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Dag Hammarskjöld
Foundation

FRYSHUSET

Youth perspectives
from the global North

– The relevance of SCR 2250 in Sweden

Youth,
Peace &
Security

Youth perspectives from the global North

Introduction

Following the adoption in December 2015 of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (SCR 2250), much focus by donor countries and the global north has been on ways to strengthen the inclusion of youth through overseas development assistance. Yet, it is just as important to recognize the universality of the YPS agenda and the need to promote youth engagement at home as well as abroad. While Sweden is considered one of the world's most peaceful states, the country is not immune to challenges of xenophobia, racism, polarization, discrimination, criminal activity and economic inequality. Despite these and other barriers to inclusion, youth in Sweden are actively involved in promoting peace and security. These efforts need to be strengthened in order to ensure the full and successful implementation of SCR 2250.

Recognizing the importance of highlighting youth perspectives from the global north as well as the global south in international policy fora, Interpeace-Sweden, Fryshuset and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation have collaborated in efforts to explore the relevance of SCR 2250 and young people's contribution to a more peaceful and inclusive society in Sweden.[1] As part of these efforts and to feed into the Global Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, the organizations jointly carried out focus group discussions with young people living in the Stockholm area on 9-11 August 2017.[2]

Before presenting the outcomes from these discussions, the methodology used in selecting participants and facilitating consultations is briefly outlined.

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1   Interpeace is an international peacebuilding organization that has been active in Sweden since 2013 working to overcome dynamics of social exclusion of marginalized groups. The Pluralism and Dialogue Institute is an initiative which is part of Fryshuset which has been working for the participation and inclusion of youth in Sweden since 1984. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, established in 1962, works to promote international cooperation, peace and development in the spirit of the second Secretary-General of the United Nations.
2   The report was developed as a contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by Security Council Resolution 2250. The research and consultations for this report followed the key research questions and methodology developed for the Progress Study.

A presentation of participant reflections on the concepts of 'peace' and 'security' in the Swedish context follows. Based on participant experiences and perspectives, the report then explores how young people in Sweden are already engaged in their communities and the obstacles they face to participation. Challenges to peace and security in Sweden and proposed actions for addressing these challenges as identified by participants—ensuring the genuine engagement of youth—are then presented.

Methodology

A total of 19 youth participated in two separate groups and on separate evenings in three-hour-long focus group discussions on youth, peace and security.[3] The age range of those who attended was between 18 and 32 years. All participants, including those over the age of 29, were invited in their capacity as engaged youth and defined themselves as youth in the context of these discussions. Although focus group conveners tried to ensure an equal gender balance, the majority of participants were men. This imbalance was due to last-minute cancellations by several female participants and difficulties finding replacements.

Participants were recruited individually from the networks of Interpeace and Fryshuset, with each organization inviting approximately half of the participants to each session. From Fryshuset, participants came from various networks, for example 'Tillsammans för Sverige' (together for Sweden) that works with young people on inter-faith dialogue and the annual 'Camp Connect', a summer camp that brings together different youth networks and organizations for exchange and promotes youth entrepreneurship.

The findings presented in this report are not representative of the perspectives of all Swedish youth, nor the barriers they face to engagement. It highlights challenges to peace and security as identified by young people in segregated urban environments, in this case the city of Stockholm. From Interpeace's network most youth came from the suburbs of Tensta, Rinkeby and Hjulsta in the Järva area outside of Stockholm. Järva is well known in Sweden as a socio-economically disadvantaged area with a large resident immigrant population. The area is often featured in the media as being home to gang violence and violent crime but also for social problems such as over-crowded living spaces, high unemployment and difficulties for children and youth to succeed in school. The discussions clearly highlighted how marginalization and segregation influence the extent to which young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods are able to participate and feel included in Swedish society. While some of the participants who came from middle- or upper-class neighbourhoods had no personal experience with some of the challenges included in this report, they still recognized them as challenges for peace and security in Sweden.

To repeat, the challenges brought up here are a snapshot of SCR 2250-related challenges in Sweden. From the work of organizations such as Fryshuset and Interpeace, we know that there are other challenges in Swedish society related to SCR 2250 such as violent extremism and disengagement and reintegration of youth who have become involved with criminal and terrorist groups. As these challenges were not brought up or discussed during the consultations, they are not covered in this report but are considered equally significant.

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3   Focus group discussions were held at Fryshuset in Stockholm, Sweden. The discussions were facilitated by two experienced facilitators from Interpeace and Fryshuset respectively, one man and one woman aged 29 and 25 years old. The discussions proceeded as follows: Food and refreshments were provided in the beginning of the session, followed by introductions and an ice-breaker exercise. After the discussions were over each participant received two cinema-tickets to thank them for their participation.

Defining peace and security

Following a presentation on SCR 2250 and its five pillars—participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration—participants were asked what they think of when they hear the terms 'peace' and 'security', respectively. Participants reflected that how one views peace and security likely depends on a person's background and experiences, including where they may have lived throughout the world and in Sweden.

While participants noted that barriers exist to making their voices heard in their communities and in decision making, they recognized the opportunities they have compared to young people in countries facing armed conflict and high levels of poverty. Youth in Sweden, along with the general population, have access to a welfare state; basic needs such as water, safe roads, clean air, and food; and the opportunity to receive an education and get employment. A functioning transportation system makes it easy for youth to communicate and collaborate with their counterparts across the country. They also noted that they can exercise their freedom of speech and have the right to organize without fear of repression. Participants reflected that this kind of access and freedom contributes to overall peace and security in Sweden.

Based on their own experiences, participants highlighted the following when asked what peace means to them: a community that celebrates love, tolerance, acceptance and respect; economic and social development and environmental sustainability; human rights and equality; and security. From their perspectives, security ranged from employment and access to basic needs for a long and healthy life; a free and fair judicial system in which everyone is held equally accountable to the same laws; a harmonious society in which people can freely move without the fear of violence; and prevention of violence. The role of media in contributing to a secure environment—one that does not portray a 'we vs. them' narrative—was also identified. Although Sweden is peaceful when compared to other countries, participants stressed that more is needed to ensure that SCR 2250 is actively promoted and supported in Sweden.

Participation

Participants expressed eagerness to engage in their neighbourhoods and in Sweden more broadly on various issues of importance to them. Many are already active in their communities through youth organizations, civil society and their professional networks, advocating for democracy, human rights, and environmental protection. Some of those present work with other youth as well as with children, serving as role models and sharing their experiences of constructive engagement. Additional opportunities for participation were identified: young people in Sweden can be engaged in youth wings of political parties; start their own organization; or plan an event. While one participant stated that he was in a position to be able to influence policy—discussing youth perspectives with decision makers, writing opinion pieces for newspapers and serving on a jury—participants in general felt that they are more likely to be able to participate within their local communities and families. Their efforts often do not impact Swedish society more broadly, particularly through political processes. Even at the communal level, however, youth face barriers to participation.

Adults, including parents, policy makers and teachers, were mentioned as particular obstacles to youth participation in that they often fail to recognize the positive role youth can have in society *as youth*. Rather than empowering and encouraging young people, grown-ups in positions of power often tell them to

wait their turn. As a result, youth often lack self-confidence to voice their perspectives and advance their interests. While participants agreed that youth need to take individual initiative to become engaged, they also stressed the importance of having a supportive community structure that allows them to develop ideas and influence policy. Adults and those in power therefore have a responsibility to genuinely engage young people and actively invite them to participate in their communities.

While being young can be a barrier to participation in and of itself, the extent to which youth are excluded in Sweden very much depends on other identifying factors such as where they live, their background and upbringing. Participants highlighted for example that while they appreciate that Sweden is taking in refugees from other countries, the country has yet to find mechanisms to successfully integrate communities with immigrant backgrounds into Swedish society. Instead, these communities are often housed in segregated and socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods where young residents do not have the same opportunities for participation as youth living in wealthier neighbourhoods. Many young people in socio-economically marginalized areas feel like they do not belong and that their voices are not heard in a country where they are among the most affected by challenges to peace and security.

Challenges and obstacles to peace and security

Crime and Law-enforcement

Violence and crime are contributing to making young people feel less secure in their communities. In terms of security, participants testified to increased levels of violent crime in many areas around Stockholm and especially highlighted how it is becoming easier to acquire weapons, including heavy assault rifles. They also identified drug dealing as an increasing problem; while it is not new, it is becoming more visible in many neighbourhoods, contributing to feelings of insecurity. Several participants had friends or acquaintances who have been shot despite not being involved in criminal groups and stressed that even innocent people have reason to be afraid.

Closely linked to criminality, and a challenge in and of itself, many youth lack confidence in the police and other law enforcement agencies. Participants mentioned that heavy police presence in certain areas has increased their feelings of insecurity. Rather than feeling protected, many youth instead feel collectively suspected of wrongdoings at the sight of police patrolling their neighbourhoods. Many expressed frustration at the ineffectiveness of the police in resolving cases of violent crime and murder and in putting those responsible to justice. That drugs are increasingly dealt out in the open is also seen as a sign of the police not being able or even willing to control the situation, allowing criminals to increase their control and influence in certain neighbourhoods.

> *On the one hand I do feel safe here because I know most people and I have lived here my whole life, but the constant presence of the police and police helicopters makes me feel unsafe. It signals that there is reason to be afraid.*
>
> *Young man from Järva*

Participants expressed concern about the influence that the presence of crime has on both peace and security and youth participation. Young people and children learn to look up to 'negative role models', many of whom attract youngsters by showing off their wealth, accumulated through petty crime and drug dealing. A culture that glorifies drugs and violence, in combination with a lack of positive role models and a lack of opportunities to engage in constructive ways, was also highlighted as a major challenge that youth living in affected neighbourhoods have to overcome.

Stereotypes and prejudice

Participants stressed that people, regardless of where in Stockholm they live, feel more secure among others with whom they can identify and are often afraid of what is different and unknown. Segregation in Stockholm and a lack of places where youth with different backgrounds and from different areas can meet are widening the distance between 'us and them', fuelling stereotypes and prejudices. Economic inequality and divisions between socio-economic classes further contributes to reducing interaction between groups and increasing segregation in the urban environment.

> *Segregation is a major problem, I wish that there were no immigrant suburbs but that people mixed everywhere.*
>
> *Young woman from Järva*

The role of the media in shaping perceptions and strengthening stereotypes was repeatedly raised during the discussions. Many of the participants who have grown up or who live in socio-economically marginalized areas feel that the media paints a negative picture of their neighbourhoods, one that does not fully represent reality. Media often do not highlight positive aspects of living in multicultural communities and do not give enough attention to people who play a positive role in these areas. The representation of many neighbourhoods as violent and dangerous further instigates feelings of exclusion amongst residents in marginalized areas by promoting perceptions in Swedish society that people who live in these neighbourhoods are different from Swedish society at large. The dynamics of how negative media coverage can affect young people's way of thinking about themselves was illustrated by this quote from one of the discussants:

> *It is more difficult in the suburbs, you are seen as something negative by the media and by society and then it is easy to start seeing yourself that way. Tensta is only mentioned in relation to crime and drug dealing and I come from there! Maybe they are talking about me? Maybe it is me? Maybe I should be a criminal and dress in Adidas? That's what they expect from us.*
>
> *Young man from Järva*

Lack of trust between youth and institutions of the state

Many of the participants felt that pre-conceived notions in Swedish society are often based on where people live but also their ethnicity and family background. Structural racism was frequently mentioned as a barrier for youth with foreign backgrounds to be meaningfully included and provided the same opportunities as ethnic Swedish youth. Participants told stories of having been denied employment for reasons that seemed to have little to do with their qualifications, positions instead being offered to candidates with a more typical Swedish name or appearance. Several participants had also felt a lack of encouragement from their teachers in pursuing their dreams and ambitions in school, leaving them with the impression that teachers didn't believe in their ability and intelligence to succeed.

A Lack of trust in the state

Many youth expressed that they lack trust in state institutions and policy- and decision makers. The participants pointed to a lack of dialogue between young people and decision makers and a lack of faith by policy makers in the willingness and ability of youth to understand their own challenges and participate in developing solutions. There is a sense that external actors, whose understandings of issues are often shaped by media, get to define problems and identify appropriate responses. When the views of external actors determine what should be done, it gives rise to frustrations and decreases levels of trust among those concerned.

This lack of trust does not only concern decision makers but also public agencies that are providing services to local communities through schools, unemployment offices, health care providers and the social insurance agency. Many youth have the impression that these service providers are gradually abandoning their neighbourhoods and that they do not have access to the same services as residents in other areas. Fuelling this sense of injustice are increased financing and personnel to the police service; this is seen as happening at the expense of other services, giving residents in marginalized areas and youth in particular the sense that the Swedish society views them as a problem to be contained and managed rather than a resource worth investing in.

Lack of equal access to information

Access to information was brought up as a problem facing immigrant families in particular where language and cultural barriers between Sweden and their country of origin make it difficult to become familiar with the functioning of society. Not knowing how to reach out to authorities, look for jobs, engage in the community or learn about their rights in society makes integration more difficult and has an impact on the inclusion of children as well. Despite the fact that many initiatives and actors work to provide such information and make it available to all citizens, including information in different languages for immigrant communities, this information does not seem to reach everyone who would benefit from it. Ensuring that such information reaches its' intended target audiences would ensure greater collaboration between the state, its agencies and marginalized communities and contribute to increased trust.

If my mother had had access to information, she could have helped me understand the system and engage in my community. There should be a place where immigrant-parents can turn to get information.

Young woman from Järva

Proposed actions to promote peace and security

Address the increase in crime and violence: In response to the increase in violent crime, participants agreed that policy makers should develop tougher regulations to restrict the inflow of weapons to the country and ensure stricter punishments for possessing weapons. They also identified the need to reform judicial proceedings that allow for hearings to be held closer to arrest dates and restrict the release of people from jail until they receive a verdict. This would prevent suspects from being released on parole and able to resume criminal activities while waiting to be sentenced.

Build trust between youth and law enforcement agencies: Participants highlighted that in order to work effectively in their neighbourhoods and build trust with young people, police and law enforcement need to value local knowledge and collaborate with local actors. They stressed that they very much support initiatives to deal effectively with violence and crime, but that local youth, parents and religious leaders have to be taken on board in order for these efforts to succeed. These actors are trusted and seen as legitimate in many of the most affected communities, even by those engaged in criminal activities.

Schools need to do more to foster inclusion: While the Swedish school curriculum includes concepts such as equality and solidarity as core values, participants stressed more is needed to ensure that these concepts are applied in practice within schools. Participants suggested that the ministry of education and other relevant government agencies develop national and local exchange programmes for youth as an effective exercise on 'inclusion in practice'. Youth from different neighbourhoods in Stockholm could for example experience attending different schools and participating in new communities for a few months. Such programmes would aim to challenge and break down prejudices and promote greater understanding between young people from different backgrounds.

Treat appreciation for diversity as a life-long learning process: Participants argued that society should actively advocate for tolerance and acceptance of diversity amongst all age groups. They stressed that inclusion, tolerance and anti-discrimination are not only something that young people need to learn but should be taught to older generations through jobs, clubs and associations. Promoting these core values would increase understanding of and respect for different perspectives, helping to maintain and strengthen Sweden as a peaceful and secure country for all.

Showcase role-models to change stereotypes and misperceptions: More initiatives are needed that can attract, promote and showcase ambitious and successful young people to serve as role models for other youth in their communities. There are many examples of local artists and successful entrepreneurs from socio-economically marginalized areas that should be acknowledged and promoted. The media has

a responsibility to play a constructive role by reporting on positive stories, challenging negative and dominant perceptions in Swedish society of these areas and the people living there.

Increase the representation of youth from diverse backgrounds in the media: Several participants suggested that major news and media outlets would benefit from hiring young journalists that have grown up in socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods to ensure more nuanced reporting that accurately reflects the experiences of people living in these areas without fuelling fear and misperceptions. It was also suggested that young people should 'be their own journalists' and use social media to share positive stories about their neighbourhoods.

Promote youth participation in policy making at all levels: It was argued that local and national government agencies have the duty to seek ways and tools to share information on forums where youth can voice their concerns and have an impact on decision making. Participants repeatedly stressed that young people are the ones with the greatest knowledge about the difficulties they face and possible solutions needed to resolve their problems. Policy– and decision-makers have to reach out to young people for dialogue to better understand their perceptions and how best to address the challenges youth face at the local, regional and national levels. Doing so will lead to more accurate analyses of the problems that youth face and to more sustainable solutions.

Promote collaboration with local communities: All public service providers, including unemployment offices and schools located in socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods should include local stakeholders, including parents, youth and religious leaders, in efforts to engage young people. These actors better understand the needs of community members. Having community members work within local service-providing agencies also allows citizens the possibility of receiving information in their own language, ensuring greater and more equal access to information.