

POLICY BRIEF

Harnessing Youth Leadership in Peacebuilding to Counter Extremism

Perspectives from 113 Youth Leaders Across 42 Countries



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Introduction

This policy brief is the outcome of a collaborative conversation conducted using Pol.is, an AI-powered deliberative technology tool, to get a pulse of youth perceptions about the peace and security issues in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, North America, and Europe. This policy brief addresses youth perceptions of youth-led initiatives vs military actions, youth engagement in policy and action, and the shared challenges youth groups face in peace and security efforts in different regions around the world. The policy brief also makes recommendations to the U.S. government, specifically the USAID, Department of State, Department of Defense, and U.S. Congress on enhancing youth engagement in peace and security efforts, aligned with U.S. foreign policy and national interests, to ensure sustainable peace globally.

Pol.is Deliberative Technology Tool

Pol.is is an open-source tool that allows large groups to share their opinions and ideas and reach better decision-making. Unlike traditional surveys with predefined questions, participants can agree, disagree, pass on, or suggest their own opinions, which are then shared with others for reactions and comments. Pol.is has previously been used to help pass legislation in the United States, Canada, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, Spain, and other countries around the world.^{[1] [2]}

Collaborative Conversation Methodology

The collaborative conversation took place in October 2024 using Pol.is based on five Peace Impact Framework (PIF) themes: **Physical Violence** (experiencing direct violence), **Personal Agency** (trust in society and the belief in one's ability to create change), **Polarization** (people's trust in each other), **Institutional Legitimacy** (people's trust in institutions), and **Resource Investment** (long-term investment on peace over conflict).^[3]

A total of 113 youth leaders—representing local organizations focused on youth, women, peace, and security agenda—from 42 countries were invited to participate in this conversation throughout a 60-hour timeframe.^[4] During this period, participants ranked others' opinions by expressing "agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty" while adding their own perspectives and first-hand experiences—which were also ranked by others.

In this collaborative conversation, no personal identifiers were collected, and participants were allowed to share their thoughts and opinions in a safe space. This approach allowed for richer and more deliberative engagement among the participants, allowing us to gain a better understanding of their true thoughts and feelings.

1. The Effectiveness of Youth-Led Initiatives vs. Military Action in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

Military action may effectively achieve short-term security goals, but achieving and maintaining peace remains in the hands of people, particularly youth, who make up 52% of the global population—with most countries in Africa and Asia having over 40% of their population under the age of 20 and over 70% of their population under the age of 35.

During the conversation, 65% of the participating youth leaders confirmed that "they have seen youth-led initiatives being more successful than military action in resolving local conflicts".^[5] When asked if "military action is more effective than youth-led peacebuilding initiatives in dealing with violent conflicts," 59% of participants agreed that military action is indeed effective in dealing with violent conflict.^[6] Later, when the participants were presented with the statement "peace will never be achieved without military power," 40% agreed and 40% disagreed.^[7] Seeking their personal experience on the issue, the participants were presented with the statement that when they "experienced conflict" in their communities, they did NOT find young people "helpful in resolving the conflict," and 59% of the participants disagreed, suggesting that they had seen young people being helpful in resolving local conflicts at some point.^[8]

According to participants of this deliberation, military actions are an effective tool for dealing with violent conflicts and short-term security gains. However, the majority expressed that youth-led initiatives are more effective in establishing and maintaining peace in those communities—the type of peace and trust that all parties will defend, also referred to as Personal Agency in PIF. Therefore, it is critical to recognize the influence and impact that young people, both as actors and victims, have on the path toward long-term peace and security. Studies show that young people in conflict zones have demonstrated success in peace, security, conflict resolution, prevention, and transformation initiatives, despite limited resources.^[9] If they're provided with opportunities to engage in peacebuilding on a larger

^[1] Open AI, Democratic Inputs to AI, <https://openai.com/index/democratic-inputs-to-ai/>

^[2] Wikipedia, Pol.is, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pol.is>

^[3] ConnexUS, Peace Impact Framework themes, <https://cnxus.org/peace-impact-framework/>

^[4] Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Bolivia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Cameroon, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Sudan, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania, Netherlands, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela, and Yemen.

^[5] Pol.is Statement #1: I have seen youth-led initiatives being more successful than military action in resolving local conflicts.

^[6] Pol.is Statement #2: Military action is often more effective than youth-led peacebuilding in dealing with violent conflict.

^[7] Pol.is Statement #31: Peace will never be achieved without military power.

^[8] Pol.is Statement #3: When I have experienced conflict, I have not seen young people helping to resolve conflicts.

^[9] United Network of Young Peacebuilders, The Missing Peace, <https://unoy.org/download/the-missing-peace/>

scale, their positive impact could be significant, as research shows that every dollar invested on youth peacebuilding yields a \$5-10 return on investment.^[9]

STATEMENT	AGREED	DISAGREED	PASSED ON
8 The U.S. government needs to have a Youth Peace Security strategy that engages young people as partners, not trouble-makers.	88%	2%	9%
3 When I have experienced conflict, I have not seen young people helping to resolve conflicts.	35%	59%	4%
6 Peacebuilding initiatives and funding prevent young people from joining violent groups.	80%	9%	9%
7 Donors are missing out on opportunities to meet the needs of the community by not engaging the young people, who make the majority of the population in conflict zones.	90%	0%	9%
10 The main reason formal peace agreements in my community break down is because young people are not engaged enough.	80%	14%	4%
0 I have seen youth-led initiatives being more successful than military action in resolving local conflicts.	65%	24%	9%
4 Most entrepreneurs creating jobs in conflict areas are youth, boosting the economy and contributing to peace.	68%	14%	17%

Data from Pol.is, <https://pol.is/report/r9hjn5pamtzvi74cvher>

2. The Importance of Youth Participation and Representation in Policy and Action

Youth, both men and women, have a significant impact on peace and security, and their importance cannot be overlooked because they are key stakeholders for positive change and sustainable peace. However, if youth are not given the right tools, resources, and space to express their creativity, concerns, and hopes, we may end up seeing countries further struggle to tackle emerging complex challenges, leading to deteriorating trust in institutions, referred to as Institutional Legitimacy in PIF.

Young people's growing mistrust in governance institutions and electoral processes is an important factor that affects their political participation. According to UN Secretary-General's 2024 YPS report to the Security Council, across 26 countries, 76 percent of young people believe that politicians do not listen to them.^[11] Unfavourable perceptions of young people harboured by institutions,

decision makers and governments further deter progress.

2.1. Youth-Centered Peace Practice: Youth-led initiatives, particularly social entrepreneurship, have a direct positive impact on preventing polarization, conflict and radicalization as well as establishing positive peace in communities. When asked, 68% of participants in the collaborative conversation agreed that "*most entrepreneurs creating jobs in conflict areas are youth*" and that their initiatives "*boost the economy and contribute to peace*".^[12]

This is significant because previous reports and studies indicate, and 62% of our collaborative conversation participants agreed, that "*most often young people are radicalized into armed groups in the promise of material and financial gain*" among other factors.^{[13][14]}

Although 75% of the participants in this deliberation agree that "*counter-terrorism activities prevent young people from joining violent activities*",^[15] 80% also confirm that "*peacebuilding initiatives and funding*" are effective in "*preventing young people from joining groups*".^[16] The two statements are not paradoxical. While counter-terrorism activities are still effective at identifying and apprehending individual perpetrators, youth-led initiatives have a broader impact and benefit a larger number of young people, making it one of the most effective preventive tools against radicalization and extremism.

2.2. Unheard Stakeholders: It is important to note that youth participation in practice alone is not enough to enable them to reach their full potential in maintaining peace and security. Youth must be involved in policy discussions, including peace talks in order to have a say in situations and on issues they inherit. If youth are not given the opportunity to express their concerns and hopes, they will feel marginalized and used as a tool for agendas that do not address their issues. During this deliberation, 80% of participants agreed that one of "*the main reasons formal peace agreements in their community broke down was because young people were not engaged enough*".^[17] This is especially true given that youth play multiple roles in times of conflict (from perpetrators to a majority being actively involved in peacebuilding activities including influencing peace processes). When young people are ignored by institutions, they do not connect with formal peace agreements, viewing them as a power-sharing agreement among elites who are disconnected from the people.^[18]

^[9] ConnexUs, Economic Return on Investment in #Youth4Peace, <https://cnxus.org/event/economic-return-on-investment-in-youth4peace/>

^[11] ConnexUs, YPS: The Report of the Secretary-General, <https://cnxus.org/resource/youth-and-peace-and-security-the-report-of-the-secretary-general/>

^[12] Pol.is Statement #4: Most entrepreneurs creating jobs in conflict areas are youth, boosting the economy and contributing to peace.

^[13] UNDP, Frontlines Global Report, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Frontlines-Web.pdf>

^[14] Pol.is Statement #29: I agree and most often young people are radicalized into armed groups in promise for material and financial gain.

^[15] Pol.is Statement #5: Counter-terrorism activities and funding prevent young people from joining violent activities.

^[16] Pol.is Statement #6: Peacebuilding initiatives and funding prevent young people from joining violent groups.

^[17] Pol.is Statement #10: The main reason formal peace agreements in my community break down is because young people are not engaged enough.

^[18] Pol.is Statement #24: Youth voices in formal peace agreements are still limited so they can't be the main reason for failure.

3. Challenges and Barriers Faced by Young Peace-builders

Youth are aware of their responsibilities, and they have proved their role in peace and security. However, the challenges they face are enormous, preventing them from having a genuine and long-term impact.

3.1. Social Entrepreneurship Eclipse: Although 91% of the conversation participants agreed that "*youth social entrepreneurship builds upon peace and security*" and "*solving local issues with sustainable solutions*", there is no strategy or national action plan, and enough resource investment, to legitimize and anchor these efforts, trapping youth in a cycle where they initiate and make efforts, get exhausted, and withdraw.

3.2. Donor Disconnect: 90% of the conversation participants agreed that "*donors are missing out on opportunities to meet the needs of the community by not engaging young people*".^[19] Donor-grassroots engagement is critical not only because donors are missing out on opportunities to leverage the unique insights of young people (as a demographic constituency), but it also allows the donors to design programs in ways that take into account important factors that affect program and project impact. It also leads to improving institutional legitimacy and trust. 97% of the participants agreed that peace and security efforts "*need to be sensitive to youth grievances*".^[20]

3.3. Funding Barriers: Grassroots organizations often fail to meet the stringent requirements set by donors. This automatically disqualifies local initiatives led by grassroots organizations with innovative ideas, energy, and a desire to contribute to peace, security, and development. These local organizations, which are at the forefront of peacebuilding and have the potential to make a tangible difference, lack the necessary resources compared to an established organization.

The majority of local organizations around the world operate with a budget of \$10,000 or less, but they can generate a \$5-10 return on investment not only for youth, but also for the private sector, local governments, and society. Donors have a strong incentive to change their stringent requirements to better support local groups, particularly youth-led organizations whose work benefits society writ-large.

Policy Recommendations

Youth represent both the present and the future. They have a proven impact on peace and security issues and an evident five to ten times return on investment; it is now up to the U.S. government to capitalize on this opportunity and assist youth in reaching their full potential for the sake of a

secure and peaceful world consistent with U.S. foreign policy. Addressing the concerns raised by youth leaders and considering their perspectives strengthens an America First foreign policy and U.S. national interests in the same way that it helps stabilize countries and ensure sustainable peace around the world and reduces the risks of brain drain.

1. Develop an Inclusive and Cost-Effective Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Strategy: The U.S. government should develop an inclusive YPS Strategy as a holistic approach to peacebuilding, recognizing the efforts of both young women and young men to promote inclusive participation, prevent violence, and foster synergy among youth men and women in parallel, and strengthens the U.S. interests abroad. An inclusive YPS Strategy facilitates further collaboration, reduces duplication of efforts, and makes better use of resources while addressing multiple dimensions of peace and security.

2. Increase Funds for Youth-Led Peace and Security Initiatives: Allocate a portion of military and counter-terrorism funds to youth-led peacebuilding initiatives to invest in extremism, conflict and violence prevention, which is less expensive. When supporting youth peacebuilding, it is also critical to ensure at least 5% of the programming budget is allocated for protection needs to respond to unexpected risks that youth face, including legal and physical violence protection. In doing so, the U.S. not only reduces threats to its national security and stakeholders, it also improves its image abroad and ensures that its values are upheld.

3. Mandate and Support Youth-Inclusive National Action Plans for US Tax-payer Recipient Countries: USAID missions and the Department of State, along with the embassies, should coordinate to support country-level national action strategies and plans on Youth, Peace, and Security based on the agency's YPS Strategy (as outlined in recommendation #1). Aligning priorities to advance the NAP/Strategies supports cost-effective and efficient ways to achieve national peacebuilding goals. It also provides a pathway for youth to have a voice in policy, promotes inclusion, helps donors to better allocate funds, strengthens the country's economy, and aligns with international commitments, particularly UNSCR 2250.

These efforts could be strengthened further by adopting a common framework, based on PIF, to measure the progress and impact of YPS NAPs, irrespective of country or issue specificity. This enables the USG to assess the extent to which resource investment improves personal agency and institutional legitimacy, and their influence on issues like polarization and physical violence.

^[19] Pol.is Statement #7: Donors are missing out on opportunities to meet the needs of the community by not engaging the young people, who make the majority of the population in conflict zones.

^[20] Pol.is Statement #9: Peace and security strategies need to be sensitive to youth grievances.