Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt Stiftung

GEN P(EACEBUILDER)

Lost in Translation

Why Latin America hasn't "owned" the YPS agenda

Author: Galia Kademian

Latin American youth have always been peacebuilders: university reformers, student resisters, Indigenous organisers, feminist activists. Their struggles anticipated many of the principles later enshrined in the UN's Youth, Peace and Security agenda. Yet, paradoxically, the agenda itself has failed to resonate in the region. For the framework to matter in Latin America, it must stop speaking about youth and start speaking with them, on their own terms, in their own vocabularies.

Biography: Galia Kademian is a lawyer and board member of the Argentine Youth Organization for the United Nations (OAJNU) and International Steering Group representative for the Americas at the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY).

1. Introduction

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, adopted by the UN Security Council in 2015, was hailed as a breakthrough in global governance. For the first time, youth were recognised not simply as victims of war or instability but as indispensable partners in peacebuilding: actors capable of shaping dialogue, preventing violence and sustaining inclusive institutions.

Yet in Latin America, the resonance of YPS has been minimal. This is striking, given that young people have long been central to the region's political and social transformations. From university reformers who challenged oligarchic elites a century ago, to student martyrs resisting dictatorships, to today's feminist, Indigenous and environmental youth movements, Latin American youth have consistently defined, contested and reimagined what peace and justice mean. If anything, their activism anticipated many of the principles enshrined in the YPS resolutions. Why then does the YPS agenda feel distant, even foreign, in this region?

2. Peacebuilding in Latin America: background of movements

The role of youth in Latin American peacebuilding cannot be understood as a recent phenomenon, nor one that emerged through UN resolutions. If anything, it is deeply rooted in the region's modern history. The emergence of a self-conscious youth movement can be traced as far back as the early twentieth century. The 1918 student-led *Reforma Universitaria* in Córdoba, Argentina gave rise to demands for the democratisation of universities, co-governance, academic freedom and a break from oligarchic traditions. Its impact spread to other countries like Peru, shaping higher education and installing the "student-intellectual" as a political actor for decades to come (Faletto, 2009). In Brazil, the *Revolução dos Tenentes* (1924) and, in Chile, the "military youth movement", signalled the emergence of youth as a generation consciously articulating itself as a transformative political force.

The mid-to-late twentieth century brought another wave of youth protagonism, this time against authoritarian regimes. In the 1970s and 1980s, student movements became the moral vanguard of democratic struggles. In Argentina, the *Noche de los Lápices* (1976) remains a haunting reminder of how secondary school students demanding basic rights were targeted by the dictatorship. In Chile, young people mobilised clandestinely against Pinochet's regime while across the region youth documented abuses, organised civic resistance and pressed for democratic restoration.

In the 1990s, Indigenous youth in Chiapas, Mexico redefined autonomy and dignity through community assemblies, educational initiatives and local governance, embodying the principles of participation and protection outside both state and UN frameworks. In Bolivia, young Indigenous activists linked to the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) helped push forward the recognition of plurinational identity and intercultural rights in constitutional reform (Ranta, 2023).

The most recent wave of youth movements has foregrounded intersectionality and rights. In Argentina, the feminist collective *Ni Una Menos* (2015) transformed the struggle against gender-based violence into a hemispheric movement, directly connecting it to abortion rights and with young women and LGBTQ+ activists at the forefront. Anti-racist youth movements have also challenged structural discrimination across Brazil, Colombia and beyond, reframing equality and dignity as non-negotiable components of peace.

Taken together, this century-long trajectory shows Latin American youth at the forefront of resistance and reconstruction through democracy, rights, feminism, indigeneity and anti-racism. Yet, it is telling that few of

these movements explicitly adopt the vocabulary of "peacebuilding"; instead, they frame their struggles through the idioms of democracy, human rights, feminism or indigeneity, which makes their contributions less visible within the global YPS discourse. In the following, I will dive deeper into why this agenda that echoes so many of Latin America's youth practices has failed to take root in the region.

3. Reasons behind the lack of ownership

1) The paradox of peace in Latin America: One explanation for the weak ownership of the YPS agenda is the dominant narrative that Latin America is already "at peace". From the 1980s onward, most states in the region democratised, while the 1990s witnessed the resolution of long-standing civil wars through negotiated agreements that, notably, avoided relapse into war: Argentina in 1983, Nicaragua in 1990, El Salvador in 1992, Guatemala in 1996 and Peru in 1998, to name but a few. This trajectory has been celebrated as a success story of the liberal peacebuilding model. As Kurtenbach observes, "Latin American governments frequently emphasise the democratic and peaceful order in the region. [...] However, although Latin America has democratised and ended wars, it is still the most violent region in the world" (Kurtenbach, 2019).

This paradox – understanding peace as absence of war amid daily violence – shapes how YPS is received. Framed as being already achieved, "peace" leaves little room for youth as ongoing peacebuilders. In official discourse, peace is equated with democracy, the rule of law and constitutional order. Yet, in practice, young people continue to face staggering levels of homicide, organised crime, gender-based violence and structural exclusion – all of which are detrimental to peace (Hatzky et. al., 2021). The YPS agenda, then, risks being dismissed as irrelevant, even though it speaks directly to the kinds of violence and exclusion that persist across the region.

2) Youth seen through a security lens: This framing of peace as something that has already been achieved not only obscures ongoing violence but also distorts how youth are perceived. Governments in Latin America often frame young people as risks rather than peacebuilders (Henao, L, 2021). This is because they are perceived as the leading cause of violence, extremism and social instability (United Nations, 2017). This criminalising gaze portrays the "young man in the barrio" as a gang member, criminal or potential extremist. This conception leads to policies ignoring youth-led peacebuilding,

without even addressing youth as victims of recruitment into violent extremist groups, let alone as agents of positive change.

The result of these limiting narratives is that entire generations are treated less as political subjects with rights and agency and more as security problems to be managed through "mano dura" (tough-on-crime) law enforcement, such as in Brazil, El Salvador and Guatemala (Simpson, 2018). As Henao (2021) has argued, this securitised framing only allows for a binary perspective, positioning young people either as perpetrators of violence or as instruments of the existing order, underestimating the wide spectrum of youth roles the YPS agenda aims to acknowledge: youth as victims of structural violence, community organisers, mediators and peace educators.

3) Political exclusion of youth: A second driver of weak ownership of the YPS agenda is the systematic exclusion of young people from meaningful political representation. Across the region, trust among young people in democratic institutions is persistently low (Berthin & Gilbert-Roberts, 2018). This scepticism is not irrational: as democratic transitions have coexisted with enduring structural violence, corruption and impunity, the promise that formal institutions will resolve everyday insecurities often rings hollow. The reasoning is: why should I trust or contribute to democracy when it fails to deliver on its promises? Where institutional channels for youth do exist, they are disproportionately routed through party youth wings (Anaya Jiménez & Ali, 2025). These structures frequently function as instruments of elite brokerage and partisan mobilisation, rewarding loyalty over deliberation or genuine discussions and narrowing the space for independent or neutral voices. For many young people, "having influence" still means aligning with a party machine, a pathway that can expose them to confrontational street politics and online or in-person harassment. This amplifies polarisation by forcing political identities into rigid partisan camps. The result is a representational asymmetry: youth who are not embedded in party networks struggle to be heard on equal terms. These gatekeeping dynamics are often reproduced in international arenas. Youth delegate schemes and multilateral consultation processes in the region are commonly filtered through government nominations, which can privilege partisan affiliates and performative inclusion over broad-based representation (Altiok & Grizelj, 2019).

Taken together, low institutional trust, party-mediated participation and politicised selection mechanisms send a consistent signal: formal politics is not built for independent youth leadership. This helps to explain why YPS is not claimed by Latin American youth: the agenda resides within the very institutional ecosystem that has historically excluded or instrumentalised

youth. In this context, many young peacebuilders deliberately organise themselves outside of party structures, developing their own organisations, languages and practices of civic action.

4) Political dynamics and policy gaps: Importantly, scepticism toward the YPS agenda is not driven solely by young people in civil society. Latin American governments themselves, across the ideological spectrum, have frequently questioned or outright dismissed UN-led frameworks. In some cases, these frameworks are portrayed as instruments of foreign interference; in others, as powerless, or they are criticised as irrelevant imports that fail to reflect domestic realities. Regardless of ideological orientation, such anti-globalist rhetoric creates an environment in which international agendas are easy to delegitimise (Kurtenbach, 2019). The consequences of this stance are clear. It erodes the political will needed to embed YPS within national strategies, since aligning with the agenda poses the risk of being framed as surrendering sovereignty or adopting "northern" priorities. The result is a framework that exists primarily in rhetoric, without the institutional infrastructure required to make it effective in practice. Unlike the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which several Latin American countries have institutionalised through National Action Plans (Biddolph & Shepherd, 2024), the YPS framework has no such anchors in the region.

5) Language and accessibility barriers: Another reason for the limited ownership of YPS in Latin America lies in the linguistic and cultural inaccessibility of the framework itself. The agenda largely circulates in the technical jargon of multilateral institutions, saturated with acronyms, policy categories and bureaucratic phrasing that rarely speak to the lived realities of young people on the ground. While this technocratic language may facilitate negotiations within UN corridors, it often obscures meaning for grassroots actors who engage daily in community-level peacebuilding. As explained by Anaya, "[m]uch of the global YPS discourse remains in English and uses technical language that can alienate many youths in Latin America" (Anaya Jiménez & Ali, 2025). The barriers are particularly acute for rural and Indigenous youth, whose political vocabularies are rooted in local languages, cultural traditions and community epistemologies.

4. The stakes: why it matters

The stakes of ownership over the YPS agenda are considerable: it determines whether youth peacebuilding in Latin America is institutionalised as public policy or

relegated to the margins of political discourse. After all, these experiences cannot be adequately measured, analysed or acknowledged if young Latin Americans themselves are not the ones naming and framing their work first.

Ownership is equally crucial for the relevance and survival of the YPS framework itself. A global agenda that fails to resonate locally forfeits its legitimacy. In this case, competing policy frameworks in human rights, development, security or climate inevitably take precedence. The danger is that YPS becomes a rhetorical accessory rather than a central reference point, thereby losing the political traction required to shape policy. Yet, the framework offers more than symbolic value: it provides a comprehensive lens for addressing participation, protection and prevention, while positioning Latin America within the global architecture of indicators, reports, multilateral bodies and National Action Plans.

The absence of stronger ownership allows governments to avoid accountability for meaningfully including young people in peace and security decisions, further weakening the agenda's credibility at the national level (Simpson, 2018). By contrast, genuine ownership would enable the YPS agenda to function simultaneously as a global standard and a locally grounded tool, ensuring that youth peacebuilding is visible, adequately resourced and institutionally recognised, rather than perpetually sidelined.

Moreover, ownership is indispensable for moving beyond the cycle of short-term, donor-driven funding. In the absence of state commitment, youth organisations remain reliant on fragmented external resources tied to shifting donor priorities. This jeopardises the sustainability of their initiatives, which too often remain temporary projects rather than consolidated, long-term contributions to peacebuilding.

5. Policy recommendations and conclusion

For the YPS agenda to gain genuine traction in Latin America, it must be reframed not as an external imposition but as an architecture that amplifies what youth in the region are already doing. This requires deliberate policy and institutional choices.

First, governments and international actors should recognise Indigenous, feminist, grassroots and student movements as legitimate expressions of YPS principles, even when they do not adopt its vocabulary. In doing so, the framework itself must be

translated into accessible, multilingual and culturally resonant terms so that rural and Indigenous youth can see their realities reflected within it.

Additionally, multilateral institutions must open independent spaces for youth participation beyond party-affiliated structures, ensuring that representation is plural, autonomous and genuinely reflective of diverse youth voices. This should be backed by meaningful investment directed toward youth-led initiatives that address structural violence and inequality, supporting their sustainability and organisational development. A decolonial approach to funding (Moorthy, 2024) allows flexible, multi-year, locally mediated support that strengthens organisational resilience and centres community voices that can be oriented to organisational development for a greater impact in their communities (Baguios et. al., 2021). Additionally, as explained in the independent YPS progress report "The Missing Peace", "to ensure transparency and public accountability of funds, young people must also be involved in financial monitoring and oversight mechanisms" (Simpson, 2018).

The absence of ownership is neither inevitable nor irreversible: if global frameworks adapt to local epistemologies, governments embrace responsibility, and donors commit to decolonial funding, the YPS agenda can evolve from a distant resolution into a living, breathing framework. Latin America has no shortage of youth leadership, innovation or courage. What is lacking is the institutional recognition and sustained investment that would allow these efforts to redefine (or adapt to) what peace and security mean in the region.

The author is responsible for the content of the article. The contribution does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung.

References

Altiok, A. and Grizelj, I. (2019). *We are here: An integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes.* New York: United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. Available at: https://unoy.org/download/we-are-here-an-integrated-approach-to-youth-inclusive-peace-processes/ (Accessed: 9 September 2025).

Anaya Jiménez, L.M. and Ali, K. (2025). Generation Peace: Youth-Driven Solutions for Security in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Leclerc, K., Yague, E.I.B., Berents, H. (eds.) *Youth Leading Change. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 147–159.

Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A., and Pinnington, R. (2021). *Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: models, approaches and challenges.* ODI Report. London: ODI. Available at: https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ODI-SH-Localisation-Report-Oct21-Proof06.pdf (Accessed: 9 September 2025).

Berthin, G. and Gilbert-Roberts, T-A. (2018). Explaining youth policy participation in Latin America and the Caribbean through social auditing processes, *Olhares Amazônicos*, 6(2), pp. 1186–1221.

Biddolph, C. and Shepherd, L. (2024). *WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation*, v4. Available at: https://www.wpsnaps.org/ (Accessed: 6 September 2025).

Faletto, E. (2009). La juventud como movimiento social en América Latina, in Siglo del Hombre Editores. CLACSO (ed.) *Dimensiones sociales, políticas y culturales del desarrollo*. Bogotá: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, pp. 265–278. Available at: https://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/coediciones/20141009050406/3.2.pdf (Accessed: 9 September 2025).

Hatzky, C., Martínez Fernández, S., Michael, J. and Wagner, H. (eds.) (2021). *¿Latinoamérica y paz?* Buenos Aires: Editorial Teseo.

Henao, L. (2021). Decolonial Feminist Peacebuilding from Latin America, in Ali Altiok (ed.) *Journal of Youth, Peace and Security. Volume 1. Issue 1.* United Network of Young Peacebuilders, pp. 8–15.

Kurtenbach, S. (2019) 'The limits of peace in Latin America', *Peacebuilding*, 7(3), pp. 283–296.

Moorthy, S. (2024). 'Understanding Power Better 4: A Decolonial Approach to Funding', *The SMC Group*, 11 December. Available at: https://thesmc.group/behind-m-e-lines/understanding-power-better-4-a-decolonial-approach-to-funding/ (Accessed: 7 September 2025).

Ranta, E. (2023). Nascent activism in times of disillusionment: struggles between Indigenous self-determination and state co-optation in plurinational Bolivia, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 19(4), pp. 841–851.

Simpson, G. (2018). The Missing Peace. UNFPA. Report No: A/72/761–S/2018/86. Available at: https://unoy.org/downloads/the-missing-peace/ (Accessed: 9 September 2025).

United Nations (2017). Youth, Peace and Security: Social Issues and Social Policies. Draft report. United Nations, 30-31 October. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2017/12/17-EGM-Advance-Report-on-Youth-Peace-and-Security.pdf (Accessed: 7 September 2025).

Sponsored by:

Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien