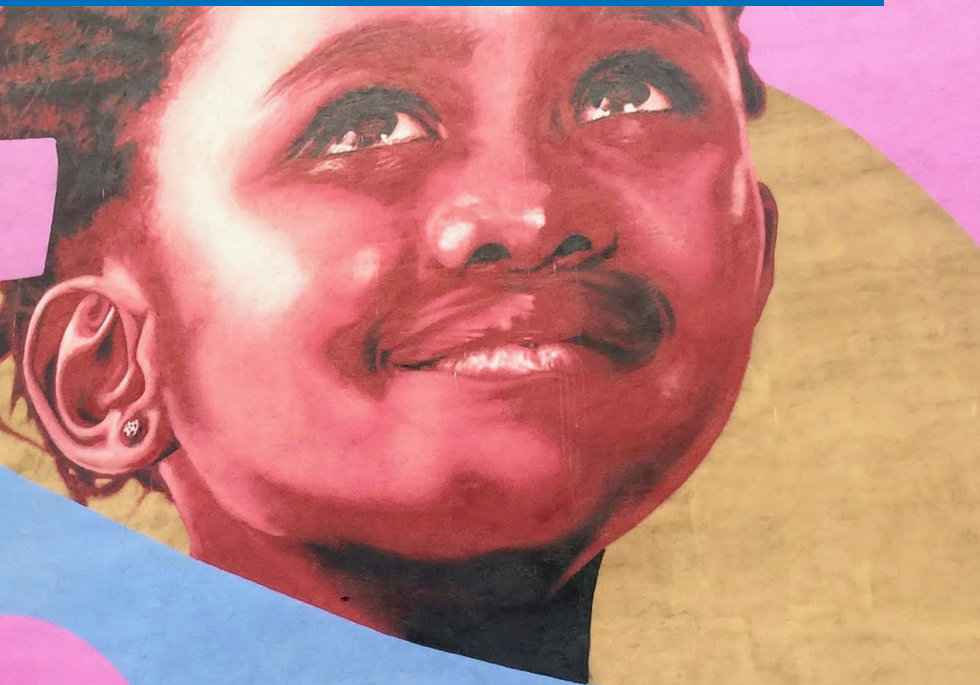


From Policy to Practice

Meaningful Youth Participation in Peacebuilding

Dorothea Schiewer



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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1 Terminology	3
2 The Relevance of Including Youth	5
3 Youth Participation in the International Policy Landscape	7
4 Youth Participation in Theory	8
5 Approaches for Meaningful Youth Participation in Peacebuilding Practice	12
6 Examples of Meaningful Youth Participation from Practice	15
7 Connecting Local Practice to International Policy	19
8 Challenges for Meaningful Youth Participation	21
9 Concluding Reflections and Recommendations	24

Introduction

While the importance of including a broad variety of stakeholders in peacebuilding processes is widely recognized,¹ large parts of society often remain at the margin of conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. One of them is youth who, in many conflict-affected settings, are the largest population demographic.² In 2014, one billion young people lived in the world of which approximately 800 million lived in conflict- or crisis-affected settings.³ In many contexts, this large part of society does not have a voice in (political) decisions (e.g. peace negotiation) and their actions are not recognized. Yet, they bear the brunt of the consequences of conflict and crisis such as lack of educational and economic opportunities, increased vulnerability to recruitment into armed groups or the military, gender-based violence, or death.⁴ However, youth participation in societal and political processes, including conflict prevention and resolution, is essential for building sustainable peace and democracy.⁵

Accordingly, this publication puts a focus on the implementation of the participation pillar of the UN Security Council resolution 2250, the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda (YPS), asking how international NGOs can contribute to the implementation of this pillar through their peacebuilding activities. It is a practical guide to help organizations facilitate and improve youth participation in peacebuilding practice based on a series of interviews with 12 different international non-governmental organizations and their partner organizations - nine member organizations of the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF and three organizations external to the platform.

It summarizes the key findings of these consultations including the organization's different approaches, concrete project examples, and encountered challenges, showing the different ways and strategies through which different international NGOs contribute to increased youth participation in the field of peacebuilding.

1 see United Nations. (2012). *Guidance for Effective Mediation*. New York: United Nations; UN Department of Political Affairs. (2017) *Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies*. Nairobi: UNON.

2 UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding. (2016). *Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding – A Practice Note*. UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding & PeaceNexus Foundation; UNSC. (2015). Resolution 2250. S/Res/2250.

3 UN Development Program. (2014). *Youth Strategy 2024-2017: Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future*. New York: UN Development Program.

4 UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding. (2016). n 2.

5 Altiok, A. & Grizelj, I. (2019). *We are here: An integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes*. Youth, Peace & Security & Youth 2030. p. 35.

The publication first delineates the terminology of youth and participation. Second, it explains the relevance of youth participation in peacebuilding and situates the publication in the international policy context and the theoretical conceptualization of participation. Afterwards, the publication explores different approaches of youth engagement from practice such as formal and informal participation, capacity-building, dialogue projects and self-determined action – and presents examples from different projects. Further, opportunities for connecting policy and practice in the field of meaningful youth participation as well as existing challenges for meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding activities like the lack of institutional support and funding or reaching marginalized youth are discussed. The presented concepts, approaches, and examples can be used as an inspiration for peacebuilding practitioners and organizations interested in engaging with youth as key stakeholders in their work.

1 Terminology

Two concepts are at the core of this paper's argument: youth, and participation.

Youth is a diverse, heterogeneous group for which different actors and, accordingly also the interviewed NGOs, use alternative context- and culture-specific definitions. As such, the YPS Agenda, UN Resolution 2250 and its follow-up resolutions, define an age between 18-29,⁶ Swiss government entities mostly define youth between the age of 10-25,⁷ the different UN agencies use varying definitions, and the African Union defines an age between 18-35.⁸ Independently from these different age ranges, most actors agree that youth should be recognized as a specific transition period in life from childhood to adulthood.⁹ Depending on the context and the culture, different markers signify the transition from youth to adulthood.¹⁰ Thus, defining youth culture- and context-specifically is essential. Particularly, in contexts affected by armed conflict or crisis, this period can be prolonged and the progression towards adulthood delayed because of the lack of, for example, formal education, socio-economic opportunities or even marriage, leading to a period of so-called "waithood".¹¹

It is important to recognize the diversity of youth and the intersectional characteristics each person holds.¹² Young women and men are confronted with different gendered realities as are youth with differing educational or socio-economic backgrounds.¹³ As with any other group, youth have different aspirations, needs and challenges that arise from their intersectional positionality in society. Hence, they cannot be understood as one homogenous group.

The consulted NGOs all work with different definitions that depend on the context of their activities or on the requirements and standards posed by donors and governments for monitoring and reporting reasons.

6 UN Resolution 2250, n 2, Preamble.

7 EDI. (2014). Aktueller Stand der Kinder- und Jugendpolitik in der Schweiz. Eidgenössisches Departement des Inneren EDI, Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen BSV, Bereich Kinder- und Jugendfragen.

8 African Union. (2006). African Youth Charter.

9 Simpson, G. (2018). The Missing Peace Study. Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security. UNFPA & PBSO. p. 10.

10 *ibid.*

11 see Honwana, Alcinda. (2014). Waithood: Youth Transitions and Social Change. In D. Foeken, T. Dietz and L. Johnson (eds.) *Development and Equity* (pp. 28-40). Leiden: Brill.; Simpson, G. (2018), n 10, p. 11.

12 Mahanta, R. (2022). Political Participation is Key. How to strengthen youth as peace actors. Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

13 *ibid.*

Participation can be understood as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives”.¹⁴ Participation is often looked at from two perspectives: as a rights issue and as an issue of effectiveness.¹⁵ First, youth have the human right to participate and be included in political processes, which holds an obligation for states that needs to be fulfilled. Second, in many societies, youth constitute a large part of a population that are not heard, valued, or respected enough.

The human right to participation is enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN-ICCPR), and in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

While a series of different definitions and models exist for building a theoretical framework of youth participation in academia, all of them are concerned with the following questions: Where does youth participation begin? What does youth participation entail?

What are the benefits and downsides of youth participation? Who is responsible for facilitating youth participation? And what factors determine meaningful youth participation? All of them focus on slightly different factors like self-determination, relationships with adults, or the degree of decision-making power. The discourse on youth participation is closely intertwined with the discourse on citizen participation generally since both ultimately aim for everyone to use their right to participate in society.¹⁶

Interestingly, for a few interviewed organizations the idea of youth participation is not just about power and decision-sharing but rather any engagement that improves the well-being of youth.

14 Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF.

15 see see also Tanghoj, E. & Scarpelini J.F. (2020). *Youth, Peace and Security – Adviser's Handbook*. Folke Bernadotte Academy – Swedish agency for peace, security and development.

16 see for example Arnstein, S. R. (1969). *Ladder Of Citizen Participation*. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (4), 216-224.

2 The Relevance of Including Youth

The invaluable resources youth can contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding are often overlooked. Yet, as experts of their life and their context, they have unique capabilities, can challenge narratives, and are a huge portion of the population and, thus, indispensable for inclusive peacebuilding with local ownership.

Including youth means including the majority of the population, building ownership, and gaining them as important agents for sustainable peace. The sheer size of the global youth population is one reason why they should be considered an important demographic in sustainable peace work.¹⁷ Based on their demographic, practitioners agree that including youth can be an avenue for a greater peacebuilding impact and long-lasting results. The Missing Peace Study commissioned by the UN Security Council to track the progress of the YPS Agenda argues that “if the right investments are made in the positive resilience of youth, and their peacebuilding work is recognized and nurtured, societies may reap a significant peace dividend”.¹⁸ Overall, an inclusive approach can have a positive impact on existing power dynamics and collective solutions.

As many of the interviewed organizations mentioned, youth are experts of their own lives and lived realities and bring important perspectives about their contexts. Foregoing youth involvement in context and conflict analysis means that crucial perspectives are missed that can help to identify and address root causes of conflict. Additionally, youth hold important capacities: They can raise awareness, mobilize and advocate for peace informally, mediate tensions at the grass-root level, or contribute to ceasefire monitoring.¹⁹ Besides, one organization discussed the youth’s potential role for addressing intergenerational trauma and their function as intergenerational touchstone between older and

“They are the future, which is why they should be involved, to design, to decide what that future should look like, but also to get ownership and to feel they are in the driving seat and not only passive bystanders in the process.”

— Caroline Vuillemin, Fondation Hirondelle

17 see Altiok, A. & Grizelj, I. (2019)., n 5.

18 Simpson, G. (2018), n 10, p. 115.

19 Altiok, A. & Grizelj, I. (2019). n 5.

younger generations and, thus, as great multipliers. Lastly, conducting meaningful youth participation presents an opportunity to challenge existing negative stereotypes about youth in conflict-affected settings and shows them as active agents of peace.

“I think peacebuilding at its core is about inclusion and about addressing exclusion as a way to generate social cohesion and form peaceful communities. So, I think you cannot have inclusion if you do not involve young people.”

— Interpeace

3 Youth Participation in the International Policy Landscape

The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda (YPS Agenda; [UNSCR 2250](#), 2015 and its follow-up resolutions) is a milestone for the discourse on youth in peacebuilding. The agenda was adopted acknowledging the relevance of young people in conflict-affected settings after strong advocacy and lobbying by youth and youth allies.²⁰ It is the first policy framework that recognizes the positive potential of youth as active agents for peace and security and stresses their important role in peacebuilding processes on all levels and in conflict prevention. The resolution consists of five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. It is further strengthened by two subsequent resolutions - [UNSCR 2419](#) in 2018 and [UNSCR 2535](#) in 2020.

The YPS Agenda is the most important international policy tool for youth inclusion in conflict settings. The UN Security Council resolutions stress that the responsibility to implement this framework lies mostly with the member states. Yet, so far, only Finland, the DRC, Nigeria, and the Philippines have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) that define actions and priorities for implementing the international resolution.²¹ This indicates the generally low priority of the YPS Agenda. However, it is not only states that can support the implementation of the objectives codified in the YPS Agenda. Youth participation in peacebuilding practice, groups, social movements and projects by international non-governmental organizations and civil society can also contribute to the implementation of agenda's participation pillar.

Accordingly, this publication puts a focus on the implementation of the participation pillar of the YPS Agenda in the work of international NGOs, asking: What is understood as youth participation in peacebuilding by different NGOs? What participation forms and mechanisms are used in projects and activities? What challenges do peacebuilders and peacebuilding organizations face when implementing youth participation? And how does the youth-participatory work of NGOs contribute to the implementation of the participation pillar of the UN YPS Agenda?

²⁰ see UN Security Resolution 2250, n 2, Preamble.

²¹ Upadhyay, M. (2020) YPS Monitor: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation. Available at <https://www.ypsmonitor.com/> [last accessed June 13, 2024].

4 Youth Participation in Theory

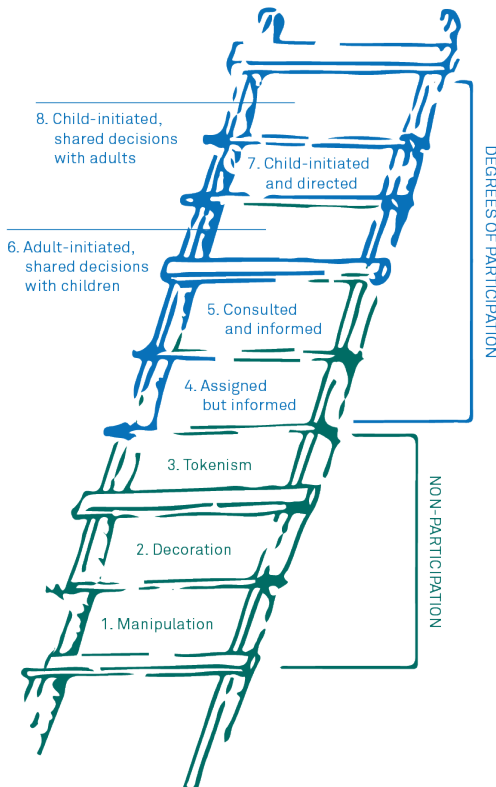


Figure 1: The Ladder of participation. Adapted from Hart, R. (1992).

One of the commonly used theoretical concepts for understanding youth participation is the model of the participation ladder by Hart (1992).²² Hart (1992) adapted and extended the concept of citizen participation developed by Arnstein (1969) to children and youth and describes three forms of non-participation and six forms of genuine participation. The stages of genuine participation move from receiving information to self-initiation to decision-making and show increasing degrees of self-determination (see Figure 1).

Delgado & Staples (2008) on the other hand offer a model for youth-led community organizations which focuses on youth-adult relationships.²³ It points out a continuum of youth power depending on the involvement and role of adults (see Figure 2).

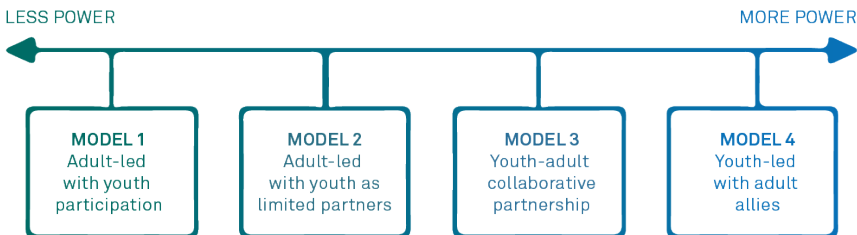


Figure 2: Continuum of youth power. Adapted from Delgado, M & Staples, L. (2007).

²² Hart, R. (1992). n 15..

²³ see Delgado, M & Staples, L. (2007). Youth-led Community Organizing. New York: Oxford University Press.

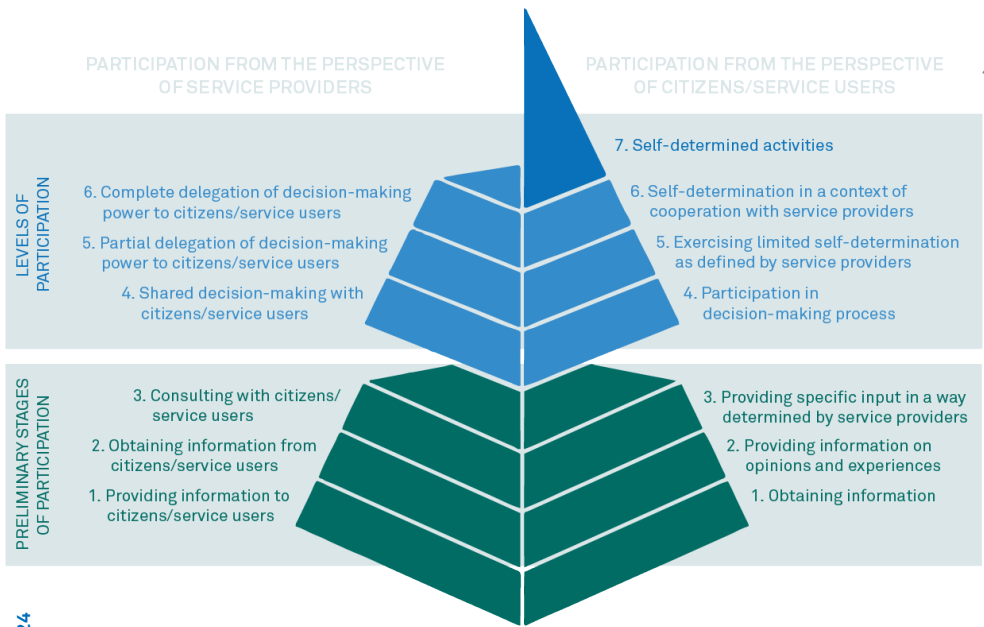


Figure 3: Participation pyramid. Adapted from Strassburger, G. & Rieger (2019).

The participation pyramid by Strassburger & Rieger (2019) is another commonly used model for understanding citizen participation in general.²⁴ Similarly to the other models it is structured based on the degree of self-determination. Uniquely, this model depicts participation from the bottom-up perspective of citizens as well as from the top-down perspective of institutions (see Figure 3). Like Hart (1992) this model defines pre-stages to participation, yet contrary to the participation ladder, this model argues for information and consultations as preliminary stages, focusing on decision-making as the key principle of participation.

To use these theoretical models as a conceptual basis for his practical work, Luciano Gagliardi responsible for youth participation at the KOFF member organization terre des hommes (tdh) schweiz, developed a participation spectrum (see Figure 4) which visualizes a continuum of eight different youth participation stages from the stage of observation in which youth passively participate in activities to the stage of acting within a self-implemented activity.²⁵ Instead of thinking in fixed stages, this spectrum recognizes that there is a flowing transition between

²⁴ see Strassburger, G. & Rieger, J. (eds.) (2019). Partizipation kompakt. Für Studium, Lehre und Praxis sozialer Berufe. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.

²⁵ Illustration by Luciano Gagliardi, based on: Nationale Kulturdialog (2021), Förderung kultureller Teilhabe, ein Leitfaden für Förderstellen, p. 13.

all the stages. It can support the initial design of a project as well as reflections on the level of self-determination in existing participation projects.

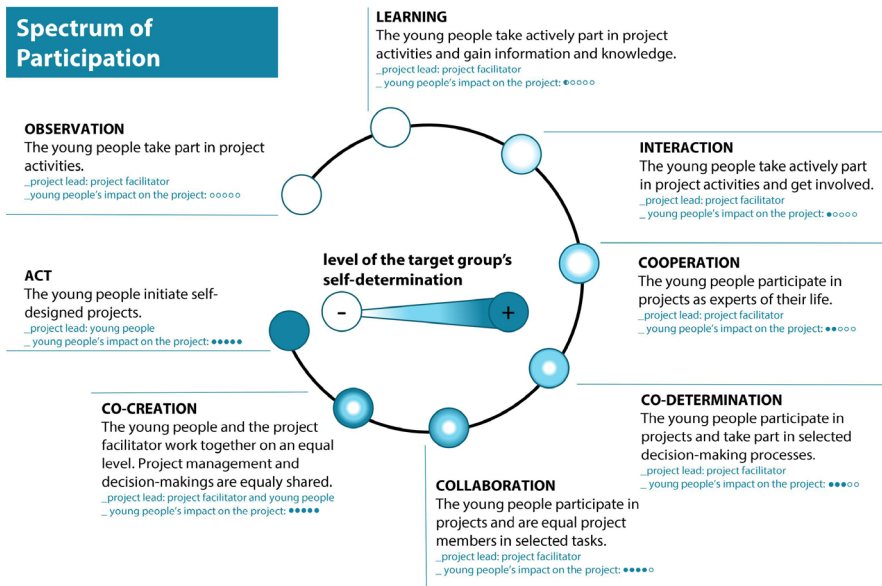


Figure 4: Spectrum of participation. Illustration by Luciano Gagliardi (2021).

All presented models include different stages towards meaningful youth participation and self-initiated action. In the participation pyramid and the participation spectrum, stages like information, learning and interaction are understood as capacity building rather than meaningful youth participation. Nevertheless, these stages can be important steps toward empowerment. They capture the importance of empowerment and giving young people the tools to participate. Hart (1992) stresses that the effectiveness of participation not only depends on the targeted stage within a participation model, but also on factors such as education and development.²⁶ In contrast to the other authors, the participation ladder by Hart (1997) also includes tokenistic participation in its steps, where youth are manipulated and used as decoration by those in power. This highlights the challenge of creating youth participation that is meaningful and beneficial for youth itself.

26 Hart, R. (1992). n 15.

Some organizations mention their preference to speak about “youth collaboration” or “youth cooperation” as this wording stresses youth as active agents and partners instead of yet another group that should be included in existing structures, projects or activities. They also highlight that in addition to these classic models of youth participation, other factors must be considered. Youth participation takes place at different levels: 1) within society – from the individual over the community to the global level – 2) and within organizations – on the project, organizational and system level. Further, participation takes place at different stages of conflict (before, during, and after) and across different forms of conflict including armed conflict, gender-based violence, communal violence, among others.²⁷

27 Simpson, G. (2018), n 10.

5 Approaches for Meaningful Youth Participation in Peacebuilding Practice

Considering the models of youth participation mentioned in the previous chapter, approaches in practice can target different stages of youth participation. While capacity building trainings, for example, are often already considered as youth participation when they target youth-specific needs, the implementation of projects by youth includes more independence and self-determination, and thus, more active participation.

Before engaging youth on any level of an organization's work, many of the interviewed organizations recommend that the following issues should be considered to avoid frustration and disappointment: 1) the main objectives of youth engagement; 2) the space for decision-making that youth will have in the context, the organization, and the project structure; 3) the willingness of the organization and actors to share power and take youth recommendations into account; 5) and the resources the organization is willing to invest in meaningful youth participation to ensure sustainability. Further, a thorough youth-specific context analysis that considers risks, existing youth initiatives and structures, gaps, (lack of) spaces for youth participation, as well as youth's needs and challenges can critically inform the planning of projects or activities aimed at meaningful youth participation.²⁸

“It's really thinking of a long-term engagement and that this is more of a marathon than a sprint.”

— **Interpeace/Voz di Paz**

In practice, organizations choose different approaches depending on the context, identified needs and the project's or initiative's objectives. On the one hand, there are efforts to mainstream youth in the work and decision-making processes of (peacebuilding) organizations, projects, or activities. This is similar to approaches used by organizations to mainstream gender. It entails that

every stage of the project includes “youth-consciousness” and takes specific youth perspectives into consideration. A partner organization of Frieda – the feminist peace organization, for example, established a youth advisory group that accompanies the work of the organization and consults on all stages of the project cycle. They recommend involving youth directly in planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects to practice meaningful inclusion and design relevant programs.

28 see Tanghoj, E. & Scarpelini J.F. (2020). n 16.

“Rather than working for youth, work with youth and try to include them in every step of your project.”

— Sophia Biscuola, UNOY

On the other hand, many organizations have specific projects or activities that have youth as the target audience. A few interviewees highlighted that in these cases, youth should not only be considered as beneficiaries of projects but as active agents of change. Most of these approaches can be grouped under

the term of informal participation which opposed to formal participation does not take place in institutional settings based on codified laws or regulations (like voting, local youth councils, or official advisory boards). Instead, informal participation is often more accessible and can include various forms like protests, activism, campaigns, educational activities, and other projects. Naturally, both formal and informal participation approaches are closely intertwined and can promote one another – capacity building approaches can for example empower youth to become active in their local youth council.

The organizations interviewed for this paper shared various approaches for targeting and including youth in their work. These can be grouped in the categories of (1) capacity building, (2) dialogue (3) self-determined action, and (4) facilitated (political) participation which will be described with examples in the following:²⁹

1. Capacity building for youth can include access to information, peace education, communication trainings, psycho-social support or activities to strengthen self-confidence. Besides the importance of creating structural provision for youth participation, capacity building lays an essential foundation for political participation. To give an example, [Mission 21](#) has established the network [young@mission21](#) that brings young people from all over the world together to foster cultural exchange and transcultural competencies. Further, the consulted organizations [tdh schweiz](#) for example organizes context-specific capacity building opportunities like leadership trainings with their partner organizations and works with youth on the individual level. The aim of these activities is to empower youth into a position capable of action. Likewise, [World Vision](#) has a specific focus in its activities in Uganda on vocational training and peace education, including trainings on advocacy and communication.

²⁹ These four categories developed to consolidate the work of the consulted organization and their activities are in no means exhaustive.

2. Dialogue activities can include intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, policy dialogue but also dialogue between peers on thematic issues or youth groups from different conflict parties to exchange narratives. These can be important tools for strengthening social cohesion and act as “stepping stones” for young people to become peacebuilders or peace activists. This approach is for example used by [Coexistences](#) who organizes dialogue formats for Israeli and Palestinian youth groups in the form of summer camps in Switzerland. Similarly, the [Kinderdorf Pestalozzi](#) offers youth groups from Switzerland and various other countries the opportunity for intercultural exchange and learning in form of a week in their village, promoting diversity and plurality.

3. Self-determined action refers to activities in which young people initiate, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate. It is often considered the highest level of youth participation as it entails the strongest degree of self-determination and puts youth in the lead. One example of self-determined action is the youth club idea by a World Vision project in Uganda. Within these youth clubs, youth can initiate a project to jointly address grievances and needs that they have identified in their community. As another example, the [PACEY award](#) by the [Basel Peace Office](#) incentivizes young people to develop self-determined projects by celebrating youth projects related to international peace, nuclear abolition and climate protection.

4. Facilitated (political) participation can take place in different forms. It refers to any kind of participation mechanisms that is offered and supported. This can include speaking opportunities at events, or a non-governmental workshop in which youth jointly work on recommendations for a policy that affects them. [Fondation Hironnelle](#) for example gives youth a voice through local radio shows in various contexts in which the organization is working.

“It is not only about inclusion in existing structures, not the “taking part” in certain predetermined structures, but rather the promotion of one’s own protagonism.”

— [Andrea Zellhuber](#), tdh schweiz

6 Examples of Meaningful Youth Participation from Practice

While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, the following projects provide good examples of how to work on this topic.

“NASHAT”, FRIEDA

The project “Nashat” by [Frieda](#) and a partner organization in Algeria is exemplary as a capacity building project for marginalized youth between 16 to 30 years from rural areas with little economic, educational and cultural opportunities. The project allowed youth participation in all project stages. Its core objective was to offer peer-to-peer sensitization workshops on violence with a psycho-social approach using theme-centered interaction (TCI). TCI considers multiple levels for group work – the personal, group, theme, and context level. Through its workshops, the project provided access to information, education, and dialogue through a multitude of tools including short films, games, and role plays. Besides participating in the workshops, youth could become facilitators through “train the trainer” workshops which had a positive effect on the project activities as they were facilitated at eye level. Further, participants and trainers could engage in project management, being able to participate in decision-making and adjustments of the program. This way, the project included interested youth throughout the whole project cycle, enabling adjustments based on needs and interests. Lastly, the project had an overall positive effect on the work of Frieda’s local partner organization which, recognizing the benefits, began to include young people in its organization in project planning, implementing, and decision-making. In sum, the project is an interesting example of the benefits of a peer-to-peer approach and the active inclusion of young people in the entire project cycle.

“Maybe youth participation is when they realize that they matter, that they can make a change by just existing.”

— Frieda

“YOU – YOUTH UNITED FOR FUTURE” PROJECT, HELVETAS

The “YOU” Project by [Helvetas](#) in Kyrgyzstan is a dialogue project for the prevention of violent extremism that is particularly interesting as it not only focuses on capacity building of young people but also on

“Youth participation not only means enabling young people, but also working with adults so they can make the spaces possible for them.”

— Helvetas

training, young people in the community have the possibility to work on issues of identity, self-awareness, self-confidence, and communication skills. The adult’s module also focuses on identity and communication but adds a focus on active listening and mentoring. In the last step, the intergenerational dialogue, both groups exchange on prejudices and experiences in society. Moreover, they choose a set of topics to work on after the dialogue. This way, the intergenerational dialogue paves the way for addressing concerns of youth in the community. After successfully piloting this methodology, Helvetas partner “Youth of Osh” adapted it for schools and succeeded in having it adopted into the national education curriculum. They supported teacher training institutes in training teachers in the methodology. Teachers then trained students and their parents, and supported students to establish dialogues with parents, school and local authorities on issues of concern to them. Hence, the “YOU” Project implemented by Helvetas is a thought-provoking capacity-building and dialogue project because of its emphasis on adults for the creation of the space and context for effective and meaningful youth participation.

the capacity building of adults as allies. The project’s objective is to prepare youth, mostly students between 14-18, and adults in the community for a meaningful intergenerational exchange. Accordingly, it consists of three parts: youth training, adults training, and an intergenerational exchange. In the youth

“YOUTH SPEAKS”, TERRE DES HOMMES SCHWEIZ

The “Youth Speaks” program by [terre des hommes schweiz](#) is a pilot program currently being implemented based on community-based participatory research. The program goes beyond adult-led youth participation and focuses on youth-led initiatives. So-called “senior coaches” (staff members of tdh) train youth facilitators, young people active in existing projects, in methods and empower them to design peer-to-peer workshops according to their life realities: From selecting the methods, to the way where and how to conduct it, and how to document and report the results, everything is defined by the young people according to what makes sense to them.³⁰ Accordingly, it is an interesting example of self-determined action of youth on the local level which is still accompanied by some guidance from tdh schweiz

30 Gagliardi, L. (forthcoming). Unlearning Hierarchy in Knowing: With Project Based Learning Towards Equity in Inner Development. In E. Egel & M. Campos Suarez (Eds.), Inner Development Goals: Stories of Collective Leadership in Action. De Gruyter.

and its partner organizations. Further, it is a global project that is carried out in all program countries of the NGO. In the first stage, the “Youth Research Labs” carry out a context analysis to determine the most important fields of actions in their context or community for a project intervention. In the second stage, the “Transformation Labs”, youth plan and implement their own project addressing a field of action they identified in the first stage of the project. Lastly, in the “Evaluation Labs” the project participants evaluate their implemented actions, reflecting whether the action achieved the desired change. Thus, this is a good example of a project that includes youth in every step of the project cycle and empowers youth to address existing problems and needs in their communities through independent projects.

“OBS MADA”, FONDATION HIRONDELLE

OBS Mada, or the observatory for young people, is a project in Madagascar implemented by the UN Development Program and multiple NGOs including a partner of Fondation Hirondelle, [Studio Sifaka](#). The project is designed to train young people and empower them to take political responsibility and become peace promoters in their communities. Within the project young people learn to observe and analyze factors contributing to conflict in society, but also public action contributing to peace as well as to set up early warning and conflict prevention systems. Thus, youth are not only included in prevention measures and conflict monitoring but are encouraged to take ownership and agency. Further, the young participants become representatives towards authorities in order to take action when they observe conflict risks. So far, the project has reached more than 7000 young youth leaders.

CAPACITY BUILDING IN GUINEA BISSAU, INTERPEACE/VOZ DI PAZ³¹

Another project that builds on capacity building is implemented by [Interpeace](#) and its partner organization [Voz di Paz](#) in Guinea Bissau. In its first stage, the project started with individual capacity building of selected youth-leaders, offering platforms for exchange and micro-grants for advocacy. These measures aimed at initiating a more dynamic youth environment on the local and regional level. Fulfilling this objective, the project resulted in strengthened self-confidence of youth leaders and improved relationships between youth and local government as well as traditional leaders, allowing youth to participate

³¹ The project has two phases: “Drawing the pathway together: new leadership for meaningful participation, peace and stability in Guinea Bissau” (Phase 1) and “Inclusive policies and institutions for a peaceful society” (Phase 2).

more in local-level decision-making. In the second stage, the project moved on to the institutional level of youth organization, strengthening the collaboration between them and building their capacity to engage with local authorities and to contribute to the evaluation of the national youth policy. In consultations, youth define their priorities in order to include them in the drafting process of the national youth policy. Thus, the project cycle moves along the participation spectrum from capacity building to formal participation.

7 Connecting Local Practice to International Policy

While most consulted organizations believe that their work contributes to the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2250, the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, only few engage in advocacy on and bring their experience from the practice level to the policy level. Most see the international policy sphere as too far away from the realities in their project countries and prefer to focus on local peacebuilding activities. Most also share that it is difficult to connect their community-based work with the national policies of the countries that they work in. However, some examples showcase how to successfully connect policy and practice. For example, the “YOU” project by Helvetas that made it into the national education curriculum.

This gap between policy and practice is shaped by a lack of willingness and interest which is reflected in the lack of funding opportunities and financial commitment by donors and governments.³² On the one hand, states have committed to the YPS Agenda on the international policy level, yet on the other hand, the national implementation of this agenda through National Action Plans or roadmaps, youth policies or mainstreaming of the key elements of the YPS Agenda in other policy areas remains slow. Yet, it should be highlighted that there have been advances on the regional level, for example through the [African Union Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security](#) and the [Youth Action Plan \(YAP\) in European Union external action 2022-2027](#).

Regardless of this gap between practice and policy, the interviewed organizations still regard the YPS Agenda as an important source for learning, guidance, and as a useful instrument for project conceptualization. Further, it is used for communicating and leveraging arguments for their practical work, for the national policy level and for shaping the discourse and action on youth engagement.

“The YPS Agenda provides a lot of leverage for young people. It basically is a multilateral agreed upon document that says that young people are contributors to peace, that they’re a resource and not a risk, and that they are worthy of investment for peacebuilding.”

— Interpeace

32 see Mahanta, R. (2022) n 13.

One of the organizations that works on the intersection between policy and practice in regard to youth participation is [UNOY – the United Network of Young Peacebuilders](#). Their work includes raising awareness at the local project level for international policy developments, advocating for and working on the national implementation of the YPS Agenda and for the inclusion of the YPS Agenda in other national and international policy frameworks. UNOY, for example, formed regional youth advocacy teams with their member organizations in Africa and Asia to lead the regional advocacy to promote meaningful youth engagement in policy and practice, at all levels of decision-making.

Another example is the KOFF-member organization Interpeace. Their work also recognizes the “symbiotic relationship between policy and practice, and between local experience and global policy perspectives”. By working on both levels, the organization promotes a localization of the YPS agenda and its context-specific implementation in practice in the form of so-called YPS programming, while at the same time ensuring that global policy is shaped and informed by local practice of young peacebuilders.³³

Hence, while all consulted organizations contribute to the implementation of the participation objectives of the YPS Agenda, the organizations define and shape their specific role differently. Even though informing the policy level with the practical experiences is important, some organizations might decide to concentrate their resources on the practical implementation of youth participatory approaches in a specific context, while others have turned advocacy into their core strength.

³³ see for example Interpeace. (2021). Outside the Box: Amplifying youth voices and views on YPS policy and practice. Available at <https://www.interpeace.org/outside-the-box-amplifying-youth-voices-and-views-on-yps-policy-and-practice/>.

8 Challenges for Meaningful Youth Participation

In achieving meaningful youth participation in their peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities, the following challenges have been identified by the consulted organizations:

Tokenistic youth participation:

Some of the interviewed organizations highlight the pitfall that tokenistic youth participation poses. It refers to instances in which participation is only used symbolically, for example when youth are invited to speak at an event, but their recommendations are not considered, or a youth-project advisory group is established but youth are not treated as equal partners, making merely the appearance of inclusion or participation.³⁴ In these situations, the idea of youth participation loses its meaning. In other cases, youth participation loses its significance as it is only implemented ad-hoc. Hence, participation is neither meaningful for youth nor sustainable. Accordingly, some interview partners mentioned the fear that, as with gender mainstreaming, youth participation could become a “ticking-the-box exercise”.³⁵

Realizing a “Do No Harm Approach” and guaranteeing protection:

As with other groups, interviewed organizations perceive it as a challenge to find a balance between empowering youth to actively participate and become agents of change while at the same time ensuring their protection, as in certain contexts participating in these projects, but also political participation and expression of opinion can pose a risk.

Finding a balance between youth participation and other objectives:

A few organizations also mentioned the challenge of navigating between activities that promote meaningful youth participation in projects or activities, and the need for educational, vocational and socio-economic opportunities for youth. The latter often takes priority and subsequently many young people do not have the capacity to engage in participatory activities. Thus, it is important to see youth participation not as a given, but to provide the needed resources and potential compensation for the time and the effort of young people.

³⁴ see Ozoelik A., Nesterova, Y., Young, G., Macwell, A. (2021). Youth-led peace: The role of youth in peace processes. University of Glasgow.

³⁵ see UNOY n.d. Meaningful Youth Engagement Checklist.

Including marginalized youth:

Most interviewed organizations have mentioned the challenge of building inclusive projects that also reach marginalized youth including youth outside the education system, in rural areas, members of ethnic or religious minorities, displaced youth, or young women. Many recognize the risk of mainly working with a more accessible youth population, that has the necessary knowledge, and that participates on a regular basis. However, an actor's mapping, proactive outreach work, and including partners with experience in reaching marginalized youth may help overcome this challenge.

Trust:

The issue of trust has multiple dimensions. On the one hand, for program coordinators it can sometimes be challenging to trust in the expertise and competences of young people. On the other hand, there might be mistrust between policy makers and youth, which goes both ways.³⁶ Youth participation is often seen as a way of challenging existing power relations and too often the narrative remains of young people's inclusion being a risk.

“Let them speak up for themselves, trust them, trust their knowledge, trust their capacities, and trust their abilities to be positive actors for peacebuilding.”

— Sofia Biscuola, UNOY

Managing Frustration and Expectations:

While one might assume that capacity building and facilitation of participation opportunities provides mainly benefits, there is the risk that youth become frustrated when they realize that they have reached an invisible “glass-ceiling” of participation, due to the limited willingness for power- and decision-sharing of the relevant stakeholders. Thus, expectation management on impact, as well as socio-economic benefit, is difficult but important.

Fluctuation:

As young people are in an age where a lot of things in their lives continually change, projects that work with youth often face high turnover rates. This fluctuation can impact projects and activities by slowing down or interrupting activities and influence built up networks and relationships.

Power Imbalances and Ambiguity:

Power imbalances between youth can be a challenge for peacebuilding activities when working with young people from different backgrounds

36 see Mahanta, R. (2022) n 13.

“Money is relevant. Money also determines time in our society. If it is financed, you have time to get involved in a process and to listen to children and young people and develop ideas. If you don’t have that, then participation and the chances of success for what children and young people can actually implement in the foreseeable future are doomed to fail.”

— Adrian Strazza, Kinderdorf Pestalozzi

and with different language use, due to unequal access to education and socio-economic opportunities. Similarly, uniting young people in one voice can also be demanding, since youth is not a homogenous group and lived realities may vary strongly.³⁷ This leads to diverging views and conflicting opinions.

Lack of funding and accessibility to funding for youth-related projects:

As many other peacebuilding projects, the implementation of youth participation projects is mostly driven by donor’s objectives and criteria

design, their timeline, focus, and funding, which can result in lack of time or flexibility that would be required for developing sustainable youth participation projects. The lack of funding might be caused by the failure to recognize youth as important stakeholders, and the little interest and prioritization of youth so far which is reflected by the few governments that have mechanisms in place to implement the YPS Agenda. Additionally, especially for small youth-led initiatives, funds can sometimes be inaccessible because of administrative and donor requirements. Thus, funding criteria has to be adjusted if youth-led initiatives should gain access. For example, one organization recommended that donors should include youth in the design of funding criteria and mechanisms to ensure that it is youth-specific and accessible. Moreover, some organizations mentioned a lack of core funding to build comprehensive foundations for sustainable youth projects and to mainstream youth in the general work of the organization.³⁸

Lack of institutional structures for youth participation:

In many project countries, organizations and youth that are attempting to build youth participation mechanism through their peacebuilding activities face the absence of institutional structures and provisions for (formal) youth participation, as well as hindering laws and regulations. As for many formal participation projects a “buy-in” by policy makers and the government is needed to avoid alibi-participation and create the space for meaningful participation, including the provision of a certain decision realm or “objects of participation”.

37 Tanghoj, E. & Scarpelini J.F. (2020), n 16.

38 see Mahanta, R. (2022). n 13.

9 Concluding Reflections and Recommendations

This paper illustrates the various methods INGOs use to improve youth participation and implement UN Security Resolution 2250, the YPS Agenda. Many challenges exist, including lack of funding and institutional structures, the risk of tokenism, and the need to spend time building trust. Despite this, as the organizations here show, promising approaches for youth participation in peacebuilding activities offer a useful guide and source of inspiration for others who would like to work in this field. Sustainable participatory mechanisms like youth councils, youth-targeted capacity building, dialogues, self-determined projects, and both formal and non-formal political participation are a few examples to build on.

The consulted organizations actively work on including youth participation in their organizational structures or implement projects or activities with youth as a target group. Yet, many other organizations do not consider youth as stakeholders in their work. Mainstreaming of youth-consciousness and of youth participation in organizational structures and project cycles including planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation remains low.

Accordingly, this paper leads to the following recommendations:

Include a youth-lens in conflict analysis for all projects

Youth are experts of their own lives and contexts and have unique perspectives on conflict dynamics, actors and root causes. Including youth-sensitive context- and conflict-analyses leads to a holistic and inclusive perspective and avoids reinforcing negative narratives or stereotypes. A youth-lens is essential to identifying the diverse needs, priorities and grievances of this large proportion of the population and recognizing their agency.

Mainstream youth participation in organizations and projects to amplify youth-specific peacebuilding projects and activities

INGOs active in the field of peacebuilding have further potential to mainstream youth in their work, establish advisory youth councils within their structures, and consider a youth-lens on their activities to further contribute to the implementation of the participation pillar of the YPS Agenda. Including youth supports holistic and inclusive projects and helps to address population groups that would otherwise remain

marginalized. It also means focusing on long-term, sustainable peacebuilding goals for a group that will have to live with the consequences of the peace negotiation outcomes. Yet, most peacebuilding activities and projects with youth as a target group remain the exception rather than the rule. Organizations and other actors risk spending resources, time and effort on peacebuilding activities, peace negotiations and agreements that are not supported by the next generation and, subsequently, lack ownership by a majority of the population. More research on the reasons for (and against) youth-consciousness and youth-targeted action in international non-governmental organizations contributing to peacebuilding is needed to identify further challenges, obstacles and strategies to overcome them.

Promote youth's self-determined action through youth-led initiatives and projects

As outlined in this Essential, youth participation approaches have different degrees of self-determination. Youth-led, self-determined initiatives and projects are the category of approaches that reach the highest degree of independence and participation. Yet, these peacebuilding projects and activities are particularly rare. While creating space for youth to develop ideas, initiatives and projects can be challenging and take a lot of time and resources, it is important that organizations continue to work towards these approaches from youth-centered activities towards youth-led initiatives.

Anticipate challenges to implement meaningful youth participation

Implementing meaningful youth participation comes with many challenges like including a diversity of youth in projects, managing frustrations, expectations and high age-according fluctuation. Anticipating these challenges and their impact in the project or activity design can support the smooth and successful implementation and avoid frustration for both youth and facilitators. To anticipate these challenges, diverse youth perspectives must be included from the pre-stage of every project to establish different perspectives and include context-specific knowledge.

Use the possible link between policy and practice

Despite the vast advancement at the UN-level through the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, most organizations implementing youth participation projects do not maintain a close connection to policy on the national, regional, or international levels. On the one hand, peacebuilding INGOs can benefit from using the key points of the YPS Agenda for funding applications and to justify the relevance of their work. On the other hand, international agendas should be informed by local and lived

realities of youth. Formal participation mechanisms like youth advisory councils or consultations on national policies must be implemented through national legislation. Accordingly, it is in the interest of organizations and of youth to maintain the link to policy and explore ways for channeling the outcomes of peacebuilding activities to the multilateral level. This can also include advocating for roadmaps or National Action Plans (NAPs) at the national governance level.

For the effective and meaningful implementation of the participation pillar of the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, all actors – government, donors, and INGOs – must increase their efforts. In consolidating existing methods and learnings from practitioners, this Essential offers a starting point to inspire and guide others interested in developing youth participation approaches in their peacebuilding work.

CONTRIBUTING KOFF-MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

- Basel Peace Office / Ertis Mektebi School
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- Kinderdorf Pestalozzi
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