

GEN P(EACEBUILDER)

Tri-sector power

Youth, civil society and government engineering youth, peace and security

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Structural roadblocks to peace cannot be overcome without collective action: a collaborative strategy between youth, civil society and the government is needed. A collective and collaborative approach is essential to dismantling systemic barriers that youth face in peace and security, and to ensure that youth, civil society and the government are all part of the solution for long-term social change and a peaceful society.

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Introduction: The need for collective action in YPS

In December 2015, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 (UNSCR2250) and later Resolutions 2419 (2018), 2535 (2020) and 2807 (2025) which are collectively known as the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. The UNSCR2250 was a landmark resolution because it was the first time the UNSC recognised the efforts of young people in peacebuilding. It highlights five key pillars for youth engagement: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disarmament and reintegration. The YPS agenda is important for countries around

the world for many reasons: it shifts the narrative from youth as perpetrators of violence to youth as agents of peace; it urges countries to engage youth in decision-making, peace negotiations and implementation; it calls for an end to impunity and to protect human rights; it gives young people a greater voice at all levels; it calls to invite, include and listen to young people and it encourages increased investment in youth employment and skills training (Interpeace & Indigo Côte d'Ivoire, 2021).

Globally, youth face substantial systemic obstacles to their political engagement, and

their limited institutional influence stands in stark contrast to their demographic prominence. According to Altiok et al. (2020), 23 per cent of the world's youth are impacted by organised violence, and over 400 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 reside in areas that suffer from armed conflict. Young people are frequently "mobilised by political forces" and "conceptualised as troublemakers" rather than appreciated as contributors (Gyamfuaa-Abrefa et al., 2024). Youth are often seen through a security lens, with global narratives generally portraying them as potential dangers rather than positive change agents (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018).

Systemic obstacles to youth engagement still exist ten years after UNSCR2250, especially in Africa, which is home to more than 400 million young people. African countries continue to develop National Action Plans (NAPs) on YPS as implementation tools to address these exclusions. While early iterations focused on creating policy texts, subsequent versions seem to be emphasising inclusive processes, cross-

governmental collaboration and multi-stakeholder design (UNIDIR, 2025). Consultations between youth, ministries and government agencies are frequently organised and spurred by civil society. Nevertheless, the earlier approach suffered from persistent underfunding, creating rivalry for limited resources. These constraints are pushing young people and civil society to adopt systems-oriented methods that reject fragmented efforts and seek to develop more cohesive, long-term ways to further the YPS agenda. The systemic hurdles to youth engagement in peace and security are greater than the capacity of any single player to overcome, demanding coordinated responses. A whole-of-society strategy that is based on cost-effectiveness, trust building and intergenerational collaboration designates youth, civil society and the government all as essential partners. It can facilitate coordinated, multi-level collective impact in national, regional and international contexts (Leclerc, 2022).

The systemic barriers: Why collective action is necessary

Youth engagement in peace processes remains very low (Saferworld, 2025), owing to persistent structural and social impediments that prevent them from participating in formal and informal governance settings.

Youth are typically portrayed as "future leaders", a framing that unintentionally delays their current agency and indicates a lack of competence or qualification for leadership today (Gyamfuaa-Abrefa et al.,

2024). This framing undermines appreciation for the substantive contributions that young people already make while ignoring the immediate impact that decisions on conflict, climate change, unemployment and digital transformation have on their lives. Such exclusion reinforces generational power disparities in which older actors retain authority based on age or experience, maintaining gerontocracy and tokenistic approaches to youth involvement. Securitised narratives only serve to exacerbate these issues. Youth in unstable and conflict-affected environments are frequently depicted as possible security concerns, a framing reinforced by the “youth bulge” theory, according to which large adolescent populations in countries of the Global South are linked to instability (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018). Berents (2025) argues that this hypothesis is methodologically unsound and is based on geopolitical worries rather than empirical data. These narratives also disguise the role of adult elites, who regularly mobilise or compel youth to violence, reinforcing preconceptions of youth as conflict-prone while

concealing the structural causes stemming from older powerholders (Gyamfuaa-Abrefa et al., 2024). These dynamics breed mistrust between generations and diminishes the prospects for long-term peace.

Other challenges include actor fragmentation and resource limitations. Youth-led projects frequently lack sufficient financing, which limits project sustainability and access to peacebuilding training. Duplication and service gaps result from government departments and civil society’s compartmentalised practices and donor-driven agendas. Although these structural obstacles are widely acknowledged, there have been few concerted attempts to overcome them, especially in neoliberal development models that perpetuate exclusion (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018). Integrated, cross-sector cooperation that makes use of group capabilities is necessary to overcome these obstacles. Thus, the YPS agenda reflects a change toward intergenerational, holistic methods that are crucial for creating societies that are just and peaceful.

The actors and their roles

The government, civil society and young people all have a significant part to play in creating the institutional framework required to guarantee the long-term success

and sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives.

a) Youth as change agents

Young people are key to civic participation, peacebuilding and conflict prevention because they frequently donate their time and skills to improve community cohesion. Their contributions go beyond conventional methods of resolving conflicts; they provide fresh, contextually relevant viewpoints that enhance peace initiatives. Kenya's youth-led campaign *#Peacemtaani*, or "peace in the streets", is a noteworthy example. Through tailored civic education, it aimed to change the narratives surrounding tensions before and after the 2022 elections. The programme used popular music, graffiti art and creative public engagement to spread messages of peace, acknowledging that many young Kenyans rely on *matatus* ("minivans") for everyday public transportation. Promoting voter awareness and civic duty were the main focus of pre-election marketing; online campaigns and virtual concerts took place during the election period and cohesion-focused messaging followed. By December 2021, the project had reportedly reached one million young people. Despite its influence, *#Peacemtaani*, like many other youth-led initiatives, suffers from sustainability issues due to a lack of institutional support and funding, threatening its long-term viability ahead of future elections (UNDP, 2022).

b) Civil-society as bridge-builders

Civil society's role in advocacy, accountability and capacity building has been instrumental in building bridges in society as well as amplifying youth voices and channelling grassroots demands to higher levels. A good example of such an organisation is Faraja Africa Foundation, a youth-led and youth-serving organisation in East Africa that was founded in 2013. The organisation has engaged in several youth and governmental projects. For instance, it worked to bridge the interests of youth and government for inclusive policymaking across the East Africa region through the National Youth Parliament for the East Africa Region. It launched the East Africa Youth Parliament under the East Africa Community which was later institutionalised by the East African Legislative Assembly. These regional platforms successfully advocated for a unified tuition policy across East African universities. They connect youth directly with policymakers and within youth parliaments, forums, debates and advocacy campaigns by facilitating structured dialogues and amplifying Community conversations (Faraja Africa Foundation, 2013).

c) Government as enablers or gatekeepers

The UN and AU have continuously promoted civic involvement and conditions that

encourage youth and civil society since the 1972 Stockholm debates, i.e. the UN Conference on the Human Environment, which established the first significant global agreement on the relationship between human activity, environmental protection and development. The AU-backed support for Burundi's NAP on YPS by President Ndayishimiye as well as the collaborative creation of NAPs in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are two recent examples of UN and AU efforts to encourage youth and civil society involvement in peace and security matters. Although both nations

complain that ongoing funding shortages impede implementation, such a partnership nevertheless increases coordination and creates legitimacy. Government commitment must continue to be sustained. Rwanda's investment in Gacaca community courts serves as an example of how state-led systems can expand peace interventions across the country, demonstrating that full governmental ownership is necessary for disarmament, reintegration and peace education to be successful (African Union, 2023; Hagos, 2025).

The collective impact framework: A strategy for collaboration

States and institutions must radically rethink how cross-sector collaboration is used to implement the YPS agenda in a way that is both sustainable and transformative. Because it emphasises long-term, systematic, systems-oriented responses to difficult social concerns, the collective impact framework (Kania & Kramer, 2011) provides an appealing model for such redesigned cooperation. Collective effect necessitates a higher level of alignment through five key requirements and stands in contrast to standard multi-stakeholder collaborations which sometimes rely on loosely coordinated activities. To meet the first requirement, a shared agenda, diverse participants must develop a theory of change and establish a common understanding of the issue. The

next step involves creating shared measuring tools that enable consistent progress tracking and comparable evaluation across organisations. Stakeholders can then contribute their individual strengths while coordinating efforts within an integrated action plan, thanks to the third component, mutually reinforcing actions. Building trust, maintaining transparency and promoting evidence-based decision-making without favouring any one actor's priorities all hinge on the fourth requirement, continuous communication. Finally, to be successful, a large collaborative endeavour requires a dedicated, professional support team (the "Backbone Organisation") that handles all logistics and data. This team must be independent and unbiased to guarantee that

everyone trusts its judgments and that the entire effort is consistent (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Successful applications in the health and education sectors show the potential of the collective impact strategy to address deeply engrained systemic issues, although evidence of its efficacy in the peace and security arena is still emerging. When the framework is applied to the YPS agenda, it could synchronise the relative strengths of government, civil society and youth: governments guarantee institutionalisation and national reach, civil society builds capacity

and advocacy, and youth offer energy and local expertise.

This strategy would increase the sustainability of peace outcomes, decrease effort duplication and promote intergenerational trust. Additionally, donor approaches must change from competitive, “leading boldly” paradigms to catalytic philanthropy that promotes co-created, community-driven solutions (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018). This change would guarantee that youth priorities, voices and experiences will continue to be crucial in creating inclusive and resilient peacebuilding structures.

Best practices: Nigeria’s National Action Plan on YPS

A best practice example for a collective approach to implementing YPS is the Nigerian process to developing an NAP, which was the first country in Africa to do so. It offers new hope and proof that the government, youth and civil society can indeed work together for the common good. It showed that when everyone has a seat at the table, the result can be more resilient and more legitimate. The inclusion of Nigerian youth in national security dialogues has paved the way for many other African countries to start having multi-stakeholder engagement in NAP processes that allow youth to co-lead and take their rightful seat at the table. Nigeria made it possible for more countries in Africa to start working on their own NAPs. African countries having

launched NAPs so far include Nigeria in 2021, the DRC in 2022, Malawi and South Sudan in 2024, as well as Burundi, the Gambia, Liberia and Cameroon in 2025 (ConnexUs, 2025).

Young people in Nigeria overcame systemic barriers by working collaboratively on the NAP and using a multi-stakeholder, participatory design. The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports worked together with the Nigeria coalition on YPS, which has a membership of over 1000 civil society partners. They also held robust, grassroots-led consultations directly engaging youth and diverse stakeholders. This comprehensive form of engagement ensured the plan was grounded in the lived experiences and priorities of Nigerian youth (Nigeria Coalition on

Youth Peace and Security & Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2023).

Recommendations

A collective strategy to implement the YPS agenda builds on the comparative strengths of the government, civil society and youth, and it benefits all of them. Governments are the architects of national progress, and implementing the YPS agenda with a collective strategy offers a cohesive framework to enhance the impact of existing policies and programmes. It demonstrates the government's commitment to a future where youth are empowered as partners in building a stable and prosperous nation. By fostering intergenerational collaboration, the government can unlock innovative strategies, build broader societal trust and ensure the sustainability of the national developmental goals. This is an opportunity for the government to leave behind a legacy of inclusive governance and shared prosperity.

The dedication of civil society makes up the heart of the YPS movement. Civil society organisations are on the front lines, and they are deeply connected to the needs and aspirations of communities. By adopting a collective impact strategy, civil society

should be provided with a platform to amplify the voices of youth through coalitions, strengthen their advocacy efforts and forge meaningful partnerships with government and other stakeholders. By aligning civil society initiatives within national frameworks, civil society gains greater potential for increased impact in policy engagements.

Youth actors constitute the energy and vision of YPS. Their lived realities and experiences are the driving force for a better tomorrow. By adopting a collective impact framework, youth actors could be recognised not as mere beneficiaries of programmes but as essential leaders and partners in shaping a nation's future. A collective strategy provides a pathway for the youth voice to be heard, for their ideas to be realised and for their potential to be fully unleashed in collaboration with other actors. Its adoption would be an invitation to the youth to take a seat at the table and co-create a healthy, just and peaceful society for the present and coming generations.

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