

Recommendations from youth peacebuilders in the MENA region: building meaningful intergenerational partnerships to advance the YPS Agenda

Executive summary

Since 2015, there has been growing recognition globally of the vital role of young people in building peace and preventing and resolving violence and armed conflict – this has come to be known as the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. To further this agenda, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, and the MENA Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security held two workshops in 2021 to seek the input of young peacebuilders from the MENA region and other key stakeholders. The workshops discussed recommendations to build meaningful, authentic and equal intergenerational partnerships to advance the YPS agenda within the region.

The following recommendations were put forward by the participants in the workshops:

1. **Create safe spaces for engagement**, for instance by donors including protection policies, developed in consultation with youth groups, in their funding strategies, and by donors, governments, and UN agencies supporting the development of digital security systems, while advocating for the end to cyber harassment and other harmful government practices.
2. **Improve outreach and youth inclusion**, by seeking the participation of a diverse set of young voices, from different regions of a country, different socio-economic backgrounds, religious backgrounds and different genders and sexual orientations, while also addressing structural and cultural barriers to participation faced by those groups.
3. **Strengthen youth leadership and mutual capacity development**, by recognizing youth civil society as a partner with agency and expertise, while also improving financial management, follow-up, and youth-led programming in capacity building programmes.
4. **Increase the accessibility and quality of funding available to young people**, by increasing overall funding, simplifying application and reporting requirements, diversifying funding models, and developing funding priorities in consultation with young people.
5. **Develop regional and intergenerational cooperation and implementation mechanisms**, by strengthening synergies, coherence, and coordination between local, national, and regional actors working on YPS, growing their institutional capacities to engage youth, and developing more intergenerational platforms.

Background

With the adoption in 2015 of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and follow-up resolutions 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020) – referred to as the Youth, Peace and Security agenda – there is greater recognition at the global policy level of the vital role of young people in building peace and preventing and resolving violence and armed conflict. Yet, much more is needed to ensure the resolutions’ implementation and young people’s meaningful engagement in decision making.

Importantly, young people are often not recognised as equal and viable partners in efforts to promote peace and security. As a result, young peacebuilders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are increasingly turning away from traditional peacebuilding processes and actors. The Secretary General’s Report “Our Common Agenda” called for meaningful engagement and partnerships with young people. In order to meet that call, governments, civil society, and inter-governmental organizations must shift their practices and allow young people to identify what they need to participate in authentic and equal intergenerational partnerships.

Towards this end the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, and the MENA Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security held two workshops over the course of 2021. In the first, young peacebuilders from the MENA region, as well as representatives from multilateral and regional organisations (including the United Nations and the European Union), governments and other stakeholders, identified challenges and opportunities to build successful intergenerational partnerships. In the second, young peacebuilders were invited to develop concrete recommendations based upon the themes identified in the first workshop. Recommendations identified by young peacebuilders have been grouped in the following thematic areas: safe spaces to participate, outreach and inclusion of diverse youth, youth leadership and capacity building, access to quality funding, and regional and intergenerational partnerships.

Safe Spaces to Participate

Increasing restrictions on civic space limits engagement opportunities and threatens the safety of young peacebuilders in the region. Some examples mentioned concerning restrictions on civic space included:

- Individuals who are active in CSOs, in particular those who have political views, have been banned from travel, arrested and/or tortured.
- Increase in physical attacks on activists to spread fear.
- Criminalisation of group gatherings or the bureaucratically onerous processes for approval of gatherings.
- Increase in the use of software to spy on activists and human rights defenders.
- Expectations that young peacebuilders remain loyal to governments and their allies in any international or regional conversation.

As a result of these trends, many young people in the region do not participate in advocacy for fear of reprisal and the risk of incurring physical and psychological harm.

Meaningful implementation of the YPS agenda requires that the issue of shrinking civic space be addressed by the UN, other multilateral actors, and governments. Participants identified a number of concrete recommendations to create safe spaces for engagement. (I.) Donors should

include protection policies, developed in consultation with youth groups, in their funding strategies. (II.) Donors, governments and UN agencies should support the development of digital security systems and trainings for youth groups and put pressure on governments in the region to stop cyber harassment, surveillance of the activities of civilians, and restrictions of online expression. (III.) The United Nations should develop a special protection mechanism to monitor and support people who are at risk of arrest, or other danger, in connection with their work to implement the YPS agenda.

Governments and international civil society should use their networks to elevate the voices of young peacebuilders. Current efforts to engage youth remain tokenistic. Participants explained that the international community and national and local civil society actors often come to young people with a set agenda, rather than listening to what youth themselves want and involving them in planning processes. When young people are given a seat at the table, it is often to fill a youth seat, without giving them the agency to independently express opinions. The engagement of youth often takes place through one-off initiatives and lacks long-term follow up. As a result, many young peacebuilders in the region have begun to avoid these types of consultations.

Outreach and inclusion of diverse youth

Governments, inter-governmental bodies, and donors frequently engage the same group of young people, which often have a similar and affluent background. Efforts should be made to reach out to a diverse set of young people, including from different regions of a country, different socio-economic backgrounds, and different genders and sexual orientations.

Effective outreach requires partnership with local actors and networks which are trusted in these communities. Participants highlighted youth networks, including the MENA YPS Coalition, as important platforms to reach a diverse range of youth groups and to create spaces where they feel safe to share their opinions. A greater effort should be made to meet youth in their own spaces in addition to inviting them to provide their reflections in policy fora and in high-level conferences. Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people are treated as equal partners.

Outreach alone is insufficient, structural and cultural barriers to participation for diverse youth must be addressed to facilitate meaningful participation. Identifying the barriers diverse young people face based upon their intersecting identities is key to ensuring that no one is left behind. Participants identified several barriers, including: (i.) Rural youth have difficulty in accessing events and networks located in capital cities, and are frequently forced to pay for their own accommodation and transportation. They may also lack stable internet in their homes, limiting their ability to engage within online events. (ii.) Young people can be excluded by the language used in international and regional events, rendering them unable or uncomfortable to participate. (iii.) Young peacebuilders from lower-income backgrounds can be financially excluded from coalitions which require membership fees. (iv.) Cultural discrimination and violence against LGBTQI individuals, displaced youth and others prevents their access to public platforms and threatens their safety.

Youth leadership and mutual capacity development

Acceptance and implementation of the YPS agenda continues to be an issue in conflict-affected countries. Some leaders interpret it as an “imposed” agenda and claim that developments on the ground leave little time to focus on the agenda and its implementation.

Recognizing youth civil society as a partner with agency and expertise. Participants stressed the need to look towards youth civil society and civil society at large as a partner in the implementation of the YPS agenda. They also emphasized the importance of moving beyond the same elite actors in order to include new perspectives and ideas. Recognizing the agency of youth civil society and building sustainable partnerships could accelerate the cooperation and thus implementation of the YPS agenda. If governments and international institutions are genuine about working with youth, they should consult youth, who know better their own needs. Many government led plans have failed, due to lack of perspectives and genuine buy-in from young people. It was also stressed that youth civil society organisations need financial and technical support, but that both government institutions and donors should leave the primary leadership in implementation of projects to the youth without interference.

Making sure young people feel heard, and are given agency and space for the implementation of their plans. Participants noted that young people lack genuine belief that the security situation in their contexts could change, and that their ideas would be recognized and implemented. They called for open horizons for opportunities and their just and fair distribution. They also suggested a regional advocacy campaign for all youth in the MENA region, aiming to create awareness around the YPS agenda.

Breaking up silo approaches. Participants identified the current siloed approach as a hindrance towards the implementation of the YPS agenda. They stressed the need to widen the discussion to more people and organizations (from diverse backgrounds and thematic focusses) to generate new ideas and breathe fresh air into the implementation of the YPS agenda. Wider outreach, networking and collaboration could create new spaces for dialogue and action.

Participants called for capacity building programs with better management of funds, clear follow-up, adequate funding and youth-led programming. Young people must have leadership when designing capacity building programmes. Participants identified a lack of quality capacity building programs in terms of content and follow-up as well as limited spaces for youth to take the lead in design and implementation. Capacity building efforts could be more efficient if young people could gain access to opportunities to exercise their skills in a real-life setting. Participants also stressed the need to train government officials and institutions to better equip them to integrate young people in peace and security efforts. While young people have been asked to build their capacities, little attention has been given to policy and decision makers’ need to develop a meaningful youth lens. Capacity building should work both ways and focus more on how generations can learn from each other. Participants also called for a better management of funds from governments in capacity-building efforts.

Contextualizing the YPS agenda and adapting resources and materials to the MENA region. Participants stressed the need to contextualize the YPS agenda in the MENA region. They identified a lack of tools and resources in Arabic, practical steps to implement, lessons learned from the MENA region and success stories to be inspired by. Participants called for the creation and adaptation of resources to the MENA region’s specific context.

Institutionalizing the YPS agenda. Participants called for institutionalized approaches towards the implementation of the YPS agenda in the MENA region. Many countries still perceive the YPS agenda as a project or programme, rather than something to institutionalize in all aspects of peace and security. This problem analysis also holds true for international organizations and donors. Participants called on more countries to adopt national action plans for YPS and for the allocation of funds and resources. They called for organizations move beyond individual programs and initiatives and towards implementation of long-term YPS strategies which support innovative approaches and foster local ownership.

Accessing quality funding

Continued engagement of young people in traditional peacebuilding processes requires increasing the accessibility and quality of funding. Participants linked growing disengagement with governmental and intergovernmental peacebuilding processes to unpredictable and restrictive funding. Young peacebuilders indicate that accessible and quality funding is key to develop equal and authentic intergenerational partnerships.

Participants called for increased allocation of resources to funds which are accessible to young people. In particular, they highlighted the lack of funding from their own governments and called on the United Nations to pressure governments to allocate a budget to finance youth peacebuilders domestically. They called for donors to disaggregate their data and strategies to ensure that funding is accessible to diverse youth groups, including LGBTQI-led groups. Participants emphasised that this funding should be multi-year and sustainable in order to allow young peacebuilders to build a long-term strategy and to avoid cycles where funding disappears, resulting in the dissolution of organisations.

Donors should simplify grant application and reporting requirements to make themselves accessible to young people. Smaller and start-up youth-led groups struggle to meet proposal, reporting, and financial auditing requirements. Participants called for simplified application and reporting forms as well as the development of reporting indicators in consultation with young people to ensure that the impact being defined is relevant to their work and communities.

Participants called for differentiated funding models which reflect the range of formal and informal organisational structures that different youth peacebuilders employ. Finding ways to support informal and unregistered youth groups is key to diversifying the young people donors support. At the same time, youth groups that want to develop organisational structures, which can absorb larger grants, called for capacity building for youth-led groups to develop application-writing and organisational management skills. Coordination around developing differentiated funding models to support these different organisational structures is important to ensuring wider accessibility of funds.

Developing funding priorities in consultation with young people would facilitate programming which matches the needs of young people and the communities within which they operate. Participants indicated that donor-identified priorities are frequently unrealistic and lack the context of the communities within which they fund projects. They called for participatory grant-making processes where young people have a leadership role in the design of the entire granting process. Additionally, restrictions on where funding can be spent prevents young peacebuilders from budgeting transportation, accommodation, and salaries which are necessary to implement projects. Core support grants were identified as a best practice to both

allow for organisational growth and to be flexible to young people's priorities and programming.

Regional and intergenerational cooperation and implementation

Synergies, coherence, and coordination between local, national, and regional work on YPS. Participants pointed to a lack of coherence, coordination, and information-sharing between local, national and region work on YPS. They noted that it was essential to consider different contexts, while at the same time strengthening platforms for regional collaboration between both people and governments in the MENA region. Participants also noted stronger sentiments from young people to engage on a municipal level, and a need to strengthen young people's role in the implementation of the YPS agenda on the national and regional level.

Bridging the generational trust gap and promoting intergenerational dialogue and platforms. Participants noted a trust gap and lack of communication channels between generations. More intergenerational platforms could strengthen inter-generational collaboration while at the same time creating channels to sustain partnerships in the long term.

Participants called for older generations to become better door-openers. This would bridge knowledge and learning between generations. At the same time, young people wanted to be trusted with implementation and called for equal and authentic partnerships with older generations.

Building institutional capacity to engage youth. Participants stressed the need for government actors, the UN and other "duty bearers" to support and increase their knowledge in how to engage young people in an inclusive and meaningful way. They stressed the need for an enabling environment, building coalitions with young people, and providing platforms beyond tokenistic representation. Participants noted their disappointment in the lack of follow-up to major international conferences, and suggested that decision-makers also invite youth to informal and smaller-scale dialogue formats.

Research and evidence-based knowledge on YPS and how it links to other thematic focus areas. Participants emphasized the need for greater research on YPS and its linkages to other thematic issues, for example the generational gap, climate, environment, the WPS agenda, and the gendered effects of conflict. They stressed the need to simultaneously apply a gender and youth lens in research on conflicts.

Conclusion

While there is recognition by global leaders of the importance of young people's involvement, more work is needed to translate that recognition into practice and into opportunities for young people, activists and peacebuilders to safely engage, share ideas and feel that their voices are heard and influence decision-making. A key message from participants was that the international community needs to walk the talk, and move from policy discussions to real implementation, through political, as well as financial support.

The MENA region's young population is a source of energy, imagination and hope to build systems of peace and resolve entrenched conflicts. It is both the right thing and advantageous

to take the implementation of the YPS agenda in the MENA region seriously. This paper highlights some of the aspirations and demands of young people in the region.