

Outside the Box:

Amplifying youth voices and
views on YPS policy and practice

Assessing Youth Participation in Implementation of the YPS Agenda

Mridul Upadhyay

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Introduction

A broad base of youth participation over the years has helped to establish a global consensus in favour of recognising and supporting the positive and important role played by youth in building and sustaining peace. In August 2015, over 600 participants, including 200 young people representing 80 nationalities, contributed to the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security, hosted by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Amman.¹ The Forum adopted the Amman Youth Declaration, which advocated a new narrative on youth that did away with a victim and perpetrator dichotomy. Later that year, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250,² adopted on 9 December 2015, became the first UN resolution to formalise the Youth, Peace and Security agenda (YPS) and enshrine this new narrative.

Since then, important progress has been made in engaging young people in global policy-making processes on peace and security issues. The participatory and inclusive approach taken by *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study*

on Youth, Peace and Security (henceforward *The Missing Peace*),³ an independent study mandated by UNSCR 2250, established a precedent and broke new ground in its inclusive and participatory methodology premised on listening to and amplifying the voices of young people, who would not ordinarily be heard in global peace and security policy processes. The study consulted 4,230 youth from 153 countries in 281 focus group discussions, seven regional consultations, five online consultations and five national consultations over a period of two years. However, the UN and most Member States have largely reverted to a limited or selective engagement with youth in the design, implementation and evaluation of progress on the YPS agenda, both at country level and in the multilateral system. The first report of the Secretary-General (SG) on YPS in 2020 inevitably adopted a more traditional approach to UN reporting. Oriented more towards internal reflection, it marked a growing disconnect from inclusion and participation of young people themselves.⁴ The report consequently drew much less attention to the voices and agen-

1 Amman Youth Declaration (August 2015). At youth4peace: <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/49>.

2 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2250, S/RES/2250 (2015), adopted on December 9, 2015. At: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015)).

3 Graeme Simpson (lead author)(2018), *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, UNFPA/PBSO.

4 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2020/167 (2 March 2020). At: <https://www.youth4peace.info/SGreport>.



YOUTH FORUM AT CSW60 BY UN WOMEN / RYAN BROWN

cy of young women and men, and included significantly fewer examples showcasing the leadership and ownership of young people in implementation of the global YPS agenda.

This Policy Brief is an attempt to assess the extent and efficacy of youth participation in the implementation and operationalisation⁵ of the global YPS agenda at country level. Inclusion and participation do not stop with global policy formation, but continue into the design, implementation and assessment of progress on the YPS agenda.

Currently, coalition-building efforts, roadmaps and similar mechanisms have been put in place to implement the YPS agenda in more than a dozen

countries.⁶ The degree of youth participation varies in these different structures and processes. In a few countries, such as in Finland, young people lead and shape these efforts collaboratively with their government. In others, including the Philippines and Nigeria, government-led processes either exclude young people or at best engage them only through what many consider to be inadequate consultation processes. In other countries, youth are still calling on stakeholders, such as State governments, the United Nations, and civil society organizations (CSOs), to understand the need to collaborate constructively with coalitions created by youth and accept their support for implementation efforts.⁷

5 The Brief speaks frequently of ‘implementation and operationalisation’ because no single word for these terms is globally understood. To avoid possible multiple interpretations, the author would like to make clear that, in the context of this Brief, a national YPS implementation process is equivalent to a national YPS operationalisation process. ‘Implementation’ is also used in a more general sense, for example as part of the umbrella term ‘implementation process’. When ‘implementation’ is mentioned beside ‘design, monitoring and assessment’, it can be considered to mean ‘operationalisation’.

6 YPS Monitor, ‘Youth Participation in National YPS Implementation’. At: <http://ypsmonitor.com/>

7 This issue has been raised, for example, by members of the Indian Coalition on YPS. Author interviews with youth participants from India (anonymous). Additional information is available at: https://www.instagram.com/yps_india/; and at <https://www.facebook.com/Youth4peace.India/>.

If the trust of young women and men is to be cultivated in the multilateral system, in international civil society organizations, and in their governments, then it is imperative that, as the global YPS agenda moves from policy to implementation, young people and youth-led organizations continue to meaningfully participate in coalition-building efforts and policy evolution, as well as monitoring and evaluation processes. In July 2020, in its most recent resolution on YPS, the UN Security Council acknowledged this, stating that it:

*Encourages Member States, regional and sub-regional organizations to develop and implement policies and programs for youth and to facilitate their constructive engagement, including through dedicated local, national and regional roadmaps on youth, peace and security, with sufficient resources, through a participatory process, in particular with young people and youth organizations and to pursue its implementation, including through the monitoring, evaluation and coordination with young people.*⁸

This Policy Brief will highlight the challenges and barriers faced by young people seeking to lead or participate in these implementation efforts, while endeavoring to share lessons learned by youth-led organizations and international peacebuilding organizations in the course of these processes. The Brief also highlights the need for meaningful youth participation in the assessment of YPS agenda implementation efforts, and seeks to illustrate some effective alternatives to formal mechanisms that are led and driven by other stakeholders. Most importantly, the Brief will demonstrate how the meaningful participation of young people in YPS implementation is essential, to hold policymakers accountable, to build a realistic, youth-inclusive perspective on the state of play in moving the YPS agenda from policy to implementation, to ensure effective YPS implementation, and to build and sustain effective international advocacy among young people across different national contexts.

⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 2535, S/RES/2535 (14 July 2020), paragraph 14. At: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535(2020)).

Methodology

The Brief is based on an initial review of data that have been collected over two years by the YPS Monitor: Content Analysis and Data Visualization project. This initiative assesses data on YPS implementation at country level and makes it visually available at <http://ypsmonitor.com/>.⁹ The data collected are sourced from publicly available documentation and information on global YPS implementation at country level, as well as one-on-one interviews.¹⁰

To obtain a more nuanced understanding of the participation of young people and youth-led peacebuilding organizations, I have strategically selected six countries on which preliminary data are available through the YPS Monitor project: the Philippines, Jordan, Finland, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and the United States. The list was selected based on a combination of factors, including: geographical diversity; access to active implementation work in these countries; and the desire to demonstrate different forms and levels of youth participation. To build on the preliminary data collected for the YPS Monitor, I conducted in-depth interviews with young people who are actively engaged or interested in engaging in national-level YPS implementation efforts in the selected countries, and had multiple peer-to-peer conversations using a 'listening and learning' methodology.¹¹ I engaged young women and men equally. In addition to the interviews, data points were drawn from various reports, concept notes, terms of reference, and national action plans. The Policy Brief is therefore in-

formed by the YPS Monitor initiative and aims to advance its work by providing further and more in depth analysis.

Given the diversity of these processes, however, the types of implementation and the quality of participation occasionally required subjective and interpretive assessment. Taking into account the various limitations of this study, it is important to recognise that there is not just one approach or answer to meaningful youth participation. Furthermore, the Brief challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about meaningful youth participation, based on engaged young people's experiences, views and opinions. The Brief does not claim to offer conclusive answers but seeks to begin a conversation, based on genuine belief in the inherent value of youth participation in all steps of the YPS agenda and the need to actively ensure it.

The Brief begins by introducing the country case studies it uses. The section below, on key findings and analysis, first assesses different manifestations of national YPS implementation processes, and then examines how the leadership and character of these processes affect the extent to which they remain meaningfully youth-inclusive. It also offers observations about persistent challenges, followed by reflection and recommendations on how to cultivate a more positive shift towards maintaining youth inclusion, from policy design to practical implementation.

9 Upadhyay, M. (2020), YPS Monitor: Content Analysis and Data Visualization. Online at: <https://www.ypsmonitor.com/>. This website is an independent, entirely youth-led initiative, which presents data on assessing the leadership, participation and inclusion of young people during implementation of the Youth, Peace & Security (YPS) agenda at national level, giving specific attention to the different forms and levels of youth participation in these efforts. The data can be searched by country and by process.

10 An example of this documentation is the '2250 Launch', which can be accessed on the Youth4Peace website (at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/index.php/node/86>) and the websites of national implementing partners.

11 Search for Common Ground, [Listening and Learning Toolkit](#).

Country contexts

Based on different findings from the collected data, the snapshots below illustrate implementation efforts in the six countries that were chosen as case studies. While the country contexts are descriptive and summarised, they are intended to provide a solid background for the analysis that follows.

Sri Lanka. A working/coordinating group, formed in 2016 during national and regional consultations for *The Missing Peace*, became the first youth-driven YPS network in Sri Lanka.¹² Youth participation was further strengthened in 2018 through a joint-UN project on 'Participation of Youth and Women in the Peacebuilding Process'.¹³ Currently, the Sri Lankan YPS Coalition¹⁴ is chaired by Chrysalis, a CSO, and CREATE Initiative,¹⁵ a youth-led organization. It is composed of 29 member organizations¹⁶ that include UN agencies, CSOs, youth-led organizations, and development agencies. To further its strategic agenda, the coalition has formed four working groups, on: advocacy; capacity building; research; and outreach and visibility. Among other things, in September 2019, the YPS Coalition developed and published a policy paper with YPS recommendations aimed at candidates in the Sri Lankan presidential election.¹⁷

The United States of America (U.S.). Founded in 2019 and co-led by young staff from Search for

Common Ground and the Alliance for Peacebuilding, the U.S. YPS Coalition consists of 50+ CSOs that work both in the U.S. and globally.¹⁸ The Coalition actively informs and engages with the U.S. Congress, advocating for the importance of youth in peacebuilding for U.S. global security efforts. Central to this strategy is advancing bi-partisan Congressional legislation, H.R. 6174: The Youth, Peace and Security Act.¹⁹ The Coalition also endeavours to create space for young people to participate in YPS implementation efforts through research, advocacy and awareness raising.

Nigeria. In October 2016, a public awareness initiative about UNSCR 2250 and its relevance for Nigeria was organized by the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), in collaboration with the Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA), and the Nigeria Civil Society Coalition on the International Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) and its New Deal for Engagement in Conflict Affected States.²⁰ Currently, there are two related but distinct YPS implementation tracks in Nigeria. The first operates through the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. In this track, the Federal Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, in collaboration with CSDEA, formed a technical team and working group (a loose coalition) in 2019 to

12 Youth, Peace and Security Coalition (2017), [Youth, Peace and Security in Sri Lanka](#), p. 7.

13 UN Volunteers (2018), [Building peace through training of youth leaders in Sri Lanka](#).

14 YPS Coalition in Sri Lanka. At: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/222619185176563/>.

15 Create Initiative. At: <https://www.facebook.com/createinit>.

16 Members of the coalition include: Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, Chrysalis, CREATE, Enable Lanka, FAO, GIZ Sri Lanka, International Youth Alliance for Peace, H3 Foundation, Hashtag Generation, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, Interfaith Colombo, International Movement for Community Development, IVolunteer International, Open House International, Partners for Change, Plan International, Rotaract, Sarvodaya, Search for Common Ground, Sri Lanka Development Journalists Forum, Sri Lanka Unites, The Asia Foundation, The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, UNDP, UNFPA, UNV, World University Service of Canada, World Vision Lanka.

17 Policy paper, unavailable online.

18 Alliance for Peacebuilding, [Youth, Peace and Security](#).

19 United States Congress, 'H.R.4838 - Youth, Peace, and Security Act of 2021'. At: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4838/titles?r=5&s=4>.

20 Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (2016), [Building Peace and Resilience in a Changing World - CSPPS 2016 Annual Report](#), p. 16.

develop a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 2250 in Nigeria.²¹ Also in 2019, over 50 youth-led and youth-focused peacebuilding organizations formed the Nigeria Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, which is co-led by seven youth-led peacebuilding organizations from seven regions of Nigeria.²² Both these initiatives share a few common members, so, while YPS implementation processes in Nigeria are completely bifurcated between governmental and youth-led initiatives, they also provide inputs to each other's processes. In November 2021, Nigeria became the first African country and the second country overall to approve a National Action Plan (NAP) on YPS.²³

Finland. In 2018, Finland became the first country to announce the development of a NAP for implementing UNSCR 2250.²⁴ This process aimed to be a youth participatory process and the entire effort is led by the Finnish 2250 network,²⁵ a consortium of youth-led peacebuilding organizations formed in 2016.²⁶ The informal 2250 network consists of 175+ individuals and organizational representatives. Its secretariat is hosted by the Finnish Youth Cooperation *Allianssi*.²⁷ The network carried out consultations with 300+ youth in 2019 and its report was submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to inform the next steps of the NAP de-

velopment process. The YPS agenda comes under the authority of the Finnish MFA, and the network coordinates with the MFA, even though the first draft of the NAP is significantly focused on the national context. Drafts of the NAP, developed by MFA, were reviewed by the Finnish 2250 network with the aim of developing specific indicators and targets. In August 2021, Finland became the first country to approve a NAP on YPS.²⁸

The Philippines. In the Philippines, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) is the leading agency responsible for YPS implementation.²⁹ OPAPP aims to develop a NAP for the Philippines in early 2022. In 2018, OPAPP organized Youth Peace Tables (YPTs), a series of three nationwide consultations with 117 key young people, representing 76 school- and community-based youth organizations/networks.³⁰ OPAPP's YPT process was undertaken in partnership with the UNDP, the National Youth Commission, and multiple CSOs. In August 2018, OPAPP finished an inter-agency (inter-ministry) workshop and developed the NAP-YPS Roadmap³¹ which was sent for review and approval by 17 State agency heads,³² including the armed forces, the National Security Council and the national police. The NAP-YPS roadmap development process also included an

21 CSDEA, 'The Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA) and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) co-host Conference on Youth, Peace and Security', 21 August 2019.

22 Building Blocks for Peace Foundation, 'Nigeria Youth 4 Peace Initiative (NGY4P)'. At: <https://bbforpeace.org/programmes/>. Nigeria Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security: at <https://www.facebook.com/NYCPSSI/>.

23 Federal Ministry of Youth, and Sports Development of Nigeria (2021), *Nigerian National Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security*.

24 Prime Minister's Office of Finland (2020), *Voluntary National Review 2020: Finland Report On The Implementation Of The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development*, p. 68. See also: 2250Finland (2021), *Finland's National Action Plan On UNSCR 2250*.

25 2250Finland, 'Finland's 2250 Network'. At: www.2250finland.fi/en/2250-network/.

26 2250Finland (2021), *Finland's National Action Plan On UNSCR 2250*.

27 Finnish Youth Cooperation-Allianssi (National Youth Council of Finland) is a national service and lobbying organization for youth work. It is a non-governmental, non-profit umbrella organization for 125 youth and youth work organizations and advocates for the rights of young people. More information is available at: <https://alli.fi/>.

28 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (2021), *Youth, Peace and Security: Finland's National Action Plan 2021-2024*.

29 Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, *OPAPP gears for youth participation in peacebuilding*.

30 Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (2018), *Pursuing Peace, Peace by Piece*, p. 24.

31 Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, *OPAPP gears for youth participation in peacebuilding*.

32 The full list of State agency heads represented is: 1. Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP); 2. Commission on Higher Education (CHED); 3. Commission on Human Rights (CHR); 4. Department of Agriculture (DA); 5. Department of National Defense (DND); 6. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA); 7. Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD); 8. National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC); 9. National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF); 10. National Economic Development Authority (NEDA); 11. National Security Council (NSC); 12. National Youth Commission (NYC); 13. Office of the Civil Defense (OCD); 14. Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP); 15. Philippine Commission on Women (PCW); 16. Philippine National Police (PNP); and 17. Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).

analysis of the youth programmes and mechanisms of various government agencies.³³ In early 2019, OPAPP promoted the ‘YPT Caravans’ initiative, a more localised and targeted consultation that aimed to include youth directly affected by armed conflict and explicitly working on peace and security.³⁴ However, completion of the NAP-YPS was disrupted when OPAPP was restructured and the unit responsible for developing the YPS NAP dismantled. It was only in early 2021 that the YPS unit was reinstated and work slowly resumed, including the stalled YPT caravan consultations.³⁵

Jordan. In December 2017, the Jordanian Ministry of Youth announced the establishment of the ‘Jordan YPS 2250 Coalition’, under the patronage of HRH Crown Prince Al Hussein.³⁶ This coalition became the world’s first coalition of government, CSOs, and UN agencies/entities to collaborate to implement UNSCR 2250. The coalition’s terms of reference (ToR) were drafted at a coordination workshop in 2018, hosted by UNFPA and the Ministry of Youth.³⁷ The Coalition consists of 22 member organizations.³⁸ It held its first official meeting in March 2019, following the selection of 20 youth members who comprise the Coalition’s ‘Voting Body’. These young people are nominated through member organisations’ youth networks. In accordance with the ToR, the first two co-chairs of the Coalition were the Crown Prince Foundation and UNFPA. In 2020 and 2021, the two co-chairs of the Coalition were Generations For Peace and UNFPA.



The Coalition conducts regular meetings to discuss collective priorities and select new member organizations, provides capacity building and representational opportunities for youth members, facilitates multi-stakeholder dialogue, and conducts an annual YPS assessment in Jordan.³⁹

33 Government of the Philippines, [Updated Philippine Development Plan \(2017-2022\), Chapter 17: Attaining Just and Lasting Peace](#), p. 8.

34 Author interviews with youth participants from the Philippines (anonymous).

35 Author interviews with youth participants from the Philippines (anonymous).

36 Generations for Peace (2017), [Minister of Youth announces Jordan 2250 Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security](#).

37 UNFPA (2020), [Jordan Youth Peace and Security 2250 National Coalition - A Year in Review](#).

38 Jordan YPS coalition members include: the British Council, the Crown Prince Foundation, Mercy Corps, Generations for Peace, Jordan Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW), Ministry of Youth, Ambassadors for Life, West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute, Terre Des Hommes, Intermediaries Change Center For Sustainable Change, Taqarob Foundation, Naya Community Network, Jordan Olympic Committee, UNFPA, UN WOMEN, UNDP, UNICEF, UNRWA, Search for Common Ground, I-Dare for Sustainable Development, and War Child.

39 UNFPA (2020), [Jordan Youth Peace and Security 2250 National Coalition - A Year in Review](#).

Key findings

The priorities and aspirations of young women and men with regard to the national implementation of the YPS agenda vary from country to country and even within countries. Youth in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Jordan and Finland said that broad changes to national policy, YPS-specific legislation, a youth-centred approach to security reform, and general funding for youth organizations, are essential for YPS implementation. For some youth in Nigeria, making sure that the process of designing and implementing existing policies is youth-inclusive took precedence over developing new policies. Many young members of the U.S. YPS coalition and Finnish 2250 network declared that it was a priority to make YPS a central element of their country's foreign policy. On the whole, the diverse strategies and priorities put forward appear not to be mutually exclusive but to indicate differences of emphasis.

Youth respondents, however, agreed on the importance of two issues: the meaningful participation of youth in YPS-related decision-making (through youth-inclusive political structures, requisite in-

stitutional infrastructure, and freedom to engage in civic and political space); and collaboration between stakeholders, including trans-generational dialogue. On NAPs, youth wanted funding commitments for implementation from stakeholders (government, UN, INGOs, corporations and other donors); an effective and inclusive evaluation process to determine progress in implementation of the YPS agenda; stronger transparency mechanisms to hold governments accountable; and involvement of youth in implementing NAPs.

“I would like to see the YPS agenda to be a common guide, one goal and collective and shared ambition/framework for all the peacebuilding organizations in Sri Lanka. Further, organizations are the channel to take the agenda to the common people, so stronger, focused and well-included youth-led peacebuilding organizations are the indicators for successful national implementation of the YPS agenda after 10 years.”

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- A Sri Lanka youth

Manifestations of the national YPS implementation processes

The implementation process has varied significantly from one context to another. In some instances, the key goal has been to establish national legislation to support the process. In the U.S., this means support for the bi-partisan YPS Act. In the Philippines, Finland, and Nigeria, the commitment has been to develop NAPs, but the process, stakeholders, and leadership in each country have varied significantly, as has the interim development of roadmaps to develop YPS implementation strategies and action plans. In other contexts, the methodology and driving force appears to focus more on national advocacy and capacity-building, as in Sri Lanka and Jordan – although there is consider-

able variation in how these are undertaken in those contexts too. The diversity of these implementation processes can be understood from observing that ‘roadmaps’ are by no means standard or uniform across contexts: there are roadmaps to NAPs and roadmaps to implementation that may or may not include a NAP.

The Missing Peace also opted for a permissive rather than prescriptive approach to YPS implementation, noting that in some instances a NAP may be the optimal entry point for implementation and to sustain governments' commitments, whereas in other instances it may be more strategic or import-

ant to build a YPS alliance or coalition and adopt a strategic partnership approach. But these are not mutually exclusive and we can see the diverse way this has played out at country level across the

globe. Another key factor that this Brief highlights is that the leading actors in national implementation influence the direction and speed of implementation processes. Let's review this in detail.

Government-led implementation

With respect to assessing momentum and progress, when compared to other options, the processes that are led by government actors (ministries/ departments/offices, etc.), as in The Philippines and Nigeria, or are heavily supported by them, as in Finland, appear to have made more progress towards institutionalising the agenda by developing implementation roadmaps or national action plans on YPS. That said, the pace (perhaps haste) and durability of the commitment of government-led processes are significantly affected by the shifting sands of political processes and priorities, occasional changes in government departments or leadership/focal points that have responsibility, and the sometimes fickle vagaries of political will. For example, political timelines and events (such as elections) put a lot of pressure on departments and

political stakeholders to make progress in a short time or perhaps emphasise particular aspects of the YPS agenda, often at the expense of others. These sorts of developments can easily fast-track, inhibit or stop the process, may generate additional resources for the agenda, or may compromise it by reducing a YPS NAP to a politically convenient and relatively quickly "ticked box".

"In my country, Government actors see this agenda as merely another document. They sometimes get to hear about challenging contexts but, as they are far from realities on the ground, they don't connect and accept that it is actually happening and it is an urgent and real need of the community.

.....
- Anonymous

UN-led implementation

UN agencies formed the national YPS coalition in Sri Lanka and co-chair the coalition in Jordan. In contexts such as Nigeria and the Philippines, some UN agencies have played a minor role in national implementation efforts. Where coalitions are led or heavily supported by UN agencies (as in Sri Lanka and Jordan), they have brought different stakeholders together and the focus has been on discussing priorities, building capacities, raising awareness, and creating representational opportunities for youth members. But these implementation processes have not always translated into commitments from the relevant ministries or governmental stakeholders. Additionally, they lack meaningful interactions between the youth in these coalitions and policy/decision makers. As one young person put it to the author, either the youth get to have a discussion with experts who cannot influence decisions, or they meet decision-makers only in settings where youth get to listen instead of having a dialogue. This is a common challenge that UN agencies face while implementing the YPS agenda,

due to their specific and limited relationship with government actors. In their assessments of UN-led implementation, young people appear frustrated: reality falls short of their expectation because UN leadership has not been able to facilitate youth access to government stakeholders.

"My term in the coalition is coming to an end but I barely got to discuss with a real decision maker. Experts are not decision makers... There will be another assessment report... But in Jordan we say 'no one is supposed to say that his olives are not good'.

.....
- A Jordanian youth

When UN agencies lead YPS implementation processes, an internal balancing act (tug of war among priorities) can prevent the UN from supporting the most favourable outcomes for YPS. Depending on the UN entity, the staff may already have a separate youth-related mandate or objective relating to education, livelihood promotion, sustainable devel-

opment or reduction of inequality. Adding the YPS portfolio to the same programmatic focal point can make it difficult for them to contribute significantly or to strategically advance YPS. Adding to this, some UN agencies tend to merge ‘preventing violent extremism (PVE)’ with YPS work in their programming.⁴⁰ This becomes very confusing for

many young peacebuilders and disappoints those who are working for the world to recognise the positive role of young people in peacebuilding, beyond violent extremism or the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. The Youth Peace Panel⁴¹ in Sri Lanka is one such example: the UN merged PVE and YPS rather than working towards a positive narrative.

INGO-led implementation

Coalitions that are led or heavily supported by INGOs tend to put more emphasis on advocacy and capacity building efforts, often with the goal of ‘localising’ the global YPS policy framework or translating and customising it at country level. While these efforts are important, they often have some counter-productive or unintended consequences. Focusing on a global policy template can eclipse important elements of national and local processes, such as the role of local legislators in shaping processes, the need to fully include nationally di-

verse youth voices, and the value of addressing specific national priorities and needs.

Interestingly, while having active government stakeholders in coalitions has been an important goal for many, INGOs in the U.S. have deliberately chosen not to include UN agencies in their coalitions (possibly due to public perceptions of the UN in the U.S.); and they engage government agencies only as an external partner and a key advocacy stakeholder.

Youth-led or mixed leadership processes

In Sri Lanka and Nigeria, the coalitions formed/led by youth are multi-partner coalitions on paper but in practice constitute a network of youth-led and youth-focused organizations. They have one or two government actors as members but these are either inactive/uninformed or engaged only in a personal capacity. Compared to the UN/government led coalitions, such networks seek to do more advocacy and to reach out and include different stakeholders. Nevertheless, empathy and support for their cause has been low. It’s even more difficult for youth-led or mixed leadership networks/coalitions to attract significant interest from governments and sometimes also from the UN. Their most immediate priority is therefore to focus on raising national awareness of the YPS agenda because they realise that achieving wider aspirations will depend on greater awareness and commitment to the YPS agenda and understanding of the positive contribution that youth can make. They do stra-

tegic advocacy, review NAP drafts or national youth policies, and build partnerships with government agencies as part of their strategy to move forward on implementation. Two common aims of these partnerships have been inclusion and establishing a foundation for further funding commitments to enable effective implementation.

“In my country, INGOs started and are leading the coalition currently. They started, which is good because others probably would not have done. But now, the coalition seems to be becoming more of a project and a baby for them. Decentralisation of the coalition is very important to ensure strong ownership of youth.”

.....
- Anonymous

All of this varies based on the national context and, most importantly, the leadership and partic-

40 For example, PVE precedes YPS in the organizational priorities of UNESCO and UNDP. See UNESCO (2017), [Preventing Violent Extremism Worldwide](#), p. 6. See also UNAOC (2021), [‘Report: Online Youth Consultation on Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport’](#), Introduction, pp. 2-3.

41 United Nations Sri Lanka (2019), [“The Potential Role of Young Leaders and Volunteers in Preventing Violent Extremism in Sri Lanka” and the launch of the “Youth Peace Panel”](#).

ularly the co-chairs of YPS coalitions. While their plans may look relatively unambitious when compared with the broader aspirations that young people have, these relatively small initial steps actually seem to be the most urgent, foundational and realistic ones, taking different barriers and challenges into account as well as the widespread lack of government commitment to significant YPS implementation.

“Running a national coalition of 25+ members requires resources. Should we get registered? Otherwise, we cannot get the funding. But if we do, we’ll become an organization and also take away resources probably from a growing YPS organization. Instead, how about supporting these important mechanisms through an additional supporting structure at the national level!

- A Sri Lankan youth

Clearly, there is no one way to implement/operationalise the YPS agenda at national level; but it is important to have a shared space in which different stakeholders can strategise YPS activities and ensure accountability and transparency, while designing and implementing their programmes. Otherwise, the gaps between youth aspirations and the realities of implementation may foster mistrust and



dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in governments. Additionally, the YPS agenda may be implemented in ways that are not conflict sensitive or in line with ‘do no harm’ approaches.

Inclusion of youth in national YPS implementation processes

The role of youth and youth-led organizations in national YPS implementation efforts varies significantly from one context to another and takes multiple forms. There are CSO-led coalitions, as in the U.S., with some youth strategically positioned but not necessarily in leadership positions; coalitions that are more explicitly youth-based and led by youth organizations/CSOs, as in Sri Lanka; coalitions that are co-led by the UN and CSOs, as in Jordan; youth-led networks, including both CSOs and youth leaders, as in Finland; government-led initiatives that seek to consult youth, as in the Philippines; and dual government/CSO led networks operating in parallel with a more fully-fledged youth-led coalition, as in Nigeria. The leading actors in national implementation processes also influence the degree to which youth stakeholders are

included in them.

Research for this Brief found that the effectiveness of pathways to youth inclusion is not only affected by the type of leadership involved, but the extent to which the design and implementation of YPS activities in fact empower and meaningfully include young people. In cases where only lip service is paid to this objective, youth risk losing voice and power over these processes. This remains true even where additional resources are invested; and certainly when youth celebrities become tokenistic substitutes for genuine youth participation.

“Limited access to the right spaces and limited people who can articulate their thoughts in these spaces are the two main

challenges and barriers. Although youth are consulted, decisions is limited to only a few [who are] politically recognised. Individual youths or those who haven't formed an organization are finding it even more challenging to engage even when

they have the most important narrative to be taken into account because they don't get an easy representation. So, a nationally developed agenda through such a process is the voice of a privileged few, not all youth.

.....
- A Filipino youth

Leadership in implementation processes

As seen in the cases of the Philippines and Nigeria, where they have led implementation, government actors appeared to see value in YPS implementation, claimed leadership over the agenda, and proactively mobilised resources for the process. However, they also tended to see the process to a great extent as self-sufficient and national, one in which diverse ministries/departments engage but which tends to exclude broad-based youth participation or reduces participation to only a few selected INGOs/CSOs/youth organizations and individuals. To the extent that limited youth involvement is envisaged, this tends to be based on a somewhat narrow notion of 'youth consultation', rather than more meaningful participation and forms of inclusion. It seems young people are still not seen as political actors and partners but as subjects to be understood by experts through consultations.

“Unlike many other countries, government people in my country are relatively more aware of these YPS frameworks and resolutions. So, awareness among government people is not a challenge. And many NGOs are also working on these. But real implementation of YPS agenda and principles on the ground is dissatisfactory for youth.”

.....
- A Nigerian youth

In Nigeria, government actors formed a separate working group on YPS to develop a NAP. According to youth interviewed for this Brief, when the youth-led national YPS network tried to work with the government working group, the latter appeared unwilling and was not open to substantial youth engagement.⁴² The government has indicated that inclusion and partnerships are limited to formal-

ly registered entities. Such bureaucratic processes not only demanded that the youth-led national YPS network had to register itself as a 'society' under government laws (in effect as if they were just another NGO), but also excluded less formal spaces and forms of youth agency as well as young people who do not belong to formal or registered organizations. This demonstrates that the government was not open to the direct and meaningful participation and inclusion of movement-based youth groups, which are largely informal and unregistered in nature. YPS is a political topic, so excluding youth groups from political association is alarming and probably related to fears about the potential socio-political agency that youth can possess.

In contexts where the government is not able to engage youth meaningfully, there may be expectations that the UN and INGOs will mediate this politicised process and create conditions for building trust between young people and their governments. But as stated earlier, YPS coalitions led by civil society or the UN have also found it difficult to ensure that young people are able to contribute actively to government processes. Some national networks/coalitions initiated by UN agencies (in Sri Lanka and Jordan, for example) have not even managed to secure meetings with government stakeholders.⁴³ Other youth are frustrated by 'one-way communication' from government ministers who do not allow them to present their needs, plans and recommendations. Even when they do meet government representatives, youth leaders have found they are always meeting 'experts', rather than able to present their own expertise. This has been a source of frustration and is not considered particularly fruitful by the young leaders involved, or helpful to advancement of the YPS agenda. It has been

⁴² Author interviews with youth participants from Nigeria (anonymous). These can also be found in CIVICUS, [Nigeria: “If passed, the NGO Bill will reduce the ability of CSOs to hold the government accountable and ensure that human rights are respected”](#).

⁴³ Author interviews with youth participants from Jordan and from Sri Lanka (anonymous).

disappointing for youth who have been looking to these governmental agencies for stronger advocacy and meaningful inclusion in decision-making.

While government-led/supported processes have made significant progress in the Philippines, Nigeria and Finland, in general governments seem to be slower to respond to queries, to complete subordinate YPS tasks (probably because they have multiple priorities to address), or to share information transparently.⁴⁴ For example, when government actors were working on a part of the YPS implementation process (drafting a NAP based on consultation with others), other stakeholders found it very difficult to obtain updates on progress, even if they were actively engaged as a partner in NAP development.

The first drafts of the NAPs developed by the governments of Nigeria and Finland were reported to lack sufficient indicators to track the progress of the entire NAP and its different sections. The youth involved in the review process identified this inadequacy and helped to develop NAP monitoring and evaluation plans. As a principle of meaningful implementation, young people should be involved in defining indicators of progress and should directly participate in monitoring and assessing progress. A strong and shared multi-stakeholder space is essential to ensure accountability and transparency for effective implementation. Further, while the NAPs in Nigeria and Finland mentioned that NGOs and youth were lead actors in several activities, it was not made clear if these groups will receive any of the funds allocated for national implementation. This demonstrates how youth included in designing NAPs may not automatically be supported to implement them.

Many of the UN-led youth networks and YPS coalitions originated in capacity development programmes, or were made possible by grants via INGOs to young peacebuilders. But there has been a lack of consistency and coordination of support and resources. As one Sri Lankan youth reflected: “in our case, UN agencies didn’t coordi-

nate sufficiently and ended up creating somehow similar youth leaders’ networks (i.e., Youth4Peace, Youth4Youth and Youth Peace Panel⁴⁵) with almost no coordination among these or with the Sri Lankan YPS Coalition which the same UN agencies initially actively supported”. This has severely hampered the potential of collective and cooperative youth voices in important decision-making spaces and processes. One consequence of diverting support and attention from organic national YPS coalitions is that the Sri Lanka YPS coalition now lacks sufficient resources to even keep its webpage running. The most recent UN Security Council resolution on YPS (Resolution 2535 of 2020) called for promotion of “coordination and coherence of youth, peace and security activities across the UN system”.⁴⁶

“It is unfortunate to see that, even within UN agencies, they don’t find ways to work together and support each other’s initiatives. Without having common recognition to this collective voice (national YPS coalition) of 25+ youth-led peacebuilding organizations, there is no way it gets included and welcomed in the national implementation work.”
.....
- A Sri Lankan

It is a reality that government leadership offers no guarantee of greater commitment to genuinely inclusive and meaningful processes, or that leadership by young people in official decision-making processes will be promoted. The same might be said of UN-led processes,⁴⁷ or even INGO-led processes, both of which face obstacles to government access, and, in the case of UN agencies, internal coordination problems with external consequences for youth.

44 Author interviews with youth participants from the Philippines, Nigeria, and Finland (anonymous).

45 United Nations Sri Lanka (2019), “The Potential Role of Young Leaders and Volunteers in Preventing Violent Extremism in Sri Lanka” and the launch of the “Youth Peace Panel”.

46 UN Security Council resolution 2535, S/RES/2535 (14 July 2020). At: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535(2020)).

47 Smith, S. (2020), ‘The United Nations: A Champion for Youth?’, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.

Common trends affecting youth inclusion in YPS implementation processes

In general, the heads or nominees of member organizations are the primary contributors to coalitions/network operations. Many of them come from privileged backgrounds, when compared to the diversity of youth in general. Coalitions seeking to foster and support implementation of the YPS agenda have often not been able to engage marginalised, non-elite, gender non-conforming, and non-urban youth, many of whom do not speak UN official languages, beyond very selective country-level consultations. In some networks/coalitions, only a few member organizations are working directly with underprivileged groups, so they tend to access only a few selected voices. Even the coalitions that are youth-led or youth-focused are not immune to this shortcoming.

“The YPS agenda is slowly becoming an elite agenda and has created a gap between those who know and those who don’t. In general, common youth are not aware of the agenda.

.....
- A Jordanian youth

It is also particularly significant that there appears to be some hesitation around the inclusion of organized, vocal and issue-oriented youth advocates connected to social/peacebuilding movements, even when the networks/coalitions boast predominantly young leadership. From the interviews conducted, it appears that there is a belief that inclusion of grassroots leaders as YPS stakeholders will not always be welcomed or appreciated by non-youth stakeholders, as this may be seen to politicise networks/coalitions, thus contributing to further sidelining youth from decision-making on YPS implementation and assessment. Since many of these YPS networks/coalitions are still relatively new, there appears to be a particular sensitivity to the politicisation of youth issues that might test the relatively fragile or embryonic connections upon which the coalitions and partnerships are founded.



HELSINKI, FINLAND BY ETHAN HU

“In my country, government actors are very open to even the most vocal, loud and critical youth movement actors. (Most of the youth peace organizations receive funding from government.) No funding is cut to such youth organizations.”

.....
- A Finnish youth

“While a Finnish youth can say so, not others.” Finland appears to be something of an exception in this respect. Finnish youth-led organizations collaborating through the national YPS network are leading implementation efforts in a close relationship with the government – and a strong social movement-based youth group is also an active coalition member.⁴⁸ In other countries, there appears to be a recently growing awareness that networks/coalitions have overlooked and therefore inadequately included youth-led social movements and their leaders.

In government-led processes, the inclusion of youth groups leading grassroots movements is even more severely affected and is even actively resisted because of the government's perceptions and sensitivities to the messages of these youth-led social movements. In one exceptional scenario in the Philippines, when the government designated a political party as a terrorist organization,⁴⁹ youth from its political youth wing were also labelled as terrorists. So, while these youth representatives were included in the previous rounds of youth consultations (Youth Peace Tables), they were barred from further youth consultations. This illustrates the dangers of a securitisation approach to youth in general, but also shows how it can severely impact the inclusion of politically engaged youth groups or youth from grassroots movements.

Intergenerational dynamics in YPS implementation processes

Overall, when talking about inclusion of young people, intergenerational communication has been a major dimension of national YPS implementation processes. It is both an asset and a limitation for young people and their organizations. Members of the youth-led Nigerian YPS Coalition indicated that they find intergenerational cooperation very encouraging, because elders in their networks/coalitions are learning about the potential and perspectives of youth. Occasionally, youth and non-youth organizations are also collaborating on joint proposals. But many young people interviewed from other YPS networks/coalitions said that intergenerational dialogue is challenging and very difficult to navigate because the occasionally authoritative and sometimes patronising mindset of older representatives mean that they do not always feel comfortable working with or under the leadership of young people.

Similarly, while INGOs often speak about youth leadership, they do not always integrate this think-

ing in their own structures and ways of operating. In the U.S., for example, the YPS coalition is led by young staff in the employ of big INGOs. In such “youth-led but adult-supervised” processes, many young people feel that middle-aged people help them bridge the gap with older people (especially with parliamentarians and political policy-makers). But they also report that at times there have been significant conflicts between youth and adult leadership on possible approaches, i.e., on political strategy and advocacy. Further, in cases where young staff represent big organizations in coalitions/networks, it remains very difficult for them to act as a young person, rather than the young face of an INGO or large CSO. There have been instances of frustration on the part of young people, over their need to seek permission when decisions are made, and over the boundaries of their roles and autonomy at coalition/network level. This also has other implications: it delays decisions and makes processes laborious.

48 Sadankomitea, History of the Committee of 100 in Finland.

49 Department of the Interior and Local Government of the Philippines, ‘Statement of the DILG on the Designation of the National Democratic Front (NDF) as a Terrorist Organization’, July 22, 2021. See also: People’s Dispatch (2021), ‘Philippines slaps terrorist label on political arm of banned communist party’.

“UN Agencies and many INGOs have a long path to go to successfully meet the checklist and frameworks they themselves create beautifully for meaningful youth participation.”

.....
- Anonymous

A shared commitment to working together in inter-generational spaces such as coalitions may trump the tendency to conflict among stakeholders, but it can also curb the more provocative strategies and demands of young people, including their protest and dissent. When governments, INGOs and UN actors share a space, such as a national coalition/network/working group, obtaining access to it may seem to be an easy means to achieve programmatic partnerships. However, this can gravitate to focus on the practical implementation of youth programmes rather than wrestling with the more existential goals associated with strategic advancement of the YPS agenda. These existential goals are about more than just inclusion of young women and men in programmes: as discussed in *The Missing Peace*, they involve their inclusion in wider social, political and economic empowerment, protection of their civic space, and ending their systemic exclusion.

Intergenerational spaces can also create conditions for the ‘decorative participation’ of youth (sometimes with informal promises of personal incentives). Even if youth are supposed to be the primary or only stakeholders with decision-making authority in a coalition, their engagement may remain tokenistic if they are kept away from orga-

nizing or from leading (co-chairing) roles. Lack of access to leadership roles can mean that youth actors never get to understand the working context, how to mobilise funds, how to prioritise resource allocation, or even set meeting agendas. Among other consequences, marginalised youth may end up tolerating more tokenism. For example, some of those interviewed said that migrant or refugee youth might become more vulnerable if they participated in such spaces: they did not find it safe to voice opinions that challenged leading stakeholders because they had a personal stake in staying in their host country.

“Youth should also learn to do community-based fundraising and in-kind partnerships. Otherwise, we end up looking up to big organizations/INGOs/UN agencies who have the funds and we are unable to challenge their implementation decisions when required.”

.....
- A Jordanian youth

Certainly, there are also downsides and obstacles to focusing on building YPS coalitions/networks. These are often slow, demanding and frequently contested spaces; they demand creative, equitable and accessible resourcing; and they do not guarantee that the aspirations to leadership of young people will be realised. Nonetheless, inclusive processes build trust between actors and inclusivity is directly related to their legitimacy. And inclusivity is about broadening the outreach to marginalised groups, beyond a homogeneous understanding of ‘youth’.

Challenges and barriers to youth inclusion and participation in national YPS implementation processes

The sections above have highlighted multiple challenges to the role, inclusion, and leadership of youth organizations in coalitions, NAPs and roadmaps. However, the majority of marginalised youth are not even in these organizations and are remote from these processes. On one hand, this is an internal challenge for youth organizations, to cross the divide that separates them from unorganized youth, rural youth, youth in armed groups or prisons or gangs, young women, LGBTQIA+ youth, and youth who are actively involved in social move-

ments that do not currently identify with the YPS agenda. On the other hand, it is a problem of the powerlessness of youth organizations which requires external support. To avert this powerlessness, many young people I spoke to said that they need: access to resources (funds, human resources, competencies); recognition (of national YPS networks); regular access to decision-makers; and meaningful inclusion (first for young people generally, also for marginalised young people).

“Many youths in the national context don't have any opportunity to participate in these implementation discussions. Others who get awareness about the YPS agenda are mostly left with almost no support to sustain themselves while continuing to work on this issue.

.....
- A Jordanian youth

Romanticising youth participation and inclusion is another danger. Youth groups are a microcosm of the wider society, so they can also be in competition with each other. In consequence, when making the shift from policy to implementation, the diversity and competition in youth communities must be considered, facilitated and navigated, rather than just wished away.

At the most simplistic level, when youth and coalition members approach government actors to discuss and negotiate inclusive implementation of the YPS agenda, they commonly find that their interlocutors are not familiar with UNSCR 2250 or the global consensus on the positive and key role of young people in peacebuilding. In many countries,

even after more than six years, the office of the permanent representative to the UN, under the Ministry of External Affairs, is often the only government agency that is fully aware of UNSCR 2250. So, for most of the youth interviewed, lack of awareness is the biggest challenge because, when basic awareness is absent among government officials, there seems to be no common ground for youth to start the discussion.

But awareness alone certainly does not solve even bigger problems. These include youth mistrust or scepticism about the relevance and impact of engaging with government stakeholders. If youth do not trust their institutions and government processes, they may choose not to engage, and thus have less space in which to make these institutions aware of the YPS agenda. So, primarily, there should be efforts to build trust; ‘raising awareness’ is only a tool to reach that goal.

Another key challenge that affects youth inclusion is how different stakeholders, including governments, consider and promote ‘volunteerism’ as a key or only means for youth engagement in YPS



YOUTHS IN NIGERIA PROTEST AGAINST BRUTALITIES AND EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS BY A ROGUE POLICE UNIT KNOWN AS SARS BY AYOOLA SALAKO

implementation, as if young peacebuilders do not need financial support to continue their engagement. ‘Volunteerism’ is a moral and social responsibility applicable to every member of the society so it should not be disproportionately imposed on youth. If women were not asked to volunteer to im-

plement the WPS agenda, it is certainly not appropriate to expect youth to mostly volunteer, or consider youth volunteerism to be the most important or only indicator to measure youth engagement in the context of national YPS implementation.

Cultivating a ‘YPS-sensitive’ shift from policy to implementation

Six years have passed since UNSCR 2250 was approved. It is inescapable that the shift from policy to implementation is and will keep shaping the different dynamics which the YPS agenda presumes and enshrines. Trust may be built or harmed during this shift. As noted in *The Missing Peace*, trust is a two-way street. It is not just about governments and others not trusting youth, but also about youth losing trust in governments, multilateral systems, and economic systems that do not benefit them because of ineffective policy implementation.

During this shift, international peace and security institutions have spent very little effort to analyse, monitor and support youth participation, leadership and ownership in operationalising the YPS agenda.⁵⁰ Consequently, there is a grave risk that, while it is important that they have engaged youth in policy-making, they may fail to sustain the engagement in design, implementation and assessment/evaluation, and may consequently appear to youth to be selective or symbolic/tokenistic. This may do more harm than good to the trust building exercise, which started with a consultative process to develop the resolution and *The Missing Peace*, and cultivate a new social contract between young people and their governments, the multilateral system and international NGOs.

This risk may also be exacerbated by the gap between vision-based and youth-inclusive policy-making at global level, on one hand, and non-delivery or implementation deficits at country- and sub-national levels, on the other. This is especially the case because young peacebuilders and human rights defenders are often most active and invested at national and local levels, and therefore this is where they are most likely to feel betrayed by

absence of support or investment in implementation by government and multilateral partners.

“Young people getting engaged in and co-leading the day to day implementation work, without tokenism, is meaningful participation. Young people invited as speakers in webinars and sessions but neither provided any support to continue their amazing work nor engaged in sharing the collective work is not meaningful. Adult buy-in is important to ensure more meaningful youth participation.

.....
- A U.S. youth

It is crucial to understand that ‘advocacy’ is rights-based. So, when they were the subject, young peacebuilders could advocate for a global consensus among stakeholders on the key and positive role that young people play in peacebuilding. But implementation (designing, implementing and evaluating national YPS operationalisation processes) is led by those with resources, institutional recognition and competencies. Most young peacebuilders lack these and that is why it becomes very easy for other stakeholders to avoid youth participation completely, or at best consult them on a limited or even tokenistic basis. This is also true because advocacy is more accessible to young people who are organized and vocal, whereas participation in design, implementation and evaluation is much more contingent on resources, political will and commitment, and sustained engagement over time. Only a few can afford to stay engaged meaningfully and actively in operationalisation processes. This widens the gap between vision-based policy-making and implementation, which becomes more elite-focused rather than inclusive.

⁵⁰ The author could not identify any research reports by prominent international institutions focused specifically on tracking youth participation in national YPS implementation processes.

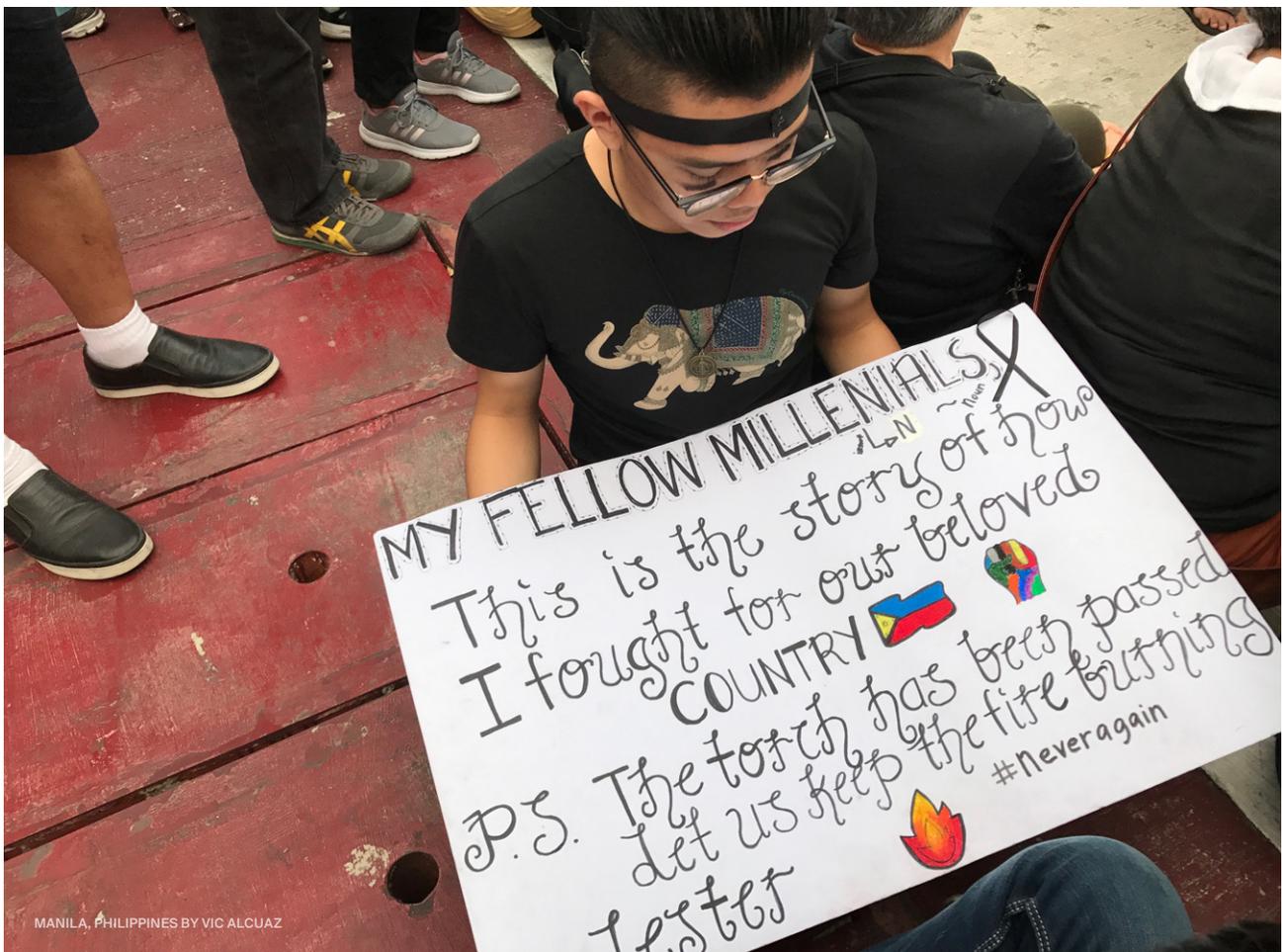
“Youth should not just be allowed to come together ad hoc to do projects but also their voices should be engaged in decision making. Youth should not just be present to be consulted by others but also be able to lobby directly, sit at the table and have a role in the implementation of the peace process (and peacebuilding processes).

.....
- A Filipino youth

When engaging with government actors, youth can face lack of sincerity (at worst) or non-prioritisation (at best) with respect to youth concerns, leadership and perspectives. Additionally, in some cases governments rely on paying lip service to youth participation, or substitute for genuine participation the token input of more palatable youth voices. Even governments that have expressed interest in implementing the YPS agenda nationally may create very little space for youth participation in their NAP consultations. For example, youth are only a minority (less than 20% of the participating group) in Nigerian NAP working group meetings.

Another important matter is that ‘youth’ is a transient category. This becomes a structural problem in the youth sector, because youth institutions struggle to cultivate and sustain an understanding of youth inclusion, and face loss of institutional memory, and loss of networks and contacts as participants age out of the youth category. As a result, over time, other groups (governments, UN, INGOs, CSOs, etc.) may come to have a more continuous presence in them and youth institutions become less representative of youth. This may happen simply because turnover in these groups is less systematic or frequent or regular than the speed at which young people outgrow their youth status. Youth participation and leadership is therefore plagued by the constant need to reproduce its capacities and commitment.

If the YPS agenda is about youth, its implementation must also be about youth. We cannot afford to exclude youth from the process when we try to address youth exclusion itself. However, youth participation in implementation and assessment comes



MANILA, PHILIPPINES BY VIC ALCUAZ

with certain costs and obligations for organizations, including a need to commit to longer processes, to create intergenerational spaces, to invest in listening to diverse youth voices, and to commit to power-sharing and co-creation with youth.

“Young people already at the deep end of the YPS agenda implementation are already close to completing 30 years. So, we need to train others and let very young youth represent youth voices and take leaderships.”

.....
- A Finnish Youth

Young people expect to be given their due recognition, importance and space in designing, implementing, monitoring and assessing progress. To have better youth participation in political spaces, youth expect to see changes in policies and struc-

tures to reduce barriers to that participation. In coalitions led by non-youth actors, meaningful youth participation occurs when INGOs, UN agencies and government actors take a supporting role and youth members start taking part in all organizing, planning, implementing and assessment activities. In going from voice to agency and leadership, there are multiple interpretations of ‘meaningful youth participation’; some are aspirational and others aim for a bare minimum. For some youth that I talked to, having the feeling that they are heard is itself meaningful. Others feel that it is meaningful when the engaged youth know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and also have an opportunity for personal growth and benefits beyond passionate engagement. Youth participation should not only be good for society, but has to also be good for young people and their growth.

Recommendations

- **Acknowledge, trust, build and support the voices, capacity, agency and leadership of young peacebuilders in national level implementation processes.** Putting youth voices at the front end of the policy development processes is not enough if it is not matched by meaningful youth participation in design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of national YPS operationalisation processes (i.e., roadmaps, NAPs, coalition building efforts, etc.). Youth perspectives, leadership and meaningful participation are essential to both the legitimacy and the efficacy of efforts to operationalise and localise national implementation of the YPS agenda. The fragile trust that may have been cultivated through global policy design processes can easily be squandered, and mistrust can even be compounded if inclusion is abandoned during national operationalisation processes. It is clearly preferable to have a youth-inclusive process to design, implement, monitor and assess progress, even if it is slow – provided that the participation of youth is meaningful and their leadership, agency and voice are guaranteed and fostered rather than compromised because of manipulation, tokenism or lack of resources.

“Education in general is very important for making youth participation more meaningful. Lack of education is an intentional act of people in power to keep common people in an underprivileged situation so that they don’t ask questions (in the language of decision makers).”

.....
- A Nigerian Youth

- **Address structural barriers that limit the meaningful inclusion of young people and create an enabling environment for the breadth of youth-led and youth-focused organizations and activities.** The quality of YPS implementation mechanisms matters and should ideally reflect the aspirations of young people and prioritise the peace and security needs of marginalised and excluded young people. This requires conscious efforts by policy-makers and youth-led organizations to address structural barriers that hinder sustainable youth leadership, the inclusion of marginalised youth, safe spaces to engage in multi-stakeholder exchange, supportive intergenerational dynamics, and formal commitment to avenues for youth to design, implement and assess operationalisation processes etc.
- **Partner with youth-led and youth-focused organizations and recognise them as equal and essential partners in national YPS implementation processes.** Many young people and youth-led peacebuilding organizations have owned the YPS agenda and are already making efforts to build national YPS implementation processes, through initial awareness raising, building networks and coalitions, or doing policy advocacy. Partnering with youth organizations and groups (formal or informal) specifically during implementation phases brings comparative advantages from young groups' vigour, creativity, reach and enthusiasm. Partnerships should be well funded, beyond expectations of youth volunteerism. ■



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