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POLICY BRIEF: BEYOND DIVIDING LINES

Youth-led Civic Engagement for Peace

- Despite the many challenges and limitations that youth face in conflict-affected countries, they engage in a wide range of civic activities for peace, including advocacy and educational activities, activism and art-related activities.
- Inner-drive of young people to contribute to the betterment of their communities and the need to feel that their engagement is meaningful are the main factors motivating youth to participate in civic-engagement, whereas poverty, unemployment, and negative perceptions of youth pose major barriers, limiting young peoples' motivation.
- Supporting, sustaining, enhancing and scaling up opportunities for engagement created by youth themselves or other civil society and community organisations is fundamental to enable youth civic engagement and to nurture the development of democratisation and peacebuilding efforts.

Introduction

In Afghanistan, young people have formed debate clubs to sharpen their critical thinking skills and to foster constructive dialogue on peace and security issues. After a small majority voted to reject the peace agreement in Colombia, over 30,000 youth mobilised online and on the streets to build bridges across a deeply polarised society. Young people in Libya are providing humanitarian relief to vulnerable communities, in the absence of international aid workers. In Sierra Leone, youth give voter education to first time voters to ensure they make an informed decision, preventing the escalation of violence around electoral processes.

Young people in conflict-affected societies around the world are leading and actively participating in civic engagement processes for peace. Their diverse and innovative approaches do not only empower youth themselves, but also con-

tribute to peace and development in their communities. This policy brief presents the findings of a research on youth-led civic engagement in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya and Sierra Leone, four countries that are at different phases of conflict for comparative purposes.

Identifying key motivators and barriers, our findings show that while a variety of factors motivates youth to actively engage, several barriers limit their motivation. Young people are driven by an inner motivation to change situations that affect them personally and their communities, which is further strengthened by having access to safe spaces for participation and the freedom of expression. However, young people's struggles for secure livelihood and negative community perceptions limit their motivation, time, level of education and mobility to engage.

The key objective of this policy brief is to propose a number of recommendations to facilitate young people’s civic engagement for peace by increasing motivators and breaking down the barriers.

Describing youth-led civic engagement

Young people engage in advocacy and education activities in which they feel safe - The majority of activities led by young people focus on advocacy and education in which they could feel safe, comfortable and owners of the space and process, and where they can develop personal, civic and professional competences.

Young women, most constrained yet most actively promoting gender equality - In general, young women were found to be more constrained in their engagement. At the same time, they are mostly the ones active in initiatives related to gender equality.

“Peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding”
 Young woman from Badakhshan, Afghanistan

Young people choose art and social media as channels of engagement - Other youth-led activities that are preferred include artistic expression, and campaigns through media and social media. Youth also take the lead in humanitarian efforts and start social enterprises to address the devastating effects of violent conflict, such as food insecurity and youth unemployment.

Few young people report being engaged in electoral processes or with political parties - Notably few young people engage with political parties and electoral processes – with the exception of Sierra Leone – which can be explained by mis-trust in politicians and political instability.

Motivating and limiting factors

Despite the many challenges and limitations that youth face in conflict-affected countries, they engage in a wide range of civic activities for peace. They are highly driven and find encouragement in supportive environments made possible by peers, families, communities, civil society and governmental actors.

Inner-drive to contribute to their communities and meaning as key motivators - The main motivating factors are the inner-drive of young people to contribute to the betterment of their communities and the need to feel that their engagement is meaningful in terms of their personal and professional development. The enabling factors are the respect for civil and political rights – such as freedom of expression – safe spaces and the support and opportunities mainly offered by civil society organisations and in many cases, also facilitated by youth, to a less extent, the support of the government. Finally, the support of family and friends is both an important motivator and enabler.

Poverty and unemployment, main limiting factors - The primary limiting factor is the structural restriction imposed by poverty and unemployment, especially on youth of disadvantaged backgrounds who are unable to access educational opportunities, information or possess the mobility to participate in civic activities.

Negative perceptions towards youth engagement discourage young people - The second limiting factor are the negative perceptions of the community toward youth and youth engagement, particularly in relation to young women stepping out of more traditional caring and reproductive roles. Related to these general negative social perceptions is the lack of recognition of youth by political actors, who largely fail to meaningfully involve them. This is linked

to the prioritisation of youth participation in governmental agendas.

Sometimes too painful to engage - Finally, it was reported that, for some youth, it is difficult to engage in peace and reconciliation activities due to the fact that they still struggle to overcome the individual trauma of having experienced the loss of loved ones as a result of the conflict.

"Young people are waking up and they aren't tolerating the situation anymore, they go out, they shout, they protest, they organise, that is an achievement that we have to recognise"
 Young woman from Jamundí, Colombia

Perceived Impacts

- There is more awareness among community members and leaders of the importance of peace and reconciliation and the key role of youth as positive agents of change, due to youth civic engagement activities.
- In Libya and Colombia, there is a sense of growing solidarity among young people due to challenging situations and new political opportunities.
- Youth initiatives contribute to depolarise societies and create positive perceptions of all groups, and help to foster dialogue and normalisation of relations among groups previously opposed to each other. Youth bridge the divide, for example, former gang members create peace initiatives in Sierra Leone, and young women who had faced discrimination find their own voice and strength to create new enterprises.
- Youth show resilience and the capacity to imagine better futures and put their ideas into practice.
- In Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, youth who had been active youth leaders have become

policy makers with the ability to look beyond dividing lines (ethnic, ideological) and with the capacity to find common goals.

- Youth are creators of social enterprises that address youth unemployment and contribute to mitigating the devastating effects of conflict on the economy, on social trust and on feelings of solidarity.

Scaling up success

Evidence pointed out that there is a strong inner drive of young people to change the reality around them. They are able to engage when they had family and community support. That is, places where they could feel safe, listened to, find like-minded persons and develop their own leadership skills. It is vital to consider major limiting factors in conflict contexts, such as insecurity (limiting mobility), civil and political freedoms, and the creation and safeguarding of youth-friendly, youth-led, gender-sensitive, safe and pluralistic spaces. These become spaces of refuge amid turbulent contexts and where the seed of civic engagement can grow and mature. They should not be spaces that are protected in a paternalistic way or where youth are kept "occupied", rather a space where youth can take the lead and experience dialogue and support from both peers and adults.

This is why opportunities for engagement created by youth themselves or other civil society and community organisations are fundamental to enable youth civic engagement. These activities create chances for young people to develop their own identities and views. At the same time, young people learn about the "other" in less biased and more respectful ways, contributing to diffuse negative perceptions of "others" and humanising all groups in particularly polarised and wounded societies. Supporting, sustaining, enhancing and scaling up these youth spaces is fundamental to nurture the development of democratisation and peacebuilding efforts.

Policy Recommendations

Key finding: It is critical for young people to feel listened to, trusted and positively viewed by the community, without being manipulated. This has been found key to sustain and enhance youth civic engagement. In order to sustain and enhance youth civic engagement for peace:

- Governments and civil society organisations should collaborate to sustain and create meaningful spaces for participation that are not tokenistic, not damaged by tribalism and regionalism, and where true partnership, unity and intergenerational dialogue for peace can take place.
- Governments, donors and civil society organisations should facilitate spaces for partnership and opportunities for young people to work with local and national governments, and importantly, employ young people in positions of responsibility.
- Governments and civil society organisations should support youth initiatives with funding and technical advice, easing bureaucratic procedures.
- More public awareness and communication strategies should be developed to explain what youth are doing to challenge fears and negative perceptions of both youth and youth civic engagement, especially for young women as social norms often discourage them from participating. Specifically, activities should be organised to address perceptions of youth as troublemakers or incompetent. The media should be more committed to covering positive youth stories.

Key finding: Educational and training opportunities are an important enabler of youth civic engagement for peace. Youth have the inner

drive to become change agents, yet often require the appropriate skills. To address this gap:

- Governments and organisations should make efforts to sustain and develop activities which enhance peacebuilding and democratic competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) so that youth can become more effective change agents and leaders.
- Governments should work on educational reform and improve access to quality education so as to both improve citizenship competences as well as youth employability.

Key finding: It is important for young people to feel secure and safe, especially for young females, young people with disabilities, the LGB-TIQ+ community and youth from minority groups. It is important for them to feel their needs and preferences are considered and that they own the spaces, feeling free to express their opinions. To promote and ensure this inclusive approach:

- Civil society, governmental and private actors should make sure the spaces they facilitate are youth-friendly and inclusive, addressing less visible barriers to participation.
- Organisations, should work on inclusiveness, including gender mainstreaming efforts or training young males to be advocates for gender equality, and ensure they de-centre, become aware of the dominating role in decision-making which affect the type of activities organised.
- Police, security forces and the justice system should be sensitised about the work of youth-led groups and organisations and show exemplary behaviour, including respect for human rights.



Sources

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Project description

This policy brief is based on the findings of a research carried out in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya and Sierra Leone in 2018 by the United Network of Young Peacebuilders. The project was undertaken in collaboration with four youth-led organisations – including Afghans For Progressive Thinking (Afghanistan), Fundación Esceulas de Paz (Colombia), Together We Build It (Libya) and Youth Participa-tion in Peace and Development (Sierra Leone). This brief is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with support from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), under the terms of YouthPower Learning, Contract No. AID-OAA-I-15-00034/AID-OAA-TO-00011. The author's views expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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For more information, please contact UNOY Peacebuilders: info@unoy.org



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