Plan International, Inc.

SUBMISSION FOR THE CONSULTATION ON THE PROGRESS STUDY ON YOUTH, PEACE AND SECURITY

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children's rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 70 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls. The empowerment of children and youth, particularly young women, is one of Plan International's priorities as outlined in our new Global Strategy 2017-2022 - "*100 million reasons*" - which aims to transform the lives of 100 million girls so they can learn, lead, decide and thrive.

I. INTRODUCTION

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the progress study developed from resolution 2250, which highlights the important and positive role young women and men play in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security. This written submission includes answers to the three guiding questions posed for the working group discussions, as well as research and programmatic examples from Plan International's work and recommendations to fully implement resolution 2250.

II. THREE GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What are the key issues related to youth in the humanitarian field, youth and human rights, youth and migration, related to the positive contribution of young people to peace and the prevention of violent conflict?

There are several issues that youth are faced with when making positive contributions to peace and violence prevention. There remains a lack of recognition that **youth are not a homogenous group**. Youth are often sidelined from policy and development processes that are not specifically ear-marked as for them as these processes are insufficiently age-sensitive. There needs to be consideration regarding who is included/excluded to ensure that youth participation doesn't exacerbate divisions or reinforce the status quo.

Barriers to gender equality and uneven power relations are also of significance. Forthcoming research by Plan International demonstrates that in many contexts, norms that limit young women's participation are often reinforced and reflected in youth initiatives, within families, and throughout public institutions and political life. The challenges faced by young people when engaging in building peace, transforming conflicts and countering violence remain highly gender-dependent. In several parts of the world, the political participation of young women in particular is jeopardized. The substantive engagement of young women is restricted as participation spaces are either completely closed to them due to patriarchal norms, or intimidating when accessed, and women's concerns are not prioritized. Furthermore, girls are disproportionately excluded from peace and violence prevention processes. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda is often insufficiently sensitive to the role that age plays in the experiences of women and girls. The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda on the other hand, addresses gender related barriers at surface level, failing to take into account the impact gender has on access and the ability to meaningfully participate in peace and security processes at every level. As a result, there is a real risk that the needs and voices of young women may fall through the gap between these two agendas.

Youth continue to be excluded and not fully engaged in the political and public spheres. Plan International's research and experience working with youth in various fragile and conflict-affected contexts has shown that many policy processes take the form of invited spaces, with youth led organizations and youth activists invited to participate in state-led processes. Yet evidence shows that young people continue to feel excluded from such spaces, or even view formal processes as biased toward political elites. There also remains structural barriers to participation, such as social and traditional norms regarding intergenerational relationships of power that limit and exclude youth.

The aforementioned issues are compounded by **negative perceptions of youth.** Discourses on violence and violent extremism frame young people as potential perpetrators of violence, reducing the role that they can play in preventing violence and transforming conflicts. Most mainstream approaches to youth and conflict over the last two decades have been preponderantly informed by "youth bulge" theories surrounding migration, unemployment and uneducated youth which lead to false perceptions that youth action leads to increased violence and insecurity. Furthermore, stereotypes about young people have skewed policy and programmatic priorities so that the dominant focus tends to remain on the "youth problem" or on "youth at risk", to the exclusion of the everyday lives of young people or those contributing to peace. As a consequence, any action which is taken tends to address symptoms rather than underlying causes, and often fails to engage youth in problem solving.

> 2. What can the youth, peace and security agenda learn from the human rights and humanitarian fields in terms of monitoring, reporting and accountability – for both Member States and the multilateral system (including but not limited to: periodic reviews, normative frameworks, accountability to affected populations)?

There are three aspects of the human rights and humanitarian fields from which the youth, peace and security agenda can learn. Firstly, any **engagement with youth can and must go beyond symbolic consultation**. Mechanisms must be created which systematically and meaningfully involve youth from the local to the global levels. These mechanisms need to ensure youth are engaged as equal partners and promote youth leadership, empowerment, and advocacy capacity. Furthermore, it is necessary to create mechanisms that not only ensure equality among genders, but also address gender-specific obstacles. This requires listening to young women's experiences and concerns, and learning from young women affected by conflict how they can best be supported to engage in peace and security processes, as is their right under international law.

Secondly, issues do not occur in a vacuum, therefore, they **should not be addressed in silos**. The human rights and humanitarian fields' **mutually reinforcing and complementary system,** shows that there can and should be a cross-over in the use of the mechanisms to monitor, report and hold groups to account. These systems should be used throughout a conflict cycle, from peace time, fragility, during active conflict, and in transitional justice and peacebuilding processes aimed at preventing further violence. For example, the continued consultations (2017) on the Human Rights Council Resolution for the Rights of Children in Humanitarian Situations highlight this complementarity, but fail to fully interlink the Security Council resolutions for these areas. The WPS and YPS agendas need to be integrated and highlighted within the already existing multilateral system and agendas. The integration of the SDGs into all other agendas is a model which should be applied to this agenda and the SDG agenda should also be used to link and reinforce human rights accountability mechanisms at national, regional and international level. SDG 16 reinforces the global understanding that there can be no sustainable development without sustainable peace and both the WPS and YPS agendas recognize that human rights violations, and gender discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence in particular are drivers of conflict and fragility and barriers to sustainable peace.

Thirdly, **the advancement of the YPS agenda requires multiple approaches**. There is a need for the application of a human rights-based approach, which is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the World Humanitarian Summit, Compact for young people in humanitarian action.

There is also a need for a socio-political approach that connects young people to civil society and the political arena, and provides them with opportunities, training and support for their active engagement and participation in public life, as well as a socio-cultural approach that analyses the roles of young people in existing structures and supports dialogue, including an intergenerational dialogue about these structures.

> 3. How could Geneva-based protection mechanisms and processes (e.g. HRC Commissions of inquiry, UPR, Treaty Body reviews, IASC Protection Cluster) address more effectively risks and vulnerabilities faced by young people in conflict situations as well as the barriers preventing their participation in peace processes and conflict resolution? And how could we ensure that young people participate more actively and systematically in the work of Geneva-based protection mechanisms?

Participation:

We need to recognize that youth are already addressing fragility and building peace, as well as invest in youth agency, and in understanding their existing responses to fragility in order to support and build on their actions. Enhancing the active participation of youth will require external stakeholders to ensure that they are acting as enablers and facilitators of youth participation, instead of occupying any actual or limited space for youth. This includes recognition from UN Member States, UN Agencies, and Non-Governmental Actors that they too should be aware of the spaces they monopolize, often to the exclusion of youth voices. Providing youth, particularly young women, with a platform for their voices through giving up their own space is one way that all humanitarian and human rights actors can support the active and meaningful participation of youth in decision-making and policy-making bodies at every level. The creation of a Special Procedure on the human rights of young people, such as an Independent Expert or Special Rapporteur to monitor and assess their enjoyment of human rights could be used to better monitor and assess the enjoyment of their rights.

Accountability:

The **treaty body mechanisms and UPR** are being increasingly utilized to address conflict situations, particularly in the area of Disaster Risk Management. The reality of protracted conflicts spread throughout the globe and the marked increases in the humanitarian consequences of both slow and sudden-onset natural disasters, demand inclusion of the human rights of affected populations in all global accountability processes at all times. Waiting until peace time or recovery is not an option, and as we strive to combat both root causes and drivers of conflict and disasters while also addressing the rights of affected populations, we must include reporting on all rights violations in human rights accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, there is a need to mainstream youth rights and issues throughout existing United Nations mechanisms, such as the UPR and the treaty bodies. This will ensure that the particular obstacles faced by youth remain on the agenda of the Human Rights Council (HRC). A more nuanced examination of rights violations and the impacts of such violations on young women and young men must include a better understanding of the intersections of both age and gender in a given context, as well as a cross over between country-specific and thematic issues.

III. GOOD PRACTICES: RESEARCH AND PROGRAMS

Plan International believes that young people should be at the heart of peacebuilding processes. Young people need to be supported in order to build a future of opportunities, where they are empowered to engage in decision-making processes that affect their lives and economic activity of their own choosing, and be free from gender restrictive barriers or discrimination. To assist them in this endeavor, Plan International has undertaken several research studies and developed targeted programs in support of advancing youth action in building sustainable peace.

Research:

Plan International has set out to better understand the needs and lived realities of adolescents in emergencies, particularly young women. To this end, we recently published a report focusing on adolescent girls' experiences in conflict in South Sudan, and have upcoming research on Youth in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts. Prior to this, Plan International undertook several research pieces, including the baseline assessment "Girls Take the Lead" on adolescents and youth, with a gender focus. Plan International also recently published a research study focused specifically on adolescents in humanitarian contexts, in order to better inform our own work, as well as to contribute to the larger evidence and knowledge base globally. This report highlighted the importance of addressing age and gender differentiated needs in a range of humanitarian contexts.

Plan International also financially supported, the development of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' comprehensive research report into Violence, Children and Organized Crime (2016). The progress study on youth, peace and security could benefit from the findings and recommendations in this report as it highlights security issues from the perspectives of children and adolescents.

Programmes:

Plan International's "Champions of Change" is an innovative strategy for promoting gender equality and social norm change through youth engagement and peer-to-peer mobilization. The overarching goal of this is to catalyze a youth-led social movement that challenges social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls' rights. As part of a joint programme: **"Women and girls for Change: building sustainable peace and gender equality in South Sudan"**, Champions of Change will be used as a method to promote youth as agents of change in gender equality and peacebuilding in South Sudan. Champions of Change curricula will be tailored to a conflict-affected situation and the deeply rooted gender discriminative environment prevalent in South Sudan and perpetuated by the legacy of conflict and weak rule of law. Moreover, a topic-specific module on peacebuilding will be developed as part of this process to empower young people as actors of peace and reconciliation and to transform the harmful patriarchal gender norms fueled by conflict. The Peace Module will focus on building girls' and boys' knowledge, attitudes and practices relevant to positive gender norms in post-conflict situations and peacebuilding. As part of the journey, girls and boys will reflect on, for example, how deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms drive violence and insecurity, as well as examine the diverse impacts of conflict on girls and boys, women and men. Girls and boys will also learn diverse non-violent ways of responding to conflict and promoting sustainable, gender-sensitive and inclusive peace and reconciliation.

Plan International has been working in Colombia for over a decade on peacebuilding initiatives in conflict zones, supporting the implementation of several projects in this area. The "Leading for Peace: Supporting the Rights of Children and Youth in Colombia (2016-2021)" project aims to ensure that victims of armed conflict, especially boys and girls, are better able to realize their rights to protection, participation, reconciliation and reparation. It will strengthen the institutional systems for the implementation of policies, programs, projects and budgets related to care and reparation. At the community level, the project will increase the capacity and opportunities for girls, boys, adolescents and youth to participate in peace-building and be more financially and socially resilient to violence and conflict. Previous to this, the "Youth Peace Builders in Colombia" project facilitated youth peace-building initiatives using a peer-to-peer methodology, where youth were actively involved in project activities through the design and implementation of initiatives based on their interests, (music, sports, theatre, dance), strengthening their participation and decision-making. A cohesive, tested and replicable peacebuilding methodology was developed and implemented by schools and youth groups throughout the country, enhancing the capacities of children and youth in conflict-affected areas to become active youth peace-builders.

Plan International mobilized and supported a group of youth to actively participate in response efforts following Hurricane Matthew in Haiti. The youth were given the opportunity to deliver relief assistance

as well as participate in efforts to rebuild affected communities. Capacity-building for the youth was emphasized and implemented through trainings on child protection, facilitation, and delivering psychosocial support. Furthermore, the youth directly contributed to the capacity needs of Plan International Haiti to provide child protection programming in areas that required additional support.

Plan International has also developed programmatic responses to refugee situations. In Tanzania, Plan International has developed a peacebuilding and non-violent conflict skills programme for Burundian refugees which focuses on providing youth with services including life skills, peer education, peacebuilding activities, and youth clubs, all of which are determined by the youth. Similar responses have been developed in Germany, where a group of young refugees was established to support and lead various intercultural and educational activities and provide trainings to other refugees. Several of them are engaged as Youth Advocates who work through different types of media and speak at conferences to raise awareness about the situation and rights of refugee children and youth. This youth participation has created change directly in the camps through consultations with the operator, in their city through pushing for more involvement of youth in decision-making processes, on a national level through their review of minimum standards for protection in refugee camps, and on an international level through their direct contribution to the development and promotion of the Core Actions for Youth in Humanitarian Settings. Through Plan International's program, refugee youth are empowered to present their perspective and speak up about their own rights and they are in a direct dialogue with actors that make decisions concerning them, providing them with a widened network in which they can act as agents of change.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several actions, which must be undertaken by governments and civil society in order to continue to build on resolution 2250 for the engagement of youth in peace and security. Plan International recommends the following:

1. That national and international stakeholders recognize the work that young women and men are already undertaking and to invest further in youth agency. Intervention strategies must invest in understanding youth's existing agency in responding to fragility, and support and build on these interventions.

2. States should strengthen national systems that promote and protect children, adolescents and youth rights, particularly at the local level. States should create protocols for early detection and handling of instances of violence, abuse, neglect and other violations of rights. Collaboration among sectors that are in direct contact with children, adolescents and youth should be reinforced, especially the education, health and social services sectors.

3. States should strengthen families' and communities' ability to care for and protect children, adolescents and youth through programmes that support them in the exercise of their responsibilities, taking into account the level of assistance families need to meet their duty of care.

4. States should create a safe and protective environment in schools that helps guarantee the right to an education, the overall development of children, adolescents and youth and their understanding of their rights. States should emphasise education and education policies as some of the most important tools for investing in vulnerable children, adolescents and youth, be it for improving their education, reducing most types of risky behaviours and facilitating access to employment.

5. States should take an evidence-based approach so that policy and programme interventions are not underpinned by presumptions about the drivers and social norms, which lead youth to take on roles as peacebuilders, or perpetrators of violence. States should invest in gender and inclusion sensitive research to better understand the drivers that lead young women and men to take on particular roles during periods of fragility and armed conflict in order to support more effective and targeted interventions to prevent violence and build peace.

6. States and civil society should learn from and support existing youth actions that are challenging gender and social norms. Taking cues from everyday actions, programmes must seek to understand how young women already negotiate and challenge restrictive norms and mobilize for action; and how young men can support young women to continue to do this.

7. Acknowledging that resolution 2250 considers youth as those who are 18-29, Plan International recommends that the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security takes into consideration youth beyond this age bracket, particularly in aligning to the generally recognized definition of youth as accepted by the United Nations encompassing age 15-24.

8. Actors should ensure that they systematically reflect on their roles, ensuring that they act as enablers and facilitators of youth participation, and do not occupy actual or limited emergent space for youth activists and youth organizations.

9. In peace processes and consultations, policy actors need to recognize and address patriarchy and gender bias at the outset of formal processes addressing fragility, and seek to create terms of engagement that are enabling for young women, including through quotas, debating rules about respect and active listening, allowing young women to speak first, and supporting women-only dialogue forums in advance of formal processes so that they can strengthen their agency and voice.

10. States should develop programmes which address the patriarchal norms and traditional intergenerational relationships of 'power over' which limit and exclude youth, in order to enable youth to engage meaningfully in processes to build peace.

11. Actors in this field need to be aware of power dynamics and gender inequality and the complex divisions among youth. It is critical that consideration is given to who is excluded and included – to ensure that youth participation does not exacerbate divisions or reinforce the status quo.

12. States and civil society should develop dedicated programme activities to transform unequal power relations and eliminate the stigma and discrimination that limit the participation of women and marginalized groups, including by engaging men and boys in positive masculinity programming. Programmes need to make use of female mentors, role models, and women-only spaces to help build assets, resources, confidence and opportunities for girls and young women. Through peer education, young women and men need to collaborate to discuss and challenge patriarchy in their own communities and at the national level.

13. States and civil society need to recognize that capacity building alone will not enable youth to engage meaningfully in processes to build peace. Youth must be engaged at every level of the peace process by both governments and nongovernmental organizations across national, regional and international levels.

14. Actors must support youth civil society and youth leaders in developing clear strategies for engagement based on power analysis, in order to a) find allies within the state and help open up space for youth participation; b) maximise the use of the existing political space to negotiate youth issues; and c) articulate barriers and risks to linking up with state actors.