SUMMARY

Youth, Peace and Security: Insights from Engaged and Disengaged Young Women and Men in Nepal, Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia

Comparative Summary of Country Reports and a National Case-Study Prepared to Inform the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security and the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2250.

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Acknowledgements

The content of this report does not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations.

Youth, Peace & Security

Introduction

In 2017, Search for Common Ground (Search) conducted qualitative research with young women and men in five countries to support data collection for the United Nations Secretary-General's Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, mandated by Security Council Resolution 2250. The research was funded by UNFPA for activities in Nepal, Nigeria and Tunisia, and by the PeaceNexus Foundation for activities in Niger. The objective was to document young people's experiences and contributions to peace and security, as well as provide a platform for them to share their concerns, recommendations and solutions on how to enhance these contributions and their engagement in the consolidation of peace.

Drawing on a youth-led and peer-to-peer approach, the methodology included focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and individual conversations with young people and field experts. Search consulted a total of 729 young people (47% were women, 53% were men) from areas most affected by the civil war in Nepal, and violent extremism in Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia. Search primarily consulted "hard to reach", marginalized young people, including former combatants and internally displaced persons, whose voices are seldom heard in global policy discussions, and whom mainstream peace and development programs have challenges in

Youth researchers during a focus group discussion with their peers in Niger

meaningfully engaging. Youth active in their communities, civil society organizations and political parties were also consulted.

This document summarizes the main findings and recommendations available in the four country reports and the Nepal national case study produced as part of this research. It highlights country-specific findings as well as key messages common across the countries, with a view to inform policies, programs and solutions to better reflect the experiences of young people most affected by violence.

Country-Specific Findings

In **Nepal,** young women and men who participated in the 1996-2006 civil war, and those recently involved in social movements in the Terai/Mhadesh, struggle to find their place in society. They feel they have gained little in return for their sacrifices during the civil war and/or in the social movements. Stigmatized, unemployed, and pressured to earn a livelihood, these young people often seek to escape humiliation and isolation and/or regain respect and status through substance abuse, criminal activities or involvement with political parties - who ultimately manipulate them. Yet, most resist violence and many lead positive activities in their community. These young people identify political manipulation of youth, caste-based discrimination, impunity, and national reconciliation as key issues to address. The case of Nepal highlights the importance of finding a healthy balance between efforts to reintegrate former combatants and engagement with young people who chose not to participate in violence. In addition, it is important to find conflict-sensitive

ways to amplify the work of young women and men who have been involved in conflict but are now contributing to building peace in their communities.

In **Niger,** Search consulted youth active in their communities and youth facing marginalization and hardship (including refugees and young women forced to marry Boko Haram members). In areas affected by violence, where access is difficult for development programming, many young people resist violence and look for ways to make a positive contribution in their communities. However, their actions remain informal and small-scale, limited by economic insecurity, lack of access to decision-making, and lack of recognition by local authorities and communities. Youth nevertheless appear united, supporting each other in a context of isolation from mainstream society. The case of Niger highlights the importance of leveraging youth solidarity, supporting and investing in youth who resist violence and violent extremism.

Consultations in **Nigeria** highlight the diverse ways that young people respond to violence, and the need to work across these different groups of youth to consolidate peace. Young people call on government, security agencies and community leaders to adopt more responsive, responsible, and collaborative approaches for working with young people. They also emphasize the need for increasing services to internally displaced persons, including creating the conditions for their return home, and creating opportunities for positively engaging vigilante groups and members of the Civilian Joint Task Force. Another key message is to recognize and support the work that young people are doing in extremely difficult situations to build peace, counter violent extremism, provide security and emergency relief.

In **Tunisia,** youth from the regions consulted feel so marginalized that they have developed a profound skepticism and disinterest in the very notion of peacebuilding, emphasizing that their problems are such that involvement is pointless. Forgotten by the State and its institutions and disdained and misunderstood by elites, these young people feel they are victims of violence and the State. They are missing sufficient avenues and outlets for exploring non-violent alternatives, participating in violence prevention and consolidating peace. The case of Tunisia highlights the importance of engaging personally with and listening to marginalized youth, to prevent further disengagement.

Cross-Country Messages and Recommendations

Address youth exclusion from their communities and main channels of participation

Young women and young men feel unheard, isolated and marginalized. In an increasingly connected world, they are disconnected from other youth, their communities, and main channels of action, and express a deep need to belong. Institutional and social humiliation in Tunisia, neglect by community and authorities in Niger and Nigeria, and hierarchical social conventions that discourage Nepalese youth from challenging or opposing elders' views are examples of this marginalization. In Nepal, **Tunisia** and Nigeria, some of the consulted youth who have risked their lives for socio-political causes or to protect their community, now feel used and further excluded because they have gained little in return of their sacrifice.

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> *"Thousands of people like me dedicated our youth to the war. We fought for social justice and political change. Many people lost their parents, children, and relatives and are still living in destitution. Ex-combatants have not been properly rehabilitated. How long can we tolerate this state of affairs?"*
> (31-year-old female ex-combatant, Bardiya, Nepal)
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> *"It is we, the young people of the deprived and poor regions, who have been the flame of the revolution. We are the ones who revolted for dignity and freedom, but we have become poorer, without development projects, our infrastructure has deteriorated, unemployment is higher. Coastal regions and the rich are the beneficiaries, they gave us a bonus; terrorism."* (19-year-old man, Kasserine, Tunisia)

Consult with youth and include them in decision-making and governance

Youth demand greater inclusion at all levels- community, traditional, government, state institutions: from including youth in traditional decision-making mechanisms in Nepal, to consulting and partnering with youth on security measures in Niger and Tunisia, to counter-terrorism responses in Nigeria. They need adults and politicians to share power and stop seeing youth as too young to contribute. Youth have yet to see meaningful improvement from traditional institutions in this area, which is at the core of their marginalization, while violent extremist groups often offer youth a greater sense of importance and power.

Restore trust between youth and institutions

While many youth expressed frustration with institutions that they perceive as ineffective and out of touch with the people, the majority of youth consulted still expressed the need to collaborate with institutions. However, this collaboration would require changes in the institutions and efforts to rebuild trust. They do not see inclusion in an unjust and corrupt system of impunity, false promises and normalized violence as the answer. Youth want support and meaningful involvement with civil society, the State, and other institutions. They ask for transformation of the current system, and commitment from governments and other power players to work together to transform institutions and relationships that lead to improved safety and security, help in violence prevention and provide role models who serve the needs of the people.

Focus group discussion in Nepal

Address economic insecurity while considering comprehensive needs of youth

Unemployment and economic insecurity increase youth's vulnerability to political manipulation, criminal activity or joining violent extremist groups. Youth struggle to secure decent and dignified livelihoods, describing a system of limited options and support, in which finding drugs and small arms is often easier than finding jobs. While addressing this issue is critical, they recognize it is not the solution to all ills. Young people expressed several other concerns and recommendations reminding us that their need for dignity, identity formation, belonging and a sense of purpose must also be addressed, strengthened and amplified by the conviction that they are a key part of their society.

Re-frame programs and refine approach of international organizations

Lack of confidence in international organizations and the effectiveness of their programs is an

> *"My father never ceases to tell me that I must be ashamed of myself when watching those of the same age as me, that I am not a man."* (23-year-old man, Medenine, Tunisia)
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> *"We face marginalization and are expected to stay home. The thought of peace and security work being for men not women is also an issue."* (15-19 year-old woman, Yola North, Nigeria)

obstacle to youth participation. Youth are open to international initiatives, but believe they must adopt more personalized approaches aligned with the real and diverse needs of young people. Going to hard to reach areas, listening to marginalized youth, recognizing the expertise of young people, trusting their ideas, letting them lead, and adjusting funding and partnership requirements to the challenges of youth-led initiatives operating in difficult contexts are recommended.

Encourage young women's participation and ensure their safety

Patriarchal norms, cultural beliefs, insecurity and gender-based violence severely limit young women's safety, mobility, and access to the public sphere, including their ability to voice ideas and concerns, realize their aspirations, and participate in peacebuilding. Recommendations include: raising awareness and celebrating young women's contributions; engaging families to obtain their approval and trust; and developing community support systems to promote participation and ensure safety in organizations and while traveling to/from activities. Another recommendation was the need to engage and educate men and boys about the diverse and constructive roles young girls and young women play in their communities.

Discussion with displaced young women, Nigeria

Widen communities' and stakeholders' understanding of the roles young women and men can and do play in peace and security

Young women and men are still cast in harmful gendered and stereotypical roles. Young men repeatedly appear as providers, protectors, political actors. Society pressures them to ignore their vulnerability and emotions, be "real men", earn a living, get married, fight for or against violent extremists. Many are unable to perform to these expectations of masculinity. On the other hand, young women are expected to remain passive. Those who fight back or work in security are frowned upon, labeled as deviant or prostitutes. Told that peace and security is men's work, they long for community recognition, and their peacebuilding contributions are less visible, often confined to informal and same-sex circles. A crucial shift is needed: Recognizing young women as actors and allowing their full potential to flourish, and supporting young men in adopting roles and attitudes free from societal pressure.

Increase young people's access to spaces fostering their identity development

In response to violence and loneliness, youth need access to spaces where they can feel valued and explore their aspirations. This includes spaces where young men are supported in expressing vulnerability. Creative expression, cultural activities, and connection to other youth and community are recommended. Providing psychosocial support and a context for socio-emotional learning is critical. Some youth shared that such personalized attention, characterized by deep and active listening, was key to their transformation.

Address youth divisions and leverage youth collaboration

Some groups of youth are deeply divided: politically in Nepal, and by socioeconomic class in Tunisia, between elite youth and marginalized rural youth. These divisions are the result of preferential and corrupt systems that exert pressures on those who have less power. Governments and other actors play a role in driving youth apart, and should explore ways to unite youth of different classes, political ideologies, and other identities around shared objectives. Rather than approaching youth as a monolith, they should refine their methods of engagement by considering the realities of youth from different contexts and perspectives. When the international community creates platforms for youth, it must be inclusive to avoid further alienating different groups, including hard to reach, marginalized youth and their non-mainstream, sometimes anti-establishment, perspectives.

Invest in all youth, including resilient youth

Too often, the reflex of governments and the international community is to work with "problem youth" or "youth leaders". Focusing on absolute deficits or advantages fails to include most youth and the complexity of their experience, and inadvertently incentivizes others to also use violence as a way to get attention and resources. While we must include and engage those previously associated with violence, this should be balanced with adequate programs for resilient youth who, despite living in adverse conditions, have not adopted violence and face additional barriers to participation.

> *"We continue to see ex-inmates with jobs created by the government while we are struggling, there will be some consequence"*
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> (Young man, Diffa, Niger)

Increase support to and partnership with youth-led initiatives

Despite facing multiple challenges, young people in hard to reach areas affected by violence do engage in peacebuilding. With deep understanding of youth experiences and local realities, they are motivated and able to make a positive difference. But while they mobilize other youth and some institutions, their activities remain largely informal, small-scale, ignored by the media and pressured by political considerations. Youth express a need for belonging to something greater than themselves, better connections to existing youth-led initiatives, larger networks, and increased opportunities for partnership with other stakeholders, including community and religious leaders, elders, government, the media, national and international organizations. Leveraging these initiatives, with a true willingness to let youth lead, would contribute to increasing youth's potential and contribution to consolidating peace.

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Concluding Thoughts

Consolidated learning from the research and consultations with young people in Nepal, Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia suggests that implementing the above recommendations could support greater youth engagement for preventing conflict and sustaining peace. This may require a fundamental shift in how local and international institutions operate, starting with the recognition that many youth have lost faith and trust in institutions at all levels. One way to make this shift is by improving access to and relevance of interventions and services for young people from different backgrounds and ages- including those who are typically not engaged.

To truly support young people's contribution and leadership in peace and security, however, these findings indicate that various institutions and actors must work together to address systemic barriers to youth participation, proactively foster trust and collaboration, and secure greater space and support for youth-led initiatives. Continuing to ignore young people's experiences, aspirations and contributions to peace and security, could not only further isolate young people and exacerbate their grievances, but also miss the potential for greater impact in addressing the root-causes of violence and conflict and consolidating lasting peace and security.

Overview of Research Participants

Country and Areas of Research	Youth consulted			
	Total	Women	Men	Targeted Youth
NEPAL - 7 districts: Bardiya, Gorkha, Kailali, Kapilvastu, Rautahat, Rolpa, Saptari (most affected by civil war and recent Terai/Mhadesh movement)	175	42%	58%	Youth involved in civil war and youth who participated in the Terai/Madhesh movement.
NIGER - Niamey capital and 2 regions: Diffa and Tillabéri (most affected by violent activities and violent extremism)	135	49%	51%	Hard to reach youth 86% were engaged in some activity promoting peace, 14% were not.
NIGERIA - 2 states: Adamawa and Borno (most affected by Boko Haram insurgency and host to the highest numbers of internally displaced persons)	91	46%	54%	Internally displaced (39%); Active in peacebuilding and P/CVE (21%); Members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and vigilantes (14%); Other hard-to reach youth, including street youth (26%).
TUNISIA - 6 localities: Bizerte, Greater-Tunis, Jendouba, Kasserine, Medenine, Siliana (most affected by violent extremism and recruitment)	158	46%	54%	Active in initiatives (35.5%) Not active (64.5%)