SAFERWORLD
PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

Submission

UN Progress Study on Youth, Peace & Security

Saferworld submission, January 2018

Introduction

Saferworld warmly welcomes the UN Secretary General's decision – mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) – to 'carry out a progress study on the youth's positive contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution, in order to recommend effective responses at local, regional and international levels'.[1] Saferworld is an international NGO working to prevent conflict and build peace in over 20 conflict-affected and fragile contexts around the world. In addition to on-the-ground programming with communities affected by conflict, we produce research and evidence to inform national and international policy makers on issues related to peace and security, and advocate for change.

This submission reflects our conviction that the empowerment of youth and fulfilment of their potential is of vital significance for the effectiveness of the UN's efforts to champion peace, human rights and development in support of the entitlement of all people to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives free from the scourge of violent conflict. We agree with the emerging conclusions of the study and suggest practical options for ensuring progress in practice below.

'Policy panic': reclaim space for empowerment, prevention & peacebuilding

The emerging findings regarding the counter-productive impact of 'policy panic' is strongly echoed by our research and programme experience. Policies driven by fears about violent extremism, forced migration and dangerous youth bulges exhibit counter-productive short-termism, a misguided focus on symptoms rather than root causes or drivers, and a dangerous tendency to exacerbate grievances and isolate aggrieved populations. It is becoming clear that 'prevention is not effectively served by these simplistic solutions'.

This tallies well with our research on a wide range of contexts, such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Kenya, Somalia, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria. These studies have shown how the prioritisation of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism by national and international actors has enabled repression and corruption as opposed to more transformative and empowering engagement focused on addressing drivers of conflict.

In many other contexts, it is clear that 'policy panic' regarding forced migration is having a similarly counter-productive effect – cementing security partnerships to control movement that risk exacerbating rather than addressing the drivers of conflict and forced displacement.

The study is therefore correct to assert that a prevention approach is needed, and that 'an effective prevention strategy has to be rooted in a better understanding of and focus on the positive attributes, resources, capacities or attributes of young men and women, in their responses to marginalisation and exclusion, and to invest in supporting and sustaining them.'

Lawful responses to legitimate protest must be the foundation

For preventative approaches to have any chance of success, the UN and all member states must curb sins of commission as well as omission by placing greater pressure on those who deploy indiscriminate and disproportionate military force in response to protests and unrest, which are often youth-led. The first step is for states to act on their primary responsibility to protect and promote the right to legitimate protest and stop abusing young people when they call for political freedom and change, as has been the case in Kenya and Tunisia for example. They must also challenge highly repressive and provocative state

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[1] https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm

responses such as those that have led to the disastrous escalation of conflict and violence, for example, in Egypt and Syria.

An example of what a changed approach to security provision can do to quell violence and restore trust among young people is illustrated by our case study in Garissa County, Kenya, where years of increasing insecurity drastically intensified with the Garissa University college attack in 2015 where almost 150 people died. Rather than double down on the previous strategy to combat violence and insecurity, the local government sought new security leadership that worked to build local trust and respect across social divides, clamped down on corruption and arbitrary arrest, worked with communities – in particular youth - to restore trust and break up potential flashpoints for violence.

In many contexts, Saferworld's programmes focus on institutionalising security provision that listens to and acts on communities' concerns and engages youth in initiatives to improve security at local level. Community security requires interaction between all segments of society – including the youth and women who are often excluded from security processes. Such interaction is severely challenging if not impossible in contexts where those raising legitimate concerns are met with violence and repression.

See and hear conflict and violence through the eyes and ears of young people

The issues young people see as important for future peace and stability can often be very different from the political, security and economic priorities that the international community attempts to assert on local contexts. In many of the contexts we have studied, international actors have labelled conflicts with complex causes as problems of 'terrorism' and/or 'violent extremism'. This can lead to a narrow analysis of the roots of the problem and confused and counter-productive response strategies and programmes.

By consulting local communities, especially young people and women, about the factors driving violence at local level, it is possible to identify grievances and issues that could feed into more effective and sustainable response strategies focused on peace rather than the mere elimination of problematic groups or ideologies.

In Tunisia, avoiding major instability will depend on supporting the young and the marginalised to achieve an equal chance in life, decent treatment by security providers and a voice to participate in politics. In Garissa County, Kenya, it will depend on young people being able to trust security providers, on authorities providing youth with IDs, jobs, services, infrastructure and access to resources. In Lamu County in Kenya, people also want security provision that treats all groups equally and respects rights and due process; and equal access to land titles, jobs, education and political representation. In Yemen, it is important that working with youth activists is not put into a 'post-conflict' category. Instead there must be renewed and deeper commitment to innovative youth-led examples of civic activism, social enterprise, and humanitarian relief, which exist at local levels throughout the country.[2]

Our research findings suggest the importance of resisting 'policy panic' and reclaiming the policy space in contexts that have been made into battlegrounds in the global war on terrorism in which youth continue to be marginalised and abused. Such contexts must be redefined with peacebuilding as the strategic priority. A vital path for achieving this is the empowerment of youth to lead constructive change processes in their own communities and at national and international levels.

With notable exceptions, donors and international agencies often develop plans and partnerships in an artificial, elite realm, far removed from a genuine understanding of the needs, priorities and potential of youth. They frequently act in ways that undermine the agency of young people and other local actors. This is especially true in conflict settings. A simple and practical first step to reverse this trend would be to make consultation, analysis and planning with the full involvement of young men and women the foundation of UN engagement in all contexts. In many ways the methodology for the progress study has demonstrated the high value of including and consulting with youth to define priorities by listening first. This should become the norm.

Involve youth in strategic dialogue and international peacebuilding and relief efforts

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[2] Among the findings in Saferworld Yemen submission to SG Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security – 'Youth contributions to peacebuilding during conflict in Yemen' (2017).

Our research provides further evidence that young people are not only frustrated about local socio-economic issues that can be resolved by recreational or employment initiatives. Aside from events in their localities or countries, young people are often angered by international injustices. As we documented in Tunisia:

> According to several Tunisian interviewees, the abuses committed with impunity by western states in Muslim countries especially in the context of the 'war on terror', are a reason why some people in Tunisia support and join violent groups: "As long as the international rules of play aren't in place, feelings of injustice and anger will continue".

In this sense our research supports another emerging conclusion of the progress study: that peacebuilding that is genuinely responsive to the concerns and priorities of youth 'should not be assumed to be limited to the local level'. In a world riven by internationalised conflicts, peacebuilding needs to support youth to counteract transnational dimensions. For example, youth in Tunisia or Central Asia who are angry about what is happening in Syria could be supported to set up humanitarian or social programs to tackle the injustices they perceive to be taking place.

Take action for and with youth

In many countries around the world in recent years youth have been at the forefront of demand for change – most notably in the Arab Spring. If we do not find a way to support and respond to young people when they demand change, many of them will reject the future they are offered. Simply suppressing this hunger for change cannot work. The task of governments is to deliver meaningful progress fast enough to counter those with a violent agenda who seek to take advantage of this hunger for change.

Leaders and agencies responsible for the multilateral system need to be strong advocates of this change and to work patiently with those who are determined to deliver it. As the progress study recommends, it is important that the UN finds practical ways to 'fund the upside' through things like creating an enabling environment, addressing factors that inhibit young people's peacebuilding work, funding youth-led peacebuilding, 'listening down' and 'speaking up'. Some initial suggestions on how this could be done are set out below.

Recommendations

1. Unrepresentative and unaccountable decision-making at the UN needs to be addressed. At the structural level, we need to devise new ways and create new mechanisms for dialogue and accountability so that we hear the voices of young men and women and include their priorities in international responses to conflict and violence. Innovative approaches will be needed to create legitimacy for the outcomes from these spaces. This could include, for example:
   o considering radical options to bolster the voice and leverage of youth in a meaningful way, for example, by building momentum for a multilateral commitment to lower the voting age in UN Member States.
   o creating genuine channels to enable youth to engage with the UN and member states on international peace and security issues. This could include sessions in which the Security Council – either through a standard briefing, an Arria Formula, or a new mechanism - directly hears the perspectives of youth living in the countries on its mandate.
   o an oversight body of prominent young human rights defenders and activists with a mandate to ensure commitments made by member states and the UN are implemented and troubleshoot institutional blockages to reform.
2. There needs to be renewed momentum on achieving goals and targets under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development concerned with peace, justice and inclusion for youth and in particular young women. Member states must integrate targets included within SDG16+ into national development strategies and work with youth to identify and support appropriate implementation opportunities at local and national levels. Additionally, governments and national statistical offices with the support of third parties including civil society should make swifter progress on generating reliable, age-disaggregated data to improve accountability for the framework.

3. The localisation agenda of the humanitarian community is starting to make real impact. The Charter for Change has begun to innovate the way humanitarian aid is delivered. This can be replicated for the peacebuilding community: it is time for the UN and its major partners to commit to a localisation agenda for all youth-focused work. As part of this, norms around including youth consultations in analysis and planning processes and acting to address their concerns in a way that supports youth empowerment and agency need to be built into the work of all UN agencies. Steps towards achieving this might include:

   o building a requirement to consult youth and address their concerns into relevant policies and programming guides across different sectors.

   o adjusting staff performance processes to reward those that take account of youth perspectives and priorities in the design of UN policies, programmes and actions.

   o requiring UN field programmes to have youth representatives on their boards/steering committees and to include youth perspectives in evaluations (which could be gathered via perceptions surveys, focus groups and interviews with young civil society representatives).

   o establishing a trust fund to invest in youth empowerment and agency, and setting rules for the proportion of such funds that can be spent on international staff, overheads and partners versus youth-led/youth-focused civil society. The proportion ring-fenced to support the agency of local partners should be really bold, for example 75%. Other thematic funds could also have funding ring fenced, for example towards programmes that have undertaken participatory conflict analysis involving youth and women and demonstrably respond to the priorities raised by youth within them.

   o develop a new cadre of Peace and Development Advisors with a specific mandate to develop prevention and peacebuilding strategies that consult with and respond to the concerns of youth, and task them with supporting the development of wider know-how and commitment to empowering youth while constructively addressing their concerns. These staff should have the responsibility to report independently of UN hierarchies on fulfilment of rights for youth at country level directly to an international oversight body composed of youth.

   o institutionalising the inclusion of youth into all context/conflict analysis carried out by the new UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), and ensure all UN PBF youth programs exhibit a conflict analysis that is developed in coordination with youth. Prioritise projects that can demonstrate how their design addresses conflict drivers that are important to youth.

   o recognising that the UN will not always be best placed to deliver the localisation and empowerment agenda in practice and that a commitment is needed to work with international and national civil society partners who have pledged to champion the localisation and empowerment agendas. Priority should be given to those set up to work in close solidarity with local humanitarian initiatives, social movements and community level entities in which youth have a strong or leading role.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict. We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in over 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

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