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Leaders of today:
Engagement of youth in sustaining peace

By Sarah Smith

While often hailed as the leaders of tomorrow, the role that the world's approximately 1.8 billion young people[1] —about one quarter of the global population—can play today in promoting more peaceful and inclusive societies is often overlooked. The engagement of youth is essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive peace, as recognised by Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. Building on the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation's work on inclusive peacebuilding, the Foundation has been exploring youth engagement in development and peacebuilding, with case studies on Liberia, Myanmar and Tunisia. This paper presents findings compiled from these studies, with an aim of highlighting how young people participate in peace efforts, what specific challenges they face and suggestions for strengthening their engagement.

Introduction

Youth bring innovative ideas to the table. They often bring new perspectives and an abundance of energy and optimism which can catalyse renewed dialogue between groups toward more peaceful and inclusive societies. Not yet indoctrinated or moulded by social structures and cleavages that often characterise societies and conflict, they typically are less likely to accept the status quo and more prone to push boundaries. It is therefore important to ensure that young people are included in local, national and international peace and decision making processes.

Security Council Resolution 2250 (SCR 2250) on Youth, Peace and Security, adopted in December 2015, recognises the positive impact young women and men can have in their communities and calls for the inclusion of youth in processes to build and sustain peace. A result of joint initiatives over several years by youth organisations, the United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), SCR 2250 highlights the inclusion of youth in peace and decision making processes as a priority area for the international organisation, outlining five main action areas: participation; protection; prevention; partnerships; and disengagement and reintegration. The importance of youth participation is further underlined in parallel resolutions by the UN Security Council (SCR 2282) and the General Assembly (A/RES/70/262) on sustaining peace, which underscore the role of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) to strengthen youth engagement in peacebuilding.

More than a year following the adoption of SCR 2250, much more work is needed to ensure that the recommendations are implemented on a global scale. Youth—defined here as 18 to 29 year olds[2]—continue to face challenges in making their voices heard in local, national and international political processes. More evidence for how young people are contributing to formal and informal peace and development initiatives and the barriers they face is needed. In its inclusivity work[3], the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation emphasised the imperative of fully understanding and recognising local experiences and contexts in promoting inclusive peacebuilding identifying young people as a key stakeholder group in building peace. To deepen its insights the Foundation conducted case studies on Liberia, Myanmar[4] and Tunisia[5] to draw attention to various perspectives on youth engagement and challenges to participation, as well as ways to strengthen participation, with the aim to contribute to implementation processes for SCR 2250 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[6]

While many of the same themes and challenges were identified across the case studies, it is important to recognise that the findings do not capture all possible perspectives regarding youth engagement. A synthesis of key issues identified is presented below, along with suggestions for how the PBSO, PBC, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and other international actors can support and promote the inclusion of youth in peacebuilding.

Diversity among youth

The concept of youth, and the age range this represents, is not standardised across the UN system, Member States and civil society. The 1993 Child Law in Myanmar defines youth as persons between the ages of 16 and 18, but participants at the 2016 Myanmar Youth Forum (MYF), which brings together young people from all states and regions of the country, voted to define youth as between the ages of 16 and 35.[7] While youth in Tunisia are officially considered to be between ages 15 and 29,[8] some definitions go as high as the age of 40. In many countries, this broader definition is a result of the concept of youth being associated with social status rather than age; as you get married, buy a house and have children, you are no longer considered young. Following 14 years of conflict in Liberia, a large segment of the population may face additional exclusion from decision making processes because they are too old to be considered youth but have not been able to make the transition into "adulthood."

Allowing for context specific definitions of what constitutes youth is critical, but having a definition that is too broad can also lead to challenges when engaging young people. In Myanmar, for example, many youth organisations are led by 35-40 year olds, limiting the possibility for younger youth to become leaders in these movements. Younger youth may feel that their perspectives are not adequately represented by older youth, who often have very different concerns and priorities. In ensuring that youth of all ages are included, international and national policy makers and peace and development organisations should develop initiatives geared toward sub-groups of youth, allowing for targeted programming based on their different needs. In funding youth organisations, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that financial support is provided to youth of all ages.

In addition to differences in age, young people have diverse backgrounds and experiences, perspectives and ideas for the future of their countries. Their needs and reasons for becoming engaged in their communities are just as varied. Young people may be engaged in community level advocacy or service provision; they may be engaged in more national level political processes. In including young people, peace and development efforts should be careful not to view youth as a homogeneous group, recognising and supporting different approaches to and targets of engagement.

Challenges to engagement

Despite very different contexts, young people in Liberia, Myanmar and Tunisia experience similar challenges to engagement in efforts to build and sustain peace.

Multiple layers of marginalisation facing youth

Along with recognising the diversity among youth, it is critical to understand that some youth—from various socio-economic, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other groups—are more marginalised than others. In all three country contexts, young women, who may be expected to fulfil traditional household duties, face particular challenges to inclusion, both in labour markets and in political processes. In Liberia, many former combatants are also marginalised from employment opportunities and peacebuilding processes due to a failure to reintegrate them into society through long-term skills building and jobs training. As a result, many of them have turned to criminal and drug related activities to support themselves. Youth from more deprived rural and urban neighbourhoods of Tunisia, many of which lack access to basic services, are often stereotyped as violent criminals and prone to joining extremist movements. For international actors, rural areas can also be more difficult to reach especially when, as in the case of Myanmar, they face government restrictions on travel outside of urban areas.

More focus is needed to identify methods for engaging these and other young people who face multiple societal barriers and who are least likely to otherwise be included in peace and political processes throughout their lives. Grassroots initiatives to achieve this aim do exist and should be replicated. Kaw Dai, a local CSO located in Shan State, an area of Myanmar that suffers from violent conflict, implements a 2-year internship programme for young people from rural areas of Shan and Kachin states as well as Mandalay and Bago. Following a year of training and education on human rights, democracy and conflict resolution, participants go back to their villages to promote peace through community organising and advocacy.[9] Supporting these kinds of initiatives in Myanmar, as well as Tunisia and Liberia, are key to ensuring the engagement of all youth in these countries.

Economic barriers to engagement

According to the International Labor Organization, 4.6 percent of Liberian youth and 9.5 percent of Myanmar youth ages 15 to 24 were unemployed in 2014, though the actual numbers are likely much higher.[10] Approximately 33 percent of Tunisian youth ages 15 to 29 were not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET)[11]. In all three countries, young women are more likely than young men to be unemployed.[12] Unemployment can contribute to uncertainties regarding the future, as well as disillusionment among young people toward government, leaving them with a feeling of having no role in society. While some interviewees maintained that unemployed youth in Tunisia are less likely to engage in peace and development initiatives, youth representatives from Myanmar suggested that unemployed youth are more likely to be involved with civil society since they have more free time than those with fulltime jobs. This may be a result of a strong activist culture in parts of Myanmar. Overall, however, less educated youth who are poor and struggling financially are unlikely to be able to afford transportation costs or the time required to engage with peace and development processes, instead prioritising employment and providing for their families.

Cultural barriers to engagement

The role of youth in political processes in Tunisia is constrained by a traditionally hierarchical culture that values experience over ingenuity; traditional elder cultures in Myanmar and Liberia also expect youth to defer to older generations and wait their turn to assume leadership positions. The constructive role young people can play in their societies is often overlooked by families, communities and decision makers. In Liberia, traditional leaders are trying to re-establish their influence in communities, which was to some extent lost during the country's years of violent conflict as youth joined armed groups—willingly or unwillingly—and assumed leadership roles.[13] Ensuring that traditional leaders and youth can engage in dialogue and work together is therefore critical.

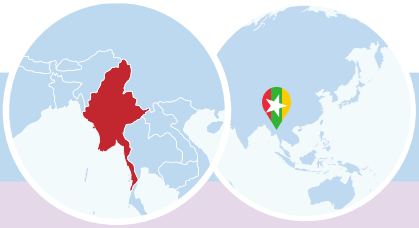
Cultural barriers to participation can also be replicated within civil society. In Myanmar, some youth representatives working with peace and development CSOs expressed frustration that their organisational leaders did not allow them to take the lead on various initiatives. They indicated that they often feel young people are invited to CSO meetings only to fill a quota without allowing for their voices to be heard.

Political barriers to engagement

Due in part to the cultural and economic barriers mentioned above, young people in these countries face challenges to inclusion in political processes. Within governments and political parties, youth issues are often not considered in party platforms or broader political discussions. Many interviewees have pointed to the need for a national youth policy in Tunisia and Myanmar—a process is underway in Myanmar (See Box 1)—outlining steps to support inclusion of youth in local, regional and national decision making.[14]

While this would be an important step toward ensuring

Myanmar



Box 1: Development of a Myanmar national youth policy

Youth in Myanmar have advocated for the development of a national youth policy, and in April 2016 their efforts yielded results when the government commissioned young people to develop such a policy. The National Youth Congress (NYC)—created in 2012 at the first Myanmar Youth Forum (MYF)—has been collecting youth perspectives from all states and regions of the country in an effort to promote such a legal framework. Following the third MYF in June 2016, local and regional youth forums were also held to identify representatives from each state and region to participate in discussions on a national youth policy. Generation Wave, founded in 2007, and other youth organisations have also been engaged in these processes. A central committee began drafting the policy in February 2017, and a finalised draft is scheduled to be completed by August 2017. Youth representatives stressed the importance of having a legal framework for the engagement of young people to encourage those who may still be hesitant to become involved in politics due to fear of reprisals—the military continues to have strong influence despite the country having begun to transition from authoritarian to more democratic rule—to become engaged.

Source: Chan Wai Sow, "Youth policy to be finalised by August," January 2017, Eleven
See https://www.facebook.com/NationalYouthCongress.Myanmar/ and https://www.facebook.com/Generation-Wave-209504710104/

youth participation, additional mechanisms are needed to ensure that such policies are implemented and lead to real change.

In Tunisia and Myanmar, where young people often mistrust their state institutions, political parties are mostly perceived as including only elite youth in decision making processes, including through formalised youth wings. Ensuring that youth from various sectors and levels of society are represented in these structures and in government positions is critical. Peer-to-peer exchange between various youth wings is also critical to promoting dialogue between groups. Young people are already engaged in such initiatives. The Mano River Union Youth Parliament, for example, provides a platform for young leaders from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone to advocate for and raise youth perspectives on regional peace and stability.[15] Meanwhile in Myanmar in July 2016, around 800 youth from 26 ethnic groups developed recommendations regarding the peace process at the Ethnic Youth Conference (EYC) in Panglong. Participants formed the All Burma Youth Ethnic Alliance to advocate for a seat at the Panglong-21 negotiations.[16]

Lack of access to education

Creating a space for young people to engage is made even more challenging by a general lack of knowledge among youth and civil society of national and international legislation, including SCR 2250, and how to contribute and participate in their implementation. Little to no outreach by governments and media outlets on peace and development processes further limits access to information. In Myanmar, information, including school textbooks, is often disseminated in Burmese or English rather than local languages, further alienating ethnic minority youth.

The education sector should be a primary channel for promoting awareness of these issues, but lack of access to these institutions can limit the participation of young people in building peaceful and inclusive societies. A 2016 report shows that only about 12 percent of adolescents (ages 10 to 19) in Rakhine state and 16 percent of adolescents in Kachin/Shan states in Myanmar have access to secondary education.[17] According to the Education Policy and Data Center, only 4 percent of youth ages 15-24 had completed secondary education in Liberia as of 2007.[18]

A common theme throughout the three case study countries was the lack of self-confidence among youth in their ability to contribute to peace, human rights and democracy. More than increasing access to education, interviewees pointed to the need to develop educational systems that promote critical and independent thinking. Young people are often taught to memorise and repeat, rather than to think critically, speak up and voice their own opinions in a safe space for dialogue and debate. Education curricula that incorporate elements of peace education—social cohesion, conflict resolution, dialogue, etc.—and teach students about SCR 2250 and sustainable development processes such as the SDGs are needed. Some laudable local efforts are underway. Sawtouna Tunisia advocates for the incorporation of peace educa-

tion in Tunisian schools by training teachers to integrate the principles of peace and dialogue in their day-to-day exchanges with students.[19] Through the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) peace education programme, students in Liberia are trained and certified to provide dispute resolution services in campus based peer mediation centres.[20]

These kinds of initiatives can instil in youth a sense of their ability to constructively contribute to peace and development processes and are needed to ensure the inclusion of a broader spectrum of youth.

Funding challenges

Youth organisations lack funding to be able to implement long-term initiatives that advocate for issues of importance to youth. Donors prefer providing larger sums of money to well established organisations, often based in urban areas, that speak English. For them funding a local organisation that needs 1,000 USD in seed money to initiate a community based project may require the same amount of paperwork as granting 100,000 USD to a larger organisation implementing several projects. In addition, small organisations often lack experience in managing grants. Since many youth initiatives are just starting up and tend to be more grassroots, such practices can severely limit the number of youth and youth organisations that receive funding.

Furthermore, donors often require—or are themselves required to insist—that organisations are registered with the government in order to receive funding. In Myanmar, where the space for civil society has only recently begun to open up, most CSOs are not registered with the government. These kinds of constraints contribute to a disconnect between local and international initiatives. As a result of limited contact with young people outside of urban areas, international actors may not even be aware of how young rural people are engaged. Peace and development efforts need to find ways to access youth in these more remote areas to understand their needs, fears and priorities, with backing from donors.

Role of technology and social media

As more and more youth, even in remote areas, are becoming active on social media, the use of technology to involve youth should be further explored and built upon. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube can expose young women and men from various backgrounds to youth initiatives, promote national and international dialogue on various issues and encourage young people to become more involved within their communities. In Liberia, for example, social media and SMS-based programmes were used by youth in efforts to respond to the Ebola crisis.[21]

These platforms can also present certain challenges to engaging young people. Youth representatives from Myanmar mentioned that there is a risk that youth may lose interest in engaging in politics and peace processes through these outlets and become more interested in using social media for purely social purposes.[22] Social media can also be used as a platform for hate speech and spreading of misinformation. If not regulated correctly—while still ensuring free speech—there is a risk that it can marginalise certain young people.

Youth in poorer, rural and ethnic minority areas who might not have access to electricity and technology face additional barriers to accessing information and therefore do not have space to raise their own voices on social media. Data shows that as of 2016, 51 to 75 percent of the population does not use the Internet in Myanmar[23]; approximately 90% of Facebook users access the site from Yangon and Mandalay.[24] Twice as many men have Facebook accounts as women, the latter of which are much less likely to have a mobile phone.[25]

To ensure that youth from all levels of society have access to information, social media and technology should be used strategically to engage young people, in parallel with initiatives that emphasise personal contact, including information sharing and awareness campaigns by local organisations in their communities. Using social media in schools and libraries as a learning tool in areas where youth may not have ready access to technology at home could help expose students to ways to get engaged in politics and peace and development initiatives.

Tunisia

Box 2:
Youth engagement through technology in Tunisia

The past few years have seen a rise of technological enterprises started by young Tunisians. AlphaLab, based in Soliman, creates mobile applications with the aim of making social media and technology more accessible to local populations outside of Tunis. SOGEER, developed in 2015, installs renewable energy technology in businesses and homes in Sfax. These are just a couple of examples of the many tech start-ups being developed in the country by youth. Yet, they often face barriers in setting up their businesses.

Registering a company in Tunisia is a five-step process that can take up to two weeks. Starting an enterprise also includes a lot of paperwork and meetings with people in Tunis, making it more difficult for those living in rural areas. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative effort from various stakeholders in Tunisia, including the private sector. Workshops that help youth navigate through the bureaucratic system in starting their own business is critical. Legislation that outlines regulations for banks to provide low-interest loans to young entrepreneurs is also needed.

Sources: http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/young-tunisian-entrepreneurs, and http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/can-tunisia-become-hub-entrepreneurs

Strengthening youth engagement

The international community still has much to learn when it comes to identifying effective strategies and mechanisms for engaging youth and implementing the recommendations presented in SCR 2250. Key to ensuring that youth are involved in peace and development is recognising that many are already participating in various activities within their communities. As one youth from Myanmar succinctly summarised: young people do not need to be motivated to get engaged. They need support.

Despite challenges to youth engagement, there are several ways that the PBSO, PBC and PBF and other international actors can strengthen youth engagement going forward:

Incorporate youth engagement into existing inclusivity and sustaining peace programmes. The engagement of young people should be more systematically integrated in international efforts to sustain peace, including interfaith and interethnic initiatives using lessons learned from inclusivity efforts of other marginalised groups. Rather than thinking simply about how to engage youth, policy makers and practitioners should develop methodologies for engaging women, ethnic minority groups, religious actors and other marginalised groups at a younger age. The PBC and PBF should ensure that a youth lens be applied in sustaining peace efforts by making it a requirement for funding.

Advocate for and take concrete steps to ensure that youth who face multiple barriers to engagement are included in peace and decision making processes. More time and effort is needed to meet with and to listen to young people who are engaged and to raise awareness among those young women and men who are not. Creative methods should be applied for linking grassroots initiatives to national-level peace and development processes that do not rely solely on technology.

Include training on project management, communications and other transferable skills that are sought after in the labour market in efforts to engage young people. By gaining these skills, youth will more easily be able to transition from working with youth organisations to working with CSOs or gaining employment.

Reform funding structures to allow for greater flexibility in providing financial and technical support to smaller youth initiatives, including at the local community level. The PBF Youth Promotion Initiative, launched in May 2016, which provides direct financing to select NGOs working on youth empowerment and participation is a step in the right direction, but could go even further by creating funding mechanisms, including support functions, that allows for small scale grants to youth-led grassroots initiatives.

Provide links to other country contexts. A key role for the PBC should be to serve as a resource for countries and organisations working on youth issues by sharing exam-

ples of how young people have been engaged in other contexts. The international community can also provide financial and technical support to help facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges between youth from various countries.

Support initiatives that provide a platform for intergenerational exchange. Dialogue between young people and their elders can help promote a more positive image of young people and the role they can play in their communities, breaking down cultural barriers to engagement.

Encourage and support governments to complete comprehensive education reform and incorporate peace education in curricula, promoting safe spaces for people from different backgrounds to express themselves and learn from each other. To reach youth that may not be enrolled in formal school systems, peace education programmes should also be implemented within non-formal education i nitiatives, youth centres and libraries, at the local and national levels.

Conclusion

The above findings present a glimpse at some of the key issues related to youth engagement in local, national and international peace and development initiatives. In reality, these issues are often much more complex and nuanced, and may look very different for young people from other countries. Much more is therefore needed to identify the full range of challenges youth face in engagement and ways to strengthen their participation in Liberia, Myanmar and Tunisia, as well as in other contexts. It is particularly critical that young people from the most marginalised sectors of society, whose voices are often under-represented in projects and studies, be brought into conversations. More information sharing between UN agencies and national and international CSOs is also needed to ensure that programming is knowledge based and synchronised to the extent that is possible.

To contribute to efforts to better understand youth engagement, findings from the case studies will feed into the ongoing Global Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, which was mandated by SCR 2250 to identify how young people are involved in peace and conflict resolution processes and to develop recommendations for implementing the resolution at the local, national, regional and international levels.[26] The Foundation will also support a final consultation with youth representatives from various regions throughout the world to validate the results of the study before it is finalised and presented to the Secretary-General.

While SCR 2250 and the Progress Study are significant positive steps in strengthening inclusion of young people in peace and development, full commitment and continued efforts by UN agencies, including PBSO, PBC and PBF, will be critical to ensure that findings and recommendations are implemented. Equally important is acknowledgement by the UN and its member states of the universality of SCR 2250. In a recent meeting hosted by the Foundation on youth engagement in Sweden, many of the same challenges, including difficulties in reaching more marginalised youth and accessing funding, were raised. It was an important reminder that efforts to strengthen youth engagement in preventing conflict and building peace are needed globally.

End Notes

1 As of 2016. Data refers to young people between the ages of 15 and 29. See "The Power of 1.8 Billion: Adolescents, Youth and the Transformation of the Future," State of the World Population 2014

2 The Foundation has adopted the definition used in SCR 2250, which defines youth as persons between the ages of 18-29 years old. In line with the resolution, the Foundation recognises that the definition of youth varies across national and international organisations, including within the United Nations itself. The definition of youth also depends on social, cultural and political factors in a given country.

3 See Development Dialogue no. 63, Inclusive Peacebuilding: Recognised but not realised

4 The military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. The name is still contested and the use of one or the other can be seen as a political statement. In its case studies the Foundation uses Myanmar as that is the name used by its local partner.

5 For more on the Tunisian case study, see Strengthening Youth Engagement in Post-Jasmine Revolution Tunisia, Development Dialogue Paper no. 19

6 Myanmar and Liberia were chosen to build on the Foundation's established relationships with local partners who have been exploring questions of inclusivity. Tunisia was selected due to its role as a pilot country for the implementation of the SDGs and because it is seen as a context where peacebuilding efforts succeeded in preventing the eruption of violent conflict. Case studies consisted of desk reviews of relevant reports and articles, as well as key informant interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including local and international NGOs, UN institutions and other international governmental agencies, and, to as great an extent as possible, youth representatives. A total of 10 people, including 1 youth, were interviewed for the Tunisia study; 26 informants, 8 of them youth, for the Myanmar study; and 8 informants, including 2 youth, for Liberia.

7 "Myanmar Youth Forum defines youths as people aged 16-35," Coconuts Yangon, 18 November 2016

8 EuroMed III Youth Programme, "Studies on youth policies in the mediterranean partner countries: Tunisia," 2009

9 See http://www.kawdai.org/kaw-dai-internship-program.

10 ILO, Key Indicators of the Labour Market database

11 World Bank, "Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion," November 2014

12 ILO, Key Indicators of the Labour Market database

13 Key informant interviews, November and December 2016

14 Liberia established a National Youth Policy Action Plan in 2009. A revised version of this plan for 2012-2017 was passed in September 2013. See Liberia, youthpolicy.org

15 http://www.waynyouth.org/Files/MRU.htm

16 The conference was held despite government attempts to cancel the event. The event also received criticism is response to reports that two Muslim attendees were turned away for not belonging to a particular ethnic group. See: "Youth ethnic alliance emerges after summit," Myanmar Times, 3 August 2016; "Youth Alliance Forms From Ethnic Conference," Burma International News, 3 August 2016; "Democratic Voice of Burma: Muslims excluded from ethnic youth conference," BurmaNet News, 28 July 2016

17 OCHA, "Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report: 2016 Mid-Year Monitoring: Myanmar," August 2016

18 EPDC, Liberia Report, 2014 update

19 For more information on Sawtouna see https://www.facebook.com/Sawtounatunisia-456372264389384/

20 WANEP, "Peace Education in Formal Schools of West Africa: An implementation guide," 2012

21 UNICEF, "Fighting Ebola with Information," 29 June 2015

22 Key informant interview, September 2016

23 International Telecommunication Union, IDG Connect, ICT Facts and Figures 2016

24 Catherine Trautwein, 'Facebook racks up 10m Myanmar users,' Myanmar Times, 13 June 2016,

25 Ibid.

26 See https://www.youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy

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