Insights from the 2018 Paris Peace Forum Debate Sessions

Youth: From Participants to Partners in Peace

In late 2015, the UN Security Council approved Resolution 2250, the first to specifically recognize the importance of youth and their inclusion in the promotion of peace and security. Youth populations often form the majority demographic in countries experiencing armed conflict. And far too often, they are amongst the constituencies left on the sidelines in post-conflict governance and recovery. It’s logical that there should be a concerted effort to integrate and vest them in peace and stability work.

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UNSCR 2250 [link to factsheet] goes even further than a call for inclusion. It calls out the power of youth as change agents. The aim is to shift the way peace and security operators approach younger constituencies, welcoming them as contributing partners and stakeholders with unique added value. The new momentum is encouraging. But converting the new resolution into new practices, changing mindsets, and creating real buy-in will require significant, long-term work. The Paris Peace Forum hosted a discussion at its 2018 session on how to push forward.

What’s the Problem

There are plenty of reasons for greater inclusion of youth in peacebuilding and stabilization projects, not least that peacebuilding efforts should be as inclusive and participatory as possible to succeed. Young persons are often some of the most creative changemakers and willing risk-takers – useful when searching for stakeholders to take a leap forward to break out of a circular conflict. Youth populations are vested in a better future, for peace to be durable and for prosperity to develop, increasing odds for sustainable peace.

Numbers also necessitate it. Nafisa Shekhova of the Aga Khan Foundation laid out the point. Think of places like Kenya, where 70% of the population is under age 30. Likewise, Miriam Allam of the OECD noted the youth demographics which dominate the Middle East. How can peace and security initiatives succeed if a majority of the population is ignored?
This cohort often plays a critical role in the success of conflict prevention, resolution and recovery efforts. Consider, for example, how these tasks depend on strong civic participation. The distrust of governments and institutions that is prevalent amongst younger populations can hinder efforts to craft or rebuild governance post-conflict. “Let’s face it. In conflict and post-conflict settings, when trust in government is anyhow badly shaken, engagement with youth is not an option. It is a necessity.” (Allam)

The question then is: how do we challenge the existing rules and practices in peace and security work so that we can support initiatives for youth empowerment? How do we turn UNSCR 2250 into practice and reach the ambitions it has laid out?

The Big Picture

Taking a step back, the Forum’s panel warned of the larger trendlines and indicators which make it imperative for leaders and policymakers – in the security arena and beyond – to shift their practices. We can longer ignore youth voices and their unique concerns.

First, looking at the trend of civic apathy and distrust in governance prevalent amongst younger persons, it is clear to see these as potential drivers of instability, even on their own. Second, the rapidly growing uncertainties of our era – and especially as they affect the rising generation – are creating pressures and vulnerabilities that can directly impact global stability.

Haifa Dia Al-Attia of the Queen Rania Foundation described it this way: From the perspective of the younger generation, the world is rapidly transitioning into one that they are unprepared for, with governments either unable or unwilling to help them adapt and meet their socio-economic needs. Institutions and traditional pillars of society are struggling to adapt to the lightening-speed changes triggered by the digital revolution. Looking at the social and economic upheaval arriving, the generation coming of age today can easily conclude they are at risk of being left aside.

Even more specifically, as Al-Attia warned: “Half of the jobs in existence today will be disappearing very soon…Looking already at 2020, one-third of the skills that they will need [for the replacement jobs], they don’t have. We’re not talking 2050, we’re talking 2020!” If we don’t invest in skill-building urgently, then by default we are creating a highly vulnerable population and a formula for instability. And not only skill-training for jobs, but skills and pathways for the next generation to make a real living and build a balanced life. Creating and inspiring hope is essential.
“There is more than just the crisis of trust ... The crisis of trust between youth, their governments, and the institutions that follow those governments, is also one that is amplified by a crisis of skills, a crisis of attitudes, and a despair, a loss of hope.”

- Haifa Dia Al-Attia, Queen Rania Foundation

These realities, and many more make it clear that rethinking our approaches to youth engagement is no longer a task for the horizon. The effort is needed now.

**At the End of the Tunnel**

Given that it was the first time the youth constituency has been recognized as a strategic element of sustainable peacebuilding, UNSCR 2250 was a groundbreaking accomplishment. Kessy Martin Ekomo, head of URU, a civic initiative in the Central African Republic (CAR), applauded the step forward. “Most often, in the arena of conflict and peace, youth cohorts are seen as the problem, not the solution.” At least it is a first step in changing the narrative. And it was a successful example of a youth-driven initiative that succeeded by bringing together a coalition of states, civil society, youth groups, and a wide range of stakeholders.

Now, the project needs to go further. Youth strategies in the peace and security arena must not be just about logging another constituency or diffusing a potential spoiler. They should be about embracing an opportunity, complementing their missions and mandates with a portion of the population with unique value to offer. This is the next step on the change-agenda.

Pulling from her grassroots experience with URU and her work on the UN-mandated commission on Youth, Peace, and Security, Kessy Ekomo pointed out: The way youth approach the notions of peace and security is often much more diverse than what international actors propose. They see and experience current challenges and future opportunities for their environment differently than those in positions of power. Policymakers and peacebuilders could utilize their community-level insight to bolster the work at the international level. Ekomo pointed to some of the successes that URU has achieved in the CAR, including bringing young voices from across differing conflict zones to feed into the UN’s peacekeeping assessment mission in CAR. These youth leaders were able to concretely contribute to the UN review, offering recommendations for what should be done and a ground-truth validation of proposals.

“We (URU) recently got access to the review of the UN [peacekeeping] mission’s mandate in CAR, and this is a success. The fact that the youth of CAR is recognized is already a victory per se. We had the feeling of being listened to by the UN experts – we really sat and worked with them.”

- Kessy Martine Ekomo, URU
Unfortunately, engagement is not going to yield the results and peace dividend that we hope to see without a seismic shift in paradigms across governments, civil society, and youth actors themselves. The rethink must be both ways. Governments must look at youth voices with new potential and the emerging generation must bring meaningful and concrete contributions to the dossier. Finally, Ekomo advised these emerging leaders that this is not a one-time hit; it will require a repeated demonstration of value to gradually shift attitudes over time.

“A piecemeal approach certainly won’t work. Governments need to think big.”
- Miriam Allam, OECD

At the policy level, changing longstanding assumptions and practices will be an uphill battle. Miriam Allam of the OECD advised for governments to shape an integrated strategy for youth engagement, whether that be education, employment, or health. “Look horizontally across ministries and vertically across levels”, to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders. Most of all, empower youth-led initiatives in all these domains.

More specifically, to vest youth cohorts in building and nurturing sustainable peace, then they need to be more involved in affecting decisions, engaged directly in the policy process. Panelists referred often to the report of the Youth, Peace, and Security commission (hyperlink), an independent assessment study mandated by UNSCR 2250, which after a two-year consultation process with over 4,000 diverse youth voices presented to the Council a concrete action plan for operationalizing 2250. It is just one example of revising processes to integrate youth voices upstream, listening early on in the policy development process to what they need, what they are already doing, and what might work.

**Who’s on the Hot Seat**

At its core, the “Youth, Peace, and Security” movement underpinning UNSCR 2250 is about expanding inclusiveness, empowering changemakers, and rethinking our assumptions to better match the realities of today’s world. It’s not surprising that the panel called for contributions from actors across the spectrum.

“We all have a role to play, so states understand it is in their best interest to follow this through.”
- Hafia Di AlAttia, Queen Rania Foundation

Some specific ideas for advancing youth agency specifically in the peace and security arena included:

- **States**: Embrace UNSCR 2250 and give it a national-level mandate. The next step of implementing 2250 will be to develop national action plans and build coalitions locally.
• **Civil society, advocacy, and youth organizations**: Make your voice heard. “This is the right time. There is a real, sincere effort on behalf of those in charge to integrate you into the solution.” (Al-Attia). Getting to UNSCR 2250 was a success. Keep going.

• **Peacebuilders and practitioners**: Don’t just consult or extract information from them. Give them real agency; directly involve them in decision-making. Consider them as equal partners and stakeholders at the table.

• **Youth representatives**: Don’t consider getting to the table to be enough. Earn your credibility. Prepare yourself, your ideas, your input. Contribute.

• **International organizations and civil society**: Initiate efforts to actively demonstrate how youth are value-added stakeholders. Collect and present evidence and data, as in the OECD studies. “Research can go a long way to help.” (Al-Attia) Show leaders and policy officials, again and again, that youth engagement strategies are evidenced-based.

• **Any and all stakeholders**: Proactively build the bridge. If there is not a platform ripe for this engagement, build one (or fund one) so that governments, implementers, and youth can sit down together. Make the focus on facilitating concrete links between the work of governments and youth voices on the ground who can offer solid contributions.

**What’s Next**

There is a heavy lift still ahead in order to implement UN Security Council UNSCR 2250. It’s time to rethink youth as stakeholders in policy development as well as its execution; to think of them as partners not just participants. The [independent report of the Youth, Peace, and Security commission](hyperlink) offers a useful action plan as a start.

We need to get to work. The demographic imperative demonstrates it. The uncertainties of the digital revolution and its follow-on effects require it. The young generation will demand it. No gains will come from leaving them aside.
Panel Participants

The Forum thanks panel participants: Haifa Dia Al-Attia, Chief Executive Officer, Queen Rania Foundation for Education and Development; Kessy Martine Ekomo, Founder and Executive Director, URU Initiative; Nafisa Shekhova, Global Lead for Education, Aga Khan Foundation; and Miriam Allam, Head of the MENA Governance Program, OECD.

The panel was moderated by Noella Richard, Youth Global Program Manager, UN Development Programme.

This is a publication of the Paris Peace Forum reflecting the debates at the Forum’s inaugural session in November 2018. It does not necessarily represent the conclusions of each individual participant.

About the Paris Peace Forum The Paris Peace Forum is a unique platform for global governance solutions. It focuses on improving the organization of our world, in order to address its most pressing challenges in the areas of peace & security, development, environment, new technologies, inclusive economy, and culture & education.

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