conducts research, coordinates the mediation support team, designs strategies for negotiation and dialogue processes, and strengthens the capacities for mediation of women, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, youth, and rural communities.



## SHADI ROUSHSHAHBAZ

Shadi is an Iranian peacebuilder and founder of PeaceMentors. Through multiple training programs held within the youth, peace and security sphere, Shadi is an experienced trainer and facilitator, driven by tremendous passion for youth participation in peacebuilding. She has also researched issues relevant to youth, transgression and migration. Shadi has interned at the UNIC, UNICEF Iran and ALDA Italy while working as a consultant with the Council of Europe. During her time as a Projects and Fundraising Officer at UNOY Peacebuilders she was featured on the Peace Corner podcast with award-winning author and researcher, Séverine Auteserre.