Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt Stiftung

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When youth engagement means one delegate

Between symbolism and substance in the YPS agenda

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UN Youth Delegate programmes open doors for a few young people into international politics. But when a single delegate equals "youth participation", it is performance, not power. States use these delegates to tick the participation pillar of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda while ignoring structural change and the other four pillars. The programme must be redesigned to ensure genuine, diverse youth inclusion and reframed to be linked to wider efforts to implement the agenda.

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Introduction

The UN Youth Delegate (UNYD) programme is often described as a gateway for young people into international politics. Yet, if it is a gate, it opens for only a few, while most young voices remain stuck outside.

States are quick to point to "their" Youth Delegate(s) as proof that they are implementing the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. The YPS agenda recognises young people as agents in preventing conflict, building peace and shaping more inclusive security policies. It emerged from years of youth activism and organising, and it sets a clear expectation for governments and institutions: Youth participation is not meant to be a photo opportunity or a side event. It is supposed to shift who is listened to, who sits at the table and who has a say in decisions about peace and security.

In practice, however, many governments have embraced a much narrower interpretation of this ambition. Instead of redesigning institutions and processes, they rely on highly selective youth participation programmes to show that they are "doing" YPS. UNYD programmes are a key example of this trend. They create important opportunities for a small number of young people, but

they also risk turning participation into something that is symbolic rather than structural. When youth engagement means one delegate, participation becomes easier to manage, but it remains far from the broad and diverse youth constituencies that the agenda promises to include.

This paper argues that UNYD programmes have come to function as a convenient shortcut for implementing the participation pillar of the YPS agenda, especially in Europe. They allow states to claim progress in YPS implementation while avoiding more difficult questions about power, access and inequality. Nevertheless, they are not completely meaningless. For those who are selected, these programmes can open doors, amplify youth perspectives and connect local struggles to global debates. The tension between symbolism and substance runs through every aspect of these programmes. Throughout the paper, European UNYD programmes are used as a case study to explore this tension. First, the essay outlines how these programmes work and how they are framed as a response to the YPS agenda. It then examines who gets to become a Youth Delegate, whose voices are left out and how this reflects broader regional and socioeconomic inequalities. Finally, it provides recommendations for how to move from symbolic representation towards more structural forms of youth inclusion and link Youth Delegate models to wider efforts to implement the agenda in practice.

I write from a specific position: I am a white cis-woman, born and socialised in Germany, and I served as Germany's UNYD in 2024–2025. This experience gave me rare access to international diplomacy and to conversations that most young people never see. I was also confronted with the limits of speaking "for" a generation in spaces that were never designed with us, young people, in mind. This essay grows out of that contradiction: recognising the value of these programmes, while questioning what it means when they become the only way that countries claim to include young people in matters of peace and security.

The UNYD Programme

To understand UNYD programmes better, it is useful to look at how they were created and how they work in practice. This section outlines the UN resolutions that set out the formal expectations around Youth Delegates and how states have translated those into national programmes.

The inclusion of young people in official national delegations to the UN General Assembly was first mentioned in a resolution

in 1981 (UNGA, 1981). A resolution from 1986 not only repeated this call but also specified that youth representatives should be included "whenever possible" in delegations to the General Assembly and other relevant UN bodies, "with a view to stimulating the participation of young women and men in the implementation of the Programme of Action" (UNGA, 1986). This approach was confirmed and further developed in the World Programme of Action for Youth, adopted in 1995 and revised several times, which frames youth participation in decision-making as a central objective (United Nations, 1995).

A distinct feature of UNYD programmes is their mode of representation. Youth Delegates are expected to consult with diverse young people in their country and bring these perspectives into international spaces; they are meant to be representatives, not merely to speak for themselves. In practice, the degree of independence they enjoy from their governments varies. In some European countries, national youth councils play a strong role in the selection of delegates and offer support throughout the mandate, which can create space for more critical positions. In other contexts, Youth Delegates are selected directly by ministries or foreign offices, hence requiring them to align more closely with official positions and potentially giving them less room to challenge their governments publicly.

Unlike many youth-led civil society organisations, UNYDs are a formal part of their countries' official delegations to the General Assembly or to specific conferences, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission for Social Development or the High-level Political Forum. This gives them a different and privileged kind of access: they can attend negotiations that are closed to most non-governmental organisations, organise side events at their country's permanent mission and, in some cases, speak on behalf of their country in official meetings.

At the same time, UNYD programmes exist alongside a growing number of youth roles in other international formats. The G7 and G20 Youth Summits, for example, bring together large numbers of accredited youth representatives each year as part of official engagement groups. Yet, these processes are often organised parallel to the leaders' summits and remain largely siloed from where final decisions are made. This separation underlines a broader tension: while states invest in visible youth spaces, only a few have translated this into systematic youth inclusion in their core diplomatic work, such as at the UN. Among G7 member states, only Germany and Italy have an official UNYD programme; among G20 members, only Australia, Germany, Italy and Mexico currently do so. It raises the question of whether the visible political commitment

to youth participation is about staging youth-branded events or about genuinely sharing access and influence within existing power structures.

Youth Delegates often describe their role as being bridge-builders: between their country and the UN, between civil society and governments, and between young people at home and decision-makers in New York. The concrete framework for their work differs from country to country. Most programmes appoint one or two delegates; a few have larger teams or thematic roles, for instance a dedicated climate Youth Delegate in the case of Switzerland or Denmark (Curlo et al., 2023). Mandates typically last one or two years, although in some cases they run for 18 months in an overlapping system. In many programmes, Youth Delegates work on a voluntary basis and while travel and direct programme expenses are often covered, there is usually no remuneration for their time and labour (Ibid.).

Being part of an official delegation matters. Youth Delegates can access diplomatic spaces and influence how their country is seen on the international stage. They can raise youth perspectives in national coordination meetings, suggest amendments to resolutions and help shape side events that highlight issues important to young people. At the same time, the impact they can have on actual peace and security policies depends on how their mandate is designed, how much support they receive at home and how willing their governments are to treat youth input as more than a symbolic gesture.

The YPS agenda

To ensure that this paper is accessible both for those that have never heard of the YPS agenda as well as those that have worked extensively on its implementation, a short introduction to the agenda is required.

Young people have organised themselves, built peace and shaped political decisions long before the UN recognised them in a formal agenda and adopted a resolution in New York. The YPS agenda put this reality into the language of international norms and into a framework to which states can be held accountable. Since 2015, four Security Council resolutions have defined and expanded this framework. Resolution 2250 (2015) was the first to recognise young people as important actors in the maintenance of international peace and security. Resolution 2419 (2018) strengthened the call to include youth in peace processes and resolution 2535 (2020) clarified the responsibility of states and UN entities to implement the agenda in a more systematic way. The most recent resolution 2807 (2025) reinforced

these commitments and underlined the need to move from ad hoc initiatives to more structural forms of youth inclusion in peace and security. The YPS agenda is often described through its five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration. Together, they point to a simple but powerful idea: peaceful societies need institutions that take young people seriously as rights-holders, as political actors and as people directly affected by conflict and insecurity.

For this paper, the participation pillar is particularly important. It calls for the inclusive representation of young people in political decision-making at all levels and demands that youth perspectives are taken into account when peace agreements are negotiated and implemented. In other words, participation is not just about being present in a room. It is about having the information, the support and the power needed to influence outcomes.

The other pillars matter too, especially for young people living in or fleeing from conflict-affected contexts. The protection pillar focuses on shielding them, among other civilians, from violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, and on ensuring that their human rights are respected. The prevention pillar highlights the role of states in addressing the conditions that can fuel violence and exclusion and in creating environments where young people have alternatives to joining armed groups. Partnership and disengagement and reintegration emphasise collaboration with youth and youth-led organisations, and the need for tailored support for those leaving armed groups or returning from conflict situations. Taken together, these pillars demonstrate that peace and security cannot be built for young people without young people. Taking their needs and voices seriously in peace processes is not only a question of fairness. Evidence from the first YPS progress study from 2018 indicates that meaningful youth inclusion can help strengthen the legitimacy and implementation of peace agreements and thus contribute to more sustainable peace (Simpson, 2018).

UNYDs as implementation of the YPS agenda

This section examines the intersection between UNYD programmes and the YPS agenda. While there are many aspects of UNYD programmes that could be improved, for instance how they are set up and integrated into a country's national and ministerial structures, there is also a lot of potential in the mandate. UNYD programmes are a concrete, partly state-driven policy tool that enables young people to

participate in UN conferences and the General Assembly, with at least some mandate to speak about youth concerns. The fact that these programmes exist and are funded by member states shows a recognition that further youth engagement in international politics is needed up to the highest level, the UN itself.

Yet, their current design and framing risk turning this potential into a narrow exercise that "ticks the participation pillar" while leaving structural inclusion (and the other YPS pillars) largely untouched. The problems are structural. First, there is a strong regional imbalance: more than 30 out of roughly 40 UNYD programmes worldwide are European, resulting in European perspectives dominating funding, room presence and speaking time (Curlo et al., 2023). Non-European UNYD programmes often carry disproportionate representational weight, sometimes expected to speak for entire continents. Second, within Europe, the programmes reproduce socioeconomic exclusion. With almost no financial remuneration, high language barriers and selection based on prior experience, they systematically favour privileged, urban youth (Ibid.). Third, the participation UNYD programmes offer is often more symbolic than substantive: photo opportunities with UN leaders but no real conversations; comments on resolutions ignored without accountability; "independent" speeches reviewed word-for-word by ministries.

These design choices create a clear risk: participation as performance, not power. A single person cannot translate the diverse realities of a country's youth, especially on complex issues of peace and security. UNYD programmes are therefore severely lacking as a stand-alone measure for implementing the YPS agenda. Rather than abolishing UNYD programmes, my recommendation is two-fold. They should be redesigned and reframed – going from "showcases" to becoming embedded components of a broader YPS infrastructure where young people share power, not just panel time.

1) Redesign the UNYD programmes:

- *Democratise access:* Introduce remuneration to enable participation to beyond those who can afford unpaid work. Create transparent selection criteria prioritising socioeconomic and regional diversity over the "best CV".

- *Deepen the mandate:* Structurally link UNYD programmes to national YPS mechanisms (such as National Action Plans and youth advisory councils) so they contribute to policy development throughout the year, not just during trips to New York. Give youth delegates formal roles reviewing government positions on peace and security resolutions.

- *Build accountability loops:* Require mandatory national consultations

before and after UN engagements, with public reporting on whose voices were

heard and how they shaped outcomes. Commission independent evaluations involving youth organisations.

While the UNYD programmes themselves need redesigning, a more structural form of inclusion is crucial. Research shows that deeper, more continuous forms of youth engagement strengthen the legitimacy and durability of political decisions more than one-off consultations (Simpson, 2018).

2) *Reframe UNYD programmes within YPS implementation:*

- *UNYD as one entry point:* Stop treating UNYDs as proof that YPS is "done". They should be framed as one visible entry point within a wider ecosystem: UNYDs + National Action Plans + youth-managed peace funds + local youth peacebuilding networks. Finland shows this is possible, combining both a second National Action Plan (Finnish Government, 2025) with a UNYD programme.
- *Contextualise YPS implementation:* States should examine existing programmes and civil society actors and decide together with young people how YPS should look in the respective context. Some countries will prioritise National Action Plans, others youth funds or permanent advisory bodies. UNYD programmes can strengthen all of these initiatives, but the YPS agenda can never be reduced to one programme selecting a few people per year.

The political question is therefore no longer whether states have a Youth Delegate, but whether they are prepared to let meaningful and effective youth engagement unsettle existing hierarchies of voice and power. If YPS means anything, UNYD programmes should mark a beginning, not a badge of completion.

Conclusion

If the UNYD programme is a gateway into international politics, then it is open for only a few. The view through the gate is bright: attending conferences in New York, holding speeches at high-level meetings, receiving media attention. But the gate itself remains narrow, and those who pass through do so more by privilege than by design.

This essay has shown two core problems with treating UNYD programmes as proof of implementing the YPS agenda. First, they tick the participation pillar of the agenda while sidelining the protection, prevention, partnership, disengagement and

reintegration pillars. States celebrate one delegate in New York as "youth engagement", ignoring the broader structural changes the YPS agenda demands across all pillars. Second, the programmes themselves lack global, regional and local representativeness. European programmes dominate funding, speaking time and visibility. Unpaid mandates and elite selection criteria systematically exclude marginalised youth.

For states, UNYD programmes offer low cost and high symbolism: good PR with minimal power-sharing. Yet, they have real value for young people, they open doors and amplify voices. Thus, they deserve a redesign, not abolition: remunerated mandates for diverse youth, links to National Action Plans and year-round policy work. They must also be reframed as one bridge in a wider YPS ecosystem.

The question for states is clear: are you ready to share power, or just the stage? UNYD programmes should mark a beginning: youth as co-authors of peace, not symbols on panels.

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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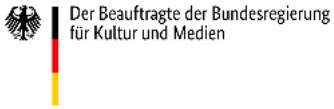
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