

Modifying the *status quo*: Young people as actors for peace*

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Youth against the background of violent conflicts

One sixth of the world's population (that is, 1.2 billion people) are between 15 and 24 years old. The participation and inclusion of these young people in politics, the economy and society is a key challenge, especially for countries of the global South. Over recent decades, the United Nations (UN) has continually tackled the various challenges facing this section of the population. In its *World Youth Report*, it analyses both specific aspects and global themes, highlights their importance for young people and refers to the challenges presented by contexts of violence.

Young people in areas of violent conflict are viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, children are the principal victims of violence and it is considered a violation of international humanitarian law to recruit them by force. On the other hand, young people are often perceived as potential aggressors. In areas without armed conflicts young people are seen as a major threat to security and stability, especially when they are poor and belong to marginalized social groups.

The way society treats young people is of crucial importance. Depending on the response they receive to their requests and suggestions, they may make a constructive contribution to social development or they may withdraw into parallel worlds of gangs, drugs or organised crime. However, UN Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security does not present young people as a problem, but points to them as important actors for security, peace and constructive change.

Young people in post-conflict societies

Countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Mozambique, South Africa, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Cambodia and East Timor have something in common: after an internal war in the 90s, there is now a first post-conflict generation made up of people aged between 15 and 25.

After the war, the possibilities of formally involving young people improved in many countries. In the first decade of peace their attendance at secondary schools increased considerably and opportunities for them to participate politically also increased, especially where the armed conflict and its ending were accompanied by a regime change and an opening up.

The new generation is not apolitical, but they prefer other forms of participation such as social networks or show greater commitment to civil society. This also applies to the post-conflict societies of El Salvador, Nicaragua and South Africa. Young people principally become involved within civil society and their commitment to the political system is different from that of adults: their participation in elections is lower; on the other hand, they are more prepared to protest.

It cannot from any point of view be said that young people are not interested in politics. They have often expressed the feeling of being 'manipulated' by politicians. Their trust of political parties is as weak as their hope of being able to change anything through elections.

Blocked transitions

All over the world young people are facing a level of unemployment triple that of adults. In El Salvador, Nicaragua and South Africa the greatest challenge lies in generating more jobs that would allow young people to take the step to economic independence. Young people say that education does not give them the knowledge and skills needed in the labour market and that earnings are usually too low for them to live on.

Young people in these countries are also sceptical of adult society and those responsible for taking decisions. They have little hope that their active participation might achieve any major change. As in other post-conflict societies, those who are within the armed conflict continue to control access to social and economic resources. A 'bottleneck' is then formed, through which only young people who join the dominant networks and submit to the (existing) structure can pass. This represents a time bomb for economic development and the future of democracies, which could explode at any time in the inter-generational conflict.

Participation of young people on an equal footing

The involvement and active participation of young people are essential in building peace. Consultations organised by the UN show that young people are well aware of the framework they need in order to make a contribution to peace and security.

In Colombia, four months after the agreement was signed between the Government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), an attempt was made to find out what young people understood peace to be. According to what they said, that concept encompasses social reconstruction through reconciliation and memory, justice, guaranteed human rights and equal opportunities.

Generally speaking, there are two partially linked themes dominating the international debate: the prevention of violence and improved training, with the aim of facilitating the transition from educational establishments into the labour market. It is assumed that if young people are not attending educational establishments and have not joined the labour market either, then they may easily be recruited by violent groups.

In reality, as has been shown in post-conflict societies, access to the labour market does not only depend on individual skills and 'fine-tuned' training, but is also subject to the power relations at political and social level. The main thing is to change social conditions so that those young people can play their part as autonomous political and social actors, with their desires, needs and ideas for the future. The latest *World Youth Report* (2015) suggests, among other things, strengthening joint management by and representation of young people (especially women) in parliamentary forums and other institutions responsible for taking decisions.

Young people are not asking for handouts or for a favour that can be granted or refused; they have rights they must be able to claim without fear of repression or criminalization.

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