Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt Stiftung

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From the front lines to policy tables

Advancing youth participation in Lebanon

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Lebanese youth have been working on the front lines of responding to Lebanon's overlapping crises, addressing humanitarian needs, supporting community recovery and promoting social cohesion. Yet, they remain systematically excluded from formal political decision-making processes, and their contributions are unrecognised within national governance structures. To change this, Lebanon needs a National Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security that leverages the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus and ensures the participation and protection of youth which is essential to localise the agenda according to local needs. Such a plan would establish an institutional pathway for meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding and recovery processes.

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Introduction

Since 2011, Lebanon has hosted over 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which has strained public services and the labour market. Since 2019, Lebanon has faced a series of overlapping crises. Nationwide protests were followed by a banking collapse that restricted access to deposits and triggered the currency depreciating over 98 per cent (World Bank, 2023), with inflation reaching 221.3 per cent (IMF, 2024). The situation worsened with the Beirut explosion in 2020, which killed at least 200 people, injured 6,500 and displaced 300,000 (INSARAG Secretariat, 2020). All these crises unfolded amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, since 2023, Israeli attacks have killed over 4,000 people and displaced more than 1.2 million, further exacerbating the country's humanitarian, social and economic challenges (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Lebanese youth are not only bearing the brunt of the ongoing Israeli attacks, through

disrupted education, widespread psychological trauma, forced displacement and other consequences. Above all, they are the main victims of a failed state that fails to provide basic services to its citizens. Youth have contributed to the recovery efforts of every crisis Lebanon has faced since 2006, addressing the diverse needs of their communities, operating with limited resources and through non-hierarchic forms of organisation. However, these recurrent crises have had a severe impact on them, leading to a high unemployment rate and an increased dropout rate from educational institutions, which, in turn, hinders their engagement in peacebuilding and recovery efforts. Youth remain systematically excluded from formal political decision-making processes and their contributions are unacknowledged.

In this context, the UN's Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda is very relevant to Lebanon. The systematic exclusion of youth from political decision-making aligns directly with its "participation" pillar, which calls for creating formal avenues for youth to influence policies affecting their lives. The security risks that young Lebanese people encounter during protests, community mobilisation and frontline crisis response underscore the importance of the "protection" pillar. Implementation of the YPS agenda in Lebanon can ensure that youth can contribute to peacebuilding and recovery without facing harm or marginalisation.

This paper argues that integrating the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus into a National Action Plan (NAP) on YPS is essential to ensure youth are meaningfully included in political decision-making processes. This would transform their participation from informal involvement into structured engagement in peacebuilding and recovery. Implementing the YPS agenda in Lebanon requires inclusive coordination between government, civil society and youth-led organisations, dedicated support for the NAP and monitoring structures to ensure sustained youth participation in all policy stages.

Youth in humanitarian action

Youth in Lebanon make up a significant share of the population – around 24 per cent of the Lebanese population is under 24 years old (UNICEF Lebanon, 2025). The Lebanese Ministry of Youth and Sports defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 29 years old. However, youth in Lebanon reject rigid age categories and define themselves by qualities like ambition, resilience and energy rather than by a number. They utilise these traits to mobilise themselves to respond to the overlapping crises in the

country. Youth mobilisation in Lebanon takes three forms: conformist, non-governmental organisation and progressive activism (Harb, 2021):

1. *Conformist*: Each of the 10 political parties has its own institution that serves and mobilises youth through sports, leisure, cultural events and other forms of social or religious activities or services. For example, the Free Patriotic Movement operates a youth sector that organises cultural workshops, football tournaments and other activities.

2. *Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO):* Youth play an essential role in the Lebanese NGO sector. They often volunteer in NGOs; some receive a daily subsistence allowance, and others are paid based on their professional experience and background. For example, Amel association provides educational, protection and medical services across disadvantaged regions in Lebanon.

3. *Progressive activists:* Youth mobilise themselves in various grassroots and community-based initiatives. Usually, they are organised as a group of friends or collectives which have emerged from post-crisis action. One example is Lihaqqi, which is a socio-political organisation committed to promoting participatory democracy, social and economic justice, and systemic reform through community-led activism and policy advocacy, supporting the people and their rights.

Taken together, youth are the biggest contributors to the country's humanitarian sector. To take one example: 8,876 youth contributed to the front-line humanitarian response during the 2024 Israeli war crisis (UNICEF Lebanon, 2025), demonstrating a significant level of engagement among youth. They were deployed by different local organisations such as the Lebanese Red Cross and were engaged across multiple sectors such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, education and protection.

In addition to these organised deployments, numerous undocumented youth-led initiatives have operated independently. Youth are dedicating their time, resources and personal efforts to fundraising, organising and implementing community-based humanitarian actions. These progressive activists, leading informal, independent initiatives, are precisely the groups whose actions embody the HDP nexus, but whose exclusion is most profound due to a lack of institutional recognition.

The Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus

The recurrent and protracted crises that Lebanon continues to face require organisations and informal humanitarian assistance groups to provide services, distribute in-kind donations and implement psychological first aid. These immediate responses are vital to support communities. However, it must be ensured that the human and economic resources mobilised during emergencies are utilised to support long-term recovery, not just immediate crisis response. Humanitarian assistance in Lebanon must move beyond short-term relief and connect the emergency response efforts to structural development and peacebuilding objectives. This is where the HDP nexus becomes essential.

The HDP nexus was endorsed during the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in 2016 through the "New Way of Working" framework signed by the UN Secretary-General and nine UN Principals at the WHS and endorsed by the World Bank and IOM (United Nations, n.d). It aims to guide countries in navigating complex and recurring crises and to coordinate and integrate actions across sectors to bridge the gap between short-term humanitarian interventions and long-term peace development. The HDP nexus and the YPS agenda are interlinked, sharing common mechanisms and objectives rooted in promoting lasting stability and reducing the recurrence of humanitarian crises. The YPS agenda was formally established by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 in 2015. The resolution outlines five interlinked pillars of action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. The prevention pillar of the YPS agenda is at the heart of the HDP nexus because it links all three pillars (humanitarian aid, development and peace) by addressing the root causes of crises rather than their symptoms. The YPS agenda, like the HDP nexus, recognises young people as key actors in preventing conflict and sustaining peace.

Resolution 2250 (2015) was followed by three other resolutions on YPS: Resolution 2419 (2018), Resolution 2535 (2020) and Resolution 2807 (2025). The YPS agenda doesn't explicitly refer to the HDP nexus. However, Resolution 2535 highlights that the meaningful engagement of youth in humanitarian planning and response strengthens the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and fosters more inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding processes.

An example of Lebanese youth embodying

the HDP nexus is the organisation Peace of Art in the Bekaa region that uses sport and art to strengthen social cohesion and community dialogue. After the Israeli attacks, the organisation adapted its programming to provide immediate humanitarian aid while continuing to support youth engagement in peacebuilding (Peace of Art, 2025). While powerful, these youth-led interventions are unscalable without institutional support and integration into national planning.

The HDP nexus remains underrepresented in general YPS programming and policy debates. In theory, YPS programming aims to be holistic. Resolution 2535 implicitly aligns YPS with the HDP nexus, as it calls for youth to be included across all phases of crisis. In practice, however, YPS discussions and policies often remain narrowly focused on peace and security concerns. At least three factors explain why the HDP nexus is sidelined in YPS discussions.

First, there is shrinking funding for youth-led initiatives. To date, the UN system does not disaggregate collected data on peacebuilding financing based on age. This significantly limits the available evidence base for identifying the financing needs of youth-led community service organisations, which makes it difficult to coordinate youth-focused work across humanitarian, development and peace actors (OSGEY & UNOY, 2023).

Second, in many contexts worldwide, policymakers still frame youth as a threat, limiting their inclusion in national emergency response plans. While the YPS agenda highlights youth as potential actors for peace, it remains common among certain governments to highlight them as a threat. For example, during the recent GenZ212 protests in Morocco, the government treated youth mobilisation as a threat to public order (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The third reason why the HDP nexus is sidelined in YPS discussions is limited cross-sector planning. UN youth strategies are drafted without the meaningful engagement of the most vulnerable and hard to reach youth, leading to the funding of strategies that do not reflect realities on the ground (OSGEY & UNOY, 2023).

Including the HDP nexus in YPS discussions is important to ensure that YPS programmes are more conflict-sensitive, sustainable and impactful. For example, a YPS project that focuses solely on youth dialogue and mediation is valuable but may fail to create lasting change if it does not include a development component based on local needs such as education, job creation or humanitarian assistance in crisis situations. Explicitly integrating the HDP nexus into YPS efforts is necessary to ensure that youth-led initiatives are scalable, sustainable and aligned with national planning.

Policy landscape: Youth in decision-making

Youth in Lebanon are often perceived as a burden that needs to be supported, trained, educated and integrated into the economy (Harb, 2021). The global YPS agenda incited a narrative shift, recognising the important and positive role of youth in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

One way to implement the YPS agenda is through an NAP, a strategic policy framework that defines how the government, civil society and other stakeholders will systematically implement and contextualise the five pillars of the YPS agenda. To date, 11 countries have adopted an NAP on YPS. In Southwest Asia*, Jordan is the only country that has adopted a fully developed NAP on YPS. The Arab League endorsed a Regional Strategy on YPS in 2023, but its operationalisation across member states has been slow and uneven. Lebanon has not yet developed or adopted an NAP on YPS.

According to the YPS monitor country analysis, which is a youth-led initiative tracking how countries implement the YPS agenda. Lebanon ranks at priority #27 out of 195 to develop an NAP (YPS Monitor, 2025). Lebanese efforts to include youth are minimal and insufficient. In 2012, the Ministry of Youth and Sports developed a National Youth Policy including 133 policy recommendations with the goal of improving youth lives. However, the policy merely paid lip service to the urgent needs of Lebanese youth rather than addressing them (UNFPA Lebanon, 2025). Several factors hindered the implementation of this policy such as the absence of adequate funding, relevant laws and a concrete action plan with follow-up mechanisms. In partnership with two UN agencies, UNICEF and UNFPA, the ministry launched the 2022-2024 National Youth Policy Action Plan (following up on the 2012 policy). But a lack of political will and significant institutional dysfunction hinders the transition from policy adoption to actual implementation.

In addition, the minimum voting age limits youth political participation in Lebanon. Young people in Lebanon must wait until the age of 21 to vote in elections, and 25 is the minimum age to run for parliament. The youngest member of the parliament in Lebanon is 28 years old and inherited the seat from a parent who previously held the position (Bou Khzam, 2022).

Lastly, the framing of youth provides a barrier to their meaningful participation. In Lebanon, youth are referred to as “leaders in the making”, which underestimates their true power to be part of the decisions that directly affect their quality of life (Abou Melhem, 2019). This is a form of age-based political tokenism that needs to be

dismantled. This mindset is a crucial barrier to formal youth inclusion. Addressing these barriers and recognising youth as active stakeholders is essential for embedding youth participation within broader frameworks like the HDP nexus, ensuring that youth contributions are not symbolic but meaningfully integrated into national planning and crisis response.

Policy recommendations

Considering Lebanon's ongoing political and socioeconomic challenges, developing an NAP on YPS is critical. As a first step, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and a representative group of Lebanese youth should establish a National Youth Advisory Council to guide the process. The council must ensure the equal representation of diverse Lebanese youth, from different regions, religions and sects, as well as youth with disabilities and other marginalised groups, and it must avoid nepotism. Council membership should be determined through a transparent selection process, with applications evaluated based on relevant experience and knowledge in humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and YPS.

Members from the Youth Advisory Council should participate independently with equal decision-making authority and access to the same information as other stakeholders. Youth inclusion is required at every stage: from consultation and policy design, to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

It is essential to localise the YPS agenda and address the unique needs of Lebanese youth. Therefore, the five YPS pillars should be reflected in a clear implementation path. A particular focus on the participation and protection pillars is critical given that Lebanese youth are largely excluded from current decision-making processes and face security risks during their activism and crisis response. A context-sensitive Lebanese NAP on YPS should also reflect the HDP nexus. While several youth-led initiatives and humanitarian efforts in Lebanon are already working within this nexus, it should be formally included within the NAP to ensure that youth-led initiatives are coordinated, sustainable, impactful. Without institutional support, efforts remain largely unrecognised and unscalable. Alongside the development of an NAP on YPS, Lebanon should adopt the HDP nexus approach to ensure more coherent and sustainable recovery outcomes. This requires aligning donor funding with nexus objectives by encouraging multi-year, flexible financing that bridges emergency relief with long-term development and peacebuilding. Efforts should also be better coordinated among humanitarian,

development and peace actors to minimise duplication and promote complementary, context-responsive interventions. By fostering strategic cross-sectoral partnerships, Lebanon can diversify its response portfolio to address immediate humanitarian needs while also tackling structural drivers of instability such as youth unemployment, exclusion and weakened governance.

Joint efforts by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, other relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education, UN agencies and local NGOs, including youth-led organisations, are needed to build the capacity of youth and encourage them to align their interventions with the HDP nexus model.

Once an NAP has been developed, it is crucial to ensure its effective implementation. The government of Lebanon, in collaboration with international donors and development partners, should allocate a dedicated budget for its implementation. This should be complemented by a regular review process, clear control mechanisms and publicly available accountability reports to monitor progress, assess outcomes and ensure transparency.

Implementing these recommendations would be a crucial step toward ensuring youth participation in national decision-making processes and empowering them to contribute effectively to recovery and peacebuilding.

* SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) is a geographically accurate term that resists colonial labels. It acknowledges the region's diversity and avoids the Eurocentric implications of the "Middle East", which centers Europe as the reference point. MENA (Middle East and North Africa): This term, coined by Western powers, reflects colonial perspectives and often erases the distinct identities and cultures within the region. "Middle East" was defined in relation to Europe, thus reinforcing colonial geographies (Laghssais, Chokairi and Benslimane, 2023).

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

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