THE ROLE OF
YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM
IN SUSTAINING
PEACE AND SECURITY

Background paper for the Secretary General’s Progress Report on Youth, Peace and Security

September 2017
Introduction

Under Agenda 2030 the world needs new ways to tackle the scale and scope of the global challenges to peace that confront us. At the same time, increasingly people everywhere expect to be agents of change, and drivers of their own development. Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security explicitly recognizes the need for youth participation in decision-making and peace initiatives, protecting youth in armed conflict, preventing violent extremism, building partnerships, and supporting disengagement and reintegration. It urges Member States to “facilitate an inclusive and enabling environment”\(^1\) for youth actors to contribute to “sustainable peace in all societies”\(^2\).

Although the contribution of volunteerism to peace and security is an under-researched subject, evidence suggests that youth volunteerism can provide opportunities and mechanisms for the activities envisioned under SCR 2250. Around the world, young people are engaged in strengthening peace in a variety of ways through voluntary action - from youth activists supporting civic engagement online and offline, to those involved in cross-community and cross-cultural initiatives with their peers, to young people providing protection for their communities from small-scale conflict.

“Whether we are looking at development issues, peace and security, tackling Climate Change, on all these fronts we need to engage young people because they are capable, ready and very much able to do the heavy-lifting in implementing the SDGs” (UN Youth Envoy).

This background paper looks at the contribution that volunteerism can make to engaging young people effectively for peace and security, **including emerging insights from the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 on the role of volunteerism in strengthening community resilience.** It looks at potentially distinctive characteristics that youth volunteerism can bring to peace and security efforts, and the enabling environment required to ensure that young people can be positively engaged as a force for peace across diverse contexts.

A full paper on youth volunteerism and peacebuilding will be published by UN Volunteers in early 2018 as part of the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 ([www.unv.org/swvr/resilientcommunities](http://www.unv.org/swvr/resilientcommunities)).

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\(^1\) SC/RES/2250, p.4.

\(^2\) SC/RES/2250, p.3.
Youth volunteerism as an asset for peace and development

“There are more young people in the world than ever before, creating unprecedented potential for economic and social progress” (UN Youth Envoy). Many of the 1.8 billion youth aged 10-24 are located in developing countries, with these same countries the most likely to see continued youth growth beyond 2030.³ The policy challenges of these demographics are not insignificant - for example, providing these generations of children and youth with health care, education, and employment opportunities, including in the poorest countries and groups, will be critical for peace and the successful implementation of Agenda 2030.⁴ Yet at the same time, young people constitute a significant and valuable resource for peace and development which is still not fully and consistently explored in peace and development discourse.

Meanwhile, people everywhere increasingly expect to be agents of change, and drivers of their own development. The relationships, spaces and mechanisms required to facilitate this will no doubt constitute an important building block for sustainable peace and security. Agenda 2030 stakeholders are looking at new ways of doing business, to engage people in development processes to tackle the scale and scope of global challenges to peace that confront us.

Within this, if social and political structures can be created to shift from addressing youth as a ‘burden’ to recognising youth as a ‘development asset’ - not only in numbers but in the unique perspective and distinctive value that they bring - there is the potential to position youth at the forefront of solutions that work not only for themselves, but that also enrich the communities and societies around them.

Volunteerism has an important role in this landscape, as a people-centred approach to development, based on voluntary participation in the support of others. Volunteering seeks to solve problems through “interpersonal engagement and action, human relationships, and participatory decision-making in local communities”.⁵ Volunteerism has the capacity to transform bystanders and observers, including among the younger population, into active agents of change.⁶ Under the right conditions, it can create the structures, networks and platforms for the involvement of various groups. This is especially significant for young people, since volunteering will usually be their first experience of civic action and engagement.

Global estimates of the numbers of young people volunteering are difficult to produce. Based on Youth Development Index global participation rates of 21%, that would suggest around 230 million young people aged 15-24 actively volunteering through organizations in 2016.⁷ Furthermore, based on 52% average reporting ‘helping a stranger’ in the past month this would translate to around 570 million young people doing so at a global level.⁸ Beyond regional variations it is difficult to break down these youth participation rates further in terms of demographics, however in more developed economies across all age groups there is generally parity in formal volunteering rates, whereas in developing contexts men still report slightly higher participation in organizational volunteering.⁹

The impact of volunteerism on individuals themselves is shown to depend on age, social status and the socio-economic environment in which they act. Overall however, youth volunteers report that they gain valuable experience, self-esteem, awareness, voice, social status, and larger and more diversified social networks. As we will see below, these networks can play an important role in overcoming ethnic, religious, and other social divides.

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⁵ Lough; Mati 2012, p.2
⁶ United Nations Volunteers 2015a
⁷ Commonwealth Secretariat, Global Youth Development Index 2016 p150
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Charities Aid Foundation 2017
The contributions of youth volunteerism to peace and security

Young people not only constitute an important resource in terms of numbers but several evaluations of youth participation interventions as well as UN Volunteers’ own research demonstrates the distinctive contributions of youth and the impact that this can have in addressing conflict and fragility. The below outlines five areas where youth volunteerism is already contributing to sustainable peace.

2.1 Ownership, innovation and influence

We rely on youth because they are more proactive, they really want to get involved… Youth are also more educated and can bring innovation and ideas.

Local Red Cross Representative, Burundi
State of The World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 Field Research

In many instances, volunteerism provides entry points for young people to determine their own priorities, set their own agendas and engage with young people or other actors. Volunteering may be a catalyst, particularly for young people, to participate in the political realm. For example, a 2012 Mercy Corps report suggests that expanding participation of young people in local groups nurtured greater electoral and political participation.11

Youth often engage in volunteering through peer groups rather than as individuals; such groups can become brokers of engagement, connecting institutional initiatives with volunteer action at community level to ensure that their interests are reflected.12 Thus under the right conditions, youth volunteering brings together different components of social action, for example combining direct action and service provision with online and in-person advocacy and representation. The latter roles have potential for building ownership, leadership and contributing to the development of inclusive institutions in the long-term. For example, youth played an important leadership role beyond their own communities in mass movements such as those active in the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. This included a wider range of innovative forms including establishing virtual forums, real-time organization and other forms of protest.13

The role of youth in influencing social norms varies by context and by issue, but there is evidence to suggest that young people are able to push adults to challenge traditional practices or ways of thinking.14 As research on social norms and adolescent girls in Nepal has shown, youth are important agents of change when they become local leaders, heads of peer groups, government representatives or local teachers.15 Young people can provide role models for others and form positive networks and environments to ensure that vulnerable groups are not drawn into conflict.

10 Carter 2015.
11 Mercy Corps 2012 p5
13 United Nations Volunteers 2015a
14 Ghimire; Samuels 2014.
15 Ghimire; Samuels 2014.
More broadly, UNV’s recent field research did find examples where formal volunteering increased opportunities for women’s participation and leadership in their communities. Whether this translated into women’s empowerment and gender equality however was unclear. For example, women’s participation in non-traditional roles could come under suspicion from leaders as disrupting the status quo. As such it should be noted that this ‘challenge’ aspect to existing ways of doing things could also potentially be a source of inter-community conflict. Furthermore, wider evidence suggests that shifts in gender norms through volunteering is complex, for example communities’ own responses to crises may be a catalyst for positive and negative changes in gender roles – while at the same time, formal organizations and schemes have not always worked to empower women through participation in volunteering activities. Since both informal and formal volunteers can have important roles to play in supporting peace and development, there is more work to be done to understand how each of these might foster shifts towards gender equality.

2.2 Addressing drivers of conflict

Across diverse contexts, youth volunteers are addressing the root causes of conflict around structures, power and resources - issues that have the potential to cause or exacerbate instability and fragility. This is an area where spontaneous, informal, bottom up volunteering contributes, particularly in fragile contexts. Volunteers, including young people in youth and mixed age groups, address deficits in service provision in conflict and fragile settings, address violence against women and children, and more broadly strengthen the social capital required for lasting peace.

The Youth-Mullah Volunteer Caravan on Gender Equality and Rights in Afghanistan project by UNV and UNDP started in 2016 and aims to promote a culture of peace by enhancing gender equality and empowering women and girls. It utilizes volunteerism and creates ministry-supported volunteer networks as a tool for wide gender equality and awareness campaigns in Afghanistan, thereby strengthening the role of young people as leaders in advancing the course for gender equality and women’s rights. The project brings together youth and mullahs and uses their networks, mobilizing youth volunteers to advocate for change at the local level.

A preventative approach

In Sudan, UNV and UNDP implement the “Youth Volunteers Rebuilding Darfur Project” that places young Darfuris at the centre of development in that region. The conflict in Darfur has had destructive effects on lives and livelihoods, and a whole generation of youth has suffered from diminished educational and developmental opportunities. The failure to provide educational opportunities, in combination with youth being cut off from their traditional livelihoods due to displacement, creates a double disadvantage for them. While young people have a great potential to help build peaceful and prosperous communities, the pressure to make a living can become a destabilising factor fuelling violence and criminality.

The Project trains young volunteers in key business and environmental skills so that they can then share their knowledge to their local communities, with the goal of rebuilding Darfur in a peaceful manner. The project seeks to ensure that youth in Darfur have opportunities for self-empowerment to support their communities. The project has set up a sustainable volunteer scheme integrated in the national framework. UNV believes that by improving the skills and building new opportunities for youth, they will provide the building blocks to rebuild Darfur.
2.3 Fostering trust and cohesion

Effective peacebuilding requires trust to ensure open dialogue between stakeholders, a sense of community ownership in the rebuilding process and feelings of self-reliance and empowerment among members of the community. There is extensive evidence to demonstrate that volunteerism generates forms of social capital that are indispensable to peacebuilding.\(^{19}\)

While volunteers promote and contribute to peace through their professional skills and competencies, it is often their status as volunteers, and their values, attitudes and behaviours, that can most positively influence social cohesion and peace processes.\(^{20}\) Volunteerism can be perceived as a neutral force for positive change by motivated individuals, helping unite people who are otherwise divided, improve cooperation and dialogue and galvanize wider community participation.

Governments have often partnered with volunteers to create safe spaces for exchanging views and addressing concerns as part of healing societal fractures. For example, truth and reconciliation commissions are largely made up of volunteers with some degree of independence from government.\(^{21}\) Seeing young people volunteering without direct personal interest for the benefit of others in an inclusive manner often plays a powerful role in questioning conflict and hate mechanisms.

An important contextual basis for building social cohesion is that “mutual understanding is more likely when people in contact have the perception of relatively equal status”.\(^{22}\) In many cases, relationships among volunteers and between volunteers and other community members have the potential to be much more egalitarian. “The majority of service projects are designed for volunteers to come together on equal ground – offering their hands and hearts to accomplish a common goal”.\(^{23}\)

However, power dynamics dictate the relationships between types of volunteers (for example, insiders vs outsiders), as well who can participate in types of volunteer opportunities. Young people’s access and benefits of such opportunities will be gendered and are also likely to depend on other socio-economic factors such as ethnicity, class and status. As such, trust-building and solidarity through volunteerism requires careful consideration of the type and nature of activities, the profile of volunteers and in many cases greater attention to ensuring more open and inclusive forms of volunteering.

2.4 Building networks, platforms and relationships across groups

A study of peace interventions in the Rift Valley showed that the idea of reconciliation was significantly more popular among youth than among older people.\(^{24}\) Youth from different tribes participated in joint peace initiatives and thus learned to accept each other and become less suspicious of members from other ethnic groups and “stronger in their belief that the different communities can live together peacefully”.\(^{25}\) The older generation, on the other hand, were more reticent in overcoming hate and distrust toward other tribes.

“...Youth are often among the first to offer the hand of reconciliation, and overcome territorial and behavioural barriers in post-conflict regions. Thus, young volunteers can be particularly effective in building peace.”


\(^{19}\) Lough; Mati 2012.
\(^{21}\) United Nations Volunteers 2015a
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Kimenyi; Kimenyi 2011.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., p.6.
Depending on the setting, volunteers may be involved in collaborating across ethnic, tribal, and political divides. Research on volunteerism repeatedly confirms the benefits of intergroup contact stating that “increased contact between diverse groups has the potential to reduce inaccurate perceptions of the other, thereby increasing intergroup tolerance and understanding.” In addition, according to Mead’s theory of social roles, engagement in human-helping positions may increase people’s empathy and enhance their ability to change perspectives. This may help fighting prejudices and intolerance which are a root cause of violence.

2.5 Prevention and protection

Finally, youth volunteers can play a more direct role in fostering peace and security, including leading and supporting violence prevention and protection mechanisms. Young people can also play vital roles in helping other youth find an off-ramp from violence, by providing networks, solidarity and promoting positive norms among their peers.

For example, UN Volunteers’ research in Madagascar showed that young men had organized into security patrols to combat cattle theft from their communities under a broader initiative. For others, these roles may be seen as apt for young people, particularly young men, based on perceptions about strength, energy, flexibility and free time.

However, it should be noted that wider evidence points to the limited ability of community-led protection by volunteers to keep communities safe, including protection of women from gender-based violence, without the required external support from others, particularly in conflict contexts. As such volunteerism can be effective when part of a broader strategy or intervention developed by stakeholders working to uphold rights.

Many countries now have a significant policy focus targeted at the very small numbers of young people that do participate in violent extremism. Yet the vast majority of young people in all societies are not involved in such violence. Furthermore, youth can, and do play an important role in combating such extremism directly and indirectly. From monitoring and reporting concerning activities online, to providing important ‘off-ramps’ from violence for their peers through creation of positive networks, friendships and role modelling, both young women and men have a much more proactive and positive role that could be maximised for peace and stability.

3 An enabling environment for youth volunteerism

UNV’s own research suggests that a number of factors are likely to influence the contribution and impact of young people’s volunteerism.

3.1 Empowerment

Evidence suggests that a number of factors are likely to influence the contribution and impact of young people’s volunteerism. Volunteerism makes it possible for youth to work together with others, to show leadership and to gain skills and experience through their actions. However, to make sure that voices

26 Allport 1954.
27 Mead 1934.
of youth can be heard, there must be an enabling environment for youth to articulate their opinions, beliefs or concerns.

This is particularly important for young women, and women’s ownership and participation is crucial to build sustainable peace. Though men and women can have similar same rates of participation in (particularly informal) volunteer work, the roles and benefits of such work are largely determined by gender roles and norms in community and society. UNV’s recent field research did find examples where formal volunteering through organizations did increase opportunities for women’s participation and leadership in their communities. Whether this translated into women’s empowerment and gender equality however was unclear. The issue of transforming norms through volunteering roles is complex for example communities’ own responses to crises may be a catalyst for positive and negative changes in gender roles – while at the same time, formal organizations and schemes have not always worked to empower women through participation in volunteering activities. Since both informal and formal volunteers can have important roles to play, there is more work to be done to understand how each might foster shifts towards gender equality.

Yet within communities, tensions can arise around the role of young people around the participation and leadership of youth. For example, In Myanmar, research for the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 (forthcoming) found that youth play a strong role in social and religious volunteering, but face challenges in seeking to move outside traditional volunteering roles and gain support for youth-focused priorities and plans. Volunteerism was also mentioned as a source of tension between young and old in one community in Madagascar:

“The local administration did not encourage an active and influential youth group. In the end the youth leader himself decided to leave his position as youth group leader.”

Community members, Madagascar
State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 Field Research

“Before it used to be easier to organise ourselves, the older people command and make decisions, and the others execute, without discussion. But now the young people ask too many questions before executing. (...) they bring new and good ideas but they also ask questions the elder have difficulty to find answers to.”

Community Elder, Madagascar
State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 Field Research

Beyond community level, these tensions have been replicated on a wider scale when young people come together to show active engagement on the issues that matter to them:

The patterns of youthful civic engagement we identified in Egypt (through research) are being repeated with variations across the Middle East and North Africa. More and more young people engage in public spaces through virtual forums, innovative artistic expression and real-time organizing. In each country, the government response is different, and that dynamic is determining whether the largely peaceful mass demonstrations that characterized Tunisia and Egypt are replaced by violent protracted conflict. This is a historic narrative of youth civic engagement across a huge geographic swath of the Middle East that is still being written.

29 Stone, L (2015)
Furthermore, narratives around young people in relation to peace and security can still veer towards the negative. For example, despite very low levels of participation, the role of young men and young women in crime, conflict and violent extremism can be emphasised in the media. On the other hand, many of the grievances that fuel conflict and violent extremism are tied to exclusion and marginalization, including that of young people, in many contexts. As such, the question of how to harness the potential of youth action within a participatory, gender sensitive, inclusive and human rights-based framework is a key-challenge in our societies, and particularly in fragile contexts.

3.2 Inclusion

A crucial precondition for lasting peace can be widespread participation and room for all voices.\textsuperscript{30} Parajon et al. suggest that building a culture of peace is a multi-layered task which involves all sectors of society.\textsuperscript{31} Involving young people will contribute to long-term stability through improving social integration and sense of belonging.\textsuperscript{32} Yet young people are not a homogenous group, and it should be recognised that the opportunities and benefits of volunteerism will not be distributed equally.

Volunteerism can in some cases provide a rare opportunity and a space for inclusion of diverse actors, including increasing the role and status of women and minorities in peacebuilding processes. For example, volunteers may be able to forge alliances across clans, religions and nations, and claim spaces within exclusionary and restrictive socio-political systems to get their voices heard.\textsuperscript{33} However, some degree of openness and responsiveness from government is usually a prerequisite for widespread participation and widening participation through volunteerism.\textsuperscript{34}

Newer forms of volunteering, such as online volunteering have the potential to increase participation from some groups. For example, UNV’s own online volunteering service has more significant participation of persons with disabilities than onsite volunteering.\textsuperscript{35} Online volunteering may also be a good option for people with less time and location flexibility. However, such opportunities will also of course exclude others particular if they are technology-based and require infrastructure and resources. A wide range of opportunities meeting different needs and with the relevant support will always be required to ensure inclusive volunteering opportunities for all.

3.3 Support structures

In many cases, national and international schemes and volunteerism programmes are an important mechanism for enhancing youth experience, fostering communication and mutual understanding.

\textsuperscript{30} United Nations Volunteers 2015a
\textsuperscript{31} Parajon et al. 1996.
\textsuperscript{32} United Nations Volunteers 2015b, p.1.
\textsuperscript{33} United Nations Volunteers 2015a
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} https://www.unv.org/news/helping-others-while-helping-yourself-persons-disabilities-un-online-volunteers
between people, thus ensuring sustainable peace. Such programmes can also confirm young volunteers’ status, security, and enhance their recognition in their sphere of intervention.

The success of the Dinabe [youth-led security patrols initiative] is not only because it’s young people involved, it’s because it’s a State initiative. But it’s not something the State has imposed on the community, the community was involved. So it’s the collaboration between the State and the community that has ensured the success of the Dinabe. If it had come from the young people only, it wouldn’t be effective.

Group of Young Men, Madagascar
State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 Field Research

Where specific objectives are developed, formal volunteering schemes can also support more inclusive volunteering, for example by specifically providing opportunities and incentives for marginalized groups to participate.

“One of the potent means for governments to leverage volunteerism is to create structures and institutional mechanisms for volunteerism to thrive and for it to contribute to national development goals. Having frameworks of laws and institutions in place, provides volunteers with ready opportunities and structures to volunteer within. It enables governments to mobilize and deploy volunteers systematically. Putting these legal and institutional mechanisms in place also enables governments to draw on specific target groups – for example, youth – as volunteers for a range of purposes such as increasing social cohesion by providing a space for them to explore issues of difference and identity, to build new national commitments for their voices to be heard, and to increase their participation in decision-making processes.

State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2015: Transforming Governance

At the same time, since the majority of volunteerism happens informally, and this type of volunteering also brings unique and distinctive benefits, there is equally a need to provide support particularly to ensure that access and benefits are equitably shared. Policies, frameworks, investment and access to training and support, leadership opportunities are just some of the ways in which other actors can engage with informal volunteerism for peace and development outcomes.

Volunteering can provide the channels, platforms and spaces for young people to participate effectively in their societies. For example, a number of countries have national youth councils, national youth volunteer agencies and various national or sub-national bodies that can be used to ensure that volunteers’ voices are effectively heard. And these in turn can feed into global mechanisms.
However, across the evidence, we continue to see a greater need for engagement - by all stakeholders - with the widespread volunteerism that already exists among young people in their communities, to ensure that they can manage risks, receive training and support and to achieve their objectives. Volunteering may be a lower-cost or cost effective means of implementation for the SDGs, but it does require investment.

Furthermore, where young people are taking an active role in addressing development challenges, there is still much more to be done to ensure that they are involved in planning, implementation and monitoring of development initiatives and frameworks in line with their responsibilities. Not only is this an opportunity to join up policy and planning with concrete actions and priorities on the ground, it is imperative to avoid any potential for the frustration and disengagement of young people as they play an increasingly active role in countries’ peace and development pathways. After all, young people are hopefully only at the start of a lifetime of contribution through voluntary action.

4 Conclusion and policy implications

Youth volunteerism both directly contributes to peace and security in the short-term, while addressing drivers of conflict and building foundations for peaceful and inclusive societies. However, meaningful youth participation for peace and security as intended by Resolution 2250 requires the creation of an enabling environment. Member States and other Peace and Security actors can support this through:

- Conducting national and sub-national analysis on the contribution of (different types of) volunteering, including where youth volunteers can best add value in the context of sustainable peace and within national peace and development frameworks (for example in relation to systems reform, service delivery, leadership, social norms and or fostering social integration through cross-community initiatives). Ensuring that such analysis looks at the gendered nature of volunteering in the contexts and that policy responses provide opportunities for the empowerment of women and marginalized groups.

- Developing context-specific national youth volunteering policies and frameworks where these are not already in place, including leadership opportunities for young people, training and support, but also securing young volunteers from personal insecurity, risk, exploitation and other abuse.

- Incentivising the positive contributions that so many young people (250 million globally) are making through volunteerism, rather than focusing on the small minority engaged in conflict and violence. For example, providing opportunities for young people to participate in national and sub-national volunteering schemes and programmes, specifically supporting inclusion of marginalized youth. Training, education, vouchers, recognition and discount programmes for example are good ways to leverage a greater investment in volunteering activity.
- **Creating, engaging and/or supporting (youth) volunteering platforms** (virtual and physical) and networks to increase voice and representation of youth volunteers working on the issues that affect them, in their communities and societies.
- Allowing **space for, and conferring legitimacy on, youth-led initiatives as a valuable resource** including changing attitudes, better public recognition, inclusion in decision-making processes and generally finding ways to the value of such contributions as a building block for sustainable peace.


Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) (2017) World Giving Index

Commonwealth Secretariat (2016): Global Youth Development Index and Report


Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP) and The American University in Cairo (AUC). (2011): Youth Activism and Public Space in Egypt. Washington DC and Cairo: ICP and AUC.


A full paper on youth volunteerism and peacebuilding will be published in early 2018 as part of the State of the World’s Volunteerism Report 2018 (www.unv.org/swvr/resilientcommunities).
The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. We work with partners to integrate qualified, highly motivated and well supported UN Volunteers into development programming and promote the value and global recognition of volunteerism.

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