



## Key Takeaways – SDG 16+ Interactive Session

*This document presents the key takeaways from the 'Interactive Conversation to Identify Youth-Led Recommendations for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies', hosted in preparation of the ECOSOC Youth Forum 2021 and with a focus on 1) digital inclusion and safe spaces, 2) participation in decision-making and peace processes, 3) reducing inequalities and discrimination, 4) crime prevention, criminal justice and the rule of law, and 5) partnerships for progress towards SDG 16: peace, justice and inclusion. This document is based on the notes from the session and reviewed by facilitators and notetakers. The opinions, analysis and recommendations contained in this document do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the co-organizers.*

### Digital inclusion and safe spaces

COVID-19 has underscored the importance of keeping young people safe online. The explosion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has created unprecedented opportunities for young people to communicate, connect, share, learn, access information and express their opinions on issues of their interest and that of their communities. However, the threats and harms abundant in cyberspace have also increased.

Participants highlighted:

- The importance of creating safe spaces for young people to express themselves and to advocate for issues of their interest (online activism).

- The impact of cyberbullying on young people's mental health and the need for government authorities to address these issues, but also the need for educators, families and the society at large to educate themselves on the issues and the measures that can be taken.
- The role of online platforms to contribute to the creation of safe spaces and ensuring appropriate monitoring of these issues

Key recommendations include:

- Identifying the risks and vulnerabilities of cyberspace for young people.
- Creating awareness on safe use of online tools/social media and the internet in general, providing practical tools and capacity building to help minimize the existing risks.
- Sharing knowledge and experience in order to promote safe online environments.

## Participation in decision-making and peace processes

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making and peace processes around the world. The conversation of youth engagement needs to refocus its lens on recognizing young people as active agents of change in their communities along with eliminating the barriers to participation that exist.

Participants highlighted:

- There are a variety of barriers to participation in decision-making and peace processes including:
  - Youth groups are in some contexts experiencing an oppression of their right to freedom of expression.
  - Sometimes decision-makers are discouraging the participation of youth through threats and a lack of recognition of youth as agents of change.
  - The breakout group provided examples of how young people experience exclusion on grounds of cultural and social norms, bureaucratic structures and political and economic issues.
  - A lack of accessible funding and genuine partnerships are restricting youth engagement.
- By recognizing the important work towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies by youth, and activists in country, governments can further encourage such action, thereby providing an added incentive for youth to engage in these processes.

Key recommendations:

- Local peace initiatives by formal and non-formal organizations should be sufficiently invested in, as many youth organizations have the technical expertise to carry out projects but often lack financial capacity.
- Support from the international community to capacity development of youth organizations, movements and networks at the local level can strengthen youth engagement at national and international levels.

- Creating genuine collaboration and strong partnerships for youth participation in decision-making and peace processes at the local and national levels.
- It is important to support a culture of peace and peace education as an approach, even if it is not part of formal education and curricula.

## Reducing inequalities and discrimination

Participants highlighted:

- Integrating young people as part of the policymaking process and not a one-off consultation process to improve policy making and designing of these policies.
- There have been many forms of discrimination affecting young people especially during COVID-19: an example is young people of Asian descent affected by hate speeches and treated as scapegoats of the pandemic. Politicians have been fueling discrimination through media channels, looking for scapegoats, following an anti-Asian discrimination agenda, that helped them simplify a complex issue such as a pandemic. It is important to recognize minority groups, their contributions to society and regulate hate speech channeled through the media.
- Another group left behind during the pandemic is youth living in conflict. Crisis regions face a double crisis: conflict and COVID-19 and young people have been particularly impacted and neglected.
- In some contexts, young people are experiencing discrimination on grounds of the ethnicity.
- Youth at the community level have become more involved in Nigeria to solve local problems during the pandemic through activities such as volunteerism. In Cameroon during the pandemic, more safe spaces for youth have been created to allow them to talk about their emotions and to support their mental health.

Key recommendations:

- Paid opportunities for young people must be institutionalized.
- There should be restrictions and guidelines on how the media portrays specific groups of people. Education is key and educational policies need to be transformed to complement media work.
- Discrimination of people with disabilities: public speaking opportunities have not been provided to them. How to include them? Need for more inclusive policies: everyone should be included, no one has to be left behind.
- Adults and youth alike need to look towards including youth in *all* processes and directing youth to spaces where they can be represented. In particular, young people should be included in all policies that impact them directly.

## Crime Prevention, Criminal Justice and the Rule of Law

There are concerns of rising domestic, gender-based and family violence due to lack of access to safe places such as schools because of curfew and lockdown caused by COVID-19, and

economic impacts such as loss of income, leading to increased hostile environments. Spaces that were considered safe prior to COVID-19 presented challenges, leading to environments such as homes, or relations with people such as partners becoming unsafe. The rise of forced recruitment of youth by militant groups in conflict areas, such as Somalia, has led to a rise of forced youth participants crime.

Social awareness is the dominant theme discussed. Using social media by youth can be important, even vital. Raising awareness of not just the impact of COVID-19, but also raising awareness of human rights for various groups, motivating people to be active participants in preventing crime. This includes:

- Engaging with other organizations
- Observing what has been successful for them
- Sharing ideas and support
- Leading to engaging with a much larger group and audience
- Use other forms of media to spread awareness such as televisions and radios, and distributing leaflets about the rights of people, and the awareness of the dangers caused by COVID-19.
- Agreeing on facts and negating misinformation in partnership with governments and other agencies.

Participants highlighted:

- Denial of COVID-19 and misleading information by governments has created a lack of communication between leaders and the people.
- Concerns of those with authority, such as the police who have used their power to commit human rights violations, such as inflicting violence on people for breaking curfew or sharing information.
- In areas of conflict, Human Rights are considered being less important or more than a back of mind thought.

Recommendations:

- Participants asserted that safe spaces need to be created for young people, especially when faced with gender-based violence.

## Partnerships for progress towards SDG 16: peace, justice and inclusion

Participants discussed key elements related to strong partnerships for peaceful, justice and inclusive societies. These elements include:

- Accessibility, flexibility, mutual respect, balanced commitment and investment.
- Alignment of vision, harmony of partners.
- Mutual benefit and respect.
- Flexibility.

- Commitment – not necessarily about money but more focused on time.
- Need to learn each other's' languages, focus on listening and move forward in terms of shared language.

Key recommendations around making resources more accessible for youth and youth organizations include:

- Having the option to submit multimedia proposals, not solely written ones. Youth are engaged in technology in unique ways and often have more visual talents and tools to showcase.
- Making funding accessible and available for youth organizations to apply for and receive funding.
- Advocating for specific funding targeted to youth organizations
- Ensuring that legislation supports youth NGOs such as the nature of legalities related to NGOs can limit funding opportunities.