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The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

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Young people are frequently 'othered' in discussions about conflict. This is a dangerous practice as youths can play a very positive role aiding peacebuilding in societies recovering from conflict.

The UN World Population Prospects statistics estimate that there are 1.3 billion 15-24 years olds in the world and nearly one billion live in developing countries where conflict is more likely to have taken place.

In such demographic realities, the potential youths hold for change and positive action is the subject of growing research agenda, and this is particularly the case with the recent wave of social upheavals and humanitarian crises in different parts of the world.

For much of human social interaction, the category called 'youth' has been perceived as a historically constructed social category, a relational concept, and as a group of actors that is far from homogenous. A myriad of factors make childhood and youth highly heterogeneous categories in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, political position as well as age.

They also have multi-faceted roles. Youths can be heroes as well as victims, saviours and courageous in the midst of crisis, as well as criminals in the shantytowns and military entrepreneurs in the war zones. Yet, as a category, youth are often approached as a fixed group or demographic cohort.

Youth, peace and conflict

Youths as a conceptual category are frequently 'othered' in the discourse on conflict. They are seen as potentially dangerous 'subjects' and policy approaches often regard them as 'a problem'. Often, male youths in the age group 16-30 have been observed as the main protagonists of criminal and political violence. In other words, much of contemporary thinking on youth and conflict tends to be overly negative. It focuses on the dangers posed by disaffected youths as is evident in the negative connotations of the 'youth bulge' or 'at risk youth' concepts.

A number of dangerous assumptions about the role, position, and contribution of youths appear to plague thinking among national and international elites driving recovery efforts within societies in transition. The majority of national and international policy pronouncements or security-related programmes in post-conflict and fragile contexts reflect a polarised discourse.

The young vacillate between the two extremes of 'infantilizing' and 'demonizing'. On the one hand, youths are viewed as vulnerable, powerless and in need of protection. On the other, they are feared as dangerous, violent, apathetic and as threats to security. Youths are subjected to stereotypical images of being angry, drugged and violent and as threat, especially those who participated in armed conflict as combatants.

On the other hand, recent literature on youth in post-conflict societies marks a shift in thinking about youth. It underlines the agency perspective, and acknowledges the importance of making the connection between youth and peacebuilding for transforming a predominantly negative discourse on the role of youths in societies recovering from conflict.

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The positioning of youth in society has a bearing on their leadership potential and their possible role in peacebuilding. The tension between young and old has been one of the key features of inter-generational shifts pertaining to the control over power, resources and people.

The tension lies in the palpable impatience of youth, their desire to strive for more, their willingness to be seen as responsible and capable, and the structural barriers to their social mobility. Independence from others and responsibility for others, such as taking care of a family or household, can be seen as defining markers of pre-requisites of social adulthood.

In this sense, dependency, exclusion, and social or political marginalization become prominent sources of social contest. At the same time, it should be recognised that such societal dynamics, challenges and opportunities vary across different cultural contexts whether it is in Africa, Europe, Asia or Latin America.

Within the challenging fluidity of post-conflict environments, which are nothing but contexts where the politics of war continue through different means, the young would need to show great 'navigational skills' in order to respond to such power dynamics. Their social, political and economic navigation is about their identity transformation as well as the negotiation or re-negotiation of societal norms, values and structures so that they can find a voice and place in the emerging structures of post-conflict environments.

What needs to be underlined is that youth should be conceptualized and studied as agents of positive peace in terms of addressing not only the challenges of physical violence, but also the challenges of structural and cultural violence, and the broader social change processes to transform violent,

oppressive and hierarchical structures, as well as behaviour, relationships and attitudes into more participatory and inclusive ones.

The key point to remember is that without recognizing youths as political actors, their trajectories in peacebuilding would likely be ignored, wasted and at best, under-utilized. To recognize their agency as a political actor in peacebuilding, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of their conflict trajectories, and this is particularly important for those young people who have taken direct participation in an armed conflict as combatants.

To understand the engagement of youth in peacebuilding, first of all, the youth mobilization and reintegration factors such as who they are, what they did before the conflict, how they were recruited, what specific fighting roles they undertook, what they experienced physically, socio-economically and psychologically, during the armed conflict, and what 'home' context they will be reintegrating into will all be critical for the youth's trajectories in peacebuilding.

Second, the involvement of youth in non-violent politics, and from a wider perspective, the enablement of their political agency in a more positive and peace-oriented role in post-conflict environments, is likely to depend on how these trajectories are shaped by the overall political and governance context.

Third, the enablement of youth as an active agent in peacebuilding cannot be considered without considering such challenges they tend to face due to the armed conflict such as the loss of education, a lack of employable skills and the destruction of a stable family environment. The wider socio-economic needs of youths are often ignored in post-conflict contexts as they are not seen as a 'vulnerable' group.

Fourth, it is important to provide youths with training opportunities to take an active part in peacebuilding. With their youthful energy and capabilities, and ability of adaptation to new technological trends, for example, youths could act as mediators, community mobilisers, humanitarian workers and peace brokers. Like any particular conflict affected population group, the mobilisation of youths' capacities requires a targeted and long-term approach.

At the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, an annual event called Global Peace Workshop is held in Turkey every year. Around 70-80 young participants from across the world get together in this one-week training, networking and solidarity event, and it is incredible to see the transformation of those young people in a such a short span of time as peacebuilders and start undertaking a wide range of peacebuilding projects in their own communities, schools and work places.

Fifth, the engagement of youth in peacebuilding in a wider perspective can be ensured through the arts, culture, tourism, sports and education. The innovativeness and creativeness of young people in those areas could be mobilised effectively by connecting them with wider peacebuilding objectives such as building bridges between divided communities and ensuring a viable process of reconciliation.

There are many examples across the world of the contributions that the young make towards peacebuilding such as the strengthening of community cohesion and reconciliation in South Sudan, civic awareness for peaceful social relations and development programmes in Nepal, trust-building across different ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka, and community entrepreneurship and livelihoods programmes in Burundi. Furthermore, the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Report entitled 'Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding: A

Practice Note' presents a number of policy and programme examples from different conflict affected countries that would facilitate such participation more effectively.

Finally, in undertaking all of these objectives it is also pivotal to avoid the well-known cliché of referring to youths as the 'future leaders'. Leadership should not be considered as a factor of age and providing appropriate governance contexts would likely enable young people to flourish as leaders today. In other words, they need to be treated as leaders today without postponing it to an elusive future whether it is in governance in general or peacebuilding programmes specifically.

To achieve this objective there have recently been a number of critical developments such as the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security of December 2015 which makes a clear recognition of positive contributions of youth to peace and sets an overall framework to support their efforts. In May 2016, the UN Peacebuilding Fund started its first Youth Promotion Initiative, which could play a key role to encourage youth leadership in peacebuilding. Therefore, the current trends show that there will be many more similar youth leadership programmes across the world in the near future, but the key point for their successes will depend on whether or not such initiatives can also respond to wider socio-economic, cultural and political barriers that young people face in their quest of becoming an active agent of positive change, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Image by CIFOR via Flickr.

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