



Neglected or Criminalized: Youth in Peacebuilding

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The inclusion and participation of young people in societies is a necessary condition for sustainable peace. The neglect of young people's current needs and future livelihoods is a recipe for renewed conflict.

Despite all the sermonizing on the important role of young people for a society's future and the United Nations [Security Council Resolution 2250](#) (December 2015) on the importance to include youth in peacebuilding, the active and independent participation of youth is rarely welcomed. Across the globe youths are criticized either for their political apathy or their open political protest that travelled around the world in 2011 and 2012. In the debate on peace and conflict especially there is a significant divide: children are mostly seen as victims and the United Nations have an [important advocacy role](#). At the same time, many governments perceive youths (age 15 to 25) as perpetrators of violence and potential troublemakers. While there have been [calls](#) to include youths in peacebuilding by giving them voice and agency, the inclusion of youth in current peacebuilding programs rarely includes elements other than education or training.

Colombia's comprehensive peace accord is an example. Youths appear 13 times in the 310 pages but only as part of other marginalized or excluded groups such as women, elderly, or the indigenous people. Under a broader perspective of peace being defined as more than the mere absence of war and armed conflict, this lack of youth's political citizenship is counterproductive for sustainable peace. Neglected and/or criminalized young people either leave their countries and seek a better life elsewhere or they use violence to survive or to get attention from adults. They do not develop trust in the government and its institutions.

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The mismatch between formal possibilities and realities

A research project of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies on youth participation in postwar societies funded by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development has provided interesting evidence for there being a significant mismatch between increasing formal possibilities of political participation of youths and their neglect and criminalization by adult society. In a first step, we collected data on the risks and opportunities for youth social, economic, and political participation – such as education, elections, employment– in 21 post-war societies (10 in Sub-Saharan Africa, six in Asia, four in Latin America, one in the Middle East). Many post-war societies liberalize their political regimes after the end of war.

Political and civil rights are expanded, elections are introduced as a means of formal participation at the national as well as the local level. Consequently, young people in these countries – often the first generation that grew up and was socialized after the end of war – should have bright perspectives. While youths participate in society, they do so overwhelmingly in civil society organizations (sports clubs, religious organizations and cultural activities) but to a much lesser extent in the political system. In a second step we conducted field research in three countries – El Salvador, Nicaragua, and South Africa – all perceived as rather successful cases of liberal peacebuilding at least in the first decade after war's end. But even there young people feel marginalized.

Youths in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and South Africa face a set of common challenges: The most pressing problem is finding decent work. While the first post-war generations have a significantly better formal education than their parents, youth unemployment is higher than adult unemployment. Even if young people can find work, available jobs offer low pay, long working hours,

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short contracts and few social benefits. Many youths are not able to make the important transition to adulthood and are unable to form a family. Political activism and citizenship should provide perspectives for change in demographically young societies. But a set of structural conditions influences youth political participation negatively: Poverty and inequality limit youth political activism, most of all in the rural areas and especially for young women.

Overall, young people confront a generational bottleneck due to the war generation remaining in power, dominating economy, society, and politics, shaping the rules of post-war order and the possibilities for youth political participation. Although young people are interested in political participation they do not trust politicians and existing institutions. They do not “see benefits in participating” as change does not happen; they feel existing political parties only approach them during campaigns for their votes; and that they have neither real voice nor impact. Hence, they do not trust in elections as a mechanism of change. If and where young people organize as autonomous and independent actors, adults and elders view their political activism as problematic and as a challenge to their own status. They aim at integrating young people in a subordinate position for example in youth wings of political parties or other forms of controlled and supervised participation.

Blocked transitions

How do young people cope with these problems? Based on A.O. Hirschman’s classic book we can distinguish various strategies of exit, voice, and loyalty. Confronted with little future options and opportunities many youths exit through inner migration as well as out of country. El Salvador is an extreme example as a fifth of the population lives outside of its borders. While this may be an option for individual survival and upward social mobility, its potential for promoting

change is limited. Other forms of exit are related to individual withdrawal from society via apathy, drug abuse or by joining a gang.

Nicaraguan and South African youths have fewer options to leave. In these cases, the majority of young people are mostly muddling through taking the few chances they have to survive. South African participants in our project's focus group discussions stated that change was only possible through the ruling African National Congress. Becoming a member is not necessarily a sign of confidence in the party but could rather signal high levels of realism regarding existing power relations. In this sense, the strategy of displaying loyalty might not be the best but a viable way of getting along regarding access to the labor market and other important public goods.

Last but not least, there is the possibility of youth acquiring a voice. While political citizenship through the existing formal channels does rarely allow for significant changes, young people opt for non-violent as well as violent protest. Salvadorian and Nicaraguan youths are at the forefront of ecological protests about problems such as water scarcity and the canal project linking the Pacific and the Atlantic.

In South Africa, youths protest against corruption. While most young people prefer non-violent protest, they also acknowledge that violence can be used to get attention by the governmental institutions. As a girl living in a high crime area stated: "If you want to get the attention of the government you have to 'toi toi' – make a lot of noise". But protesting also bears the risk that young people and their claims are criminalized and repressed.

Youth needs to be included for sustainable peacebuilding

The active and participatory inclusion of young people is a necessary condition for sustainable peace. Post-war societies produce high risks for sustainable peace if the society fails to integrate young people into the political system and to allow them to participate in political decisions and actions. Where the war-time generation has an exclusive control of social and political resources generational conflict will arise. This might lead to renewed armed conflict and war or shift violence from the political arena to society and crime.

El Salvador provides evidence of the escalation of violence due to a lack of social and economic integration of young people. Despite a formally democratic political system the country remains one of the **most violent worldwide**. These changing patterns of violence provide important lessons for other processes of peacebuilding. Where protest is criminalized and violence is answered with state repression, armed groups tend to institutionalize. Giving young people a chance to voice their concerns as well as express their hopes – and acting on them in concert with them – is much cheaper and provides an important pattern of conflict prevention and sustainable peace. Implementation of UN Resolution 2250 at different levels thus needs to open space for youth active participation and shared decision making for a peaceful future.

Image credit: [wjgomes/Pixabay](#).

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